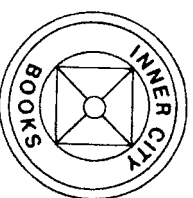


Marie-Louise von Franz, Honorary Patron
Studies in Jungian Psychology
by Jungian Analysts

Daryl Sharp, General Editor

The Middle Passage
From Misery to Meaning
in Midlife

JAMES HOLLIS



For Jill, and for Taryn and Timothy, Jonah and Seah

"And then comes the knowing that in me there is space for a second, large, and timeless life."
(*"Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden."*—Rainer Maria Rilke.)

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hollis, James

The middle passage: from misery to meaning in midlife

(Studies in Jungian psychology by Jungian analysts; 59)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-919123-60-1

1. Middle age—Psychological aspects.
2. Jung, C.G. (Carl Gustave), 1875-1961.
- I. Title. II. Series.

BF724.6.H64 1993 155.6'6 C92-095112-0

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INNER CITY BOOKS

21 Milroy Crescent, Toronto, ON M1C 4B6, Canada.
Telephone (416) 927-0355

www.innercitybooks.net / booksales@innercitybooks.net

Honorary Patron: Marie-Louise von Franz.

Publisher and General Editor: Daryl Sharp.

Senior Editor: Victoria B. Cowan.

Office Manager: Scott Milligen.

IT Manager: Sharpconnections.com.

Editorial Assistance: David Sharp, J. Morgan, E. Jefferson.

INNER CITY BOOKS was founded in 1980 to promote the understanding and practical application of the work of C. G. Jung.

Cover: "Pursuing the Eons" (1987), by Jerry Pettick; etched mirror, glass, aluminum, silicon spectrofoil, Payne skin, enameled steel and copper.
Photo by Bob Cain. (Publisher's collection)

Index by Daryl Sharp

Printed and bound in Canada by Rapido Livres Books.
Reprinted 2021

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The Advent of the Middle Passage

The Middle Passage is a modern concept. Before the sudden extension of the life span around the turn of the century, life was, in Thomas Hobbes's words, "nasty, brutish, and short."⁶ Changes in health care brought the average life expectancy into the forties at the beginning of our epoch. One has only to walk through the cemeteries of early America to see the lamentable rows of children who died when fevers passed through—the plague, ague, diphtheria, whooping cough, small pox and typhus, which modern children avoid through immunization. (I recall my city of about 100,000 being closed to all but essential transactions—no parks, no movies, no swimming—because of an outbreak of polio.)

Perhaps even more than limits on lifespan, those who survived to a later age were strongly controlled by the power of social institutions—church, family, social mores. (I had divorced persons pointed out to me in childhood, in the same tone as, "There goes a murderer.") Gender definitions were clear and absolute, injuring both women and men. Family and ethnic traditions offered the sense of roots, and sometimes community, but were also inbred and discouraged independence. A girl was expected to marry, raise a family, serve as the hub of the system which sustained and transmitted values. A boy was expected to grow up and take over his father's role, be the bread winner, but also support and endorse the continuity of values.

Many of these values were and remain laudable. But, given the weight of such institutional expectations, great spiritual violence was also suffered. One should not automatically applaud the fifty-year marriage without knowing what happened to the souls of those in the relationship. Perhaps they feared change, feared honesty and suffered. The child who lived up to the parent's expectations may have lost his or her soul along the way. Longevity and replication of values per se are not automatic virtues.

The idea that one is here to become oneself, that mysterious but absolutely unique being whose values may differ from kith and kin, was sel-

dom imparted to those who lived before our time. Even now some see it as a rather heretical notion. But the modern *Zeitgeist* is characterized most by the radical shift from the psychological power being vested in institutions to its relocation in the individual. More than any single change, meaning in the modern world has shifted from mace and miter to the individual. The great unifying ideologies have lost much of their psychic energy and have left modern individuals in a state of isolation. As Matthew Arnold observed a century and a half ago, we wander "between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born."⁷ For good or ill, the psychic gravity has shifted from institution to individual choice. Today there is a Middle Passage not only because people live long enough, but also because in Western society most now accept that we play the dominant role in shaping our own lives.

Tectonic Pressures and Seismic Intimations

As suggested earlier, the Middle Passage begins as a kind of tectonic pressure which builds from below. Like the plates of the earth which shift, rub against each other and accrue pressure that erupts as earthquakes, so the planes of the personality collide. The acquired sense of self, with its assembled perceptions and complexes, its defense of the child within, begins to grate and grind against the greater Self which seeks its own realization.

These seismic ripples may be dismissed by defensive ego-consciousness, yet the pressure builds. Invariably, long before one becomes conscious of a crisis the signs and symptoms have been there: depression which one outworks, overindulgence in alcohol, marijuana to enhance love-making, affairs, recurrent shifts in jobs, and so on—all efforts to override, ignore or outrun the underground pressures. From a therapeutic standpoint symptoms are to be welcomed, for they not only serve as arrows that point to the wound, they also show a healthy, self-regulating psyche at work.

Jung observed that a neurosis "must be understood, ultimately, as the suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning."⁸ This does not suggest that one may achieve a life without suffering, but rather that the suffering is already upon us and one is obliged to find its meaning.

⁷ *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, p. 187.

⁸ "Psychotherapists or the Clergy," *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, CW 11, par. 497. [CW refers throughout to *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*]

During World War Two the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer went to a martyr's death for opposing Hitler. From Flensburg concentration camp he smuggled out a number of letters and papers. In one of them he struggled with the obvious question: Did God in some way bring about the camp and its horrible conditions? He realized that he could not answer such a question, but he wisely concluded that his task was to work with and through the horror to find the will of God in those circumstances.⁹

So one may say that in suffering the tectonic pressures of the psyche, one may not discover the ultimate purpose of life. But one is obliged to find the meaning of the conflict, that collision of selves which the Middle Passage entails. Out of this fated collision, this death-rebirth, new life emerges. One is invited to regain one's life, to live it more consciously, to wrest meaning from misery.

