

The Age of Opportunities?

A study of the transitional period into mid-life.

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Abstract

**“Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
For I had wondered off from the straight path.**

**How hard it is to tell what it was like,
This wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn
(the thought of it brings back all my fears),**

**A bitter place! Death could scarce be bitterer.
But if I would show the good that came of it,
I must talk about things other than the good.”**

(Dante. Inferno. Canto I)

Mid-life is a reality that touches us all. The transition from youth into the mid-life years can take place as a smooth physical and psychological adjustment or it can dawn on us in a whirl of emotional chaos.

This study focuses on the experience of eight co-researchers and observes the major themes relevant to their transition. Having immersed myself in the data that emerged from the interviews and also in the study of the theory, I have proceeded to highlight the experiential development of this transition, from disintegration of personality to integration of new values and choices for a possibly fulfilling second part of life.

As the development goes through a deep state of sometimes unconscious grief and sadness at the loss of youth and the impending closeness of death, I ask myself, and the reader, a fundamental question; is there any evidence that the transition into mid-life can offer the means to reach maturity, wholeness and the ability to fully engage with life's multitude of opportunities? Or is this phase more to do with physical changes, as the media often suggest?

For the purpose of this dissertation I will be observing the phenomenon of transition into mid-life from a predominantly developmental and psychodynamic perspective.

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for Fausto

PART 1

Introduction.

It's my fiftieth birthday party, a happy gathering on top of London's Tower Bridge. I mingle with my guests, greet and chat in the bubbly atmosphere of laughter and excitement, suspended on the two long gantry walkways. I smile graciously at the crowd of friends assembled to celebrate this important milestone. It's a farewell to my youth and a welcome to the onset of mid-life. I smile and laugh, in the buzzing mix of music and chatter.

The show goes on and the smile of my pretence stays fixed on my lips. The gayety of the surroundings collides with the desolation I feel inside, while outside the City of London shines in the misty golden evening light.

Down below the dark, rippling waters send a message of terror. A secret impulse takes me from within and I need to be gone, down into its depth, not having to cross over.

Another guest has been accompanying me all evening. A sinister presence, silent and invisible, messenger not of good wishes, rather a witness of that feeling of chaos and frailty I experience inside.

That sensation of being on the verge of disintegration, a thousand sparkles of an extinguished firework, its dying embers falling to the ground.

“Disintegrated, my soul cries for help.

Falling apart. Breaking up.

Shattered, trying to hold crumbling pieces together.

Cracked up, smashed and broken, my soul

Can only envisage a future of decomposed

Decayed, rotting matter.

Dissolving and degenerating in the moulding earth,

Eroding remains of useless life meshing humid soil

Feeding worms, feeding stinging nettle.

Joining putrid corpses and abandoned burial stones,

Crackling under hurried muddy soles,

Decaying like a squashed cockroach.

Voiceless, my soul cries for help.

In the wind, in the rain, in darkness and silence.

It cries and cries again.

Dried up like an arid desert,

Hopeless, bruised and beyond help,

My soul cries in vain.”

(P. Pomponi, 2007)

Mid-life arrives as part of the natural development in human life. Sometimes early, sometime later, it arrives inexorably. We should know about it, it happened to our mothers, our friends' mothers, our grandmothers. In perhaps a more subtle way it also arrived for our fathers and grandfathers. We seem to think that, like death, it is something that happens to others, not to us. Before it arrives, there can be a transitional time that can take us by surprise and, for some, it can create havoc, destruction and despair.

Heralded for women by the menopause, mid-life has, in the past, been considered mainly a female issue. Predominant among all the lurking fears, is the idea that a woman at the menopause ceases to be desirable. Changes in her body as well as in her appearance will make her unlovable and no longer useful. With the end of child-bearing age, life seems to be closing down and coming to an end.

In the past couple of decades attitudes towards the menopause have altered not least because women have started to openly talk about it and they have started to appreciate the climacteric as an important change in their life. The menopause, which delineates so clearly the advent of mid-life in women, has also become a symbol of the difference between women and men.

Although my personal experience of this transition may put more emphasis on women, it is also important to stress that in recent years doctors have started talking about *male menopause*, pointing out a number of symptoms in men that are quite similar to those already observed in women. *Male menopause* is an interesting concept; it is a contradictory fictitious term, since menopause strictly refers to the cessation of menstruation. *Andropause*, *viropause* or *endopause* are all terms that the experts have put forward in order to define the ***“hormonal, physiological and chemical changes which occur in men between around forty and fifty five.”*** (www.malehealth.co.uk).

Whichever the choice of terminology, apart from the obvious fact that men do not cease to be fertile, they also go through a major change which often becomes apparent when they are faced with issues related to retirement, redundancy, impotence, depression and a blurred vision of the future.

Because men usually discuss feelings and bodily changes less than women, such symptoms are often kept hidden inside and men tend to suffer in isolation; ***“Silence is manly, and we are trained to keep our feelings inside. Better a heart attack than speaking openly about a broken heart.”*** (Keen, 1991. P. 78). What is new in our present society is the awareness that men, just as women, suffer psychologically over the ageing process, and that sexual failure is for them the equivalent of their change of life. Today there is a greater willingness to acknowledge that men and women share the same human condition.

This study has been influenced not only by the experience of my co-researchers and my own, but also by the work of many authors I encountered during my review of the literature. The major influence on my understanding of the transition into mid-life has to be attributed mainly to the writings of Jung, which offered me an insight into the turmoil and pain of this moment of deep change. His biographical accounts are full of emotion and meaning and resonated deeply with my own experience. ***“Experience shows us ...that the basis and cause of all the difficulties of this transition are to be found in a deep seated and peculiar change within the psyche.”*** (Jung, 1933. P. 122). He uses the term *transition* to pinpoint to this moment of awakening. Later on in the same text he uses the word *transition* referring to the moment of death: ***“...it would therefore be desirable to think of death as only a transition - one part of a life-process whose extent and duration escape our knowledge.”*** (Jung, 1933. P. 129).

Human development is often described as a sequence of stages and linear movement from one to the next. Erikson's developmental theory, Levinson's description of the cycles of

life and Steiner's theory of seven years cycles, equipped me with a schematic tool which enabled me to name the particular moment I am describing.

It has been argued that “... *the notion of a stage approach to the life cycle is an artefact of the research method.*” (Adams, 2006. P.262) and that the chosen research method will produce results which are in accordance with the method itself. In addition the words we use in the research indicate our assumptions and pre-conceived ideas.

It is not my intention to enter into a critique of the different stage theories or research methods, and whilst I am aware of the implications of choosing any method or following any particular theory, I must state that I could not depart from making such choices of method and terminology which were essential parts or at least starting points of my study.

It is as a consequence of such choices that I have decided to use the term *transition*, which I understand as a moment of preparation for mid-life, what Levinson (1978) calls “*zone of overlay*”, doorways between one cycle and the next.

The term *transition* refers to “*the process of changing from one state or stage to another*” (Oxford English Dictionary). The term implies movement and openness to change. It may imply growth and change or simply reaffirmation of one's position. It may bring acceptance but not necessarily in its totality. Transition may bring a sense of risk; making choices that will re-configure the way we will spend our mature years and old age. It may bring out our vulnerability and most distressing of all, the nearing of our encounter with death. Indeed the transition into mid-life can be a moment of death and re-birth.

Sometimes it can be a long moment, it can last several years. Comparable to adolescence, it is the biggest change we may undertake in our life in order to come to maturity and to make use of all the experience and knowledge gathered during the years of youth.

The transition into mid life can be a kind of awakening, like the one Dante described, a kind of doorway, the passing from one stage to another. I am not stating that it is a universal experience. On the contrary, it is very unique and individual and it can be influenced by our

culture, social status and personal beliefs. It can be a time of great loss and pain, but it can also become a glorious moment, if lived well. Can it also be the beginning of one's fulfilment, the actuation of one's utmost possibilities?

While in most literature this transitional time is often referred to as mid life, I will use the term *transition* in order to refer to the moment (however long it may be) of preparation and self-evaluation that prepares the years commonly referred to as mid-life.

My understanding of the term *mid-life* is "*the period of life beyond young adulthood but before the onset of old age. Various attempts have been made to define this age, which is around the third quarter of the average life span of human beings...usually considered to occur approximately between the ages of forty and sixty*". The Oxford English Dictionary gives a similar definition but with a later start point "... *the period between youth and old age, about forty five to sixty*". The US Census lists middle age as including both the age categories thirty five to forty four and forty five to fifty four, while Erikson (1968) sees it ending a little later and defines middle adulthood as between forty and sixty five. (Wikipedia).

Jung positions the transition into mid-life at the age between thirty five and forty. And while for me the transition started around the fifty year mark, this study shows that for each of my co-researchers the transition into mid-life started at different ages. Furthermore it can be argued that not everybody goes through this traumatic transition and for some people mid-life is a natural and mellow part of life development, although another point of view could assert that the opportunity of this transition can be resisted or ignored for fear of change and anxiety about the future.

The period that flags the beginning of mid-life is often referred to as "*the mid-life crisis*". The word "*crisis*" in Greek means a time of intense difficulty, but also decision.

I prefer to consider that time as a transition not necessarily as a crisis.

Review of the Literature.

“In the morning [the sun] rises from the nocturnal sea of unconsciousness and looks upon the wide, bright world which lies before it in an expanse that steadily widens the higher it climbs in the firmament. In this extension of its field of action caused by its own rising, the sun will discover its significance; it will see the attainment of the greatest possible height, and the widest possible dissemination of its blessings, as its goal. In this conviction the sun pursues its course to the unforeseen zenith - unforeseen, because its career is unique and individual, and the culminating point could not be calculated in advance. At the stroke of noon the descent begins. And the descent means the reversal of all the ideals and values that were cherished in the morning. The sun falls into contradiction with itself. It is as though it should draw in its rays instead of emitting them. Light and warmth decline and are at last extinguished.”

(The Stages of Life. Jung, 1930.)

The Jungian Metaphor.

Jung has written extensively about the inset of mid-life. His writings cover most of the major themes that appear during that time of transition. His theories have been a source of inspiration for many other writers who studied the subject. The famous metaphor is a wonderful way for Jung to describe the essence of mid-life transition; when the sun reaches the zenith everything is reversed and the transition begins from adulthood into the next part of one's life

Whilst in youth we were engaged in the task of developing our personality in order to achieve goals and to be accepted and rewarded by society, during the next stage our bodies and our values begin to change and they slowly seem to develop into their opposites.

The difficulty of this transition resides in the deep-seated change in our psyche. When the sun reaches the zenith and starts to descend, the individual has to recognise and accept that something strange and different is happening. The necessity appears, to transform the human being into the new, future man and allow the old one to die away. This is no easy task and it is a problem with not just one solution, but a whole range of possibilities. It seems to me, in fact, that the problem is there not necessarily to be solved, rather to be reckoned with, as if its purpose lies not in its solution but in the ability to engage with it incessantly.

From Adulthood to Mid-life

Jung (1958) states that during adulthood life is experienced as a horizontal, chronological succession of events. Transiting into mid-life we start to experience life as a vertical movement towards meaning and depth. That is the time when self-knowledge becomes a process that goes inwards. We often find that we are totally defenceless in this state of uncertainty; all theories seem invalid and the certainties that so well worked before are now inadequate. Self-knowledge is a very individual process and while statistics may be able to tell us what goes on at that certain point of one's life, they do not tell us how this happens, because the experience is unique and its irregularity is the norm. Do we conclude then that this irregular and individual characteristic of mid-life is exactly what makes it universal?

The transition into mid-life can be a time for depression and disorientation. The change, which at first is not obvious, often comes to the surface because of a sudden crisis; the loss of one's parents, job or relationship. In agreement with Jung, Hollis (1993) argues that this crisis needs to be understood for the death-rebirth process to occur. If adulthood (the period in the late twenties and early thirties) stems from adolescence, then mid-life also needs a second adolescence.

During our adulthood we may be driven by what we don't know about ourselves; we

need to use those resources of our personality that will help determine our stand in society. In order to do so we need to split from all the other parts that would impede such stand. During the transition into mid-life suddenly old strategies no longer work, and this is when a crisis often occurs. People nowadays live longer and there is an urgency to reassess the new personality. This is not in order to cancel pain from our living, but to give it a meaning. Living one's life more consciously is a necessity in order to wrestle meaning out of misery.

Spirituality

For Jung (1958) transiting into mid-life is the time when one's spirituality may need redefining. He explains that just as man cannot exist without his relationship to society, so the individual will never find a justification of his existence outside of his own sense of spirituality. The magic and ritualistic aspects of spirituality and religion have a psychological importance in as much as they give man a sense of safety and explanation which is essential for carrying out decisions. Spirituality in this context can be understood as **"...conscientious regard for irrational facts of life..."** (Jung, 1958. P. 29)

During the transition into mid-life there may be an acquiring of a sense of *"wonder"* (Keen, 2001). Man starts to be less concerned with doing - pursuing money, power, success etc.- and knowing, and becomes more open to the gift of just being, with gratitude. This wondering, can also be understood as *"spiritual availability"*, or *"spiritual readiness"*. (Keen, 1991. P. 157)

Following the trail of Spirituality, an important contribution comes from Brewi and Brennan (1999), who organise seminars and workshops sponsoring spiritual growth at the onset of mid-life and beyond, describe how exploring the mystery of life and death is essential in order to awaken us in mid-life, or else we became cynical and jaded, burnt out old people. Whilst our body and our senses age, we often forget that our soul stays young. One major task in mid-life is to reclaim our soul. Reclaiming our soul means making peace with our past, our

childhood misery, our mistakes, learn from it and then move on.

Brewi and Brennan take the life of Jesus as the best example of Jung's (1940) call for "*individuation*", the task of knowing and expressing our real selves. At the age of thirty Jesus left his home and his work as a carpenter to begin a new life, to accomplish what he was meant to. In order to accomplish his task he had to confront times of doubt, temptation, disorientation and psychological pain. He retreated to the desert seeking solitude and meditation, and then re-emerged in the middle of the crowds. He did not negate his relationship with his parents, rather his goals and values transcended that relationship and integrated it in his new life.

Integrating a new understanding of our personality, re-assessing the important relationships in our life and making changes in order to develop what in youth could not be developed, is the big task in order to prepare for mid-life. If lived through with acceptance of pain it can result in a new ability to fulfil our potential. If ignored or resisted it will result in many years of living waiting for death. **"One can die at forty and not get buried until ninety."** (Brewi & Brennan, 1999. P. 99).

The transition into mid-life is sometimes defined as a time of momentary madness. This may explain the tendency to consider this a moment of crisis; there are reasons for this disturbance to manifest at this particular time, as this is the time when one may need to undergo a thorough self-examination and to **"engage with the summons of our souls..."** (Hollis, 2005. P. 25).

Hollis (2005) further argues that we are often programmed by the expectations that our parents, our culture, our boss, our spouse bestow on us. While the first part of life is social, the second part becomes spiritual. Understanding the call of our soul can result in anxiety or depression, yet to deny the power of our own history will mean going on living unconsciously; to acknowledge it will open the possibility of real change. **"Anxiety is the price of the ticket to life... depression is the by-product of our refusal to climb aboard."** (Hollis, 2005. P.76)

Re-evaluation of Childhood.

Part of the process of mid-life presupposes the return of the individual to the fantasy world of his childhood. Jung (1958) argues that the moment of standstill experienced in the development of the personality during the transition into mid-life offers an opportunity for those fantasies to reach a certain level of intensity, break through consciousness and create a conflict situation. This can result in the individual splitting into two personalities; what one had wished to become and what one actually managed to be. Indeed, preparing for mid-life it is important to look at one's childhood with new eyes and forgive the mistakes. Not forget, but grieve what was wrong so that from pain and anger there is transformation and possibility. Then we are born again. We can re-parent that child that we were.

The concept of re-visitation of childhood is expanded through reference to Attachment Theory as Holmes (2001) explains that attachment is an intrinsic need of human life, not a childish propensity that disappears with maturity. It is whilst transiting into mid-life that we begin to separate from our own early experiences of childhood. Our infancy needs to be revisited in order to finally stop our parents' control on our life. If adults were to describe their secure base, Holmes goes on, they would probably refer to the feeling of a sense of self which can be described as the knowledge of knowing where one came from and where one is going to.

Holmes' contribution on attachment is fundamental in order to understand how, from the parental attachment of childhood, adults create new forms of attachment, as in partners, pets, the love of music, nature or art, a good game of tennis or whatever they may decide that inspires in them a feeling of being active and passionate about life. If securely attached in infancy, as adults they discover a new enthusiasm in feeling secure in the world and within themselves. Therapy can help adults to foster such sense of well being and to reach more ambitious objectives such as

"... the development of a strengthened and more versatile set of selves: for example a

more secure self, a more creative self, a more coping self, a more resilient self, a more autonomous self, a self with greater capacity for intimacy.” (Holmes, 2001. P. 85)

Understanding and integrating Attachment issues into self-analysis is necessary, but in the case of the transition into mid-life it has been noted that often this introspective work demands times of solitude and isolation. Detachment from others and from the outside world is what opens the way to a moment of reflective pause before action (or inaction, if that is the result) can take place.

Isolation.

Reading Jung's biography I learnt that his mid-life transition was a long and dramatic process. He describes his situation as that of intense isolation. Full of doubt and hesitation about his decision to give up his academic career, he comments: **“The consequence of my resolve, and my involvement with things that neither I nor anyone else could understand, was an extreme loneliness.”** (Jung, 1995. P. 219)

As the gulf between the external world and his inner turmoil became irreconcilable and contradictory, he could see that he needed to find a point of contact with other people and the outer world by showing that psychic experiences are indeed real, and are experienced by others as collective experiences. **“I knew - he commented - that if I did not succeed, I would be condemned to absolute isolation.”** (Jung, 1995. P. 220)

Hollis (1993) describes how the collapse of the idea that if we follow all the rules everything will be fine, leaves us confused and frustrated. Our time perception changes and we have to realise that many of our wishes will never come true. We suddenly realise that we are not in control of our life. We search for ways of regaining power over our fragilities, but we also realise that we no longer know who we are and there is no one there to rescue us.

There is an urgency in this isolation, which causes anxiety and depression. The old patterns that kept such urgency at bay no longer work and sometimes we feel that all we can do

is to keep repeating them with increased anxiety. Hollis introduces the idea that at times the trigger that gives way to the process of mid-life transition can be brought upon oneself, and it may not simply be an external occurrence. Transiting into mid-life the self may assemble itself into a crisis in order to bring about a correction of course. Or there may follow a more subtle and hidden process that will prevent change in an effort to cling to the way things were.

Understanding and being able to accept and value isolation takes a new meaning during the transition. For some the choice could be to learn or to continue to lead life without a partner's support. Conversely, fear of loneliness and isolation could deter the positive outcome of independence and self-reliance. In order not to succumb to total isolation we need a radical alteration of the relationship between ourselves and society, and also ourselves and our family, Hollis argues. As we acknowledge our own mortality and limitations, we also see the limitations in our closest relationships. This will almost certainly affect our marriage. In order to reconstruct a marriage in mid-life the two must first be separate and then able to dialogue about their separateness.

The dialogue with ourselves must be reflective and meditative. Isolation teaches us that we must be able to be alone with ourselves. When loneliness gives way to solitude we know that the work is progressing; **“In the experience of estrangement from self and others... is the potential for that solitude wherein one may discern the largeness of the person within...”** (Hollis, 1993. P. 34)

Transiting into mid-life can pose a challenging demand for men used to a hectic business life. During the transition, *“We need to acquire a heartfelt mind. This seems best done through the cultivated discipline of solitude, and the habit of recollection and autobiographical thinking.... Solitude begins when a man silences the competing voices of the market, the polis, the home, the mass, and listens to the dictates of his own heart.”* (Keen, 1991. P.160-161)

Growth and Integration.

Transition into mid-life is a phenomenon that produces itself, we don't decide when it is time for that call, it simply happens. Jung (1940) explains that at that point it is no longer possible to be the same person one was in youth. Jung saw the archetypal dimension of the psyche as the source of growth in the next part of one's life which he describes as the most important moment of adult development. When we become able to integrate our history and our pain, then we are also able to adopt a new way of relating to others. Our future growth or decline is dependent on this newly acquired consciousness.

The inability or unwillingness to do this often results in neuroses, depression and despair which are a protection against the objective, inner activity of the psyche, to escape from the inner voice and so from vocation. The inner voice is the voice of a fuller life with increased awareness. It may also be the voice of our vices and our bad side, because it brings to the surface the whole of the personality, good and bad. If we succumb to it in part then no healing and reward will come out of it. Confusion, deception and despair will open up as an abyss in front of us. If we acknowledge it in full and integrate the parts that we judge as needed in the new personality, then we will attain full consciousness.

Holmes (2001) describes the transition into mid-life as a process that requires patience and the ability to observe the changes that are taking place. Without waiting we immediately tend to shift into all the opposites that were repressed and are now coming out into the open. The temptation is strong to collapse into the opposite of what we have been. That would not be going through the process of re-building our personality, but simply going from one extreme to the other. Remaining closed off from the future or throwing ourselves into that, are equally destructive behaviours.

Preparing for mid-life one has to nurture the less developed side of the personality because the highly developed side starts to be bankrupt or too tight. Openness to the pain and distress of this situation, rather than moving away from it, will eventually generate a new birth.

“Bearing the tension of the opposites without totally letting go of either side will give birth to a new thing that is neither wholly one nor the other but somehow both.” (Holmes, 2001. P. 144)

The Cycles of Life.

Jung, Hollis, Holmes and the other writers I have reviewed so far discussed the transition into mid-life from a psychological and spiritual point of view. Human development in Life Stages Theory studies the unfolding of human life from a rational and scientific stance. *“...the textured world of lived time is fragmented into its constituent parts and then reconstituted and the reconstituted whole is then taken as being the truth.”* (Adams, 2006. P.263)

A scientific model can help us to understand and put order to reality, so that events can be observed as a consistent sequence of cause and effect. Yet it can be argued that the possible fallacy of such scientific method resides in the fact that the experience observed can never be reproduced in exactly the same way given the same conditions, and human life is at all times individual and different for each subject. Nonetheless, I think it is interesting and important to look at such theories and to employ them, if necessary, as a benchmark to try to clarify the concept of development, whether or not we believe in their scientific value.

