PARING DOWN LIFE TO THE ESSENTIALS
An Epicurean Psychodynamics of Midlife Change

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This article presents a psychodynamic hypothesis about a certain type of productive midlife change often to be observed in creative individuals. This model is called paring down life to the essentials and is connected to the Epicurean tradition. It is exemplified by analyzing the autobiographical narrative of Charles Handy, a leading business philosopher, who at midlife left his previous employment to dedicate himself to writing about the search for meaning in a capitalist world. The psychodynamic interpretation of this process dialectically bridges between Elliot Jacques seminal interpretation of the resolution of the midlife crisis as acceptance of mortality and Ernest Becker’s theory that the denial of death is one of the deepest human motivations—a hypothesis strongly corroborated by empirical research. Focusing life on a heightened process of creation at midlife is shown to reflect both death acceptance and denial of death. It is argued that this model for midlife change could be of importance in contemporary consumerist culture.

Keywords: midlife, existential psychology, death-acceptance, death-denial

There is a common denominator to midlifers in the Western world, a group that at present roughly coincides with the cohort generally known as the baby boomers (AARP, 2002). They are faced with the amazing increase of life expectancy that has occurred throughout the 20th century. It has risen from less than 50 to around 80 in the developed world. This means that the average midlifer (for the sake of argument, we will define this as the age group from 40 to 60 years) has another 30 years of life ahead.

The assumption underlying this article is that increasing life expectancy will necessitate life changes at midlife for a large proportion of people at midlife (Giarini & Malitza, 2003). In the same way as many midlifers are likely to experience divorce, a growing proportion will experience other major changes, among them, career change (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008).

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1 To avoid the cumbersome “person at midlife,” I suggest the use of the neologism “midlifer” that, at this point, seems to be finding its way into written language.
The potential impact of longevity is well illustrated by the life of Elliot Jacques, whose seminal paper ‘Death and the Midlife Crisis’ (Jacques, 1965) introduced the very notion of the midlife crisis into psychological theory, psychoanalytic thinking, and into general culture as well. Jacques was 48 years old when he published the paper in which he argued that the resolution of the midlife crisis consisted in accepting mortality.

Jacques thesis was primarily based on the analysis of the life work of a large number of artists. He claimed that a very distinct development was to be observed when they reached midlife (the onset of which he took to be age 35). They moved from a jubilant, ebulliently optimistic view of life to what he called “sculpted creativity.” He interpreted this transformation to be a reflection of the integration of mortality awareness into their psyche and their creativity, and the resulting works were autumnal, darker and, in a deep sense, more realistic.

After this paper Jacques was to embark on the journey that was to turn him into one of the leading thinkers in the domain of organizational development. He was to publish another 12 books; together with his wife Kathryn Cason, he founded a company that disseminated his ideas and consulted with major profit and nonprofit organizations. He was to die in 2003, at age 87, soon after completing one of his most ambitious theoretical works (Jacques, 2003).

It would be tempting to say that Jacques’ life disproves his theory of the midlife crisis and its resolution. After all, the second half proved to be the most protracted creative period of his life. His creative energies came to their fullest fruition rather late in life when he wrote books like *Requisite Organization* (Jacques, 1997) and *Social Power and the CEO* (Jacques, 2002).

But I believe that such a conclusion would be simplistic. It is certainly true that Jacques placing the midlife crisis at age 35 does not fit with the current conception in which midlife is generally considered as an extended period covering, roughly, the two decades between age 40 and 60. And Jacques may have underestimated the extent to which the increase in life expectancy would influence our very conception of midlife (AARP, 2002), but this does not invalidate his psychodynamic hypothesis.

The question that arises is as follows: Are there psychological determinants that can increase the likelihood that career changes will be made fruitfully and lead to satisfaction both in life in general and in work?

Between Acceptance and Denial of Death: A Psychodynamic Hypothesis

This article sets forth a hypothesis about the psychodynamics of a particular type of successful midlife transition that bears a complex relation to Jacques’ thesis. On the one hand, I believe that there is something essentially right about Jacques’ idea that facing mortality is one of the crucial developmental tasks at midlife.

