

– Introduction –

Since I began practising as a psychotherapist, three quarters of my clients have been between the age of thirty-five and fifty-five. They invariably arrive for their first session in a state of depression, anxiety and uncertainty, often unsure whether to give up a profession or a marriage. In this state of near breakdown, they feel overwhelmed by some insoluble, intractable problem. As I have traversed this challenging emotional rockface with client after client I am, time and again, impressed by how these periods of inner turmoil provide us with an unmatched opportunity to review our lives and explore our personalities. We can then attempt to adapt and reshape those aspects of our nature which constrict our development, that hold back our true potential and impede our sense of well-being.

This rite of passage that we have come to call ‘the midlife crisis’ has an ancient provenance. Indeed, it is the subject of the second story ever told in the earliest stirrings of Western culture. Homer’s *Odyssey* recounts Odysseus’s journey home to Ithaca after the end of the Trojan Wars. As the gods test his resolve, Odysseus is beset by a multitude of calamities and

temptations that – during the course of his long voyage home – transform him from a youthful warrior into a wise and enlightened elder.

Several thousand years later another sacred text recounts a similar rite of passage undertaken by Dante Alighieri whose *Divine Comedy* begins with its famous opening sentence: ‘Midway through this life upon which we are bound, I woke to find myself in a dark wood, where the right road was wholly lost and gone.’ This epic story describes Dante’s journey through the Inferno, Purgatory and finally into Paradise, in the company of his guide and mentor Virgil and then his muse Beatrice.

These confrontations with inner demons and outer misfortune experienced by Odysseus and Dante have numerous parallels in Western religious texts and literature. They appear in the Old Testament stories of Jonah and Job, in Christ’s forty days and nights in the wilderness, in St John of the Cross’s Dark Night of the Soul, in Goethe’s drama *Faust*, in Tolstoy’s accounts of Levin and Pierre’s tribulations and in Eliot’s *East Coker*. The sense that inner wisdom or a feeling of enlightenment and psychological repose can only be achieved through a crisis, an ordeal or a long hazardous journey is a belief that runs through the entire tradition of Western literature, mythology and spirituality.

As with Odysseus and Dante – and as with the heroes and protagonists of Goethe, Tolstoy and Eliot –

many of my clients who experience this ordeal meet the challenge and undergo some form of transformation. As they recover they begin a new phase of life, having resolved their central difficulties and having made the necessary adaptations to their lives, having released once dormant potentialities. The midlife crisis is invariably a unique opportunity to grow and develop our personalities in a direction that will give our lives a deeper sense of meaning and purpose, a greater sense of fulfilment and a less troubled, richer engagement with our own true natures and the world around us.

A hundred years ago Freud and Jung produced two works that were to have an immeasurable impact upon the theory and clinical practice of psychotherapy. In 1920 Freud published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which gave a comprehensive account of his repetition theory, while in the same year Jung was writing *Psychological Types*, in which he described for the first time his concept of ‘individuation’. These thoughts on the psychology of midlife have running through them continual references to these two theories which stand as cornerstones of the psychoanalytic revolution, two different models of the human psyche and two contrasting approaches to the practice of psychotherapy. Both, however, shed light on why this psychological rite of passage not only appears to be a necessary experience in our emotional development but also the role of the midlife crisis as a significant part of our evolution as a species.

There are perhaps three evolutionary processes that sculpt humanity's development – biological, technical and ethical evolution. Biological and technological evolution are both accepted mechanisms of human development, but I would argue that ethical evolution provides a third tier to humanity's progress which becomes essential if we are to control our species' technical advance, which if left unrestrained will put our existence at risk.

If our ethical progress does not keep up with our technological progress, the planet and our species will be placed under perpetual threat. Our midlife experience therefore is crucial in providing our species with the wisdom, compassion and altruism necessary to guide humanity safely through the challenges that lie ahead.