

MID-LIFE CRISIS – PART I

Ofordile, Christopher (Rev. Fr., Ph.D.)

Lecturer, Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Phone: +234-806-379-0553, Email: chrisofordile@yahoo.com

Abstract

Mid-life crisis, which deals with a deeper existential crisis in which the meaning of the whole person is put to question, begins for some people from ages of 35 to 50 years. This study examines the symptoms, diagnosis, and interventions of mid-life crisis afflicting those in education and other industries, mainly from available literature and from clinical consultations.

Statement of the problem

It is not quite long ago when the Nigerian society came to grips with adolescent crisis, which often manifests in secret cult activities especially in our tertiary institutions. Crisis is not limited to the adolescent period of life. Mid-life crisis begins for some people from ages of 35 to 50 years. In mid-life crisis we are dealing with a deeper existential crisis in which the meaning of the whole person is put to question: Why do I work too much? Why do I wear myself out without finding time enough for myself? Why, how so, to what purpose, for what, for whom? These questions frequently crop up at mid-life and disrupt our former concept of living. The crisis, moreover, shakes up the elements of human life in order to separate them out and arrange them anew.

The purpose of this article is to expose the mid-life crisis through literature review so that people will be able to understand it and tackle it without much cause for alarm, but just as a way of being in the world and to seek help from experts in the field to withstand the trauma.

Symptoms

At the onset of this crisis, one begins to express despair, anxiety, depression and disappointment. Sometimes, the patient is successful by ordinary standards. Sometimes, he is highly successful, but plagued with a sense of purposelessness and futility. Going by the literature of the fourteenth century, Dante, at the age of 42 in the opening stanzas of *The Divine Comedy*, wrote:

In the middle of the journey of our life, I came within myself within a dark-wood where the straightway was lost. Ah, how hard it was to tell of what wood, savage, and harsh and dense, the thought of which renews my fear. So bitter is it death is hardly more.

In like manner, Milton (1965) noted:

Which way shall I fly. Infinite wrath and infinite despair? Which way I fly to hell; myself am hell. And in the lowest deep a lower deep still threatening to devour me, opens wide. To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven.

Dante's and Milton's words can be seen as powerful statement of profound psychological depth, depicting opening scene, for which much of the script had already been experienced, of the mid-life journey. The pervasive and dominant themes are those of loss, confusion, despair, and fear.

In the nineteenth century play, *Ivanov*, by Anton Tchekov, Ivan was calling off his wedding to Sasha:

I've worn myself out. At thirty five, I feel like a man after a drunken soul, I'm old already. I've put on an old man's dressing-gown - I go about with a heavy head,

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with a lazy soul tired and broken, without faith, without love, without aim; I wander about among my friends like a shadow and I don't know who I am, or why I live, or what I want. Already, it seems to me that love is silly, that caresses and endearments are sugary nonsense, that there isn't any meaning in work; that song and impassioned words are trivial and old fashioned. And wherever I go I bring misery, blank, boredom, discontent, disgust with life...I'm ruined, hopelessly ruined. Before you stands a man tired at thirty five, disenchanted, crushed by his trivial efforts – burning with shame and jeering at his own weakness... Oh how my pride revolts.

Sasha made desperate plea from Ivan but Ivan, deaf at the pleas, commits suicide. Tchekov was 27 when he wrote these lines, lines which capture the full range and potency of the feelings that can erupt for men at this time in their lives. But suicide may not be the preferred solution for most sufferers.

Jaques (1965), an English psychoanalyst, and a few other scholars who were concerned about the mid-life crisis focused on the issue of death and its relationship to the crisis. In a random sample of some 310 famous painters, composers, poets, writers and sculptors, he found a dramatic and sudden jump in the death rate between 35 and 39 during which time it was far in excess of the norm or average. In his sample were outstanding creative personalities as Mozart, Raphael, Chopin, Purcel and Baudelaire. No one rules out other variables that could have been the reasons for the deaths of these artists around the age of 37, but it is strange enough for these deaths to occur at this particular age bracket.

It would be a serious mistake to think that this is peculiar only to famous people. Eliot (1941) displays an extraordinary ability to give form to a man's inner struggles thus:

So here I am, in the middle way having had twenty years – twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres – trying to learn to use words, and every attempt is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure.

