

Life Transitions

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Last year at this time, on the eve before heading off to General Assembly and then into vacation, I talked about my tenth wedding anniversary. By that point it was just weeks away. What better way to celebrate Father's Day than with a reflection on marriage and family. That said there was another significant life milestone that I celebrated last summer that I was not particularly comfortable discussing until now: I turned 40.

I can't say I did much that particularly exciting or memorable for a birthday that ended in a "0." There were a few jokes at my expense; my younger brother asking me if I had picked out a midlife crisis yet. I still haven't – I am carefully weighing my options. Midlife crises are actually kind of a pop psychology idea. It's a caricature of a deeper, more complex spiritual transition that occurs usually around midlife. Adults have stages and cycles of development too – not just children. But the so-called midlife crisis is more than simply buying a sports car or taking up golf. I

can't afford either one. Rather, there is a shift of perception and perspective that happens whenever someone comes face to face with their own mortality and understands that they have a limited number of days left.

It started for me when I turned 30. At age thirty I was newly married, and my wife and I were spending our honeymoon in Hawaii. Very cliché I know. We were doing a lot of touristy things that newlyweds do, including hitting the vendors that hang out around luaus and various other tourist traps, hawking souvenirs. One such woman had quite the sales pitch that she had honed over the years. She was selling, what she claimed, were authentic Hawaiian petro glyphs; pictures carved and polished into black stones from the ocean. Stones with these pictures carved into them were considered sacred, and were an important part of native Hawaiian folk religion and ritual. The vendor said that she and her husband continued this tradition and had even once sold a petro glyph to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg when she had been on vacation there. Not sure if that was true, but it was an oddly specific person to name.

Well this vendor hooked me with a rock called "Rainbow Man." The little note that came with it, described Rainbow Man as being associated with shamans and wise elders. It was meant to

bestow wisdom to those who were leaders; or at least that was how I interpreted it. It seemed appropriate for the moment. I was about three years into my ministry, and just beginning a new chapter of my personal life. Three years later I would become a father for the first time. So in that moment, at age thirty, life for me was at a transition point; my career, my new marriage, and soon my new family. In many ways it was the culmination of everything I had been working for since leaving my parents house. I had finished school, gotten a foothold into my dream of becoming a minister, and had married a fantastic woman whom I loved and she loved me. Everything was just beginning. And everything was just ending.

One of the reasons why the midlife crisis is such a misnomer is because it implies that it only happens once! In point of fact, it is a long transition that can happen at any age, but often takes place over the course of a decade or so. Carl Jung was the first to claim that there are two halves to life. The first half of life is about building and acquiring things. We build up a resume, we string together a series of letters before or after our name, we are credentialed, licensed, certified, and authorized. We begin to cobble together the pieces we need to build the life we dream of. Note that this can happen at least as much from our failures as well as our successes. At one point I was sure I would become a

physics major in college – until I crashed and burned in Calculus class. But even setbacks like that become a kind of trial and error learning process. I learned that I would not become a scientist. I had too much of the philosopher in me for it. So I had to mourn that dream in service to learning something about myself. In my early twenties my desire to become a minister took center stage. I aimed everything I could at that dream. Getting there became a big part of my identity. Quite literally in the case of ministers; people start referring to you as “reverend.”

However, all of that is just the first half of life. What seems like it would be the pinnacle of the mountaintop at age 20 may be something you attain by age 30, or 40, or even 50 depending on what it is you want to acquire. But the strange thing is that there is always a day that comes after the day you achieved your desires. What do you do then? Jack Kornfield wrote a follow up book to his classic “A Path with Heart.” The sequel is entitled “After the Ecstasy, the Laundry.” In other words what do you do after you have attained enlightenment? After you have arrived or gotten there or made it, what then? His answer is typical Buddhist simplicity: the laundry. Don’t be so impressed or attached to your achievement of enlightenment, he says.

Which is good advice for the second half of life. Again, I make no particular assumption as to what age this occurs, but typically it is in one's 30s or 40s. Whereas the first half of life is about acquiring things and degrees and other symbols of personal achievement, the second half of life is about doing something with them! Having crafted your identity and self-understanding, you are now able to respond to the calling of your heart. Often this means letting go of things. In the first half of life our task is to see how many things we can acquire. In the second half of life the task is to see how many things you can let go. Because at the end of the second half of life is the ultimate in letting go.

When I attended seminary, there were two age cohorts among the students. The first were folks my age at the time in our early to mid-twenties. The other group was people over the age of 45. Sometime in the 80s a number of denominations started to notice this trend in their student body. A number of second career people were going into the ministry. The baby boomers had chosen a career, had done the work of the first half of life, and then started going through this spiritual transition. Acquiring things, degrees, business ventures, they all seemed less important. What was more important was to follow their heart's calling, which for some lead them into ministry.

