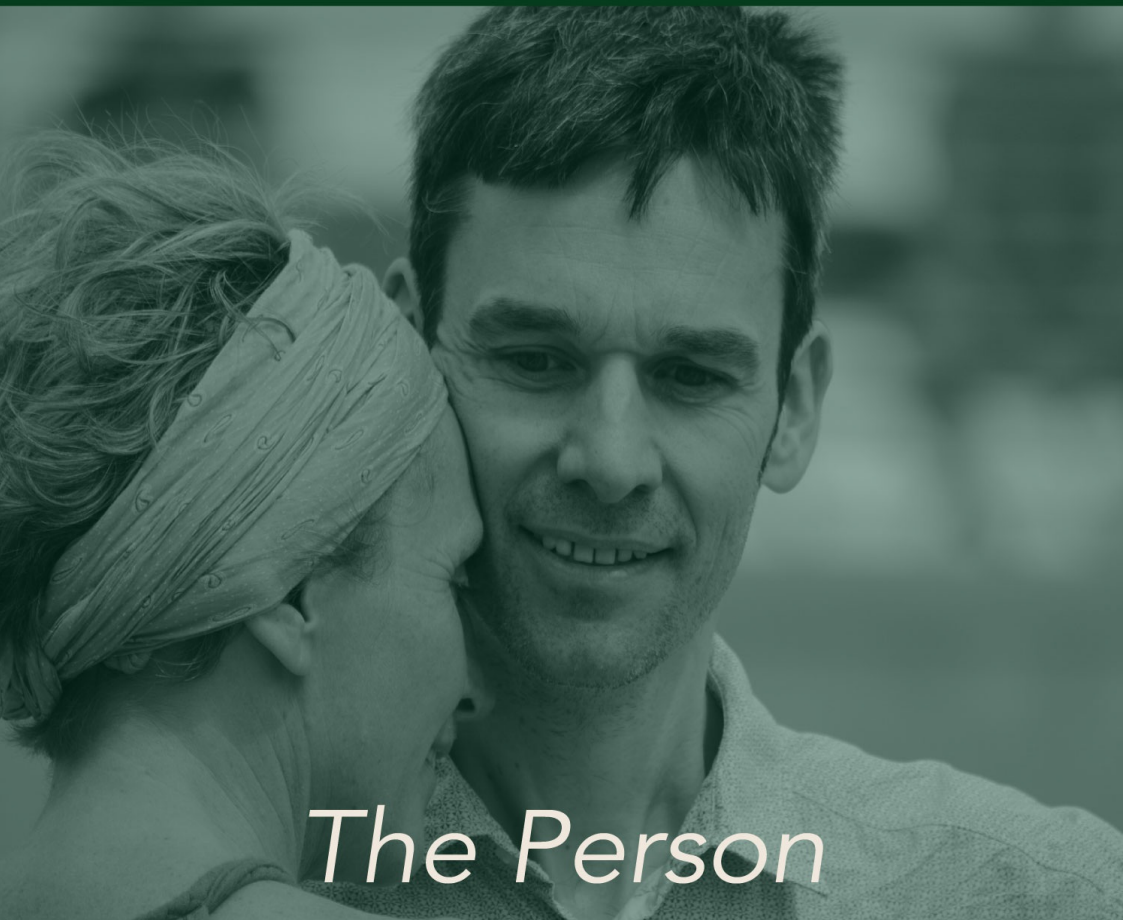
Theodore Lidz

The Middle Years



The Person

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From *The Person* by Theodore Lidz

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The Middle Years

If we think of life as a play, the middle years lead up to and away from the climax of the plot. The characters have all been on stage, and the theme and countertheme introduced; as the third act ends, the play reaches its denouement, and when the actors enter their forties their fates have been settled. The play then begins to move toward its inevitable conclusion. The critical transition may not be recognized at the moment, but some time around the age of forty, most persons gain insight into the way their lives are going to turn out. Can goals be achieved, dreams fulfilled, satisfaction attained? Will one's most significant relationships provide fulfillment and happiness? Must one come to terms with just getting by, or accept disappointment and disillusionment? Many persons refuse to be passive players, acting out the script of the Master Playwright. They will rewrite the ending. At the start of middle age there is still time to revise, time to start afresh or, at least, to salvage the years that are left—and many will try.

The middle years start when persons achieve maturity, usually in their early thirties, having gained the skills, knowledge, and assurance needed to settle into their careers and family lives. They are caught up in the challenge of making the most of their abilities and opportunities. They soon move into the period most people consider the "prime of life," the years between thirty-five and fifty-five, during which they reach the midlife transition or crisis—a period of stocktaking, and perhaps of reorientation, occurring around the age of forty—and become *middle aged.* Middle age is usually a period of fruition, but often a time of coming to terms with where one's life is going. Then, as persons enter their mid-fifties, the efforts and creative capacities of most, though far from all, persons diminish as they tend to coast on previously gained skills and accomplishments until they reach old age, which is rather arbitrarily considered to start at about sixty-five.

Our efforts to encompass almost half of the life span in this chapter will be rather inadequate and, in places, somewhat ambiguous. Although there are clear relationships between people's ages and the various critical turns during the middle years, landmarks vary with education and social class, and there are notable differences between the lives of men and women.[1] The middle years have been changing markedly for women, because they are usually occupied with being mothers for far fewer years than

formerly, and because the two transitions in women's lives that had formerly been highly upsetting to many, the "empty nest" and the menopause, are now often welcomed.

MATURITY

People reach maturity in very different ways. When they were in their twenties they consumed much of their energies learning skills needed at work and for raising children. Some were still trying out jobs if not careers. Others felt they were just getting started and were not yet ready to make a major effort. Some changed occupations or spouses, having become dissatisfied with the results of decisions made before they knew themselves or the world. They were likely to believe that life belongs to youth and to consider anyone over thirty incapable of understanding what they sought in life. However those who went to work after completing high school may have become firmly settled and have come to terms with what they expected from life before they reached thirty.

