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Midlife is a Crossroads, Not a Crisis

By Dr. Jim Manganiello

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MIDLIFE IS A CROSSROADS—NOT A CRISIS

Part one

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The common notion of "midlife crisis" refers to the feelings of stress, chaos and disequilibrium that typically accompany this special stage in our lives.

The turmoil of midlife usually enters into our consciousness as anxiety over who we are. It is better to think of midlife as a psychological and spiritual time rather than a biological one. Some people enter this important stage at 30 others at 70.

The key to transforming midlife stress into depth and meaning is to understand that midlife is not a crisis at all—it's a crossroads of the soul, a crossroads that's too often misunderstood and unacknowledged.

During adolescence we go through a development change called puberty, a change that's clearly recognized because it's physical and so visible. At midlife we go through an even more powerful developmental stage, but it's primarily an inner one. Because this stage isn't visible, it often goes unrecognized and unacknowledged for what it truly is.

At midlife our soul thrusts an important question at us: Will we come home to our deeper identity and live the second half of our lives as the real thing or as a dress rehearsal? Midlife chaos comes as a result of our soul's efforts to liberate us from a conditioned identity that's too small for who we truly are.

During midlife we encounter a natural movement from within ourselves to leave our surface identity and journey to our innermost identity—the Heart. This movement often meets with strong resistance from internal forces that naturally seek safety by maintaining the status quo. These forces need to be educated to see the big picture so they can become allies in helping us to grow and Craft the Good Life.

Midlife is a Crossroads, Not a Crisis

Midlife changes require us to leave known for foreign territory. They can be a changes filled with doubt and fear. They involve experiences of turmoil and inner stretching that, if negotiated properly, can yield something of enduring value. It's as if our identity loses its solid ground while we are in movement between different possibilities within ourselves.

During midlife confusion we occupy a psychological location that is like being on a suspension bridge. Any emotional upheaval is like a strong wind that can leave us feeling out of control as the familiar images that have defined us in the past no longer seem fixed, stable and reliable.

If we resist change and rigidly hold on to our old self-image, we run the risk of living the second half of our lives confined to an identity that has trouble taking advantage of life's deeper opportunities. We can

then develop a kind of chronic dread about having to face growing old and inevitably having to die. This dread steals life's bright colors and makes it something that we merely endure rather than live with any vibrancy or passion.

Our deepest possibilities often emerge most clearly during times of psychological and spiritual confusion. Many of us enter midlife with well established patterns of identity. Our work and family life have become predictable sources of externally based identity and enjoyment. Then all of a sudden we can begin to feel depleted and out of sorts. What we have worked hard for, and what we have valued, begins to seem lacking in some vague way.

Our lives begin to feel like a drama that someone else has arranged. We lose energy for what we do every day. It becomes repetitive and boring. Even our most prized possessions may all of a sudden appear to be just "things" that no longer mean very much to us.

It can almost feel as if we have lost something that we then struggle to get back. But typically that doesn't work. We can find ourselves stressed out as the old wounds in our self-image begin to feel very sore again. As a kind of panic sets in, we might find our connections to people in our family and work lives feel strained. We begin to question everything that seems to have a hold on our time and energy. And we can feel a strong appetite for freedom.

Midlife is a time when the old images that we had come to rely upon for self definition no longer seem to work well. But, as yet, there are no new images on the scene that could provide us with a clear sense of identity. As a consequence, our experience of ourselves, of the "I" or "me" that we tend to identify with can become uneasy and indefinite.

It is a little like discovering that the solid ground that we were standing on is actually a large turtle's back that is moving. What results is a subtle sense of stressful panic as we lose our balance and the certainty of who we are.

Next month we'll continue exploring the fascinating territory of midlife in part two of this series.

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together ancient wisdom and cutting edge knowledge. The Process is a powerful tool for negotiating midlife change and for creating a life that can be well lived, loved and understood.

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MIDLIFE IS A CROSSROADS—NOT A CRISIS—Part Two

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MIDLIFE IS A CROSSROADS—NOT A CRISIS

Part two

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In last month's Part one of this article we learned that midlife is not a crisis; it's a crossroads of the soul. One road leads to what I call the "not-such-a-good-life" and the other to The Good Life.

The road to the Good Life requires that we recognize and honor our soul's call to the Heart—to our innermost identity. To respond to this call, we must get the knowledge and the tools to free ourselves from a conditioned identity that limits us to yesterday's vision of who we are and that limits our vision of what our life can be.

If we fail to understand and properly negotiate midlife territory, we might become rigid and inflexible in an attempt to hold on tightly to what was. This can result in a narrowing and constricting of our lives as we forfeit the opportunity to claim powerful options for growth that emerge during midlife.

We also can fail to properly negotiate midlife territory if we impulsively react to the chaos and confusion it brings by making changes that we don't understand or that we're not prepared for. We might, for example, prematurely change jobs, leave a relationship, make risky investments, or embrace some glitzy philosophy in a not too well thought out gesture to make change. Too often this reactive approach leaves us washed up on a psychological shore that is empty of any depth or meaning.

Our surface identity seeks to find and cling to some sense of certainty that could keep it secure and safe. We could say that when it travels, our surface identity likes to have an itinerary clearly and precisely mapped out. It does not like surprises. It even avoids the scenic routes so that it can stay on the main road where everything is predictable.

Midlife can be a time when our old maps for life do not fit the territory that we find ourselves in.

As Dante put it in his Inferno,

Midlife is a Crossroads, Not a Crisis

Midway this way of life we're bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

Circumstances that can make us intensely aware of midlife turmoil are both internal and external. The external ones include realities such as the physical evidence of our aging, the death of our parents, our children leaving the nest and the closer view of our own death on the visible horizon. These situations are depressing in that they tend to put us face to face with an existence that contradicts the stance of our youthful heroism, a heroism that always imagined that we could have our own way in this life.

Our heroic ego also finds itself assaulted from the inside. The solid ground that our self-image seemed to stand on begins to crack. We find ourselves experiencing a discrepancy between who we thought we were and who we actually are now. To make matters worse, while the person we thought we were seems to be dissolving, the person we hoped we weren't begins to show up more and more. This clash of images can leave us feeling sad, depressed, stressed out and very alone. We might feel a sense of profound loss that we cannot really explain to ourselves.

The forces that accompany midlife can push us deeply into our fear. But if we can open what the great spiritual traditions call the Eye of the Heart, we can see the real nature of our fear. Behind our fear is an immense sadness that is an expression of a tender Heart. This tender heart can become an important source of compassion and concern for others as well as of awe and wonder about the mystery of life. When we connect with our tender Heart, we no longer have to be embarrassed about who we are.

There is an art and science to making a midlife transformation. First we need to recognize that the turmoil we feel represents life working on us rather than evidence that we are weird, sick or other than we should be. This turmoil is really the call of the Heart to create a life that's an adventure of love, courage and wisdom. Then we need reliable knowledge and the tools to put that knowledge to work.

As we give up our limited ideas of who we are and what we "should" be, we can then become sensitive to a kind of inner guidance. Our psyche, at first, frightens us by shaking up our world entirely. It then stimulates us by pointing to some of life's most interesting possibilities. It gets our attention by making us see that our skin is too small for who we really are. Seeing this, we can begin to revision our lives as a creative adventure that is pulled by our dreams and visions and not merely pushed from behind by our past conditioned fears.

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