On the other hand, any discussion of awareness and acceptance of mortality today must relate to a psychodynamic hypothesis formulated by Ernest Becker in his seminal *The Denial of Death* (Becker, 1974). It is quite interesting that Becker’s thought has received close to no attention in psychoanalytic circles. One reason is certainly that Becker was not himself an analyst, and that he didn’t publish in psychoanalytic journals and editions. Another may be that Becker heavily relied on Otto Rank whose “defection” from psychoanalysis made him a anathema for the analytic literature for a while. This is quite unfortunate, because, as we will see, Becker’s work has become the cornerstone of a new discipline, experimental existential psychology (EEP), one of the most promising research
paradigm in personality and social psychology (Greenberg et al., 2004). It might be argued that this is the most strongly corroborated psychodynamic hypothesis in the present literature, and thus deserves the attention of psychoanalysis.

Becker argued that humans are characterized by a constellation unique in the animal kingdom, to the best of our knowledge. We are a product of biological evolution, and as descendants of mammals, we are endowed with most motivational systems characteristic of that group. For our purpose the most important is an instinctive terror of anything that could terminate our lives. But, as opposed to all other animals, we, as a species and as individuals know that we will die. This creates an impossible situation. As an animal cursed with extended time consciousness, we are endowed with a piece of knowledge that we are not equipped to live with.

Becker’s thesis was that the denial of death is one of the deepest motivations of the human species. This denial takes many forms. Becker’s emphasis was on what he called the heroic attitude. We desperately fight what we know. One way of doing so is to adopt a cultural belief system that protects us against death awareness. Another is that we try to create works that will immortalize us, or at least be part of a group that claims that is will survive into the eons.

Becker’s hypothesis has received extensive and powerful empirical validation over the past two decades. In the early 1980s, three young social psychologists, Tom Pysczynsky, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg (2003), came across Becker’s book and started to design experiments to test its central hypothesis. Their research paradigm was to expose subjects to stimuli with some mortality salience and testing whether they would increase their mortality defense mechanisms compared to control groups that were exposed to neutral stimuli.

The results were impressive (see Pysczynsky et al., 2003, for overview). Subjects exposed to mortality salient stimuli consistently showed a decrease in tolerance for other groups and belief systems and stronger adherence to their professed religious or political creed. While it took academic social psychology some time to accept the possibility that a grand psychodynamic hypothesis could indeed generate valid experimental results, Terror Management Theory (TMT), as Pysczynsky, Solomon, and Greenberg were to call their approach, has become a highly successful paradigm in social psychology. Its results have been replicated in hundreds of experiments conducted in many countries and across many cultural boundaries.

Their research paradigm has become the core of the burgeoning field of EEP. The hypothesis that symbolic immortality is crucial to the human psyche provides quite an interesting theoretical rationale for one of Erik Erikson’s most important and yet most underdeveloped concepts: the idea that in midlife generativity is the attitude that characterizes the healthy individual.

In the second edition of Childhood and Society (1961), Erikson briefly states that if he were to write this book again, he would make much more of generativity, which now seemed to him one of the book’s most important hypotheses. The attitude of generativity for Erikson is the shift from preoccupation with personal life to preoccupation with the question what world we will leave behind to later generations. While this hypothesis has received a lot of attention and sounds intuitively true, Erikson never gave a rationale for it. EEP would suggest that generativity is one of the way through which we achieve symbolic immortality—both and acceptance and a denial of personal death.

This leads us to the question: How does Jacques’ hypothesis that acceptance of mortality is the outcome of successfully negotiated midlife crises relate to EEP’s thesis that in a deep sense human nature is adverse to the full realization of our mortality?
This article attempts to bridge between the two theses dialectically. It has been argued that the human psyche is endowed with an imaginative core that refuses to accept that the world does not suit our deepest needs and desires.

Even though it is not metaphysically possible for any of us to have been other than we are, we can dis-identify with all we are. We can dissociate ourselves from our bodies, our families, our biographies. We can imagine ourselves as being very different from what we are. The result is that we feel that there is an inner, self, the “I” which is more essential to who we are than the accidental characteristics of birth and history which have determined our actual fates. [...]