This may be interpreted as Eliot's (1941) own struggle with his sense of personal inadequacy – a struggle that explodes into the conscious for many men in the decade between 35 and 45 years. Moreover, at 47, Eliot (1941), perhaps reflective of the turmoil experienced at such a time, penned down:

Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel and piece together the past and the future; Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception; The future, futureless before the morning watch when time stops and time is never ending.

Here, Eliot (1941) gives poetic form and the unceasing task and the uncertainty that plagues men and devours their confidence as the past becomes of negligible use in facing and understanding the present moment. For many men, time becomes a reality, a painful reality in their late thirties or early forties. Eliot (1941) continues:

If all time is eternally present, All time is unredeemable, What might have been in an abstraction, Remaining a perpetual possibility, Only in a world of speculation.

The inevitable heightened awareness of time can be used for many purposes. Among these are self-recrimination leading to depression, a desperate clinging to what was leading to fear; perpetual nostalgia, a desperate attempt to turn time back and recapture one's elusive youth leading to jealousy and resentment. On the other hand,

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this awareness may provide an opportunity to reflect on the challenge to growth inherent in the second half of life.

Jung (1968: 193) expresses this so well when he says:

Middle life is the moment of greatest unfolding when a man still gives himself to his works with his whole strength and his whole will. But in this very moment evening is born and the second half of life begins. Passion now changes her face and is called duty. I want becomes the inexorable I must and the turnings of the pathway that once brought surprise and discovery become dulled by custom. The wine has fermented and begins to settle and clear. Conservative tendencies develop if all goes well; instead of looking forward, one looks backward, most of the time involuntarily and one begins to take stock, to see how one's life has developed up to this point. The real motivations are sought and real discoveries are made. The critical survey of himself, and his fate enables a man to recognize his peculiarities. But these insights do not come to him easily; they are gained only through the severest shocks.

Jung's claims in the above quotation are very apt in our situation and society today, with men in this phase of their lives leaving little doubt as to the "severest shocks". We, as a people, are retarded and limited in our ability to cultivate, encourage, or simply render permissible the reflective attitude necessary if a man is to develop a path way toward resolution of this dilemma. Rather, it is activity and flight into the outside world, the maniacal construction of materialistic distractions that characterize the acceptable solutions to our affluent Twenty First Century world. Today, reflection had somehow got confused with sloth or old age and the very process that facilitates the possibility of meeting this creative challenge in life is

lost – in a world of materialism that had lost its capacity to sustain our being. Those of us in this category are called “hollow men” by Eliot (1941: 98):

We are the hollow men; we are the stuffed men learning together; Head piece filled with straw. Alas! Our dried voices, when we whisper together are quiet and meaningless; As wind in dry grass or rat's feet over broken glass; In or dry cellar.

When we sever the pathway between the conscious mind and our unconscious, then it is little wonder that “our dried voices when we whisper together are quiet and meaningless” as the rat’s feet scramble over the broken glass of our lost and shattered fantasies and dreams.

Von Franz (1975: 103) provides a clear statement of the task in middle life when she says:

While in the first half of life consciousness grows out of a purely natural basis provided by the instincts and strives primarily for the goal of social adaptation and achievement, a fundamental change takes place in middle – life; it is as if the sun, after crossing the meridian, drew in its rays in order to illumine itself after having squandered its light on the world.

Jung (1941: 139) has himself this to add:

For a young person, it is almost a sin ... to be too preoccupied with himself; but for the ageing person it is a duty and necessity to devote serious attention to himself.

The term ‘ageing person’ can be taken here to mean anyone of 35 years plus. Ellenberger (1970) calls this process “creative illness”. He lists the main symptoms of creative illness as depression,

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exhaustion, irritability, sleeplessness and headaches. The person undergoing such an illness, according to Ellenberger “lives in spiritual isolation, and has the feeling that nobody can help him, hence his attempts at self-healing”. Eliot’s (1951) views are consistent with Ellenberger’s. He sees the crisis as essentially a period when “unconscious depressive anxieties are aroused; as essentially a period of purgatory – anguish and depression”.

