

Inner Conflict as A Path to Higher Development in Women*

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A sometimes forgotten means of crisis is "a turning point." Rather than hardship thrust upon us, mid-life crisis may be an invitation to higher development and an indication that growth, begun deep within, is happening. This is the theme of today's presentation.

Mid-life crisis feels like the disintegration of self, a loss of self-definition. The experience can often be terrifying, for the individual believes that when that self is stripped away, there may be nothing left. "Under all my facades, I am a non-person." What causes it all to come apart?

There is loss. A husband dies or exits through divorce. Parents die. A rebellious child takes to the road. Youth fades in a culture that cherishes youth. Being needed, the role of the selfless nurturer, diminishes and children become independent or husbands become absorbed in their careers.

And there is stress. Along with experiencing loss, women may be juggling jobs and housecare, coping with adolescent offspring, dealing with ailing parents, and, possibly, watching a husband anguishing through his own mid-life crisis.

But there is often another, more mystifying component—that inner, undefinable queasiness, that feeling of despair for no good reason, of wrongness which one cannot put one's finger on. Having done all the right things and done them well, there now wells up a terrible, gnawing sense of unease and bewilderment. Women ask, "What have I done wrong? Why do I feel this way?" Depression clouds over everything. All of the people and activities which once gave life meaning have lost their power. There is a profound feeling of emptiness which nothing seems to fill.

In the past, women with such feelings were often advised to ease the situation by taking up something new: a hobby, volunteer work, a cause—something to "take your mind off yourself." They were seen as temporarily disoriented by a lack of purpose, as brooding neurotics needing to be returned to normalcy. It was as if their feelings had no validity.

Dabrowski's Theory of Emotional Development speaks to these feelings in a new way. The theory describes a transformative process, a pathway to higher level development, which requires the disintegration of the current psychological structure in order to evolve into a more integrated, complete level of development. It is different from other stage theories, in that it proposes that the higher level structure and the lower level structure exist side by side: the higher one does not grow out of the lower one. This creates inner conflict between two different conceptions of reality. As the higher level structure expands, the lower level structure diminishes, but not without a fight for its survival.

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The theory was conceived by Polish psychiatrist and psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski in 1938. Dabrowski witnessed acts of complete self-sacrifice in the midst of incomprehensible inhumanity during two world wars, and he could not understand how both could exist in the same world. Were the humane and the inhuman all made of the same cloth? He thought not. His theory is an outgrowth of his own confrontations with death, suffering and injustice, and his insatiable desire to understand the meaning of human existence.

Dabrowski's Theory was translated, refined and put to empirical test by Michael Piechowski, a scientist and psychologist at Northwestern University. It has recently begun to receive attention in this country.

The theory posits five levels of development, each of which represents a distinct psychological structure and creates a unique world view. At Level I, there is little genuine concern for others. The individual is completely egocentric, using others to meet his own needs. There is no self-reflection, no guilt, no emotional sensitivity. There is no inner conflict; all conflict is external in nature—obstacles between the person and his desires. Since there is no inner life to come between such persons and their ambitions, they often obtain power by ruthless means. At worst, the Level I personality is psychopathic, with no indications of growth potential. At best, the personality is shallow, emotionally closed to the needs of others—not from malevolence, but rather from deprivations of their own emotional needs.

Level II individuals are under the influence of the social group. Their main question, under all circumstances, is "What will others think of me?" The essential ingredient of development, an inner hierarchy of values, is lacking in such people. Since they have no means of directing their behavior from the inside out, they rely on others to tell them what to do. They feel powerless, uncertain about everything, and inferior to others. There is so much inner confusion that these people rarely know what is intrinsically right in a given situation. They conform to group standards out of a need for security, rather than out of a true commitment to those standards.

Most individuals in society are at Level II. They have ambivalent feelings and inconsistent behavior, reflecting their confused inner life. Piechowski calls Level II's "conservers," since their emotional and intellectual energy serve to maintain their current level of functioning. In contrast, the "transformers" of Level III use their energies in the service of higher level development.