In their early thirties, most persons begin to settle down and make deeper commitments to their work and families. Now almost all women who have children are devoting a large part of their time to raising them. Although most couples have their first child when they are in their earl) or mid-twenties, there may now be a trend for women, particularly highly educated women, to marry later, or at least to delay having a child until they near the age of thirty. Now persons are likely to experience the pleasures of mastery. They have gained assurance and are "on top" of their work whether in an occupation or in taking care of the home and children. The work may be arduous but some tasks have become routine and experience provides answers to many problems. The mother can keep her little child engaged in helping as she cleans, or listening to a story while she washes the dishes, a story she had made up to tell an older child. The man at work has acquired ways of approaching various colleagues and no longer must prepare precisely what he is going to say at a luncheon meeting. However, though a woman now finds caring for a child easier, if she has several children the tasks of managing are multiplied, and if the man is moving up the ladder, he becomes confronted by more complicated problems.

It seems simpler to generalize about men's lives than women's as people move toward middle age. With his wife occupied with their children and employed only part-time, if at all, the man is now the main support of his family. He is now out to establish himself in his career. As Levinson *et al.* (1974) have

noted, at the same time the man settles down he also becomes involved in "making it." He sets markers on the way to his goal and dates when he expects to reach them. He is in a race, the so-called rat race, toward success, and if not competing with others, he is timing himself. A fortunate person may feel sufficiently sure of his abilities to be able to disregard competition. A pharmacologist with a large pharmaceutical corporation could say, "I don't wish to sound conceited but I know what I do and can do, and I know the potentialities of most of the others in the laboratory. The firm would be foolish if they did not place me in charge of our division as soon as they could clear the way for me." Others enjoy the competition, some because it induces them to use all of their capabilities, some because it requires them to devise means of looking better than they are or of jockeying into a favorable position with the boss. The sorting out has started, even though definitive decisions concerning a person's future remain to be made. Seniors recognize the bright, the highly motivated, the creative, the leaders. A young adult may have had one or more mentors who taught and guided him and smoothed his way, but now he may acquire a sponsor who picks him out as a protégé, grooms him as a successor, backs him for promotions, or recommends him when a good position opens elsewhere.

Although the man in his mid-thirties is now a mature person capable of assuming responsibility, he is usually still a junior member of his occupation—a manager who carries out the plans of an executive, or an assistant professor who teaches required courses planned by others. At home, however, he is a decision maker and planner. Here, he carries the responsibilities together with his wife and seeks to provide a model for his children. Here, lie gains self-assurance in his ability to look out for others. Of course, for the many who know that they will never gain acclaim or even very much attention in their occupations, the esteem and love of a wife and children may be particularly important. A telephone linesman who realizes that his pay will increase from year to year but that he will never advance beyond foreman feels that his children admire him for what he is, and some of his major satisfactions come from coaching the children's baseball team and taking the family on a trip in their camper each summer.

As men who expect to become successful approach the age of forty, they feel constrained in their junior status. They have abilities and ideas and wish to put them into operation. It is not simply a matter of advancement. It is time to become one's own man (Levinson *et al.,* 1974). The chief is a fine man but he is not always right. He is too conservative and does not see the opportunities. He holds on to the reins and does not realize that the younger man could do the job as well if not better. If there is no place in the

organization in which the individual can do things on his own in his own way, he begins to look elsewhere. Other firms need young executives and heads of departments. The man who is ready to come into his own may now break with his sponsor (much as the adolescent separates from his family); lie finds fault with his boss; feels unappreciated or misunderstood; and, unable to contain his resentments, breaks away in anger. He may seek to become a competitor who by his achievements shows that he has been unappreciated. An associate professor of internal medicine accepted the chairmanship of a department in a much less prestigious medical school in the same city, and set out to develop a superior department. He confided to a coworker that he was out to woo the best students from his former university to his department, as a way of getting back at his former chief who had promoted a rival to section chief.

The opportunity to be one's own man, to be relatively free to direct oneself and the organization, or some division of the organization, provides a sense of accomplishment and sets new challenges that mobilize energy and enthusiasm. New facets of the personality are utilized and develop as the individual assumes a leadership role. Some who feel that they have now reached their goals accept the prestige and diminish their efforts; but others become disappointed when they find that they are still limited by constraints that keep them from completely fulfilling their aspirations. The new chief of research for the corporation finds that he must compete with advertising, development, sales, etc., for funds to develop his new process; or that the president does not think the process will lead to increased earnings. It is a rare and fortunate man who finds his career strivings free of constraints by middle age, or at any age.

Even those who feel assured of success may change careers in midcourse. Indeed, some may feel free to change only after it has become clear to them and others that they are not giving up because of failure. A man who had demonstrated his abilities by planning and completing a large housing development for his father's corporation resigned to go abroad to study musical composition. His major interest had always been music, and he was an excellent pianist. But he had not pursued a musical career because his father considered his interest in the piano an effete activity, implying that he lacked the courage and stamina to make his way in the building industry. Only after he had demonstrated his ability to compete effectively in his father's industry could he feel free to follow his own interests. Another highly capable man surprised the heads of a multinational corporation by resigning in response

to a major promotion. He had been placed in charge of a large manufacturing plant in a different part of the country. It was the fifth time in twelve rears that it had become necessary to relocate his family to move along the path to the presidency of the corporation. His wife felt rootless and one son was in difficulty at school. He decided that, if he were so well thought of in one of the country's leading corporations, he could find a rewarding and useful position in the city in which they were living. A major university was happy to recruit him as its treasurer.

Women frequently change the course of their lives some time between the ages of thirty-five and forty. They may resume their education or careers when their two or three children are in grade school; or, if they wait longer until the children are more self-sufficient, they will become engaged in some significant activity outside the home when the last child is in school. A woman may know precisely what she wishes to do, and have kept preparing by study or part-time work while the children were small. A woman with a master's degree in psychology who had kept abreast in the field and gained experience by assisting at the university a few mornings a week started working for her doctorate as soon as her children were all in school. Many women will return to work to help finance their children's college education, or simply to improve the family's standard of living. There are many alternatives, and a woman may not be completely certain whether she is starting on a career or simply pursuing an interest, and may need time to find out. A woman who followed her youthful ambition to become a high school English teacher soon found that she had enough of adolescents at home, and became a magazine editor instead. For another, an evening course in photography, taken as a diversion when her two children were small, blossomed into a major interest and occupation. Whatever the precise course of action, these years are increasingly becoming a time of transition for women. They often embark on the new activity bursting with enthusiasm and interest after release from being tied to the home for years. Those who return to college, expecting to feel uneasy among young students and unable to compete with them, often find not only that their experience and maturity give them an academic advantage, but that young women seek their friendship and advice.