Awakening to the Middle Passage occurs when one is radically stunned into consciousness. I have seen many begin their Middle Passage when faced with a life-threatening illness or widowhood. To that point, even into the fifties and sixties, they had managed to remain unconscious, so dominated by complexes or collective values that the questions incarnated by the Middle Passage had been kept at bay. (Examples will be given in the next chapter.)

The Middle Passage is less a chronological event than a psychological experience. The two Greek words for "time," *chronos* and *kairos*, observe this distinction. *Chronos* is sequential, linear time; *kairos* is time revealed in its depth dimension. Thus, for an American, 1776 is more than a year on the calendar; it is a transcendent event that determines the quality of every subsequent year in the nation's history. The Middle Passage occurs when the person is obliged to view his or her life as something more than a linear succession of years. The longer one remains unconscious, which is quite easy to do in our culture, the more likely one is to see life only as a succession of moments leading toward some vague end, the purpose of which will become clear in due time. When one is stunned into consciousness, a vertical dimension, *kairos*, intersects the horizontal plane of life; one's life span is rendered in a depth perspective: "Who am I, then, and whither bound?"

The Middle Passage begins when the person is obliged to ask anew the question of meaning which once circumambulated the child's imagination

but was effaced over the years. The Middle Passage begins when one is required to face issues which heretofore had been patched over. The question of identity returns and one can no longer evade responsibility for it. Again, the Middle Passage starts when we ask, "Who am I, apart from my history and the roles I have played?"

As we carry the history of our life in our psyche as a dynamic, autonomous presence, so we are likely to be defined and dominated by the past. As we have been conditioned to institutionalized roles, such as spouse, parent, wage-earner, so we have projected our identity onto those roles. Thus James Agee began his autobiographical novel: "We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child."¹⁰ All the large questions were asked by the child we once were, as we observed the big folk silently, as we lay in our beds at night, half-fearful, half-joyous to be alive. But the weight of the schooling, the parenting and the acculturation process gradually replaces the child's sense of awe with normative expectations and cultural certainties. Agee concludes his preface by recalling how he was taken up to his bed by the big people, "as one familiar and well beloved in that home: but [they] will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever, but will not ever tell me who I am."¹¹

Such questions, the large ones, give worth and dignity to our lives. If we forget them we are consigned to social conditioning, banality and finally despair. If we are fortunate to suffer enough, we are stunned into a reluctant consciousness and the questions return to us once again. If we are courageous enough, care enough about our lives, we may, through that suffering, get our lives back.

While some come to this fated meeting with themselves through a catastrophic event, all suffer warnings long before. The ground beneath one's feet trembles ever so slightly, and it is easy to ignore, at first. Seismic intimations, the big brothers of tectonic pressures, are always present before we become fully aware of them.

I know a man who by the time he was twenty-eight had achieved all he had hoped for—a doctorate, a family, a book published, a good teaching post. His first seismic intimations, acknowledged years later, were boredom and loss of energy. So he did what most do, more of the same. In the

⁹ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 210.

¹⁰ *A Death in the Family*, p. 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

next ten years he wrote more, had more children, taught in still better posts. All of this activity could be rationalized for it was outwardly productive and embodied the typical career ladder onto which we are prone to project our identity. When he was thirty-seven the growing underground depression broke through in full fury and he experienced near-complete enervation and loss of meaning. He quit his job, left his family and opened a Victorian ice-cream parlor in another city. Did he overcompensate for his previous life? Did he suppress the good and useful questions the Middle Passage was calling him to address? Or did he somehow hit upon the best way to spend his second half of life? Only time will tell, only he can say.

Often the seismic tremors occur as early as the late twenties, but they are easy to overlook then. Life is full; the road ahead beckons; rapid shifts, more effort, more energy are easy enough, and one overrides the warnings. One must have gone around a track a few times to even know if it is a circle or an oval. Patterns, with their costs and side-effects, can only be discerned as patterns when one has suffered them more than once. In retrospect, one is often chagrined, even humiliated, at the mistakes, the naive, the projections. But such is the first adulthood: full of blunders, shyness, inhibitions, mistaken assumptions, and always, the silent rolling of the tapes of childhood. If one had not set forth and made those mistakes and crashed into those walls, then one would have remained a child. Reviewing one's life from the vantage-point of the second half requires understanding and forgiveness of the inevitable crime of unconsciousness. But not to become conscious in the second half is to commit an unforgivable crime.

There are a number of significant symptoms or experiences, detailed below, which signify the summons to the Middle Passage. They occur autonomously, outside the will of the ego. They transpire silently, day by day, and trouble the sleep of the inner child who wants the known and treasures security above all else. But they represent the ineluctable movement of life toward its unknown fulfillment, a teleological process which serves nature and its mysteries and cares little for the wishes of a nervous ego.

A New Kind of Thinking

As suggested earlier, childhood is characterized by magical thinking. The child's ego is not yet battle tested, not yet clear about boundaries. The objective, outer world and the inner, wishful world are often confused. Wishes seem possibilities, even probabilities. They represent the narcissism of the child who wants to believe he or she is the center of the cos-

mos. Such thinking is inflated and delusory but in a child it is entirely healthy and wonderful. "I am going to grow up and wear white gowns and marry a prince." "I'm going to be an astronaut." "I'll be a famous rock star." (Try to recall your magical wishes of childhood and muse on what life did to them.) Most of all, the magical thinking of the child assumes, "I am immortal. I am not only going to be rich and famous, I am going to be sheltered from death and decline." This kind of thinking prevails until about the age of ten, though battered about the edges. The illusion of superiority, of specialness, takes some hard knocks when even other kids aren't impressed. (When I was a child I thought I might be the one to replace Joe Dimaggio in center field for the New York Yankees. Alas, the gods gave Mickey Mantle the necessary skills.)