This imaginative creation of a self hidden from the outside world and untouched by the fate of the body is one of the paradigmatic strategies of what I will call the ontological protest of subjectivity. ... We can refuse to accept that we are who we ostensibly are by saying “I have the freedom and the power to shape myself and external reality according to my desire.” The centrifugal strategy is exemplified by the cultural narratives of the transformations from rags to riches, from wimp to sculpture of muscle, from misfit to famous artist. (Strenger, 1998a, p. 6)

The concept of the ontological protest of subjectivity is in tune with Becker’s thesis of the denial of death. It assumes with Winnicott (1963) that, even in health, the human psyche does not fully accept that the world is external, governed by laws not under our control. Along with Becker it assumes that the human protest against our temporality and finitude is the source of all specifically human creation. Because we can imagine that the world could be different, we create new worlds in science, technology, politics, and art.

This is where we reconnect to Jacques’ thesis. Phenomenological and clinical experience shows that there are shadings in the acceptance of mortality. Manic denial of aging and death often takes obvious forms ranging from excessive preoccupation with health and looks to large-scale cultural phenomena like the huge industry of so-called antiaging medicine and the lucrative boom in cosmetic surgery. We can also agree with Jacques that successful midlife transitions often lead from a more jubilant type of creativity in early adulthood to a more reflective and sculpted creativity at midlife and after.

Nevertheless, mortality acceptance is not an either-or affair, and the question is not whether we have fully worked through the depressive position or not and thus come to accept mortality in full. We might rather want to follow Winnicott (1963) when he argues that even in health there is a core that can never quite accept that we have not created the world. In saying so Winnicott certainly did not mean to imply that there is no difference between the psychotic, who claims that he is the god-like creator of the world, and healthy psychological functioning. In the latter case we consciously accept the world’s externality, while unconsciously preserving what Winnicott called the intermediary realm, in which the distinction of subjective and objective is kept in dialectical suspense.

I would therefore like to suggest the following amendment to Jacques’ thesis. There is indeed a certain change to be observed when, at midlife, mortality becomes more salient. Yet along with Becker and TMT we need to refrain from saying that this simply means that death becomes an accepted fact. The ontological protest of subjectivity never quite lets us acquiesce in mortality.

The first suggestion is to refrain from talking about successful resolution of the midlife crisis, and instead speak of well-negotiated midlife crises instead. This difference is not just semantic; it implies that mortality acceptance is not an either-or affair, but moves on a continuum between manic denial and the ability of calm contemplation.
Before continuing it is important to qualify the next thesis. I believe that it is unreasonable to assume that there is a single model that is likely to cover the great variety of existential situations that can be encountered at midlife. Jacques originally built his thesis on a very particular group, creative artists, who exemplifies Becker’s heroic attitude in its purest form. In what follows I will focus primarily on a similar group; midlifers who have made creative achievement the center of their lives.

Here, then, is my second suggestion: Jacques’ notion of sculpted creativity must be rethought taking into account Becker’s notion of the heroic attitude (Becker 1974, ch. 1). The creativity that characterizes midlife is not of necessity more sober or less ambitious. The lives of the two founders of modern depth psychology prove the opposite (Atwood & Stolorow, 1978). While neither Freud nor Jung were devoid of ambition before midlife, both of them began building the grand edifice of their definitive work from midlife onward—in both cases arguably as a way of dealing with the midlife crisis as Becker (1974, ch. 4) has documented in some detail. The same holds true of many other domains: in politics, business, the arts, and in many academic disciplines (even though more typically in the social sciences and the humanities), there are many examples for people who initiated their major projects from midlife onward.

In fact it may not be unreasonable to hypothesize that at midlife the need to create something that will create a lasting legacy acquires urgency, because the reality of death becomes more tangible. As a result life as whole, in many cases, becomes more focused. Anything that detracts from the central goal of creating a lasting legacy is called into question.

Midlife can initiate a process in which the questions are asked: “What am I really good at? What gives my life the most meaning? On what do I have to focus in order to leave a creation that has some lasting value?”

