

Welcoming the Crisis of Meaning

For some people, a crisis of meaning becomes most intense at mid-life. They've spent half their life striving, straining, building for the future and one day they realize: the future is here. This is it. This is the life I've been looking forward to. I'm not a kid anymore. I'm an adult.

And I still don't feel like I've made it.

Jungian analyst James Hollis argues in his book *The Middle Passage* that this realization is at the crux of the mid-life crisis. It's a crisis of meaning, of pointlessness. The realization that youth is gone or fading fast and we still haven't "*got there*". Perhaps we have had a goal and realize that we'll never make it. "*I'm not going to be Prime Minister.*" Perhaps we have reached our goals and don't feel the payoff we had anticipated. "*Okay, so now I'm the big successful lawyer with the fat paycheck. Why do I still feel empty?*"

The crisis can be tremendously anxiety-provoking. Some of us respond by leaping backward into youth: buying the sports car, having the affair with the 22-year-old, getting the tummy tuck. Others try to anesthetize the worry with alcohol, or worse. Still others spiral downward into depression.

Hollis suggests that crisis of meaning can be an opportunity, not just a threat. It's a chance to look inside and discover our core values, the things that are really important to us, and to make them the centrepiece of our lives.

Hollis' idea is that when we first reach adulthood we have scant notion of how to be an adult. Naturally enough, we look around for examples and suggestions. "*Amy over there looks confident and is headed for medicine; maybe I should try that.*" "*Dad wants me to be an accountant and I don't have any better ideas, so...*" We spend much of our early adulthood trying to live up to these external images, taking our cues from the world around us and ignoring our own inclinations, talents, and desires.

It works...for a while. We have a few successes, learn the roles we have chosen, and look like we're getting somewhere. Maybe fulfillment is just up ahead. But by the time we reach midlife we have proceeded far enough along this path that we begin to suspect that the road just continues on and on and never gets any better. Despair. Anger. Fear. And a thought: "*Maybe fulfillment just doesn't exist; it's a myth, like the Emerald City.*" Disillusionment.

But with the death of the illusion comes the opportunity to see the reality. Having tried to live by other's standards and ideas of life, we are granted another chance to "give up" on the mad chase for the approval of others, and instead look inward. At that point we can find our own meaning, and forge a new adulthood, one dictated less by the expectations of others and more by our real interests, talents, and values.

Can you identify any aspects of your life that you adopted to satisfy someone else's expectations? What are they?

Does it seem likely that your difficulties are linked in any way to these areas of your life?

If so, could this situation be turned into an opportunity to re-examine that area of your life so that you can pursue your true interests? How?

Now may not be the time for such a move, especially if you are depressed or especially discouraged. Major decisions are often best left for a time when your mood is improving, and you may not have the energy or stamina to handle a major life upheaval.

But now may well be the time to begin thinking about your personal style, your real interests, and the kinds of choices before you.

Additional reading:

Hollis, James (1993). *The middle passage: From misery to meaning in midlife*.
Toronto: Inner City Books.