

Running head: THROUGH MIDLIFE CRISIS TO PERSONAL GROWTH

Through Midlife Crisis to Personal Growth.

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Abstract

The topic of this research paper explores the phenomenon of midlife crisis or midlife transition, and both terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper. The existing literature on the subject involves mostly the argument whether midlife crisis is a scientifically proven concept, worthwhile exploring, or is it just one of many popular contemporary beliefs. Indeed, one can find very few academic sources, which deal with the subject directly. However, when looking carefully through other evidence of human experience such as poetry, literature, philosophy and personal journals one comes across a curious phenomenon of midlife turmoil and inevitable change at midlife in lives of many individuals. It has been my intention through this paper to paint a fuller picture and to broaden our understanding of possible occurrence of midlife crisis. My wish was also to provide a frame of reference for practicing health professionals, who will be in the position of assisting their clients on the journey through the Middle Passage. In my research, I sought to stress one point: that even though midlife crisis as any life-changing event might be experienced as a period of chaos and confusion, at the same time being a powerful catalyst for change it has the potential to lift us, to help us grow, and evolve.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Chapter 1. Introduction	5
Chapter 2. Midlife Crisis: Theoretical Perspective	12
Experience of Midlife	12
Midlife Crisis and the Confrontation with Death	14
Scholarly Research on Midlife Crisis	16
Theoretical Perspectives of Change, Development and Transition	19
Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961).....	19
Erick Erikson (1902-1994).	20
Daniel Levinson (1920-1994).....	21
O'Connor and Wolfe's Theory of Transition.	22
Summary	23
Chapter 3. Subjective Experience of Midlife Crisis	24
The "What" of Midlife Crisis	27
Questions of identity.....	28
Questions of direction.....	32
Questions of relationships.....	36
Summary	39
Chapter 4. Midlife Crisis: Therapeutic Applications	41
The Trend of Modern Psychotherapy	42
The Soul and Spirit of the Therapeutic Encounter.....	45
Existential Psychotherapy	49
Freedom and responsibility.....	50

Meaning, meaninglessness and death. 54

Summary 55

Chapter 5: Conclusion..... 57

References 63

Chapter 1. Introduction

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.

– William Wordsworth (1994, p. 701)

I can clearly recall standing in my mother's kitchen as a 15 years old girl and my mother pointing her finger impatiently at my father saying to me: "Remember, you cannot teach the old dog new tricks! Don't ever count on it! People do not change and that is the truth." I have no memory of the context, which brought out my mother's strong reaction; I have no idea what my father's "crime" could have been. I only know that my father was 40 years old then. And here I am in my own kitchen, having just entered the fortieth year of life myself, smiling at mama and her fiery personality, which fortunately for us all, has *changed* and softened with age.

Somehow, contrary to my mother's beliefs, through my own life experience I acquired a conviction that change is inherited in being born and being human. I have observed indeed that the only constant thing in life is change. You cannot look at the old family photo albums and say that people do not change. Of course, the physical appearance is the most obvious of changes to behold. But I believe that there is also an inner force inherited in being human that makes us want to strive, struggle, and persevere; it is that human potential which will always want to realize itself.

It gives me some satisfaction to think that I can develop, grow, mature and pretty much never arrive. The metaphor of a journey is a hopeful one to me, not a sad one as some might think. Of course, we all need moments of arrival and peace in our lives, but to me those are just brief rests to simply gather forces for the next venture, the next challenge, and the next mountain peak ahead.

I share that notion of constant movement and confrontation with life itself with others, such as Dag Hammarskjold, the Swedish diplomat and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who wrote in his journal “Markings”:

On the path of the others
Are resting places,
Places in the sun
Where they can meet.
But this
Is your path,
And it is now,
Now that you must not fail.

(Hammarskjold, 1964, p. 213)

Or Rudolf Steiner, Austrian philosopher and visionary, who said:

To us is it given
At no stage ever to rest.
They live and they strive the active
Human beings from life unto life
As plants grow from springtime
To springtime – ever aloft.

(Steiner in Samila, 2018)

Let me pause here for a moment and contemplate the nature of change. How exactly does change and growth occur? It might be worthwhile to mention here that the process of change and transition might not always be the most pleasant. On the contrary, the road to change at times

seems to be paved with agonizing questioning of reality, inner and/or outer chaos, and plenty of physical and psychic growing pains, all of which could be summarized by one pungent word: crisis. Many will probably shy away at the sound of the word and many will grimace with fear and discomfort. But what if I was to propose a hopeful definition of crisis, one that is positive, optimistic, and even promising?

If indeed “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting” (Wordsworth, 1994, p. 701) could it be then that the purpose of our life is to wake up and to remember; wake up to ourselves, to what we came here to do, to purpose and meaning. Crisis in this context could play a role of a helper, an alarm clock, so to say, or a faithful disciple always on the lookout, vigilant and attentive, not allowing us to fall back to sleep. Long time ago Rumi has already warned us:

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.

Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask for what you really want.

Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill

where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.

Don't go back to sleep.

(Rumi in *The Essential Rumi*, 1995, p. 36)

I would like to propose here that crisis be looked at as an opportunity, rather than a calamity to be avoided at all costs. Could we even take it a step further and suggest that we look forward to it, knowing that the encounter with crisis can be compared to the essential process of polishing of the gem, which is in fact our very Self? Perhaps there are times in our life when we

need the dramatic element of crisis for the change to take place; perhaps we can only arrive at the new world order through chaos and the alchemical process of transformation through the proverbial fire. Bernard Lievegoed (1946/1997), a Dutch pediatrician and educator inspired by the ideas of Rudolf Steiner, suggested, in fact, that the young child needs all the childhood diseases in order to overcome the heredity and to acquire the new impulses for the development of individuality. The high fever, which often accompanies those illnesses, is supposed to help to bring in the incarnating ego forces of the child. Lievegoed (1946/1997) considered the childhood diseases important milestones in child's development (p. 190).

What seemed like my own transformative work through sickness and fever took place when I was much older. I was 21 years old and I just left my parents' house and my country for the very first time to spend a year of volunteering abroad. Four months into my experience I got sick with measles. Since I was already beyond the age of common childhood diseases nobody was able to diagnose it properly and so I spend full three weeks in the dark room fighting a very high fever, having the closest encounter with death I can think of to this day. Interestingly enough, when I was well enough to stand up and use the bathroom again, I did not recognize myself in the mirror. The face that was looking at me was so drastically changed that it gave me a fright.

Perhaps all of us at some point in our life will need an element of crisis for change to take place. It seems that right from the start, from the moment of birth, which Hollis (2001) calls "an existential blow of separation" (p. 38), our life is full of smaller and bigger revolutions, transitions, moments of adjustment, and major and minor shifts. Hollis (1993) reminds us that we go through significant physical, social, and psychological changes every seven to ten years. The journey of uncovering of self continues till the end and it is as terrifying as it is exciting.

In this paper, I will focus on a rather particular change, a significant transformation that takes place in the second half of the human life, or as Jung (1933) poetically put it in “the afternoon” of life. I will call that change: midlife transition or midlife crisis, and throughout this paper I will use both phrases interchangeably. In my opinion, the concept of midlife transition is an important one for all counsellors to become familiar with, to understand and to embrace, since many clients will seek counselling support while going through painful and often confusing experiences of midlife. Some individuals will face serious marital problems ending in divorce or in an extra-marital affair, some might embark on a career change, others will experience the pain of the empty nest, and the majority will grieve the death of their parents. Each of the above events in itself has a potential to be quite traumatizing and the chances for a full-blown crisis increase when the problems and hindrances accumulate, without any solution in sight.

It is my hope that through this paper I will be able to answer some questions about midlife in particular but also about the nature of transition in general. It certainly holds a personal value to embark on this enriching discovery, as in my beginning forties I find myself entering “the swamplands of the soul” (Hollis, 1996). However, I wish for the work to be universal enough so that others in the counselling field might find it informative, useful and even inspiring for their work with individuals going through the challenging phase of transition. How can we assist our clients in those inner and outer shifts, how do we normalize for them the pain of change, how do we adequately play our role of midwives of the soul, and support them to deliver their true selves into the world? How do we help them to remember?

In the first chapter, I will focus on building the context for the concept of midlife crisis and taking a closer look at how this particular transition has been portrayed throughout the scholarly literature. What do authors agree on and what do they passionately dispute about?

What are the pros and cons for acknowledging the existence of the phenomenon of midlife crisis? Who was the first one to coin the term? We will also have an opportunity to become familiar with some theories of change and life transitions as proposed by Erikson, Levinson, and O'Connor and Wolfe.

Chapter two will take us right into the heart of midlife transition as proposed with great detail by James Hollis, a Jungian analyst and a counsellor, Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher and educator, and others. Our goal here will be to become familiar with and to understand what midlife transition looks and feels like. Together with writers, poets, and philosophers we will ask some important questions about the second half of life: "Who am I, apart from my history and the roles I have played" (Hollis, 1994, p. 19)? "How do I make my life more conscious and more meaningful?" "How do I take responsibility for my own life and my own happiness?" "How do I wake up and remember?" Through rich examples of those who documented their own midlife experiences a complex and complete picture of the phenomenon shall emerge.

In the third chapter, I will propose an ideal model of a therapeutic encounter, which might be helpful for those who in the midst of their midlife transition are looking for professional support. I will contrast the ideal model of therapy with, in my opinion less ideal, modern way of treatment and diagnosis. Also, a concept of the whole-soul conversation will be presented, together with the essential ingredients needed for the whole-soul conversation to take place. In my therapeutic approach, I will draw upon Anthroposophical Counselling Psychology, Jungian psychology and the existential methodology as some possible therapeutic means in addressing client's midlife concerns.

I will finish the paper with an in-depth summary, which will bring together the three chapters and the unique picture of midlife crisis presented in each of them: the theoretical-scholarly approach, the subjective-poetic approach, and the therapeutic approach.

Chapter 2. Midlife Crisis: Theoretical Perspective

The spirit of the world does not desire to tie us and restrict us,

But step by step to raise and broaden us.