This creation need not be a work that is distinct of the midlifer’s life itself. The analogy between living a life and creating a work of art has been suggested by Michel Foucault (1984), who lived a truly philosophical life. Every aspect of his life, from his writing and teaching through his political engagement to his sexuality served definition of philosophy as finding out that we always have a little more freedom than we think as James Miller (1993) showed in impressive and convincing detail.

Foucault complemented this idea with his poignant definition of madness as manque à oeuvre. The state of madness is one in which a human being no longer feels that she has the possibility to link between desire and reality; no possibility of creating a life that she experiences in any way as her own creation. Madness is the most extreme expression of the sense of fatedness. There is no option but to create an alternative reality that is purely internal and divorced from actual life.

It is indeed often useful to look at a person’s life as that person’s central creation; the existential experience of having created a life that truly expresses a person’s sense of individuality can be called the sense of authorship (Strenger, 1998b). The analogy to art is quite strong: an artist endorses a work as truly her own by the act of signing it. This act expresses the feeling that the creation indeed expresses the fulfillment of the artist’s creative urge and her individuality. A sense of authorship over ones life, similarly, reflects the feeling that we have left a stamp on our own life, so to speak; that we accept it as our creation. Neither the sense of authorship nor the sense of having lived life as a work of art can be taken for granted. Many suffer from the experience that the raw materials of their lives simply don’t allow the creation of a life that is experienced as satisfying. They suffer from a sense of fatedness instead, that life has dealt them cards that cannot be played (Strenger, 1998a, 1998b).
At midlife the urge to create an *oeuvre* (not necessarily beyond living a life well lived) often necessitates a process that has affinity to Jacques’ notion of sculpted creativity. Sustained creation requires discipline; if during earlier periods of life we may harbor more of the illusion that we can be anything, do and experience everything, midlife often heightens the feeling that there is not enough time left in life to waste. Life needs to be organized around a central theme, the creation that the midlifer experiences as the center, the critical mass around which everything else is organized. Life needs to be pared down to the essentials.

This model bears an interesting analogy to a philosophical school that was very influential in Hellenic and Roman culture: Epicureanism. As opposed to the stereotype that associates this school with gluttonous hedonism, the historical teachings of this school were very different.

Epicurus and his disciples (Gaskin, 1995; Strenger, 2003) argued that freedom can only be achieved if we are relatively independent of the external world and its vagaries. Striving for freedom requires that we ask ourselves which of our needs and desires are truly essential to us, and which are not. Once we have come to the conclusion that many of the things we strive for, like riches, fame, and power, are not essential at all, we can restructure our lives around the needs that are essential. In addition to food, shelter, and sex, Epicurus put great emphasis on friendship, and Epicurean communities nurtured this kind of relationship with great care.

A central tenet of Epicureanism is its emphasis that the fear of death is irrational because death is not an event in our lives, and hence not to be feared—a thesis that stands in an interesting tension with Becker’s hypothesis of the denial of death. The essence of freedom for Epicureanism is the ability to pare life down to essentials. This process takes a particularly interesting form when creation becomes the center of a refocused life—reflecting both the acceptance that time is limited, and the desire to leave behind works that will survive their creator. I will try to show how this illustrates the dialectics between Jacques’ view of sculpted creativity at midlife and Becker’s hypothesis of the denial of death.

Case Study: Charles Handy, From Manager and Professor to Business Philosopher

As an exemplification of this dynamic we will now turn to the life of Charles Handy, in many ways a colleague of Elliot Jacques. In 2001 Charles Handy was voted number two in *Thinker’s 50* list of leading business thinkers in the world. He became a household name for many when he published *The Age of Unreason* in 1989. He is a particularly instructive example for us, because he has documented his midlife transition in *The Elephant and the Flea* (Handy, 2001). He has done so in his wonderful, down-to-earth, witty style devoid of pomp that does not even vaguely resemble magical transformation tales that are so common in the business literature.

Handy describes the first half of his life as a series of learning experiences. He was the son of an Irish Parish Priest who took over his dioceses when Handy was two years old and would stay there until his retirement 40 years later.

