

Exploring the Gifts and Opportunities of Mid-Life

A Jungian Perspective

By Marla Estes

In our youth-driven culture, the specter of mid-life looms for some as an ominous time of regret or grief for what might have been, lost opportunities, roads not taken, and things that will never be. Carl Jung, however, has left us with a further perspective. His view was that the first half of life is spent learning how our world works and establishing ourselves in it. The second half of life is when the real work of individuation, of “soul-making” can begin: becoming all that we can become. Usually by mid-life, we have enough experience and inner strength to see where we’ve been and where we might be going, so we can start connecting the dots, and begin making sense of our own particular journey. A “mid-life crisis” becomes a crossroads: we can stay unconscious and resist the realizations and changes that our essential self is hungering to complete or...we can wake up.

It is common these days to hear that we need to strive for wholeness and integration. But what do these words mean and how do we get there? Jung offers a road-map, breaking the territory down into regions to be traversed: ego, Self, persona, shadow, and anima/animus.

By Self, Jung means our authentic self, which is also connected to a larger force, whether we call it God, Allah, or the Tao, and the collective unconscious. The point of working through aspects of our personality is to live more from this center of who we really are, by making more of what is unconscious conscious.

In my view, the word “ego” has been maligned. In some circles, it has become something negative, to be avoided. In Jungian terms, a healthy ego helps us navigate between our inner experience and our outer experience. It’s a grandiose ego that gives a bad name to this part of ourselves. An undervalued ego is not much better, and one of the tasks of mid-life is arriving at an accurate assessment of ourselves, neither inflated nor deflated. What often blocks this connection between Self and ego are persona, shadow, and anima or animus.

Persona

We relate to the outside world through persona.

Persona is the mask we wear to interface with the outer world. Working with our persona necessitates our waking up from “consensus trance,” the ways in which we have been conditioned by parents, family, school, religion, and the culture at large. How much of what we believe and how we behave are truly ourselves and how much have we adopted in order to comply with the world that we were born into? This is one of the many questions we have the opportunity to explore in the mid-stream of our lives.

Psychoanalyst Karen Horney coined the term the “tyranny of the shoulds.” When beginning our inner work, this is a good place to start. Finding ourselves saying or thinking “should” or “supposed to” raises a red flag. We can ask ourselves: whose voice is really speaking, ours or someone else’s that we’ve incorporated into our operating system?

“Do anyone’s insides and outsides match up?” asks a young boy from a novel by Jonathan Safran Foer. This matching up is called congruence, and working towards congruence is one of the tasks of wholeness and integration. We can look at the image that we may be wanting to project and why. Do we want to be admired? Are we afraid to be seen for who we truly are? Do we feel that we need to please to be loved? Do we always need to be right? To succeed?

Defense mechanisms are a way that we hold our personas intact. Part of the business of soul-making is to determine not only which of these we operate from, but what they are defending. Could the defense of anger hide shame or vulnerability or fear? Could the defense of hyper-sensitivity hide rage? Could the defense of arrogance hide feelings of inadequacy? The only way out is through—to loosen the glue of our defenses, we need to experience the painful emotions that are being guarded against.

Shadow

*The shadow is found in those parts of us
which are unlived or repressed.*

Jungian author Robert Bly calls the shadow “the long bag we drag behind us.” The shadow is anything, “good” or “bad,” that we hide or repress. The word “shadow” has the connotation of being something negative, like violence or anger or evil. But there are a range of things that get put into the bag. One could be creativity, perhaps put away when we were shamed by teachers. Another possibility is sexuality. It’s hard to imagine many in our Puritan society surviving with their innate sexuality intact. We see its shadow coming out in the collective American society, with the largest pornography industry in the world and sexual secrets that have been revealed by dogmatic religious leaders. Another example is seen in past generations when girls were taught to put their intelligence in their bag, so as not to scare away potential mates.