Through the pain and confusion of adolescence, the magical thinking of the child suffers some rough wear. Yet the untested ego persists and exhibits what one might now call heroic thinking, characterized by greater realism, yes, but still with a considerable capacity for hope, for projection of the unknown through fantasies of grandeur and accomplishment. One may look at the sorry remains of a parent's marriage and conclude, "I know better than they and will choose wisely." One may still expect to be CEO, write the Great American Novel, be a terrific parent.

Heroic thinking is useful, for were one to suspect the trials and disappointments ahead, who would have set off into adulthood? I have yet to be asked to give a commencement address, but loathsome as such speeches usually are, I still might not have the heart to tell the truth. Who could bear to say to eager and hopeful faces, "In a few years you will likely hate your job, your marriage will be in peril, your kids will cause you fits, you may very well experience so much pain and confusion about your life that you will think of writing a book about it." Who could do that to the dented, hitching their wagons to a star, even as they lurch down the same confused and wounding way their parents trod?

Heroic thinking, with its hopes and projections barely tempered by the world's ways, helps the young leave home and dive, as they must, into life. The youthful Wordsworth, across the channel and present at the start of the French revolution, wrote that to be young and to be there was very heaven.¹² A few years later he would despise how the revolutionary promise had been replaced by the Napoleonic regime. And the battle-weary

¹² "The Prelude," *Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, p. 570.

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T.E. Lawrence saw his desert hopes sold out by the old men at the peace conferences. Still, youth sets off, as it must, falls, begins anew and blunders toward an appointment with time.

One is in the Middle Passage when the magical thinking of childhood and the heroic thinking of adolescence are no longer congruent with the life one has experienced. Those who have reached the mid-thirties and beyond have suffered an ample measure of disappointment and heartache to surpass even the shattered crushes of adolescence. Anyone in midlife has witnessed the collapsing of projections, of hopes and expectations, and has experienced the limitations of talent, intelligence, and, often, of courage itself.

Thus, the kind of thinking which characterizes the experience of the Middle Passage is rather prosaically called realistic. Realistic thinking gives us perspective. Greek tragedy demonstrated that the protagonist might be richer at the end, but in ruin, for he or she had come back into proper relationship with the gods. Shakespeare's King Lear was not a bad man; he was a fool, for he did not know what love was. His need for flattery deceived him; he paid through his flesh and his sanity and was the richer for it.

So life calls us all to a different perspective, a settling of the youthful hubris and inflation, and teaches the difference between hope and knowledge and wisdom. Hope is based on what might be. Knowledge is the valued lesson of experience. Wisdom is always humbling, never inflationary. Socrates' wisdom, for instance, was that he knew he knew nothing (but his "nothing" was so much more than the certainties of the sophists and savants of his day or ours).

The realistic thinking of midlife has as its necessary goal the righting of a balance, the restoration of the person to a humble but dignified relationship to the universe. A friend of mine once said he knew when the Middle Passage began for him. It came as a thought, a sentence in the head, the truth of which was self-evident. The thought was: "My life will never be the whole, only the parts." His psyche was announcing to him that the inflationary expectations of youth were not to be achieved. Such a realization may be felt by some as a defeat, but others will be moved to ask the next question, namely, "What work, then, needs to be done?"

Changes in Identity

Given the opportunity for a full life span, one passes through a series of different identities. It is the natural project of the ego to manage the exis-

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ential anxiety of the person by stabilizing life as much as possible. But the nature of life clearly presumes and demands change. Approximately every seven to ten years there is a significant physical, social and psychological change in a person. Consider who you were at 14, at 21, at 28 and at 35, for example. While all of us are strung out along a continuum, we do have common passages to make. It is possible to generalize these cycles and identify a social and psychological agenda for each phase. While it is the hubristic assumption of the ego that it is in charge of life and that its vision will hold for the years to come, clearly there is an autonomous process, an ineluctable dialectic, which brings repeated deaths and rebirths. To acknowledge the inevitability of change, and to go with it, is a fine and necessary wisdom, but our natural tendency is to resist the dissolution of what we have managed to accomplish.¹³

The popularity of Gail Sheehy's *Passages* a few years ago testifies to the importance of the theme of periodic change. Yet, as Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell and other observers of the social and anthropological scene have suggested, our culture has lost the mythic road map which helps locate a person in a larger context. Without a tribal vision of the gods, and their spiritual network, modern individuals are cut adrift to wander without guidance, without models and without assistance through the various life stages. Thus, the Middle Passage, which calls for death before rebirth, is often experienced in frightening and isolating ways, for there are no rites of passage and little help from one's peers who are equally adrift.

As well as the many subphases of life, each a passage obliging death of some sort, there are four larger phases of life, each with a power to define the person's identity.

The first identity, childhood, is characterized most by the dependency of the ego on the actual world of the parents. Physical dependency is obvious, but the psychic dependency, wherein the child is identified with the family, is even greater. In ancient cultures adulthood began with the onset of puberty. No matter how geographically, culturally and ideologically varied the tribes, they all evolved meaningful rites of passage from the dependency of childhood to adult independence.

For all the disparity of initiatory practices, traditional rites of passage

¹³ The unconscious will frequently acknowledge resistance and call for change in such dream images as a house being flooded or undermined, a car stolen or stalled, or one's purse or wallet, containing one's ID, stolen or lost. These images suggest that the old ego-state is becoming inadequate.

typically involved six stages. Briefly, they were 1) separation from the parents, often through a ritual kidnapping; 2) death, wherein childhood dependency is "killed"; 3) rebirth, wherein the new being, however nascent, is endowed; 4) the teachings, wherein the neophyte is told the primal myths of the tribe to give a sense of spiritual locus, the privileges and responsibilities in that particular tribe, and the knowledge of hunting, child-bearing, etc., necessary for adult functioning; 5) the ordeal, most commonly of further separation so that the initiate might learn there is a strength within to meet the task without; and finally 6) the return, whereby one reenters the community with the knowledge, mythic grounding and inner strength necessary to play a mature role. Often the initiate was even given a new name to befit the radical transformation.