Handy is very refreshing in describing some important junctures in his life as coincidences rather than planned decisions. At high school he studied Greek just to keep company to a friend, a decision that later led to his receiving a scholarship for classics at Oxford, which was of crucial importance given his family’s financial limitations.
After finishing his degree, Handy did not really know how to make a living. Hence, aged 23, he accepted a position at Royal Dutch Shell without knowing anything about the oil business, business management, and certainly not about the Far East where he was first placed. He learned about management and organizations on the job and does not hesitate in pointing out the funny aspects of this process.

Soon his ability as a teacher and mentor were recognized by the company, and he started a teaching career that led him to MIT and then back to London in 1967, where, at the age of 35, he cofounded the London School of Management, where he was a professor.

The death of Handy’s father became a turning point. Handy, in his early forties, was doing well, in demand, teaching, meeting people, being invited to fancy business lunches, and doing a lot of consulting, in brief “a success,” as he writes.

His description of his father’s funeral, devoid of sentimentality, is nevertheless moving. He had always been somewhat disappointed by his father, who had turned down larger urban dioceses and stuck to his country position. He was greatly surprised when hundreds of people turned out for the funeral, even though his father’s death had not been well publicized. He wondered how many of the people he now saw at the dozens of occasions at which he was lecturing would be at his funeral and began to realize that his father, in many ways, had left more of a mark than he, the son, had ever realized.

Briefly he considered going to a theological seminary. Returning to London he consulted with several bishops, and he expresses gratitude for their comment that he would serve God better “as a business professor than in a dog-collar” (Handy, 2001, p. 28).

Nevertheless Handy felt that it was time for a change. He moved from business school to becoming the warden of Windsor Castle, an institution founded by the Church of England and members of the Royal Family. It was devoted to seminars for leaders on wide ethical and religious issues. Handy felt that he was reconnecting to his upbringing, that he was focusing his life on issues of meaning and value.

But he soon started to feel uncomfortable because he was accountable to the Center’s board, and, as he said, he was never very good at working under bosses. “I was unhappy and stressed,” he writes, “[and] that took me to the psychotherapist in the first place. I discovered only then that I needed him to explain to me that my problems might be because I had not fully understood what sort of person I was. ‘Know Yourself’ was the maxim of the ancient Greeks, inscribed over the temple of Apollo at Delphi. I now believe that is difficult to do until you have gone through the process of knowing who you are not. That takes time, but in my midforties I was nearly there, having crossed several roles and careers off my list” (Handy, 2001, p. 29).

Handy didn’t like working in organizations, even though he had become an authority in understanding them. He had started his career as a manager, but he was, at heart, a man of the spirit and the intellect rather than a man of action. He gives great credit to his wife for encouraging him to leave his position, even though he had no idea how he would make a living.

At age 49 Handy was unemployed, by choice, for the first time since age 23 and made the jump into becoming a freelance writer and lecturer. He describes the months after his fateful decision without idealizing them; they were difficult. Used to having his schedule filled for months ahead, he gazed at an empty appointment book, and the phone hardly rang. He neither had the business card nor the institutional affiliation that brought engagements. While he had hated the social occasions forced upon him by his former employers, it had been more comforting to be invited and hating it, than not to be invited at all. Finally, Handy had no financial assets worth speaking about: no inheritance, no accumulated capital, and no significant pension.
Why then, did Handy make the step to cleaning the slate and starting a new life? He never thought that his previous occupations were wrong choices or had not helped him to gain knowledge of the world and of himself. But at midlife he felt that it was time to pare down his life to its essentials. He was later to tell people that the secret of the good life was to live a deep and enduring passion, and he felt that he was missing out on his (Handy, 2001, pp. 157–159).

Handy’s decision was neither impulsive nor devoid of inner logic. He had already published some books, most notably *Understanding Organizations* (1976). He knew he could teach, he knew he could lecture, and he had amassed a wealth of experience as a manager and professor. Nevertheless his move was not easy: he describes himself as rather shy; calling people for the sake of making contact goes against the grain of his personality.

