The Midlife Experience: An Autoethnographic Study or How Did a Professor of Computer Scientist Find Her Way to a Hakomi Workshop?

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Editor’s Note: Carole McNamee offers a candid account of her personal and professional journey from a successful, though unsatisfying career into the field of experiential psychotherapy, complete with lessons about listening to inner voices that escalate when ignored. Some parts of this article have appeared in Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy.

Dr. Carole McNamee is a Professor Emeritus of Computer Science at California State University Sacramento. Her educational background includes an B.S. in Mathematics from Simmons College, an M.S. in Computer Science from Stanford University, and a Ph.D. in Computer Science from the University of California Davis. As a faculty member at CSUS, she taught and published in the area of parallel and distributed language design and implementation. She received awards for both her teaching and research. Since her retirement in January 2001, Carole has been pursuing a second career as a Marriage and Family Therapist with a special interest in the use of creative and expressive arts as a way of understanding. She received a Ph.D. in Marriage and Family Therapy from Virginia Tech in 2004 where she maintains a connection as an Affiliate Research Professor and Clinical Associate. In 2005, she founded Willowbank Creative Center in Blacksburg, VA where she maintains a private practice and provides creative arts workshops. In her spare time, Carole can be found visiting family, on the tennis court, or in the art studio.

ABSTRACT: This paper describes the midlife experience of the author as she journeyed from her career as a professor of computer science to that of marriage and family therapist with a special interest in the expressive arts. The universal elements of this journey are highlighted as well as elements that are unique to the author’s experience. The author’s interest in the expressive arts as a healing element are demonstrated by example as well as through description.

On September 6, 2002, I listened to a version of the biography above as I was introduced to an Information Technology group retreat focused on issues of change. I was to lead an experiential exercise designed to provide the group with a metaphor for the process of change and their experiences of it. It was the first time since I left the field of computer science in January 2001 that I was willing to own my own biography, to take some pride in my accomplishments. The last several years have been a period of dramatic change and even now when I look at my curriculum vitae, the person on paper, whose accomplishments are readily apparent, seems very remote.

The midlife transition phenomenon is described by Jung, Hudson, Chinen, and Bergquist among others. (Berquist, Greenberg, & Klaum, 1993; Chinen, 1992; Hudson, 1999; Jung, 1989). In many respects, the midlife journey is a journey of the spirit. Hudson describes the dilemma with which we grapple with a quote from Angus Campbell’s Sense of Well-Being in America.

For many Americans the “revolution of rising expectations” may be simply a desire for a larger house and a second car, but for some it is a growing demand for the fulfillment of needs which are not basically material but are a search for a larger and more satisfying life experience (Hudson, 1999, p.7).

This quote and Hudson’s book give the impression that this search for meaning is perhaps an American experience and a function of our rapidly changing and materialistic culture. While our culture is certainly a contributing factor, I believe there is something more intrinsic about this stage of life experience. Carl Jung who devoted much of his life to understanding the midlife experience and Alan Chinen, whose work with cross-cultural midlife folklore is informed by Jung’s work, both provide evidence of the universal nature of this process.

This autoethnographic study provides both a visual and a narrative description of my own experience of midlife transition. The visual description of this experience, “A Pea’s Progress,” predated the narrative and provided a framework for the work that my transition required. The initial exploration began with an attraction to a work of art viewed many years ago—a large ceramic plate with an
image similar to that in frame three of “A Pea’s Progress.” The work was entitled “The Great Escape.” It had a whimsical character, but something less whimsical resonated. The image and the title stayed with me and emerged in my own artistic effort. In the midst of my transition, the image came back to me and over a six-month period it evolved into the sequence of images that comprise “A Pea’s Progress.”

The following narrative parallels the visual portrayal of my experience. Some make this transition gracefully; others like myself do not. My change was painful and abrupt. I include a quote from Parker Palmer’s compassionate accounting of his experiences as a framework for my own narrative.

Depression was, indeed, the hand of a friend trying to press me to the ground on which it was safe to stand--the ground of my own truth, my own nature, with its complex mix of limits and gifts, liabilities and assets, darkness and light.

Eventually, I developed my own image of the “befriending” impulse behind my depression. Imagine that from early in my life, a friendly figure, standing a block away, was trying to get my attention by shouting my name, wanting to teach me some hard but healing truths about myself. But I--fearful of what I might hear or arrogantly trying to live without help or simply to busy with my ideas and ego and ethics to bother--ignored the shouts and walked away.

So this figure, still with friendly intent, came closer and shouted more loudly, but I kept walking. Ever closer it came, close enough to tap me on the shoulder, but I walked on. Frustrated by my unresponsiveness, the figure threw stones at my back, then struck me with a stick, still wanting simply to get my attention. But despite the pain, I kept walking away.

Over the years, the befriending intent of this figure never disappeared but became obscured by the frustration caused by my refusal to turn around. Since shouts and taps, stones and sticks had failed to do the trick, there was only one thing left: drop the nuclear bomb called depression on me, not with the intent to kill but as a last-ditch effort to get me to turn and ask the simple question, “What do you want?” ...