No sooner do we feel at home in our surroundings

And snugly settled in, we slacken.

– Hesse (in Burkhard, 1992/2002, p. 138)

Each successive step, then, is a potential crisis because of the radical change of perspective. (Erikson, 1959, p. 55)

In the first chapter, let us examine the concept of midlife crisis through the literature review. We will start by defining the terms ‘midlife’ and ‘crisis’ as understood by the researchers. Also, we will discover how and when the term ‘midlife crisis’ has been coined. We will analyze the time frame for the period of midlife proposed by different scholars; we will ask the question about the reason for a pervading negative view of midlife in public domain and we will explore a few theoretical frameworks of change, human development and the stages of life transitions as proposed by Jung, Erikson, Levinson, and O’Connor and Wolfe.

All of the above-mentioned subjects will provide a context and a focus point for the health professionals to begin a conversation about midlife as a significant and potentially difficult time in their clients’ life.

Experience of Midlife

When we say “midlife” what do we usually mean by that? What is the time frame for that period of a person’s life? The definition of midlife suggests that is it a point in the middle of one’s life. Considering that the average human life expectancy in most western, industrialized countries is about 80 years would locate midlife at around 40 years of age (Freund & Ritter,

2008). However, it seems to make more sense to define midlife as a phase rather than a specific point in time. Interestingly enough, there is a significant discrepancy in the suggested time frame in the literature on the subject of middle adulthood. Some authors indicate that the midlife stage embraces only an age span between 35-45 years of age (Gould, 1972), while others extend that period to 55 years of age (Lawrence, 1980). The most common view among researchers implies that midlife begins at 40 and ends at 60 (Lachman, Lekowicz, Marcus & Peng, 1994).

Interestingly enough, Gambhir and Chadha (2013) point out that even though “those between ages 40 and 60 are typically considered middle-aged, there is at least a 10-year range on either end, so that it is not uncommon for middle age to begin at 30 and end at 75” (p. 27).

Certainly, midlife can be viewed as a period in the middle in two ways. First, as mentioned above, it might simply mean a period in the middle of one’s life; second meaning comes from the fact that the midlife adult lives in a very unique sandwich of generations: he or she lives between the younger generation of children and the older generation of parents, being a connector between those different age groups (Lachman et al., 1994).

Unexpectedly, this relatively long period of time, which connects early and late human development, has not been given a lot of attention in the research world. Childhood and adolescence have been shown as periods of dynamic and vital growth and development, yet we know surprisingly little about the characteristics of adulthood (Lachman, et al., 1994). Also, the results presented by the limited research that exists seem quite conflicting. Is it a time of greatest personal and financial freedom paired up with a peak professional experience; a time of boredom, disappointment and professional plateau; a phase of increased responsibility for children and aging parents accompanied by the decline of one’s own physical health (Freund & Ritter, 2009)?

In addition, the picture of midlife that emerges out of today's popular culture is full of mockery and caricatures (Horton, 2002). There seem to exist only two opposing scenarios: "One of these holds that the time is consumed with reckless and driven searching for one's youth. (...) The other view, also culturally supported, considers midlife to be a wholly unappealing plateau, dull stasis, an uneventful series of years" (Horton, 2002, p. 278). It seems to me that all the above scenarios might be possible as the experiences of midlife will vary according to many factors, such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, culture, marital status, gender, employment, and health status.

Gambhir and Chadha (2013) in their article, "Psychological Experiences of Midlife," revealed that often when you ask people about "midlife" they offer another word that goes with it and that is the word "crisis". The authors identify crisis as "consisting of the simultaneous onset of a number of life events, all of which conspire to cause a substantial, and at time traumatic, re-evaluation of self and relationships" (Gambhir & Chadha, 2013, p. 27).

Midlife Crisis and the Confrontation with Death

The term "midlife crisis" has been coined by Jaques (1965) and appeared for the first time in his very engaging and fascinating article "Death and the Mid-life Crisis". Jaques became interested in the phenomenon of midlife transition while studying lives of many famous artists such as Bach, Raphael, Gauguin, and Goethe, to name just a few. During his research, he noticed "a marked tendency towards crisis in the creative work of great men in their middle and late thirties" (Jaques, 1965, p. 502). He also observed that the crisis expressed itself in three different ways: the creative career came to an end because of the drying up of the creative genius, or because of the actual death; the creative flair showed itself for the very first time; or there was a

significant change and a shift in the quality and content of the masters' work (Jaques, 1965, p. 502).

Jaques has taken his examples from the world of the creative genius because he believed that midlife crisis had manifested itself in their life in the most "full and rounded form". However, he claimed that midlife transition is a reaction that reveals itself in everyone and that the primary reason for that transition is a sudden awareness of death:

I believe, and shall try to demonstrate, that it is this fact of the entry upon the psychological scene of the reality and inevitability of one's own eventual personal death, that is the central and crucial feature of the mid-life phase – the feature which precipitates the critical nature of the period. Death – at the conscious level – instead of being a general conception, or an event experienced in terms of the loss of someone else, becomes a personal matter, one's own death, one's own real and actual mortality (Jaques, 1965, p. 506).

According to Jaques (1965), everyone will react to an encounter with realization of death differently. Some will be able to face it while others will try to deny it. Yet, it is that ability to live the second half of life with the conscious knowledge and acceptance of death that is needed in order to reach a truer understanding of life itself, deepen one's awareness, and achieve greater self-realization through cultivation of such values as wisdom, fortitude, courage and love (Jaques, 1965).

Though many scholars dealing with the subject of midlife crisis quote Jaques' work in relation to the coining of the phrase, at the same time most of them dismiss his theory on the nature of midlife transition as invalid, or at least exaggerated. Some argue that the proposed picture of people in their forties beginning to think about death is outdated "given the longevity

revolution of the twentieth century” (Wethington, 2000, p. 87). Others suggest that sudden awareness of immortality seems to be a rather new phenomenon as in the past most people would have been exposed to deaths in their families throughout their lives due to lack of medical technology (Lawrence, 1980).

Even though I recognize the above arguments, at the same time I am quite fascinated by and attracted to another point of view. Setiya (2014) in his carefully crafted, philosophical article “The Midlife Crisis” confirms that often crisis is brought about through our confrontation with mortality: “Something about the fact that we will eventually die, that life is finite, makes us feel that everything we do is empty or futile” (Setiya, 2014, p. 2). The author asks some poignant questions: How to still find meaning in the world, which suddenly “contracted to a single path” (p. 3)? How to still live fully knowing that “the best I can hope for is another forty years” (p. 14)? Without a doubt, an interesting change takes place for the middle-aged individual: one stops counting time since birth and starts thinking about the time yet left to live (Brim, 1974).

Scholarly Research on Midlife Crisis

How do researchers view midlife crisis and do they agree that such a phenomenon is worthwhile mentioning, let alone studying?

Just as it is surprising that not much research has been devoted to exploration of the midlife phase, it is equally remarkable to note that a large number of articles deals specifically with the question of midlife crisis. Let me be more precise. The authors of those articles do not seem necessarily interested in the phenomenon of midlife crisis as such and what it could possibly mean for an individual to be living it, but rather they are asking if it is legitimate for us to use the term itself.

What one encounters in the literature on the subject is mostly a debate between the proponents and the opponents of the concept of midlife crisis (Freund & Ritter, 2009). It seems that a significant number of scholars is trying to prove that either the phenomenon of midlife crisis does not really exist or that it has been unnecessarily blown out of proportions. Some argue that midlife transition is more like a chimera rather than a crisis (Kruger, 1994); others focus on the uncovering of the myths surrounding “so-called midlife crisis” (Lawrence, 1980).

In my study, I have come across a considerable number of scholars who refuse the midlife crisis perspective, which assumes that the midlife passage will be eventful and full of inner and outer turmoil. For example, Wethington (2000) argues that the concept of midlife crisis should not be looked at as a theoretical research concept but rather as a contemporary folk belief. In her opinion people seem to overestimate the possibility of having midlife crisis and there are no actual indications, which would suggest that midlife is a time of “out-of-the-ordinary distress” (p. 87). The most important changes already took place early in life when the foundation for the future career and relationship was being laid; big changes are rather rare in mature adulthood (Wethington, 2000).

Why then is the concept of midlife crisis so popular? According to Lawrence (1980) the potent presence of the concept in the public domain can be explained by understanding the process, which popularized it in the 1970s. Lawrence suggests an interesting justification for misconceptions surrounding midlife crisis phenomenon. 1970s have been described as the decade of “narcissism” (Lasch, in Lawrence, 1980). There was an explosion of interest in self-help literature as people began looking for concepts to better understand and name their life experiences. Many appreciated the newly coined term “midlife crisis” because it normalized a stressful experience, making it more bearable. Generalization allowed individuals to move

through tough times with more acceptance and ease. “The thinking went: it is not quite so bad to be faced with difficulties in my life if I know that everyone else is also having them” (Lawrence, 1980, p. 36).

There are a number of researchers who similarly to Lawrence do not necessarily argue that midlife crisis does not exist, but rather they oppose treating it and talking about it as an inevitable experience of life. They are against the view which conveys that everyone goes through midlife crisis at the same, specific time and that it holds the same, specific characteristics for each individual (e.g. Lawrence, 1980; Kruger, 1994). They refuse to accept the view of crisis being a normative experience and assert that perhaps “clinically trained investigators find what they are educated into looking for, namely, pathology” (Kruger, 1994, p. 1301).

It seems that many mainstream psychologists believe that the experience of midlife crisis is in fact pathology and is faced mostly by those who tend to be more neurotic and prone to difficulties in their life anyway (e.g., Lachman et al., 1994). However, on the other side of the spectrum, there exist a number of researchers who hold an understanding of midlife crisis being an opportunity for growth and an important chance to review one’s life, take a closer look at one’s values, beliefs and the meaning making process. In their opinion “transition and crisis can no longer be viewed as deficiencies of character or spirit, but rather the norm” (O’Connor & Wolfe, 1991, p. 2).