What the rites of initiation hoped to achieve was separation from the parents, transmission of the sacred history of the tribe to provide spiritual grounding, and preparation for the responsibilities of adulthood. In our own culture there are no meaningful rites of passage into adulthood and thus many youth prolong their dependency. Our culture has become so heterogeneous, and has lost its mythic moorings in any case, that we can only transmit twentieth-century beliefs in materialism, hedonism and narcissism—with some computer skills thrown in. None of this provides salvation, connection to the earth and its great rhythms, meaning or depth to one's journey.

The second identity begins at puberty. But without the traditional rites of passage the young person is characterized by spiritual confusion and ego lability. The nascent ego is quite malleable and prey to the influence of peers and pop culture, both comprised of other confused adolescents. (Many therapists consider adolescence as extending roughly from age twelve to twenty-eight in North America. I came to conclude, after twenty-six years as a professor, that the primary cultural role of colleges was to serve as a holding tank while youth sought sufficient solidification of their egos to make a more substantive break from parental dependency. Indeed, much of their love and loathing for Mom and Dad was deflected to their Alma Mater.)

The second passage has as its primary task, then, the solidification of the ego through which the youth gains sufficient strength to leave parents, go out into the larger world, and struggle for survival and the achievement of desire. Such a person has to say to the world: "Hire me. Marry me. Trust me." And then prove worthy. Sometimes at midlife one still has not

taken the decisive steps away from dependency and into the world. Some may still be living with parents. Some may lack the personal strength and self-worth necessary to risk relationship. Others may have failed to meet the tasks of work with sufficient strength and resolve. For those persons, the body may have reached midlife chronologically, but their *kairos* is still childhood.

I call the period from roughly twelve to forty the first adulthood. The young person who knows, deep down, that he or she lacks a clear sense of self can only try to act like the other big people. It is an understandable delusion that if one comports oneself as one's parents have, or rebels against their example, one will thereby be an adult. If one holds a job, marries, becomes a parent and taxpayer, the confirmation of adulthood will surely follow. In fact, what has occurred is that the dependency of childhood has partly gone underground and has been projected onto the roles of adulthood. These roles are not unlike parallel tunnels. Out of the confusion of adolescence one walks through them with the assumption that they will confirm one's identity, provide fulfillment and still the terrors of the unknown. The first adulthood, which may in fact extend throughout one's life, is a provisional existence, lacking the depth and uniqueness which makes that person truly an individual.

These tunnels are of indeterminate length. They endure for as long as the projected identity and dependency upon them still seems to work. It is next to impossible to tell a thirty year old who is productively working, married and expecting a second child that he or she is still in a form of extended childhood. The parent complexes and the authority of the roles offered by society have sufficient power to attract the projections of anyone still exploring life in the world. As suggested earlier, the Self, that mysterious process within each of us which summons us to ourselves, often expresses itself through symptoms—loss of energy, depression, sudden fits of rage or over-consumption—but the power of the projections is such that one may keep the larger questions of the journey at bay. How terrifying it is, then, when the projections wear off and the person can no longer avoid the insurgence of the Self. Then, one must confess to powerlessness, to loss of control. The ego never was in control but rather was driven by the energy of the parental and collective complexes, sustained by the power of the projections onto the roles offered by the culture to those who would be adults. As long as the roles have normative power, as long as the projections work, the individual has managed to forestall the appointment

with the inherent Self.

The third phase of identity, the second adulthood, is launched when one's projections have dissolved. The sense of betrayal, of failed expectations, the vacuum and loss of meaning which occur with this dissolution, creates the midlife crisis. It is in this crisis, however, that one has the chance to become an individual—beyond the determinism of parents, parent complexes and cultural conditioning. Tragically, the regressive power of the psyche, with its reliance on authority, often keeps a person in thrall to these complexes and thereby freezes development. In working with the elderly, each of whom has to face loss and anticipate death, there are clearly two categories. There are those for whom the life remaining is still a challenge, still worthy of the good fight, and those for whom life is full of bitterness, regret and fear. The former are invariably those who have gone through some earlier struggle, experienced the death of the first adulthood and accepted greater responsibility for their lives. They spend their last years living more consciously. Those who avoided the first death are haunted by the second, afraid their lives have not been meaningful.

Characteristics of the second adulthood will be discussed more fully in later chapters. But it is important to note here that it is only attainable when the provisional identities have been discarded and the false self has died. The pain of such loss may be compensated by the rewards of the new life which follows, but the person in the midst of the Middle Passage may only feel the dying. The fourth identity, mortality, which involves learning to live with the mystery of death, will also be discussed later, but already in the second adulthood it is essential to accept the reality of death.

The good news which follows the death of the first adulthood is that one may reclaim one's life. There is a second shot at what was left behind in the pristine moments of childhood. The good news deriving from our confrontation with death is that our choices really do matter and that our dignity and depth derive precisely from what Heidegger called "the Being-toward-Death."¹⁴ Heidegger's definition of our ontological condition is not morbid but rather a recognition of the teleological purposes of nature, the birth-death dialectic.

Another way to look at these shifting identities is to classify their different axes. In the first identity, childhood, the operative axis is the parent-child relationship. In the first adulthood the axis lies between ego and

world. The ego, one's conscious being, struggles to project itself into the world and create a world within the world. Childhood dependency has been driven into the unconscious and/or projected onto various roles, and one is primarily oriented to the outer world. In the second adulthood, during and after the Middle Passage, the axis connects ego and Self. It is natural for consciousness to assume that it knows all and is running the show. When its hegemony is overthrown, the humbled ego then begins the dialogue with the Self. The Self may be defined as the teleological purposiveness of the organism. This is a mystery larger than we will ever understand and its unfolding will provide us with more magnificence than our short lifetime can possibly incarnate.