Furthermore, Erikson (1950) sees this stage of life as being precisely about the issue of stagnation versus generativity. Generativity means finding ways to accept one’s own authority, which in the main is derived from the painful process of having come to an understanding of one’s own vulnerabilities as well as strengths. The mid-life crisis perhaps only becomes a “creative illness” when this awareness is integrated with an appreciation of one’s strengths and a clearer perception of purpose. To place this topic in focus, therefore, it may be helpful to recapitulate Ellenberger’s (1970: 447) views of a creative illness:

A creative illness succeeds a period of intense preoccupation with an idea and search for a certain truth. It is a polymorphous condition that can take the shape of depression, neurosis, psychosomatic ailments or even psychoses. Whatever the symptoms, they are felt as painful, if not agonizing, by the subject with alternating periods of alleviation and worsening... Throughout the illness the subject never loses the thread of his dominating preoccupation ...he is almost entirely absorbed within himself. The subject emerges from his ordeal with a permanent transformation in his personality and the conviction that he has discovered a great truth or a new spiritual world.

This creative illness is evidenced in the life of eminent psychologists – Sigmund Freud, Karl Gustav Jung and not the least

Gustav Fechner. It needs courage to surmount creative illness as exhibited by Jung's (1941) succinct statement, "From the middle of life onward only he remains vitally alive who is ready to die with life".

In the real sense, what does mid-life crisis mean? This crisis is not physical and is not the dreaded 'male menopause'. Then, what is it? As has already been indicated from literature, it is a period in man's life approximately between the ages of 35 and 45, during which he finds himself caught in an inevitable review of his situation. It is a time of self-assessment when a sufficient period of time has elapsed for an adult to see how well earlier hopes, fantasies, and dreams have been achieved. For some men, it is a very nervous blink, for others it is a prolonged, painful, seemingly never – ending state. It is called the mid-life crisis since in pure statistical terms, given the average age of death around 70, 35 is the true middle age of one's life, not 45. The fact that we think of 45 as middle age is a reflection of an illusion that we are all going to live to 90.

It is also indicative of one of the major difficulties encountered in the mid-life transition, that of facing the reality of one's mortality. For many, it is around 35 that they first realize in an emotional sense that they are actually going to die. As one man said "I finally realized that I was not immortal".

Summarily, characteristics of creative illness which was discussed earlier could be experienced as:

1. a fading of self. This compels many people into seemingly irrational behavior such as the impulsive purchasing of grossly inappropriate flashy clothes, drinking bouts, extravagant and flamboyant entertainments, preoccupation with erotica, and sexual material of all kinds, and an obsession with one's physical appearance that is far in excess of any teenager's.
2. When this state coincides with the waning sense of sexual potency then extra-marital liaisons often seem to be the norm – not relationships that lead to a deepening awareness of the possibilities of intimacy, but relationships that are a

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form of intimacy, but relationships that are a form of sexual athletics aimed at convincing the male involved of his ongoing potency and existence as a person. This is typical of those whose sense of identity derives from physical prowess. This is a fading sense of self.

3. The acquisition of material possessions: Behind this is belief that money and possessions are the source of one's identity. As a result a pattern of acquisition of possessions which are seen as valuables, becomes the primary behaviour. Thus, the 'hero' pursued in this pattern is often a cultural stereotype of success, a recognized status symbol. Their values are tied to the physical and materialistic world, to the values of an affluent society that sets goals for individuals to pursue; however, having attained these goals, an individual often finds himself left in a state of ennui. It is quite a pity that man has acquired all the symbols of success – large house(s), expensive car(s), large expense account (s), overseas trips, all the degrees and chieftaincy titles, beautiful wife (s) and beautiful children – and still feels within himself a devastating sense of hollowness. It is far more difficult to make sense of or be open to the inner world when one has been exclusively preoccupied with the outside world, the social world, the ego world for the first half of one's life. Yet the truth of the matter is that most men are in the outside world in the first half of their lives. The salvation for some men, however, is that they never quite believe in it fully and maintain a question with respect to materialism but for those on the other side take everything – hook and sink.

Wickes (1963: 61) so succinctly states:

If one chooses refusal of this inner urge the second half of life is devoted to being a bigger and better caterpillar, or a large dead caterpillar.

