

## Psyche & Soul 53

### MIDLIFE – IX: BALANCING THE MASCULINE AND THE FEMININE

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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.

In this edition, I present another midlife challenge: integration of the masculine and the feminine, or the anima and the animus.

*“You were not like this. What happened to you?” Anita’s husband asked her with some annoyance in his voice. Anita had been a very self-sacrificing wife and mother, a compliant and pleasing type of person, always saying “yes” to whatever her husband and others asked of her. Now she had learned to say “no” and take care of her own needs. While Anita felt good about the changes in her, others were less pleased. Rahul, a midlevel manager at a firm, had been a difficult person to deal with. He was very demanding on others, used to get easily angry and irritable. He always wanted things to be the way he thought they should be, and gave little consideration to other people’s needs and situations.. Now those around him noticed that he was changing. He was more calm and more considerate and understanding. He was now less driven by the need to achieve and they found it easier to relate to him.*

What Anita and Rahul were experiencing and others noticing in them were the kind of changes midlife can bring about in our personalities.

These changes are part of the journey toward wholeness that Carl Jung described with the term “*individuation*.” For us to become more whole, for individuation to occur, it is necessary to bring about greater balance between our masculine and feminine qualities.

#### **Animus & Anima**

All of us, men and women, have both masculine and feminine qualities. In the first half of life men develop their masculine characteristics. Their feminine characteristics remain underdeveloped within them and are personified as the *anima*. In the first half of life women give priority to development of their feminine characteristics. Their underdeveloped internal masculine characteristics become personified as their *animus*. The animus is also known as the “*internal masculine*” and the anima the “*internal feminine*.”

The animus represents the human potential for active modification; assertiveness and abstract (impersonal and objective) rationality. The anima represents the human potential for receptive accommodation, contextual (empathic) thinking, and focus on feelings and relationships.

The terms *masculine* and *feminine* derive their meanings from a social process of *gender splitting* by which culture distributes aspects of human personality differently between the sexes. Within a particular culture, an individual tends to develop qualities attributed to his or her own sex by that culture and to suppress qualities attributed to the other sex. Generally in most cultures, men are encouraged and expected to focus on getting things done (*accomplishment*). Women, on the contrary, are to focus on relationships and nurturing others (*affiliation*).

However, it is to be noted that it is not just cultural expectations that shape the animus and the anima. Biology also plays a significant role.

Masculinity and femininity in men and women are significantly influenced by hormones. Oestrogen, progesterone and oxytocin (hormones responsible for nurturing, bonding, care giving) predominate in women in the first half of life. Testosterone (the hormone responsible for aggression/assertiveness, sex drive) is dominant in men during the early years. In midlife there is a noticeable decline in these hormones in both men and women, leading to a lessening of their impact and increasing the influence of the opposite hormones and helping to bring about greater balance.

These biological dynamics are able to lessen the impact of cultural expectations and allow men and women develop greater *androgyny* – an energizing blend of the masculine and the feminine. At midlife both men and women naturally begin to manifest their contra-sexual qualities.

As a result men at midlife tend to appropriate the qualities of nurturance and tenderness, traditionally associated with women. Likewise, midlife and post-midlife women adopt the assertive and competitive qualities which the men at this stage are beginning to relinquish. This was the experience of Rahul and Anita.

Greater balance of the masculine and feminine can be further facilitated by a conscious effort as well.

### ***Men's Midlife Challenge: Moving from Accomplishment to Affiliation***

The challenge for men at midlife is changing their attitude toward work and emotions. They are invited to move from ambition and aggressiveness on the work front to warmth and caring in relationships.

As psychologist Daniel Levinson observes in his study of men titled *Seasons in a Man's Life*, the masculine pattern is characterised by a concern with *doing*. Men are expected to “*perform, accomplish, produce.*” It is work (performance) that gives meaning to their lives. The desire to move ahead in their careers makes them work harder than needed.