The fourth axis is Self-God, or Self-Cosmos if one prefers. This axis is framed by the cosmic mystery which transcends the mystery of individual incarnation. Without some relationship to the cosmic drama, we are constrained to lives of transience, superficiality and aridity. Since the culture most of us have inherited offers little mythic mediation for the placement of self in a larger context, it is all the more imperative that the individual enlarge his or her vision.

These shifting axes delineate the sea-changes of the soul. When we are swept from one axis to the next without our volition, then confusion, even terror, may ensue. But the nature of our humanity seems to oblige each of us to move toward a larger and larger role in the great drama.

Withdrawal of Projections

Projection is a fundamental mechanism of the psyche, a strategy derived from the fact that what is unconscious is projected. (The word "projection" comes from the Latin *pro + jacere*, "to throw before.") Jung has written that "the general psychological reason for projection is always an activated unconscious that seeks expression."¹⁵ Elsewhere he states: "Projection is never made; it happens, it is simply there. In the darkness of anything external to me I find, without recognizing it as such, an interior or psychic life that is my own."¹⁶

In the face of the awesome outer world and the unknown immensity of the inner, our natural tendency is to project our anxiety onto the parent, whom we believe to be omniscient and omnipotent. When we are obliged

¹⁴ *Being and Time*, p. 97.

¹⁵ "The Symbolic Life," *The Symbolic Life*, CW 18, par. 352.

¹⁶ *Psychology and Alchemy*, CW 12, par. 346.

to leave our parents we tend to project knowledge and power onto institutions, persons in authority and socialized roles (the tunnels mentioned above). We assume that to act like the big people is to become one. Youth setting out on the first adulthood cannot know then that the big people are often children in big bodies and big roles. Some of them may even believe they *are* their roles. Those less inflated are more conscious of their uncertainties, while those in the Middle Passage and beyond are experiencing the dissolution of their projections.

Of the many projections possible, the most common are those onto the institutions of marriage, parenting and career. More will be said later of the role of projection in marriage, but perhaps no other social construct has so much unconscious baggage imposed upon it. Few at the altar are conscious of the enormity of their expectations. No one would speak aloud the immense hopes: "I am counting on you to make my life meaningful." "I am counting on you to always be there for me." "I am counting on you to read my mind and anticipate all my needs." "I am counting on you to bind my wounds and fulfill the deficits of my life." "I am counting on you to complete me, to make me a whole person, to heal my stricken soul." Just as the truth cannot be told in a commencement address, so the hidden agenda may not be spoken at the altar. One would be too embarrassed, if one acknowledged them, by the impossibility of these demands. Most marriages which end are broken by the weight of such expectations and those which persist are often badly scarred. Romance feeds on the distant, the imagined, the projected; marriage saps the common gruel of propinquity, ubiquity and commonality.

In his book *He*, Robert Johnson suggests that most moderns, no longer at home in the old mythic systems, have transferred the needs of the soul to romantic love.¹⁷ Indeed, images of the beloved are carried within each of us from childhood and projected onto one who can receive our unconscious material. As the Persian poet Rumi wrote:

The moment I heard my first love story I started looking for you,
not knowing how blind that was.
Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.
They're in each other all along.¹⁸

Living with another person on a daily basis automatically wears away

projections. This person to whom one has delivered one's soul, to whom one has opened up in intimacy, turns out to be only a mortal like us, afraid, needy and also projecting heavy expectations. Intimate relationships of any kind carry such a large freight because they come closest to replicating that Intimate Other which once was the parent. We do not wish to think of our partner as a parent. We spent so much energy getting away from parents, after all. But the beloved becomes that Intimate Other, onto whom the same needs and dynamics are projected, to the degree that we are unconscious. It is not surprising, then, that people end up choosing someone as like or as unlike their parents as they can, for the simple reason that the parent complexes have a hand in the choice all along. When the Biblical peoples declared that marriage required leaving mother and father,¹⁹ it was harder than even they imagined. Thus, the withdrawal of the projections of nurturance, empowerment and healing which one brings to the Intimate Other can only partially be achieved. The discrepancy between silent hope and quotidian reality causes pain of considerable magnitude during the Middle Passage.

Another role which receives heavy identity projections is parenthood. Most of us believe we are capable of knowing what is right for our child. We are certain we can avoid the mistakes our parents made. But inevitably we all are guilty of projecting our unlived lives onto our children. Jung observed that the largest burden a child must bear is the unlived life of the parents. The Stage-Door Mother and the Little-League father are stereotypes, but just as insidious are the jealousies a parent can have of a child's success. Thus a constant stream of messages, overt and covert, bombard a child. The child will carry the angers and hurts of the parent and suffer the full range of manipulations and coercions. Worst of all, we may unconsciously expect that child to make us happy with ourselves, to fulfill our lives and to bring us to a higher place.

By the time we come to the Middle Passage, our children have arrived at their adolescence and, pimply, sullen, rebellious and generally as obnoxious as we were to our parents, they resist our projections with a fury. If we realize how difficult and dangerous the parent complexes are as obstacles to the individual's journey toward personhood, we know those adolescents are right to resist the demand to be extensions of their parents. Nevertheless, the gap between the expectations of parenthood and the

¹⁷ *He*, pp. 82-83.

¹⁸ See Sam Kean and Anne Valley-Fox, *Your Mythic Journey*, p. 26.

¹⁹ Mark 10: 7-8.

frictions of family life cause further pain to those in the Middle Passage. The disappointment can only be assuaged if one remembers what one wished one's own parents had known, that the child only passes through our bodies and our lives en route to the mystery of his or her own life. When the parent at midlife can accept this, the ambivalence of parenting gains its proper perspective.