Because of my Polish background it was particularly interesting for me to find an article about midlife crisis out of University of Lublin in Poland. Oles (1999) described the midlife transition as a process of consecutive internal and external changes, caused by the realization that the old adaptation style has become inadequate. To add to it: “On the one hand, midlife crisis has

to do with a re-evaluation of the past and dissatisfaction with the present. On the other hand, midlife transition offers new opportunities to follow personal dreams and to reformulate personal strivings” (Oles, 1999, p. 1060).

Theoretical Perspectives of Change, Development and Transition

I believe it to be of importance for the purpose of this study to become familiar with and bring into focus a couple of theoretical lenses through which the change and growth at midlife have been viewed.

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961).

One of the first investigators to support the notion of midlife transition was Carl Gustav Jung, the chief founder of modern psychiatry and psychotherapy. In his very stimulating essay, “The Stages of Life,” Jung (1933) quite poetically compares the span of the human life to the journey of the sun. He divides that life span into the first half, which moves through the morning and lasts till about noon, and the second half, so called the afternoon of life, which leads all the way to the evening and beyond. According to Jung (1933) the second half of life begins for each person at around 40 years of age, and something of great importance happens during that transition from the morning to the afternoon of life: a mysterious and significant change in the human psychic takes place:

At first it is not a conscious and striking change; it is rather a matter of indirect signs of a change which seems to take its rise from the unconscious. Often it is something like a slow change in the person’s character; in another case certain traits may come to light which disappeared in childhood; or again, inclinations and interests begin to weaken and others arise to take their places (Jung, 1933, p. 104).

According to Jung it seems to be of great importance to experience those changes and allow them to work on our psyche rather than cling to the old convictions and values as they were “eternally valid”. We simply cannot live the second half of our life guided by the principles of the first. The consequence for doing so would be possibly too serious: diminution of our personality and damage to our soul (Jung, 1933).

Erick Erikson (1902-1994).

Another psychoanalyst who used the concept of crisis in his theory of development was Erikson. He is the most known for his studies on the psychosocial development of human beings, and his well-established theory of eight different stages of growth and evolution (Erikson, 1959). His model is built on the concept of crisis, a needed obstacle, overcoming of which will allow the individual to move upwards on the stage ladder of development to acquire a certain capacity. It might be curious to note however that even though in his research Erikson addressed the entire life cycle of a human being, his account of development in adulthood is not quite complete. While he was able to produce a colorful and detailed picture of the five stages of childhood, the three adult periods he painted with a rather broad, and more general brush stroke.

Let us take a closer look at Erikson’s second stage of adulthood, which is of particular interest to us, called Generativity versus Stagnation (ages 40-65). During this phase, the individual must be able to contribute of himself to the world in a creative, engaging way. According to Erikson this ability is most clearly portrayed through parenthood and taking care of the future generations. Those who for some reason will not be able to have their own offspring are advised to pick up some other form of altruistic concern. This particular time in Erikson’s view is an important one as “this is a stage of the growth of the healthy personality” (Erikson, 1959, p. 97). In the article, “Growth and Crisis of the Healthy Personality,” Erikson (1959) warns

those who do not develop generativity against unhealthy self-absorption and becoming their own only child. When all goes well in the second stage of adulthood a person will be able to acquire a new quality of Care.

Daniel Levinson (1920-1994).

Another scholar who closely pondered the idea of midlife crisis was Levinson (In Freund & Ritter, 2009). In his theory of human development, he proposed that growth and change occur in stages and each stage is characterized by a specific developmental task. He divided all of adulthood into alternating periods of stable life structure and transition. "A person's life structure is the pattern of activities, relationships, roles, and physical settings at a given time which enables one to pursue a set of life choices and values" (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987, p. 801). Levinson's chronological concept of transition, connected to each stage and lasting approximately 5 years, is the time when change happens because the old structures of dealing with life's challenges are no longer adequate. According to Levinson the tasks of every transition are:

To question and re-appraise the existing structure, to explore various possibilities for change in the self and the world, and to move towards commitment to the crucial choices that will form the basis for the new life structure in the ensuing stable period (Levinson in O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987, p. 801).

In his studies of midlife 80% of Levinson's subjects underwent severe crisis during midlife transition. The transition (ages 40-45) was characterized by possibly painful process of reevaluation of one's marital and professional life, which might lead to "de-illusionment", disappointment, and even cynical attitude (Levinson in O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987). This period of

external and internal turmoil Levinson called midlife crisis, and the resolution of it is essential to Levinson's theory.

O'Connor and Wolfe's Theory of Transition.

O'Connor and Wolfe (1987) picked up Levinson's idea of transition and through their research tried to deepen the understanding of the very process of transition. What emerged out of their extensive studies of midlife transition was a sequence concept and model that might be helpful for the interpretation of the concept of midlife crisis and also for grasping the general phenomenon of change. The five-step model of transition is built accordingly (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987, pp. 805-807):

Step one: *Stability*. Here one's life structure is well established with stable roles and relationships. The values and beliefs seem clear and unobstructed.

Step two: *Rising Discontent*. No life structure remains constant for periods longer than a few years and out of those periods of stability will arise discontent, which is "a source of energy for change and new directions for growth" (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987, p. 806). There surfaces a new desire to do things differently without however knowing yet how. Some aspects of self that have been ignored until now are demanding attention and consideration. The need for change is "felt in the gut" rather than being logical and rational.

Step three: *Crisis*. Suddenly the world as we knew it is no more. Everything is put into question as the old life structure is collapsing. The belief system, the values, identity and self-worth are on the line and we really do not know who we are any more. The running emotions of that time are intense and extreme: anger, depression, confusion, boredom and grief.

Step four: *Re-Direction and Adaptation*. "Crisis provides the shock, the motivation, the frame breaking, and the unfreezing necessary for change to take place" (O'Connor & Wolfe,

1987, p. 806). For the brave of heart, step four provides an opportunity to exercise different choices and try on new ideas and identities in order to invite growth to take place. However, many will not dare to swim to the new shores in fear of the unknown and will hold on for dear life to the old, familiar horizon, relieved for surviving yet another storm.

Step five: *Re-Stabilizing*. Here, it is time for commitment to a particular, newly acquired life structure. Certain choices are being made and one is asserting a new identity and purpose.

O'Connor and Wolfe (1987) certainly did not perceive the period of adulthood as a "long plateau of steady rationality" (p. 814). Instead, they acknowledged not just a possibility but rather necessity for midlife crisis, which can serve as a motivational force for change and growth.

Summary

As the above literature analysis shows there are as many opinions on the existence and the nature of midlife transition as there are people interested in the subject. I would venture to say that just the fact that so much research has been conducted on the phenomenon of midlife crisis (even if only to point out that others were not correct or limited in their understanding) makes for a proof that the topic is indeed an important one for counsellors to engage with. It is my aspiration and a goal for the next chapter of this paper to go beyond simple arguments and superficial descriptions. I have confidence that as we immerse ourselves in the rich sharing of experiences and discoveries of writers, poets, scientists and philosophers a true and complete picture of the midlife transition will emerge.

Only after having a full understanding of the phenomenon the therapists will be able to address it competently and to support those seeking professional help in the midst of confusing and often disturbing midlife experiences.

Chapter 3. Subjective Experience of Midlife Crisis

I already know the storm, and I am troubled as the sea.

I leap out, and fall back,

and throw myself out, and am absolutely alone

in the great storm.

– Rilke (1981, p. 79)

This chapter will explore what exactly midlife transition looks like and which areas of an individual's life might be the most affected by it. Certainly, change at midlife will take on many different forms, faces and shapes in endless combination of possibilities, and yet it seems important to become familiar with the overall gesture of change and study the tendency of that particular life transition.

It is my wish that this chapter will provide health care professionals with a detailed picture of midlife change in hopes to deepen the conversation on the subject. After addressing the general, theoretical context of the phenomenon in the previous chapter, it is now time to offer concrete examples of midlife struggles experienced by different individuals. The examples, presented below in a form of questions, might serve as a guide for those working with middle-aged clients on how to dialog about experiences which at first might be difficult to understand and come to terms with.

In my presentation, I will draw upon an extensive knowledge of James Hollis, Jungian analyst, whose broad research on the “Middle Passage” has been extremely helpful in expanding of my understanding of the concept; also, Hollis' books have been hopeful companions in times of my personal midlife journey through the dark night of the soul.

I will be supporting the picture of midlife crisis with writings of other authors, such as Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), an Austrian philosopher, educator, and visionary whose understanding of the human development lead him to creation of the science of the human being, called Anthroposophy. Among his many areas of influence, Steiner is a founder of a worldwide movement of an alternative education system of Waldorf Schools, where the curriculum is specifically and carefully designed to support the developmental stages of the child. On a personal note, I have been a Waldorf school teacher for the last 10 years and it seems like an exciting opportunity to be able to share my journey with Anthroposophy and its understanding of the human being and the nature of change.

I believe, that the depiction of midlife transition would not be complete without giving voice to the poets. The interesting thing about poetry is that it has the ability to paint a true picture of a phenomenon with just a few words. What sometimes researchers need years to discover and many pages of writing to convey to others, the poets know immediately and intimately as an inner experience of the soul.

Could anyone portray the first stage of change better than the Sufi poet Hafiz in his poem of less than 20 words:

“Damn Thirsty”

First

The fish needs to say,

“Something ain’t right about this

Camel ride –

And I’m

Feeling so damn

Thirsty”.

(Hafiz, 1999, p. 198)

It seems that indeed the change at midlife is prompted by the realization that something is not quite right. All of a sudden, we might be feeling like a fish taking a ride on the camel’s back, finding it hard to breathe. Or if we put it in words of the scholars, what we are likely to experience at midlife is a paradigm shift (O’Connor & Wolfe, 1991). The paradigm is defined here as a system of values, beliefs, expectations, and perceptions that helps to make sense of the world we live in (p. 3). It influences and permeates everything that we think, feel and do, though often on the unconscious level. Each individual is embedded in his or her paradigm and so we can say that it is like a culture, which helps us to deal with many life circumstances (O’Connor & Wolfe, 1991).