Women professionals—physicians, architects, musicians—who had been pursuing their careers in low gear, so to speak, while occupied and preoccupied with small children, now feel free really to devote themselves to their professions, even though motherhood will still remain a major activity. Some women, even some who had prepared themselves for professions, now seem ready to enjoy the benefits of being

supported by a husband. They decide to pursue interests as amateurs, rather than pursue a career. They enjoy running charitable organizations together with friends; or, having been initiated through becoming a member of the school board, they find that politics can become a fascinating activity in which they can gain power and prestige even if they do not wish to hold public office.

MIDDLE AGE

Stocktaking

Middle age is properly a time of fulfillment, when years of effort reach fruition. However, it is commonly ushered in, around the age of forty, by an interlude of stocktaking and uneasiness—the midlife crisis or transition. As many women have already undergone a major transition, the crisis occurs more frequently in men. The turn into middle age involves a state of mind rather than some specific bodily landmark. It is initiated by awareness that the peak years of life are passing. Persons realize that they are no longer starting on their way; their direction is usually well set, and their present activities will determine how far they will get. James Baldwin (1967) wrote:

> Though we would like to live without regrets, and sometimes proudly insist that we have none, this is not really possible, if only because we are mortal. When more time stretches behind than stretches before one, some assessments, however reluctantly and incompletely, begin to be made. Between what one wished to become and what one *has* become there is a momentous gap, which will now never be closed. And this gap seems to operate as one's final margin, one's last opportunity, for creation. And between the self as it is and the self as one sees it, there is also a distance, even harder to gauge. Some of us are compelled, around the middle of our lives, to make a study of this baffling geography, less in the hope of conquering these distances than in the determination that the distances shall not become any greater.

A man had been occupied and preoccupied with making his way in a career, and with providing for his wife and children. A woman's life had centered around the care of her children and in making a proper home for them. Now it is time to look where their lives have been going, for new patterns of living are required. Then, too, parents have died or retired; and persons realize that they are now members of the older, responsible generation. They have moved to the center of the stage.[2] The consciousness of the critical transition is abetted by awareness that the body is slowing down. It is no longer the well-oiled machine that quietly responds to the demands placed upon it; it creaks and groans a bit. The woman sees the menopause looming before her when her generative capacities will come to an end. What has been

achieved? And what do the years ahead still hold? Middle age is obviously not a bountiful time for all. For some the regrets and disillusion mount, often mixed with a bitter resentment that life has slipped through their fingers. Still, even for the fortunate, the balance of life is upset by awareness of the passing of time and the limits of life's span. There is a recrudescence of a type of existential anxiety, an awareness of the insignificance of the individual life in an infinite of time and space. Now, in middle life, a stock taking and a reevaluation occur. Two of the world's literary masterpieces start on this note. Dante opens the *Divine Comedy* with the line "Midway in the journey through life, I found myself lost in a dark wood strayed from the true path." Goethe's Faust finds that although he has studied philosophy, medicine, and law thoroughly, he is fundamentally no wiser than the poorest fool, feels his life wasted despite his achievements, and makes a pact with Mephistopheles in his attempt to salvage it. The lives of ordinary mortals beyond this juncture are more prosaic than the wars in which these two giants attained salvation; but in a personal rather than a universal context, the path often leads to pacts with the devil before a resolution can be found. For some, middle age brings neither fruition nor disappointment so much as angry bewilderment as they find that their neglect of meaningful relationships in the frenetic striving for success now makes life seem like "a tale told by an idiot—full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (*Macbeth*, Act V, Sc. 5).

Although the usual course of life continues along a well-trodden path, with ample satisfactions and rewards found on the way, with hopes and ambitions tempered by experience, and doubts and concerns countered by religion or philosophy—summing up and reassessment are characteristic of middle age, even when they do not lead to any notable changes.

The stocktaking does not simply concern success or failure in achieving goals. It has to do rather with inner satisfactions, with considering whether what one has achieved is compatible with one's earlier dreams and ideals; with any disparity between one's way of life and what truly provides a sense of self-esteem (Levinson *et al.,* 1974).

Satisfactions of Middle Age

When life has gone well, when ambitions and expectations have not exceeded potential, or when modifications of goals either downward or upward have been made in accord with reality, the middle

years can bring great satisfactions. Most persons are now at the height of their potential. They have passed their physical prime but they use their heads effectively and have learned to conserve their energies. They know what will work and what will be a waste of time and energy. The executive has learned which functions can safely be delegated and to whom, and he can make many decisions on the basis of past experience. The artisan now rarely encounters an unfamiliar job, directs assistants how to tackle a task, and reserves for himself those aspects that require special skills or involve risks. Now persons know their areas of competence and they have the satisfaction of feeling in control in them. Some enjoy the prestige and power and may feel impelled to seek after more and more power over others, but the sense of mastery provides pleasure to less driven individuals. The more successful persons have not simple acquired knowledge and skills but also wisdom in making decisions, in approaching tasks, and, particularly, in convincing others. A chemical engineer in his fifties managed to overcome a major crisis in his industry by inventing a totally new and highly complicated process and then putting it into operation, all within a few brief years. When reviewing how he had managed the accomplishment, he explained that, because of his intensive and prolonged experience with related chemical processes as well as his knowledge of the theory involved, he had been able to figure out, with considerable assurance, how various chemical reactions would turn out, even while lying in bed at night, simply by calculating mathematical formulae, thereby eliminating much trial and error. Less experienced engineers, or those without his special knowledge of theory, would have required many time-consuming and costly trials. He went on to point out that he had not only to convince himself that he dare eliminate trials, but also later to convince the president of the firm that it was worth taking the risk of spending a million dollars in constructing a model plant.

Persons are now established in their work. For some, particularly in executive circles, the period between forty and fifty, or even fifty-five, may involve intense striving to capture the elusive top positions or properly to climax a career by amassing the wealth or prestige that has come within grasp. Demonstrated capacities may lead to greater demands, expectations, and responsibilities, and open new opportunities. Others become involved in political jockeying to win out over a competitor. The strain of the competition can be wearing. However, as far as the vast majority is concerned, if individuals have not yet reached the peak of their achievements, they can see how far they will get, and move toward it as part of the career pattern. In the factory, they have become foremen or foreladies, or at least old and

experienced hands, with security and some special prerogatives. In a profession, persons are established members whose experience is valued by younger colleagues. They are no longer in direct competition with younger members, but can take a parental attitude in guiding the next generation. They need no longer prove themselves from day to day, for they are credited with past accomplishments. Those whom they direct or supervise respect and seek to satisfy them. They see the realization of their efforts and can relax occasionally and depend upon their experience.