Another observation pinpointed by Jung is that we often ponder about life development once we have reached our adult years, and that gives us a biased view of the phenomenon. *“The nearer we approach to the middle of life, and the better we have succeeded in entrenching ourselves in our personal standpoints and social positions, the more it appears as if we had discovered the right course and the right ideals and principles of behaviour.”* (Jung, 1933. P. 119). Jung proposes life development in three stages; childhood, adulthood and old age.

Freud (1962) elaborated the concept of psychosexual development, which he divided in

five different stages, characterized by erogenous zones; oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. Erikson (1968) elaborated Freud's genital stage into adolescence, and he then added three more stages during the adulthood years.

Erikson (1968) believed that personality traits come in opposites and that the development of personality is determined by the interaction of physical, psychological and cultural influences. He asserted that in order to reach full development every human being goes through a total number of eight stages from birth to death; Infancy, Early Childhood, Play Age, School Age, Adolescence, Young Adulthood, Middle Adulthood, Late adulthood, Death.

After his death his wife added a ninth stage: Old Age.

These stages are each related and dependent on each other and appear in the correct sequence of each item needed for proper development. Each stage comes to its ascendance, meets its crisis and finds its lasting solution. Each stage presents its character and at the same time its opposite. With reference to Middle Adulthood, comprised between the age of thirty five to fifty five or sixty five, Erikson (1968) introduces “*Generativity vs. Stagnation*”, as the predominant opposite concepts. Generativity in this context means “... **primarily the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation**” (Erikson, 1968. P.138). When that objective fails the individual is taken over by a “**sense of stagnation, boredom, and interpersonal impoverishment.**” (Erikson, 1968. P.138)

Erikson does not mention whether such development occurs as a preparation, what I would define as the transition, for Middle Adulthood, or whether he intends it as the peculiar character throughout the whole of that stage, but he describes very thoroughly the sequence of such development in his biographical work *Gandhi's Truth* (1970), positioning Generativity vs. Stagnation as occurring at the age between forty and fifty.

Although Erikson describes the various stages as melting into each other with an element of fluidity, and this has indeed been observed in the accounts of my co-researchers, it is also true that movement from one stage and the next could happen abruptly, often triggered

by a dramatic event.

Erikson's work has left an important imprint especially for his study of Adolescence. He suggests that those who were best equipped to resolve their crisis during adolescence were also the best equipped to resolve crisis in later adult life. This theory is somewhat consistent with the Attachment Theory expressed by Holmes (2002), that secure attachment in infancy process secure adults.

Another comprehensive study of life cycles can be found in the work of Steiner (1973); introducing Anthroposophy, his spiritual philosophy, and his famous Waldorf Education model through his copious writings and lectures, he identifies seven year cycles as approximate intervals which are fundamental to the development of human life.

“We know that the substance of the body is renewed every seven years and, in passing, it may be stated that the human being continues to come into possession of different forces in the same rhythm.” (Wilkinson, 2001. P.37-38)

The Greeks also had used the same concept by dividing human life into “*heptomades*”, ten seven year phases. The figure seven is approximate and it is not produced by mathematical or algebraic methods, rather it stems from the study of the planetary movements.

Steiner (1983) describes the sixth seven year cycle as of one's mid-life. This is the time when one develops an awareness of the soul. One begins to question the essential nature of things. The emphasis is more on thinking than acting, but this thinking is thinking ahead, with a new type of will that powers the intellectual search. With rapid changes in the physical body, the soul has to work at maximum speed to develop and integrate the awareness of one's own death.

More contribution of a different nature, about the various cycles of life, comes from Levinson (1978). Levinson conducted a research based on the study of the life of forty men, in order to draw a developmental picture and empirical conclusions such as finding a common criterion that would identify the onset and development of mid-life. The core of his theory sees

the underlying pattern of human's life structure at any given time. Such structure is influenced by the social and physical environment, the place in society, within the family and at work. The person's race, religion and financial status were also taken into account. Levinson theorises that there are four "seasonal cycles" including pre-adulthood, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood.

After that, in 1987 Levinson interviewed forty women aged between thirty five and forty five and concluded that women go through the same cycles as men, but they tend to be more closely connected than men to the family circle.

Like Erikson, Levinson (1978) drew a graphic showing cycles of development that he called "*eras*". In each era unique changes take place and each change is part of the whole process of life, like different acts of the same play or different segments of the same orange. Levinson sets specific ages at which, broadly speaking, each era begins and ends. In between eras he puts transitional periods, which he identifies as "*zones of overlay*" from one era to the next as essential preparation for the next era to come into place.

Mid-life transition is positioned in men aged between forty and forty-five and it serves to terminate what he calls first adulthood and initiate the second adulthood. Levinson describes the mid-life transition as a most dramatic part of one's life and highly fundamental for change. It is also a difficult experience to define in a clear way because no concrete, tangible event occurs which is universally recognisable and which can be the reference point for theory and research.

While Erikson and Levinson's studies have been pivotal for the understanding and schematizing of human development, it has to be noted that not all people necessarily develop in the same way and what can be true for one can be the opposite for another .and if mid-life, as Levinson observes, cannot be pinpointed to any specific symptom or time, does that make it un-definable? What, then, is the value of the individual experience observed and narrated throughout research?

By observing the development in the life of his forty male co-researchers over time, rather than searching for a single criterion, Levinson shows how the development comes into focus: it is an interweaving of different elements, biological, generational and enterprising, that offers the structure for understanding and studying the process of transiting into mid-life. As well as being moment of change, the transition can facilitate the progress and transformation into an enriched life, a greater capacity for loving and cultivating intimate relationships and friendships. It can bring a facilitating and caring influence for younger generations. In mid-life qualities can ripen, although working attitudes may need to be re-tuned and redefined, wisdom, compassion and understanding can come into full bloom, as well as creative maturity and most effective contributions to political, diplomatic and philosophical life.

Levinson's contribution not only adds to other developmental theories, but expands on the psychological and social study of such development, positioning the human being in relation to others, to culture and to nature.

Does human development always take place as a horizontal, linear occurrence? In the practice of psychotherapy we often deal with repetition of behaviour. It seems a human construct to go back to what is known, what is felt as safe, what is being held as truthful and right. People often grow tired of cycles that repeat destructive choices. They want to change and straighten up. It may be better, Moore advises his therapy clients, to reflect positively on the repetitions that fuel their desires. In his opinion, life development happens in spirals. People get somewhere even if they move in circles and there is no reason to believe that life is correct only when it moves in a linear fashion.

We are essentially rhythmic, musical beings, he posits. Our emotions are in orbit, like the planets we move in patterns that return over and over again and it is in these returns that we can find our identity. ***“The soul does not evolve or grow, it cycles and twists, repeats and reprises, echoing ancient themes common to all human beings. It is always circling home.”*** (Moore, 2001. P. 5).

The dilemma *linear/spiral* may hint at one possible solution; that human development can be experienced in many different ways and narrated with as many different metaphors and images. Perhaps what, once again, is common to all of us is the experience itself of evolution, development, movement and change.

Animus/Anima

In Jung's concept of *animus and anima*, the unconscious or true inner self of an individual, as opposed to the *persona* or outer aspect of the personality, is expressed in the unconscious of men by the feminine inner personality - anima; and in the unconscious of women as a masculine inner personality - animus.

The process of development in a male is about the male subject opening up to emotionality and spirituality, by developing creativity and imagination and sensitivity towards himself and others. Jung believed that every woman has an analogous animus within her psyche, which is expressed unconsciously by masculine attributes and potentials;

“The animus and anima should function as a bridge or door, leading to the images of the collective unconscious, as the persona should be a sort of bridge into the world.” (Jung, 1995. P.412)

The concept of “*WOMAN*” (Keen 1991) as part of any man's psyche is one of the opening statements in Keen's book on what it is like being a man.

“It was slow in dawning on me that WOMAN had an overwhelming influence on my life and on the lives of all the men I knew. I am not talking about women, the actual flesh-and-blood creatures, but about WOMEN, those larger-than-life shadowy female figures who inhabit our imagination, inform our emotions, and indirectly give shape to many of our actions.” (Keen, 1991. P.13).

We only begin to understand the mystery of maleness when men are ready to leave WOMAN, but this task requires the exploration of unconscious feelings and the acquired ability to come to respect and love the strangeness of womankind. The archetype of WOMAN takes three shapes: WOMAN as Goddess, WOMAN as Mother and WOMAN as Erotic Power. The journey into manhood (what I would call the transition into mid-life) is the process of changing WOMAN into either one single special woman, or the female into women at large.

Notwithstanding that Keen's observation of maleness is exact and heartfelt, one has to wonder whether women experience a similar task of having to free themselves from MAN or whether they develop their feminine personality in a completely different way. Leaving aside the obvious difference that women give birth and men don't, from a psychological point of view we have already met the idea that male/female co-habit in each of us, yet, as Moore (2001) argues, we generally believe that there are only two genders, and we base such belief on our anatomical and psychological differences. That would mean reducing a human being to sheer biology.

Moore proposes that gender is a state of mind, it could even be a product of our imagination, because for every human being femininity or masculinity is completely personal. *“Paradoxically, to become less certain about one's own gender may be the turning point at which one begins to discover the richness of one's masculinity and femininity.”* (Moore, 2001. P. 55)

Rites of passage.

In every tribe and nation, ancient and modern, there are rites and traditions designed to turn a boy into a man. In the rites of human life Keen (1991) identifies at least four main rites of passage; birth, coming of age, marriage and death. These are common to male and female.

But for males the important rites are those in between birth and death, which is when they separate from WOMAN; ***“Male rites of passage were designed to allow boys to escape from woman’s world long enough to discover the shape of man’s world.”*** (Keen 1991. P.28.)

Keen describes the passage to manhood as a drama in three acts: separation, initiation and reincorporation. While a girl typically becomes a woman at first menstruation. A boy becomes a man in social time. The crucial difference between the two sexes is that they have a different sense of time, view of death, sense of their body and personality structure.

Men are programmed to be warriors. In ancient times their passage into manhood was accompanied by rituals and ceremonies that allowed the boy to learn the art of hunting and fighting. Nowadays apart from those who join the Army or a local gang, the man-warrior has to fight at his place of work. ***“The rights of manhood in any society are those that are appropriate and congruent with the appropriate myth. The horizon within which we live ,the source of our value system and the way we define ‘reality’ are economic.”*** (Keen,1991. P.53) If such is the myth, it is no surprise that for most men work is not just to make a living. Work is their life.

Retirement, or the loss of one’s job can bring forth a change in social status. This, in the opinion of O’Connor (2000) requires a sort of initiation. Change of status is recorded by particular rituals; twenty first birthday party, acquiring a driving license, getting married, “coming out” for the gay community. From birth to death such achievements are accompanied by different forms of celebrations. The interesting fact here is that

“... society does not provide a rite of passage for people entering middle or old age. On the contrary, it systematically ignores this transition, focusing further ahead on the already aged...There is a public silence, a gap, in which people can find themselves chronically stuck without any guidelines as to what it means to be a fifty-year-old in our society.

Fundamentally it is a liminal state between being young and being old, a state of betwixt and between.” (O’Connor, 2000. P.24)

The importance of rituals and ceremonial traditions is that they give the individual the opportunity to feel part of the collective psyche, to release the existential angst about the changed status and to learn from the experience of others what behavior may be expected and how to best deal with the new situation.

“Perhaps then it is understandable why the transition of the fifties extracts such a heavy psychological burden; in one's soul there exist profound and disturbing rumblings of the change, yet the existence of change is either denied or trivialized” (O’Connor, 2000. P.26)

Drawing on examples from initiation rituals in primitive societies, as well as the main rituals in the Christian and Judaic religions, O’Connor notices that most male initiation rites exclude women. The boy is taken away, he is initiated and then returned. It is this separation and the nurturing teachings of the community’s elders, that give value and meaning to the rite of passage. Without rites, the transition into mid-life is anxiety ridden.

The mythical structure of the journey from childhood into manhood is usually described in three phases: departure, initiation and return. There are many examples in literature of this type of hero’s journey. Campbell (1949) gives us a startling example with his *Hero with a Thousand Faces* who is called upon a journey into a supernatural world. After many ordeals he finally returns from his adventure with wisdom and knowledge that he can use to change the world. The pattern of the hero’s journey is found in most tales of wisdom.

Collodi’s (2002) tale of *Pinocchio* follows the same footsteps, as the wooden puppet has to leave his master and engage in a perilous journey. He is challenged by all possible dangers and unethical propositions; he is robbed, ends up in prison, is swallowed by a whale (just like

the Hero of A Thousand Faces), until, under the auspices of his godmother, the Blue Fairy, he is ready to return home, finally transformed into a real flesh and blood boy.

Going back to the transition into mid-life, the process seems to unfold in a very similar way. The journey takes our hero deep into his soul and once the pain is embraced and knowledge is gained, finally the hero can start ascending back and is ready to be reunited into the world;

“To age gracefully we must aspire to become wise and beautiful elders. For this, men require a revolution in identity in which we measure success by our capacity for compassion rather than by accumulation of power, and virility and the capacity to nurture, husband, and mentor.”(Keen, 1991. P.164).

The hero’s journey is not necessarily an all-male adventure. Women have their own initiation rites, although women’s bodies somehow seem more apt at developing through life following a natural course, with menstruation, birth and menopause.

Bly’s (1990) rendering of the German fairy tale of *Iron John*. proposes another mythical narration of a boys journey into adulthood. Along with all stories of journeys into the unknown and returns as wise men, the inherent subject of Bly’s book can be seen as a deterministic model of male behavior. It can be argued that human growth and development is bound to happen only in that specific way and that a person’s sense of choice and peculiar stand in their own cultural and social context, have no relevance.

Whether one agrees or not with such vision, all these adventures can be appreciated as containing wisdom and providing inspiration, as well as promoting self-analysis and growth. Transiting into mid-life seems to be a mini-hero journey for all those people who, somehow, feel the need to go deep into their self and come out somewhat changed.

Talking specifically about women, Northrup (1994) defines the menopause as an initiation rite that develops in three stages: isolation, death, re-birth. Menopause brings a

woman face to face with the unknown. The woman who enters mid-life aware of the powerful possibilities contained in that transition, can learn to speak her own truth with a courage and strength that make her irresistible in her power and beauty.

“We can no longer afford to let our culture silence the wisdom of the wise woman – the woman who contains her sacred body.” (Northrup, 1994. P. 571)

Mid-life as a construct of modern society?

In spite of recent research on what is often defined as *male menopause*, there is still a tendency to consider men’s reaction to the mid-life transition as just an excuse to try to recapture their youth by shedding their spouses, quitting their jobs or leaving their families. Yet there may be a different truth hidden under this superficial type of behaviour; that men may have more difficulty than women to deal with mid-life issues.

Whether that is true or not, one way to get a taste of the present-day’s attitude to mid-life transition is to surf the internet. Modern society is often reliant on the advertising, openly or subliminally, of remedies for different complaints. Ageing is often perceived as a negative occurrence that can be rectified, cured, hidden or slowed down.

Approaching the transition into mid-life is often accompanied by a sense of panic. Nowadays the Internet is the first port-of-call in order to learn more and find answers, perhaps before or leading to buying self-help books. Unfortunately, I have observed a disappointing tendency in various sites, to just skate on the surface of the subject, to offer advice often discarding the deeply emotional and painful experience that people may be going through.

The internet offers several sites devoted to people who are going through the transition into mid-life, on offer there is wealth of practical advice, self-help books and different kinds of alternative remedies and cosmetics that promise a fast and effective cure for the problem. The advice, mostly aimed at women, tells them how to become experienced at wrestling with physical ageing, a husband who runs off with a secretary or the danger that one’s marriage may

collapse because of difficult behaviour of one of the partners.

In the *“Midlife Club”* (2009) the main editorial addresses the male mid-life transition as a deep crisis, and offers a long string of advice tips for the wife;

“If he's between the ages of 40 and 60 (give or take a few years), your man is blazing a trail through male midlife — he's having a crisis... Men are expected to hide their emotions but that doesn't mean the emotions don't exist—they're buried deep in the recesses of how 'real men' act.” (www.midlifeclub.com/).

The editor suggests that the wife must be very patient, must become independent and active and leave the man to get on with his problem. At the side of the text a number of ads for dating clubs, singles holidays, anti-wrinkles creams and self-help books, catch your glimpse in an alluring way.

There is quite a contrast with some of the post-feminist literature that sees life evolution as an opportunity to refine one's psychological knowledge and inner qualities. Philosophical and spiritual literature can make this transitory moment as a fine time to ask questions that mankind has always asked, about meaning, death, responsibility and choice.

Rowan (1987) argues that whilst the women's movements have made a big difference in understanding what it is like to be a woman today, for men this has opened a profound wound. Rather than falling into despair about dealing with the new social role expected of them, it is about time for men to be asserting their case.

Rowan's writing have perhaps provided a breakthrough for men to resume a new role in society, to reflect on how they have managed to anger women and to counter-act the feminist movement with the birth of a new man, a self-reflective man, a man who knows his soul.

Men are under considerable pressure from society to understand and open new possibilities of asserting their masculinity. Rowan (1997) argues that, although physical decline starts at the age of twenty, men do not seem to notice until they reach their middle years. They seem to rely on successful experiences or simply a busy life in order to keep alive the illusion

of retaining their impaired faculties. When the illusion is shattered by external events, depression and identity crisis become the significant elements of the experience of failure. Such issues need to be worked out through psychotherapy. Rowan's literary work also provides a clear and practical manual for therapy designed specifically for men.

Proposing a thorough study of ageing as a construct of society and culture, Morganroth Gullette's (2004) argument is that ageing is nowadays considered as the evaporation of youth and the onset of physical decay. This cultural construct is not only reductive but also disturbing. Her socio-cultural polemic against "*middle-ageism*" lays the ground for a new theory of age. She turns this ideology of decline from viewing ageing as a negative destructive and frightening experience, into a fulfilling and powerful progress across the life cycles. Morganroth Gullette comments that in western society we are influenced by the media into believing that old age is a problem and that **"...appearance and selfhood, increasingly, are stickily twined so that your appearance (minus your expression) is your age."** (Morganroth Gullette, 2004. P. 7)

The media and the beauty industry automatically exploit these ideas for their stories of decline. They show the ageing body devoid of its history and its emotions. One possible way to re-connect physical change with maturation and decline with progress is to use narrative. **"Writing 'critical age autobiography'...may give us a better method for understanding the embodied psyche in culture, over time."** (Morganroth Gullette, 2004. P. 143)

It is important to acknowledge that not all cultures see ageing in the same way. There are cultures different from ours that respect and value elders. The image of the wise man or the fairy are mostly present in children's narrative, but also as much in any tale of journeys and heroism. The archetype of the wise elder is something that is not necessarily held in time. It is something young and old, that protects life and bestows courage and power.

"If a man devotes himself to the instruction of his own unconscious, it can bestow this gift, so that suddenly life, which has been stale and dull, turns into a rich, unending

inner adventure, full of creative possibilities.” (Jung, 1964. P. 209.)

Respect for old age is an inheritance from parents to children. It is observed and imitated throughout the generations; I would define it as contagious.

I was trekking high up in a remote part of the Himalayas not long ago when I saw coming towards me two women carrying a load of woods for the stove. I stopped to let them pass and I noticed that one was young and the other old. They were both wearing their colourful traditional dresses: thick materials dark reds and emerald green, adorned by coral and turquoise jewelry. Their long, black hair shone as their intricate gold earrings.

What stunned me was not the pretty face of the young girl, rather the solemnity and the majestic allure of the old one. Her face was burnt by the sun; hundreds of thin lines had woven an incredible pattern of lace. I felt a reverential awe as the woman passed me. I did not take a photograph, I couldn't. A sense of deep respect prevented me from that typical gesture of the visitor. I would have made her an object of my camera, rather than the subject of many moments of meditation on what ageing can be like. Respect for the elder was somehow bestowed on to me as the two women approached; I absorbed it from their split-second presence and infused in me the desire that one day I could be like her.

Physical Change.

Expanding on the concept of animus/anima, Jung (1940) describes mid-life as a time not only of psychological but also physical change:

“It is easy to observe that women at a more advanced age develop masculine qualities, grow a moustache, acquire a rather acute and sometimes obstinate mind, and often develop a deeper voice... Men of advanced age, on the contrary, become mellow... sentimental, and rather emotional; their anatomical forms become rounded, they take an interest in the family and home life...” (Jung, 1940 P.18)

Physical change is perhaps the most dramatic symptom of the transition into mid-life. The change is so rapid and radical, that the image reflected in the mirror is often perceived as no longer matching the one in our mind. Startled and desperate, most people start looking for remedies to stop the ageing process from staring them in the face day after day.

Physical change presents differently in males and females. While the first sign of male ageing is often experienced as a decrease in sexual activity or impotence, for women it takes a more aesthetic character. While ceasing to be fertile is something that happens in a concealed way, a woman's body and face outwardly show the passing of time.

Losing one's image and becoming thoroughly repellent, is de Beauvoir's (1949) dramatic description of ageing. Being used by man, having gone through pregnancies and hard work, a woman's life is always infested by the ferments of age and death. Once ageing starts to show, she loses her erotic attraction and charm. An infirm, homely old woman is repellent. As for man, de Beauvoir goes on, the situation is slightly better because older men are not experienced as flesh, they are experienced in a more unitary way.

de Beauvoir points out that for women the discomfort of growing old is not related to their body itself, but to the perception that they and others have of that body. So the woman who has invested heavily on her looks will suffer the most at the loss. For peasant women who are busy working in the field, the menopause may be a welcome relief from the burden of menstruation and pregnancy, yet for de Beauvoir the position of women in an autocratic male dominated society is hopeless.

de Beauvoir's contribution on the issue of women's liberation is highly significant. Indeed, she is considered the godmother of post-1968 feminism. With her writings, de Beauvoir has given permission to a whole generation of women to question their state and to change their attitude, their values and their role in society.

As well as her four autobiographical volumes, it is also through her novels that we can trace the development of her life and find a source of inspiration for the lives of many others..

de Beauvoir embodied the possibility of women rising to freedom of thought, action and sexuality. She states that the paradox of human life resides in the fact that *“Life is an unstable system in which balance is continually lost and continually recovered: it is inertia that is synonymous with death.”* (de Beauvoir, 1972. P.11)

Her essay *The Coming of Age* (1972) provides us with an intellectual meditation on the decline and solitude of the human condition, confronted with the physical reality of ageing and dying.

