

Psyche & Soul 46

MIDLIFE: EMOTIONAL AWARENESS OF MORTALITY

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In the last weekend's podcast of Psyche & Soul I spoke of four kinds of journeys resulting from the quest for meaning and purpose in life. What triggers this quest for meaning and purpose that results in the journeying is what Elliott Jacques, the first to introduce the concept of midlife into psychological and social discourse, termed "*emotional awareness of one's mortality.*"

What this phrase means is that we recognise, as never before, that we are going to die soon, that we have lived more years than we are going to live. When we were young, we knew we would die one day. But that did not really bother us. Why? Because death was far away on the horizon. It would be years before it would reach us. We had then what could be called an "intellectual" understanding. But when we reach the decade of the 40's, or even in the late 30's, we have an "emotional" awareness of our mortality. As Daniel Levinson pointed out in his study of men and women at midlife, we can feel in our bones, in our dreams, in the marrow of our being that we are going to die, that we do not have many more years to live. We have reached the top of the hill and now what is left is the way down.

In Jacques' words,

Death—at the conscious level—instead of being a general conception, or an event experienced in terms of the loss of someone else, becomes personal matter, one's own death, one's own real and actual mortality...the reality of one's own death forces itself upon our attention and can no longer so readily be shelved. (1993, p. 214)

The awareness of the imminence of death is underscored by a realisation of losses and changes in our body, the reality of aging or dying parents or serious illness and death of friends. We experience a diminishment in our bodily and mental powers after 40. Our vision and hearing become less acute; we remember less well; we are prone to experience chronic aches and pains and may undergo serious illness and surgery. For men, decline of bodily powers is experienced dramatically in the loss of sexual potency. Women may be approaching menopause and the physical and hormonal changes leading to it can bring a profound sense of loss or ending. Though normal for the stage, these physical changes can sometimes be experienced as catastrophic.

This emotional awareness of mortality is something that in most cases creeps upon us gradually. But sometimes it can be triggered by dramatic events. This was the experience of Fr. Douglas (name changed), a pastor at a parish in an area where violence was common. He had given himself selflessly to the people working in a parish where other priests had refused to go. He had believed that if he worked hard for the welfare of people, nothing bad would happen to him. He was mistaken. One night a group of people rushed into his room and shot at him point blank. He was badly wounded and collapsed to the floor. He was taken for dead and the assailants went away. Fr. Douglas, however, was alive and dragged himself into the bath room and hid himself

for several hours dreading the assailants might come back and finish him off. When he felt safe to come out, he got in touch with his assistant and received medical attention and survived.

The incident affected Fr. Douglas profoundly. His consciousness was now filled with the intense awareness of his mortality and the fragility of life. This awareness very rapidly set in motion the other dynamics of midlife described so far and those that will be described later.

We are today living through times where death is all around us. Many of us would have directly come face to face with the death of dear ones and friends. This would naturally intensify the emotional awareness of our own mortality and create a whole gamut of feelings.

The awareness of impending death can plunge us into an existential crisis. That crisis can lead to positive or negative outcome. The realization that we need to change can motivate us to transform ourselves in meaningful ways. But it can also discourage us. It may dawn on us that in the short time available to us before death strikes we will not be able to make our future better than the past. Thoughts such as “Can I really make my life more worthwhile in the remaining years? Am I now too old to make a fresh start?” can lead to pessimism and resignation or even self-destructive behaviour.

Such existential crisis can also result in a desperate attempt to push death back, or even to deny its inevitability. The compulsive attempts in many men and women reaching middle age to remain young, the hypochondriacal concerns over health and appearance, the emergence of sexual promiscuity in order to prove youth and potency, Elliott Jacques observes, are attempts at a race against time and which can result in impoverishment of emotional life and even character deterioration.

According to Roger Gould, another psychologist at the forefront of exploration of midlife, the “most malignant form” in which the fear of our impending death manifests is “in a sudden outburst of exaggerated symptoms: acute anxiety or self-destructive, dangerous behaviour.”

Gould cited the example of a prominent writer who wrote about

a wild year in which a newfound obsession with cemeteries was paralleled by drunkenness, over-use of drugs, gambling, high speed drunken-driving and provocation of dangerous criminals. All of this began at his thirty-sixth year and has since disappeared: with a kind of frantic craziness, he was trying to overcome some existential terror. (*Transformations*, 1978, p. 229)

The Psalmist presents this emotional awareness of mortality in poetic and poignant words:

“O Lord, you have shown me my end,
how short is the length of my days.
Now I know how fleeting my life is.” (Ps. 38, 4)

For Introspection, Prayer and Journaling

- *Is “emotional awareness of mortality” part of your experience? If yes, how are you impacted by it? Is the impact positive or negative? In what way?*

- *Is the awareness creating any urge to bring about some changes in the way your journey on? If yes, what?*

Jesus of Nazareth was often aware of his impending death, even though he was only in his thirties, and often spoke of. We also know how that knowledge affected his life. We could follow his journey toward his death and stay open to whatever this evokes in us and talk to him about it.

Or just say in the presence of the Divinity (God/Goddess) we believe in and talk, if we feel the need, to talk to him or her about how we feel about whatever is evoked in us through the emotional awareness of our mortality.

We could also stay in the presence of the divinity we believe in with all that is evoked in us by the Covid deaths surrounding us and with which we are coming face-to-face.

We can also journal about these feelings. We can also do a drawing/painting to express our feelings. Both will provide us with insights as well as to give vent to our emotions.

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

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