Adolescents or even young adults commonly consider that their parents' lives are over; that they have had their day in a remote past, but now, in their forties or early fifties, the "heyday in the blood is tame" (*Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. 4); that their lives are without passion and without a future. Some middle-aged persons feel the same way about themselves. But each period of life differs from the others, offering new opportunities and new ways of experiencing as well as new tasks to be surmounted. The more mature can accept the advantages and pleasures of middle life together with the limitations it imposes. Persons become pathetic and sometimes even ludicrous when they insist on seeking the pleasures and rewards appropriate to a younger age. Some fear displacement by the next generation; some now begin to live through their children; but others are still very much engaged in pursuing their own careers and life patterns and may well feel that with responsibility for children gone they have a new freedom to focus on their own lives and interests. As we have noted, many women find new interests and enthusiasms now that they can pursue their old careers again, or enter upon new vocations or avocations now that their children can look after themselves. The "empty nest" syndrome—the mother's depression after the children all leave home—is still fairly common, as we shall consider later in the chapter, but most women now find other satisfying interests. With parental functions largely completed, persons are likely to find related gratification in a different type of generativity. They have reached a stage of life when they can be the mentors. They wish to have heirs in their fields of endeavor to whom they can bequeath their knowledge, and who will carry their interests into the next generation. They are interested in the future of their firms, university departments, hospitals, towns, in which they have invested their energies, and they hope that these institutions will not only flourish after they leave, but continue along the lines they have pursued. Erikson (1959) has considered such *generativity* a crucial aspect of middle life, with *stagnation* as the negative outcome.

Some Critical Problems

A critical aspect of middle age concerns coming to terms with one's accomplishments: not only to accept the limits of achievement and not become embittered and depressed over what one considers inadequate recognition of what one has done, or of one's personal qualities, but also to be able to enjoy the prestige attained and to accept the responsibilities that accompany it. Soon after a much desired promotion or some specific recognition of their abilities some persons become depressed—the "promotion depression" that catches all by surprise. Classically, the man is caught in an outgrowth of a pattern that had its origins in his childhood—he feels vulnerable in surpassing his father. It is a version of the childhood fantasy of displacing the father with his mother; and old fears haunt him that father will take vengeance, and he punishes himself for his hubris. Commonly, however, persons resent being burdened with a new load of responsibilities. They had striven to reach the goal, but the goal turns out to be somewhat of an illusion. It is no haven but requires more work, more decision making, more responsibility. They cannot turn from it without loss of self-esteem, but they resent the expectations others have for them, the demands of the boss or the organization, or a spouse's ambition that carried them beyond their limits.

When most people become middle-aged they still have adolescent children. Although adolescents require less actual care, they usually require considerable attention and can become sources of great concern to parents. Memories of their own adolescent problems return to haunt the middle-aged parents. They struggle between wishes to set limits and protect, and their realization that each generation must gain experience on its own. They know that there is a way between control that is resented and protection that is desired, but how to find it? They seek to understand their children according to the ways and concepts of the young generation, but have trouble finding any sense in them. They may also feel envious of their children's vitality and their growing sexual interests and attractiveness, and relive the missed opportunities of their own youthful years. Now the parents must recognize the individuation of their children in order to foster their attainment of firm ego identities. However, some will seek to bind one or more children to them, feeling that their own lives will be meaningless without a child or needing completion through a child. Others may use a child as a delegate (Stierlin, 1974) to achieve what they could not achieve, or to live out the sensuous pleasures they could not permit themselves. Such usages of adolescent children are very likely to lead the children to revolt against the parents or into serious

problems that can blight parents' lives, but they also assure the children that they remain central to the parents' lives.

When things go well, however, the children will eventually cease to preoccupy the parents—a time that may indicate the actual start of middle age for many parents. The change usually affects a mother more than a father. The nurturant functions, which have constituted her cardinal interest and shaped her activity for two or more decades, come to an end. Concerns for her children may remain a dominant interest, but they are in the form of thoughts and feelings and no longer take up much of her time and effort. Some mothers feel that their major life function has been completed. Though a mother may be pleased and even relieved at the release from so much work and responsibility, she usually also has regrets and feels an emptiness in her life. A mother may feel that the children to whom she has given so much have become neglectful and ungrateful, and misunderstandings can easily arise with children whose dominant interests are now their own spouses, children, and careers.[3] The capacity to shift cardinal emotional investments seems essential to a satisfying middle and old age. The withdrawal of a major "cathexis" or emotional investment from children may be the first such shift, but others will follow inevitably as parents, relatives, and friends die.

The Physical Changes

Middle age is a period of considerable significance both for medicine and for psychiatry. Whether persons admit it or not, although they may be in the "prime of life," they have passed the peak of their physical abilities. Hair is growing gray or sparse, wrinkles appear, the abdomen gets in the way when they bend. Slowly but surely, they realize that their bodies no longer respond to their demands without squeaking. The paper must be read at arm's length and then bifocals become a necessity. The wear and tear of life add up and begin to be felt. The knee injured in youth stiffens at times and aches in bad weather. A back injury may be incapacitating every now and again. The drink before supper is no longer taken simply to enliven, but to counter the dull fatigue felt after a days work. The slow increment in weight requires reluctant attention to diet, for a gain in weight at this age is considered hazardous to health.