What seems to take place at midlife is a loosening of the old ways of seeing and doing. The individual begins to question their beliefs and values, and suddenly starts asking fundamental questions about life, identity, meaning, and purpose. For many different reasons (which we will address more fully later in this chapter) the old paradigm does not work any longer and clearly a new perspective needs to be taken. The person might realize that all along they have been a fish riding on the camel’s back, and now the time has come to look for more appropriate and fulfilling ways of being in the world. Change needs to happen, however, it might take time to transition to more suitable environment and truthful ways of expression. Researchers (e.g., O’Connor & Wolfe, 1991) talk about a period of several years for the paradigm shift to take place.

In this chapter, we will examine that uncomfortable time of “in between”, be it the difficult phase between the realization of thirst and getting into the source of water, or to use

another metaphor, the crossing of the dangerous waters of the Middle Passage with hope of getting safely to the shore. It might be useful to mention that midlife transition is not necessarily a chronological event; it is rather a psychological experience, which means that one can be “stunned into consciousness” (Hollis, 1993, p. 18) at any time during the midlife stage. Midlife crisis is not so much about “when” (though it more or less indicates the time as midlife) as it is about “what”.

The “What” of Midlife Crisis

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of midlife transition, especially in its very beginning stage, is suddenly having a lot of questions (O’Connor & Wolfe, 1987). I have always been assured that formulating questions was even more important than having answers. In my education, it was considered to be a sign of the ability to think, to seriously reflect and study. And yet, it was answers that we were all graded on, and it was answers that were really attractive to us. Perhaps our attitudes are just a reflection of today’s culture, where with the development of modern technology most of the answers are just a click away.

Some authors have taken up the interesting subject of questions in their writing. For example, Rilke (1934/1962) in his “Letters to a young poet” makes a suggestion to love the questions themselves. And though his plea might seem outdated and out of touch with today’s western reality, I cannot help but consider his advice true when he puts forward that: “The point is to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer” (Rilke, 1934/1962, p. 35). Who can though with a hopeful heart endure the ambiguity of the unknown? Especially, when what is at the stake is our very self?

Questions of identity.

The questions asked during midlife crisis consider not small matters, the most important being: “Who am I and where am I going?” The question of identity returns to us once again, even though we have perhaps not asked it since adolescence, when our identity was beginning to form more consciously for the first time.

According to Hollis (1994) throughout our life we live many different identities. The first one is the identity of childhood, where we are the most connected to the world of our parents. Here, the child learns through imitation of his or her environment, copying the behaviors, words and even inner moods of those around (Bento, Knighton, Nelson, & Tresemer, 2015). From the dependency of childhood, we move to the independence of adulthood through the period of second identity, which begins at puberty. The turbulent years of adolescence are marked by the development of a distinct and separate inner life, which at first might seem quite chaotic (Bento et al., 2015). With the lack of traditional rites of passage in our culture this phase of development might be cloaked in confusion, and filled with anxiety and apprehension. Perhaps absence of significant rituals and important thresholds in the life of our youth might be responsible for their search for danger and exhibition of risky behaviors. Hollis (1994) suggests that this period of the first adulthood extends all the way to the age of forty (p. 25), or may even in some cases continue throughout one’s whole life. He calls it a provisional personality, a temporary identity “lacking the depth and uniqueness which makes the person truly an individual” (Hollis, 1994, p. 25).

This provisional personality, as an identity build mainly upon the world of our social connections, our culture, and our family needs to be questioned, scrutinized, and then shed and discarded for the growth and change of the second adulthood to take place. We need to ask an

exciting and perhaps at the same time terrifying question of who are we without the roles that we have played in our life so far, without the status, positions, titles and salaries. In this powerful life evaluation lies an opportunity to go “beyond the determinism of parents, parent complexes and cultural conditioning” (Hollis, 1994, p. 26). We will only be able to enter the next phase of identity, the second adulthood, when the false self has died (Hollis, 1994).

The concept of the true and false self is a controversial one. Let us look at it more closely for a moment. When Hollis talks about death of the false self what does he mean by it? When we contemplate the concept of true self what do we usually mean by it? I would venture to say that the idea of true self is connected to other important concepts of: freedom and becoming. To me they are closely related and both are inherent in being human. It is a curious thing indeed that the human being is able to make something of him- or her-self. That reality seems to be different for the animal and the plant kingdom where nature simply provides each organism with the archetype of the particular species: a cow will always be a cow, a donkey will never be able to decide to become a horse, and an acorn seed will always grow into an oak tree. However, a human being cannot simply rely on the forces of growth within him or her. Each person must become something in the course of their life as each has the unique freedom to imagine, aspire and reach for what it is that they desire for themselves.

I would like to propose that perhaps when we talk about the true self we mean that free part of our being that is able to do the above: to freely dream and take action towards becoming. Steiner (1949) puts it clearly in his “Philosophy of Freedom” when he states that there exists in each human being the possibility for transformation and that “the human being remains in the imperfect state, unless he takes hold of the material for transformation within him and transforms himself through his own force” (p. 132).

I believe, that when Hollis (1994) refers to midlife crisis as an opportunity to get in touch with our true self he understands it as a chance to connect with that part of our being that wants to become more and more free, beyond the polarity of “nature versus nurture”. According to Steiner (1949), “Nature makes of man merely a natural being; society makes of him a being who acts according to law; only he himself can make a free man of himself” (p. 132).

Who am I then beyond being a female, a daughter, a wife, a teacher? What remains when I strip myself of all those roles and identities, which have been given to me by life itself or which I myself, more or less unconsciously, acquired and pursued during the first half of my life journey?

During the “Grief and Loss” counselling course, I participated in an interesting exercise where I was asked to write down 5 different roles that I identified with in my life; then I was asked to number them according to their importance. After that, I had to cross off each identity, erase them all one by one, starting with the least important one, each time imagining what my life would be like without that particular role to play. At the end, I was left with nothing. Yet, that nothing felt powerfully free and liberating. It felt like for a moment I was able to be in touch with the core, the essence of my own self, which was clean and simple, and yet held within all the possibilities of being and becoming. There was an open space within me filled with lightness and peace, which were inspiring and exciting.

The idea of our true identity has been explored and questioned by many writers. Dag Hammarskjöld in his powerful inner dialog talks about the need for a disciplined single mindedness in order to get to the mysterious experience of the real “I”:

At every moment you choose yourself. But do you choose **your** self? Body and soul contain a thousand possibilities out of which you can build many Is. But in one of them is

there a congruence of the elector and the elected. Only one--which you will never find until you have excluded all those superficial and fleeting possibilities of being and doing with which you toy, out of curiosity or wonder or greed, and which hinder you from casting anchor in the experience of the mystery of life, and the consciousness of the talent entrusted to you which is your *I* (Hammarskjold, 1964, p. 19).

It seems that what Hammarskjold is conveying is that we have a responsibility to ourselves and to the world to become worthy of all that has been entrusted, given to us. It must be our duty and our life task “to become as nearly like ourselves as we can manage” (Hollis, 2001, p. 69). It also reminds me of the Parable of the Talents in the Bible (Matthew 25: 14-30), where the master who is leaving on a journey entrusts his servants with the talents. First servant receives five talents, and he is the one who during his master’s absence is able to double the gift; the second servant receives two talents and he also is able to multiply his endowment by the time the master comes back home. However, the third servant who receives only one talent does not do anything with it; instead he buries it in the ground. Upon his return, the master rewards the two servants who were able to double their gift and he punishes the one who out of fear did not dare to use what was given to him.

It seems to me that midlife transition might be exactly about taking the account of all that we have been given, all our skills, gifts, and abilities and examining it. While we simultaneously look at the past deeds and gaze towards the future possibilities we can make a decision about what is still worth pursuing. Which talents do I invest in to multiply them and which do I let go of; what risks are still awaiting to be taken and which practices can be shed and discarded?

It is quite fitting to the above discussion that the word crisis shares the same root as the words criticism and critique from the Greek “krinein” meaning “to sift” (Hollis, 2001, p. 76).

Certainly, for many individuals midlife crisis presents an opportunity to discern, consider and separate the essential and vital from the trivial, false or unimportant parts of their identity.

Questions of direction.

It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work and that when we no longer know which way to go we have begun our real journey (Berry in Kobat- Zinn, 2005, p. 1).

Closely related to the identity question of “Who am I?” is the question of life’s direction: “Where am I going?” The matter of work is another important area, which will most likely demand to be assessed during midlife transition. Having resurrected our gifts and talents, which might have been buried for a while, we can now turn to the question of what we would like to do with them in the second half of our life. If the task of the first question was to get as closely to ourselves as possible, then the task of the second question is to discover or to remember how this Self can be fully present in the world.

By midlife most of us have experienced an economic reality and the need to earn a living (Hollis, 1994). For some it might have been an exciting journey of starting up a new business, others became part of a bigger, perhaps very successful corporation, while still others struggled to make the ends meet every month. Some identified with their positions and careers strongly, while others always felt like strangers in their work-world, all along playing out the projections of their parents or fulfilling the needs of demanding partners.

The midlife crisis, when it comes, will often touch this important area of life and manifest itself as a sudden dissatisfaction with one’s career, a certain frustration, boredom, confusion or anger (Hollis, 1994). One might suddenly feel stuck and dramatically trapped in the old experience:

It's possible I am pushing through solid rock
in flintlike layers, as the ore lies, alone;
I am such a long way in I see no way through,
and no space: everything is close to my face,
and everything close to my face is stone.