Handy by no means knew that he would become one of the most respected business thinkers of his time. He does not describe his developmental trajectory as an inevitable journey toward success. He even says that if his literary agent had not insisted on the title *The Age of Unreason* (Handy, 1989—his title had been *Changing*), his second career might not have taken the turn it did.

He just knew that he was not living the life he should be living. By clearing his schedule and moving to a purely self-generated mode of work he sought to truly become Charles Handy, and deep inside he knew that his true vocation was philosophical, and he was willing to take considerable risks to live this vocation. From then on, his creativity burgeoned: he has written 17 books from age 50 to age 75 and is still going strong.

Handy created a special *oeuvre* by combining a deep understanding of macro developments in the capitalist economy and society together with a deep concern for its spiritual substratum. Because he understands the economy well, he does not get lost in generalities of “connect to your spiritual energies” or “humankind needs to care more about mother earth.” Together with his wife he embarked on several projects in which he identified both urgent issues and the concrete possibilities that ebullient hypercapitalism produces.

The relationship with his wife, Elizabeth Handy, plays a very important role in Handy’s narrative of his midlife change is. He makes very clear that he could not have done what he did without his wife’s partnership. Elizabeth made her own midlife transition from being a couples’ counselor to her true passion: portrait photography in parallel with Charles. Several of their later books were cocreations of the couple (Handy & Handy, 2001, 2006).

Handy narrates their central creation as their lives. *The Elephant and the Flea* is primarily a book about how to live life right. Handy puts great emphasis on how to structure life: how to divide life into work that is paid, work that focuses on the house, family and work that centers on developing the self and the mind, and the Handy couple have turned their lives into a creation that involves all these spheres.

The *Psychodynamics of a Type of Midlife Change*

The initial catalyst for midlife change can take many forms. Sometimes the event is external; a midlifer’s job may be threatened or lost; a spouse may raise the option of divorce; a parent or close friend dies. Sometimes there is no identifiable external event, but a change in inner constellation. One of the best-known phenomena is career burnout, and the analogue of burnout in relationships, the realization that a marriage no longer works (Malakh-Pines & Aronson, 1988). Sometimes a “round” birthday (40, 45, or 50) generates the realization that death is coming inexorably closer.
The period of inception is always difficult, because, inevitably, the realization that life no longer works is not accompanied by awareness of possible solutions. Hence, the first signs of inception are sometimes symptoms rather than a conscious realization that a change is imminent. Depression and anxiety are the most common symptoms, followed by hypochondriac preoccupations, or sudden obsessions with sports, the possibility of plastic surgery, or other ways of dealing with aging by technical means.

In Handy’s case the period of inception was initiated by his father’s death, often one of the defining experiences of midlife. Parents, in a sense, continue to protect us against death awareness by their very existence. “It is not yet my turn” seems to be our, often unspoken assumption, while they are still alive. We may be concerned about their health and well-being, and at times preoccupied by the knowledge that they will die at some point. But they are also the buffer between us and death, symbolically if not in actuality.

Handy’s description of his reaction to his father’s death is indeed instructive. He makes it fairly clear that his first reaction was one of guilt. He felt that he had not appreciated his father enough and experienced guilt about having judged him for not making more of his life than he could have. His first impulse of following his father’s steps and becoming a priest is a nice exemplification of the mechanism described by Freud in his “Mourning and Melancholia” (Freud, 1917/1957). Because there is unresolved anger and guilt, we may try to keep the parent symbolically alive by identifying with him or her.

After this initial reaction, Handy continued to feel that he was not quite doing what he should be doing. He realized that teaching and writing about business per se was not quite right for him. While he had achieved a good understanding of the business world and had become an authority on organizations, he did not feel that this fulfilled him. So, as a first step, he decided that continuing as a professor in a business school was not quite right for him.

While Handy’s development is unusual in its success and visibility, it is by no means unique. I have observed a number of developments in which midlifers made substantial changes even well into their sixties (Strenger, 1998b, ch. 5). It is important to emphasize that in none of these cases the transition was miraculous. As in Handy’s case, there was strong evidence for talents, inclinations, and passions. More than anything, these people felt the overwhelming need to become most truly who they felt they could be. They no longer wanted to invest energies in activities that did not serve what they felt was the essence of their lives.

