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ENCOUNTERING LIFE

DISCOVERING WE HAVE LOST THE QUESTIONS

In today's world we have to *intend* to become adults. With affluence, birth control, and an absence of societal expectations, supportive rituals, and customs, our remaining in emotional childhood for extra decades and even for life has become easy. Nobody else can make this choice for us—this choice to become an adult—as adults in primitive tribes made it for their initiates. We no longer have outer circumstances that can save us from the necessity to make this choice personally. Driver's licenses, school graduations, sports teams, Boy Scout and Girl Scout activities, Outward Bound-type programs, menstrual cycles, and even pregnancies cannot bring about maturity on their own.

A successful arrival in adulthood means we have developed our personality into a cohesive form and we have taken up the mantle of a role, a place in the world that has a purpose. These activities reflect psychological maturity and bring about a change of attitude. Adulthood means we have become psychologically self-responsible, having left the state of non-responsibility and dependency that marks childhood and other youthful stages.

By the time we have achieved a purpose, a stable identity, and a place in the world, we may want to stop and breathe a sigh of relief. But life continues to push us with the imperative to grow and become. The fact is, we have found the common gold and are nearing completion of the tasks of the first half of our life and the beginning of the work of the second half.

This turning point comes to us unannounced, accompanied by small amounts of discomforting awareness. Generally, by our late thirties, we may begin discovering that the world we are living in is not quite the way we thought it was. The person we fell in love with turns out to be very different from what we had imagined and may actually seem like a stranger. The career that seemed so engaging turns out to be dull and almost pointless. As we make these discoveries, we may begin to wonder about the other aspects of our life. The kids who are keeping our house in turmoil seem like they must either be

someone else's or creatures from another planet. And if we ask around, we may discover that our close friends, colleagues, and family members are beginning to wonder about us as well. Beneath the orderly surface of our lives, a current of emotional confusion is developing.

This confusion, however, is perfectly natural, for one of the great *boundary* situations of life is approaching and, psychologically, we are preparing for the crossing.

The first step in this preparation is a shift in our perceptions, a shift that usually begins before we're aware of it, which leaves us wondering who we are and what we are doing with our life. Often we experience the shift as a feeling of being trapped and living a warmed-over existence, as if we had missed the chance to live out our true selves. A lot of people, naturally, are terrified of the approach of the midday of life.

DENIAL AND CHOICE

An awareness of life's ambiguities and complexities may lead us to a startling discovery. The journey through life that once felt well-grounded and stable in terms of our roles, beliefs, and conventions may now seem potentially turbulent, unstable, and beyond our control.

As we begin to experience more of life's changes and to question conventions, we find that the identity we built through all the struggles of adolescence and young adulthood—whether that of solid citizen or troublemaking rebel—is not as secure as we hoped it would be. In fact, the journey may begin to feel less like a solid trek over land and more like the voyage of a ship on a turbulent sea. Maybe we've recently run aground on one of life's shoals or feel as though we're caught in a squall we had not expected. Perhaps we are simply beginning to catch a glimmer that beneath our "solid" deck and hull lies an unfathomable deep, with creatures and currents we can't imagine.

Yet, we still long for peace, for affirmation, for direction. In searching for it, some people may have an affair, a middle-age crisis, or an emotional or physical breakdown. Others may batten down the hatches, covering their bodies with comforting carbohydrates. Still others may begin to jog compulsively around the deck or search for cures among the profusion of popular, oversimplified, "cure-yourself-in-a-weekend" distortions of legitimate medicine, psychology, or religion. All of these choices involve denying what we've seen of the depth and strength of the currents beneath us and, in the end, they rigidify our soul. These defensive tactics are the best many people can do, and I don't criticize anyone for drawing in and seeking security. In fact, I often envy those who seem to do so successfully—they may become bastions of the status quo, though they don't all have to become "old" and "bitter." However, my clinical experience has taught me to have a few reservations about the mental health of their children.

Others of us may choose to stay on deck. We still struggle to captain our little ship, searching for stars to guide us, for fair winds and compasses. At some profound level we realize this experience is not an illness. There *is* no cure. This is life. With that realization we must sail on, not out of courage (although courage is required), but because we realize we have no other choice.