(Rilke, 1981, p. 55)

One becomes aware of a significant longing for a change that is not yet clear, and a path, which is not yet in sight. The not knowing can be terrifying and disempowering, and so understandably one is desperately looking for answers in this tender time of transition:

Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

(Oliver in *Teaching with Fire*, 2003, p. 145)

However, this uncomfortable land of not knowing is exactly where we need to dwell for a while. David Whyte (2009), a contemporary poet and a speaker, in his book *The Three Marriages; Reimagining Work, Self, and Relationship* suggests that the experience of not knowing is an important one, as it invites us to start paying attention and also prevents us from taking steps towards false directions. Perhaps we have been on this journey for a very long time and we stopped looking around, we stopped paying attention to the landscape; in fact, we have forgotten where we were going in the first place, and now we are lost. Another poet, David Wagoner, gives us a useful and powerful advice:

Stand Still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you

Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know and be known.
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.
(Wagoner in *Teaching with Fire*, p. 97)

It seems that this being lost might be an excellent opportunity to pause, be still and listen carefully for the forest, the world, holds the answer to another important question: “What am I really called to do?”

It is necessary here to make a distinction between a job and a vocation. Hollis (1994) differentiates these two as the job being what we do to meet the economic reality of our life, and the vocation as what we are called to do with our life (p. 72). It is important also to recognize that we do not choose our vocation, instead it chooses us and it is up to us how we respond to this calling. Again, Dag Hammarskjöld comes to mind as he perfectly portrays the reality of that calling in his major work “Markings”:

I don't know Who — or what — put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer *Yes* to Someone — or Something — and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal (Hammarskjöld, 1964, p. 205).

Another vital element that Hammarskjöld touches on in the above quote is meaning. Why is the question of work so important? Because: “A considerable part of the meaning of one’s life comes from saying yes when asked” (Hollis, 1994, p. 74). Victor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor, was very much interested in this human quest for meaning. In his well-

known book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959) he acknowledged work and doing a deed as one of the ways to discover meaning in one's life. Frankl (1959) was certain that to find true meaning in life we must be in the world rather than in the enclosed system of our own psyche.

Perhaps one more aspect worth mentioning in the discussion about work and the vocational calling is love. Another poet, Kahlil Gibran who contemplated the nature of work, wrote beautifully in his masterpiece *The Prophet*:

Work is love made visible.

And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.

For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds half man's hunger. (Gibran, 1923/1968, p. 28)

It seems important that we do something in our life that we love and feel passionate about. And perhaps that something does not need to be connected to our career, as not everyone will be lucky enough to get paid for a job that he or she loves. Perhaps there will not always be in our life a congruence of our job and our vocation. Yet, it is important to keep asking the question and patiently wait for the answer to come to the surface. Maybe midlife transition will not necessarily be about the dramatic change of career but possibly about discovery of a new life task, a new hobby or an area of interest which pursued in our spare time could bring us a great deal of joy and satisfaction. Again, we are reminded that midlife transition is about courage and movement to go beyond the familiar landscape towards the new horizon.

Questions of relationships.

The final set of questions that I would like to examine in this chapter has to do with the relationship that we have with our intimate partners. In the field of the romantic love and sexuality the drama of life unfolds itself in myriads of ways. It seems that those in the center of the midlife storm will be faced with some serious challenges in their private life of marriage and relationship (Hollis, 1994).

Let us first focus on two concepts that have been helpful in my understanding of crisis in the realm of intimate relationships, that is, projections and complexes. Both concepts come from Jungian psychology: The concept of projection being understood as “a natural process whereby an unconscious characteristic of one’s own is perceived in an outer object or person” (Hollis, 1998, p. 146), and the concept of a complex being explained as an energized structure, which has been generated by our history (Hollis, 1996, p. 118). Just like we are not able to escape from all that once happened to us, so we are not able to avoid our complexes. “The charged clusters are buttons, so to speak, which we unavoidably make available to the world and which may be unwittingly pressed by anyone at any time” (Hollis, 1996, p. 119).

According to Hollis (1998) out of all possible projections the most common ones have to do with the institution of marriage and the relationship with the “Magical Other”. Apparently, no one is really aware of the weight and seriousness of their expectations while getting married. The demands we place on each other are so severe that they are simply impossible to meet: We want the other person to give our life meaning, we want them to make us whole again, we want them to heal our wounds, and be ready to read our mind whenever possible (Hollis, 1994, p. 28). The theory by which we are able to explain the above observation connects us with the concept of a complex and specifically to this discussion with the parent complex. It seems that our primary

caregivers significantly influence our choices of life partners and that “intimate relationships of any kind carry such a large freight because they come closest to replicating that Intimate Other which once was the parent” (Hollis, 1994, p. 29).

It is the hurt inner child, who in search for the Magical Other, on the one hand wants to get as far away from the disappointing parental figure as possible, and on the other hand, it longs to find in the intimate partner the ideal parent that never was. And so, according to Hollis (1994), in the matter of the heart we have but two choices: we either marry a person who is the opposite of our parent, or one who is an exact replica of our parent, bringing into the relationship exactly the issues we have been trying to avoid and forget.

Both choices might be problematic and both offer a great possibility for disappointment, because in both cases our choices are driven by the unconscious experiences of ourselves. In both scenarios we project onto the other all our expectations, hopes and needs for wholeness, only to realize much too soon that the other person is an ordinary human being just like us, with his or her own projections. Apparently, nothing wears away our projections quicker than living together and just around midlife when finally “our capacity for self-deception is exhausted” (Hollis, 1994, p. 44) we fully wake up to the otherness of the Other. Suddenly, we “conclude at midlife that ‘You’re not the person I married’. Actually, they never were. They always were somebody else, a stranger we barely knew then and know only a little better now” (Hollis, 1994, p. 47).

Who has not experienced the excruciating power of longing for the Other; the desire so strong that it only could be stilled by merging with the beloved? The poets certainly know this powerful phenomenon first hand. Here is just one poetic sample of that wonderfully experienced symbiosis. The poem comes from the collection of *100 Love Sonnets* by Pablo Neruda:

I love you because I know no other way
than this: where *I* does not exist, nor *you*,
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.

(Neruda, 1959/2000, p. 39)

And yet, those who have dared to analyze and give advice in the sphere of love often warn us about the romantic fusion, which they perceive as one of “immature forms of love” (Fromm, 1956/2006, p. 17). Rilke seems very clear about the difference between the merging of selves and the task of real love:

Love is at first not anything that means merging, giving over, and uniting with another (for what would a union be of something unclarified and unfinished, still subordinate?), it is a high inducement to the individual to ripen, to become something in himself, to become world, to become world for himself for another’s sake; it is a great exacting claim upon him, something that chooses him out and calls him to vast things (Rilke, 1934/1962, p. 54).

It seems that during the midlife awakening the fusion model of a relationship does no longer serve us. We are waking up to the true otherness of the Other and “where one wanted the simple love of sameness, one must now learn the difficult task of loving otherness” (Hollis, 1994, p. 49). The point is to realize that we will not be saved or rescued by our partner, that the real relationship will need to be based on two people taking responsibility for themselves. Rollo May (1969/2007) in his book *Love and Will* suggests that our life task is to unite love and will and that we need our will “to lay the groundwork which makes a relatively mature love possible”

(p. 285), where one does no longer seek “to re-establish a state of infancy” (p. 258) but instead, one takes responsibility for his or her choices.

The above does not come easily and May (1969/2007) recognized it by calling the relating of love and will a task, which might only be achieved over time. Similarly, Rilke (1934/1962) also called love one of the most difficult tasks ever undertaken by the human being.

This brings us to the phenomenon of a love affair so often present during the midlife transition. Does the affair happen because one cannot comprehend yet the enormity of the love task? Perhaps what our scared and lost in the midlife storm self wants is to simply go back to the womb and to sleep and forget - fused with another upon whom all the old projections of the inner child can be placed again. Could it be that before taking a step forward we are thrown back to the old patterns of being in order to confront them more consciously? The possible, positive meaning of the midlife affair could be “to go back and to pick up what was left behind in one’s development. Since what was undeveloped agitates from below consciousness” (Hollis, 1994, p. 59).

Summary

Ultimately, what we aim for in this quest called midlife transition is a greater level of self-consciousness on all life fronts. Because only to the degree and depth that we can be comfortable with self we can also be in communion with others. And so the identity question weaves through all the levels of our life at midlife: It is my responsibility to know myself in order to know with whom and where I am going.

The midlife crisis is often experienced as an eruption, breaking of the crusted structure of life that we knew up to this point. Perhaps new landscapes want to be created, and new horizons discovered. Yet, we need to be daring and courageous as the severity of the changes that lie

ahead can be frightening and overwhelming. We might feel vulnerable and confused with too many questions and not enough answers in sight. Still, according to Hollis (1994) we need suffering for the change of consciousness to take place and “if we are courageous enough, care enough about our lives, we may, through that suffering, get our lives back” (p. 19).

It is precisely the task of a counsellor to help the clients to gain back their lives through truthful examining of one’s life. By asking difficult questions the therapist invites the client on a journey of gentle exploration, while communicating that it will be a safe, even though not always comfortable, travelling together. It is not a small task to normalize, to assist, and to encourage those on the path to new selfhood. The counsellor needs to understand and not be afraid to address the midlife transition as it comes up in the clients’ life and consequently in her own life.

If for some reason the growth is stunted and the new awakened forces of the soul do not get assimilated into the person’s life in a healthy, organic way, they might need to find a different way of expression, perhaps as depression, addiction, despair and anxiety.

The next chapter will present a picture of a counselling model, which might be useful in assisting clients going through their midlife transition. We will try to address the question of how could the healthy therapeutic encounter look like, and what kind of tools does the therapist need to competently support clients in crisis.

Chapter 4. Midlife Crisis: Therapeutic Applications

An unexamined life is not worth living.

– Socrates (in Hollis, 2001, p. 27)

The longest journey

Is the journey inwards.

Of him who has chosen his destiny,

Who has started upon his quest

For the source of his being.

- Hammarckjold (1964, p. 58)

In this chapter, we will discuss the task of counselling for those in midlife crisis. I will present a model of help that is in line with what I believe a true therapeutic encounter might look like. I will try to answer the question of how do we as counsellors support those in midlife transition; how do we create a safe space for the clients to engage in the process of change and growth; how do we assist them in the difficult task of birthing of Self? However, before engaging with the ideal we will first look at some trends in modern psychotherapy, which in my opinion have long parted from the authentic therapeutic encounter.