As in Handy’s case, some financial sacrifice was necessary. Some of these executives made reasoned decisions, together with their spouses, about what in their lifestyle was essential, and what they could do without (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). Freedom at midlife often allows us to find out that much of what we had thought was absolutely essential (“how do you want me to do without my $20,000 membership in the golf club?”), actually isn’t.

Paring down life to the essentials requires us to ask what we want our lives to be really about. Questions at midlife can be quite radical: What are my deepest concerns? What matters to me? What is my place in the world? They touch upon the essence of who we are and are correspondingly quite frightening. This is neither easy nor without risk. But we always need to remember that the risk of not living our lives fully carries a price tag that can be immeasurably high: not to live the second half of our adult life as passionately as we could.

Here we come to the point where the proposed psychodynamic hypothesis is closely related to Elliot Jacques’ thesis about resolving the midlife crisis and his idea that sculpted creativity characterizes midlife. Handy began to sculpt his life in the way Michelangelo
describes the process of sculpture: chipping away the superfluous pieces. He pared it down to the essentials.

For Handy the central theme was to find meaning in an increasingly capitalist world. Handy had realized that increased competition in a global capitalist economy was forcing organizations to rid themselves of any excess weight and to cut down the core of fully employed workers to the absolute minimum. Handy’s prediction (1989, 1996), which turned out to be right on target, was that this would dramatically change the structure of employment in developed economies. A much larger proportion of the work population would have to learn to think of itself as essentially self-employed and to learn how to market itself.

Handy did not end with this prediction, though. He presented very interesting thoughts on how what he called the portfolio life could and should be lived. His main argument was that it was a mistake to see work exclusively as defined by financial remuneration. Instead, he took self-development through reading, study, and other means to be an essential ingredient of work; the same goes for investment in family, house, and a central relationship, mostly marriage.

Generativity, Creativity, and Flow

There are interesting analogies between Handy’s biography and Jacques’. Both truly found their mature, unique voices in their late forties, when each of them, in their respective ways, realized what their deepest talent was and turned it into a vocation in the deep sense. Jacques’ left England for Canada, distanced himself from organized psychoanalysis, and focused exclusively on organizational theory and consulting. For Jacques, paring down life to the essentials meant both more writing and widening his contact with the external world by building a company that disseminated his ideas. Handy, as we saw, quit organizations to focus on social philosophy.

Paradoxically, the process of heightening focus at midlife may be attributable no less to the denial of death as it has with acceptance of mortality, as Jacques would claim. The question then remains what a life’s central theme is. What is the activity, the role that constitutes the organizing factor of a person’s life? What is the life domain through which a person feels that her individuality is expressed, and through which she can contribute to the world most effectively and meaningfully?

The biographies of Freud and Jung are instructive (Atwood & Stolorow, 1978; Ellenberger, 1970). Freud at age 40 underwent a strong crisis following his father’s death in 1896. A variety of hysterical symptoms made life quite difficult for him. His attempt to cure himself went through delving into the dark sides of the unconscious, and this initiated an almost uninterrupted period of creativity until Freud’s death in 1939.

Jung’s midlife transformation took a similar direction. After an intense friendship and collaboration with Freud, he came to the conclusion that he could no longer continue being Freud’s disciple, and that he needed to carve his own way. The break with Freud initiated a protracted crisis in which Jung went through what Ellenberger (1970) has called a creative illness, which initiated Jung’s most dramatic period of creativity and his emergence as a truly independent and seminal thinker.

We can see a distinctive pattern here. An event at midlife triggers mortality awareness. The result is a move in the direction of increased individuation. Life becomes more focused on independent creation, even though this focus entails a price: protracted
isolation for Freud and Jung; financial insecurity for Handy, and the separation from psychoanalysis for Jacques.

Becker’s theory leads to the following interpretation: the event that increases mortality awareness leads to an increased need for some type of defense that strengthens the human denial of death.

