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Prayer in Midlife
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“It was a delight to discover, O God, that as I developed my understanding of myself it meant you were increasing your hold on me” Teilhard de Chardin

This prayer of thanksgiving is never more appropriate than in the years called midlife. Midlife is not the same as being middle-aged. It is an experience that can begin well before a chronological middle-age and last into what some might call being elderly. So what sort of experience is it? Here are some characteristics:

- a feeling of being SPLIT; always hovering between having to do things and wondering why you should bother
- a sense of REGRET that some choices you made were the wrong ones and other choices will never come your way again
- a desire to stop being DRIVEN by circumstances and events and become more responsible for your own direction in life
- a recognition that LOSS and CHANGE have become a regular experience of your life
- a need to battle with ISOLATION and MISUNDERSTANDING arising in our relationships
- a RESTLESSNESS that prevents you feeling settled and makes you feel betwixt and between
- a discovery of UNEXPECTED TEMPTATIONS to say and do things that are out of character.

A time of uncertainty

All sorts of events in our life may prompt such experiences; the death of a parent; the marriage of your child; a change or loss of job; sudden illness; relocation of home; the offer of new opportunities. Such external events tend to mirror internal turmoil.

Within our spiritual life there will be other uncertainties. These may reveal themselves in these ways:

- a once-loved church no longer seems like home
- hymns and the Bible seem to mean less to you
- you feel you have to be more questioning of your faith
- you can no longer value what you once believed
- you feel you need to worship in a different way
- you get angry, disillusioned, passionate over people and events
- you need things to be different: more simple, less complex, more intricate, less rigid.



A Rediscovery

Midlife is an opportunity to rediscover yourself in God. But it may not feel like that. It will often be experienced as difficult and dark. It may feel like suspended animation. We sense we are going through the motions without purpose. Yet in this breaking down of what we thought was secure and safe, is the potential for new growth and faith.

As never before, we must hold to the Johannine image of the seed dropping into the dark earth, breaking its outer casing and then in the intimate seclusion of the ground, allowing its old self to die so that new life can arise.

A Spiritually Creative time

Increasingly, many find that spiritual experience is not what they left behind when they were young but in fact is the discovery of midlife. This goes against so much church culture that proclaims 'remember your Creator in the days of your youth'. That is undoubtedly good advice, but such remembrance is not the exclusive property of the young.

In our society today to be young is almost always to be a hedonist. Youth culture encourages a narcissistic, materialist outlook. Life is about getting on, achieving, seeking status. This has to be lived through. The discovery of midlife is invariably that life cannot be sustained on such meagre rations.

Unfortunately in a desire to be more youth-centred, churches are neglecting the needs of the group of people who are arriving at potentially the most spiritually creative time of their life. This can leave them feeling disenfranchised or pressurised into becoming permanently adolescent. For midlife is like a return to adolescence - a time when everything is questioned and nothing is acceptable. But maturity works out the other side of such times.

A new way of Praying

So, what can the life of Prayer bring to this experience of midlife?

The first thing to acknowledge is that our Prayer will be affected by the experience of midlife. Prayer is not an aspect of life that somehow remains immune from times of disorientation. Indeed the more important Prayer is for us, the more likely it is that it will indicate to us our spiritual condition.

One person talked of trying to have an early morning Quiet Time as being like attempting to start up an old car engine on an Autumn morning. Just a few chug-chugs and then a flat battery. Another described how she still went to a Baptist church but only felt close to God when she went to Compline at a local convent and experienced the refreshment of having water sprinkled over her.

She had discovered a new way. But it took a long time spent in feelings of guilt and incompleteness before she made the discovery of a new way of Prayer. But fundamentally we cannot begin with new ways of praying. That is a false trail. We need to begin with the unending loyalty of God to all whom he has made.



God the restorer of health

*Light of Light, you have searched me out and known me,
You know where I am and where I go,
Where shall I go from your Spirit,
Where shall I flee from your presence?*

The Psalmist rests in the security of God's presence. But God does more. God is more than a faithful companion. God is the restorer of health. Another Psalmist speaks of God pardoning wrongs and renewing youth. Here is belief in the God who can encounter us in the depths of our need and make a difference.

Often that will mean we have to undergo an appraisal of our priorities. It is likely that this will be best done in company with another human being or by writing a journal. Jesus didn't have either in the wilderness, except for the rather questionable presence of Satan, who seems to have gone beyond his remit as the Accuser. The Temptation of Christ can be seen very much as Jesus' own midlife crisis. Crisis not in the sense of disaster but understood as a risky experience that held within it the seeds of opportunity.

Prayer in midlife may feel very disjointed and erratic. No one's experience is exactly that of another. So it is difficult to prescribe help. That is why the prayer of Teilhard de Chardin that commenced this piece is so important. In the struggle and surprise of understanding ourselves there will come moments of illumination that chart the way ahead. But of this we can be certain:

*We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning. For what was
great in the morning will be little at evening,
and what was well at morning will at evening have become a lie.*

Carl Jung



Exercises to help Prayer in Midlife

1. Immerse yourself in the meaning of Psalms 38, 103, 131, 139.
2. List the decades of your life and recall:
 - a) the things that gave you the greatest joys during each decade
 - b) the things that gave you the greatest sorrows during each decade
 - c) consider the relationship you had with God in each decade.
3. Consider the greatest disappointments of the first half of your life. Talk them over with yourself. Have you offered them to God?
4. Pray the Lord's Prayer. Learn it in a different version. Jim Cotter's interpretation in his book Night Prayer is challenging and beautiful.
5. Make a pilgrimage to significant places in your childhood. Recognise this may be a bitter sweet experience.
6. Help someone to celebrate their fortieth birthday or twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.
7. Consider how your gifts have been a source of pain and suffering to you and to others. Consider also how they have been a source of joy and growth to you and others.
8. Explore what worship in another church or Christian tradition gives to you. And what you might contribute to it.
9. Discover a soulfriend who can reassure you of the forgiveness and grace of God.
10. Take up an activity that is a service to others in which their need is the source of your motivation.
11. Can you find ways in which you can make amends for past blindness or deliberate evil in your life? Where you cannot, can you release this burden to Christ the Pain-Bearer?
12. Discover how regular REVIEWS can become part of your life.