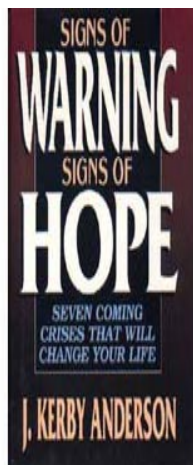


Mid-Life Transition



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 marshall 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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Financial Security for the Future

Kerby Anderson looks at our financial future, especially of baby boomers, discussing savings, corporate pensions, Social Security and retirement.

 What kind of financial security can you expect in the future? The answer to that question may depend on when you were born. The generation currently entering retirement will do much better as a group than the baby boom generation

following it.

A major reason is demographics. The baby boom was preceded, and more importantly, succeeded by consecutive years of fewer births. Thirty-five percent more Americans were born during the baby boom than during the previous nineteen years. And 12 percent more were born than during the subsequent nineteen years. This nineteen-year blip in fertility has created more than just an oddity in social statistics. It has clouded the financial future of baby boomers. The elderly are supported, especially during the waning years of their old age, by members of the younger generation. The baby boom was immediately followed by a baby bust, or what many commentators have labeled a "birth dearth." This disproportionate ratio between baby boomers and baby busters raises questions about the boom generation's future and suggests it will face an impending crisis of financial security.

Concern arises from both economic and demographic realities. The harsh economic reality in the 1990s is the federal deficit which mushroomed during the 1980s. Aggravating this economic situation are also such issues as trade deficits, increased taxes, higher oil prices, and an inevitable downturn in the economy.

A survey released by the International Association of Financial Planning found that "the long term psyche of the American public is depressed," with significant majorities fearing a resurgence of high inflation and worrying about the chances for a deep recession. But the more important issue is not economics but how demographics affect economics. The sheer size of the boom generation has had a negative impact on its members. Paul Hewitt of the Retirement Policy Institute put it this way:

The baby boom as a generation has been its own worst enemy. Whenever we wanted anything the price went up, and when we sold the price went down. So we got less for our labor and

paid more for our houses. When we want to sell those houses the price will go down, and when we want medical care in old age, prices will go up.

Boomers in general, and leading-edge boomers in particular, find themselves part of what has become called “the triple-squeeze generation.” The more than 25 percent of Americans between the ages of 35 and 44 are finding their own retirement being squeezed out by the college costs of their children and the long-term health care costs of their aging parents. Sixty-six percent of baby boomers surveyed by the International Association of Financial Planning said “providing long-term care for a parent would affect their ability to save for their children’s education” and would no doubt also affect their ability to save for their own retirement.

Commentators have also referred to these people as the “sandwich generation” because they are sandwiched between an older generation dependent upon them for elder care and a younger generation dependent upon them for housing and education. Surely this is one generation that needs to take a hard look at its financial future. The economic and demographic realities may seem dismal, but they will be much worse if we fail to apply biblical principles to our finances. The key to financial security for most Americans has been the three-legged stool of savings, pensions, and Social Security. Unfortunately, economic termites threaten the strength of that stool.

Savings

The first leg on the retirement stool is savings. The boomers are justly concerned about the savings (or more to the point, the lack of savings) they have put away so far for their retirement. A survey of leading-edge boomers found that six out of ten expressed great concern about being able to meet all of their financial responsibilities, and 62 percent fear that they will outlive their retirement savings.

But they aren't the only ones concerned. A survey by the American Academy of Actuaries echoed boomers' fears. Seventy-two percent of pension-fund actuaries polled predict that half the baby boom won't have the wherewithal to retire at age 65.

How much have baby boomers saved so far? Well, not very much if a recent survey is any indication. When a group of 35- to 49-year-olds were asked if they could come up with three thousand dollars in a few days without borrowing or using a credit card, 49 percent said they could and 49 percent said they couldn't. Not surprisingly a smaller percentage (only 29 percent) of the 18- to 24-year-olds had the three thousand dollars.