Changes in the various organ systems occur as processes of repair and renewal lag and lead to

degenerative changes that increase the proneness to illness and dysfunction. For the man, the years between forty and fifty hold the threat of sudden death from coronary occlusion. Such heart attacks are less likely to be fatal later in life after a gradual narrowing of the coronary arteries leads to development of anastomotic arterial pathways by which the heart muscle can receive blood after a large vessel occludes. Malignancies take their toll and women are advised to check their breasts for masses regularly and have annual gynecological examinations. Even persons who remain healthy become familiar with hospitals through visiting friends, and find that they can no longer avoid scanning the obituary columns if they wish to keep track of acquaintances. They may gain some secret satisfaction from surviving enemies, or from noting that they are outlasting acquaintances or that one's own obituaries will read better than those of a colleague. Middle-aged individuals become aware that ill health and even death are potentialities that hover over them and those close to them. Such awareness consciously or unconsciously influences the pattern of life. Some slacken the pace of their activities to keep in step with the body's capacities or infirmities, whereas others are provoked to renewed exertions in order to get more or further before it is too late. Psychologically disorganizing illnesses become less common, for the personality has become more firmly integrated and an ego identity established; but depressive reactions become more frequent, and they are related to regrets over the way life has gone, accompanied by resentment toward those who have caused frustration and by anger against the self for failing to meet expectations.[4]

The Menopause

The woman's loss of nurturant functions is compounded by the loss of generative capacities, another function that has been so much a part of her existence and so fundamental to her self-esteem. Even though most women are prepared for it, and may even welcome it, the menopause forms a major landmark in women's lives, and a woman is likely to feel, perhaps only unconsciously, that she will be elderly after it occurs, and an empty woman. The menopause occurs at a mean age of forty-eight or forty-nine; but often in the mid-forties and occasionally even earlier. Most women are psychologically preparing themselves for it as they turn forty. It is common for women to believe that the menopause comes in the early forties or even the late thirties, and some women oblige by suffering from appropriate symptoms ten or fifteen years ahead of time. The difficulties may ensue both from the physiological

changes that occur with the cessation of estrogen secretion and from the emotional impact of the "change of life."

The changes in hormonal secretions, with a marked decline in estrogen secretion as the climacteric starts, upsets the physiological homeostasis and produces an array of physical discomforts that varies in degree and duration from individual to individual. The menses may cease abruptly or taper off over a rear or longer, with periods missed or coming irregularly; the flow may be sparse or unexpectedly profuse. The woman may become uneasy, for the irregularity can interfere with plans, lest she be caught unawares. Although an occasional woman may experience no discomfort during the climacterium, vasomotor instability often causes considerable trouble during the menopause and occasionally for some years thereafter. Waves of hot feelings that sweep over the woman, termed "hot flashes" or "hot flushes," are most common, but unexpected sweating, blotching of the skin, and feelings of being unpleasantly warm much of the time can also be annoying. Episodes of faintness or dizziness make some women feel insecure, and headaches can become troublesome. Most women are simply uncomfortable and uneasy, but a few become severely upset. Although the emotional lability may be provoked by the hormonal changes, for some women the menopause requires a realignment of attitudes about the self that cuts deeply into the personality and its defenses. It is a time of emotional vulnerability when neurotic difficulties can flare into symptoms, particularly depressive symptoms. However, such difficulties were more common when large families were desired or when a woman's prestige and self-esteem were closely related to her generative capacities. Now, when a few children are sufficient and women have other gratifications in life, relatively few women suffer from notable menopausal problems. Most are pleased to be free of the bother of menstruation and of the possibility of a late, undesired pregnancy. Nevertheless, even though a woman experiences only mild physical discomfiture, she will feel changed by the event and will have readjusted her inner balance.

Although attitudes concerning the menopause have changed greatly in recent decades in the United States, old traditions persist among some ethnic groups. Folklore has engendered the belief that the menopause causes serious emotional and mental instability and that a woman is fortunate if she does not become seriously depressed or insane: the physical symptoms are amplified into an almost unbearable suffering, another burden to which the deprived sex is subjected. Another common belief, held by men as well as women, that the woman loses her sexual responsivity and ability to enjoy sex with

the menopause, may lead a woman to feel that she will become an undesirable old woman whose husband may properly seek gratification elsewhere. Such concepts have no basis in fact. Indeed, there is now ample evidence that, in general, the woman's potential for sexual responsivity throughout middle age is greater than the man's.

We noted that menstruation, even though resented as a burden, constituted a desired symbol of femininity (Chapter 10). The woman feels the loss of this badge of womanhood—an indicator of her capacity to reproduce—that has provided feelings of worth. In contrast to the situation in childhood, she now has no prospects of a future flowering to offset feelings of emptiness and deprivation. She knows, indeed, that she will lose more than her menses and fertility: her breasts grow flabby, the subcutaneous adipose tissue that softens her contours gradually disappears, her skin becomes wrinkled and sags, and pouches appear under her eyes. Ultimately she will again assume a rather sexless appearance which she may be better able to conceal from others than from herself. Her narcissism suffers, for she will no longer be able to use her physical charms to attract. She may mourn for the person she had been. Helene Deutsch (1945) believed that "almost every woman in the climacterium goes through a shorter or longer period of depression." It may be scarcely noticeable in a woman who feels that her life has been productive, who finds new sources of fulfillment and pleasure in middle life, or it may be apparent only in bursts of frenzied activity utilized to ward off recognition of the changed status; but many women will experience a downswing before they reorganize themselves.[5]

Fortunately, the physical discomforts of the menopause can be largely dissipated by replacement therapy with estrogens. The woman no longer need fear distressing symptoms. At the present time the medical management of menopausal symptoms varies according to the opinions of the gynecologist or internist: some prefer to let mild or moderate symptoms continue without replacement in order to permit a new balance to become established as soon as possible. However, discomforts can easily be checked if deemed necessary.

Currently, an increasing number of gynecologists institute permanent estrogen replacement therapy at the start of the climacterium. They not only consider that it is unnecessary for women ever to experience menopause, but that various other manifestations of aging can be prevented. The subcutaneous tissues do not atrophy, protein loss is countered, the breasts remain firm, the genital tissues

do not atrophy, and the loss of calcium from the bones that leads to bowing of the spine and loss of height is slowed. As such measures have been undertaken only in recent years, the long-term results and possible dangers cannot yet be assessed.[6] At present, it appears that the increasing longevity of women can be accompanied by preservation from many aspects of aging.