One of my classmates had a very specific vision for her ministry; she was going to be a UU chaplain for women in prison. She had been a Unitarian Universalist for quite a while and had been successful as the CEO of the local history museum. One day leaving her office, she was walking down the steps to go home, and she suffered a heart attack. Fortunately she received medical care and was able to recover, obviously. But that was, in a very dramatic sense, her call to ministry. She had no interest in being a parish minister; she had done the CEO role in a non-profit already. She was ready to follow her calling to serve women in prison as a spiritual counselor. She quit her job, moved from Seattle to Chicago, saw her husband part-time, and was a student with the rest of us trying to become a UU minister. Now hopefully it won't take you until age 60 or a heart attack to transition from the first half of life to the second. But her story demonstrates the difference between those two halves of life. In the second half we are more open, less attached to our stuff, more about service to another, concerned about expressing love rather than grasping for love through the narrow gateway of lust. In the second half of life we are more inclusive and less selfish. Although she did not have a long career in the ministry, my classmate did eventually become a chaplain for women in prison in Minnesota.

I think it no coincidence that my former classmate was attracted to Unitarian Universalism as an expression of her second half of life. I think most religions have teachings for the first half of life and for the second half of life. For the people who are still building up their identity and need external symbols and markers for that, they can look to teachings about being “God’s chosen people” or “No one gets to the Father except through the Son.” Evangelists and fundamentalists love the first half of life teachings. They fit really well onto brochures and pamphlets. The first half of life markets very easily. The most blatant of course is the so-call “Prosperity Gospel” which says straight up, believe in God and good things will come your way. Not all of Christianity or Judaism or Buddhism is like that of course, but it is there if you are in the first half of life.

Unitarian Universalists have our first half of life teachings too, but we are definitely a second half of life religion. Just look at the principles and purposes. They are all about inclusivity, openness, acceptance, and world community. “The inherent worth and dignity of EVERY person.” “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.” “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” Those are tasks for the second half of life.

While my transition may have started that day on the beaches of Maui, it didn't really come to fruition until I became a father. It is Father's Day today, so I am using that as the example, but you could easily substitute other experiences. Obviously becoming a parent regardless of gender or even being a mentor or Big Brother or Sister to a young person can have a similar dynamic. The key for me was a shift in identity and priority. Simply becoming a parent doesn't necessarily mean you have achieved some kind of spiritual enlightenment. There are plenty of people inextricably stuck in life's first half that have managed to reproduce. What made becoming a father a second half of life issue for me was that it brought with it a shift in how I thought about what was important. The shift went from being about me, to being about my son and my wife. There is absolutely nothing wrong having yourself as a priority when you are setting out trying to figure out who you are and what you want to do. Indeed, if you neglect that work it can linger far too long. The shift from the first half of life to the second is a widening out from me, to you, to ultimately we.

That can be a tall order. Letting go is not easy. In our story today, Paul had to abandon almost everything in his life in order to achieve his dream of becoming a writer. This included some pretty lucrative financial incentives to stay with the family

business. Ultimately though, he had to follow the leadings of his need for artistic expression. Obviously his family would have preferred him to stay with the more financially secure path of business, but Paul knew that there was a bigger vision for himself that needed to be addressed. In time it meant that he could be more present with his family than he had been before. Then he was able to expand that circle to include students as he became a professor. Paradoxically, his life became bigger the more he gave up.

That is the challenge before us. To ask ourselves how much can we let go. Which is the other reason why I don't believe in the midlife crisis in the sense that it means acquiring something like a sports car. If anything that is desperately clinging to the first half of life; a kind of regression. In the second half of life we are called to finally respond to whatever we have been yearning to express but have not yet expressed. This is hard because sometime that means mourning a life that we were not able to live. I imagine what if sometimes. I had dreamed of being a scientist as a kid. The day came when that dream was no longer possible. I have mourned that loss by now, but at the time I do remember being pretty devastated that I would have to find a new trajectory to life. It makes sense in retrospect but rarely does it in the moment.

As we get older there is more on the line. Our choices matter more, if only because we have less time to correct them if we are wrong. Which is why letting go is such an important spiritual practice in the second half of life. It means we can be more flexible. When we are more ready to grieve things when they don't work out, then we find ourselves in a place of acceptance. It is a tall order, and a hard challenge to meet. Fortunately we have our whole life to work at it.

Our culture is too obsessed with the first half of life, with its insatiable desires for more, and acquiring trophies and stuff to brag about. We are able to let go only when we are wise enough to know what is truly important to us and what is not. That is the sort of compassionate wisdom that Rainbow Man represents. Perhaps the native Hawaiians were on to something with their petro glyph. The rock is sacred not because of anything supernatural, but because of the powerful idea it symbolizes. By the way, that petro glyph sits on one of the shelves in my office if you ever want to see it. The native Hawaiians knew that compassionate wisdom was something to be treasured in their leaders and their elders. What better idea expresses the best of being a father than that?

Well it has been one interesting church year, where letting go and following the heart's calling has been my primary spiritual challenge. This is my final sermon of the church year, although this year I will be preaching a bit in the summer before we all return at Ingathering. May it be a summer of rest for the body, and deeply sustaining growth for your soul. See you next year! Amen Blessed Be.