Men pay a price to this dedication to work: starving emotional needs and neglecting relationships.

Psychologist Roger Gould describes some of the more hazardous price men pay for this focus on achievement: depression after a big failure; stroke, bleeding ulcers, or sudden crushing pains in the chest; heavy drinking and/or heavy womanising; disappointment with what they have achieved; deep sense of personal failure and worthlessness leading to bitterness.

These negatives sometimes lead to some positive transformation as well: They “lead men to open themselves to deeper recesses of their being, search their souls for unexpressed areas which they had been afraid to touch before” (*Transformations in Adult Life*, pp. 232).

It is in giving more importance to emotions and relationships that men cultivate the feminine. In midlife, men are invited to reclaim the qualities they formerly denied in themselves and projected onto women, such as tenderness, sensitivity and vulnerability.

Another way to develop the feminine is cultivating aesthetic interests. Commitment to art, music, drama and exploration of nature will release men's blocked feminine energies.

### ***Women's Midlife Challenge: Caring for and Developing One's Own Self***

Women's challenge at midlife is changing their attitude towards caring and self-interest. They are invited to move from undue focus on other-care to increased self-care; to meet their own needs than others' needs; to be assertive on behalf of their own interests than being obliging and compliant toward others.

Most of the first half of their life, women have neglected their own needs and dreams in order to care for and help others, especially the men in their lives, by being loving, giving and self-sacrificing. They gave priority to

relationships, to nurturing others, at the cost of self-nurturing and self-development. Many women, for example, have given up their own dreams and careers to serve the needs of others.

At midlife women feel an inner urge to act on their own behalf and seek their own growth and the realisation of their own dreams, rather than stick to the stereotypical wife-mother role. To do this, and gain control over their own destiny women have to confront whatever inner fears or external controls have interfered with their achieving a full life for themselves. Once they take back their power and stop being subservient, they are able to expand their personalities and grow in self-confidence.

In her bestselling book on the crises of adult life *Passages*, Gail Sheehy described this challenge as follows:

*It is not through more caregiving that a woman looks for replenishment of purpose in the second half of her life. It is through cultivating talents, left half finished, permitting ambitions once piggy-backed, becoming aggressive in the service of her own convictions rather than a passive-aggressive party to someone else's. (p. 426)*

For many professional, as well as religious women, the animus/anima integration challenge is very similar to that of men: i.e., developing their feminine personality. Many religious women were thrust into positions of responsibility and of power early in life. Professional women had to compete hard with men to attain positions of power and influence. In order to be effective and remain competitive in a male-oriented power structure both religious and professional women had to suppress their anima qualities –warmth, compassion, tenderness, vulnerability--and strive to become “*more manly than men.*” Their midlife and post-midlife challenge then becomes reclaiming these suppressed and underdeveloped feminine qualities.

Greater balance of the masculine and the feminine, the anima and animus, enables men and women to be more integrated, more whole and enriches their personality. Life once again becomes a meaningful and energising adventure. This is a major challenge at midlife.

### **Reflection Exercise**

- *Are you noticing changes in your personality? If yes, what kind?*
- *Are other people commenting on changes they notice in you? If they do, what are they saying?*
- *What is your challenge in terms of greater integration of your masculine/animus and feminine/anima qualities?*
- *What is it you need to do to respond to this challenge?*

### **Prayer**

In the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* Jesus speaks of the need for integration as follows: “*When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same...then you will enter the Kingdom.*”

Thus, in the Gnostic Christian tradition, this journey toward wholeness through the redemption of the shadow and the integration of the animus and the anima are necessary to enter the Kingdom of God and as such can be considered necessary spiritual exercises.

We could stay a while with whatever is evoked in us through the ideas expressed in this podcast and the quote from the Gospel of Thomas and spend some time talking and listening to God.

Have a pleasant weekend. Be safe. Be blessed.  
Thank you for listening.

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