

Spiritual Rebirth Dispelling the Myth of the Midlife Crisis

by
Todd F. Eklof
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Although the Moses figure has been complicated and compounded through hundreds of years of additions to the Hebrew scripture, his initial story has a fairytale like quality to it. Once upon a time, as the fairytale goes, an innocent baby was born among the Hebrew slaves at a time when the Egyptian Pharaoh had ordered the execution of all their male children. But by a twist of fortune or fate, baby Moses is set adrift in a small basket in a desperate attempt to save his life. The basket is soon discovered by one of Pharaoh's daughters and the child ends up becoming part of the royal family.

In a sense, this is a backward Cinderella story in that Cinderella was a princess forced into servitude by a family that wasn't her own. Moses, to the contrary, is the story of a slave who ends up a prince in a family that isn't his own. But, as Robert Bly once noted, all of us must eventually descend upon a *Road of Ashes*. "The fall from being a king's son to being a cook is the step the story asks for," he writes. "Carrying wood and water, working in the basement of the castle—where the kitchen is—stands for the Drop Through the Floor, the Descent, the humiliation, the 'way down and out.'"¹ All of us, according to our fairytales, which ought to rightly be taken as maps for our souls, indicators of our psychological progress and digress, must become a Cinderella or a Cinderfella, sweeping the cinders, the ashes, in somebody else's dungeon.

If not, we are in danger of remaining unfinished, incomplete, psychologically immature, a *puer aeternus*, an eternal child. Eternal children, like Peter Pan and the Little Prince, are attractive to us because they never have to grow up and face reality. They can lose their shadows, and with them, the experience of life's darkness. Indeed, because they gravitate only toward the light, eternal children are always high, always on the up and up, always with their heads in the clouds. "Imprisoned birds flutter up the wall toward any cracks of light," writes Bly, "So the young ascenders often find themselves achieving spirit, but at the expense of life or their own grounding..."² Without eventually descending upon the road of ashes, we end up with a simple spirituality that is ungrounded, without shadow. Only simple two-dimensional people are without shadows, for to live without shadow is to live without depth.

In our Hebrew fairytale, Moses discovers the road of ashes when he steps in to protect a slave being beaten by an Egyptian. Because of this deadly intervention Moses must flee his royal family and ends up wandering as a fugitive in the desert the rest of his life. Alas, this must be so, for the "way down and out," is the only real way there is to escape the shallow, naïve psychology of the eternal child, of the golden prince and princess

living the privileged life. Like the young Prince Siddhartha who abandons his royal family and leaves his protective triple-walled palace to become the Buddha, stepping onto the Road of Ashes means letting go of the easy life we have known. It means stepping out into the barren desert with little to nothing. It means letting go of the ideas and the habits that once served us so well. And, like Moses, it means acknowledging our true heritage; that there is something more to us than meets the eye, that there is something deep within us, a calling, demanding fulfillment. This is why Jewish mysticism suggests the slight impression each of us has under our nose is from the angel's finger that sealed our lips just before we were born, leaving us with a little reminder that we are born with a "preexistent soul-life"³ that must be fulfilled! "*Shush, don't tell the secret,*" the angel whispers.

What the stories of Siddhartha and Moses, as well as others, tell us, is that all of us must eventually grow up, and that growing up means facing negative experiences. As James Hillman, who reminds us Darwin's thesis is *The Descent of Man*, not the "ascent of man," has suggested—growing up really means growing down. "Normally we come into the world headfirst," he says, "like divers into the pool of humanity. Besides, the head has a soft spot through which the infant soul, according to the traditions of body symbolism, could still be influenced by its origins. The slow closing of the head's fontanel and fissures, its hardening into a tightly sealed skull, [signifies] separation from an invisible beyond and final arrival here. Descent takes a while. We grow down, and we need a long life to get on our feet."⁴

It is true, the longer we live, the further down we grow, until even our skin and bones seem to sink with gravity. By contrast, the images left us by real eternal children, like Marilyn Monroe and James Dean, who never grew old, show them forever young, on top of their game. One famous picture of Monroe even has her dress blowing upward, unlike the baggy clothes she might have eventually worn had she lived to become an old woman. Like plants, which on the surface appear to grow only upward, each of us has to establish deep roots beneath the dark surface if we are truly going to live long healthy lives.