The inability of so many boomers to come up with the sum of three thousand dollars illustrates two things. First, it shows how little (if anything) they have in savings or investments. Second, it demonstrates how much many of them are in debt. The first leg of the three-legged stool is in awful shape because, for many in the boom generation, savings are decreasing while debt is increasing. The reasons for boomer debt are fairly simple. First, the boomers had great expectations for themselves and were often willing to go deeply in debt in order to finance the lifestyle they had chosen for themselves. Second, they had the misfortune of entering the consumer world at the time when wages were stagnant and when most of the goods and services they craved were hit by inflation. This further fueled consumer borrowing, which became both a cause and a consequence of their downward mobility.

Between 1970 and 1983, the percentage of boomer families paying off consumer debt increased from two-thirds to three-fourths. Of families in debt in 1983, the average amount of debt was nearly five thousand dollars.

Families in debt usually are not saving. If they had any financial resources to save and invest, they would be wise to first retire their high interest consumer debt. In 1984, more

than a third of all households headed by a person under thirty-five had no savings whatsoever on deposit with banks and other financial institutions, aside from non-interest-paying checking accounts.

The solution to this problem is simple: Get out of debt and put money into savings and retirement. Now while this may be easy to say, it is difficult for the current generation to do. Baby boomers' expectations frequently exceed their income, and the changing economic and demographic realities place them in a precarious position. But if this generation wants to have a more secure financial future, it must take appropriate financial measures now.

Corporate Pensions

In the past, there used to be an unwritten agreement between a company and an individual. If you faithfully worked for the company, the company would take care of you in your retirement. But this tacit agreement has broken down for two reasons.

First, many of these companies lack the financial resources to take care of the baby boom generation. Consolidation of some companies and the bankruptcies of many others put pensions in jeopardy. Other companies heavily invested in speculative schemes by thrifts and junk bonds, and their portfolios rest on shaky ground. In other cases, the current financial resources seem adequate but have yet to be tested when the millions of baby boomers begin to retire. Second, many baby boomers have not spent enough time with any one company to earn a significant pension. It was not uncommon for the parents of baby boomers to have worked for a single company for more than twenty years. Baby boomers, on the other hand, change jobs if not career paths with unprecedented frequency.

This apparent restlessness is born from both choice and necessity. Boomers are much less likely to stay in a job that

does not enhance personal development and self-expression. Unlike their fathers, who would often remain with a company "for the sake of the family," the boom generation is much more likely to move on.

Boomers also change jobs out of necessity. They find themselves competing with each other for fewer upper-management positions for a number of reasons. First, companies have thinned their management ranks. Most of this restructuring was done in the 1980s to make companies more efficient. The rest was a natural result of buyouts, takeovers, and consolidation leaving fewer structural layers in upper management and fewer jobs.

Second, boomers crowded into middle-management ranks at the same time restructuring was taking place. The leading-edge boomers in their prime career years are finding themselves on career plateaus and becoming dissatisfied. Many wonder if they will ever make it to the corner office or the executive suite.

Third, there was a boom of business school graduates. The first boomers who graduated with MBAs were often ridiculed by classmates in other academic disciplines. But this initial condemnation gave way to active pursuit, and the number of business graduates quickly proliferated. As supply has outstripped demand, this ambitious group with heightened expectations finds itself frustrated and constantly looking for a job change.

All of these factors have put this generation in a precarious position. By and large, they are not saving and have inadequate pensions to give them a secure financial future. So many are trusting that Social Security will be there for them when they retire. But will it?

Social Security

The impending Social Security debacle is complex and the

subject of whole books. But the basic issue can be illustrated by once again looking at the demographic impact of the boom generation.

When Social Security began in the mid 1930s, the ratio of workers to recipients was ten to one and life expectancy was two years below retirement age. The pay-as-you-go system could work with those kinds of numbers.

But two fundamental demographic changes threaten to send Social Security off a cliff. First is the "senior boom." Advances in modern medicine have raised life expectancy by 28 years in just this century. Today the median age is already 32 and still climbing. Some demographers see the median age reaching as high as 50 years old. One has to wonder about the stability of Social Security in a country where half of the people qualify for membership in the American Association of Retired Persons.

The second demographic change is the ratio between the baby boom generation and the baby bust generation. The smaller generation following the boom generation will be called upon to support Social Security when boomers retire. The system will face incredible strains through the next few decades as the ratio of workers to Social Security beneficiaries continues to decline.