“The growth of skin in the aged causes a thickening of the eyelids, while at the same time hollows appear beneath the eyes. The upper lip becomes thinner: the lobe of the ear increases in size. There are changes in the skeleton, too.”(de Beauvoir, 1972. P.25)

Attention is not only given to changes in the body, but also to the way society treats its elders. Contemporary tribal societies like the American Indian seem to offer a better treatment of the old, valuing their wisdom and knowledge as an asset to gain understanding of the environment. In societies where money is not of prime interest, the members of the tribe retain their value and respect even after their productive years have come to an end.

de Beauvoir’s knowledge of anthropological and historical literature is quite impressive. She draws a portrait of well known artists, intellectuals and politicians of her time, men and women, dealing with the experience of ageing.

Back to today’s state of affairs, Neustatter (1999) interviewed one hundred and fifty men and women about their experience of mid-life. Her work provides a social and psychological account of present-day attitudes inherent to men and women during their mid-life transition. Neustatter’s style is fast and to the point, it seems to mirror the mentality of today’s society where *fast* is applicable to nearly everything we do. When transiting into mid-life presents as an issue to be dealt with in slow motion, the easiest answer could be to find a fast remedy and keep going. One remedy, she comments, is apparent in the steady rise of the number of men and women choosing cosmetic surgery in mid-life as an alternative to improve

their looks and to slow down the ageing process.

The world seems to be unkind to people getting older, says Neustatter, and cosmetic surgery often offers a chance to make people look fresher, more confident and more alert, if not younger looking. It is at that point that, with renewed energy, people may pursue the dream of a second youth, a new wife, a better job, a younger lover. This often offers the illusion that at least for a few years, everything can be as it was, old age and death are at bay and nothing really needs to be changed.

Fransella and Frost (1977), review extensive research carried out to study different aspects of how women see themselves at mid-life. From the results of such research it seems clear that losing one's image as youthful, motherly and attractive, has always brought on insecurity and depression. There are no rituals to accompany women from adulthood into mid-life, and it seems that often women slowly fade into anonymity.

Asking a sculptor why he never portrayed images of middle aged women, he replied that he could not. He found that middle aged women hide their looks under sweet smiles, make up and a youthful appearance. But if one looks at them when they are lost in their thoughts, one can see they are grandmothers. Whilst an older woman has wrinkles on her face and this can make her more interesting, a middle aged woman simply has no image.

Barbie and the Baby Boomers.

Essential in the understanding of the impact of Barbie is that for almost fifty years yesterday's little girls/today's women, have played with a role-model of how they are expected to look. Barbie does not age, and her message seems to be that women should continue to follow her model well into old age. These principles seem to apply today in the quest and the belief that eternal youth is a right, not an illusion.

The feminists considered Barbie's presence in the life of little girls as a negative

influence and a possible cause for the development of eating disorders, body issues and gender role insecurity.

Barbie continues to enrage feminists. Greer (1999) states that whatever women do, they feel that they must not look their age. Greer feels that Barbie has been instrumental in teaching short legged, wide-bodied real women that they are not appreciated by the world over so that they feel inclined to spend their money on beauty products and plastic surgery rather than apples, books or computers.

If we take Greer's comments further to concern middle aged women, then the pursuit of beauty can become an obsessive denial of ageing and death.

The Barbie generation is also the generation of the "*Baby Boomers*". Baby Boomers are defined as those people born between 1946 and 1964 (Wikipedia). They are the present mid-life generation. American Doctor Terry Grossman (2000), proposes that this is a generation that believes in ever-lasting youth. Research into Baby Boomers' attitude to life, shows the tendency to lead an independent hedonistic life, where job status and enjoyment are essential, relationships are valued only while they last satisfactorily and free love and free divorce are everybody's right. (Wikipedia)

What happens then when the first signs of ageing appear? Krauss (2006) tries to find answers; Baby Boomers have to reckon with the fact that they have now become very much like the parents they once rebelled against. While they were at college, during the mid sixties, society went through a radical change. Identities and traditional values were challenged and new social orders established. A new challenge appears now as middle age approaches.

Krauss reports the finding of several studies that show how Baby Boomers seem to worry more than previous generations about dementia, memory loss and Alzheimer. They are concerned about physical signs of ageing and try to retain their youthful style of life in an effort to keep mortality at bay.

Male menopause?

In an article titled “*The Male Mid-life crisis*”, Cohen (2007) mentions unfinished emotional business as one cause for distress in men during their transition into mid-life. Cohen gives the example of a man who felt unloved and unworthy during childhood who spends all his adult life trying to be a good husband, good father and good provider. Yet, his earlier feelings surface and undermine his hard work. ***“One theory suggests that these feelings of inadequacy ironically surface at a time when the man has finally reached a point in his life when he is strong enough to “come to grips” with and work through these emotions.”*** Many men do experience age related concerns that feel like personal crises, Cohen adds, ***“...and these crises often denote the onset of a transition and the need for a man to reinvent or redefine himself. However, the prospect for men undergoing midstream appraisals is encouraging. With patience, help and perseverance, most men regain their sense of purpose, meaning and satisfaction.”*** (www.psychcentral.com/lib/2007).

Looking for the meaning of one’s life, getting to know one’s real inner personality, can, in some cases, imply the desire in people to figure out what is going wrong in their life so that they can put it right. Yet, Moore (2001) believes that life meaning may be hiding not in such great awakening and resolutions, but in the smallest, simplest things in life;

“...meaning that makes life worth living may be nothing more than a moment’s realization, a sensation, such as the touch of your baby’s skin, or a sudden breathtaking appreciation of your home, or the passing thrill when you are reminded of the love for your spouse. Meaning may be an epiphany rather than an understanding.” (More, 2001. P.123)

This ability for endurance was the most important asset when, between the age of thirty eight and forty three, Jung himself went through a deep transformation. He underwent a form of illness, similar to a neurosis, if not even a psychosis. He became socially isolated and took a voyage into a far-removed psychic world.

Not unlike what Dante describes in his *Divine Comedy* (1308), Jung had to meet many of his demons and had to go through four or five years of what he named as “*confronting the unconscious*” (Jung, 1995). By analysing his dreams, visions and fantasies, drawing mandalas, painting and sculpting, he reached his personal growth and transformation.

As he entered mid-life, Jung had been a rather aloof and prickly person. As he got out of the mid-life transition he had developed into a wise, genial, mature person. Although he decided to leave his academic career, he never stopped working on the unconscious and he was able to put in practice his theory of individuation. He showed us how acquiring wisdom and using life experience in order to contribute to society’s and future generations’ well being, is the best way to fulfil one’s life.

To individualise is to realise that each one is a unique expression of humanity;

“The years in which I was pursuing my images were the most important in my life - in them everything essential was decided.” (Jung, 1995. P. 225)

Wisdom may also mean honesty in the way we approach the mid-life transition; honesty and courage in trying to resist all delusions that tell us that being old is just the same as being young and that by manipulating our looks we can hide the natural process. It is not easy, when we look through that hypocrisy, to try to discover the possible rewards of ageing.

Possibilities.

Josselson (1996) followed the longitudinal development of thirty women, from college to mid-life. She describes how these women created and then revised their identity. Women, Josselson explains, have multiple layers to their nature and the solution to the formation of their identity is to try to integrate as many of these layers as possible. As they grow and enter mid-life after having learned to adapt to the demands of motherhood, work and marriage, they find that their creativity and playfulness may have been sacrificed.

Redefining these qualities that were there all along, becomes women's passionate quest. **“Like slowly turning kaleidoscopes, the shifts in a woman's identity involve rearrangement of pieces, now accenting one aspect and muting another, now altering the arrangements once more.”** (Josselson, 1998. P. 243)

Such re-arranging allows women to move among multiple roles, both contemporaneously and at different times in their life. The dramatic tension in a woman's life comes from her strife to keep all those segments in balance. Most women are artists in small ways.

Women could certainly be defined as *“bricoleurs”*, in the meaning that Levi Strauss (1966) gives to individuals who are able to accomplish multiple skills, with an inventiveness and creativity that enables them to employ a large variety of tools and methods, as they perform a number of different tasks in their daily routine. Most women, those without genius or obsession, are perfectly capable of leading multifaceted lives in a private and individual way.

At mid-life women describe moments of change as awakenings to a new way of recognising possibilities and exploiting them, a way which they have known all along. More understanding, more openness and more confidence are the results of this revision. Understanding includes and often starts with a critical view of childhood, of the way parents raised them and finally accepting and forgiving their families of origin. It also includes the awareness that parents were not super-beings, but normal people.

Talking about therapy in mid-life, Josselson (1998) posits that for some women therapy had been useful in their search for a new identity, not in the relief of symptoms. Facilitating women, some more than others, to get perspective on and insight into themselves, therapy had helped them to enliven those possibilities of self-expression that may have been paralysed, dormant or underdeveloped. Therapy is necessary for successful identity formation, revision of one's life and to liberate the future from the bondage of the past.

Waddell (1998) points out that by the age of fifty continuing to develop becomes a real

challenge. Whether development continues or emotional growth comes to an arrest, **“... it very much depends on how securely the adult state of mind has been established in earlier decades.”** (Waddell, 1998. P. 218)

The pivotal element necessary for further development is a person's ability to bear separation and loss, mourning, disappointment, absence and guilt. That ability is perhaps the biggest challenge that appears at the onset of the transitions into mid-life.

The fundamental psychological change is both internal and related to external circumstances. The contemplation of one's own death is the ultimate test for all one's defensive measures to come together and be able to endure, not run away from, the experience of ageing. Referring to Attachment Theory, Waddell explains that such process of endurance starts as soon as the baby is born, in his/her relationship to a secure mother figure. There is a stimulating feeling in growth, which, if experienced often enough, teaches the baby the ability to endure loss and setbacks in later life, culminating in a positive and constructive disposition that will last well into old age.

Wilder (2005) promotes a call for women to acknowledge that menopausal and post-menopausal women are at the peak of their creativity and skills. It is time to put an end to the myth that by mid-life our work is done. Women's energy and experience is desperately needed in order to restore balance in a society that has lost touch with the feminine. Wilder suggests steps to empower women at mid-life and beyond, and urges them to become leaders and guides, using the skills they have acquired in earlier years. Feminine experience and wisdom are needed in order to help society evolve out of contemporary chaos. Wilder gives ample examples of women who have been able to endure socio-cultural negative tendencies about ageing. These women have been able to implement their wisdom and creative skills during and after the amazing transition called menopause.

Literature, social relations, psychotherapy, media, can make transiting into mid-life an experience immersed in confusion and uncertainty. All the theories and the studies I

have come across offered meaning and knowledge. As I approached each and every theory I felt that I had indeed found the key to understanding my subject and also to classify my own experience. How untrue this is!

The authors I encountered seemed to all confirm some of my assumptions and seemed to all agree with each other. Yet I can now see that they could be saying something different, that I was perhaps not ready or not willing to grasp. Every theory could be argued with and proven wrong, just as it could be deemed right. It seems that whatever was written about mid-life transition is true and so is its opposite. We are studying subjective reality and as such there is no parameter to truthfulness.

What I can rest assured of is that there were opportunities and possibilities for me in those many pages, for stopping and thinking and perhaps that was the value of this review; as long as there is even one small possibility, life goes on.

It is “*The possibility of the impossibility of existence – that is to say, the utter nullity of Dasein.*” (Heidegger, 1962. P. 354) that gives value to our experiential world.

**“It is the loss of possibility
That claims you bit by bit. They take away
Your man, the children you had hoped would be,
They even take brown hair and give you grey
Instead. You ask if you can save your face
But that is part of their plan-to strip you
Of your future and put the past in its place.
They don’t stop there. They take the skies’ deep blue
And drain it off; the empty bowl they leave
Inverted, white as bone. They dust the trees
With strontium, but they keep up their sleeve
The biggest trick of all, that one that sees
You give up in the end. It is the loss
Of possibility that murders us.”**

(Lines written on the eve of a birthday. Chelly, 1973)

Research methodology.

Preparation: choosing my subject.

Faced with the dilemma of choosing the subject of my dissertation I had to pose myself a number of questions. I needed to find a topic that could spark my interest and my passion. I am writing this as a mature student, a woman in the midst of a mid-life experience. My existence is not only the subject of my quest for understanding, it is not just what I am doing, it is who I am. It did not take me long to decide that I would write and research the phenomenon of change at mid-life.

Writing a dissertation is by no means the same as writing an autobiography or a piece of fiction. I need to rely on study and research as well as the knowledge of both my own and others' experience. I have to be thoroughly honest and prepared to reveal and acknowledge the deepest part of myself. I need to ask questions and accept that there may be no answers.

In order to define the methodology for this research I read several books, but primarily I followed guidelines by Dawson (2006), Mason (2002), McLeod (2001) and Marshall & Rossman (1995).

Formulating the question: the five “W’s”.

Having decided the topic of this dissertation, I needed to design the strategy for my research methodology, which is the essential starting point to make this a valid project. The first step of research is “**Understanding the five ‘Ws’... What? Why? Who? Where? When?...**” (Dawson, 2006. P. 5)

What is the nature of the phenomenon I am researching?

I will be researching the phenomenon of the transition into mid-life.

Why do I want to research this transitional period in mid-life? What is my knowledge of this subject?

This research is motivated by my own experience of entering mid-life. The underlying character of my personal experience of the transition into mid-life has been one of isolation and hopelessness. For this reason, I need to be aware that the aim of this project is not to provide me with corroboration of my experience, nor companionship. I understand that I need to be open to observing significant differences and themes which may not be related to my own. It is important that I accept whatever view is offered by my co-researchers and go with whatever they choose to express. Indeed, it may be the relationship between me and the co-researchers and the narrated experience that forms the core of this project. **“Understanding people’s experiences through their own meaning frame...”** (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000. P.155)

Who is the topic of this research concerned with?

The topic of this research is concerned with people who feel that are at present experiencing that stage of life or have already experienced it and are willing to narrate it to me.

Where will I find the information I am looking for?

I will find the information I am looking for in the analysis of the elements contained in the narratives of my co-researchers.

When?

The project has a defined time element and I will need to contain the research within the deadlines I have been given by my College.

One last, and probably most important, question addresses my own understanding of the of the term *transition* and the term *mid-life*. Before starting, I had to define the experience I wanted to observe. As mentioned in the introduction I define the term *transition* as a door-way, a preparatory experience of inward movement, introspection and evaluation, which prepares us to mid-life. With the term *mid-life* I intend the period of one’s life that includes his/her mature years and that can, broadly speaking, span around the age of thirty five and sixty, in a totally

personal and individual way. In spite of it being defined as mid-life , this period often coincides with the third quarter of one's life.

Based on my experience I broadly identified this transition as something that could happen after the years spent establishing a place in society, after study and work had been engaged with and in many cases marriage and parenthood had been achieved. It would then be my co-researchers' choice to define when and how this period happened for them. I could only observe and suspend judgement while listening to their narrative.

A number of supplementary questions came to mind at this point and the project all of the sudden seemed to acquire that nuance of confusion and uncertainty that is so much an element of the researched phenomenon itself.

What kind of research method would be most suitable for my study? Quantitative or qualitative?

Quantitative research methods are based on the possibility of seeking results that can be measured, weighed, and counted. Although transiting into mid-life certainly involves physical development, the process is such that informs our psychological and spiritual dimensions, as well as the re-assessment of our sociological and philosophical stance. As such, this experience is virtually impossible to quantify.

I also felt that, even if I decided to attempt such research methodology, it would be difficult to define a sample of population that could be used for quantitative research on mid-life transition because the scale of such survey would be far too large for me to manage. The nature of the subject could not be easily described by asking people to fill a questionnaire, because it implies a very personal, subjective narrative approach.

I was seeking narratives concerning personal emotions and personal values in the life of my co-researchers. Even the question itself, the very subject was questionable and the meaning of the concept of mid-life transition could vary from person to person. A quantitative research method seemed inappropriate and I made the initial choice of using qualitative research.

“Knowing where you stand on these and indeed other questions, is likely to be a shifting endeavour... Scrutinizing your own changing perspectives and assumptions should become almost a habit of active reflexivity....” (Mason, 2002. P. 22)

There are, however, many different methods to do qualitative research; Moustakas (1994) names the main ones as

- Ethnography, which aims at cultural description, by observing the individual and the phenomenon in its social and cultural contexts.
- Grounded Theory, which studies elements of the experience of the interviewed subjects
- Hermeneutics, which focuses not only in the cultural and experiential context, but also on the consciousness of such experience.
- Empirical Phenomenological Research, which aims at obtaining descriptions of feelings.
- Heuristic Research, which involves self-dialogue, self-research and self-discovery.

Although any of these methods carry viewpoints that are essential for research, I decided to follow the Grounded Theory model. Grounded theory focuses on the element of experience. The elements of such experience are identified by interviewing co-researchers. The data is collected, organized, coded and finally analysed. Such process is at all times alive and in a flux.

Data inform other data and the process is continually growing. I was drawn towards this movement and development which would allow me, the researcher, to grow with the research itself. I sensed a possibility of liveliness in this process;

“Good research is a living thing: it should leap off the page to revitalize some aspect of our way of being as therapists. In doing so it mirrors the characteristic of good therapy, that there is a genuine connection between worlds of clients and therapist and, in the meeting, some sharing of experience.” (du Plock, 2004. P. 32)

Grounded Theory.

Once the purpose of the research and my own understanding of the phenomenon were clarified I needed to organize my strategy. Grounded theory analysis offers a flexible approach to qualitative research; its task is to help the researcher to try and make sense of the social world, to try and develop a theory of the researched subject and to ground such theory in the collected data. The data construct the theory, rather than being constricted by it.

This approach seemed to sit well with my project. McLeod (2001) offers a clear set of rules for the researcher to follow, to ensure that all the essential components of grounded theory are observed.

These components comprise the setting of the initial research question, identifying the number of people needed as a source of data collected (ideally between eight and twenty), trying not to review the literature before the data collection, analysing the data as soon as possible, and being able to select co-researchers who are deemed to be able to offer an expansion of one's theories.

McLeod (2001) explains that data collection ends when the issue is "*saturated*", and no new data is found. The data is then divided into "*activities*" or themes, rather than static processes, and matched by quotes from the interviews. Through "*constant comparison*" the activities are identified across the different cases, they are fragmented and then re-organized like different pieces of a puzzle. The researcher needs to keep memos and diagrams in order to constantly engage with the new findings and be aware of new ideas, understanding and themes. Finally, the analysis is written up by illustrating predominant themes, subsidiary themes and absent themes, bearing in mind at all times the ethical concerns pledged in the Ethical Protocol, regarding confidentiality, anonymity and the safety of the co-researchers.

Research strategy.

My schedule was finally drawn; I looked for co-researchers, my experts on mid-life change. I produced an advert in order to invite co-researchers to take part and, having found my co-researchers, I sent them a letter giving information about the process (see the Appendices Section for samples) and I set up the interviews. I then proceeded with the analysis of the data collected in order to identify themes and patterns. I discussed the findings and a criticism of the research highlighted all the possible shortfalls of my process. Finally, I reflected on the implications for the practice of psychotherapy and possibilities for further research. I was then able to draw my own conclusions and my evaluation of the whole process.

Collecting data: the interview.

Describing the interview process, Darlington and Scott (2002) state that **“The in-depth interview takes seriously the notion that people are experts on their own experience and so best able to report how they experienced a particular event or phenomenon.”** (Darlington & Scott, 2002. P. 48).

Having placed the advert in my local adult education college, I had to wait and see how many people would respond. I also advertised my research topic among friends and colleagues and this led to some of them coming forward and offering to be interviewed.

“In grounded theory studies, the number of people to be interviewed is not specified at the beginning... because the researcher ... continues with the data collection until... no new information is being provided” (Dawson, 2006. P. 20)

Although Dawson adopts an open-ended approach to the number of interviews, I was aware that my project had well defined time issues and I decided to interview about eight people, possibly of both sexes.

Once co-researchers offered to co-operate I sent a Pro-Forma Consent Form confirming their agreement to take part and outlining information related to my approach to Data Protection, which stated that the recording would be destroyed at the end of the study, and re-

affirmed the co-researcher's right to withdraw at any time. An Ethical Protocol had been submitted and approved by the Research Panel, beforehand. Samples of all these forms are enclosed in the Appendices Section.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) especially alerted me to the ethical implications of conducting qualitative research. I noticed the issues of power and payment that arise in some cases.

I had not foreseen paying my co-researchers; some of them were acquaintances of mine and seemed eager to be interviewed in order to help me with my project. I wondered as to their motives for wanting to take part in my research and I imagined that the experience of talking in confidence to someone they deemed trustworthy, was probably what brought value to their interview. "**Understanding and respect can transcend power.**" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000. P.85). Similarly, those who had replied to the college advertisement were all counselling students and probably interested in exploring the subject for their own personal development.

The other important issue was that of informed consent. I had to warn my co-researchers of possible negative implications as distressing issues could arise during the interview process. I made clear, both in writing and verbally, their right to withdraw at any time, before, during or after the interview. Following Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) directives I understood that the criterion I had to employ should be that of guarding the co-researchers against harm and I could achieve this by securing a safe environment for the interview, as well as approaching the process with respect, empathy and honesty. This I could pledge to do at my best. I arranged for the interviews to take place in total privacy and away from noise or outside interference.

After some preparation I decided that I would be conducting "*loosely structured interviews*" (Mason, 2002), starting with an open-ended question about the co-researcher's experience of the transitional period that they would define as leading to mid-life. The interview would end with a second question seeking the co-researcher's comment on the

experience of recounting and sharing their story with me. The rest of the interview would develop without further interventions on my part, **“like a conversation with a purpose”** (Mason, 2002, P. 67).

The interviews were going to be face-to face and tape-recorded. I would take notes about my own feelings during the process or any other inherent considerations that seemed relevant.

In the end my eight co-researchers were British, Italian and American, four women and four men, aged between forty-two and seventy years. I conducted some interviews in my counselling room, some in my home and others in the co-researcher's home. One was conducted in the co-researcher's car, at the co-researcher's request.

The interviews took between thirty five and seventy five minutes and invariably I was unaware of time passing by and totally focused on the process. I was able to take notes while listening, knowing that even if I missed some of the narrative, I could rely on the tape recording.

