



Seeking Your Direction from Midlife On

By Ed Merck

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Most people go through six stages – which are you in?

I vividly remember turning 40. It was truly the first time it occurred to me that this thing I call “my life” had a horizon, that the notion of dying might actually apply to me someday. It’s not that I had been in denial. There were just many urgent demands on my energy, such as supporting a family and moving up the career ladder.

I’m now nearing 70, and no one needs to remind me I am aging, or that I will die.

The years between 40 and 70 have been a mixed bag, at times exhilarating, at times downright challenging. What I learned along the way is that there are stages most of us go through. With advance knowledge of these phases, you will, I hope, enjoy a smoother ride.

Here’s my map, consisting of six milestones. It will take you all the way from an absorption in the external world of career and parenting (if that is your choice) to a sense of freedom that comes from shifting your focus inward.

Plateau

Most of us find ourselves in midlife enjoying a stable platform. The trials of moving from adolescence into a full sense of adulthood are safely behind us. Our orientation is comfortably outward. And the basis for our ego development is how we are perceived in the world. We are motivated, our path is clear, and our purpose is understood.

For me, family vacations during this period were activity intensive. Whether sailing, hiking, or attending ball games, the emphasis was always on having “fun in the sun.” Accomplishments and their tangible rewards made my ego feel “safe” as well, even if there was a turn in the road just ahead that I didn’t see coming.



Early Rumbblings

Somewhere in our 50s we begin to sense a disconnect. What felt like a clear connection between effort and reward now seems less apparent. There are the beginnings of an inward tug, a subtle demand to pay more attention to our inner landscape. Larger questions begin to loom, such as: *Who am I outside of my roles at work and home? What am I doing that truly matters? How am I helping others?*

These are the early warning signs that change is ahead and, if heeded, will be seen later on as gifts. If, instead, we resort to denial and its kissing cousin, distraction, the symptomatic clues will develop into something more debilitating to our physical and mental health. Ironically, this is also commonly the time when our external work is in full-flourish mode, necessitating increased time and attention. Like the cartilage in a runner's knee, our flexible sense of self is caught in-between two hard places, and isn't fully reconciled to either.

My choice of activities during this stage became increasingly more introspective: music, art, yoga, reading and even some meditation. Our family vacations were now split between having fun together, and personal retreats for me – a direct reflection of the push/pull I was beginning to feel.

Crossroads

As the challenges of change intensify, we either choose to prepare in earnest for transition into the after-work years, or we go deeper into denial and distraction. But what does it mean to prepare? What are we preparing for?

In sum, we are beginning to shift from an outward gaze to an inward gaze – from a guidance system that keys off of the external environment to one that takes its cues from our inner being.

I spent many years honing the basic skills that drove my success in the middle years – in essence, an outwardly focused pursuit of achievement through a goal-centered, future-oriented, strategic and predominantly rational orientation to life. Now I felt an urgency to become more reflective, using skills that were instead open-ended, present-oriented and heart-centered.



Decision Point

Finally, we retire from full-time employment. If we've done our preparatory work, the still-budding capacities of introspection are strong enough to override feelings of loss and move us instead toward a sense of gain. There is indeed the potential for opening to a fresh and glorious life chapter.

But it often comes at a stiff price. Psychologists tell us that before creating a whole new sense of who we are, and what we're here to do, we must first let go fully of the life we have lived and how we lived it.

At this point, I knew that the only way out was through. Jumping in deeper, I became certified as a yoga and meditation teacher, which both enhanced my own contemplative practices and launched me into my next stage: helping others.

Rebirth

With continued practice, a sense of awakening floods in, heralding a newfound life-chapter. We learn to better open our hearts, to even *lead* with our hearts. There is a form of ego relief as we move more clearly into a felt reality bigger than the confines of our own sense of self.

If that sounds too abstract, think of the rewards in terms of good health. Research shows that as we age, there's a direct connection between our ability to let go of a rigid sense of self and feelings of being truly reconciled, truly happy. In addition, researchers say that those among us who experience high levels of happiness also enjoy bodies and minds that are freer of pain and disease.

Freedom

We all desire to become free – to be a slave to nothing and to no one, especially to our own expectations and conditions. The self-trust we have developed in moving diligently through the various stages brings us right to freedom's door. And as we learn to open it with vigor and greater frequency, the benefits of abundance emerge. We are peaceful, able to feel deeper levels of compassion and empathy, and to engage freely in unconditional love for ourselves and others.



The journey, for me, was definitely worth the effort. May you feel that as well, and may you reap all the rewards that are yours.

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