A beautiful example of shadow in film can be seen in the French movie *Man on the Train*. Two men meet. One is a retired schoolteacher, Mr. Manesquier; the other, Milan, is a criminal. Both are facing potentially fatal deadlines: a serious heart operation and a bank heist. The film reminds us of our mortality—such as becomes apparent in the mid-life passage—and puts an impetus on us humans. How much of our lives can we live in the time we have left? How much can we actualize of all that is inside of us?

Manesquier invites Milan to stay with him, as there are no hotel rooms to be had in the tiny village. The teacher has always dreamt of being a criminal. Milan teaches him how to drink hard liquor and shoot a gun. Manesquier even gets the opportunity to stand up for himself in a café. On the other hand, Milan has clearly never had a home or stability

in his life. Poignant is the scene where he asks Manesquier to lend him some slippers because he's never owned any. In another scene, Milan fills in as a tutor for a young student in the Manesquier's absence. In these small ways, both get a chance to live out parts of themselves that had been buried. This is a sound example of how the shadow need not be negative or destructive.

In the case of the emotion of anger for instance, there are even biblical examples of Jesus' anger at the injustices around him. Anger, used consciously, is a potentially very creative force. It is said the repression of anger that creates rage. Things left to rot in the black bag become twisted, perverse, and sometimes out of control because they are unconscious. (Robert Louis Stevenson showed this well in the classic Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde). We don't consciously know what is in our bag until we do our inner work.

Jung said there is gold to be found in the shadow. Integrating the shadow will bring back to us not only the helpful, "positive" traits that we have hidden away, but also whatever shunned parts that we need to integrate to move toward wholeness. We tend to spend a great deal of energy keeping these aspects of our shadow in our black bag. When we incorporate our shadow into our lives, much more vitality and aliveness come with it.

Anima/Animus

The anima and animus are what men internalize as "what is female" and what women internalize as "what is male."

Why are we drawn to those who we are romantically attracted to? Jung attempts to answer this question with his theories on anima/animus. Anima is the word that Jung coined to represent a man's inner template of the feminine, comprised of what he has understood from his mother or female caregivers as well as cultural views of women. Animus, in turn, is a woman's inner template of the masculine, created from the males in her life as well as societal images and beliefs. These concepts are also used in other ways, which won't be covered in this article.

Many of us at mid-life find ourselves unhappy in relationships, often spinning around in repetitive patterns. Sometimes we understand we are acting like our same-sex parent reenacting our parents' marriage, and see it isn't working for us anymore, if it ever really did. Here another task of mid-life presents itself. It's only by changing our inner landscapes that our outer life will change. As within, so without.

This endeavor of coming to terms with what we've internalized about the "Other" is even more challenging than working with our persona or shadow. Although all processes have their painful and sometimes devastating passages, working with our anima or animus through romantic relationship is the most difficult. It is here that we face things more mysterious, deep, and possibly more unconscious than in the other realms. It engages all parts of ourselves, including the sexual. It is all somehow more personal.

One of the first obstacles to face, in my view, is the myth of romantic love, which has become a virtual cult in our society. We are inundated with movies, songs, literature, TV

shows, advertisements and so forth, which dangle the illusory carrot of the romantic other in front of our noses, perhaps especially for women. We think the other person is going to save us, or give meaning to life. In Jung's terms, this is looking outside for what is inside. And we believe that the unattainable is obtainable, if only we could get it right.

What we project, fantasize or idealize onto the opposite sex (or "romantic other" in the case of same-sex relationships) gives us clues to our own unconscious workings. Most of us have had the experience of falling in love. And most of us have had the experience of being disillusioned when we see the person for who he or she really is. We can pinpoint our projections in the difference between who we believed we fell in love with and the reality of who that person actually is. There is a wealth of information in that gap with which to do our inner work.

By using this map of our inner territory, we have the opportunity to engage in the process of not only healing, but of growing and evolving into our own fullest potential. As Jung said, "Everything in the unconscious seeks outward manifestation, and the personality too desires to evolve out of its unconscious conditions and to experience itself as a whole." We can make our way to this wholeness through explorations of our persona, shadow and anima or animus.