

**MIDLIFE JOURNEYING**

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

This weekend I shall describe four kinds of journeys we undertake during the Midlife passage: Journey inward which includes a Journey into the past, and a journey outward which includes a journey into the future.

One of the most central dynamics of midlife is related to meaning and purpose. Even if our life had been very meaningful hitherto, as we approach midlife there can be an erosion in that meaningfulness causing a restlessness of soul.

**A Time of Questioning**

Midlife forces us to ask some radical questions about ourselves, the meaningfulness and direction of the life we lead. These questions are invitations to us to make better sense of our past and present and create new meaning and purpose for the future, so that we can live the second half of our lives more consciously, that is, the way our “soul,” meaning our deep authentic self, want us to live.

There are four kinds of questions we usually ask ourselves as midlife creeps upon us:

1. Who am I?
2. Whose am I?
3. What have I accomplished?
4. What do I feel about the way I have lived and now live?

The first question raises the issue of identity - the way I see myself; the second that of intimacy - my experience of love and close relationships; the third that of generativity - my fruitfulness in terms of contribution to society; and the last the issue of integrity – meaningfulness, contentment with my life as a whole.

**Midlife Journeying**

The quest for meaning and direction, and the kind of questions we ask at midlife, lead to four kinds of midlife journeying.

**Journey Inward**

There is first of all a *journey inward*. This is a journey to be in touch with and accept ourselves in the context of the new awareness of self that midlife awakens in us.

By midlife we have experiences and insights that were not part of our lives or awareness earlier. As the poet Robert Frost wrote, “*The afternoon knows what the morning never suspected.*” For

example, we begin to realise that we are not the kind of person we thought we were. We begin to experience new desires and needs that were not in our consciousness before, such as awakened or re-awakened sexuality and intimacy needs. We begin to recognize our limitations, frailties and vulnerabilities and that we have little control over many things in life. We accept and embrace ourselves with these new awareness and experiences.

### **Journey into the Past**

This inward journey also includes a *journey into the past* in order to work through and reconcile with the unresolved issues—the “baggage” that we carry from earlier years. During midlife, traumas and conflicts that we had buried deep in the recesses of our psyche and soul begin to raise their heads seeking our attention. Our “*Shadow*” – all that we had rejected or repressed to conform to social expectations or to live up to an idealized self-image – breaks through our repression barrier and makes their presence felt. Journey into the past involves addressing these issues and working through these experiences and developing new perspectives on and attitudes toward our past.

Journeying into the past also involves paying attention to those aspects of our self that were undeveloped or underdeveloped and/or distorted by earlier choices and life situations. For example, we may have wanted to pursue an artistic or academic career, but our parents or our religious formators might have discouraged us, or certain situations prevented us from doing it. Or, we may have regrets about certain choices and decisions that affected our development and life goals negatively. Midlife invites us to revisit these issues and make peace with them.

### **Journey Outward**

There is also a *journey outward* that invites us to relate to our environment differently and to be generative in new, more meaningful and satisfying ways. In the first half of life we might not have been able to follow our own dreams, for example. For a variety of reasons, we might have had to compromise on them and do what others wanted us to do. But by midlife, we may have grown tired of following other people’s dreams or directives and feel an inner urge to pursue our own, in the way we want. Rebellion against the restraints of the earlier years is quite common at this period of life. This discontent can lead some of us to make drastic changes in our lives. Many choose new careers and break commitments which might have been very meaningful earlier.

Part of this journey outward is addressing the issue of power and care differently than in the past. These issues are handled very differently by men and women in the first half of life. Men tend to focus more on gaining power and exercising authority and control. Women tend to focus on exercising care and developing and nurturing relationships. At midlife both men and women experience a shift in these orientations and priorities. This results in a desire to live our lives differently from the way we have done so far. As Psychologist Daniel Levinson observed, we "cannot go on as before, but need time to choose a new path or modify an old one."

### **Journey Into the future**

The insights gained by the journey into the past and the new orientations and priorities resulting from the outward journey lead to *a journey into the future* - planning how we want to live out the rest of our life, how we want to reorient it in terms of goals and dreams we create for ourselves at midlife. This consideration of how we want to live out the rest of our life is one of the crucial tasks of midlife.

The result of these four kinds of journeying – inward, into the past, outward, into the future - is a reworking of the narrow identity by which we had defined ourselves in the first half of life and creating a new self-identity and a new way of living and relating. These journeys bring about new priorities and new dreams, further transforming us into the kind of persons we are destined to be.

### **Introspection and Prayer**

- *Which of the four kinds of journeying mentioned have you been experiencing in recent years? How are you impacted by them?*
- *Which of these journeys do you need to engage in a little more at this time in your life? Why?*

Journeying is an important feature of the content of Sacred Narratives. The Bible, for example, describes many famous journeys. We have the journey of Abraham from Haran to the Negeb (Genesis, 12, 1-9); journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the promised land (Exodus 13, 17-14, 21); journey of the holy family from Bethlehem to Egypt (Mathew 2, 13-23; the journey of the disillusioned disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 42-13-35) and so on.

You could read one of these stories (if you are not Christian, you can focus on journey stories from your own Sacred Narratives) and stay with what is evoked in you by them, and talk to God who accompanies you on your journeys about what is evoked, as well as about your own journeys, especially the journey ahead you are planning.

May your weekend journeying be happy and safe. Be blessed.  
Thank you for listening.

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