In my presentation, I will draw upon the writings of therapists practising Anthroposophic Counselling Psychology, Jungian analyst James Hollis, and the Existential Psychotherapy as presented by Irvin Yalom, Rollo May, and others.

I would also like to mention here what will not be found in this chapter and why. What I consciously did not focus on are specific techniques, methods or procedures that one could simply implement while “dealing with” a client in midlife crisis. I must agree with Rollo May (1983/2015) who suggests that perhaps the biggest block to the understanding of human beings

in western world is the overemphasis on technique, “an overemphasis that goes along with the tendency to see the human being as an object to be calculated, managed, analysed” (p. 155). It is not to deny the importance of structure and adequately chosen therapeutic methods while engaging with the person in need. Yet, it is to point out, that “the importance of models and techniques has been inflated in psychotherapy” (Miller, Duncan, & Hubble, 1997), since it contributes only 15% to the therapeutic outcome (Miller et al., 1997).

Now, I would like to give a few words of introduction to the above-mentioned Anthroposophic Counselling Psychology, for it is a relatively new approach to the art of counselling. The major characteristic of its underlying philosophy, called Anthroposophy, is that it perceives every person as a being of body, soul and spirit (Bento et al., 2015). The founder of Anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner, who lived from 1861 to 1925, influenced his generation with many important initiatives such as biodynamic farming, Waldorf schools, Anthroposophic medicine, an original movement art called Eurythmy, and many others. Those inspired by his philosophy have taken his concepts on the nature of the human being and the world and begun to formulate a new approach to healing and the art of psychotherapy. In this chapter, I will give examples of this innovative approach, which “understands human existence in ways not found in mainstream psychology” (Bento et al., 2015, p. 24).

The Trend of Modern Psychotherapy

Now let us spend a moment looking at what is currently happening in the mainstream counselling psychology and what is the modern tendency when it comes to healing and diagnosis. Perhaps it should come to us as a serious concern that “a recent trend is to treat the human being as a bag of chemicals that can be adjusted by the right psychotropic drugs. In that view, all that matters is physical matter” (Bento et al., 2015, p. 10). Indeed, it seems that

nowadays the medication is brought in way too soon, when perhaps the clients would be capable of enduring the suffering; instead they are being drugged to numb the pain. The above tendency seems to be supported by the cultural movement to eliminate human suffering at all costs. After all, even the Constitution of the United States of America tells the citizens that they have the right to pursuit of happiness. Just as with the development of technology we expect having answers only a click away, so with the rise of the medical model of care we are expecting to be able to erase any kind of pain, be it physical or emotional, with a pill. And, of course, in this situation the pharmaceutical corporations are thriving and well. According to Tresemer (Bento et al., 2015), in the near future the counselling professionals will be providing care to many clients impaired by self-mediation and the over-use of prescription drugs.

One might ask: Why not to make the goal of therapy to eliminate our clients' suffering? Is it not our duty as helping professionals to alleviate our clients' pain and discomfort? And help them to replace it with joy, pleasure and happiness? To provide a possible answer to address the above questions I would like to offer a radically different view on the role of psychotherapy by quoting Jung:

The principle aim of psychotherapy is not to transport the patient to an impossible state of happiness, but to help him acquire steadfastness and philosophic patience in the face of suffering. Life demands for its completion and fulfilment a balance between joy and sorrow. But because suffering is positively disagreeable, people naturally prefer not to ponder how much fear and sorrow fall to the lot of man (Jung in Hollis, 1996, pp. 144-145).

It might be that it is in "the swamplands of the soul" (Hollis, 1996) that we forge and fashion our being and gain necessary wisdom. Perhaps the therapy should not just focus on

removing the suffering but on helping the client to move through it towards “enlarged consciousness” (Hollis, 1996, p. 10). It is a rather known, even though not a comfort-providing, concept that it is through the struggle and strife that we become our own people. Steiner said it quite well:

Our thinking needs riddles

To wake up.

Our Feeling needs pain

To mature.

Our willing needs resistance

To become strong.

(Steiner in Clark, 2017)

And yet, the mainstream therapy is much more interested in quick measurable results of symptoms reduction. Rarely is the client encouraged to stay with the painful process to achieve a greater perspective. No wonder that in the fast-paced world of superficial fix the most extensively practiced method of therapy in the Western world today is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). And even though “Albert Ellis (the father of CBT) insisted that thinking was the master of all the realms, and re-organizing your irrational beliefs the key to transformation” (Bento et al., 2015, p. 121), I would venture to say that this mechanistic view strikes me as quite limited. When feelings and thoughts are merely behaviours, which can be manipulated, in order to get rid of undesirable symptoms, we begin to diminish the incredible complexity of the human psyche, reducing the human being to a mechanism. Hollis (1996) considers it quite ironic that the idea of soul has been lost in the practice of psychotherapy. Instead, modern psychology focuses on “the behaviours which can be observed and converted to statistical models, or cognitions

which can be reprogrammed, or biochemical anomalies which can be medicated” (Hollis, 1996, p. 9).

Surely, the CBT and other similar treatment modalities have their place among the therapeutic approaches and it might be useful to have them as a band-aid in our therapeutic tool box, however, when dealing with the tenderness and complexity of the midlife transition other modules of treatment and attitudes will need to be considered and applied.

The Soul and Spirit of the Therapeutic Encounter

The task of therapy at midlife could be described as helping an individual to find his or her story, to recognize how it has played out up to this moment and perhaps acknowledge that there is a new, different story only awaiting to emerge, given the right therapeutic conditions (Hollis, 2001). What are those right conditions about and what would the right therapeutic climate look like?

If we agree that a person in midlife crisis is on a deep soul search, or on a spiritual journey, then the first condition for the true therapeutic encounter to take place would be to acknowledge the existence of two concepts, that is, of soul and spirit. The book with the provocative title “The Counselor...as if Soul and Spirit Matter. Inspirations from Anthroposophy” (Bento et al., 2015) has been extremely helpful in defining these two important concepts. Chapter six in the book begins with these words:

Soul and spirit. Mainstream science says you don't have these. If, however, you find them, what do you do with them? And how does the discovery assist a counsellor? These statements and questions, though oversimplified, will be familiar to anyone who has dealt with phenomena beyond the physical/chemical structures assumed by science to be the causes of our behaviour (Bento et al., 2015, p. 118).

It seems that the counsellors practicing non-mainstream psychology often wonder how it came to be that the word “soul” which lives in the very definition of psychology: “study of soul”, does no longer have a place in the Western art of psychotherapy. Duran (2016), a counsellor, who has been working with the American Indians for the last two decades, offers an explanation to the above phenomenon. He suggests that, “through the process of so called enlightenment and the Cartesian splitting of the world, we literally have done that. We have been split off from our world-soul” (p. 19). Hollis (1994) is quite clear that any therapy, which does not address issues of the soul, will remain superficial, no matter how much attention has been brought to the identification of symptoms.

It seems to me that both, Anthroposophic counselling psychology and Jungian psychology come here to the rescue as they both acknowledge the existence of spirit and soul. Anthroposophic psychology (Bento et al., 2015) defines spirit as a consciousness that permeates all creation; it is the awareness that goes beyond the physical matter. Soul, on the other hand, can be defined through its three distinct functions of thinking, feeling and willing (doing); it is that part of our being that connects us to the world. Similarly, Hollis (2001) identifies the spirit and soul as the core of our being, the Self, that part of us that feels, intuits, dreams and longs for meaning. And even though the idea of soul might be too vague for those in helping professions, we must keep the concept of soul alive “precisely in order to honour its ambiguity, its elusiveness” (Hollis, 1996, p. 13).

I propose, that during their midlife transition it is exactly that core of our clients’ being that the counsellors need to engage in the therapeutic dialog, in the “whole-soul conversation” (Bento et al., 2015). The therapeutic journey at midlife becomes then “an invitation to an enlargement of soul” (Hollis, 2001, p. 91) where each individual is beheld as a sacred mystery

with an individual task and unique developmental challenges. It is of great importance that these challenges or presented concerns, rather than being perceived as pathology, are treated as an opportunity, as pathways for the client to become more and more attuned to that which he or she came here to accomplish (Bento et al., 2015). In that regard, the therapist does not take the position of an expert but rather her role is to awaken the wisdom existing already in the client.

Another prerequisite for the whole-soul conversation to take place is the therapist's ability to listen. To create a safe space for the client to open up takes a special kind of listening: listening to hear rather than listening to speak (Bento et al., 2015, p. 91). It requires of the counsellor an inner stillness so the client can begin to hear her own thoughts and experience her own feeling-life in a new way. The therapist must become a mirror, where the client can see herself more clearly.

An alternative metaphor for listening, which I appreciate, comes from another anthroposophical counsellor, Edmund Knighton. In the chapter on mindful conversation (in Bento et al., 2015) he suggests a useful, though not easy, practice of the whole being of the therapist becoming an ear. It might be that when we are truly quiet in the presence of another person, a sympathetic resonance has a chance to occur: "We are silent enough to resonate with whatever note is played by the other. We do not have thoughts ahead of time to obstruct the resonance of the speaker's note" (Bento et al., 2015, p. 312).

I remember one of my female clients commenting to me on the usefulness of counselling. What she appreciated the most was the ability to share with me her story, knowing that I did not hold a particular agenda for her life. So far, asking friends and family for advice had turned out to be only more confusing as everyone had their own opinion on how she was to solve her relationship struggle. She was deeply moved by the experience of someone just truly being there

for her, accompanying her in the process of awakening her own voice and connecting to her own wisdom to solve the relationship issue.

Some therapists call this undivided attention to what the client is saying empathy (Miller, Duncan, & Hubble, 1997). Empathy is that attitude that places client first; it is also the attempt to understand the client's experience, even though at times it might be difficult to exactly relate to what the client is feeling. What matters is that the counsellor is trying, even struggling for that understanding. The authors of the *Escape from Babel* (1997) urge us, the therapists, to expand our view of empathy into the one, which "encompasses the light as well as the dark, the hope as well as the despair, the possibility as well as the pain" (p. 113). Empathy is not only about connecting with the client's pain and suffering, but it is also recognizing the client's strengths and resources, and connecting her with hope.