For a particular group of people, the most effective defense is immersion in a process of creation that is fed by the hope that its result will outlive its creator. I am focusing here on thinkers whose main work is writing, but there are, of course, many other examples: the creation can be a business, a political movement, or a building. The focus of life on creation in Becker’s view is a direct result of the increased need for an indication that death will not make the person disappear, and I have described two cases in which such increased death awareness at midlife led to far-reaching psychodynamic changes (Strenger, 1998b, chapter 5; Strenger, 2009).

Becker’s idea of the denial of death can also be used to shed new light on Erikson’s (1963, 1964) notion of generativity, which he took to be midlife’s defining feature. Listening to oneself at midlife often leads to growing concern for society and the world we live in. Handy’s mature reflections on the spiritual needs of the age generated some of his most important work and earned him the distinction of generally being regarded as a “business philosopher.”

Handy widened his concerns to a truly global scale. What makes Handy stand out in the landscape of leading business thinkers is his preoccupation with the dimension of meaning. On the one hand he argued that those who will really make a difference are driven by true passion—a thesis that is not unique, but Handy gives it an interesting slant. He defines himself as a “reluctant capitalist” and is very preoccupied by the spiritual dimension in work. He has consistently argued that disregarding this dimension has not only personal, but also large-scale implications.

Looking at the notion of generativity from Becker’s point of view creates an interesting angle. Redirecting focus from the self’s immediate needs to its place in and contribution to the world at large can serve our need to deny death. Focusing on the world that we will leave behind, we implicitly take the stance that our actions now will leave a mark beyond our personal deaths. This can be done in many ways ranging from mobilization for ecological causes or improving the educational system to the creation of a creative legacy that will contribute to culture and knowledge.

How does this relate to Jacques’ thesis that the resolution of the midlife crisis entails acceptance of death and finitude? The answer is complex. On the one hand, the two theses seem to contradict each other—and to some extent they do. Becker sees the focus on creation as a heroic gesture of defiance against the fate of finitude. It is as if the creator says “I know that I will die—but I will fight to my very last breath against this fate. I will create works that outlive me, and will beat death!”

On the other hand, the process of paring life down to the essentials seems to be based on an acceptance of death. It is as if the midlifer says “I know that I will die, and I am aware more keenly than ever that my time on earth is limited, and I cannot waste it on anything inessential. I must focus and concentrate on the task that is uniquely mine, because I have hardly enough time to do what I feel I’m meant to do.”

As suggested at the beginning of this article, I do not think we need to decide which of these interpretations is right. They stand in dialectical tension to each other, and the psyche, as Winnicott has argued, indeed has the propensity to live with such tensions well.

I would like to add one final element to this model. The process of concentrated, sustained creation is likely to engender the state of mind that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
(1990) has called “flow.” By this he means to state of total immersion in an activity in which a person is highly skilled and experiences as meaningful and valuable. Through ongoing research for more than 30 years, Csikszentmihalyi has come to the conclusion that flow is the state most highly correlated with a general feeling of happiness.

Phenomenologically, flow is primarily characterized by a lack of self-consciousness. Reemerging from a flow experience we are likely to say something like “I wasn’t aware of myself for hours!” Flow therefore counteracts two aspects of the human condition that Becker most strongly associates with existential terror: self-consciousness and awareness of time.

Paring life down the essentials and focusing on creation serves multiple functions: It liberates us from awareness of self and time; it allows us to be immersed in an activity that we experience as intrinsically meaningful. Along with Jacques we can say that it allows us to symbolically come to terms with our mortality, while at the same time, it sustains our defenses against mortality awareness.

As said at this article’s beginning, there are good reasons for the fact that very little systematic theorizing of midlife. Given the great variety of existential situations at midlife, no single model is likely to provide a developmental path appropriate to all of them. The model of paring down life to the essentials is no more likely to be suitable for all than any other. Nevertheless it is interesting and intriguing in that it goes against the grain of our increasingly global consumerist culture. It is a model that, in the midst of surging concerns about natural and human ecology, may prove to be important for this troubled time in human history.

References


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