I engaged differently with each of the co-researchers and responded in different ways to different narratives. In fact, I found that each story evoked in me a well defined emotional response. I was always thoroughly immersed and absorbed by the narrative, the body language and the quality of the dialogue. I was at times overwhelmed, angry, sad, hopeful, surprised, excited, yet I feel that I was able to listen in a non-judgemental way. I never felt bored or detached. On occasions there was some difficulty in understanding either the accent or the vocabulary, or simply in hearing what was said, because of change in voice clarity or the co-researcher suddenly mumbling.

“... you will be observing what is going on around the interview; you may be making notes... keeping half an eye on your equipment to ensure that is working; and you may be dealing with ‘distractions’ like a wasp which you think is about to sting you or your interviewee...” (Mason, 2002. P. 74)

Transcribing.

All interviews were taped and then transcribed. The ones that had taken place in Italian were translated by myself. During the transcription all personal details were either omitted or changed so that my co-researchers could not be identified by a third party. I offered to show them a copy of the transcript. All but one declined. I asked for permission to include one sample transcript in this dissertation, and obtained the co-researcher's agreement, after submitting the text of the interview, duly amended of any personal references.

Transcribing and translating seemed, at first, just a simple procedure. It soon transpired that it was one of the most challenging parts of my work and the one that posed many ethical questions; **"... how you can be sure that you are not simply inventing data, or misrepresenting your research participants' perspectives."** (Mason, 2002. P.76).

Transcribing was at times difficult because I could not always fully comprehend the vocabulary used. On two instances the recording was not clear because the co-researcher was adopting a low tone of voice or there were interferences caused by a necklace against the microphone, too much movement etc. As a consequence, I sometimes missed some of the sentences and had to leave them out.

I did my best to understand the general meaning of the narrative and report it as precisely as I could. When translating from Italian it became obvious that the transcript would be my own understanding and interpreting of the interview, using my own choice of words.

Repeatedly listening to and reading the interviews, I found new information and new meaning. It could have been just a small pause that I had not heard before, or a sentence that suddenly acquired a new character. The transcript kept changing and expanding.

Another ethical question related to the issue of confidentiality. Apart from making the co-researchers totally anonymous in the written version of the interviews, I made sure that my digital tape recorder was locked away and out of reach. I was careful not to write names or

personal details anywhere and most of all I took great care not to reveal to third parties the identity of my co-researchers. This was most important especially in order to protect the anonymity of those friends who had offered to help me with my research.

I also took great care to make sure that the co-researchers did not know each other, and belonged to different social environments. I was offered introductions to friends of friends, who were deemed to be suitable people to be interviewed. On those occasions I declined the offer because I felt that the introducing friend may be bound to ask information about the outcome of the meeting and confidentiality could easily be broken.

My decision of taking loosely-structured interviews meant that my co-researchers had total control of the narrative, they were not forced nor tricked into narrating events that they may have found of a sensitive nature, nor did they have to specifically focus or expand on any part of their experience, other than through their own free choice.

Data organization: the analysis.

My initial desire to compare my own experience of mid-life transition with that of others posed some challenging issues about the nature of the research I was undertaking. I realised that I could easily be drawn into empathic behaviour on occasions when the narrative sounded familiar or, on the opposite note, to dismiss too quickly situations alien to my own experience. The danger of being biased to the narrative was very obvious.

Utilizing a phenomenological approach for my research was therefore essential and I had to be aware of my assumptions, or my anticipated themes, conclusions and hoped results. Bracketing all that was important, notwithstanding the knowledge that while listening to my co-researchers I would be part of their experience of telling, because they would be telling their story to me, and for me. I had to learn to be part and at the same time to abstract myself from the interview in order

“... to explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essences of the experience.” (Moustakas, 1994. P. 49)

Mason (2002) explains that the analysis of data can be conducted through *“literal”* or *“interpretive and reflexive readings”*. I could not read the data in a literal sense, because that implied studying the literal form of the narrative, the style, the words used, the structure of the content etc. My focus was not on that aspect, and also it would have been impossible to carry it out with the translated material. I was interested in finding meaning and representation in the collected data and in being able to draw out the social, philosophical, psychological and physiological understanding of the co-researchers’ specific mid-life experience. Interpretive and reflexive reading seemed more in line with my purpose.

I approached my co-researchers bearing all these points in mind. Using a simple questionnaire formulated by Dawson (2006) I structured a summary indicating the date and place of the interview, how easily the rapport was formed, which themes arose, reflections on possible improvements for future interviews, the general mood of the co-researcher as well as mine, and any other useful observations.

The whole exercise of analysing the data was undoubtedly an experience that saw me as the protagonist in interpreting and understanding. I had to be careful not to compromise my phenomenological approach by misinterpreting the material or becoming too involved in the narrative, rather than trying to relay the facts as they had been narrated to me.

Riessman (1993), states that during transcription narrative and analysis become all one and she then adds that most students become worried at this stage of their research because transcribing inevitably means selection and reduction. The tone of voice, the overall emotionality and the pauses cannot be transferred on paper and the result is always an approximation of the co-researcher’s experience, dressed with the researcher’s own emotions.

The transcript seemed to be alive and developing and I had to go back several times to the recording to squeeze new meaning out of the interviews.

“Doing a grounded theory analysis properly involves a constant checking and re-checking of every aspect of the data, so that every possible way of making sense of the data can be given sufficient consideration.” (McLeod, 2001. P. 74)

Ultimately, I accepted that the researcher is indeed part of the process and so I accepted that while retaining a phenomenological approach, I could not abstain from conveying my presence during this stage of my work. The narratives became part of one larger story, no longer theirs or mine, simply ours.

“Narrative enquiry requires a great deal of sensitivity between participant and researcher: The inquiry should be a mutual and sincere collaboration, a caring relationship akin to friendship is established over time for full participation in the storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences. It demands intense active listening and giving the narrator full voice. However, because it is a collaboration, both voices are heard.” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995. P.86-87)

I moved on to study the data collected, following the procedure of phenomenal analysis by “*horizontalizing*” (Moustakas, 1994) every relevant statement as having equal value; listing meanings by clustering them into themes and then from there adding a verbatim description of the experience. In that way a meaning of the experience is constructed.

“Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process... Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data. It builds grounded theory.” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995. P.112)

Firstly, I highlighted the text searching for themes using different coloured pencils. I noted triggers, stages of life, places, important relations, and outcomes of the transition, if any. I then listed all the significant statements on a separate sheet, one for each co-researcher, in

such way as to easily identify different themes. I then integrated the data into a general analysis of the phenomenon of the transitional period in mid-life.

As the analysis of the interviews went along, and I read the transcripts over and over again, I could recognise themes that had been latent in previous readings. I studied the narratives and I felt as if I had gained a refined sensitivity for the material. In order to achieve this I had to move backwards and forwards several times between interviews and transcripts, reassessing my understanding and knowledge.

Finally, once the data had been organized, I proceeded with my literature review in order to link the data to the available theories on the mid-life transition.

Data analysis was an elaborate and long process, but I found it exciting and inspiring. My notes grew bigger and bigger and the findings will be discussed in the following chapter, but there are some other important considerations on the implications the process had on me.

Grounded theory, as Dawson (2006) had mentioned, goes on until no new meaning is to be found. I had thought that by limiting the number of interviews I could deal with that problem, but in fact what I was dealing with was the task of having to define human experience. Not only is this something that cannot be quantified, but, judging by my own predicament, its essence is ever-changing even once it is fixed on a tape recorder or transcribed on a piece of paper.

Having to identify the main themes, I became lost and confused and for sometime I was unable to process the information, let alone write about it.

After some reflection, I sensed that each of my co-researchers' narrative seemed to hold the clue to what I was looking for. Each of them suddenly appeared as the embodiment of a predominant theme. Although each narrative contained a variety of references which were also shared by the others, nevertheless each individual story seemed to herald one aspect of mid-life transition in a predominant way.

At that point I felt an almost irresistible urge to recount each story in its entirety because I felt that those stories could not be reduced to a couple of quotations here and there, even if I spread the content of the interviews across the border and covered all eight themes. It seemed to me that my co-researcher's voice would be lost. That voice had a special meaning that I wanted to transfer in my written words. Those stories had probably become enmeshed with my own and I was left with a lot of uncertainty on how to proceed.

I stumbled into a writer's block.

I was writing an academic dissertation, yet those eight stories had deeply touched me. I felt I could only write about those and then, at the end, add a ninth story, that of my own life. I wanted to write a novel, about pain, fear and hope. I already had a title; "*Eight lives plus one.*" I lost myself in a fantasy that saw me as the author of a best seller, famous and rich. But, enmeshed in the trepidation of that dream, I kept finding myself back on that party night, staring at the dark waters and wanting to jump into them, unable to move forward or to move backwards. I froze for days, staring at the screen of my computer, wanting to abandon my work and resign to failure.

For me change is not a linear process. It often happens by taking two steps forward and one backwards. I was experiencing something similar to "*interrupted change*", a change pattern that sees a "*...brief surge of improvement followed by a setback (resistance) with clients reporting a return of the symptom, and increased self-doubt.*" (Hubble, Duncan, Miller, 2005. P. 73). But each backward move is never a defeat or a loss. It is an important part of the growing process. My writer's block was in tune with my experience of transiting into mid-life because, faced by yet another challenge, I had retreated into what I knew best; the pain of my own failures and the anguish of re-elaborating my own strategies.

Changes in my personal life had left me bruised and with a heavy baggage of guilt. I had chosen to go on a solo journey and I had had to contend with the condemnation of family

and friends, the uncertainty of my future financial situation and, most of all, the isolation and anxiety of facing mid-life and old age, my most vulnerable years to come, alone.

Having experienced all that, writing a dissertation should not have posed such a big problem, but my writer's block was a clear sign that I still had to master the ability to stop, think and then take a deep breath and move on. Whilst during my youth and adulthood I had enjoyed safety and social comfort, but I had felt dead, moving away from that situation had been spurred by the willingness to embrace my desperation and choose to be alive, hoping that things will turn out for the best.

We have seen how the hero's journey contemplates separation, initiation and reunion. I went through all those phases once again, as if my experience could not have any other form than a spiral or a series of spiral circling backward and forward in yes, a movement, but also a convoluted, confusing, co-axial pattern that left me for a while exhausted and blocked. Then for reasons that elude me still today, one morning I woke up feeling that the nightmare was over, the wound had healed, and I was able to smile and to resume my work, re-organize the information I had collected from my co-researchers, and continue writing.

I recognized the need to resign the desire to narrate life vertically, from top to bottom, as if that had a higher value than other ways of analysing the data. I had to find the courage to silence the novelist in me, reflect on the stories, distil them and proceed horizontally linking the different arguments of my co-researchers' narratives to each theme.

“... the rule of horizontalization warns ... to avoid imposing any hierarchical assumptions of importance with regard to the items of description by temporarily equalizing their significance or meaning value. ... in being willing to follow this rule to some extent, investigators reduce the likelihood of imposing unnecessary judgments or biases on their initial observations.” (Spinelli, 2007. P.116-7)

I am aware of the fact that my co-researchers were self-appointed and that they are not indicative of different strata of society. There are many other people whose life predicaments

may not even allow them the opportunity to tell their story. For many people there is no time or money available to spend with a therapist, observing their development or discussing their concerns. I approached the analysis of my co-researchers' experience by holding that awareness in mind and this made me re-examine my own assumptions and my pre-acquired knowledge which was intrinsic to my own experience.

I had to expand such knowledge by questioning, in order to go from theory to experience and back to theory again. A great deal of open-mindedness is needed when observing experiential material, and it is often impossible to pigeon-hole real life. Reflecting back on the whole interviewing process I can now see how I had become emotionally attached to my eight incredible stories.

Phenomenology had seemed to gently fade away towards the end of the interviews, when I could see in my co-researcher's eyes that the process was coming to an end and it was at that precise moment that I had felt free to resume the other type of listening. I had felt free to acknowledge my own emotions and to conclude the interviewing process by allowing that special bond to be expressed; the gratefulness for the other's trust in telling and allowing me to listen. We then both shared compassion and companionship, as well as, in some cases, a few tears, and there was a great deal of consolation in that exchange.

From that fusion I have, hopefully, gained the ability to accept the un-assumed, the un-explained, and the un-expected.

PART 2

Findings.

Introduction.

The result of the data analysis is formulated in the following eight sections which illustrate the themes that were prevalent in my co-researchers' narrative. A ninth section offering a summary of other themes which are an important part of the transition but had not been prevalent in the collected interviews, then follows. In addition I have commented on those themes that I have found referred to in parts of the literature but were absent in the co-researchers' narratives.

The identity of the co-researchers has been changed and personal details omitted so as to safeguard their privacy. In order to offer the material in a clear visual presentation, I have used bold characters for theoretical quotations and italics for the quotations taken from the interviews.

1. Not-knowing.

Entering the mid-life transition with a bang, as one of my co-researchers described it, leaves one in a precarious mental state. There is, at the beginning, a sense of chaos and devastation. Whatever made sense before, no longer does. Life seems to have come to a turning point, only one does not really know which way to turn. Not-knowing is a concept that holds a number of feelings within it; it means not knowing what has happened, why things have happened, what to do next, how to find meaning and solutions. Not-knowing expresses the basic existential issue of meaninglessness.

Heidegger (1967) defines meaning as

“... the ‘upon which’ of a projection in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something; it gets its structure from a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception”.

(Heidegger, 1962. P. 193)

Meaning can be understood as a projection, a way to disclose the possibility of one’s future, while at the same time it stems from something that was already there, a pre-constructed way of seeing and understanding.

The not-knowing stems from sensing the loss of that previous meaning and not finding an immediate replacement, not being able to transform the pre-existing knowledge in order to suit the new present situation. Transiting into mid-life evokes this movement between the known of the past that is no longer and the not-known future that is not yet.

Following the death of his mother, Matthew describes his bereavement and the devastation at having lost the link between himself and the rest of the family. Losing his mother meant losing a reference point, a safe contact and a sense of guidance. Most of all it meant not knowing how to respond to such loss.

“When my mother went all was switched off. All was cold. Her loss was terrible afterwards. There was raw pain, anger, and I started reflecting on what had gone missing. I really did not know where to find a new reference point.”

Fiona's experience of bereavement was similar, although the frightening character of her loss was an unexpected total freedom which implied suddenly becoming solely responsible for her own life.

"After my husband died I found myself in total freedom. Yet I was desperate and scared. My whole world collapsed. I was devastated and I did not know whether I wanted to go on living or not. I decided that I wanted to live, not just survive, but first I had to rebuild myself. Be in charge."

Not-knowing involves a grieving process; one grieves the loss of security, the loss of a past situation and a clear future. In a study of mourning in both children and adults, Bowlby (1988) describes some of the typical responses as

"... anger, directed at third parties, the self, and sometimes at the person lost, disbelief that the loss has occurred... and a tendency, often though not always, unconscious, to search for the lost person in the hope of reunion." (Bowlby, 1988. P. 32)

George's first reaction to his redundancy shows, in a similar pattern, his bereavement at the loss of identity;

"I was angry. Depressed. I was devastated because I no longer knew who I was. When I lost my job I felt I was judged for that job that had disappeared. Before that was what gave me my identity. Now I don't know how I will survive, what work I will get in the future."

There seems to be a paradox with the question of meaning and work. The expectations we have from the work we do and the meaning we give our life, seem to trigger the old existential question *"If only I knew what I really want from life!"*. The question is not just to ascertain the meaning of life, but to know how to live it.

“It is not our life in this world but the work we do in it that appears essentially meaningless unless it is seen to have some inner value that is also brought to bear in the reality of the outside world.” (Treichler, 1996. P.112)

Janet’s fear of the not-known was expressed by boredom and disengagement. Rather than looking at the future she reacted by sitting on her present without any further ado.

“For a long period I had a feeling of boredom, of being shut down. Something was dead in me. I was growing into an old lady. But I did not know. I thought my life was over, there was nothing there. Perhaps I was looking for something, but what it was, I really did not know.”

Boredom is often a symptom of inner emptiness, the feeling of being frozen and indeed dead inside. But boredom is also hunger for life and while nothing seems to shake that state until the power of desire is somehow restored, eventually a new energy can surface which can offer nourishment and new meaning.

In Dante’s *Inferno*, Ulysses, the mythical hero who sets sail to gain knowledge of the world, spurs his sailors not to be afraid of the un-known, but to continue with their quest, defiant of the dangers and ready even to sink in the whirling wind; **“ ... you were not born to live like mindless brutes but to follow paths of excellence and knowledge.”** (Dante. *Inferno* XXVI, 120)

Bearing the not-known until something slowly starts regenerating inside, is perhaps the most challenging of human tasks. We strive to find meaning in life .We need to seek knowledge and understanding in order to act and do things. We plan and then move ahead and planning means knowing where we are going. To accept the pain of the not-yet is difficult. It takes courage and hope to stay in that limbo. The longer one stays in that situation, the more

painful it is. Yet hope and courage cannot be rationally generated. It is not clear how they appear and how one can facilitate their appearance. It seems that one needs to have the hope that hope will, sooner or later, return.

Human experience of hope is embedded in time.

“This ability to anticipate the future is an ontological given, perhaps the most authentic and distinctive characteristic of humanity.” (Lester, 1995. P. 59)

The ability to anticipate the future, however, is born by the ability to understand the past, and to know where we have arrived, in the story of our life.

2. Loneliness.

Much of my co-researchers' narrative illustrates the theme of loneliness. It is a basic human truth that “...*being alone is less safe than being with a companion... that we find*

comfort in companionship and seek it, and that we experience greater or less degrees of anxiety when alone, is, therefore, in no way surprising.” (Bowlby, 1998. P.172)

Bowlby (1998) links man’s primitive survival instinct to this need for companionship in order to feel safe and protected from outside danger. Fear is generated not only by the presence of a possible predator, but also by the absence of a safe situation.

“Maintenance of an individual within his familiar environment is... the result of... behavioural systems that are sensitive to such stimulus situations such as strangeness and familiarity, being alone and being with companion.” (Bowlby, 1998. P. 178)

Attachment to a parental figure is the first form in which a safe situation develops. Such form can be carried on into adulthood and can be adjusted to include closeness to spouses, relatives and acquaintances. The absence or loss of safe attachment figures creates a feeling of abandonment, of being left alone in an unsafe world.

Finding herself in a situation of mounting stress after a series of miscarried pregnancies, Sarah spent a long time looking inside herself and contemplating change. She decided to leave her husband and start anew. She felt extremely vulnerable, isolated and deeply scared. Leaving her husband also meant severing most of her social relationships. She soon realised that she had become a social outcast.

“I started reading a lot on solitude, loneliness, isolation, to try and understand all these psychological states... At first there was a conflict: do I deserve this? I am angry, because this is not fair, I am the victim, I don’t deserve this. My husband used to say that you don’t get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate, so I had obviously badly negotiated, since I found myself alone and this was not what I had envisaged.”

This type of feeling seems to be frequent during a period of crisis. There is a rebellion, a self-pity but also a willingness to react and move on.

“Sentiments like ‘I’m not going to take this anymore’ or ‘I don’t deserve this kind of treatment’ are innocent-victim or righteous-indignation slogans.”, explains Goleman, adding that it is essential to challenge them in order to overcome them, **“... to bring to mind evidence or perspectives that put them in question.”** (Goleman, 1996. P. 144-5)

It is important to try to reframe the situation and open the possibility of change rather than staying with hurt and anger. On the same subject Mitchell (1993) adds;

“It is too easy to collapse new situations into recurrent scenarios in which one always turns out to be one’s fondest version of hero, victim, or perhaps both.” (Mitchell, 1993. P.113). This process is facilitated by the opportunity to put feelings into words. It is often the other person’s participation with questions, feedback and opinions, that helps one to arrive at a fresher, richer view of oneself.

Sarah describes the passage from loneliness to solitude as her biggest achievement;

“Slowly, I had to learn to befriend my solitude. Instead of being a monster to fight against, it could be my ally, because although it was true that I no longer had a relationship with my husband, I was starting to have a relationship with myself.”

Establishing a relationship with oneself was a major task for George. Following his redundancy he decided to take time off and re-assess his position instead of looking for work.

“I had lost my social environment. I felt as an outsider when my colleagues got new jobs and I did not. I was no longer part of that world. I felt completely alone, yet the relationship with myself was full of possibilities. I have no idea where I will be in ten years time, but I know that I will enjoy my relationships more. I am looking to improving the quality of life and sharing that with others... I have been able to step aside and look at myself. ”

The reverse seemed true in Victor's experience, when he decided, following a time of deep depression, to leave his home and his profession and start a new life.

“While I was engulfed in this deep depression and I had touched rock bottom, in that solitude I became creative and that is when the big change took place. I decided to leave and start all over again. It had taken half of my life to get to that point, when I finally knew what I wanted to do.”

After a busy life spent building her business and then seeing it collapse, Catherine retreated inside her isolation, became a recluse and was unable to share her despair with others, to open up and seek help.

“My life had been very busy with work; it was a crazy life, with no time for myself. I never sat and thought about what I really wanted from life. To think about that one needs time, and I had none. To mature one needs time. I am still maturing, because now I no longer work and I can afford a little time to think, but I don't want to think too much because it is a painful experience. Now I can decide what is essential in my life and what is not.”

Results of a comprehensive research on behaviour change confirm that “... **change is a process that unfolds over time. It involves progression ...**” (Hubble, Duncan, Miller, 1999. P. 228.) Such empirical evidence confirms that an appropriate therapeutic intervention can facilitate progress and help build the necessary patience and resilience needed during this lengthy undertaking.

Following the loss of her husband, Fiona had to learn to live on her own for the first time;

“When my husband died I was devastated. I felt I had no one to talk to. I was lonely and terrified of being alone in my big house... For four years I slowly started to re-build myself. I was always well presented and dignified. I tried to be interesting to my friends and to do interesting things. I bought a dog, so that I had company and someone to look after. That kept me fit. I had someone alive in the house, to break the terrifying silence you have after someone dies. ”

It is only human nature to fear loneliness. We are in the world in relation to others. When that relation disappears we fall into sadness and depression. Loneliness then becomes something to be overcome and cured. The reaction to such situation differs from individual to individual but the intrinsic feeling of isolation is a universally painful experience. The progress from loneliness to solitude is a transition of its own. For this to take place, a positive act of will is necessary; the determination to move forward and turn loneliness into a constructive and even enjoyable experience.