But we don't have to live to be terribly old before we begin to realize there is more to life than what's on the surface, than the superficial values and habits we often adopt as golden boys and girls. The great psychologist, Carl Jung, believed this transition naturally occurs around midlife, between the ages of 35 and 45. He took this so seriously that he wouldn't train anyone in his method younger than 35. This is so because we spend the first half of our lives trying to establish ourselves in the world, trying to make something of ourselves, trying to fulfill all our lofty dreams. By the ages between 35 or 45, many of us have met our expectations to some extent. We've established a career of some sort, married or partnered, purchased a home, and begun a family of our own. If we haven't been able to accomplish these things, we often feel out of step with society and with ourselves. This is so because, for many of us, these experiences of success, love,

and family, are an essential part of the human experience.

Our fairytale reminds us, however, that there is also much more to the story; that if we leave the story here, we leave it unfinished. In real life, we often come to this realization through some sort of fall that forces us to leave our immature aspirations and come crashing down to Earth. Sometimes the fall is a slow descent, the subtle realization, perhaps through a growing sense of urgency or depression, that there must be more to life than making a decent living and providing for a family—more to life than earning money and paying bills. This slow awakening may cause us to start asking questions about the true meaning of life. Perhaps we start questioning the validity of our jobs, our relationships, and our religion. This could lead to quitting our jobs and our respectable income for something that pays less but is more meaningful. Our friends and family won't understand and probably won't be supportive of the decision. Or maybe we'll have a love affair. Even though everything we've been taught tells us it's wrong, we know there must be something more exciting about love than the coldness and distance and quiet that have become indicative of our home life after so many years. Nobody will understand, and the people we love most might even get hurt, but something drives us toward it anyway. And, finally, we may stop attending Saturday morning Mass or services at the Baptist Church in favor of something new, like Yoga, Tai Chi, Transcendental Meditation, or those weird Unitarians down the street. Now everyone will say we're crazy and tell us we need help!

Then there are those of us who remain numb to this inner calling no matter how loud it becomes. These tend to experience more dramatic falls in which everything suddenly comes crashing down, perhaps through the loss of a long term career or marriage, or by a life changing illness or accident. This is more like the fall of Icarus who flies too close to the sun, melting his waxwings. As harsh and heavy as these experiences can be, they have a tendency to make us go deeper, to begin really questioning our selves and the purpose of our lives. "The paralysis of progressive energy," writes Jung, "has in truth some very disagreeable aspects. It seems like an unwelcome accident or a positive catastrophe, which one would naturally rather avoid."⁵ But, as even Peter Pan came to realize, the shadow cannot be avoided. We have to eventually chase after it and reconnect with it, symbolizing our need to look deeper into our lives.

This is especially difficult because it often means coming to oppose much that we've previously stood for, and exploring aspects of our own personalities we formally repressed. Jung called this process *enantiadromia*, a Greek word meaning "changing into opposite." Normal psychological development, according to Jung, involves changing into our opposites as we grow older, even to the point that men feminize and women masculinize. "The assimilation of contrasexual tendencies then becomes a task that must be fulfilled in order to keep [our psychic energy] in a state of progression,"⁶ he said. The progression toward which we move, again, according to Jung, is also a downward progression, toward some representation of the womb for rebirth, the second birth during

which as adults we are spiritually reborn.