There are many important distinctions between conservers and transformers that have relevance to women in mid-life. Conservers are extremely insecure and in constant need of validation from their world. So much of their energy is consumed by their need for self-esteem that there is little left for development or rich relationships with others. They may be warm, sensitive, easily moved, motivated to work for the welfare of others, and extremely concerned with close personal relationships. They are often quite empathic, and their empathy takes the form of overidentification with others, losing themselves in the drama of others' lives. Empathy may quickly turn to disdain if they don't feel appreciated for their caring. Their emotionality may take the form of dependence on others, jealousy,

or self-deprecation. They experience a great deal of guilt about possibly not living up to others' expectations, and they are also quite capable of using guilt to manipulate others. The classical picture of "selfless" mother who peppers the soup well with guilt is a picture of the Level II personality.

Although by society's standards, Level II is considered "normal," there are striking clinical implications in this population. Level II's are more prone to psychosomatic disorders, alcoholism, drug addiction, phobias, and even schizophrenia. Their emotionality may not be well directed, but the very fact that it exists at all makes Level II developmentally advanced from the callousness of Level I. Their confusion is their first step in the disintegrative process of higher development. Many people stay in this confused state for their entire lives, clinging to their weak sense of self, and protecting themselves from further disintegration. But some move forward, risking everything they believe themselves to be to find a higher truth; these few are the transformers.

The critical element of the Level III personality structure is the awareness of an ideal in themselves toward which they must strive. They have a sense of "what ought to be" in themselves and they are dissatisfied with "what is." From this awakening there stems the beginning of an inner-directedness, a sense of personal autonomy, and an inner hierarchy of values. The vision of this ideal self has a transforming effect. There is no longer any contentment with oneself, with one's friends, with one's values, or with one's life. There is the knowledge that life holds something more and this fuels the processes of inner development.

Many of those who do make the transition to a higher form of existence do not consciously choose this path. Rather, they are "thrown into their destinies" by circumstances which seem beyond their control. The disintegrative process happens to them spontaneously, either through external events, such as the loss of a loved one, divorce, loss of employment, or a brush with death—all of which require a reevaluation of self—or through an internal, unconscious developmental process which does not appear to have an external cause. Suddenly, or gradually, everything that the person is, everything that gave her life meaning, seems meaningless. She is dimly aware that there is something missing, and she doesn't quite know what it is.

Whether the choice is conscious or unconscious, individuals at this level are most in need of, and most ready for, therapy. They are dissatisfied with what is and ready to take the next step in their development. They are very different from the clients who want to be patched up so that they can adjust more efficiently to their worlds, or the ones who want to complain how terrible the world is, but who seem to have little motivation to change themselves. This is a true turning point in their lives, and the struggle they are engaged in is extremely painful. They must let go of their need for approval, let go of their insecurities, believe in themselves, trust their own judgments, risk being different, and even face hurting everyone who depended on them to remain the people they were. Some can make this full transition into autonomy, and some cannot. But to begin this journey into self takes great courage.

My clients have often referred to this period of their lives as "the pit."

Others call it "the desert." There is a desire to become something other than what one is, but all one can see is blackness, nothingness. The person feels like she is dissolving. Depression, despair, despondency accompany this lonely journey. At times it seems as if no one can help. The individual leaves everything behind to seek an uncertain future. Enormous feelings well up and become confronted: feelings of guilt and shame at what one isn't, astonishment with oneself, anger at the injustice in the world and the suffering and the lack of values in others, feelings of inferiority toward one's own ideals. All of these emotional reactions serve to further development: they are the inner tools of growth. Inner conflict rages between the less developed, approval-seeking structure, and the more developed, autonomous structure.

In traditional therapy situations, the person would often be counseled to eradicate these neurotic symptoms. Disintegration was not valued as an important developmental step. In a developmental approach, the individual is applauded for the same symptoms and given encouragement to continue on the journey. The therapist serves to support the presence of inner conflict, rather than attempting to cure the symptoms or solve the problems. The therapist acts as a guide, holding a light at the end of the tunnel. Naturally, those therapists who have had the courage to enter their own pits and have emerged on the other side are in a better position to aid a counselee in this process. They have been there, and they have an intuitive sense of what is needed, when to sit quietly, when to step in, and when to be on call when the crisis hits its peak.