Kevin describes his experience of becoming single again after a few years spent looking after his son following the breakdown of his marriage.

“As with most mid-life crises, I started to question what I had done, what my life was about. I was in a situation where what I had, which was a family and a young child, was in someone else’s possession. The man my wife had left me for, was now acting as my son’s father and I felt myself to be very much on my own and surplus to requirements.”

Solitude is cherished by the sage and the mystic in their pursuit for wisdom and spirituality. It is the ability to be alone without the pain. The difference between the two states is expressed by the way language

“... has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.” (Tillich, 1963. P.11)

Matthew has been able to make changes in his mid-life by taking the time to assess what he really enjoys in life. He now makes more time for himself, to read, listen to music, look after his pets.

“I enjoy my own company. I have created some places and times that are mine and only mine. They are not physical, but virtual places where I talk, live, do things, have fun. These are alternative situations that allow me to choose where I want to be and what I want to do.”

If isolation is something that can be transcended, then being alone is necessary in order to reach out to one’s spirituality, ability to love and personal growth.

“The individual in being lonely... will realize himself in loneliness and create a bond or sense of fundamental relatedness with others. Loneliness rather than separating the individual or causing a break or division of the self, expands the individual’s wholeness, perceptiveness, sensitivity and humanity.” (Moustakas, 1961. P.47)

As we try to find meaning in our life and we have to face its uncertainty and finitude **“... ultimately, we are led to the recognition of our aloneness or isolation. Just as in the end each of us must die alone, so too will that uniquely experienced world that is inseparably tied to us cease to exist.” (Spinelli, 1989. P.113)**

Being able to adapt one’s experience to this fundamental status quo and embrace the passage from isolation and loneliness into solitude, is no small step.

3. Life-cycles.

Describing their understanding of major life change, most of my co-researchers indicated there was more than one change, and they were usually able to define the age at which the change took place.

During a lecture given in Paris in 1924, Steiner presented his theory of seven years life cycles asserting that looking back at one's "*life-tableau*" this will present itself in sections or phases of seven years each.

The relevance of this view became strikingly apparent to me when most of my co-researchers described the important phases in multiples of seven and specifically pointed at two major changes in the middle of their life, one around the age of forty two, the other around forty nine. My understanding is that the mid-life transition may start around the age of forty two and end approximately seven years later. It then perhaps takes on another character, when a new cycle starts and a more creative phase takes over.

Fiona identifies one important phase of development around the age of twenty eight, when she was willing to become a mother and start a family. A second stage took place around the age of forty nine-fifty, when she started to question her role in the world and to look inwards at her achievements.

"I had two important changes; when I married my husband at twenty eight, which gave my life the imprint for the following thirty five years, and then around forty nine-fifty when I realized that I was imprisoned in an unhappy marriage."

The period around the age of thirty is supposed to be a rational one, there is an awakening to the realities of the world, and the need to complete whatever tasks were started in earlier years. Looking at her later phase, in mid-life, Fiona said the transition had lasted around thirteen to fourteen years.

Matthew seemed to have a very clear picture of the development stages not just in his own life but in life in general;

“Around the age of thirty you get responsibilities, you start building your future. Around the age of fifty you start to analyze what you have built that far.”

Matthew felt that a transition period would last seven years and he was still right in the middle of it, yet his narrative expressed a great sense of wisdom and peace.

Although the onset of the phase around the age of fifty can present unrest and traumas, **“It is as though a new vitality were lent man, and adjustments are called for. For the one still adaptable, whose sense of humor or perspective is intact, the transition can be smooth...”** (O’Neil & O’Neil, 1990. P.12)

Expressing her worry about the future after the collapse of her marriage, Susan remembers thinking:

“I am only forty nine. What am I going to do with the rest of my life?”

The answer to that question, according to my co-researchers’ understanding of that phase, suggests that Susan must reckon with the metamorphosis of her body and shift the power from the physical to the spiritual.

It is interesting to notice that the mid-life transition was perceived by all my co-researchers as lasting either seven or fourteen years and the triggering events that put it in motion seem to adhere to this same principle, as if traumas happened in seven years cycles as well. Does this mean that traumatic events also follow a cyclic pattern?

The question remains open, the implications are far reaching and I do not intend to engage with that issue, rather I am solely relaying my observations. George was thirty five when he was made redundant and forty two when he gave me his interview. Kevin was married at thirty five and they both referred to a transitional period lasting about seven years.

Janet was nearly sixty three at the time of the interview and referred to a seven year period of introversion that started around the fifty year mark;

“I was around fifty when I experienced problems with my husband. For seven years I shut down and I became aware of the boredom. The cynicism. The absence of hope.”

It is a fact that the number seven appeared again and again as part of my co-researchers’ development. Talking about numbers Jung defines “*number*” as **“an archetype of order which has become conscious.”** (Jung, 1955. P. 58). It not only contains quantities but also qualities - it is not found or discovered;

“Number helps more than anything else to bring order into chaos of appearances. It is the predestined instrument for creating order, or for apprehending an already existing, but still unknown, regular arrangement or ‘orderedness’.” (Jung, 1955. P. 57)

It seems that the experience of development may be structured around such numerical ordering, as if to provide a much needed framework to contain chaos and uncertainty.

I wonder if this principle can explain what has been observed so far. Is it possible that my co-researchers had an unconscious knowledge of entering a new seven year cycle and therefore their conscious behavior adapted to the type of development the cycle was heralding? As if they were aware of a kind of universal expectancy that something had to change in a certain way at a certain point, and they had followed suit.

In his study on the principle of “*Synchronicity*”, Jung (1955) says that often **“... an unconscious image comes into consciousness... in the form of a dream, a premonition, an idea... [and then] an objective situation coincides with this content.”** (Jung, 1955. P. 44)

Conversely, it could be argued that the unconscious knowledge and expectancy of the seven year pattern was in me before I started the research and I somehow looked for it in the

narrative, in order to fulfill my own prophecy. Then my co-researchers may have simply responded unconsciously to my request.

But what if the seven year cycle were just another metaphor that offers some kind of orderly explanation to human development? Order can offer relief from anxiety and give a sense that all has a purpose and a running rhythm and if there are rules there may be solutions and predictable results.

In my personal experience I seem to have had movement in different directions at different intervals. I have gone back to adolescent behaviour at times, but also projected forward towards my own death and contemplated but also felt my existence as an old person. It can be argued that women experience development, physical as well as psychological in a cyclic way. This may be due to the twenty eight days cycle, the repetition of menstruation and the influence of moon phases. It could be observed that women are perhaps more used to a circular or spiral-like movement throughout their lives, while men, perhaps are more inclined to a linear movement, from one event to another, rather than repetition.

There seems to be a continuous flux of emotions and cognitions that shapes in a very individual and personal way the development of personality. What I think is perhaps common, at least between my experience and that of my co-researchers, is the character of awakening, of responsibility and openness towards change. It is the awareness that a situation can be modified and that there are special moments in one's history when a sense of responsibility or an opportunity become available and a choice is made whether or not to pursue it.

The seven year cycle, as well as any other theory of life stages, offers the opportunity, or the delusion, perhaps, of recognising something that "should be" there, that is normal and universally recognized.

4. Work.

"Ora et Labora."

(pray and work).

St Benedict's Rule (6th century) is a guide to strengthen the individual's spiritual growth that is required for the fulfillment of the human vocation. More than 12 centuries later, when asked by Erikson (1994) what made a person a mature person, Freud replied that all there was to humanity was "*Love and Work*". Work is one of the two essential ways to relate and accomplish in our society;

"No other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; for his work at least gives him a secure place in a position of reality, in the human community." (Freud, 1964. P.80 n1)

For people who identify themselves with the work they do, facing a redundancy or the collapse of a business venture can be a terrifying experience which can cause a feeling of emptiness, loss of clarity, meaning and sense of purpose. Such loss may push the person to look inside for answers in order to restore their identity.

"There is a parallel between the empty nest syndrome and that which men experience when the structure and requirement imposed on them by work disappears." (Neustatter, 1996. P. 134)

George describes his experience of redundancy which marked the beginning of his transition into mid-life:

"That job gave me security and it has been so difficult without that security... That security had been financial, having a routine, a place to be and a role to play. A lot of my identity was invested in that job that I really loved. There was a credibility, a confidence, in what I was doing. I knew what I was and I was communicating that to others. Now there is a sense of

anxiety about not knowing what's next, no longer being secure in my life, but I have been able to step aside and look at myself."

Catherine describes her business failures as the two unforgivable mistakes in her life:

"I had to make two terrible decisions, to close down my business twice. The first time I was too young to know how to handle the situation, and I should have asked for advice. That was a terrible mistake. The second time, events were beyond my control, and they were too terrible for me to continue working. But even then instead of seeking help, talking to someone, I refused every contact, retreated inside myself in desperation and just gave up."

Catherine's example seems to present an attitude of strong "*sedimentation*" (Spinelli, 2007) as if the regret for those two terrible mistakes had become an integral part of her personality. In fact this sedimentation, which had never been challenged in therapy, left Catherine stuck with those initial elements of loss and meaninglessness that could have triggered a phase of self-analysis and development. However, sometimes such forms of sedimentation cannot, in Spinelli's view, be de-sedimented and the

"... insistent attempt to do so may be experienced as being so threatening... that it will destabilise to the extent that the felt experience of being becomes increasingly intolerable." (Spinelli, 2007. P. 36)

While Catherine was mourning her missed opportunities, Matthew had a more balanced view of the role work played in his life and showed an awareness of the way his values had changed in mid-life:

"Around the age of fifty, there comes a moment of spin off, of re-assessing the desire to build one's career. You start analyzing what you have achieved that far. You throw away most of the things you have collected around you and you start looking for the essential items that you

really need, what you are going to take with you in your old age. In fact the beauty of old age is that you need to take with you very little, few material things and a lot of curiosity.”

Retirement and redundancy instigate the need to reframe one’s position in society and understanding or re-assessing one’s identity. This can result in an initial sense of anger and devastation; the fear of not knowing how things will turn out. Yet, in the majority of my co-researchers’ experience it was also an opportunity for choosing what they really wanted to do. From that knowledge a determination to change and start again, takes over.

Victor describes the choice to end his successful medical career in order to become a student again, as the most incredible change:

“Some people always use the word ‘can’t’: I can’t do this, I can’t do that. That does not exist in my vocabulary anymore. You can change your life. I have done this and it’s fantastic. We only have one life and we waste it doing things we don’t like. I created opportunities. The career break was not impulsive. I knew exactly what to do and I have changed completely.”

Starting a new job at the age of sixty two, Janet describes the joy of being able to choose, in total freedom, what activity to embrace in later life:

“It’s not easy when you are older. My body is vulnerable and I have to be careful. My psyche is vulnerable and I have to be careful. So it’s harder to make changes, but the change is worth it although it’s hugely difficult, and I always rely on protecting myself. I completely changed my life when I decided to work as a carer for the elderly. At my age having a new goal and doing the work I do makes it worth it even if I had a stroke tomorrow. My work connects me with death. It does not frighten me. It helps me. It connects me with the joy of what I am doing while I am still alive. Joy is now in everything I do. I am able to stay connected to my soul. It has changed all my relationships...”

Working through the trauma of loss and meaninglessness in mid-life can lead towards some incredible development. To reach that stage it is necessary to believe that we are capable of deciding what we want to be. This freedom, **“... ours to act upon, is the existential freedom to interpret the stimulus-events in our lives as we choose to. Herein lies the basis for our freedom to choose.”** (Spinelli, 1989. P. 111)

The meaning of this action of interpretation is expressed in my co-researchers' understanding as the ability to seek opportunities and the courage to start again, risk again, build again. This time not necessarily because of any specific external need, but because of an internal desire to fulfil and create.

5. Sexuality.

Sexual relationships are as important and as intense in mid-life as in previous years, perhaps even more so. This is confirmed by a study into sexuality and the elderly;

“There is sufficient evidence to conclude that while sexual expression may change as people age, the need for such expression, and the acting out of those needs continues among older people as long as the health of the partners permits... Researchers... have expressed surprise by the extent to which older people continue to engage in sexual activity.” (Walker, 1997. P.113)

Janet argues that sexuality is an exciting factor in mid-life. With a newly acquired freedom of expression it can be enjoyed in full spontaneity and detached from the biology of reproduction;

“When you reach the stage where you are no longer in child-bearing age... Hallelujah! It changes your relationship to people, to men. It’s such a relief! I now smile; when you get older, men treat you differently. You are in a different category and I really like that. It does not mean there is no longer sex, because there is. You do not shut down sexually in your sixties, it’s still there, but your relationships with men, the intimate ones, are different, they feel safer and consequently I feel safer. It has to do with the fact that you are not going to have children. Men sense that, they feel more relaxed, and that gives you a new kind of freedom. I really like that.”

With the onset of menopause women no longer need to be concerned with fertility and contraception, but they are having to deal with physical changes and the anxiety of no longer looking attractive and desirable. Men may look more handsome with a little grey hair, but for them mid-life sometimes brings issues of impotence and depression. The type of mature sexual freedom described by Janet does not come naturally, it is something that one has to conquer. It

requires an act of courage, the will to enter the game once again, accepting the vulnerability and frailty of one's body.

When Fiona allowed herself to fall in love aged seventy, she knew she was taking a risk. If the love affair came to an end, would she be able to bear yet another loss? Her friends were worried and tried to stop her.

“I met this very pleasant person. It started with him wanting to bed me, I was a good prey, interesting and different. For me... although I valued my independence, psychological as well as financial, deep down I had started to desire a companion, a man with whom to do things... All my friends raised their eyebrows; they thought I was letting myself into a dangerous situation. They could foresee a quick end to this affair, and then I would be wounded and mortified. At seventy, you don't let yourself lightly into a love affair, you have to think of the consequences. This was their advice, their opinion. Maybe I sound ridiculous, maybe I make people laugh, but this is not ridiculous. I enjoy it, I find it exciting. I am enthusiastic about this life, because it is yet another life.”

There are other situations where mid-life seeks a re-assessment of sexuality, as in the case of Kevin who describes himself determined to learn to establish man-woman friendships, rather than seeing women as sexual objects, as he had done in earlier years:

“Talking of my younger life I was very insecure. Rather than being shy I was loud and I would feel that if there was a single woman in the room I had to have that person sexually, because then I would know that I was loving and lovable. When I got at about 35 I realised I did not need that any more... and then I became aware of the fact that even if I chose not to pursue, it kind of pursued me, which is interesting.”

It seems that at mid-life there is a search for atonement, re-balancing of previous behaviour, a slow recognition of new needs and changed attitudes. This change does not happen overnight, it requires time, hard work and occasionally one has to assess how one's relationship with the outside world is affected. Modern society seems to expect people to stay and to behave young forever.

“People try to escape the premature ageing process in their souls – and sometimes also at the physical level – and attempt to recapture parts of their youth that have been lost and others that are increasingly slipping from their grasp, wanting to put new life into these.”

(Treichler, 1996. P. 97)

Kevin wanted to shift from sexual relationships to friendships, yet it seemed that once he stopped chasing women, they started to chase him, as if his search for a different type of intimacy was somehow out of reach. To keep on course with his own development, Kevin needed the determination to stay true to himself.

Still on the subject of being true to one's own nature, Victor introduced a new point of view related to the issue of acceptance and respect for one's own sexuality. The awareness of one's orientation may lead to confrontation with others' opinions and assumptions;

“People can't accept my life style? It's their problem. I am not going to walk around with shame any more. Shame about gays, homosexuals... It's not my problem. You have the problem? You have to deal with it. I have told my relatives: you have a problem with it? You deal with it.”

Being true to oneself also means being attuned to one's physical needs, the desire for a successful and rewarding relationship, another chance to find the ideal partner. Susan describes her frustration during the last years of her marriage;

“While I was still married to my husband my femininity was screaming from inside, and I felt totally neglected. I fear that I will never find another man. Perhaps I must learn to love and nurture myself.”

There is a very real possibility that people who lose their partner through divorce or death may end up living alone. This is more of a threat for women than men, who statistically tend to re-marry more easily.

“It may not be cheerful to contemplate all this, but in fact people who have done so and drawn contingency plans often feel they have fared better...” (Neustatter, 1996. P. 274)

Becoming independent from the need of a sexual partner was Susan's contingency plan for the future.

Changing one's attitude toward sexuality at mid-life can be a natural process even within a solid married relationship. Matthew, who had declared himself happily married, had surprisingly adopted a different attitude when the subject somehow shifted from marriage to sexuality;

“I am more mature from an affective point of view, but also more disillusioned. I could even restart a love relationship, but I am a bit lazy. Yet I feel it could happen...”

Sexual relationships can often use fantasy, imagination and secrecy as tools for re-invention and development. These developments can be subtle and unexpected, with the participants almost stumbling into a bed of their own making. While this could trigger the end of a relationship, it can also lead to its reinforcement and the re-interpretation.

The re-evaluation of sexuality may have a sinister meaning. It can be understood as an attempt to deal with fear of death; the compulsive attempt to remain young, healthy and good looking as well as the onset of sexual promiscuity, can be interpreted as, Elliot Jacques (1965) calls it, "*a race against time*", or, less subtly, a race against death.

“Death cannot be ignored in an extensive venture of self-exploration, because a major task of the mature adult is to come to terms with the reality of decline and diminishment.”

(Yalom, 1980. P. 196).

According to Yalom death anxiety shapes most of human behaviour. Rather than running away from the issue, accepting one's decline, physical and psychological, may be the secret ingredient to turn sexuality from obsessive promiscuity to vibrant fun.

6. Friendship.

A common factor in my co-researchers' stories is the re-interpretation of the meaning of friendship. This element repeatedly seemed to take form towards the end of the interviews, as a sort of concluding reflection on the person's development. Friends help maintain psychological stability. They offer support, practical advice and companionship. They provide a feeling of connectedness and shared strength which counter-balances stress, self-doubt and hopelessness. Individual experiences are fed back to each other providing information relevant to day-to-day problems as well as major life decisions. These friendships often replace the role once held by the nuclear family.

For George losing his job also meant losing many of his friends. Those who remained seemed to become George's new family;

"... some friends were supportive, some I lost. Being in different places I just started seeing different people. Friendships, my close friends are still around all the time, but I did lose some and I lost a good friend I worked with. I see the improvements I have made in the relationship with myself and also in the relationship with other people so I feel I am enjoying relationships more. I am looking forward to a comfortable living with my friends as part of my family."

The equation, friends-family, is constant in all the narratives. Sharing similar experiences and looking at the future creates strong bonds between people. Rather than hoping to find support from spouses, children or siblings, mid-life sometimes demands independence and self-reliance.

"... we have to look at re-inventing a community which will work for our generation and it seems clear to me that, rather than bemoaning what no longer exists, we have to be

inventive and see how a community can be re-created in a way that is appropriate to our changed world.” (Neustatter, 1996. P.271.)

Catherine’s life story was mostly about missed opportunities and the disappointment of finding herself in mid-life with little financial support and no time to re-adjust her situation. There was only one little opening for positive thought at the very end of her interview;

“There is a warmth from my friends that I have never experienced before. I am satisfied there is a large family around me and perhaps that is more important than money.”

As well as creativity, forming or retaining important friendships requires an open attitude. While in younger years friendships are formed with people of the same generation and there is a need for the group or herd, later on the age barrier no longer seems so tight. Friendships can be formed with people of different generations.

Seventy three year old Earl McGrath, an American art gallery owner, commenting on his pool of young and old friends, said: **“... they helped me to get older and stay younger, both at the same time. Now I feel as a wise nineteen year old... and it only hurts when I move.”** (Johnston, 2005. P.169)

Fiona explains that during the initial period when one has to deal with loss and confusion, friends may just disappear. But later, when things settle and a new life takes off, opportunities and relationships start to flourish;

“At the beginning your friends support you, the real ones, the others disappear. However, even the good ones have their own life and their own problems. I can see that I have this gift of communicating with others. This for me is the most beautiful thing. People now respond to me in a way that did not happen before. Now I have friends of all ages. They phone me. We talk. We exchange opinions...”

Men seem to react to mid-life in a more isolated way, compared to women. That may reflect their distress or may contribute to it. There seems to be a tendency in men to join groups of other males thus retaining a model of masculinity formulated in adolescence.

“In the local bar, on the fishing trip, or on the bowling team men can feel free to drop their polite, restrained demeanor. They drive too fast, exchange stories of old exploits, make comments about passing females, and attempt to recapture some of the feelings of freedom, strength, and spontaneity they treasured as adolescents.” (Farrell, 1981. P.190-191.) At the same time there is also a counter-tendency that invites men to relinquish their masculinity and become more gentle, sensitive and expressive of feelings, attributes that make them acceptable to females.

Kevin’s desire to form friendships with women demanded that he learned to connect to his feminine, emotional side;

“I started to engage with women as friends. I tried to have relationships a little deeper on an emotional level, rather than just physical. Not that I had been completely unemotional, but I started to have women as friends, although it is still sometimes difficult for me to do that.”

Matthew values friendships not just for mutual company or support, but also as a link to his childhood and youth. Long standing friendships secure that the autobiography of one’s life is kept alive and available. It is noticeable in older people that long term memory is more accessible than short term one. This seems to be a natural choice, as if at one point one needs to choose what to remember and what to forget. Friends who have shared our youth can be the beholders of fond memories. They can allow one to travel back to happy times, to special

places in one's past. Friends in this context keep the past alive and add meaning to the present, as Matthew explains;

“I remember things thanks to my friends. But I often remember more about others than the other way round. I remember details of their life very clearly. We have fun remembering our youth together. I value my friendships. I like to play, to have people I can phone and talk about cars for hours, exchange records or whatever. Nothing special, I just follow some of my interests, just like a child...”

It is interesting to observe how some friendships can last a lifetime and endure situations of distance or infrequency, while others are short-lived or exclusive to a certain social context. What makes a friendship last is not quite clear.

“We may attribute this enduring quality to people's capacity to form representational models of another and of themselves in relation to the other and thus to be able to sustain a bond over time and distance.” (Murray Parkes, *et al.* 1991. P. 45)

The important element seems to be determined by the ability to form a bond with the other and if we understand mid-life as a universal experience, then it may be said that this universality can form the basis for that bond.

7. Self-healing.

So far our attention has been focused on some of the themes mostly common to the first phase of the transition into mid-life. We have also observed some behaviour at the other end, when the crisis is negotiated and the course of personal development has been facilitated. What intrigued me was my co-researchers' ability to heal themselves.