We can see from all of this why many in our culture have come to call this pivotal time in the individual's life, a "mid-life crisis." Not only do individuals often experience the challenge of readjusting to new circumstances and painful losses, but society itself is threatened with the loss of its most basic unit, somebody who is willing to cooperate without asking too many questions. "...How can we get a look at the cinders side of things," asks Robert Bly, "when the society is determined to create a world of shopping malls and entertainment complexes in which we are made to believe that there is no death, disfigurement, illness, insanity, poverty, lethargy, or misery?"⁷

Western society, in particular, with our obsession over youthfulness and being upwardly mobile, frowns upon this time of rebirth. But instead of seeing it as a crisis regarding our inflated way of life, we project the crisis onto the individual and call it a "mid-life crisis." But again, waking up to depth and meaning, questioning one's own paradigms, isn't an individual crisis, though it is a critical part of individual development. Nevertheless, our society avoids it like the plague. We have not collectively learned to cope with what it means to fall, with what it means to have things come crashing down around us, even though the fall is so important to our psyche that it appears as an archetype in many of our stories and symbols. In addition to the fall of Icarus, the Tower of Babel falls, and there is an image of a falling tower on one of the Tarot cards. It cannot go unnoticed, of course, that the fall of the World Trade Center had a psychologically profound impact on all of us, not only because of its tragic nature, but also because of its archetypal significance. It has become a living symbol of the necessity of falling, of having our highest aspirations come crashing down, of having our institutions crumble, and all that is familiar blown away.

As most of us realize now, we haven't, as a whole, handled this fall well at all. Even though President Bush often says that since 9-11 the "whole world has changed," his administration has worked really hard to make sure everything stays the same; that the economic system challenged by the destruction of the World Trade Center, and the attack on the military industrial complex signified by the attack on the Pentagon, remain at full-throttle and the world's resources continue to be funneled into the ever narrowing hands of an elite few. The unity and compassion experienced here and abroad after the fall of the World Trade Center was a pivotal opportunity to unify the world in a way that has never been achieved before. It was an opportunity for global transformation in which we should have begun genuinely questioning the way we've been doing things and our relationship to others in the world. Instead, we have squandered this critical opportunity by defiantly pretending as if nothing has really changed, as if our towers of power are still up, and we can continue thriving through violence, injustice, inequality, and domination. We see from this that the real crisis is not the sudden need to change our lives, but the desire not to. By remaining up in our various towers, our power towers, our ivory towers, and our elite penthouses, we keep our heads in the clouds, and sometimes

up our asses, in order to avoid the shadow—all that we are neglecting, not seeing, on the Earth below, including the poverty and injustice our lofty habits cause; not to mention the negligent destruction of the Earth's vital systems.

The solution, as we have seen, is to return to the map our fairytale lays out for us, pointing not away from the Road of Ashes, but toward it—not away from the midlife crisis, but toward it. Not only do we have the legends of Moses and Siddhartha, to demonstrate this, we also have the examples of historical figures like the prophet Muhammad who began hearing the words of the Koran at age 40, after becoming disturbed by the economic injustices he saw arising in Mecca; and the 12th century Mystic Hildegard, an oppressed woman, who became a great spiritual figure, shattering many of the stereotypes and limitations of her day, also at age 40, after receiving a series of spiritual visions. It is also normal in Hindu life for men to spend the first half of their lives establishing themselves by learning a trade, mastering skills, becoming more knowledgeable, and performing their social and familial duties. In midlife, however, they are permitted to leave society and family for the forest, renouncing most their possessions to live the life of asceticism in an effort to become more spiritually aware. For the Hindu this is a natural phase, and no crisis at all.

In our society it may not be practical or necessary to take the midlife transition to such an extreme, but it is necessary to take it seriously and without so much negative judgment. It is a time to question all that has gone before and to open our selves to new possibilities. It is a time to let go of all that baggage that has been holding us back in favor of freedoms we have always feared. It is a time to explore our deepest longings, to remember who we really are and what we're really about. It's a time of spiritual renewal and awakening in which to fulfill our greatest longings. Crisis? No. Critical? Yes, this journey along the Road of Ashes that leads us home.

¹ Bly Robert, *Iron John*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., U.S., 1990, p. 69.

² Ibid. p. 59.

³ Hillman, James, *The Soul's Code*, Random House, New York, NY, 1996, p. 46.

⁴ Ibid. p. 42.

⁵ Jung, C.G., *Symbols of Transformation*, CW vol. 5, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1967, 1990, p. 300.

⁶ Ibid. p. 301.

⁷ Bly, *ibid.* p. 81.