

## **The Middle Passage – From Misery to meaning – by James Hollis**

### **Book review by Dave Spenceley TSTA – Oct 2017**

As I pass by my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday it seems very appropriate to consider this beautifully written short book by James Hollis. I first read the book some 20 years ago and it's central message been important to me personally and within my practice as a TA psychotherapist ever since. The book could well have been written by TA psychotherapist I am delighted with the ease of integrating the ideas presented from a Jungian perspective by Hollis with my own ideas which were developed with in a TA framework.

The Middle Passage is a rite of passage, a journey between early adulthood with youthful dreams, hopes and expectations into old age and facing the inevitability of mortality. Hollis states that many travel through life as if in a novel hoping that by the end of the last page we hope we will have understood what it was all about however many die without illumination. His invitation is to become conscious, accepting responsibility for our story and to risk the largeness of life to which we are summoned.

- a) *Who am I apart from the roles I have played?*
- b) *How do we acquire our original sense of self?*
- c) *What are the changes which herald the middle passage?*
- d) *How do we redefine our sense of self?*
- e) *What is the connection between individuation and relationship and commitment to others?*
- f) *What are the attitudes and behaviours which support individuation and facilitate the movement from misery to meaning?*

The first step towards making the middle passage journey is to acknowledge the limited lens we have been given through which to view our experience. This lens was provided by our family and culture and so if we entered life through any different family, time, culture and we would have received a different lens. As we grow we learn not only way to see the world through our own lens but to understand that is also the right and only way to see the world.

Many are violently traumatised within their families and culture, and develop severe character disorders. However mostly people are traumatized in varying degrees and ways which can be categorised broadly as experiences of neglect, abandonment, and by being overwhelmed by life. While external forces can play a major role in the development of the child's sense of self, the primary influence is the parent-child relationship. In the trauma the child has no way of saying "my parent has a problem which is impacting upon me". They can only conclude that life is dangerous, and the world is unsafe. 3 basic conclusions / interpretations are formed by the child:

- 1) A phenomenological interpretation of the tactile and emotional bonding, or lack of as a statement of how life is. This influences the ability to form trusting relationships with others, life and the self.
- 2) The child internalises specific behaviours of the parent as statements about the self. I am how I am viewed and treated.
- 3) The child observes the behaviours of adults and struggles and internalises not only the behaviours but also the attitudes about the self and the world.

Clearly as these conclusions are based on such limited views / experiences and their dependency on the parents the conclusions are magical and overgeneralised. The wounds and unconscious responses become strong determinants of the adult personality, a reflexive response to experience and he/ she cannot create a freely expressed personality. The Jungian perspective identifies reflexive, emotionally charged responses as complexes. The greater the intensity of the emotional charge associated with the complex the more power the complex has in the persons life. Some complexes can be protective others interfere with choice and can dominate a person's life. Complexes are unavoidable, unconscious, are charged with energy and operate autonomously.

This generates a split between our nature and our choices, leading to pain and suffering. The disparity between our inner sense of self and the acquired personality can become so great in midlife that it can no longer be suppressed or compensated for and decompensation occurs. Old strategies and attitudes no longer work. This needs to be welcomed as a powerful opportunity for renewal and grounding of the inner self.

The transit of the middle passage occurs in a fearsome clash between the acquired personality and the demands of the inner self. People make statements such as I don't know who I am anymore – and in effect their former self needs to die to liberate the new self and this process can create a great deal of anxiety. Travelling through this passage is essential to earn the vitality and wisdom of maturity, moving from a provisional life to adulthood and authenticity.

Jung stated that neurosis is understood as the suffering of the soul which has not discovered its meaning, consequently we are obliged to find its meaning. In long discussion Hollis describes how the child develops projections which may be expressed through symptoms such as depression. These projections are powerful and keep the larger questions of life at bay. To move into adulthood through the middle passage these projections must be dissolved. The most common projections are onto the institutions of marriage, parenting and career.

*The moment I heard my first love story I started looking for you,  
Not knowing how blind I was.  
Lovers don't finally meet they are in each other all along.*

Living with another slowly and automatically wears away at the projections onto the other who turns out to be mortal, just like us. These relationships carry such weight as they are the closest to replicating the original parent-child relationship. It is no wonder that so often people end up choosing people who closely resemble their parents as partners.

In parenthood many project their unlived lives onto their child, and Jung observed that the unlived life of the parent is the greatest burden the child must carry.

A career is also a significant vehicle to carry projections such as self-identity, nurturance, and transcendence. By midlife the career often can no longer sustain these projections and the dissatisfaction leads to the middle passage.

Five stages of projection, described by Marie-Louise von Franz:

- 1) The person is convinced that the inner unconscious process which is projected is genuinely an external process.
- 2) Recognition that there is a discrepancy between reality and the projection.
- 3) The person is required to acknowledge the discrepancy.
- 4) This leads to a requirement to accept that an error has been made.
- 5) The search for the inner origin of the projection and knowledge of the self.

In relationships this transformation requires:

- 1) Each person assumes responsibility for their own psychological wellbeing.
- 2) Acceptance of sharing their experience without reproaching the other for past wounds or future expectations. While also listening and hearing from the others regarding their experience.
- 3) Each must commit to sustained dialogue over time. Loving the otherness of the other is transcendent. This is not me plus you- rather it is a *we* that is more than our individual selves.

This collapse, acknowledgement and ownership of projections is always painful and requires encounters with dragons in the shadows and this suffering is a pre-requisite for the transformation of the self and the journey through the middle passage.

Dave Spenceley TSTA

Review of “The Middle Passage. From Misery to Meaning in Midlife” by James Hollis.