It might be useful here to make a quick distinction between empathy and sympathy, as these two capacities of soul are closely related, yet quite distinctly different. In sympathy, the therapist identifies with the suffering of the client, which might lead to the loss of self and being engulfed by the client's story (Bento et al., 2015). On the other hand, in empathy the therapist is present to the reality of the client, yet she does not get pulled into it, she is able to experience and understand the client as "on a parallel track" (Bento et al., 2015). The counsellor does not merge with the client; there is a space between, a healthy opening into which insight and a new vision might be born. It seems to me that knowing the difference between the two might save some counsellors from the risk of a burnout. Yes, we need to be there for our clients, and at the same time we should not lose sight of ourselves; our inner core needs to be still and centred, as only from that place we will be able to assess the situation more objectively.

Existential Psychotherapy

The task of therapy at midlife is to invite the client to have those regular, deep and honest therapeutic conversations. Tresemer (in Bento et al., 2015) calls the whole-soul conversation the most powerful mode of therapy, one that is much more effective than the use of pharmaceutical drugs. In the therapeutic setting an individual in midlife transition is encouraged to ask aloud those urgently experienced questions, which seem deeply related to her or his existence. In chapter 3 we have looked at some of those important questions: Who am I and where am I going? What am I supposed to do with the rest of my life? What is the meaning of my life? How do I come to terms with the fact that I am responsible for my life-choices? How do I relate to my loved ones knowing that merging with them is no longer an option? How do I embrace my separateness?

Considering that existential psychotherapy is “a dynamic therapeutic approach that focuses on concerns rooted in existence” (Yalom, 2002/2010, p. 5) I would like to explore it as a tool for helping to guide the therapeutic conversation, where the goal of therapy is not to offer solutions but rather a space for the journey of self-discovery, a place where the client might be able to begin the process of re-imagining of him or herself to go beyond reflexive responses of the past. We do not offer solutions because life is not a problem that needs to be solved but an experiment that needs to be lived (Hollis, 1996).

It seems that a person in midlife crisis comes face to face with the “givens of existence” (Yalom, 1980, p. 8). This sudden confrontation with ultimate human concerns might be brought about by an external event, for example a death of a parent, or an inner troubling sense that the world paradigm from which one has been operating up till now is no longer applicable and helpful in facing reality. We can say, that one has been plucked out of the everyday mode of

existence, which Heidegger called “a state of forgetfulness” (in Yalom, 1980, p. 30) and catapulted into a rather uncomfortable state of awareness; first, the awareness that something is not quite right any more (let’s remember the fish on the camel’s back from chapter 1).

I believe, that our role as counsellors is to normalize this highly unpleasant sensation for the client. The experience might be compared to a moment of waking up from a wonderful dream and suddenly remembering all the troubles that we have left behind while lying down to sleep. Now, the rush of consciousness is too sharp, making us want to pull up the covers tight and keep on dreaming. It is of great importance that the therapist does not put the client back to sleep by anesthetizing the pain of consciousness with medication or other therapeutic means. Instead, the counsellor’s task is to encourage the client to stay awake in order to remember. As we mentioned in chapter 1 our ultimate life-task is to wake up to ourselves, to remember what we came here to do, to recall our life-purpose and meaning. Jung called this process individuation (Hollis, 1996). “The goal of individuation is not narcissistic self-absorption, as some might believe, but rather the manifestation of the larger purposes of nature through the incarnation of the individual” (Hollis, 1996, p. 14).

Perhaps existential psychotherapy might be helpful in this process of incarnation and maturation especially by addressing the ultimate concerns of freedom and responsibility, and the human search for meaning. In the next part of this chapter, I will focus closely on these two existential phenomena as they manifest for the individual going through the midlife transition.

Freedom and responsibility.

“Responsibility means authorship” (Yalom, 1980, p. 218). How much are we really aware of the fact that we own the magic wand and hold the power to make things happen? How often do we pause and ask ourselves what is it that we would like to see happen in the story of

our life? Where is it going? What is the next chapter going to reveal? Hollis (1993) remarks ironically that in life many of us simply pass from page to page only waiting to be told in the last paragraph what the novel - our life - was all about. And yet, he adds: "The invitation of the Middle Passage is to become conscious, (and) accept responsibility for the rest of the pages" (Hollis, 1993, p. 8).

Yalom (1980) suggests that the experience of becoming aware of one's responsibility in shaping of the world can be a deeply frightening insight for the clients. He compares it to a feeling of loss of ground beneath one's feet: "Groundlessness is a commonly used term for a subjective experience of responsibility awareness" (Yalom, 1980, p. 221). The task of therapy for the client in midlife transition will be to support her in coming to terms with this important and possibly empowering realization.

However, often before the empowerment can happen, the task of the therapist is first to assist the client in breaking down of the old structures, which she has learned to perceive as a given prison, rather than something that one has carefully and skillfully built for oneself (Yalom, 1980). That old familiar prison might constitute of a job that one has been performing on automatic pilot for the last 20 years; it might be a toxic relationship that one has endured for fear of disappointing one's parents; it might be the very structure of the parent-child conflict that has never been addressed. The prison, indeed, might have taken on many different shapes and forms, and our task as counsellors is to help the client to take responsibility for creating her own reality, and for willingly, though often unconsciously, becoming a captive of her own life.

Now, at midlife, the client becomes aware not only of constrains of life but also of its freedoms. It might be quite confusing to suddenly realize that there are many possible choices of how to live one's life. Perhaps as youth and young adults we have never had the opportunity to

choose. What influenced us in our decision-making were our family values, the standards of our culture, or beliefs of our friends. Now, the task is to reevaluate and re-imagine, and to take on the responsibility for newly discovered freedom. And it takes a lot of courage and a strong ego development to dare to look for the true source of our choices (Hollis, 1996). This is how Yalom describes the ambiguity of choice experienced by the client:

No longer pushed from within by what he or she “has” to do, or pulled from without by what he or she “must” or “ought” to do, the patient has to cope with the problem of choice – with what he or she *wants* to do (Yalom, 1980, p. 224).

It is not surprising that this radical change of perspective does not happen overnight and many clients might shy away from assuming responsibility for their life. Yalom (1980) brings up a couple of different ways by which the client might avoid personal responsibility, the most common being: by placing it on others, especially on the significant others, those “Magical Others” (Hollis, 1998), whom we have merged with, in hope that they would make our life more meaningful and whole. The client’s task at midlife is to become more separate and to acknowledge the paradox, that for the relationship or marriage to be healthy, there must first be a separateness and an individual assumption of responsibility for one’s own well-being (Hollis, 1993).

For many clients, the above challenge goes hand in hand with changing the familiar narrative of being an “innocent victim” (Yalom, 1980, p. 227). The job of the counsellor in this case is to encourage the client to shift her viewpoint from perceiving oneself as a “passive sufferer of fate” (Hollis, 1996, p. 142) to more positive and empowering perspective: Yes, bad things happened to me, however, I have the power to re-imagine myself; I have the ability to create myself and my world anew; I can move beyond my history and my reflexive ways of

being. It might be the most important achievement of midlife crisis: to experience the true impulse of freedom and say, “I am not my limiting experience; I am the creative power of my potential” (Hollis, 1996, p. 127).

According to Yalom (1980), the assumption of responsibility is a crucial element for any therapeutic work to be successful. No change can take place unless the client begins to see herself as, to use the words of Goethe, “the decisive element” in her universe. That brings me to the concept of a decision-making process, which is often considered difficult by clients embarking on a therapeutic journey.

Decision-making is very much connected to the concept of choice and freedom. As Yalom (1980) points out it is extremely difficult for some individuals to make decisions (p. 317). Interestingly enough, many clients seem to know what they have to do in order to get to their desired goal, and yet they cannot bring themselves to a place from which an action would be possible. A decision-making process seems to be difficult for many reasons, one of them being the fact that by saying yes to one thing we simultaneously say no to something else (Yalom, 1980). Another reason might lie in the fact that it is a “lonely act”, for no one else can make the decision for us. Decision “confronts each of us not only with freedom but with fundamental isolation – with the fact that each of us alone is responsible for our individual situation in life” (Yalom, 1980, p. 323).

To summarize: the task of the therapy for an individual in midlife transition will most likely be to assist her in taking responsibility for the past choices and future decisions. It will be to help the client to look simultaneously into the past with the eye of compassion and towards the future with the other eye filled with courage and hope.

Meaning, meaninglessness and death.

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning* Victor Frankl (1959/2006) suggested that each individual is also responsible for actualizing the potential meaning of his or her life, and that meaning needs to be found in the world by experiencing something or doing the deed, rather than in the depth of his or her own psyche (p. 110).

“So far as we know, ours is the only species which feels driven to find meaning” (Hollis, 1996, p. 13). It seems though that this drive to meaning awakens especially during midlife. In the first half of our life the meaning comes to us simply by following the values and directions given to us by our family and the culture we live in. There seem to be meaning in repeated rituals and practices. Without much hesitation we go to school, we find a job, we marry, and have our own children. Yet, suddenly at midlife, the meaning, which so far has been taken for granted, evaporates and we are left questioning everything; we are experiencing the crisis of meaning. During this time, we might ask many existential questions: “What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of *my* life? *Why* do we live? *Why* were we put here? What do we live *for*? If we must die, if nothing endures, then what sense does anything make?” (Yalom, 1980, p. 419).

We might suddenly experience existential vacuum, manifested is a state of boredom and emptiness. Frankl (1959/2006) talks about “Sunday neurosis”, when after busy week of work we are suddenly asked to face ourselves, only to realize the inner void and the lack of real content in our life; and the free time makes one realize that there is nothing that one actually truly desires to do. Those, whose will to meaning has been frustrated might compensate it by turning their will towards power or pleasure (Frankl, 1959/2006, p. 107). It is an important task of the therapist to convey to the client that life is meaningful under any conditions. He cannot describe what the meaning is but he can show the client that meaning always exists (1969/2014, p. X).