Freud believed that work and love were the prime requisites for sanity. Our work represents a very large occasion for meaning or for its denial. If, as Thoreau suggested long ago, most people lead lives of quiet desperation,²⁰ then surely one reason is that work for so many is demeaning and demoralizing. Even those who have achieved the positions to which they aspired will often find themselves strangely afflicted with ennui. I knew too many students who became business majors or computer programmers because their parents, or that parent substitute, the amorphous society, seemed to demand it. Both those who achieve what they desire, and those pressured to fill someone else's need, often grow bored by their careers. For every aspirant on the career ladder, there is a burned-out executive who longs for a different life.

One's career, like marriage and parenting, is a prime vehicle for the projection of 1) identity, which is thought to be confirmed through the visible mastery of a body of expertise; 2) nurturance, that one will be fed by being productive; and 3) transcendence, that one will overcome the pettiness of the spirit through successive achievements. When these projections dissolve, and the dissatisfaction with how one is using one's life energy can no longer be displaced, then one is in the Middle Passage.

The more traditional the marriage, the more fixed the gender roles, the more likely the partners will find themselves drawn in opposite directions. He has been to the mountain top and all one can see from there is a corporate parking lot. He would gladly throttle back or retire. She, having devoted herself to family life, feels cheated, unappreciated and underdeveloped, and wants to go back to school or find renewing work. For men, the issue of work at midlife often occasions depression, the deflation of hope and ambition. Women starting over often experience anxiety regarding their level of competence or ability to compete. Again, there is bad news, good news, and more. The bad news is that each has exhausted a major area of projected identity and wishes a new start. The good news is that out of

such dissatisfaction genuine renewal can come and another facet of the individual's potential may be tapped for everyone's gain. More bad news is that one projection may only be traded for another; but even so, one draws closer toward that appointment with one's Self. If a spouse feels threatened by change, and resists, then he or she can be assured of living with an angry and depressed partner. In the crucible of marriage change will not inevitably be for the better, but it will be inevitable. Otherwise the marriage may not survive, especially if it hinders the growth of either partner.

Still another projection which must be dissolved at midlife has to do with the role of the parent as symbolic protector. Usually by midlife one's parents are declining in their powers or deceased. Even when the parental relationship has been troubled or distant, the parent is still symbolically present to provide an invisible psychic barrier. As long as the parental figure is alive, a psychic buffer against the unknowable and dangerous universe survives. When it is removed, one often feels the whiff of existential anxiety. One client, in her early forties, suffered panic attacks when her mid-seventies parents decided, amicably, to divorce. Their marriage had never been good, she knew, but it still served her as an invisible shield against that large universe. Even before their mortal removal, the divorce shattered the invisible protection—one more way to feel alone and abandoned at midlife.

While there are many other sorts of projections which fail to survive the first adulthood, the loss of expectations regarding marriage, children, career and the parent as protector are the most telling.

In *Projection and Re-Collection in Jungian Psychology*, Marie-Louise von Franz notes five stages of projection.²¹ First, the person is convinced that the inner (that is, unconscious) experience is truly outer. Second, there is a gradual recognition of the discrepancy between the reality and the projected image (one falls out of love, for example). Third, one is required to acknowledge this discrepancy. Fourth, one is driven to conclude one was somehow in error originally. And, fifth, one must search for the origin of the projected energy within oneself. This last stage, the search for the meaning of the projection, always involves a search for a greater knowledge of oneself.

The erosion of projections, the withdrawal of the hopes and expectations they embody, is almost always painful. But it is a necessary

²⁰ *The Best of Walden and Civil Disobedience*, p. 15.

²¹ *Projection and Re-Collection in Jungian Psychology*, pp. 9ff.

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prerequisite for self-knowledge. The loss of hope that the outer will save us occasions the possibility that we shall have to save ourselves. For every inner child, riddled with fear and looking for rescue from the adult world, there is an adult potentially able to take responsibility for that child. By rendering the contents of the projections conscious, one has taken a large step toward emancipation from childhood.

Changes in the Body and Sense of Time

The general attitude of the first adulthood is to project one's sense of youthful inflation onto the indeterminate future. When energy flags it is easy enough to dismiss the event. Perhaps one did not get enough sleep the night before. Then one finds oneself performing as before, but not rebounding as quickly. Then the minor aches and strains persist.

Youth generally takes the body for granted. It will be there to serve and protect and may be drawn deeply upon when needed, always replenishing itself. But a day comes when one realizes that, again, there is an ineluctable transformation occurring beyond one's will. The body becomes the enemy, reluctant antagonist in the heroic drama in which we have cast ourselves. The hopes of the heart persist, but the body will no longer respond as once it did. As Yeats lamented, "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / and fastened to a dying animal."²² What once was the humble servant of the ego now becomes a surly opponent; one feels trapped in the body. However high the spirit wishes to soar, what Alfred North Whitehead called "the wiliness of the body"²³ calls one back to earth.

So too, time, which once seemed the arena for endless play, the far field of ever-returning light, also becomes a trap. The shift, a sudden *peripeteia*, leads one to recognize not only that one is mortal, that there is an end, but that there is no way one will ever accomplish all that the heart longs for and pursues. "Only the parts, never the whole," my friend concluded. The graceful body, a charnel house; the endless summer, a spin into darkness—it is this sense of limit and incompleteness which calls the first adulthood to an end. Dylan Thomas wrote of this transit in hauntingly beautiful lines:

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow-thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,

²² *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, p. 191.

²³ *Nature and Life*, p. 126.

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In the moon that is always rising,
Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.²⁴

The Diminution of Hope

When the purse strings of the heart suddenly tighten, and one knows oneself mortal, the limitations of our lives are suddenly inescapable. The magical thinking of childhood, and the heroic thinking of that extended adolescence called the first adulthood, prove inadequate to the realities of life. The expansionist, impertal ego deflects the insecurities of childhood into a grandiosity. "Fame: I'm going to live forever; I'm going to learn how to fly." The hopes of the nascent ego for immortality and celebrity are in direct proportion to childhood fear and ignorance of the world. Similarly, the bitterness and depression of midlife is linked to the amount of energy invested in the phantasmal wishes of childhood.