“Healing is part of the inherent nature of illness and the human being is essentially self-healing; it can therefore only arise from the one principal in the human being that is always healthy - the principle of the spirit.” (Treichler,1996. P.144.)

There is indeed a constant element of self-healing in all my co-researchers' stories. They are stories of people who somehow survived, managed and achieved. How did they do that, when depression initially set in and the will of doing was gone?

“This may go to the extremes in hypochondria... escape into busyness or seek oblivion in intoxication. Behind it lies the ‘silent terror’...” (Treichler, 1996. P. 112.)

Psychotropic drugs can help overcome depression, but they have an effect on the symptoms and not on the disease. Yet there are cases when psychotropic drugs can truly cure,
“In those cases the powers of self-healing were clearly strong enough to come to terms with the pathological process once the symptoms had been removed.” (Treichler, 1996. P.208.)

This seems to be the case in Kevin's experience;

“I became clinically depressed and quite ill. I was on antidepressants for close to two years. Antidepressants were a real life-saver for me. When I became clinically depressed I can only describe it that the colour went out from the world. Everything went grey. By taking the antidepressants not only the world became colourful again and I started to smell it, it was

almost like being re-born. Smelling things for the first time, tasting things for the first time, experiencing things for the first time...”

Depression seems to hold a central motif, a kind of preparatory ground.

“The individual who lives for the ‘dominant goal’ is the individual who fashions his life around a belief in personal specialness and inviolability... Depression often ensues when the belief in an ever-ascending spiral (‘dominant goal’) collapses. To live for the ‘dominant other’ is to attempt to merge with another whom one perceives as being the dispenser of protection and meaning in life.” (Yalom, 1980. P.134.)

Depression is, in that case, a last desperate plea for love.

Fiona’s transition was triggered by the death of her husband. Bereavement therapy and antidepressants were the immediate remedies during the initial stage of trauma. But once her natural self-defence system was restored, she had to look for other ways to live, as she puts it, rather than just survive;

“First, the interest and enthusiasm for life. So many things I was not able to do before, or that I wanted to do in a different way, or that I had not done completely. I bought a dog. I started taking tango lessons. I love reading and joined a book club. I love eating out so I joined a restaurant group. I have developed some lovely friendships and I am invited out by people of different ages and different nationalities. I also learned to stay away from situations that made me sad or uncomfortable.”

Therapy and antidepressants may help to put the colour back into the world, as Kevin would say, but ultimately one is left alone with his fears and losses. The work then has to be continued with the knowledge that life, just as death, is a lonely affair.

“Though the physicality of death destroys an individual, the idea of death can save him.”

(Yalom, 1980. P.159)

Susan also had therapy, but in order to move from depression to self-expression she had to find her own ways to cope;

“I started doing yoga in a very intense way, four or five times a week and I also started doing psychotherapy. All this put me in a sort of New Age planet, because the first approach to psychotherapy and introspection often assumes this type of New Age character. You read little books you find in the supermarket, sort of hippy kind of things, which for me were a valid starting approach to resume living in a different way. Alongside my psychotherapy I started reading a lot on solitude, loneliness and isolation to try to understand all these psychological states. So I started to befriend myself and I discovered many things that I enjoy doing and that I had never done before. Trekking, yoga, cinema, I got used to going to the movies alone, cooking... Now I know that I can make myself happy.”

Therapy gave Susan the courage to look for reasons and ways to relinquish depression and move on;

“The physician, especially the psychotherapist, can implicitly communicate courage to be and the power of taking existential anxiety upon oneself.” (Tillich. 1952. P.74.)

Looking after oneself seems to be a combination of learning and then experiencing, finding out what brings joy and relief in life. Self help books, physical and social activity and therapy can provide the needed resources.

“There are people who have been much helped by exercise methods with a spiritual dimension such as yoga and tai chi, or by spiritual therapies. But a depression which does not respond to other methods and will not shift or lift may require the intervention of a doctor.” (Neustatter, 1996. P. 127)

Looking after oneself may sound an egotistic attitude, but in emergency situations it is a life-saver. Making space and time for one's own enjoyment is a necessary skill that re-fuels one's energy and opens up relations and creativity, as in Matthew's experience;

"I need to keep some space for myself. I can be full of adrenaline, when I am alone or in one of my private spaces. I love to listen to music. Once I start reading I cannot stop. The most beautiful thing for me is to have books. Also meeting friends, or living without the need of programming and organizing. The most fascinating period for me is this one, when you are finally able to go back to being yourself."

Janet had always been creative, she just needed to take her skills further, use them to overcome the long period of isolation and boredom that had befallen her;

"The thing that hurts me now is the disappointment when I miss out on something. I learn. I enjoy the learning process. It is not for the result. There is so much more in the doing. I joined a writing group with famous people from the BBC. I wrote brilliant short stories. I do not need much to be happy but it's action that makes me change. Nothing is as bad as that flat deadness. I go through my highs and lows and I am a bit of an adrenaline junkie."

The question comes to mind as to why, once knowledge and development are taking place, we should still look for "*the doing*", seeking happiness and creative activity. Should we not be satisfied with our wisdom? Life seems to demand the acquisition of things and the achievement of goals, but in a new way.

"That's the world of form, of gain and loss. Yet on a deeper level you are already complete, and when you realize that there is a playful, joyous energy behind what you do... you no longer pursue your goals with grim determination, driven by fear, anger,

discontent, or the need to become someone. Nor will you remain inactive through fear of failure, which to the ego is fear of loss of self.” (Tolle.1999. P. 57-58)

Surviving the mid-life transition and starting to live again seems to be founded on the ability to nurture one’s pleasure and well being. The main elements needed are the knowledge of where pleasure can come from, and the time and space to achieve it. While therapy and medication may be necessary to give the first push out of depression, what follows is a very individual task. Reading is a source of knowledge and pleasure and I imagine that reading gives people an opportunity to compare life experiences and to engage with the world of imagination and creativity.

All the other activities keep the body fit and introduce social opportunities where, again, friendships can be cultivated and bonds established. From the seclusion of isolation and withdrawal all these experiences tend towards reaching out and relating. Self-healing is fuelled by the courage to retain one’s place in the same old world, only in a completely new way.

8. Money.

Writing about mid-life as a psychological experience of personality development we have been observing themes that mostly illustrated change and growth of the spiritual side. Yet there are other aspects inherent to this development that are very much material and external. Another aspect which drew comments from each one of the co-researchers is the subject of money.

Catherine has a very clear definition of money. Most of her energy during the interview was floating around the dissatisfaction and regret at what she could have achieved and had not; *“All my life I needed to achieve commercial success. Yet, whenever I did things for myself, or my own business, I did not succeed. I could only make money for others. Success means money. Now I realise that I never made the money I should have. This was the error of my life. Success is money, but I understood that too late. This is how it was. And I have to accept it. No point regretting things I did for others, now I want to think of myself. If I had done that before I would have had a better life. I would have been different. When I had money I spent it. I did not think of the future and now I realize I did not look after my future life”*.

Catherine’s understanding of money may relate to an interesting condition, a sort of **“... success neurosis, a curious condition where individuals on the point of crowning success for which they have long striven, develop not euphoria, but a crippling dysphoria which often ensures that they do not succeed.”** (Yalom, 1980. P.128)

Success means standing alone, being at the top, surpassing one’s own father, being one’s own God. Becoming what Yalom (1980) calls *“The Ultimate Rescuer”*, the immortal. Being God-like means having to face life as a separate being, and abdicating one’s freedom. These factors may sabotage success.

Approaching mid-life with regrets and dissatisfaction about the past, makes the transition very hard. There is a sense of loss that cannot easily be redressed. Future is not seen as a new beginning but simply as the closing down of possibilities. Psychological growth and understanding become subjugated to the daily reality of having (or not having) enough money to live on.

George, having lost his job, could also have been full of regret, but he showed a considerable amount of resilience by deciding to take a break and worry about his psychological health rather than his bank balance. It must be pointed out that George is considerably younger than Catherine and his future is all to be re-built. In fact, in his case, after the initial trauma, the loss of his job seemed to be a liberating factor;

“I don’t have a financial goal for the future. I wonder about that. I wonder if I should have ambitions and future goals, but I am actually content to be comfortable and I am not looking for millions of pounds, although that would be nice. I am looking to improve the quality of my life so that I can share it with others. Before, when I still had my job, I would hide behind having money to pay for things. When I lost it, I was fortunate because I did not have to go to another job and I had some redundancy money to see me through this phase. I had the opportunity to put the redundancy issue on one side and make some space to look at myself.”

George’s decision to use the redundancy money to “*make some space*” reminds me of the first movement of Focusing;

“Setting something down or apart allows it to become a whole, ‘that whole thing’. The purpose of this first movement of focusing is not merely to find a tolerable distance from the issue... We decide not to work on it, but not to run from it either; rather we let it be ‘a whole thing over there’.” (Gendlin, 1996. P. 93)

Fiona, on the other hand, uses her financial status to interpret her life from the very core of its infinite possibilities. There is neither pride nor fear in her status. She knows who she is, she also knows what she has, and she makes the most of it;

“I am financially independent. I am lucky I do not have to rely on anyone. Shopping therapy helped me at the beginning, but only to a certain extent. I always liked to shop, before I had less money, now I have a lot more. I like to be elegant and well groomed. When I went out, I was always presentable and well dressed. This is important because you are invited out and judged for what you are but also for the way you present yourself. For what you can contribute with your presence and your conversation. This gives faith to the person who is alone. You are wanted, not pitied.”

Being able to say, *“this is my money, this is my life”*, brings a strong element of power in one’s situation. The power of doing or not doing, of winning or losing. Life styles become one’s own choice. Possibilities are then open and available. People often feel confident that they will be judged in a positive way because of their financial status; self-esteem and pride are restored. This perception of owning one’s life is what Heidegger (1962) calls *“mineness”*;

“... in each case Dasein is mine to be in one way or another... and because Dasein is in each case essentially its own possibility, it can, in its very Being, ‘choose’ itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself;” (Heidegger, 1962. P. 68.)

Susan sounds comfortable with her financial position and aware that money is what buys her freedom to do the things she enjoys;

“I was scared stiff when I left. I moved into a basement flat. I had no money, I could not do anything. All that I had, back then, considered deficiencies, things that I did not have, are now things that I have. I am free. I can travel. I have financial independence. I can afford things and so now life is really mine and I know how to make myself happy.”

Matthew, a man with a successful career and no financial worries, takes a slightly more philosophical approach, re-assessing his values in mid-life and trying to free himself of all the material things that are no longer considered essential;

“I moved from having houses, objects, cars, things, on to having something more spiritual to take onwards. My dream now is not to have lots of beautiful cars but lots of books to read and most of all the time to read them. Ten years ago I would have said that I was going to go on working, changing my car every three years, buy things for the home. Now, I’d rather have less homes and more freedom to say ‘here today, tomorrow who knows’...”

Financial freedom, intended as freedom of action, is one way we use to relate to the society we belong to. This freedom, however, is never absolute;

“...we are limited by bio-physical determinants which impose any number of experiential restraints upon us. We are also limited by the codes and laws of the society we inhabit so long as we wish to remain members in good standing within it.” (Spinelli, 1989. P.111.)

The dilemma may consist in deciding which type of freedom is more real or appropriate, a material one or a spiritual one, or whether we may be able to integrate both.

There is a similar polarity in life when a transition is necessary from theory and understanding to action.

Victor took a drastic decision and completely changed his life. Loss of financial status was not a worry and the challenge of starting anew seemed to compensate a more modest life style;

“When I gave up my medical surgery all my relatives thought I was mad. What about the money... What about it? Life is not all about money, we have one life, and people waste that one life. Life is there for us to grab it, take it, and move on. Often people say to me: you are

very lucky... I say no, luck plays no role. I created the opportunities. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I had this clear vision and I created the opportunity.”

Making a radical career change in mid-life may answer the need to make life easier, to allow more time and space for one’s own psychological journey. Change needs time and toning down one’s work allows the possibility to look at one’s existential values.

9. Reflections on findings.

Having illustrated the eight themes that informed my co-researchers' interviews, I would now like to discuss other elements that I consider of great relevance to the transition into mid-life.

Triggers.

The main common factor that I have observed during the interviews, is that the mid-life transition becomes apparent with the triggering occurrence of a traumatic event. This could be the death of the member of one's family, a parent, a friend. It could be a divorce, children leaving home, the end of a career, an unexpected redundancy, illness or early retirement. This trigger normally involves an experience of loss. Whichever the form of this loss, it is an event to reckon with and it has to be dealt often with a time of grief, re-organization or maybe re-location.

The event in itself has to be reckoned with. However, it can happen that during the transition into the mid-life years, this traumatic event will trigger a much wider re-assessment and re-adjustment. As well as a traumatic occurrence it can also become the symptom of a much more sophisticated change, something that may have been going on unconsciously for some time before it could express itself openly.

This triggering event may offer the opportunity to start a series of steps towards personal development, bringing forward questions about the past and others about the future. It will often involve a judgment of one's achievements and an identification of future goals. The trigger can also be brought upon oneself and caused by the need for change. What seemed to work in previous years may be perceived as no longer satisfying and relationships, personal, working or otherwise, may be brought to an end in a sudden and apparently unjustified way.

This process will almost inevitably be accompanied by a deep sense of loss. Loss of

youth, loss of companion, loss of security, loss of status. Loss was a theme common to all my co-researchers.

It must also be stated that not everybody will go through this stage of self-assessment and personality change. There are many cases of people who deal with the implications inherent to a traumatic event and although they will inevitably be changed by the consequences of such event, they may be able to continue their life in a similar way as before, without necessarily going through a period of deep introspection nor advocating a dramatic change in their life. Transiting into mid-life can be a harmonious and natural development that goes unnoticed and without distress.

Going back to my project to observe the transition when it entails a major change, I noticed that my co-researchers were able to clearly remember and describe their situation before the trigger, as well as to detect the first symptoms of change inside them: a feeling of dissatisfaction, of restlessness, boredom, or frustration. They all described that they had somehow lost the sense of who they were and how they were living their life. It seems to me that a lingering state of expectancy was already present before the triggering event arrived. The trigger seemed to release and bring to the surface something that was already active inside.

Anxiety.

A sense of devastation and anxiety were the strongest feelings at the time when the trigger happened. Anxiety in this context is understood not just as a physiological symptom, but also in its existential meaning. Tillich defines it as a connection of three different mental states;

“... we distinguish three types of anxiety according to the three directions in which nonbeing threatens being.... In all three forms, anxiety is existential in the sense that it belongs to existence as such and not to an abnormal state of mind as in neurotic (and psychotic) anxiety.” (Tillich, 1952. P. 41)

From an existential point of view this threat is directed towards man in relation to anxiety about death (ageing), meaninglessness (not knowing what is happening) and of guilt and condemnation (lost opportunities).

After the first stage of trauma and shock, each co-researcher reacted in their very personal way and acted according to their circumstances and their abilities, but they all expressed the need to know themselves better, become true to their nature and to find a way to fully develop their personality and their future. Anxiety was mostly expressed by not-knowing what would happen in the future.

The concept of “*individuation*” (Jung, 1963) points exactly to this peculiar state, where we develop a need for wholeness, unity, psychological understanding of our personality and our place in the world. This endeavour points inward;

“... the goal of psychic development is the self. There is no linear evolution; there is only a circumambulation of the self. Uniform development exists, at most, only at the beginning; later, everything points towards the centre.” (Jung, 1963. P. 222)

The hardest element of my co-researchers’ development was expressed as a sense of being frozen, stuck, immobilized. They expressed the fear of remaining imprisoned inside many years of joyless, useless life. As the transition went on, some of these feeling gave way to moments of hope, excitement and a sense of power and energy. When the first signs of hope returned, they were met by a sense of re-gaining control and a renewed ability to make choices about the future.

Integration.

Looking back to how life was before the transition started, my co-researchers showed a strong awareness of how they had developed and changed. They were also aware that some personality traits had been retained, or enhanced. The change did not mean becoming a completely new person, but developing parts of their being that had always been present but not

fully engaged with, as well as retaining some others in more or less the same way as they had always been.

Integrating pre-existing traits and developing new ones is an extremely intimate and personal experience.

“What happens within oneself when one integrates previously unconscious contents with the consciousness, is something which can scarcely be described in words. It can only be experienced. It is a subjective affair quite beyond discussion...” (Jung, 1963. P. 318.)

Change did not mean throwing away the old and just embracing the new, but integrating pre-existing aspects that were useful in the new life phase.

Integration entails the evaluation of past experience. It needs an awareness of mistakes or choices that could have been made differently. That gives rise to regrets, awareness of time passing by and of lost opportunities. My co-researchers had been able to assess their past and accept mistakes or inadequacies. There were regrets and bitterness in some cases, but in general they were quite satisfied with the way they had conducted their life and they could understand how sometimes circumstances had led them to make choices, whether they turned out for the best or not.

The ageing body.

With the onset of mid-life, my co-researchers expressed a distinctly increased awareness of physical change. They responded by adopting a sort of empathy for the body, as if to come to terms with the ageing of the physical, while the mental and the spiritual were enjoying a much stronger experience. If it is true that **“One can die at forty and not get buried until ninety.”** (Brewi and Brennan, 1999. P.99), then the reverse may also be true, for one may be ninety and still feel like forty. It seemed that all the introspective work during this transition is aimed at acquiring enough wisdom and self-reliance to stay young internally while remaining healthy externally.

We live in a society that tends to consider ageing as a sign of physical decline. This offers a unique opportunity for the beauty and health industry to use ageing as a great money-spinner. It is often difficult to draw the line between genuine concern about healthy living and the indulgence into the idea that physical and psychological health and good appearance can be bought and consumed.

“...beware of the once-born psychological cheerleaders, the purveyors of one-minute solutions, who assure you that all you need to do is change your diet, manage your time more efficiently, exercise more, learn to relax on the job, adjust your priorities, communicate better, learn to enjoy stress or think positively and avoid negative emotions.” (Keen, 1991. P. 147).

The underground message is that soon immortality will be on sale at the chemist's counter.

Death.

Physical decline implies closeness with our appointment with death. Death is indeed the ever present underlying theme in the transition into mid-life. It is interesting to notice that every interview included comments from my co-researchers about death. Yet they seemed to mention it as an accepted fact. There was no major reference to the fear and terror that death usually evokes. Death was mentioned as the inevitable goal, but the narrative usually reverted back to the quality of the remaining life.

Ageing is a process that brings the issue of death very much in the open and I expected that issue to be one of the most powerful themes in the transition into mid-life. Although the issue of ageing was openly discussed, fear of death was not verbalized. Death was, instead, the underlying element that gave the transformation its meaning and life ahead a new value. **“The history of humankind includes hope that transcends death. Humans have always imagined, in a variety of contexts and visions, that existence extends beyond death.”** (Lester, 1995. P. 92.)

This leaves me somewhat perplexed. I wonder if fear is something that needs to be expressed in due time, within a greater context of intimacy, after all the good stuff has been dealt with and all there is left to discuss is the crude reality of finitude. I feel that at times discussing death is still a taboo, it may be considered a gloomy subject, an unlucky topic, an argument devoid of politeness.

It seems that our society, often based on consumism and appearance, is providing us with enemies to fight; old age, physical decline, troubled relationships. The hero archetype is thus called back into action and such action seemingly provides meaning of our lives. It seems, however, that in the end “*The most exalted type of heroism involves feelings that one has lived to some purpose that transcends one*”. (Keen, 1991. P.165)

My interviews were not therapeutic sessions, and I approached my co-researchers with an open mind and offered freedom for them to express what they wanted and how they wanted it.

It is perhaps the omission of openly expressing the fear of death, the awareness of days passing more and more quickly, time closing down and acquiring a new value, as it become scarcer, that gives the presence of death its real value. That which is always there and cannot easily be mentioned.

Spirituality.

Awareness of death often brings a renewed or a newly discovered sense of spirituality. Human beings need to find meaning and explanations. Science gives the comfort, if not the illusion, of being able to deal with problems and find solutions. Spirituality often helps reduce our thirst for hope.

Psychological development implies the wiliness to look for meaning in life and death. Without taking any specific religious stance, all my co-researchers expressed a search and a need for spirituality, which they found in nature, beauty, the arts, and the universe. Spirituality

also meant the development of a spiritual behaviour, of compassion, acceptance of diversity, respect for the other and the desire to actively look after people in need.

Freedom.

Somewhere along the path to spirituality there seems to be an experience of hope, a sense or sudden enthusiasm. The journey starts to ascend and a sense of freedom and choice is often experienced.

Not having to build anything for the future, and being able just to enjoy the present, was a liberating and exciting discovery for most of my co-researchers. Not having to work, or being able to do the work one really enjoyed seemed to give a new meaning to life. It seemed, from my co-researchers stories, that towards the end of the transition there was a sudden change of mood and a new energy to build, organize, settle into a new situation. That may be the sign that the transition is coming to an end and the adjustment into mid-life is complete. There seemed to be a feeling of contentment and relaxation, as if the battle is over and there is simple sheer joy in the fact that one is still, simply alive.

All my co-researchers declared themselves content in their present situation and able to accept or at least understand their past. Looking to their future, they expressed the ability to enjoy their own company, as well as valuing good friendships.

Absent themes.

So far I have discussed themes that were present in the account of my co-researchers' mid-life transition. Another interesting side of the research, however, resides in the themes that were absent. Informed by my own experience and by the literature available, I had made several assumptions as to which themes would be present, yet some of these were not

mentioned or simply not experienced by my co-researchers. This does not imply that they may not be part of a more universal experience, they simply were not part of the stories I listened to.

Considering the extraordinary amount of literature and self-help books aimed at maintaining one's body young and fit, I was surprised, to notice that none of my co-researchers had expressed real preoccupation about the physical changes in their bodies. There was no strong sign of the "*Barbie Syndrome*" and no relevance of the mediatic despair that sends women (and men) running to seek the help the plastic surgeon's scalpel.

Newspapers, magazines, books and television programmes often deal with the issue of mid-life from a purely aesthetic point of view. Cosmetic remedies, weight loss, diet, exercise, HRT, a variety of natural herbs, teas, and all sorts of concoctions, promise to keep old age at bay and prolong youth indefinitely. The message conveyed is that mid-life is an illness that can be "*cured*" and the cure is on sale everywhere. The interesting observation is that none of my co-researchers seemed to be concerned with preventing ageing; rather they were concerned with the ability of embracing the ageing process.