The Security of a Good Marriage

A good marriage provides great security, for both partners are certain of the affection of the person most important to him or her. They do not have to pretend, or extend themselves, or find new meaningful relationships but can feel settled with one another. The children are now more likely to be sources of pleasure than concern. If the spouses have one another, the disappointments of life are buffered. If others do not regard the husband as a successful man, at least his wife appreciates what he has done or tried to do. If the children seem to neglect their mother or have become hostile during their adolescence, her husband still loves her. Even if there had been friction earlier in the marriage, middle-aged spouses often come to terms with one another. Each knows that his or her way of life and wellbeing depends upon the other. Each has become accustomed to the ways of the other, and would feel uneasy with another. For many couples the sexual adjustment is more satisfactory than when they were young; perhaps it is less frenzied but they know the other's needs and tacit signals, and have found ways of satisfying each other. With greater control, skill, or artistry, the sexual act can bring more subtle pleasures.

However, some problems in sexual adjustment can arise. The wife may experience a heightening of sexual drive with the menopause; particularly if concerns over impregnation had interfered with her spontaneity she now feels a release to enjoy sex without worry. Then, too, the relative freedom from concerns about her children and from the fatigue caused by looking after them permits relaxation and renewed interest in sexual pleasures.[7] The husband whose sexual drive has been declining may not respond to the wife's increased interest. After the age of fifty or fifty-five, the man's sexual adequacies may decline rather notably, but he remains interested and capable under proper circumstances. However, the failures of potency that occur on occasion may upset him considerably and lead him to avoid further attempts except when he feels certain of success, and because of the psychic factors involved in male potency, self-consciousness can augment his difficulties. Such problems can lead a husband to seek extramarital relations in which he finds new stimulation. But a harmonious and

affectionate married couple can usually manage the shifts in sexual interests and capacities between themselves.

Restitutive Efforts

The man who is satisfied with where he is getting in his career, the woman who feels that she has provided a good home for her husband and children and has found stimulating interests to fill her life, the husband and wife who enjoy a harmonious marriage and have the affection and respect of their children—such persons can meet their middle age wisely and complacently and seek simply to round out a full life in the years that lie ahead. Still, the person who has few regrets or who has acquired sufficient wisdom to absorb the disappointments must be considered fortunate. It is not so simple to continue to meet life with dignity and integrity when envy, regret, and bitterness gnaw at one. Life is a one-time matter and it is difficult to cope with the feeling that the chance has been wasted. There may yet be time before old age brings infirmities, time to realize the life dreamed of in youth, to love and be loved, to gain the pleasure one has had to forgo, to win the fame and fortune one has envied—or, perhaps, simply to feel wanted by someone who cares, or to be free of carping criticism and blame for past mistakes. Middle age is notably a time when restitutive efforts are made. For some the grasping after the gold ring succeeds, but more often impetuous attempts bring further unhappiness. The final fling before the gates close[8] can disrupt a family and fill the last half of life with bitterness. The spouse becomes resentful and the children become disillusioned and unforgiving. The wife who is striving to ward off feelings of emptiness after the children have left and after her menopause becomes hostile and depressed when her husband has an affair with a younger woman. More marriages would be wrecked if many wives did not anticipate such behavior from their husbands in middle age and managed to forget or pretend to forget when their husbands realized that another woman does not provide the answer.

The narcissistic person, whose equilibrium has rested upon the admiration of others and in pride in youthful attributes, seems most prone to seek to regain adolescent capacities. A woman who was admired for her beauty and whose self-esteem derived largely from the glow of desire she could light in men's eyes felt displaced when her daughter was pursued by many suitors and when her praise now came for having an extraordinarily beautiful daughter. The mother had her face lifted, spent long hours at the beautician's, and began to dress more and more youthfully. She intruded upon the young men who

called upon her daughter, and sought to captivate them with her wit and physical charm. At times, it was hard to tell whether the young men were courting the mother or the daughter.

Strains upon the Marriage

These years can present a severe test to a marriage. With the children no longer a major focus of attention, the spouses are on their own again, largely dependent upon one another to keep their marriage alive and their lives meaningful after a lapse of twenty or thirty years. The children no longer provide diversion or activity, or serve as scapegoats for the conflict between the spouses. The spouses have more time together, which can be either a burden or an opportunity for increased closeness. Boredom comes easily after all these years together, and a number of persons will return to adolescent and early adult patterns of using sexual adventure as a way of averting ennui and loneliness. There is some increase in the divorce rate in middle age. However, a fair number of such divorces are not caused by new infatuations, or middle-aged flings, but rather because the couple had decided to wait until their children were grown before dissolving an unsatisfactory marriage. Although friends are often reluctant to see a marriage that had endured for so many years break up, and though it usually causes considerable unhappiness for one of the partners, such shifts of marital partners in midlife work out well for many. One or both partners have matured sufficiently to select a spouse with better judgment than he or she used in the impetuousness of youth. A person may even find that the second marriage is the real thing, the second choice being more suitable, and both partners are able to get off to a better start the second time. However, the tendency for repetition in the marital choice is striking. Often friends observe that the new spouse has characteristics very similar to the first. Then, too, the older man who finds a young wife whom he feels appreciates his virility, may well be marrying a woman who is seeking a father figure and who is relatively disinterested in the sexual aspects of marriage. Because of the imbalance caused by the higher death rate among men than women in middle age, more divorced women than men are likely to remain unmarried, particularly as they are much less likely to marry a younger spouse. A man is also less likely to remain unmarried after a divorce—or the death of a wife—because he is less capable of taking care of himself and a home.

Vocational Problems

People continue to change jobs throughout middle age, and the shifts can create difficulties in readjustment. The more satisfactory changes usually occur within a career rather than through shifting careers. Careers properly consist of a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of pay and prestige through which persons move in a reasonably ordered and predictable sequence (Wilensky, 1968). Persons are usually prepared for the next job in the hierarchy when they move into it. However, as persons move through middle age, their responsibilities are likely to increase as their energy and malleability begin to diminish; they are passed over for promotion and become resentful, or are promoted into positions that lead into blind alleys.

There are some careers that come to an end in middle age, and those who pursue them are in difficulty if they have not prepared themselves for new careers. An opera singer became a voice teacher and gained considerable gratification from the success of her students. In contrast, a tennis professional who became a coach began to find his days too arduous as he turned fifty, and marital troubles developed when he became reluctant to take his wife out evenings and ceased having sexual relations in order to conserve his strength. Others lose jobs because of increasing automatization or shifts in industrial needs, and the middle-aged are not welcomed into fields in which they are untrained; and middle-aged skilled workers tend to resist retraining.

