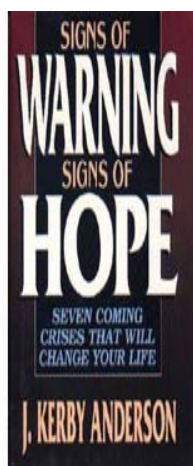


# Mid-Life Transition



Each year more than three million baby boomers turn 40. Now there is nothing magical about turning 40 per se, but turning 40 does signal the beginning of a time of introspection and re-evaluation that generally occurs during the 40-something years.

Millions of people will encounter a mid-life transition in the 1990s. Why does this occur? How does it affect people? And how can Christians marshal the emotional and spiritual resources to deal with these changes? These are just a few of the questions we will address and attempt to answer.

The leading edge of the baby boom has been the first group to hit this time of transition. Born in the late '40s and early '50s, they lived in new houses, built on new streets, in new neighborhoods, in the new American communities known as the suburbs.

When they headed off to school, they sat in new desks and were taught about Dick and Jane by teachers fresh out of college. They grew up with television and lived in a world brimming with promise. In the '60s they graduated from high school and enrolled in college in record numbers. Then they landed jobs at good salaries in a still-expanding economy and bought homes before housing prices and interest rates went through the roof.

Unlike the baby boomers born after them, the leading edge achieved, in large part, the American dream. They weren't smarter or more talented. Their success was due simply to being born earlier. But even though they have achieved a degree of financial success, many are beginning to encounter a crisis of purpose. They are like the cartoon that appeared in *The New Yorker*. The husband turns to his wife over the breakfast table and says, "The egg timer is pinging. The toaster is popping. The coffeepot is perking. Is this it, Alice? Is this the great American dream?"

Millions in this generation will no doubt repeat these questions in the next two decades. Is this it? Is this the great American dream? Add to these questions others like: Where is my life going? Is this all I am ever going to achieve?

In some ways, these are strange questions coming from the leading edge boomers who enjoy the fruits of the American economy. They have achieved a measure of success and yet they are asking questions that signal a coming crisis of purpose. So why a crisis of purpose? And why now?

## **The Age 40 Transition**

As it enters mid-life, the baby boom generation remains an enigma. Its members rejected the values of their parents and changed the structure of their families in ways unimaginable to a previous generation. But they must now shoulder adult responsibilities and assume positions of leadership (if they aren't already in them). Put another way: the baby boom stands at a point of transition. This is not the first time this generation has collectively faced a point of transition. When the leading-edge boomers began turning 30, they hit what psychologist Daniel Levinson calls the "Age 30 Transition." The struggle of leaving childhood and entering the adult years was worked out in a period of stagnant wages and appreciating house prices. Ultimately the collective angst of the boom

generation turned Gail Sheehy's book *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* into a runaway bestseller. Among other things, the book assured the baby boomers that they were not alone in their confrontation with a major lifestage.

The leading edge of this generation is now in the midst of a more significant transition: the mid-life transition. Turning 40 is no more a predictor of change than turning 30 was. But somewhere in that time period, mid-life re-evaluation begins. It is a stage in which men and women begin to evaluate and question their priorities and deal with their dreams and aspirations.

While this transition is both somber and serious, some have attempted to inject some levity into the discussion. Lawyer Ron Katz found the YUPPIE designation an inaccurate description of his friends' lifestyle. So he coined, somewhat facetiously, yet another acronym to describe boomers at this stage. No longer rolling stones, but not yet the grateful dead, they're MOSS—middle-age, overstressed, semi-affluent suburbanites.

According to Katz, MOSS (or MOSSY, if you prefer the adjective) is what YUPPIES have become in the 1990s. As Katz says, a MOSS is "41 years old; more overstressed than overworked; affluent but doesn't feel that way." A MOSS also is beginning to understand why the world hasn't changed more over the past 25 years; [and] hopes that the world changes somewhat less over the next 30 years.

And while some social commentators want to discount the existence of a mid-life crisis, psychologists and sociologists assure us that something is indeed taking place. It is not merely media hype or self-fulfilling prophecy. During the years of mid-life, a substantial re-evaluation is taking place.

In actuality, the transition to mid-life is gradual. There are

no major landmarks or signposts that signal our entry into this new and uncharted domain. Perhaps that is why there are so many jokes about turning 40 even though nothing of any significance actually happens on one's 40th birthday. Turning 40 provides a visible demarcation of a gradual process.