The ego needs to establish a foothold in a large and unknowable universe. Not unlike the coral atoll which is formed by accreting skeletal shards, so the ego collects experiential fragments and builds them as a structure to hold fast in the great tidal shifts. Naturally, ego consciousness concludes that it must defend against the overwhelming experiences of life and compensate its insecurities by grandiosity. In our insecurity, the delusion of greatness serves to keep the darkness at bay while we drift off to sleep at night. But to flounder amid ordinariness is the sour leaven of midlife. And even those who gain renown, who name hotels after themselves, who drive their children to madness, are no more exempt than the rest of us from the encounter with limit, with deflation and with mortality. If the accoutrements of power and privilege gave peace or meaning, or even lasting satisfaction, then there would be some substance to the infantile wishes we project.

Another ego-related hope of youth is the desire for the perfect relationship. While one has seen less than perfect relationships all around, we are

²⁴ "Fem Hill," in *Collected Poems*, p. 180.

prone to assume we are somehow wiser, better able to choose, better equipped to avoid the pitfalls. The Koran warns, "Do you think that you shall enter the Garden of Bliss without such trials as came to those who passed before you?"²⁵ We imagine such advice applies to others. While more will be written later on this subject, the second greatest deflation of midlife expectations is the encounter with the limitations of relationships. The Intimate Other who will meet our needs, take care of us, always be there for us, is seen to be an ordinary person, like ourselves, also needy, and projecting much the same expectations onto us. Marriages often end at midlife and one central reason is the enormity of childhood hopes which are imposed upon the fragile structure between two people. Others will not and cannot meet the grandiose needs of the inner child and so we are left feeling abandoned and betrayed.

Projections embody what is unclaimed or unknown within ourselves. Life has a way of dissolving projections and one must, amid the disappointment and desolation, begin to take on the responsibility for one's own satisfaction. There is no one out there to save us, to take care of us, to heal the hurt. But there is a very fine person within, one we barely know, ready and willing to be our constant companion. Only when one has acknowledged the deflation of the hopes and expectations of childhood and accepted direct responsibility for finding meaning for oneself, can the second adulthood begin.

I knew a man who acknowledged his core issue to be envy. By definition, envy is the perception that someone else has what one hungers for. While this man had suffered genuine deprivations in childhood, he was still defining himself negatively—"I am that absence which sees its fullness in some other." Recognizing that childhood cannot be relived and its history reversed, that no one will magically fill the void within, is surely painful, but then begins the possible path to healing. What is so difficult is to trust that one's own psyche will prove sufficient to heal itself. Sooner or later, that leap into trusting one's own resources must occur or one continues the futile pursuit of of childhood fantasies. Letting go of those will-of-the-wisps of immortality, perfection and grandiosity does much to poison a person's spirit and relationships. In the experience of estrangement from self and others, however, is the potential for that solitude wherein one may discern the largeness of the person within.

²⁵ Cited in Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 126.

The Experience of Neurosis

Just as romantic love may be seen as a transient madness in which people make decisions for eternity based on the emotions of the moment, so the turbulence of the Middle Passage may resemble a psychotic break wherein the person acts "crazy" or withdraws from others. If we realize that the assumptions by which the person has lived his or her life are collapsing, that the assembled strategies of the provisional personality are decompensating, that a world-view is falling apart, then the thrashing about is understandable. In fact, one might even conclude that there is no such thing as a crazy act if one understands the emotional context. Emotions are not chosen; they choose us and have a logic of their own.

A client in a psychiatric facility repeatedly threw chairs through windows. It was assumed that he wished to escape and he was placed in restraints. Under careful questioning, however, it came out that he believed the air was being pumped out of his room and he needed to breathe fresh air. His sense of psychic enclosure had converted symbolically into claustrophobia. His desire for more air was logical, given the emotional premise. When moved to more commodious quarters, he felt secure. His behavior was not crazy. He was logically acting out the psychological experience of enclosure and suffocation.

So, during the Middle Passage, when the largeness of emotion breaks through ego boundaries, we often concretize what is symbolically injured or neglected. The man who runs away with his secretary is terrified that his inner life, his lost feminine dimension, will wither and disappear forever. As this need is largely unconscious, he projects that missing woman within upon the woman without. The woman who suffers a depression is turning her unwelcome anger within, upon the only person she has permission to attack. Neither is crazy though they may suffer such judgments from others. Both are responding to the enormity of the needs and emotions which beset them just at a time when their maps of reality no longer match the terrain.

There is an excellent example of meaningful madness in the short story "Eli, the Panatic," by Philip Roth.²⁶ Set just after World War Two, when the world was flooded with displaced persons, Eli is an established lawyer in suburban America. When a group of survivors from a concentration

²⁶ See *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*.

camp are relocated in his town, Eli is sent to ask them to tone down their ethnic identity. In turn, he is confronted with the emptiness of his own identity and his shallow link to his heritage. Ultimately he trades his Brooks Brothers suit for the shabby attire of the old Rabbi and walks down the main street of his town chanting his Biblical name. The final scene of the story depicts his incarceration and injection with a powerful tranquilizer. He is judged mad when in fact he has simply discarded his provisional identity, shed the trappings and projections of the upwardly mobile, and relocated himself within an ancient tradition. As his new identity is not congruent with the accepted matrix, he is deemed "crazy" and his new consciousness is medicated. One might say of him as Wordsworth said of Blake, "There are some who think this man mad, but I prefer the madness of this man to the sanity of others."²⁷

The experience of the widening gap between the acquired sense of self, with all its attendant strategies and projections, and the demands of the Self which lies buried beneath one's history, is known to all, for all feel separated from themselves. The word "neurosis," coined by the Scottish physician Cullen in the late eighteenth century, suggests that what we are experiencing is neurological. But neurosis, or a so-called nervous breakdown, has nothing to do with neurology. It is simply the term used to describe the intrapsychic division, and subsequent protest, of the psyche. All of us are neurotic because we experience a split between what we are and what we are meant to be. The symptomatic protest of the neurosis, expressed in depression, substance abuse or destructive behavior, is denied as long as possible. But symptoms gather energy anew and begin to operate autonomously, outside the volition of the ego. It is as useless to tell a dieting person not to be hungry as to ask a symptom to go away. The symptom, even when counterproductive, is meaningful, for it expresses in symbolic form what is longing for expression.