The cessation of fertility in women or the decreasing sexual activity for men, were not really mentioned as major problems, rather they seemed to be accepted as part of the body's natural development. It certainly was not seen as a main issue of mid-life nor as the cause for depression and anxiety, rather as a sign of natural physical development.

Considering that most often the trigger of the mid-life transition is either divorce or the loss of a family member, I was intrigued to notice how, for my co-researchers, the role of the immediate family seemed to be overshadowed by the importance of friendship, even in cases when the co-researchers were in a married relationship and enjoyed good relations with their children. Husbands and children seemed to fare second best, after the importance of strong friendships.

Another interesting aspect was the absence, in most interviews, of an evaluation of childhood, nor were the role of parents and siblings mentioned too often. Jung (1963) describes

how during the mid-life transition one usually has to reassess one's childhood, re-evaluate how it has been and what effect it has had on one's development.

“The sight of a child... will arouse certain longings in adult, civilised persons - longings which relate to the unfulfilled desires and needs of those parts of the personality which have been blotted out of the total picture...” (Jung, 1963. P.272-273.)

According to Jung, the analysis of one's childhood is important in order to understand one's personality. Strikingly, rather than re-valuing their childhood, my co-researchers had mostly described how they had lived their youth, and what they had been able to build or not build during that phase, but they did not seem to venture further back than that.

Where I expected to find fear of death, I found acceptance. Where I expected a quest for religion, or the fostering of closed groups in order to find protection or safety, I found openness and respect for freedom and diversity.

I had envisaged this transition to be a doorway from active life into a somewhat more lethargic or slower way of being. And that may well be the experience of some people, yet through the willingness of my co-researchers to tell their story, I was confronted with a liberating sense of trust and optimism about the future. I saw positive energy, determination, compassion, joy, seductiveness, as well as great pride and expectation from the years ahead. I expected decline, yet I found the age of opportunities.

Conclusion.

During the interviews, I had the privilege to listen to stories that were full of passion, pain, loss and gain. They were success stories, in their own particular ways, because all my co-researchers had been able to re-affirm their freedom of choice and action by healing themselves, making changes, working on their personal development.

When asked how they felt about the interview, they all expressed a feeling of emotional connectedness with me. They found the interview process difficult at times, but in general an enriching experience.

My co-researchers expressed a general understanding of life values and achievable goals. There was pride in their development and pride in having come through this difficult transitional period. The future was seen as one of exciting opportunities for enjoyment, acquisition of knowledge and understanding. There was an overwhelming sense of accomplishment that came out of the interviews, and it was definitely contagious.

Yet I am aware that there are many other people out there who are not so fortunate. Not only do they go through all the traumas and the fears that this period entails, but they have to also deal with a reality devoid of financial security.

Mid-life approaches rich and poor with no exception. The poor however, may be already engaged on a fight for survival.

“Yet all the pre-retirement help in the world cannot dispel the misery caused to people who are forced to live a borderline existence, constantly worried about money, when they retire.” (Neustatter, 1996. P. 15.)

For the poor the luxury of therapy, alternative medicine, pleasurable activities, or the excitement of giving up a boring job and starting all over again, is simply not possible. How is mid-life for the person who runs out of money by mid-month? Would they have the time or willingness to share our understanding of the phenomenon?

My heart goes to those people who have led an honest life, done what they could, and never reached financial security. Those invisible people who did not fall into addiction nor took advantage of state aid. People whose dignity hides the fear of an old age spent in isolation and marginalization. Looking at a future that seems to promise only poverty, loneliness and ill health, to them all the psychological talk may sound like empty jargon.

PART 3

Criticism of this research.

This research is not intended as a scientific project or as a study relevant to the understanding of a specific set of behavioural data, nor is it meant to provide any answers to any questions. It is an exercise that finds its meaning in the shared relationship between one researcher and eight co-researchers.

Having stated that, I am now going to look at the specific way such relationship was made possible and to reflect upon the various tasks that such project included. I am specifically going to observe how such tasks could have been deemed inadequate or deficient and I will then try to reach an understanding of whether or not such possible fallacy should undervalue the work done.

My sample of co-researchers does not identify any typical part of society. The counselling students may have participated in order to gain some psychological understanding of their particular experience. The friends may have decided to join the project out of a desire to please me, help me, and show me their open availability and trust. This may have led them to somehow adjust their narrative in order to provide me with what they felt I wanted. Although I had decided to ask no questions other than the initial and the final one, it is possible that the co-researchers had already made up assumptions as to what I wanted to hear, and simply followed those assumptions rather than narrating the facts as they were.

The choice of co-researchers is probably the weakest part of this project. I can see possible objections highlighting the fact that some of the co-researchers were people I knew and I may have chosen them because I already knew their story and it fitted with what I was hoping to hear. Their story matched my assumptions of how the transition should take place. This fact in itself could jeopardize the whole research. The counselling students would have

their own psychological understanding of the transition and that would perhaps confirm my ideas or at least it would have been narrated in a language that I understood and shared.

Although I was careful to have an equal number of male and female co-researchers, I was perhaps more worried about such gender balance than the need to look for a more diverse set of participants. A golf-loving retired banker or a happy granny may have told a completely different story.

It can also be argued that some of the co-researchers were telling about an experience that had happened years before, while some others stated that they were in the middle of it. Narrating something that has past is a different task than describing something that is still happening, when the knowledge and perspective accorded by the passing of time has not yet been gained.

Another consideration I have to make is the absence of a fundamental question; I don't know what willed my co-researchers to participate in the project. Their motivations would have been important, perhaps essential to add the needed perspective to their words. I wish I had asked "Why are you telling me this?"

Perhaps I was superficial and complacent in my choice of co-researchers and I gave way to the excitement of sharing the interview process with them. Perhaps they were a good sample or the only sample available for the project to happen. It is too late for me to assess that, but I can state with no hesitation that all this was done in good faith and I was committed to my chosen methodology and its rules.

I listened to the narrative with no judgement and without comparing those stories to mine. I don't know if, as a researcher I managed to acquire the necessary distance from my co-researchers. I possibly did, during the interview, but then it is obvious that the process itself moved me deeply, and I was very close to my co-researchers. Would this study have a higher value if I had been able to remain distant and cold-blooded throughout? I doubt it. It is that enthusiasm and empathy that made me want to accomplish this work.

The subject and the material were important for me and without personal involvement and a passionate stance I would not have been able to engage in any project at all. The paradox is that phenomenology is a goal to be aimed at, but probably out of reach for most human beings. I hope that my transparency and the willingness to reflect on my shortcomings will at least partially make out for the wanting of my choice of co-researchers.

The recording of the material probably made the narrative somewhat official, one that could not be re-discussed or changed. It fixed their words and made them public. It signified a transition from private experience to public domain. Even if confidentiality was assured, it made the words belong to the recording and to me, and eventually, in their modified form, to the readers of my dissertation.

This element in itself could have influenced changes in the narrative and given the story a new quality, different from something that could have been narrated and not recorded.

While transcribing the interviews I had to re-adjust the style from a purely conversational one to a more structured written format. I had to translate the interviews that took place in Italian and in that instance the whole story had to be re-told with my own choice of English words. I have no way to assess whether or not I was able to convey the original meaning and the subtleties used in the original conversation.

I also needed to concern myself with the implication that grounded theory requires the researcher to approach the interview with an open mind and possibly before the review of the literature takes place, in order to be able to “*bracket*” the researcher’s assumptions or expectations of the narrative. This however was impossible because the researched subject had been part of my own experience well before I had decided to make it the subject of my research and as such I had already been drawn to reading books and articles as part of my personal interest. This element may have contravened one of the rules for applying grounded theory, yet it was a fact and part of my life experience.

The choice of Grounded Theory as my preferred qualitative research method was informed by my desire to listen to other people's experience through life narrative. Reading Jung's biography stimulated and inspired me and it may be that the review of literature may have been a search for confirmation of my assumptions, but then the opposite may also have been true, that I read because of a desire to know more and to learn more about the subject. Whether the theory informed the research or otherwise, is open to argument.

During the data analysis, the material was transferred from being the co-researcher's own experience, to my own collection of data. I had to look for themes and their verbal expression, but those were my themes, what I expected to be present, what I saw and recognised. Although I was aware of this process and I endeavoured to also look for absent themes and to pay attention to my own biases, it would have been very interesting to have asked the co-researchers to analyse their own data, and then compared the outcome with my own. The assessment and the result may have been completely different.

In conclusion, it must be said that the interview method lent itself to a number of misunderstandings and misinterpretations and I feel that it could not have been otherwise, for the simple fact that this method is based on language, dialogue and spoken words. Language is sometimes an inadequate means of relating emotions or facts. Words do not often do justice to the elements that a person may want to express; they confine the description, contain it, and somehow belittle it. What the listener hears is not just what is contained in those words, but what is contained in his or her experience, in all those assumptions, hopes and unexpressed feeling that are part of his or her world.

As such, it may be said that this research can only be a personal, one-sided interpretation of an encounter between two people. The narrative, the subject, the project itself, these are the tools that make the encounter possible, what gets the people to decide and choose to meet and create the experience of telling and listening, trying to express and trying to understand, giving and receiving.

Implications for the practice of psychotherapy.

Stein (1998) utilizes the transformation from caterpillar into butterfly (provided to him by a client's dream) to symbolize development, the most meaningful task during the transition into mid-life;

“While this typically is triggered by a singular encounter with a transformative image--a religious symbol, a dream, an impressive person, an active imagination--or by major life trauma like a divorce, the death of a child, or the loss of a parent or loved one, it will take months and years to become complete.” (Stein 1998. P.7)

In order to achieve that completion, a number of fundamental issues have to be considered and I need to address my learning as a result of this study, while switching from my role as a researcher to that of psychotherapist.

Working with clients who are in the process of a life-changing transition may entail listening not just to the presented narrative, but also and especially listening to what may not be said, looking for themes that are absent.

My co-researchers showed the ability to heal themselves, to find ways to overcome their distress and the feelings of loss and disruption that may have presented in their life. It could well be that there was, in their narrative, an attempt to show a brave face. During the course of therapy, I would try to go beyond that phase and focus on the pain and sadness. I would have to try to make those feelings a central point of therapy, to bring them to the open and allow them to be fully expressed. There may be shame and denial, yet it is the disintegration of the personality and the loss of the life that no longer is, which eventually brings the understanding needed to re-build the future.

Solutions and positive thought are important elements, yet they may be used to hide feelings that are difficult to acknowledge. As a therapist I need to listen to the narrative

without assuming that what is said is all there is to the client's experience. Patience and openness are essential to slowly peel off possible defences and arrive at the raw material.

Being able to relate to my clients' distress may awake their ability to bear pain and sadness. I also need to be aware that helping clients to implement new ways to relate may cause disruption of present partnerships, causing further isolation, breaking up of marriages and general disruption to family life.

Experience of my own therapy during this transition makes me aware that while my whole personal world was collapsing, I often preferred to look at the bright side, to focus on the hoped results and the quick solutions. That was spurred by my fear of delving into the darkness of my own insecurity and frailty.

Similarly, during the research interviews I noticed that I was sometimes drawn with my co-researchers to enjoy the results, to believe that all will be well and was well in the end. I was looking for a happy ending to the tale, not wanting to be left with a bitter aftertaste. However, I was listening as a researcher and not as a therapist. Reflecting on that process I can now see more clearly that therapy would require a much more thorough assessment of the unspoken elements, the hidden meaning, in the narrative.

An opportunity for autobiographical work is also necessary. Life needs to be recounted verbally in order for it to be assessed and observed. Childhood, youth, happy and sad memories contain the essence of one's experience and need to be valued and remembered. The safety and confidentiality of the therapeutic situation should offer the ideal ground for such work.

Furthermore, therapy needs to create the space for grief and bereavement to take their necessary course, before any change can be consolidated. Trying not to seek quick change and a great amount of patience, are essential qualities.

Writing on therapeutic interventions aimed at healing the painful process of growth and change at mid-life, Davidsen-Nielsen (1991) expresses the opinion that

“In the years during which our attention has been particularly focused on loss, grief and growth, we have become fairly convinced that many people are being let down, because their losses and traumas are being overlooked. Many therapists focus upon the more visible problems and thus give only superficial help. If the client were to be helped through the tasks of grief work, a more fundamental change would take place.”
(Davidsen-Nielsen, 1991. P. 156-157)

There is a call for psychotherapists to look at this stage with a dedicated attitude and understanding of the potential for adequate therapeutic intervention. In most phases of changes, like puberty and the transition into mid-life, the person has to bid farewell to one life situation and welcome the arrival of another. When this transition does not happen in a quiet and natural, almost invisible way, then the person will present with issues of pathological grief. Grief in the mid-life transition is present in a multiplicity of ways. Not just in instances where there is a death, but also and always as the consequence of loss of one's direction, loss of hope and loss of security.

The therapeutic process will need to work through grief, loss and sadness in order to re-discover hope and produce change, and only if and when change is desired. This process calls for the courage to think the un-thinkable and dare the un-dareable. It also requires the strength to bear the un-bearable and to accept the un-acceptable.

“Courage listens to reason and carries out the intention of the mind. It is the strength of the soul to win victory in ultimate danger... Courage gives consolation, patience, and experience and becomes indistinguishable from faith and hope.” (Tillich, 1952. P. 8)

Finally, I need to draw attention to the plea of men who may be looking at therapy to facilitate their transition into mid-life. We need to move away from the stereotype of the retired or redundant businessman who seems to keep his age-anxiety at bay by indulging in extra marital affairs, buying a new car or becoming a golf addict.

Men deserve to be treated with tenderness and empathy. It's not easy being a man in a society that seems to define worth in terms of looks, power and wealth. There is no celebration for men who are willing to come to terms with their feminine, who are ready to engage and develop their *anima*. It takes an act of courage for this development to come to the fore and to be valued and recognized. The transition from macho to mellow can be painful, frustrating and scary. Therapy can beneficially encourage the act of faith needed to fulfil such endeavour. In order to achieve this, a therapist needs to be willing to accompany the client in the journey down and then back up again. Therapists need to be empathic witnesses of the shame, guilt and disappointment that are often part of the baggage. *"They listen and stand beside you, and in their presence you have an uncanny feeling that you have been given the permission to be yourself."* (Keen, 1991. P.157).

It seems that recently business enterprises have started to appreciate the difficulties connected to retirement or redundancy. Psychotherapy is now often offered as part of the package, to help employees deal with the change of life and to adjust to the new status. This is a welcome development:

"...psychotherapy can, at times like this, play an invaluable role in freeing the natural instinctual desire to continue to develop and embrace the next developmental task, by providing a rite of passage." (O'Connor, 2000. P.27).

In a society often devoid of elders and wise men, it seems that the vacancy could be filled by the role of the therapist.

Thoughts on possible further research.

Available research seems to focus primarily on the transition into mid-life and then move on to the study of old age. There may be a gap in between where more study could be helpful. Possible areas for further research could involve observing the phase that follows the initial transition. Mid-life as such is a period that could span across fifteen or twenty years when one can still be as active as in younger years. In fact, this can be a very creative phase, an accomplishment of all that was learnt before. It is also the period when one has to lay the foundations for old age and try to assess how that can be organized.

Further research could also focus on the role of men and their mid-life transition. Most literature seems to consider women as the main protagonists of mid-life, yet men have recently started to undertake a radical change that sees them relating to their emotional side more than in previous times. This is quite a new phenomenon and it may point to a reassessment of what in the past was considered feminine psychology. There is a new phenomenon of convergence between the two sexes that sees women becoming active and prone to decision making, and men embracing their emotions and fulfilling more homely tasks.

This new "*male femininity*" is not only expressed by men who take more time to look after their children or fuss around the kitchen sink. It is also expressed by men's willingness to express emotions and to be able to openly talk about them. This may be a new area for observation and research.

Mid-life may see drastic changes in relationships, marriages breaking down, and new partnerships being established. However, we do not really know what impact previous relationships have on the new formed ones. It may well be that patterns are repeated and the change is only a superficial one.

Changing partners may not necessarily mean changing behaviours and there may be a number of issues that need to be considered, within the new relationships, as for example the reassessment of one's intimacy, as opposed to just sexuality. As gender differences shrink so the world of social relationships undergoes a radical change. Inevitably, there will be an impact on new patterns of relationships, which will inform how the second part of life is lived. The need for further research is essential in order to create the best environment for a generation that is dealing with a much longer life expectancy and an increased span of active years ahead.

Conclusion

This research has been quite a challenge, not because of the reading and writing, or setting interviews and transcribing them. That was the easy part. The difficulty lay in the fact that I was drawn into the narrative and could not detach myself from it. I was immersed in the story of eight lives, as they were presented and offered to me, and in that process my own life story changed and was enriched. I was part of a story that made me inhabit this new family of researcher and co-researchers doing something together. The doing was perhaps the real issue. Doing as opposed to learning.

I desperately wanted to tell each story from beginning to end. I felt compelled to voice my passion and withdraw into a fictional world of heroes and villains, witches and monsters, fairies and princesses. It had become my own fairy tale and I could not let go. I had to learn to move from experience to knowledge and then go back to the experience again by finding shared elements of human nature. I had to move from the individual to the universal, sacrifice the personal to reach the shared.

I believe that knowledge was hiding within that process. I had to compare experience and then compare the essence of the lives I had been in touch with, to elevate that relationship to something else. To try and make it part of something collective. I wished to move from symbols to archetypes, to a knowledge that is not mine or specific to any of my co-researchers, but that belongs to the world. In the end, I had to accept that all I could do was to draw out themes from the narrative of my co-researchers, rather than achieve universal conclusions.

What strikes me now that I can recognise this process is the similarity of this research with my personal mid-life experience. Isn't this what I saw happening in my own transition? In my personal life I had un-done what had been done in previous years, I had stripped my experience to its naked form and looked at it. I had had to stop and reflect, do nothing for a

while, examine all those remains of life, projects and plans. I had needed to dissect all that was built before and bear the pain of that destruction. Then I could move from sadness and desolation and start re-assembling the parts. I needed to try and try again, experiment, without losing hope. Until, unexpectedly, at one point, for no apparent reason, the bits started to fit again and create something new. Nothing was wasted, but the order was different.

In this study quotations introduce parts of the narrative; some of my own emotions explain those of others or connect to a few words I found in some of my books. A word, a connotation, takes new meaning and explains something that someone else had said at some other time. It all comes together anew and finally, when the work is done and I am tired, I can stop and look at the result and I can now see it and understand that there is new life in this. A new structure, something more than just recounting life. There is a communication of intent, of knowledge and understanding that was not visible before. There is a wealth of experience that gives way to a new scenery and that is the scenery of the future.

Having started this thesis with a description of my feeling of disintegration, I am now looking back at the dark waters of the river on that birthday night. I now feel that Charon the ferryman of the dead, ferried me across that river. He only accepts those who have died and only if they pay him an "*oboulus*", a coin for their passage. It was a terrifying passage, but I was not alone. I was in good company on that boat. I had my co-researchers with me, metaphorically speaking, and all those people who had studied, written, researched, lectured and taught on this subject. They were my travelling companions and what an adventure we had!

With Dante, I have been down to the Inferno and I am slowly coming back up. Something of that old me died during the process and I have indeed paid my "*oboulus*" in order to safely reach the other side.

It is a shame that our society does not contemplate any form of celebration for the coming of middle age. Then perhaps the celebration should be something intimate, born from

that feeling of wonder and wisdom that one can acquire during the ascending journey of the transition, from the restored knowledge that the hero is finally back home.

I cannot help but linger on this new feeling of completion, fulfilment and wholeness. I had to destroy, lose everything in order to gain it over again.

Irrespective of the academic or literal value of this dissertation, as I prepare to pose the last few words, a feeling of achievement is making its way and I am glad this has happened. I am now empowered to move on and continue building my future.

There was a possibility for me to experience and learn from this research and it has been an exciting and enlightening project.

Future is plentiful, as I approach my age of opportunities.

APPENDICES

A: Ethical Protocol

School of Psychotherapy and Counselling
at Regent's College



APPENDIX A

MA Dissertation Protocol for Submission of Proposed Research Project to the Research Ethics Panel of SPC

This form must be submitted to the Academic Registry.

To be completed by the Student

Course	MA in Psychotherapy and Counselling [X] MA in Counselling Psychology []
Student Name	PAOLA GIOVANELLI

Title of project	THE AGE OF OPPORTUNITIES The process of changing during midlife
Proposed start date of research (as distinct from review of the literature)	OCTOBER 2006
Expected duration of project	1 YEAR

Purpose of project	
(a) research question to be explored	<p>What is mid-life, and how is it perceived by different people? What factors make some people look for change in the middle of their life while others go through this transition without any major disruption? Mid-life, like adolescence, is a stage that happens naturally and imperceptively. It may be a time when one's personality needs to be reassessed, when change becomes necessary, or when the self stays still. Everybody responds to this transition at different ages and in different ways, also depending on their gender. So, are there any common themes that make mid-life a shared experience or is it just a very personal evolution with thousands of different facets?</p> <p>As well as research, I will review the available literature on the subject with particular interest in Jung's study of life cycles, shadow and individuation process.</p>

(b) clinical relevance and benefit of the study	I would like to include in my work a lifespan development perspective which will be useful for the practice of psychotherapy with a special focus on the recurrence, in mid-life, of themes from childhood and adolescence and the relevance of attachment theory in this context. I would like to explore the ways in which outer world experiences interact with the person's inner world. The outcome of my research may give answers to the questions in a) and offer some understanding of the process that happens in mid-life. It may however be just a little snippet in the continuous flux of individual development.
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Conduct of project	
(a) Number of intended co-researchers and special characteristics of interest to the study	I intend to invite 8-10 co-researchers who define themselves as being in mid-life and who are aware of this stage's potential as a time of change.
(b) Do you hope to use clinical data or interview material? (ie. are the co-researchers currently defined as patients in a clinical setting or are they otherwise interview participants?)	I intend to use interview material. No clinical material.
(c) How will the co-researchers be recruited? Will the voluntary nature of participation be explained to them and the fact that they may choose not to answer all questions or may choose to withdraw from the study entirely.	I will produce an invitation to participate and post it in my GP's practice, in my local adult education college and local gym and library. Co-researchers will be informed of the nature of my research and the confidential nature of the interview material, plus their right to withhold answers and to withdraw from the project at any time.
(d) Will data relating to co-researchers be stored on computer? If so, please confirm that the requirements of the Data Protection Act will be complied with.	Data from the interviews will be audio taped. I will personally transcribe the material and make sure that all personal information will be totally anonymous. I will explain to co-researchers my understanding about their right for confidentiality and my compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998. I will use the proposed forms in the Dissertation Handbook to do so. At the end of the study the taped material will be destroyed
(e) Will interviews be audio-taped? If so, please confirm that the Code of Practice on the use of audio-visual material will be complied with.	Yes. I confirm that I will comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998. All material from the interviews will be handled only by myself, and processed only for the purpose of this research. It will be kept safe for no longer than necessary and once the research is completed it will be destroyed. In the event that I may need extracts from the material for publication I will ask the co-researcher's permission and submit a written copy of the proposed text. This material will be sent or delivered in a fashion that will ensure safety and confidentiality. The procedure for this will be discussed in advance with the co-researcher. I will endeavour to change or cancel any personal data so

that the documents will be completely anonymous.