## **The Seasons of a Man's Life**

In the preface of his book *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, Daniel Levinson says, "Adults hope that life begins at 40—but the great anxiety is that it ends there." Fearing this may be true, many baby boomers are beginning to become "frantic at forty- something." They are making a transition from the years of their youth to a time of adulthood without any hope or optimism.

In his book, Daniel Levinson describes a number of developmental stages in adult life. He delineates an early adult era from the mid-20s to the late 30s. He also discusses a middle adult era from the mid-40s to the early 60s. What is in-between is what he calls the years of mid-life transition. He sees these years as a bridge between young adulthood and senior membership in one's occupational world.

The psychological study done by Levinson focused on men between the ages of 35 and 45. He found that about 80 percent of those studied went through a time of personal crisis and re-evaluation during this mid-life transition. Levinson argued that the 20 percent that did not encounter a struggle were in a state of denial and would go through this transition later. This raises the first of two assumptions in these studies.

While the stages and themes documented by these studies are descriptive, they are by no means normative. As a Christian, I reject a deterministic model which predicts that everyone will go through a certain stage. While writing an earlier book on the subject of death and dying, I found that not all people go through the same psychological stages of grief. Christians,

for example, who have come to terms with their own mortality and the mortality of their loved ones can face death and agree with the apostle Paul that it is better "to be absent from the body and present with the Lord." Likewise, people who have come to grips with their place in the world may not face a wrenching mid-life crisis.

A second assumption has to do with the subjects of these studies. The major studies of adult development (including Levinson's study) used male subjects born before the 1930 depression. Comparable studies for women were not done, and studies of baby boomers have not been done.

The men in the study have at least three things in common. They grew up in stable families; they had realistic goals for their lives; and they became adults in an expanding economy. Few experienced divorces in their families. Most had simple goals like "being able to provide for their families" and "being a good father." They also built their careers in a flourishing economic climate.

These assumptions are not true for the baby boom generation. They grew up in less-stable families and now are raising families in a world where divorce is very common. Baby boomers have much greater expectations and thus have personal goals that are much more difficult to fulfill. And baby boomers reached adulthood when the economy was shrinking.

Such differences make it difficult to apply these studies directly to the boom generation. While some investigators argue that talk about a true mid-life "crisis" is overblown, most believe the current generation will be even more susceptible to a crisis than the previous one.

## **New Roles**

In his research, Levinson discovered a number of themes that surface during the time of mid-life transition. The first is

that mid-life transition involves adapting to new roles and responsibilities. By the time you are in your 30s, you are expected to think and behave like a parent. You can postpone this for awhile, and the boom generation has been fairly successful at postponing adulthood by extending the period simply called "youth." Boomers extended adolescence into their 20s and even into their 30s. Now they are facing different and more demanding sets of roles and expectations. They are taking senior positions in their jobs and must provide care for both their children and their aging parents.

A man in his 40s is usually regarded by people in their 20s as a full generation removed. He is seen more as a parent than as a brother. In the minds of those who are younger, he is "Dad" rather than "buddy." This message comes first as a surprise and then as an irritation to a man in mid-life.

Another way to look at this transition is to use the definitions of generations used by Spanish philosopher Jos Ortega y Gasset. He identifies five generations: childhood, youth, initiation, dominance, and old age.

The Initiation generation includes the time of mid-life transition and leads to what he calls the Dominant Generation, where individuals are expected to assume the mantle of leadership, authority, and responsibility. According to Ortega y Gasset, the Initiation and Dominant generations are the two most crucial ones. The relations between them and the successful passing of authority from one to another affect the fate of society. During the 1990s and the early part of the 21st century, this transition from the older generation to the younger generation will be taking place.

## **Mortality**

The second stage of mid-life transition involves dealing with our own mortality. In mid-life we become increasingly aware of death. Living in a death-denying culture shields us from a

sense of our own mortality. And being young further heightens our sense of indestructibility. Teenagers and young adults tend to think of themselves as “bullet-proof” and destined for immortality. But by the age of 40, we have seen many people not much older than ourselves succumb to cancer and heart attacks. Many of us have seen death in our own families. The death of a parent is a clear signal that we are now on our own. It also reminds us how short life really is.