Additionally, failure to rework and to restructure the goals and values will restate itself in the form that Yeats (1962: 66) writes:

The holy centaurs of the hills are vanished; I have nothing but the embittered sun; Banished heroic mother moon and vanished and now that I have come to fifty years I must endure the timid sun.

We have viewed the mid-life crisis through the eyes of poets and psychologists especially Jung. We have, equally explored the ramifications of the crisis in a man's everyday life. Particular attention was not paid to the manifestations of the crisis in a man's occupational and marital life. It was noted the mid-life crisis could be a "creative illness", loss of identity and the struggle to restructure or reconstruct an old hero and to create a new hero, a new vision, a new *raison d'être*. A parallel theme was that of grief and mourning for the loss of youth and its associated ambitions, dreams and sense of eternal possibility. Intrinsically related to mourning was the issue of accepting and realizing one's own mortality, and of forsaking one's fantasies of immortality and omnipotence – then despair, depression, and grief and thoughts of suicide with periodic outbursts of rage and anger directed toward those held responsible for the despair.

Tolstoy (1900: 210ff) provides us with graphic description of the feelings of those men who experience the crisis as a loss:

What is life for? To die? To kill myself at once? No, I am afraid. To wait for death till it comes? I fear that even more. Then I must live. But for what? In order to die? And I could not escape from that circle. I look up the books, and read and forgot myself for a moment, but

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then again, the same question and same horror. I lay down and closed my eyes it was worse still.

If the sense of loss and despair continues, then the accompanying depression can serve as a barrier to resolution. Another way of reacting to the crisis is to set it as a challenge. That is to experience it as a creative crisis and accept it.

Diagnosis

Having described the symptoms, it is now necessary to make a diagnosis, leading to prescription of some treatment strategies. Jung (1964: 394) poignantly states about diagnosis:

The serious problems of life, however, are never fully solved. If ever they should appear to be so, it is a sure sign that nothing has been lost. The meaning and purpose of a problem seem to be not in its solution, but in our working at it incessantly.

This last sub-section will be concerned with the “working at it”. Any diagnosis, regardless of the field of endeavor in which it is made, involves some form of theory or theoretical thinking. Theory and the theoretical thinking are the internal models we construct of the world. The psychological theory is concerned with providing models about inner world of man and his psyche. There are many models and theories available but this author thinks that Jung will be most useful here for the mean time.

Of all Jung’s concepts, that of “individuation” is both central and provides a definition of the goal of development as conceived by him. Individuation “denotes a process by which a person becomes a psychological individual, that is, a separate indivisible unity or whole”. For Jung, the supreme state, the goal towards which an individual’s development is headed is Wholeness, and Individuation is the term he uses to describe this inner journey towards wholeness. A few more or

less equivalent terms for individuation process are “the search for individual identity”, “a search for authenticity”, “self-realization”. Individuation can be seen as describing psychic growth, inevitable growth towards an integration of the world of consciousness, the centre world and the inner world of the unconscious. This is in contrast with ‘individualism. The process of individuation, moreover, is the age old process of the inner journey, the unfolding of self, the becoming what it is that we intrinsically are; this could be seen as the process of self-realization.

The phrase “the unfolding of self captures the essential qualities of relationship between the Self and Individuation since the Self is the goal and final point of individuation. It can be seen as the common mid-point through which the conscious and unconscious pass and the marriage of the two aspects through the process of individuation results in a shift of the psychic center of gravity from the ego or conscious world to the mid-point or center of the psyche, the Self. Furthermore, this results in a major transformation of the personality. In essence, it is a shift from an ego-centered “I” base to a non-personal or more cosmic, central position, the Self.

Jung defines the self as follows:

The Self is not only the center but also the whole circumference which embraces both consciousness and unconscious, it is the center of this totality, just as the ego is the center of the conscious mind. Inversely, the goal of individuation is wholeness and wholeness is related to the experience of the highest end, the awareness of Self, the conjunction of Atman and Brahman.

Additionally, we carry with us two archetype images – the animus and the anima. Bennett (1967: 154) gives a succinct and clear definition of an archetype:

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The archetypes represent all the general human situations; any universally human mode of behavior is an archetype. Inevitably, these have taken innumerable forms, and they become perceptible as images in the mind.