In early middle age there is still time to shift vocations. As we have noted, many women not only change from their primary vocations as mothers and housewives, but enter new careers. Some men also decide that they can still start anew; but as the years pass, such changes become increasingly hazardous, for they come at a time in life when persons should be getting settled in what they have been doing rather than moving into a spot where they must prove themselves anew. There are many opportunities, of course, for successful persons. There is always a need for good, experienced executives. The successful corporation attorney is offered a position as head of a government agency; a university professor is made head of a foundation, etc. “Head hunters,” agencies that pirate executives for other corporations, may find an excellent opportunity for the competent but frustrated successful businessman. But there are few good places available for those who have not set made the grade. As middle age passes, most persons, whether executives or laborers, become concerned more with maintaining the position and security they have

attained than with seeking a better opportunity. Workers rely upon the union to protect them from displacement by younger persons and to defend their seniority rights when unemployment threatens. They learn to control feelings of resentment toward employers, to swallow their feelings when they are passed over for promotion, and find virtue in patience. As age increases, future security progressively takes precedence over opportunity. Other sources of self-realization must be found. Still, not all are wise or able to contain themselves. To some who have sought wealth, the stock market beckons—or the races or gaming table where luck may succeed when effort has failed.

Although when all goes well a person experiences relief from the need to prove himself constantly, success does not necessarily bring surcease from striving. Indeed, many successful persons tend to be compulsive, becoming anxious when they are not giving their best, while others have succeeded because they find and enjoy challenge in what they are doing. Still, it is easier to continue strenuous efforts when they are not taken as a test of worth. Some cannot accept being bested by youth or admit that age brings some limitations. A man who was invalided by a heart attack, and soon died of a second, described how his first heart attack occurred. He was a sandhog, extremely proud of his strength and his independence since early adolescence. He had been unable to accept the banter of the young crew he supervised and who referred to him as Grandpa even though he had just passed fort}-. He felt that to retain their respect as a foreman he must show himself as capable as any. When his crew was confronted by a particularly difficult task in moving a boulder in a tunnel, he insisted on showing how it could be done. Their entreaties to him to desist and let them do it only infuriated him. As lie tugged and shouted directions, he experienced a sudden sharp pain in his chest and collapsed. In the hospital he vowed that he would never live as an invalid and rely on his wife's support—and he never did. The industrialist may continue to expand his business as if his livelihood depended upon it. Indeed, some "oral" characters can never feel that their future supplies are secure. At first, they feel they will be haunted less by the specter of insecurity after they have made a million, but the million then seems peanuts and not security, and failure of an important business venture creates as much anxiety as if they could no longer feed the family. However, the pursuit of unnecessary riches even to the hurt of others brings high esteem in Western civilization.

Ill Health

The problems that arise from ill health in middle age form realistic difficulties often enough to require at least passing comment. Illness can temporarily disrupt the course of a life or require reorganizations of a life plan. The blood pressure rises insidiously and indicates a need to slow the pace; diabetes that starts after forty is relatively common and not usually serious but requires attention to diet. Some such moderate incapacitations can bring compensations. Sir William Osier is said to have remarked that one of the best ways of assuring a long life is to suffer a mild heart attack in middle age. The man gains a sufficient reason to cease driving himself and permit himself to enjoy living. He may have played golf only for the companionship, and now he can limit himself to a few holes and then sit at the "nineteenth hole" sipping a highball while he chats with friends. The wife of a man who had once been a prominent attorney considered that a mild heart attack had saved him from a serious depression. His practice had fallen off precipitously after the death of his partner, but he could not admit his inability to manage the firm and gain new clients. The family lived largely on his wife's inherited wealth, but without openly recognizing the situation. Her income would not have been able to offset his business deficit much longer, but he had been unable to give up his office and disclose the poor state of his practice to his friends and colleagues. His wife had helped maintain the pretense lest he become depressed and suicidal. The heart attack brought relief for both of them. His physician agreed with his wife that he was unable to continue his work, and he retired, occupying himself with legal research at home. The tendency to fall back upon ill health, either real or imagined, as a means of resolving serious difficulties presents a very real problem to physicians. The prop of ill health should not be removed incautiously. The reasons why a person needs it must be ascertained, evaluated, and removed before a physician insists that there is no need for the patient to refrain from his usual activities. On the other hand, persons can be made to despair and feel that their lives are worthless by overcautious efforts to preserve life.[9]

Children and Grandchildren

Even though children cease to be a major responsibility for the middle-aged couple, they are usually not lost to the parents and continue as a major center of interest. The parents who have given of themselves while fostering their children's growth and gradual emancipation from them now have children who feel free to return to them, and even to turn to them for help, for they have no reason to fear

losing their independence when they do. Relationships change as children become adults with whom parents discuss problems and from whom they may seek advice. Readjustments of relationships must be made when children marry, and it is unfortunate when parents feel that they have lost a child rather than gained one in the process. The arrival of the first grandchild will usually evoke some feelings of strangeness and perhaps something of a shock at becoming a member of the third generation. Grandparents are supposed to be old, but middle-aged grandparents do not yet feel old. The grandchildren furnish a new major source of interest; and if the grandparents can participate in raising them, they often behave differently from the way they did in rearing their own children. They feel more free to give and indulge, for they seek to be loved and needed by the grandchildren—sometimes to their children's despair.

Middle Age for the Unmarried and Single

However, not all persons marry. Some consciously prefer to remain single and others remain single unwillingly but, as we considered the matter in an earlier chapter, they usually have unconscious deterrents to marrying or unadmitted reasons for remaining single. There are many ways in which a single life can be satisfactory and even happy; but as the middle years pass, the advantages are apt to diminish. The daughter who has been the dutiful child and remained unmarried to look after her parents may have persevered in the hope of becoming the most favored child who would be properly appreciated after her siblings all married and left home; or perhaps the strength of the oedipal attachment prevented marriage: her parents absorbed her entire emotional life and she seems content to remain with them. Eventually, she finds herself saddled with the care of infirm or even senile parents who can no longer give her anything in return. The reward for being a dutiful child turns into a resented burden. When the parents' deaths eventually sever the relationship, she is unprepared to live on her own. Although it is easier for a bachelor to find a wife in middle life, he has often become too set in his ways to share his life with another. Moreover, according to Kinsey about fifty percent of men who have never married by the age of thirty-five are actively homosexual, in the sense that they have had some homosexual relationship within the year—a finding confirmed by clinical experience—which makes it even less likely that a middle-aged bachelor will be able to make a satisfactory adjustment to marriage.