People going through this transition not only face a crisis of mortality; they face a crisis of growing old. Baby boomers are entering what I call the “Ache Age.” Vigorous exercise is followed by hurting muscles that seem to stay sore longer. Cuts and bruises that used to heal almost overnight take much longer to heal. Such physiological reminders also focus our attention on our own mortality.

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has identified five different stages of grief. Although these describe the psychological stages of a patient who is dying, they correlate remarkably well with the feelings people go through in mid-life. Whether it is the death of an individual or the death of their dreams, the emotional feelings are often the same.

## **Culminating Events**

A mid-life transition surfaces from a culminating event. This event serves as a marker for a conclusion of young adulthood. It may be a very obvious one like a promotion or being fired from a job. But it also might be something that no one would be able to identify, not even our spouses. It is a milestone that helps us see that one of our life’s dreams is not going to be realized, and it provides an estimate for future success or fulfillment.

In *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, Daniel Levinson argues that the dreams we have are so compelling that nothing short of total success will satisfy. In other words, there is no such

thing as modest success. Frequently, the culminating event is seen as evidence of flawed success and often as total failure.

To those on the outside looking in, a man may seem like he has reached the pinnacle of success. But they can't see into his irrational mind affected by sin. He may have dreams that are hopelessly unrealistic, especially in youth.

It may be that a man is the president of a very successful company, but nevertheless feels like a failure because his dream was to be President of the United States. A man who is very athletic and runs marathons feels unfulfilled because his dream was to play in the NBA. A woman who is one of the top salespeople in the company may feel inadequate because she wanted a family and cannot have kids.

## **Intense Introspection**

Fourth, mid-life transition involves intense introspection. A consistent pattern of adult life is an early struggle in adulthood to achieve a measure of success followed by a mid-life appraisal of one's values and philosophy of life. A man around 40 begins to reassess the meaning of life and begins reconsidering the fate of his youthful dreams. He is asking major questions like: Is this all I am going to do the rest of my life? Is this all I am going to achieve?

Many people find that what they thought was going to make them happy isn't making them happy. They enjoyed law school and the first few years of law. But the thought of practicing law for the rest of their life is not very fulfilling. They enjoyed the first few years selling life insurance, but the thought of selling insurance for another 30 years sounds more like torture than a career.

This is a time when an individual shines a light on his or her accomplishments and sets an agenda for the second half of life. There may or may not be major mid-course corrections



depending on the evaluation.

## **Leaving a Legacy**

Finally, a mid-life transition involves leaving a legacy. As we come to grips with our own mortality, we inevitably desire immortality, which is “one of the strongest and least malleable of human motives.” Leaving a legacy means finding a form of immortality by leaving something behind. One is reminded of Woody Allen’s quip that he didn’t want to be immortal by leaving something behind; he wanted to be immortal by not dying. But since that is not possible, then an individual seeks to leave a legacy, and that quest usually forms the core of the second half of a person’s life.

Successful resolution of mid-life comes from determining what legacy—possessions, memories, ministry—we will leave behind. The legacy may encompass family, work, or all of society. It may involve contributions as a parent, spouse, leader, or mentor. These elements of the legacy define the path we will take in the second half of our lives.

## **Application**

These then are the basic themes of the mid-life transition. For the Christian, there are two points of application. First is a personal application. If you are going through mid-life, recognize that you are going to be in a daily battle over three issues.

First, you will have a daily battle with your thoughts. We need to “take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). We will also have a daily battle with temptation. A key verse to memorize is 1 Corinthians 10:13. And finally we will have a daily battle with sin and must confess our sins (1 John 1:8-9).

The second point of application is to our personal ministry.

If we are attentive to this mid-life transition, we will be able to minister to millions of people who will go through this struggle. The 1990s might be the greatest time for harvest in this generation. Until now, most baby boomers have had few struggles. As they confront mid-life, many will be asking important questions that can lead to evangelistic opportunities.

Here are two ways you can help. First, a knowledge of the transition can ease the struggle. Daniel Levinson says knowing the transition is coming is an important antidote to its effects. So a knowledge of this transition can help you reach out.

Second, a knowledge of the Bible can help you to minister. A generation that has been impervious to the gospel may be more willing to listen as it asks the fundamental questions of life. If we reach out in love with a biblical message, we can make a difference.

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