

# SELF REFLECTIONS

A JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING  
FALL 2008

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1

## *Home as a Reflection of Self*



What makes a home a home, and not a house, is that home tells a very truthful story of the life within it. Beauty arises profoundly from a simple, painful, lovely or even ugly truth. But never from an attractive lie. This is true with ourselves, and it true with a

home. To live our lives risking truth, and to let the marks of the learning and growing process show, what ever they may be, is to create a one of a kind work of art of breathtaking beauty. Any life committed to living truthfully, showing and integrating both successes and failures, is something to behold. Home is the container of that living piece of art, home is a tabernacle. Home protects a life, presents it to the world, and records the story of its development. The "story" of a home includes both the spaces that surround it and spaces that are contained within it, the ob-

jects and images that adorn it, and its developmental history. Even the curious omissions, that which is not there, odd unexplained patterns, problems, blemishes and unfinished parts contribute not just to the story of Home, but to the story of Self.

If Home is indeed a reflection of the Self, then the implications and possibilities are profound. It means that architects and designers might undo the confines of form and function and explore the personal psychology of *(continued page 3)*

### WISDOM BITS

- ◆ In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few. -Shunryu Suzuki
- ◆ Every exit is an entry somewhere else. -Tom Stoppard
- ◆ The most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely. -Carl Jung



## *Midlife: avoiding crisis and unearthing new opportunity*

Midlife is an interesting and at times, a very troubling point in our lives. Most of us have seen or experienced this stage in human development; it can proceed gracefully and quietly for some, and at other times, midlife leads to impulsive decisions, radical changes and tumultuous disruptions that spill out into families and relationships. But midlife need not be a crisis. With some study and preparation, we can recognize

this significant turning point in life and grow from it.

Carl Jung described our lives as the rising and setting of the sun, with midlife being midday. In the first half of life, the sun rises and we see nothing but potential. We focus on career, develop connection to community, build families, and enjoy our growing strength and influence in the world. But usually in our forties or fifties, we

begin to notice that what is in front of us is a sun that is setting, not rising. This can be a unsettling realization, sometimes leading to a sense of futility and hopelessness, even depression.

It is appropriate that the first half of life is focused on what might appear as endless possibility. We must use this time to develop our

*(Midlife, continued on page 2)*

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*Midlife (continued from page 1)*

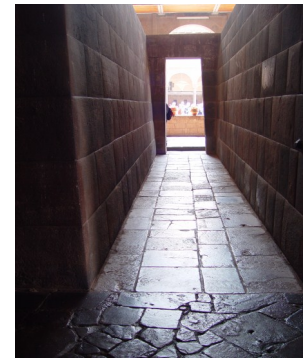
personalities, our intellect and our skills to function effectively in the world. And although we will continue these responsibilities as life progresses, a developmental shift arises within us. We may begin to feel less fulfilled with what we had previously valued. Goals such as financial success may seem less important, our careers may begin to feel less interesting and challenging. We may begin to yearn for things we had never tried or experienced.

During midlife, two major themes are emerging psycho-

logically. One is that we begin to develop and strengthen parts of our selves that had been left dormant in the first half of life. These new aspirations may often appear to friends and family as opposite qualities to what we had expressed previously. If we respond positively, we will be drawn to the opportunity to develop a balance in our life, to explore parts of our selves that are fresh and interesting. People who are more outgoing may develop a more inward focus and write poetry, or a quiet, home oriented

person may begin to travel abroad.

*(Midlife continued on page 3)*



**MIDLIFE BRINGS AWARENESS OF OUR MORTALITY AND PURPOSES BEYOND SELF**

*“Midlife brings the realization that we are closer to the end than the beginning, and faced with the reality that we are mortal, we are moved toward greater service to others.”*

*Messy rooms in the home: what it may say about us*

Observing our home environment can often provide very helpful insight into our psychological world. Clutter, excessive accumulation, or keeping unnecessary things may reflect a psychological state that asks for our attention. And at the other end of the spectrum, an excessive need for order, cleanliness, or an intolerance for even a temporary mess may likewise warrant a closer look.