The widowed and divorced increase in number, and fewer women find new spouses. Between the

ages of fifty-five and sixty-five, twenty to twenty-five percent of women become widowed; and because of the greater longevity of women, far fewer women than men remarry or find companionship with members of the opposite sex. Quite aside from matters of affection, middle-aged women have good reason to be concerned about their husbands' health. Widowhood usually brings a decline in the woman's social and economic status. People's social milieu is established in part by occupational status, and wives in general do not have the occupational status of their husbands. As the proportion of widows increases with age, intact couples find it difficult to include many of their widowed and divorced women friends in their activities. To find male companionship, many women discover that they must take the initiative, if not become aggressive and seductive, attitudes that are strange to them. Both men and women may find it difficult to remarry in their fifties and sixties. ways of interacting with a spouse have become set; children often consider them faithless to their dead spouse. Yet life is far from over in the fifties—or early sixties—and the single life can be very lonely.

The passage over the crest of life is a particularly critical period, a time of summing up in preparation for the second half of adulthood, and, as such, a time of further integration or reintegration. Women commonly change their way of life markedly as they return to vocations or start careers. In the transition from adolescence to early adulthood, individuals had become committed to a way of life. They have now lived it and are now mature—or are unlikely ever to become mature. Now, approaching the divide, they look back and also try to prognosticate on the basis of their experience. A man may try to climb still higher, change course while he still can, or decide which path of descent is safest. Whether persons make the most of the opportunities available or whether they begin to die slowly depends upon a wide variety of personality factors, but they continue to include attitudes related to the confidence, trust, and initiative inculcated in the earliest years. The realization that the turn toward the end of life has been rounded awakens anxiety and despair in proportion to feelings that one has never really lived and loved. The capacities to become mentors and sponsors, to become *generative* in developing social and occupational heirs, gain increasing importance.

As the middle years pass, the likelihood of reorganizing and reorienting diminishes. It becomes time to make the most of the way of life that has been led. Regrets cannot be waved away but they are futile: what life has brought must be accepted if the closing years are not to be wasted or become unendurable. Dignity, perhaps shaded by resignation, protects an individual against despair. When not

caught up in efforts to undo or redo, or to search after what has been missed in earlier years, persons can usually find and use the benefits that come with maturity, enjoy the opportunities it presents, and move toward bringing closure and completion to their lives in the years that still lie ahead.

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Notes

1 We must also recognize that relatively few intensive and careful studies concerning the middle years have been carried out in comparison with those of childhood and adolescence, and even of old age.

2 I recall an occasion when several medical school professors in their mid-forties received the news that a department head had died of a stroke; it was the third death of a senior faculty member within the year. They sat silently, a bit stunned, and then one looked at the others and quietly said, "Now it is up to us."

3 The "empty nest" syndrome can contribute to depressive illnesses in middle-aged women. The problem is likely to be most severe in divorced or widowed mothers, and particularly by immigrant or first-generation women who have not become well acculturated and whose families were, therefore, particularly important to them (Deykin et al., 1966).

4 Concerns over the meaningfulness of life in general, and of the course of one's own life, are not confined to intellectuals. A coal miner who was hospitalized because he was becoming increasingly incapacitated from arthritis expressed some suicidal ruminations. He was deeply disappointed because he realized that his life's strivings would amount to nothing. Raised in poverty by immigrant parents, he had entered the pits at twelve. He had become resigned to spending his life in the mines but swore that his children would become educated and lead a better life. Both his wife and he had scrimped and taken extra jobs whenever any were available. Now, at the age of forty-five he was an old and disabled man and had not saved enough to send his two sons to college. Even more disappointing, neither of his boys wished to continue beyond high school; neither was interested in their father's ambitions for them—that one become an engineer and the other a doctor. In actuality, it seemed apparent that neither had the capacity for a higher education; but the hopes that had given meaning to the miner's life had collapsed. He was resentful toward his sons, but he also blamed himself for having been an inadequate father.

5 The relationship of a woman's pride and self-esteem to the intactness of her body and particularly to her generative organs is often overlooked by gynecologists who can cause considerable unhappiness by expecting patients to assume a logical attitude toward the removal of the uterus or the ovaries in middle life. When the gynecologist finds a benign uterine tumor that requires removal, he may insist upon removing one ovary at the same time: the woman does not need it, one ovary supplies sufficient hormone, and the chances of developing cancer of the ovary is halved. However, many women cannot take this attitude and feel that they are being mutilated. All too often more radical procedures are carried out when they are not absolutely essential; the woman is "cleaned out" of her uterus and both ovaries, the gynecologist assuring her that menopausal symptoms can be avoided by estrogen replacement therapy. Somehow male surgeons tend to have relatively little regard for ovaries because in contrast to testes they are not visible. A rational approach recognizes how much a woman's uterus and ovaries are related to her feelings of worth (R. Lidz, 1974).

6 There seems to be a possibility that such replacement therapy may increase slightly the chances of developing cancer of the uterus.

7 In contrast, as Masters and Johnson (1966) have noted, a woman who has never gained pleasure from the sexual act may use the menopause as an excuse to avoid frequent sexual relations. These investigators have also found that sometimes the postmenopausal woman will experience pain on urinating after intercourse—a result of the thinning of the vaginal wall. They note that unless replacement therapy is used, a woman must have intercourse with some regularity after the menopause to maintain an adequate vaginal outlet and to prevent shrinkage of the vagina.

8 *Torschluss* is a syndrome recognized in the German language and literature in which a middle-aged person seeks gratification while it is still possible, and the term *Torschluss-panik* is used to describe the frenzied anxiety-driven efforts of a man to make the most of his waning potency by pursuing young women.

9 The point is illustrated by a story which, I believe, was told originally about the distinguished Baltimore internist Dr. Louis Hamman. A patient consulted with Dr. Hamman after recovering from a coronary occlusion. After Dr. Hamman had examined him thoroughly, the patient said, "My doctor told me that I must give up smoking, business, golf, sexual relations, and go to bed each night before eleven—is that correct?" Dr. Hamman agreed that it was sound advice. "If I follow it," the patient then asked, "will I live longer?" "That," Dr. Hamman replied, "I can't say, but it will seem longer."