There seem to occur a possible relationship between the crisis of meaning and the sudden awareness of one's mortality, which develops for the clients in their middle years. In the article titled "Midlife Crisis" Setiya (2014) makes a point that a crisis of meaning, which one might experience around midlife, is not so much about the fear of death but about what to make of our remaining years. He suggests that this "confrontation with mortality" and "something about the fact that we will eventually die, that life is finite, makes us feel that everything we do is empty and futile" (Setiya, 2014, p. 2). The solution might possibly be found in discovering that which gives us a reason to be glad that we were born, an activity that makes life worth living, be it "poetic appreciation, philosophy, or something else – and to bring it to our lives" (Setiya, 2014, p. 7). We can say that through the experience of crisis in midlife the client is invited to re-discover his or her passion (Hollis, 1993), and engage in that which makes life worth living again.

When working with clients struggling with the issues of meaninglessness the therapist needs to be deeply interested in the client and strive to get to know him or her as deeply as possible (Yalom, 1980). The counsellor's task is to engage the client in a conversation about their belief system, their hopes and goals, their interest and pursuits. "Engagement is the therapist's most effective approach to meaninglessness" (Yalom, 1980, p. 481).

Summary

I agree with Hollis (1996) that a person going through midlife crisis might benefit from a wholesome therapeutic encounter. What I mean by "wholesome" is a therapeutic relationship where the counsellor is ready to engage in a deep thought, feeling and willing (action) provoking conversation, in a whole-soul conversation. It might be more helpful if, rather than introducing too quickly the use of pharmaceutical drugs into this conversation, the therapist dares to bring

back to counselling the use of such words as “soul” and “spirit” while accompanying the clients on the journey through the Middle Passage; for this journey seems to be, indeed, about profound experiences of a soul-spiritual nature. It takes courage on the part of both, the client and the counsellor, to stay present with the tender process of change, when it might be just as tempting to anesthetize the pain of newly awakened consciousness.

The task of therapy might be to invite the client to become more conscious of, and therefore more responsible for, her existence, the choices that she has made in the past and the decisions awaiting to be made in the future. Rollo May (1983/2015) points out that self-consciousness is a very special capacity that only human beings possess and that in order for the individual to become fully herself, she has to be aware of herself and take responsibility for her life (May, 1983/2015, pp. 93-94). The therapy for those in midlife transition is about creating the space to explore, to engage in the issues of assuming responsibility, to struggle with choice and the process of decision making, to uncover the ways of possibly avoiding both, and to learn the new life-meaning and purpose.

Even though the tendency in modern psychotherapy is to treat the client as an object that can be manipulated, managed and analyzed, there are also other therapists in the field who are interested in seeing in front of them a real human being, and are willing to be profoundly shaken by the encounter with the being of another (May, 1983/2015). That encounter will certainly not be about providing the client with any kind of magical cure, even though the client might come with hopes of being cured, because as Hollis (1996) pointed out, life is not a disease that needs to be cured, but an experience that needs to be lived.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

*Let us risk the wildest places,
Lest we go down in comfort, and despair.
For what is life but reaching for an answer?
And what is death but a refusal to grow?*

– Oliver (1992, p. 238)

Is life about keeping the status quo? Is it about arriving one day at a place where everything is simple and peaceful, where there is no confusion and chaos, and all our questions are addressed immediately? No doubt, no sorrow, no pain? We all know that such a place is nowhere to be found, because life is about movement and movement means change, transition and evolution. Frankl (1959/2006) called it a major misconception to think that mental hygiene meant in the first-place homeostasis and equilibrium, a tensionless state. On the contrary, “what man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task” (Frankl, 1959/2006, p. 105).

Change happens whether we like it or not. In the Buddhist tradition one of “The Five Remembrances” states: “All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change” (Boccio, 2007). Change is inevitable and we cannot escape it. We can try to fight it and spend lots of energy preserving the old ways of being and doing. At the end, avoiding change becomes itself a form of suffering as we never are able to relax, rest, and accept what is coming our way (Hollis, 1996).

Long time ago, Rumi expressed this ability to welcome whatever comes our way in his profound poem called “The Guest House”:

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,

some momentary awareness comes

as an unexpected visitor.

(...) Treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out

for some new delight.

(Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, 1995, p. 109)

The poem is an invitation to a life of wonder, acceptance and curiosity, even though at the same time we must agree with Hollis (1993) when he warns us that it takes a lot of courage to face all different emotional states of our soul and to dialog with them (p. 108). According to Rumi they all have a place in our life, they are all guests and we need to be grateful for whoever comes and meet them at the door with a smile.

No doubt, life will present us all with many opportunities to practice the role of a humble and appreciative host. Though it might be difficult and strange for many to imagine, for example, to be thankful for depression. Can one living in our modern culture, which is very much focused on a quick diagnosis and elimination of symptoms, view depression as a messenger, and “a gift from the psyche which wishes that the old wounding be healed” (Hollis, 2001, p. 36)? Can we find enough patience, curiosity and courage to ask of our visitors: What are you here to teach me? From a therapeutic perspective, the unexpected visitors – the symptoms – are to be welcomed, for they present us with the self-regulating ability of the psyche (Hollis, 1993).

This research paper examined a very particular process of change that some individuals might experience at midlife. We called it midlife crisis or midlife transition and both terms were used interchangeably throughout the paper. It was not the goal of this paper to prove that midlife crisis is a widespread phenomenon and that every person in midlife will be faced with a crisis of some sort. However, upon careful examination of human experience, through the media of poetry, literature, philosophy and psychology a curious picture of an inner turmoil, struggle and questioning emerged, that many individuals, myself included, experienced in their biography around midlife. It seemed like an important indication that for some people the period of midlife might be paved with difficulties of personal, relational and professional nature, especially when we take into the account that midlife stretches over a long period of time. Most commonly considered view implies midlife to begin around 40 and end at around 60 (Lachman, Lekowicz, Marcus & Peng, 1994), though some researchers extend this period of time to the age between 30 and 75 (Gambhir & Chadha, 2013). Midlife crisis might be experienced at any point in midlife, as it is not so much about a specific time, as it is more about the psychological characteristic of the experience (Hollis, 1993).

As midlife has such a broad time frame it is likely that many counsellors will encounter in their practice clients in midlife. It seems important that those in helping professions become familiar with the concept of midlife transition and are able to recognize possible signs of crisis in order to address them in a sensitive and appropriate manner. Crisis has been defined as “the simultaneous onset of a number of life events, all of which conspire to cause a substantial, and at time traumatic, re-evaluation of self and relationships” (Gambhir & Chadha, 2013, p. 27). Indeed, there is a high probability that at midlife clients might be facing one of life’s difficult

transitions, such as death of a parent, ending of a marriage, career change or the empty nest syndrome, which all have a potential to be highly traumatic.

It is important to normalize for our clients and to acknowledge that the painful events of life can produce psychological distress manifested through various negative emotions, such as, anxiety and fears, sadness and depression, guilt, anger, and general irritability (Tedeschi & Lawrence, 2004). However, therapists must be reminded that crisis and trauma often coincide with growth and that there exists an overwhelming evidence that “individuals facing a wide variety of very difficult circumstances experience significant changes in their lives that they view as highly positive” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 3).

Researchers have identified at least three categories of benefits that might emerge for an individual exposed to traumatic life situations: changes in the perception of self, often described as emotional growth; changes in relationship with others, that might manifest as an ability to admit one’s vulnerability and willingness to ask for help; and a changed philosophy of life, expressed through living life more consciously and enjoying it more (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). All those positive changes observed in the life of clients who experienced highly distressing circumstances have been recognized in the scholarly literature as posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Midlife crisis as a highly stressful and potentially traumatic experience, which might last even a few years, presents one with an opportunity for growth and positive personal gain, even though one study found that “personal growth is not necessary outcome of a midlife crisis” (O’Connor & Wolfe, 1991, p. 14). It is my understanding that the personal gain through crisis is never a given, definite outcome; rather, the crisis is simply an invitation for an individual to begin their inner and outer journey towards more conscious living.

Those who dare to accept the invitation of this very particular passage might arrive some day at the exciting place of change. The possible change which results from midlife crisis has to do with the collapse of our assumptions, old attitudes and paradigms of behavior: “We know we have survived the Middle Passage when we no longer seek fame or fortune or the appearance of youth” (Hollis, 1993, p. 113), when we begin to accept responsibility for ourselves and realize that possibly what we are seeking out might lie within.

Some will be able to move away from conventional values and behaviors towards more individual ways of being, when they can experience themselves as more empowered and authentic, without the need to hide the parts of their being that do not fit into the conformist view of the world (Robinson & Smith, 2010). This growing, newly acquired bond with self might also be strengthened by gaining back the understanding of and the relationship to such concepts as freedom, dignity and autonomy (Hollis, 2001). The Middle Passage is a journey, which will hopefully lead to an enlarged consciousness (Hollis, 1996), even though we all know that the process of change can be at times slow, clumsy and difficult (O’Connor & Wolfe, 1991).

The midlife crisis, like any major life transition, is a tender time when people have both “the need for change and a fear of chaos” (O’Connor & Wolfe, 1987, p. 814). We can only hope that rather than devoting all her or his energies to preserve the status quo and fight the change, the individual will use the crisis to “provide the cover story and vehicle for changes and hopes” (O’Connor & Wolfe, 1987, p. 814) that until then have remained unarticulated.

It has been my goal for this research paper to provide a frame of reference for those in health care professions to reflect on and to imagine what their clients in midlife might be experiencing, in order to better assist them on their transformative journey. Knowledge and imagination are, in my opinion, two very useful tools in the therapeutic field. I also wanted for

this work to be a hopeful invitation for everyone to examine their own life and never stop asking the important and difficult questions, “For what is life but reaching for an answer, and what is death but a refusal to grow” (Oliver, 1992, p. 238).

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