There are no standards for what is excessively clean or messy. What matters is flexibility. Spaces in the home need to allow for all different forms of activity. Some require orderliness (such as an office) or cleanliness (such as a bathroom). But others may need to allow messes to develop, such as study rooms, children’s areas, or spaces for creative endeavors like a shop, craft room, or a kitchen.

Personality type exerts a significant influence on the degree of our comfort with messes. Generally speaking, more creative types find stimulation from the “chaos” of stuff around them, allowing new and interesting connections of ideas and material that may not be noticed if things were organized in predictable ways. The same is true for children. Although they are learning fundamental skills of organization and life maintenance, having the space for creative mess making is critical to their development.

But messes and the fear of messes may suggest other conditions that we should give attention to. The lack of energy to maintain a space, or a sense of futility and lack of interest in life, and thus an unkempt environment, may signal a slide toward depres-

sion. Excessively clean and orderly environments may suggest anxiety or avoidance, or a compulsive energy to keep uncomfortable thoughts or fears out of one’s awareness. Excessive collecting and accumulation may signal a fear of not having one’s needs met, or a fear of loss. And *after* a devastating loss, especially a loved one, we frequently avoid parting with material objects, especially if those objects are symbolic of one’s grief. As in others parts of life, the degree of balance and flexibility we exercise in our homes is usually a reliable indicator of psychological wellbeing.

Our comfort level with messes, excessive accumulation, and our need for order all are reflected in home, giving us the chance to engage them psychologically.

## *Home as a Reflection of Self (from page 1)*

their clients for inspiration. It means that psychotherapists might have yet another avenue for psychological exploration with their clients, and a rich landscape to assist them diagnostically. It means that the aesthetics of space and structure might be redefined in our culture, by allowing beauty to show itself in places we rarely allow it to go. The aged, well-worn, imperfect, traumatized, impractical, recovered, reinvented, these are the places where deep beauty flourishes. Noticing and preserving these qualities in our homes not only encourages

acceptance of these qualities in ourselves, it invites us to consider whether such qualities are more truthful and ultimately more beautiful. To surround ourselves with materials that are “impervious”, that don’t lose their luster, that don’t stain, wear out, corrode, fade or show the messy marks of living is to surround ourselves with falsehoods. We would be better to surround ourselves with the truth of our mortality, and discover the deep beauty in the weathered qualities of that which has truly lived.



THE WEATHERING OF TIME AND EXPERIENCE REVEALS A BEAUTY BEYOND THAT OF THE PERFECT AND THE POLISHED

## *(Midlife continued from page 2)*

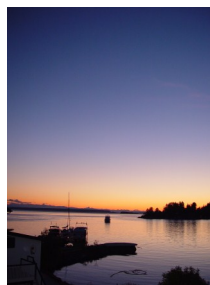
The second theme that arises in midlife is that we increasingly focus our attention on the meaning of our existence; we begin to see ourselves in a context greater than self, and beyond our life span. Midlife brings the realization we are closer to the end than the beginning, and faced with the reality that we are mortal, we are moved toward greater service to others. We may begin community service, mentoring, volunteer work or increased involvement in the well being of others.

The failure to embrace these realities may bring a crisis if we resist this crucial turning point. Rather than exploring new dimensions of oneself or facing one’s own mortality, we might refuse to let go of our past ambitions, or overestimate the call to explore, and plunge into impulsive choices. For example, someone

who may have built a very conservative, safe career may suddenly feel a strong urge to abandon his career, relocate or take a huge financial risk in a business not carefully examined. Another may suddenly feel a lack of fulfillment in his long term relationship and throw a marriage into turmoil. In refusing to let go of past ambitions, one may dig even deeper into work, competition and material wealth, losing the opportunity to experience what later life naturally presents to us: a time to share our experience and wisdom, a time to reflect on the life we lived, and a time to explore parts of life we had missed.