There is light on the other side. Transforming individuals develop a sense of self unlike anything they have previously experienced. They are no longer ruled by their worlds. They create their own lives. Their self-esteem goes from negative to positive. Their relationships with others become emotionally richer, more meaningful, more satisfying, more equal. They are not using relationships as a means of proving themselves to themselves. Because they are meeting their own esteem needs, they have more energy left to see the other person as a unique individual. Their ability to love increases for they are not manipulating others' emotions to serve themselves; they truly care about others.

A paradox occurs in the area of empathy which is difficult for the woman to understand. If she has identified herself as a selfless "helper," a nurturer of others, she will fear her own development, because she will sense that it is taking her away from the people she loves. She will fear becoming "selfish" by concentrating her energies on her own development. And she will fear her own detachment. In my own therapy, I remember my therapist repeating over and over, "You will be able to do everything you do now, just your attitude about it will be different." She was right, of course, but it took years before I understood what she meant.

The empathy at Level II—an overattachment to others, a living through others, a need to be needed as an identification of self—gives way to an empathy with a different form. The higher level empathy involves a degree of detachment. The Level III individual has faced her own suffering, understands its meaning to a greater degree, and is able to give comfort to others in their pain, rather than just wanting the pain to go away for her own comfort. Although she may appear to herself and to others to

be undergoing a move away from caring about others, she is actually going through a process which will bring her into deeper, richer contact with her loved ones than she has ever envisioned.

Another byproduct of the transformation is the development of one's creativity. Level III individuals tend to be highly creative and to use their creativity to further their own growth. They become contributors to society, eloquently furthering the cause of justice in their writing, art, dance, drama and interactions with others.

Beyond Level III, there are two higher stages of development. Both of these stages are rare, but they have been attained by various members of our society, and so they remain possibilities. Level IV is the stage of self-actualization. The individual is autonomous, responsible, and in control of her life. All of the characteristics which Maslow (1970) has identified in self-actualizers apply to this group:

1. Clear, more efficient perception of reality
2. Acceptance of others, self, nature
3. Spontaneity; simplicity; naturalness
4. Problem centeredness rather than ego centeredness
5. The quality of detachment; the need for privacy
6. Autonomy; independence of culture and environment
7. Mystical and peak experiences
8. Deep sense of identification, sympathy and affection for humanity
9. Deeper and more profound interpersonal relations
10. Democratic character structure
11. Discrimination between means and ends, between good and evil
12. Philosophical, unhostile sense of humor
13. Creativeness
14. Resistance to enculturation; transcendence of any particular culture (Maslow, 1970, pp 153-172).

The person is able to actualize those higher values that she became aware of in Level III. She can commit herself to service, but not at the expense of herself. Her own growth is dependent upon her compassion for others. Concern for self and concern for others are no longer polarized; they are synchronized. As Maslow (1965) says, they are "synergistic."

The shame and guilt of Level III is replaced by self-acceptance, and the "striving" for higher level development is replaced by the certainty that the development is occurring. Inner conflict, fear of failure and resistance all melt away as this inner security is gained. The Level IV person does not have to force change; she just allows the evolution to happen naturally.

This acceptance filters into perceptions of others as well. The Level IV person genuinely appreciates others, loving their limitations as well as their strengths. She has great compassion for the pain of others, which motivates her to devote her life to service. Her compassionate detachment allows her to face a great deal of suffering and aid others without becoming lost in their suffering. It is a condition much to be wished in therapists.

Beyond self-actualization, there is even a more advanced level of existence, one that has only been reached by a cherished few. Dabrowski calls it "Secondary Integration," and it is the attainment of the personality ideal.