Both demographic changes are relevant. Americans are living longer, and ratios between generations are skewed. These two changes are certain to transform the current pay-as-you-go system into nothing more than an elaborate Ponzi scheme by the twenty-first century. The solutions to the Social Security crisis are few and all politically difficult to achieve. Either you have to change the supply of contributions or the demand of the recipients. Increasing the supply of contributors could be achieved by increasing the birth rate (unlikely, and probably too little too late) or allowing more immigration of workers who could contribute to Social

Security. The only other way to increase the supply of contributions is to increase FICA payments. But there will have to be an upper limit on how much Americans can be taxed. If benefits stay at their current levels, workers in the year 2040 could find Social Security taking as much as 40 percent of their paychecks.

Decreasing demand would require trimming benefits. Current recipients benefit most from Social Security. A retiree on Social Security today recovers everything he paid into the system in about four years. On the other hand, few boomers will ever get the amount of money they paid into the system. Some politicians have suggested trimming benefits to current recipients. Others suggest applying a means test to wealthy recipients or those who receive other pension income. Neither proposal has much likelihood of passage.

More likely, Congress will be forced to trim future benefits. Congress has already increased the age of retirement and may induce workers to stay on the job until age 70. Another solution would be to provide the biggest tax breaks for workers to fund their own retirement through IRAs or Keoghs.

Obviously the solutions are not popular, but the alternative is a collapse of the Social Security system in the next decade. If something isn't done, the demographic realities will destroy the system.

Retirement

Although this generation grew up assuming retirement would be the norm, the changing social and economic conditions we have discussed may force a rethinking of that basic assumption. After all, the idea of retirement historically is of recent origin.

When Social Security was first adopted in 1935, life expectancy was below 63, a full two years under the retirement

age. Retirement was for the privileged few who lived long enough to enjoy the meager financial benefits from the system.

Even as late as the 1950s, the contemporary image we have today of retirement communities and the elderly sightseeing in recreational vehicles did not exist. Retirement still did not exist as an institution. Nearly half the men over age 65 were still in the workforce.

Polls taken during the 1950s and early 1960s showed that most Americans desired to work for as long as they could and saw retirement merely for the disabled. Today, however, most Americans look forward to their retirement as a time to travel, pursue personal interests, and generally indulge themselves. Yet the demographic landscape suggests we might have to revise our current images of retirement.

As baby boomers slowly jog towards Golden Pond, they will likely be the largest generation of senior citizens in history, both in absolute size and in relative proportion to the younger generation. By the year 2000, the oldest boomers could be taking early retirement. The number of workers and dependents retired by 2025 could swell to as many as 58 million workers and dependents, more than double the current number of retirees.

These large numbers are certain to precipitate a "retirement crisis" for two reasons. First, people are living longer. We have raised the life expectancy by 28 years. During most of human history, only one in ten lived to the age of 65. Today eight out of every ten Americans zoom past their 65th birthday.

Second, the burden of providing retirement benefits will fall upon the younger, (and more to the point) smaller generation born after the baby boom. Never will so few be required to fund the retirement of so many. When Social Security was adopted in 1935, there were ten workers for every person over

age 65. That ratio shrank to six to one in the 1970s.

Today there are about 3.4 working Americans to support each retiree. But by the time the last boomer hits retirement age in 2029, the ratio of workers to retirees will drop to less than two to one. Obviously, baby boomers face much greater uncertainty than their parents did when they entered into the years now seen as the time of retirement.

This next generation may even decide to reject the idea of retirement, choosing instead to enrich themselves with meaningful work all of their lives. Yet such an idyllic vision could quickly be crushed by the harsh reality of failing health. Working until you are 70 or beyond may not be physiologically possible for all people.

No wonder a chorus of Cassandras is predicting financial disaster in the next century. But significant changes can be made now to avert or at least lessen a potential crisis in the future. Wise investment according to biblical principles now is absolutely necessary to prepare for this uncertain future. The future really depends on what this generation does in the 1990s to get ready for the Retirement Century.

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