In our culture, finding crisis in midlife is quite common. Rather than revere the beauty of age and wisdom, we too often fight the reality of our passage into the sunset of life, desperately grasping at

the freshness of youth that has quietly faded. Rather than competing with those whose are in the sunrise of life for qualities we cannot recover, we would be better to embrace our experience, recognize it’s deep value and contemplate the richness that waits before us. Too often in our culture, the call of midlife is suppressed and isn’t acknowledged until much later, usually in “retirement”. By then, the opportunity for balance may have slipped



MIDLIFE BRINGS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR BALANCE AND CONTEMPLATION

“ENGAGING IN ACTIVITIES THAT ARE HIGHLY CREATIVE KEEPS THE REALITY OF CHANGE AND LOSS IN OUR MINDS, AND GIVES US AN OPPORTUNITY TO PRACTICE SKILLS OF RECOVERY”

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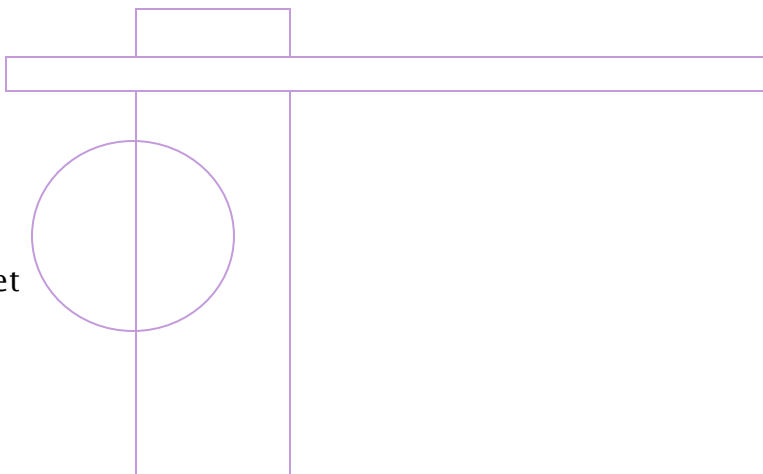


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**CREATING POTTERY OFTEN PRODUCES OUTCOMES WE DID NOT EXPECT**

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**CREATIVITY STRENGTHENS OUR SKILLS TO MANAGE UNCERTAINTY AND CHANGE**

For some of us, change is an exciting process, an adventure into uncharted territory. For others, change of any kind is frightening and disruptive, a descent into uncertainty. For all of us, change usually means a loss of what we had, a separation from what was familiar and valued. If a change is significant enough in our lives, it may even shake our sense of self, leaving us depressed, and surrendering any hope that we will experience happiness in the future.

What is true is that change happens whether we want it or not. The natural development

### *Creativity: preparation for change and loss*

of relationships, careers, communities, and even our bodies will involve changes that we must accept and adjust to. And even further are catastrophic changes, major losses that require a completely new orientation to the life we had.

It is quite easy to move along in life forgetting that change occurs. This is understandable. To be reminded regularly that loss may be right around the corner is sobering. But it is better to be prepared, and to train our minds to accept the truth that change, losses, and even catastrophic losses can happen. To avoid preparing ourselves for loss is like choosing not to build a hospital because it is a reminder that we can become seriously ill.

There are many ways to prepare ourselves for difficult changes and losses. One way is to engage in activities that are highly creative. Creative activities are by nature unpredictable: things develop that we didn't anticipate, things go

wrong, and frequently we are required to take approaches that are completely new. And as we pursue a desired outcome, we must contend with the emotional disappointment of things not going as planned. Practicing creativity is useful because it mirrors life. Our lives are essentially a creative process, we have a plan, and potentials to carry it out, but things happen along the way that require us to constantly adjust. Engaging in activities that are highly creative keeps the reality of change and loss in our minds, and gives us an opportunity to practice skills of recovery.

Involved in a creative process, we notice that we survive changes and losses, and that at our worst moments, new possibilities might emerge. We also notice that if our attention is focused on the process rather than just the final result, many more options are available. Loss and change is difficult, but understanding the creative process can soften the pain we experience.