For most of us, it remains a vision of perfection, rather than a potentiality in this lifetime. One transcends the ego at Level V, and becomes in harmonious unity with the universe. A universal consciousness replaces an individual consciousness. There is no split between "what is" and "what ought to be"; the individual is a living manifestation of "what ought to be." Among the individuals who have attained Level V are counted Dag Hammarskjold and Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Although the full attainment of Secondary Integration occurs only rarely, it is significant that Dabrowski's Theory includes it as a developmental possibility. The theory gives psychological credibility to the highest of human experience. The acknowledgement of an ideal is the first step in its actualization. As we understand more about the psychological factors involved in higher development, we may be able to nurture that development, and evolve to a race of compassionate beings.

It is important that the therapist recognize the difference between a set of societally imposed "shoulds" and an inner vision of a personality ideal in assessing a client's level of development. "Shoulds" are a Level II phenomenon; self-chosen ideals are Level III phenomena. They are quite different.

Another important factor in this theory is that development from Level I to Level V is impossible. A person may stay within a single level for an entire lifetime, growing within that level, but not undergoing the agonizing transformation to a higher level. Quite often a person will function on two levels simultaneously, and, at most, three levels, but the structure of one level will always be dominant.

Against the background of this theory, the positive value of supposedly neurotic traits which may surface during midlife crisis can be seen. The dark underside of the crisis, those often surprising feelings of "wrongness," of guilt for no reason, of nagging depression and senseless despair take on new meaning. They can be signs of growth, growth away from adapting to societal norms toward the beginnings of interiorized, self-grown values and gropings toward autonomy.

What is the role of the therapist then, in this situation? First of all, simply viewing the conflict and anxiety as positive signs of growth and health has in itself an ameliorating effect. The long overview becomes hopeful even though the immediate process remains painful. The therapist can support the woman during the transformation process, helping to reframe the elements of the situation in a positive light. The thrust of Dabrowski's Theory of Emotional Development might suggest validating these genuine feelings, allowing the disintegrative process but noting indications of new growth in such areas as owning one's experiences, examining one's values, asserting one's rights and beliefs. Emerging sensitivity and reflectiveness are to be celebrated. Knowing that the ordeal is a necessary part of growth toward a higher integration can help both the woman and her therapist to manage more wisely.

**SYLLABUS OF TRANSITIONS FROM LOWER TO HIGHER
FORMS OF PSYCHIC FUNCTIONS**

The Lower Forms	The Higher Forms
unilevel	multilevel
ahierarchic	hierarchic
automatic reflexiveness	deliberate reflection and autonomous behavior
motivation limited to stimulus-response system of drives	motivations based on intra-psychic determinants
first and second factor (determination by heredity and environment)	third factor (self-determination by autonomous dynamisms) higher instincts (e.g., cognitive, creative, self-perfection, empathy)
primitive instincts (e.g., self-preservation, sex, aggression)	higher levels of the same instinct (intra-instinctual development)
primitive levels of an instinct	creative reality function associated with retrospection and prospection
reality function limited to everyday life	integral, broad understanding of reality
fractional, narrow understanding of reality	reflective and meditative syntony (empathy)
impulsive, temperamental syntony	intellect in harmonious conjunction and collaboration with higher emotions
intellect subordinate to primitive drives	autonomy
subordination to primitive instinctive forces	significant role of consciousness (self-awareness)
limited role of consciousness	universal hierarchy of values
relativism of values	allocentrism
selfishness	transcendence of the biological life cycle (e.g., sustained creativity and lucidity of the mind in spite of infirmity of the body)
complete dependence on the biological life cycle	transcendence of innate psychological type
limitation to innate psychological type	universal and accelerated development
one-sided or "normal" development	originality and creativity
imitation of others, competition	authenticity
conformity	adjustment to norm from personality level
adjustment to social norm	qualified adjustment and positive maladjustment (adjustment to "what ought to be")
simple adjustment to actual situation in life (adjustment to "what is")	feelings of inferiority toward oneself
feelings of inferiority toward others	education-of-oneself
training and education	autopsychotherapy
heteropsychotherapy	will as a function of personality
conjunction of volition with primitive drives	

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For further reading:

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