Brief description of research methodology and approach to data analysis

Please use an extra page if necessary.

I will undertake a narrative research following a phenomenological approach to anticipated and un-anticipated themes related to the subject of transition in mid-life. I will observe the co-researchers' subjective experience with the aim of understanding the common factors in their experience, if there are any, such as the possible causes that may trigger the need for change, the systemic and inter-relational context of the co-researchers, the role of their the search for self, when their self may be defined by their role in society and the importance of hope and hopelessness in the process of change. I will be particularly interested in observing the process of re-assessing one's childhood and adolescent experiences and the evolving nature of such process. I will listen to the co-researchers' story and ask questions, if needed, relevant to the above points. In examining the taped material, I will divide the narrative into themes or overall categories, to see if there may be a common pattern shared by the co-researchers. I am, however, aware of the difficulty of data analysis with such varied qualitative material. It is possible that the result of the research will prove that mid-life is experienced in ways that are totally individual and unforeseeable.

Ethical considerations	
<p>What are the ethical considerations raised by this project?</p> <p>Has consideration been given to the requirements of COREC approval? (See section 3, 'Remit' of http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/05/86/09/04058609.pdf)</p> <p>Please use an extra page if necessary.</p>	<p>I am aware that co-researchers may be dealing with sensitive personal material. I will endeavour to use maximum respect for issues related to their vulnerability and their safety. If vulnerability seems to be provoked by the research, I will make the co-researcher aware of therapeutic help being available by other institutions. Confidentiality is paramount and I will make clear, in writing, the co-researchers' right to withdraw at any time. I will also discuss with them the safest way to provide them a copy of any extracts that I propose to publish in order to obtain their permission. I am aware of the implications of dealing with sensitive material and I will comply with Data Protection Act 1998's regulations.</p>

Agency Consent	
Does this project require consent from the agency	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes. Documentation is attached confirming consent. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Has the agency in which you hope to conduct this study required completion and submission of their own ethical research protocol?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

I confirm that the above information is correct. I also confirm my intention to obtain written <u>informed consent</u> for participation in this research.	
Student's Signature	Date

To be completed by the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee

Name of Chair	
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Additional Ethical Concerns

<p>a) What are your understandings of informed consent?</p>	<p>I understand that co-researchers have the right to be informed of the nature of the research and the nature of the interview. They must be aware of my pledge to comply with maximum confidentiality, as well as the relevant steps involved in the research. They will be asked for their consent with respect to taping the interview, studying the material and if necessary publishing extracts from such material with all identifying features removed.</p>
<p>b) What do you think may be the longer term implications for participants?</p> <p>(For clarification on these two questions, see Chapter 5 in Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2000). Doing Qualitative Research Differently. London: Sage.)</p>	<p>I feel that there will not be any long-term implications for the participants; in fact I believe that agreement to participate to my research may be an opportunity for a co-researcher to express a state experienced but not verbally expressed. This may offer them a sort of bridge from their present situation to the next step.</p>
<p>c) Give a brief outline of information you have given to participants about the project prior to the interview and to accompany the consent form.</p>	<p>I am researching the sensitive stage of people's experience usually called mid-life. As this reflects on a period of transition, my research will look at the different variants of people's coping strategies and possible changes. The aim is to learn more about people's individual experience.</p> <p>The interview will take place in strict confidentiality, in one of the rooms at Regent's College and solely in my presence. It will last approximately one hour and it will be audio-taped. All extracts from the interview that may be used for publication will be made anonymous and submitted to the co-researcher for approval.</p>
<p>d) If relevant, have you consent from your placement agency?</p>	<p>Not relevant.</p>

<p>Supervisor's approval for consideration by Research Ethic Panel</p>		
<p>Name:</p>		
<p>Signature:</p>		<p>Date:</p>

B: Advert

“The Age of Opportunities”

**CO-RESEARCHERS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH INTO THE TRANSITIONAL
PERIOD IN MID-LIFE**

I am looking for co-researchers aged between forty and sixty years of age to take part in a study of mid-life.

As a co-researcher in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview about your experience. The interview will last approximately 1 hour and it will be audio-taped.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer,
please contact:

Paola Pomponi Giovanelli

Email: *paolagiovanelli@hotmail.com*

**This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance
by the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, Regent’s College, London.**

C: Pro-Forma Consent Form for Research Participants.

“The age of Opportunities”

I agree to take part in the above dissertation Research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the **Information for Participants**, which I may keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

- Be interviewed by the researcher
- Allow the interview to be audio-taped

Data Protection.

- The information will be held and processed in order to be analysed and studied by the researcher only
- Once the project is terminated the recording will be destroyed.

I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organization.

Withdrawal from study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

Name (please print).....

Signature..... **Date**.....

School of Psychotherapy and Counselling at Regent’s College, London.

D: Information for Participants

Date

Dear.....

Information about the project and about the researcher.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research which I am undertaking for the MA programme in Psychotherapy and Counselling at Regent's College, London.

The confidentiality of all we discuss will be respected.

The focus of the research, which is entitled “**The Age of Opportunities**” is a study on the experience of the transitional period leading to mid-life.

If you choose not to answer any question, that will be perfectly acceptable. Similarly, if you feel at any stage that you no longer want to participate, then please do not hesitate to let me know.

The Interview.

The interview will last approximately one hour. It will be audio-taped and I therefore ask your agreement to do this. I myself will transcribe the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed once the study is completed. There will be no reference in the text of the dissertation to name, background, occupation or anything else that may identify you.

Brief extracts from the interview may be included in the body of the dissertation to illustrate the various themes that we are discussing but in no way will you be recognisable. As stated above, all identifying features will be changed.

Confidentiality and Ethics.

The work will be carried out in accordance with the ethical code of Regent's College School of Psychotherapy and Counselling. The final dissertation will be kept in the library at Regent's College. It will contain no reference to names, places, occupation etc., which might in any way identify who you are.

If any concern arises you may contact me at (tel. no) or(e-mail address)

Thank you for your participation.

E: Pro-forma Debriefing Information.

“The age of Opportunities”

By Paola Pomponi Giovanelli

Date:....

Dear

Thank you for taking part in the research. I would like to check that you are still willing for your contribution to be used in the research. Please let me know if you would like me to send you a copy of the transcript of your interview.

It is possible that participating in the research may lead you to reflect on your personal circumstances or on your participation in the research. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on

Researcher:

Paola Pomponi Giovanelli
..... (phone no and e-mail address)

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Adrienne Baker
C/o Regent's College

F: Interview Questionnaire

Co-researcher:

Date

Place

Rapport

Main themes

Comments on interview structure

Future recommendations

Notes

G: Sample Transcript

Matthew.

(R = researcher C = co-researcher)

R. I'd like you to tell me your experience during the time of your life that you would describe as a transitional period leading into mid-life. Please feel free to stop at any time and to tell me anything that you find relevant, in any order. I will not ask you any more questions until you feel that we have come to the end of the interview.

C. There are many different transitional periods. I have not lived a central phase of change, typically the one that happens at around the age of forty when the world around no longer makes sense and you have to draw your conclusions.

I have lived two distinct transitions. One is the phase from adolescence or youth into adulthood which is when you get responsibilities. Then there was another passage when I de-responsibilised myself. There you have a person who until the age of about thirty was basically busy building life, but at the same time who was unsure of himself about what was been built. There was more instinct than rationality. Afterwards you act because things are planned based on experience, you know how you should act. It's as if until the age of thirty you move around like a crazy molecule. You have energy, the whole world in front of you, the will of doing, maybe you have a good job, lots of managerial energy and you build.

(pause)

Then an external factor arrives... Well, that was my case, but I think it is usually an external factor, which is usually connected with a few very simple basic things: love, work and family.

When one of those mechanisms switches off, everything changes. Then there is an evolution that takes you from youth to adulthood. I lived this period of adulthood until I was about fifty. So there were twenty years of being aware, being responsible of building, constructing and to hold, as well as build. After the age of fifty comes a moment of spin-off. Of re-orientation of the desire to build something. Around the age of thirty you get responsibilities, you start building your future. Around the age of fifty you start to analyze what you have built that far. You kind of throw away most of the things you have around and you start looking for those things that you will take with you in your so called “old age”. In fact the beauty of old age is that you take with you very little and I feel that the secret to live that age well from sixty onwards is to take with you a lot of curiosity and few material things. Mmm.... This could be an interesting life project.

(pause)

At this stage I am in, I need to keep some space for myself. I can be full of adrenaline, when I am alone or in one of my private spaces. I love to listen to music. Once I start reading I cannot stop. The most beautiful thing for me is to have books. Also meeting friends, or living without the need of programming and organizing. The most fascinating period for me is this one, when you are finally able to go back to being yourself.

So this is my case. I have concluded this cycle of life, I am fifty two, I have concluded relationships, lots of things. I am ready to start a new life with new rules and more simplicity. The factor of three cycles is very important and formative. For me there have been people and events who have changed my life considerably. Two big stages were my love relationship at thirty that made me go from being a youth in my own family to being a man who is head of a family with someone older than him. Because my wife is older than me...

So I had responsibility. At fifty it was the death of my mother who, for me, was the interface with the rest of the family. She was my interface... I could only dialogue with my mother and she was communicating to the rest of the family. Losing my mother a third of my life went

missing. I have three parts of my life: love, profession and family. I lost my family. And never regained it. This caused my second change. In both cases it was an external factor that caused the change. In both cases because of a female figure. And in both cases not initiated by myself as something that caused the change.

The beautiful period is this one. I am going on with hindsight, I am re-building myself, and I now take more care of myself, both physically and spiritually and for sure I am a lot more curious about what I will do in the future, more than I was about it ten years ago. Ten years ago I would have said that I was going on working, changing my car every three years, buy things for the home.... You know, the usual stuff....

So, I moved from having houses, objects, cars, things, on to having something more spiritual to take onwards. My dream now is not to have lots of beautiful cars but lots of books to read and most of all the time to read them. Ten years ago I would have said that I was going to go on working, changing my car every three years, buy things for the home. Now, I'd rather have less homes and more freedom to say here today, tomorrow who knows...

Well anyway, at least I have that dream. I am taking lots of small steps which is interesting. Not having any more cats, which may sound ridiculous, and cats are something I love. I am waiting they grow old, all nine of them, because in any case there is affection and animals you cannot take away with you. Nor can you leave them, so I am waiting that they live their bit of life and then they will finish when the time comes.

(pause)

Is this what you want me to tell you?

R. This is fine.

C. Losing my mother created a new reality. When I went into my adult phase, part of me was still in the phase of youth. I had a referent, my mother, never my father. I had a person who was older than me who loved me where I could go if needed, knowing that she would be there. This is a reality that is there even if you then never do it, never go there. When this goes

missing, you have to do it yourself, in your second adulthood, when the referent is yourself. In fact I can imagine how hard life must be for someone who is orphan of both parents, because one always needs to refer to oneself. In the case of my mother's this was the fact of no longer having the web of family. Even if I never told my mother about my problems, and she never solved them, she was always there, you do not need her, but you know she is there. This was my mother. Or maybe she did a lot more than that, but I never noticed, she was good enough to help me pretending she was not. When my mother went all was switched off. All was cold. Her loss was terrible, afterwards.

(pause)

Really terrible.

(pause)

While she was ill I was still active, you know, you can still help, then there was raw pain, anger, and I started reflecting on what has gone missing. I really did not know where to find a new reference point. I lost the means of communication with the rest of my family, this reference point, and I had to start being that point myself, for myself. I understood that, also coupled with the death of a very good friend of mine who died in the best moment of his life, in his youth, at thirty, as he was having a wonderful life. I reflected that I have lived a good stretch of life already, then it is worth doing more practical things. Now I have gone from filling my life with things that I must do, to filling my life with playful things, instead of always doing practical things. This is due to the fact that I understood that some things are not necessary. I understood this when I lost my mother and the contact with the family. All was lost. I was born in that family, I grew up in it, I formed my personality, I tried to share my experience with my brother and father.

Mmm... my brother...

(pause)

So I understood that it was my mother that was the link with my brother and father. So the family makes you grow. Now I still see my father, but he wants me to help him and nothing more, so I understand that the family as such is lost.

(sigh)

This phase is more mature from an affective point of view. I am more mature from an affective point of view, but also more disillusioned. Paradoxically I could even restart a love relationship... I mean from an affective point of view... but I am a bit lazy. Yet I feel it could happen... But I like the life I have. I no longer am interested in my work. It's no longer the work I knew and I liked. So I try not to isolate myself, I try to re-create my routine in a new way. Concerning the family, it is no longer there, nor the interest in my work. So work and family have changed to say the least. Then there is something new that it's slowly being born and that substitutes the family and this is *Life with Me*. That means myself.

You see, even this is a very peculiar thing that I did not have ten years ago. I enjoy my own company. I have created some places and times that are mine and only mine. They are not physical, but virtual places where I talk, live, do things, have fun. New friends also, away from work, where I know that by going away somewhere I live another life. These are alternative situations that allow me to choose where I want to be and what I want to do. Not having a choice is terrible and would kill me.

(pause)

Shall I go on?

R: Yes, please.

C: My personal life (as opposed to this alternative one) is conditioned by my work and by my wife who is... well... extremely present. She would never be able to respect my spaces. She would want to get in and control. She has many virtues, really, but this is one of her limits. She could not let me be in independence. Because she is very fond of me and very focused on me. But I feel that she may be afraid of losing me and this makes her take steps that limit my

freedom. She has a very strong personality. She would want to control my private life. This is why I need to keep some space for myself. I do not have big secrets. I just like to play, to have people I can phone whom she may not know, and talk of cars for one hour, exchange records or whatever. Nothing especially strange. I just follow some of my interests without letting my wife be part of. I do not take away anything from her, as this is all stuff she would not care about, but often in the past she wanted to peek and be part of things just in order to destroy them. This I did not like, so I had to protect myself. This is typical female, wanting to know what I am doing, then deciding that it's just a silly thing and destroying, instead of letting me be. Which is something I can't stand.

This type of relationship paradoxically is what makes us go on. Because we are still a young couple. We are not tired, we argue as if we were still thirty five years old. But even this is important as I need to have my safe place and my habits, the way I am used to live. So she keeps me safe and I am very lazy, especially with my wife. But when I want I can be full of adrenaline, when I am alone or in one of my private spaces. They are places I use when I need. I am not sure if this is right or wrong, but this is how it is. For now.

The need for this perhaps was more strong than other things when I was fifty. I am not interested in someone dominating my life. Another curious thing is that until about five years ago I was no longer listening to music. Which was very strange. My mind activity was most productive in the afternoon. This has now changed. Not only, but when I was working I could not stand hearing any noise or having any interruptions, or I would lose the focus of what I was doing. I could not concentrate any more. I needed a cigarette and then I could start again.

Then I stopped smoking, fourteen years ago. Now I smoke one every twenty days, or two months ...

Not smoking, I lacked my stimulus for working. So I recently substituted that with music. Now I listen to music again, and I can start working at any time of the day and cannot stop. I don't know why.

This is one of the new mechanisms. Then there is the mechanism of emotional pain which is connected to my brother. I am sorry for my father, but not so much. My brother is in a deep crisis and I could help him a lot, but he does not know he is. I could help but I cannot because he refuses to communicate. This causes me pain because I try and be kind and go look for him, phone him ... But he does not want to talk to me. This makes me really sad and my wife does not understand this. She is not sensitive and she is too strong. Even with good intentions. This is where I am suffering. Maybe I should be more joyful.

Something quite curious is how I used to imagine myself in the year two thousand. I imagined that I would be much more structured. Apart from the fantasies of future of technology etc, I imagined myself with a family, a wife, the club, children... Instead I got married very late, no children, lots of cats, I live in the country... I used to hate the countryside. And I thought I would be a lot older in spirit. Instead my spirit is incredibly young. I could be twenty five or thirty. While when I was twenty five I used to imagine this stiff old man...

Now I am kinder and stronger with myself. Before I was more totalitarian in my behaviour and I never knew how to live at the other side of youth. Now I have more experience and I am more careful not to get too disappointed. Now I look at things in a more prudent way which saves me from difficult situations. I am still open towards others and things to do, but I have lost my serenity, I worry more about problems, I don't sleep, which I never used to do before. The energy is now used in different ways. I can use it in other ways. If you have no worries you sleep well. If you let your energy go you wake up and worry.

I would like to live again all my years, exactly as I did, maybe I could change something here and there, but essentially I would do it in the same way again. I have discovered that sometimes it's better to go for it and do it.

I recorded a television programme, and I was asked to do my bit without too much preparation, in a spontaneous way. In the past I always worried before recording, I sweated, I was nervous. This last time I was totally calm and relaxed and everything went perfectly well. I did not

realise that until I saw the recording. So sometimes one has to trust one's own experience and intuition and not plan things. I don't like people who plan too much.

In this phase that started with my mother's death I am still at the beginning. It will go on until I stop working. Now I have love and work. Next I will lose work. Which I still like somehow, but I am disappointed with. Seeing how people complain when they retire, I know I will have to deal with this in four years and I think about it. This is the conclusion of the next phase. In four or six years.

These phases are complete, they derive from living these phases which start and are concluded with certain events. The first phase around twenty one, it started with work and finished with the beginning of my relationship. Then the second phase with my wife was a lot longer, and changed me not so much. Losing my mother was the next change and I imagine that the next will be either that I lose my wife or she loses me, or that I change my work. These phases go on until something important external happens that generates the new phase. These phases melt one into another they can last ten or thirty years, there is no pattern. It just happens. The next phase may only last six or seven years, I don't know, it's to do with big changes. An illness can suddenly bring you into a new phase, you never know.

My judgement of myself has changed a lot. Before I never liked myself. Now I would say that I like at least seventy five per cent of myself, maybe more. Ten years ago I would have said that my childhood was awful. I think I had a good childhood. I have some very clear memories. And big holes of memory. I remember things thanks my friends. But I often remember more about others than the other way round. I remember details of their life very clearly. Also telephone numbers that no longer exist, or the combination of numbers and people. We have fun remembering our youth together. I value my friendships.

My childhood was ok, really. I could have been more careful a couple of times, but I am satisfied because this is how I came to be who I am now and I am not dissatisfied. I am curious about what happens next, I live for my expectations of the future and being able to have a

positive outlook for the future is quite stimulating. I am happy of this evolution, I am glad of not being an idiot.

(pause)

I am not sure what else I can tell you.... I think this is it....

R. Would you like to end now?

C. Perhaps it is good to end.

R. How was it for you to sit here with me and talk about your experience?

C. Mmm... I enjoyed talking about myself, understanding a little more, and listening to the story of my life. Ten years ago I could not have done it, I would have had a lot of questions and no answers. Yes, I must say, I found it very useful.

R. Thank you.

H: Significant Statements: Matthew.

“When my mother went all was switched off. All was cold. Her loss was terrible afterwards. There was raw pain, anger, and I started reflecting on what had gone missing. I really did not know where to find a new reference point.”

“I enjoy my own company. I have created some places and times that are mine and only mine. They are not physical, but virtual places where I talk, live, do things, have fun. These are alternative situations that allow me to choose where I want to be and what I want to do.”

“Around the age of thirty you get responsibilities, you start building your future. Around the age of fifty you start to analyze what you have built that far.”

“I am more mature from an affective point of view, but also more disillusioned. I could even restart a love relationship, but I am a bit lazy. Yet I feel it could happen...”

“I remember things thanks to my friends. But I often remember more about others than the other way round. I remember details of their life very clearly. We have fun remembering our youth together. I value my friendships.”

“I like to play, to have people I can phone and talk about cars for hours, exchange records or whatever. Nothing special, I just follow some of my interests, just like a child...”

“I need to keep some space for myself. I can be full of adrenaline, when I am alone or in one of my private spaces. I love to listen to music. Once I start reading I cannot stop. The most

beautiful thing for me is to have books. Also meeting friends, or living without the need of programming and organizing. The most fascinating period for me is this one, when you are finally able to go back to being yourself.”

“I moved from having houses, objects, cars, things, on to having something more spiritual to take onwards. My dream now is not to have lots of beautiful cars but lots of books to read and most of all the time to read them. Ten years ago I would have said that I was going to go on working, changing my car every three years, buy things for the home. Now, I’d rather have less homes and more freedom to say ‘here today, tomorrow who knows’...”

“At fifty it was the death of my mother. Who for me, was the interface with the rest of the family. She was my interface... Losing my mother a third of my life went missing.”

“Not having a choice is terrible and would kill me.”

“Now I am kinder and stronger with myself. Now I have more experience, and I am more careful not to get too disappointed. Now I look at things in a more prudent way which saves me from difficult situations. My judgement of myself has changed a lot. Before I never liked myself. Now I would say that I like at least seventy five per cent of myself, maybe more.”

“I think I had a good childhood. I have some very clear memories. And big holes of memory. I remember things thanks my friends. “

“I am happy of this evolution, I am glad of not being an idiot.”

“Cats are something I love. I am waiting they grow old, all nine of them, because in any case there is affection and animals you cannot take away with you. Nor can you leave them, so I am waiting that they live their bit of life and then they will finish when the time comes.”

“I enjoyed talking about myself, understanding a little more, and listening to the story of my life. Ten years ago I could not have done it, I would have had a lot of questions and no answers. I found it very useful.”

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