These are the images that move us, give meaning and purpose to our lives but over which we have limited, if any, control. “Projected anima activity” that seem to be increasingly common in our present day are erotica and occult. Both of these are manifested first in the proliferation of erotic material in the form of films and books, TV’s and the second, Occult, in the proliferation of gurus, all professing to be chosen dispensers of the mysterious path to truth. All these are as a result of projections of individual male animas. That is, they are externalizations, now being exploited for commercial gain, of man’s inner dilemmas and conflicts with the feminine aspect of himself.

The other contemporary manifestation of the anima can be seen in the upsurge of interest in the occult, in various spiritual and pseudo-spiritual movements. Because the anima can stand for a personification of the unconscious mind, it may come to be seen as containing, dark, hidden mysteries and esoteric truths. The world of the occult and pseudo-spirituality can then provide a perfect hook for these projections. This is equally evidenced, in a more recent charismatic movement, which also exhibits anima-projection behavior.

Finally, fantasy which is clearly such creative urges are reflective of unconscious stirrings and as such reflect the feminine side of man, is notable at this age. Notable in this group are the poets. In Paradise lost, the anima expresses itself in the divine image of the Muse, and as this quotation shows, it is feminine aspect that the poet call on to provide him inspiration.

Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and all our woe. With loss of Eden, till one

*greater man, Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
sing, heavenly Muse.*

Prescription of Treatment Strategies

1. According to Jung (1946), we should strive to recall and record our dreams since paying serious attention to one's dreams seems to be to the psyche what antibodies are to the body. To dismiss one's dreams as trivial is an egocentric act; the consequence of which may well be such regular physical symptoms as hypertension, migraines, nausea, and a general state of anxiety. As Jung (1946: 124) so clearly states, "Dreams are the natural reactions of the self-regulating psychic system". To deny them is to deny ourselves opportunity of establishing balance and harmony in our lives. Since almost invariably the dreams are a reaction to our conscious attitude and as such provide the necessary warnings and corrections when required. According to Jung (1946: 123), "A dream that is not understood remains a mere occurrence, understood it becomes a living experience."
2. Another method of approaching the inner world and cultivating the reflective attitude is simply the practice of keeping a diary. This has a healing quality especially with regard to our feelings. The discipline and practice of keeping a diary, paying particular attention to moods, is a very useful way of developing the inner world.
3. A combination of the diary and dream method coupled with meditation is another method of approaching and balancing the inner world. The essential quality of the meditative process is reflection, looking at and experiencing in the inner world as opposed to frantic and frenetic activity in the outer world.

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The physical benefits to be gained from meditation have been substantiated beyond reasonable doubt – one of the major ones being – the lowering of blood pressure, and the consequent reduction in hypertension, the factor invariably associated with cardiac failure.

Meditation is also known beyond doubt, to bring about an increase in emotional and mental tranquility. Moreover, meditation brings a certain calmness, clearness and stillness to the psyche water in such a way that awareness of Self and the reflections of other aspects of our psyche becomes increasingly possible. Russel (1902: 23) points out that:

Meditation is a fiery brooding on that majestic Self. We imagine ourselves into its vastness, We conceive ourselves as mirroring its infinitudes, as moving in all things as living in all things, in earth, water, air, fire, aether

In this sense, it becomes apparent that meditation is a method aimed at facilitating individuation. But for some people, meditation carries the danger of self-absorption and the loss of the outer reflecting mirror. There is still another method which Jung termed “active imagination”. In this technique, Jung, suggests that when referring to the anima, we put direct personal questions to her. He believes that every one is capable of a conversation or internal dialogue with oneself. This means that a man holds regular conversations with the inner woman.

Concluding therefore, one has to turn his mid-life crisis into a creative illness that he cures by developing the shaman within. In this circumstance the mid-life crisis is truly an initiatory illness, initiating man into true adulthood, where real choice, based on a knowledge of oneself, can be made. The knowledge is of the kind which uses both sides of the mirror, the inner and outer reflections and not simply the reflections of outer demands and values. In the words of St. Augustine (Chapter 39 Paragraph 72):

Seek not abroad, turn back into thyself. For in the inner man, dwells the truth.

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