What the frightened individual wishes above all is the restoration of the sense of self which once worked. What the therapist knows is that the symptoms are helpful clues to the place of injury or neglect, pointing the way to subsequent healing. The therapist also knows that the experience of midlife neurosis, when it can be faced, constitutes an enormous opening to transformation. As Jung asserted, "The outbreak of the neurosis is not just a matter of chance. As a rule it is most critical. It is usually the moment

when a new psychological adjustment, a new adaptation is demanded."²⁸ This implies that our own psyche has organized this crisis, produced this suffering, precisely because injury has been done and change must occur.

I am frequently reminded of the dream of a woman who first came into analysis when she was sixty-five, just after the death of her husband. She had grown up with a very strong, very positive father relationship and had a powerful father complex. Her husband was several years older than she. Naturally, she was devastated by the loss of both through death. She sought solace from a cleric who suggested that she enter therapy. Initially, she thought therapy would take away her pain. Predictably, she projected considerable authority onto the therapist.

Several months into the analysis she had a dream in which she and her deceased husband were on a journey together. When they reached a stream with a bridge, she realized she had forgotten her purse. Her husband went ahead and she returned to fetch her purse. She retraced her steps and, upon arriving at the same bridge, was joined from the left by an unknown man who crossed over the bridge with her. She explained to this man that her husband was ahead of her but that he also had died. "I'm so alone, so alone," she lamented. "I know," the stranger replied, "but it has been good for me."

In the dream, and in reporting it later, the dreamer was angry at the stranger for his seeming insensitivity to her bereavement. I was excited by this dream for it showed a definite psychological shift. While her father and husband were in fact deceased, they continued to have a dominating role in her definition of herself. The father complex, seemingly benign, had constituted an external authority, blocking her from finding her own. The bridge constituted the capacity to make the transition from outer to inner authority. And the unknown stranger represented her inner masculine principle, the animus, which had lain undeveloped because of the power of the father complex. It is a good example of the wonderful, self-regulating wisdom of the psyche; the suffering of her ego had occasioned the growth of an inner component not under the domination of the father. Her Middle Passage began, then, at age sixty-five, when she embarked on a journey to claim her own identity and find her own authority, both requisites for adulthood.

²⁷ Martin Price, *To the Palace of Wisdom*, p. 432.

²⁸ "Psychoanalysis and Neurosis," *Freud and Psychoanalysis*, CW 4, par. 563.

Another way to look at neurosis is to consider that the suffering arises out of a considerable degree of dissociation. In the process of responding to the socialization process of childhood and the pressure of outer realities, we become progressively estranged from ourselves. Protests from within are squelched by the weight of the outer world. But by midlife the injury and neglect to the soul may be such that parts of the psyche strenuously resist further insult. This resistance manifests in symptoms. Rather than medicate their message away, we must engage them in dialogue to bring about that "new adaptation" referred to above by Jung.

It is a very difficult truth to those in immense suffering, in the dark night of the soul, that their pain is good for them, as the above dreamer's mystery man said. But the way ahead may be found in the suffering. There is no cure, for life is not a disease, nor death a punishment. But there is a path to more meaningful, more abundant life.

I recall a woman with a history of great suffering, beginning with a turbulent passage into life and a malformed body, periods of neglect and abandonment, and a series of dependent and humiliating relationships. At midlife her world tumbled and she went inward to find the person she never knew. The word she used to describe the ordeal of the Middle Passage was "fragmentation." Many have suffered such fragmentation and many, understandably, flee to some defended stronghold of neurosis and hunker down before the winds of change. But when I asked this woman what she did when she felt fragmented, who she was during this painful process, she answered in terms which told me clearly that she would make it through to a more authentic life. She said, as best I recall, "I talk to this part of me, and then I listen. And I talk to that part and I listen. And I try to learn what Psyche wants of me."

She spoke of Psyche as a living presence, a feminine knowing which would direct her. Some would say, "She's hearing voices; she's schizophrenic." Quite the contrary. We all hear voices, so to speak; that is what complexes are—parts of ourselves that speak to us, and we, not hearing consciously, become their prisoner. This woman was assisting the dialogue between ego and Self, the dialogue which can heal the split history has wrought. Her ability to trust that inner process is as necessary as it is rare. Nature is not against us. The poet Rilke beautifully observed that our inner dragons may actually seek our assistance:

How should we be able to forget those ancient myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last

moment turn into princesses; perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave. Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us.²⁹

Giving attentive help transforms these dragons into sources of energy for renewal.

Recall Jung's definition of neurosis as "suffering which has not discovered its meaning."³⁰ Indeed, suffering seems to be a prerequisite for the transformation of consciousness. Elsewhere Jung suggests that neurosis is "inauthentic suffering."³¹ Authentic suffering requires encounters with dragons. Inauthentic suffering implies flight from them.

If Jung and Rilke are right, and I think they are, 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.

The Advent of the Middle Passage

The Middle Passage—From Misery to Meaning

James Hollis
Inner City Books'93

²⁹ *Letters to a Young Poet*, p. 69.

³⁰ See above, note 8.

³¹ "The Significance of the Unconscious in Individual Education," *The Development of Personality*, CW 17, par. 154.