



EFL Brieflet: Engaging with Mid-Life

*... our dragons represent all that we fear and which threatens to swallow us; but they are also neglected parts of ourselves which may prove immensely valuable. In being taken seriously, even loved by us, they will respond by providing enormous energy and meaning for the journey of the second half of life**

A Transition - not a Condition

“Mid-life crisis” was first termed by psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques (1956), following his observation of the uncharacteristic behaviours of depressed patients in their mid-30s. Psychologist Eric Erickson labelled the inner turmoil that 40-65 year olds experienced, during his Seventh Stage of Adult Development, as the struggle between *stagnation* and *generativity*. And Carl Jung described this challenging *middle passage* as a time of *individuation* as this cohort stumbled through existential questioning toward greater self-awareness, self-actualisation and a more authentic engagement with others and the world.

A brief web-search suggests that approximately 10-20%¹ of people report mid-life voyages of self-doubt. However, a very cursory review of my own clients suggests at least 50% of (45-65y old) leaders and other professionals experience a collision of curiosity, uncertainty and inner struggle as they re-visit their search for professional and personal purpose.

The Wero/ Challenge

Whilst it is natural to be fearful or scornful about this Styxian whitewater, taking the courage to journey with these highly personal, inner emergent dragons enables its surfers better to support those around and after them. In their turn, the next generation can better anticipate and welcome the trepidations and aspirations relating to their own, as yet uncharted, turmoil and treasure.

The value of engaging with metaphysical vulnerability is increasingly acknowledged as a core part of scaffolding inner growth. Furthermore, the uncertainties and demands of the rapidly changing socio-political and wider environmental contexts have likely significantly contributed to the sense of angst experienced by people, like my clients, who are in positions of power, responsibility and/or knowledge.

Instead of reporting problems with shopping sprees or fancy car buying, these professionals report being confronted with self-doubt about: the value of their professional careers; life, and their contribution to it; lifelong intimate partnerships; parenthood; meaning and/or spiritual faith. The fact that they are questioning - and wishing to enhance - the purpose of what and how they act and lead, so that they can be better at it, is reassuring. It also normalises the importance of this process for the families and communities that they serve.

With trusted partners to support their transition, these courageous, insightful human beings recognise the value of the struggle, and rise up to the questions that they ask of themselves. And though sometimes a little numb, whether they have completed their traverse or are continuing to engage with it, they celebrate the fuller human that they are becoming.

*The experience of crisis at midlife is the collapse not of our essential selves, but of our assumptions, [others'] models [and] paradigms of behaviour and attitude ... When [they] turn out not to be true, we feel disillusioned, anxious, even betrayed ... no one really knows what life means ... For those who worry about the impact of their journey on others, [the] best way of helping them is by living our own life so clearly [so others can be] free to live theirs**

¹ Most studies appear rudimentary, conducted with pre-CovVid, Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD) participants.

Where leadership is a team responsibility

*Individuation is the developmental imperative of each of us to become [fully] ourselves, within the limits imposed upon us by fate ... Unless we consciously confront our fate, we are tied to it. We must separate who we are from what we have acquired**

Triggers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of accomplishment (perceived/actual) • “Empty nest” - children leaving home • Income reduction; Career slowing; Retirement • Separation (cause and consequence) • Death/serious illness of peers, loved ones • Role transition • Biological changes: weight, sleep, libido, age, menopause, physical appearance 	
Thoughts and Emotions ²	
<p><u>Inner turmoil:</u> Frustration; Self-doubt; Irritability; Sadness; Loneliness; Regret; Wistfulness</p> <p><u>Sense of loss of:</u> Meaning; Purpose; Confidence; Direction; Connection; Motivation; Opportunity; Hope/optimism; Spiritual faith</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth/early adulthood seems a long way away - death seems closer • Is this really all that it is? Did I make the right choices? I gave all that effort/work/hours, raised those children, made those sacrifices, made that money, did what was expected - and this is what it comes to? Was it worth it? • Everything/everybody is so ho-hum, so average, so same-same • Everything is so different now - I don't belong • Does my community/social circle really speak to my faith/beliefs/values? • What have I actually achieved? • What am I supposed to do with the rest of my life? 	
Behaviours	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socialise within younger contexts • Withdraw from partner: separation/ infidelity • Impulsive or delayed decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become less engaged - isolate • Substance misuse • Radical lifestyle change
“Ko wai au?/Who am I?” Understand yourself, de-clutter, grow wisdom	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Validate it: read about it; talk about it; normalise it (seek support if needed) • Review your values; change your focus; look for meaning in other activities and/or communities; mentor a younger person 	

*He ao apopo, He ao tea - Tomorrow is a new day and the new day will bring clarity
Rangitakuku Metekingi, Whanganui*

Sources for your further interest

*Hollis, J. (1993) The Middle Passage: from misery to meaning in midlife
Healthline <https://www.healthline.com/health/midlife-crisis>

Sam Farmer is Owner-Director of Enhance Facilitation Limited and strongly advocates that leadership is a team responsibility. Strength-based and Values-focused in his approach, he is passionate about collaborative coaching. As well as offering professional supervision, he facilitates psychosocial growth conversations with professionals working within high emotional impact contexts. He is a registered psychologist, has regular professional supervision and is bound by the Psychologists' Code of Ethics.

² Note that these thoughts and emotions tend to come and go, and not to be debilitating. If they persist and/or feel deep-set, it is important to seek professional help