The figure calling to me all those years was, I believe, what Thomas Merton calls “true self” (Palmer, 2000, p.67-68).

While the circumstances are my own and the befriending image takes a different form, my story matches the pattern of denial and depression described above.

My befriending image was a very little voice that became audible in my late twenties. In retrospect, the voice had surfaced earlier but I was not able to acknowledge it then.

In my late twenties, I heard it, I knew it carried a message, but I chose to ignore it. It was easy to ignore; I had married an incredibly kind and accepting man and had two wonderful young children. With them to balance my then part-time career I could have handled almost anything. In fact, my career was almost irrelevant--just something else that I did; it never came in first, second, or even third. All of my very intense energy was focused on my family.

As the children grew older, their need for independence, and my need to be needed were in conflict. Knowing that I had to let go, I tried to focus on my career. Despite an honest effort, my heart was not in it. Ignoring this, my first round of depression hit, only to be lifted by the knowledge that a third child was on the way. Again, I was able to balance my life--that which I loved, my family, with that which I did not, my career. By that time, I knew that there were issues that I should be dealing with but I continued along the path I thought I should be following. The little voice continued whispering but it continued to fall upon deaf ears.

Encouraged by the senior members of my department, I tried to invest in my career. I began working full-time, sponsoring graduate students, getting a large equipment grant, administering the graduate program, and I even ventured out to University-level committees—something that would look good when I came up for tenure. I continued to ignore the very tiny voice that repeatedly told me "you've sold your soul" as I drove to work. I ignored the voice that asked "but are you really interested in this?” and "you realize that you are just going through the motions don't you, that you are just pretending to be a professor?” I was very successful as a professor at California State University Sacramento (CSUS): publishing, receiving much positive feedback for my teaching, and awards for both. However, I refused to really invest in my position. Everything that I did was secondary to the family. I did not "feel" the part.

Then another type of question began to haunt me: “Is what I am doing improving the quality of life for anyone?” The only answer that I could produce was that the graduates of our program were in demand by the computer industry and they were being handsomely rewarded monetarily for their expertise. I was also aware that many of the students were feeling overworked by employers who demanded long hours and who were supporting the immigration of foreign labor because they were easier to exploit. I began to feel that I was just providing more “fodder” for the computer industry. This was undoubtedly a very biased perspective but it was one that haunted me.

By this time, my youngest child had developed some medical problems that resulted in a significant focus on her. I became very involved in her health issues and her life. Initially, there was just a vague awareness that something was "not quite right." In retrospect, this uneasiness actually began when she was quite young. Not knowing what the
problem was, but just her symptoms, I would search obsessively for information on the web, in the library, and in bookstores. I shut out my husband whose career was blossoming and fulfilling as he moved from professor to administrator at UC Davis. He didn't really understand what was happening at home.

Nine months after the initial visit to our family doctor and several doctors, physical therapists, and specialists later, we received the diagnosis that I had feared--a chronic, life altering but not life threatening condition. An aspiring athlete, her world collapsed around her and mine around me. By that time, it was hard to tell whose pain was whose.

The details of the events leading up to that nine months and the nine months themselves as well as the year that followed are the subject of another story. Suffice it to say that after a lot of hard and painful work, she is now a delightful young person. Aside from my concern about the long term effects of all of her medications on her liver, I was confident that she would have every opportunity to lead a fulfilling life.¹

Feeling that my daughter was once again on the path to a normal life, it was time for me to heal. We had become too close. I needed her to separate from me, to do the things that normal teenagers do, but I was too fragile to withstand the onslaught of the normal teenage rebellion that needed to happen. Depression was setting in: crying, sleep disturbances, social withdrawal. I knew it was happening, but I kept pretending that everything was fine (I had fine-tuned the art of avoidance and denial). In retrospect, this was not the best approach.

While my husband was oblivious (or in denial), my daughter knew. It was clear that her progress was intimately connected with my own health. In the process of extricating myself from my daughter's being (but not her life) I had to face my own life--something that I had successfully avoided for years. The circumstances that made and still make this difficult for me are part of yet another story that I have chosen to leave at war.

The next pressing issue was my career. I continued to think that I should be able to be happy as a professor. It was a job that many people would envy. It was only, technically, 34 weeks per year. I had much flexibility with my schedule. I was able to see all of my children's after-school sporting events over the years, had vacations that matched theirs. So what was my problem? Palmer's sticks and stones where hurled at me in the form of questions. Why couldn't I make it work? Why did I feel my contributions were meaningless? Why was I so dependent upon the children for validation? Why did I not relate to my peers in the department? Why had I found it necessary to take so many leaves of absence over the past ten years? And why did I keep wishing that I didn't have to be there? Why did I find it so difficult to be alone? Why was I going to bed at six o'clock? Why was I withdrawing from others? These questions raced through my mind almost continuously. I continued to write and the little voice grew stronger and louder. It was no longer a little voice. It was screaming at me. My body had become a battleground. Head and heart were at war.

Ready to explode, I finally recognized that I had to make some changes. I had to pay more attention to the voice. I started to look at what I was reading and what I was not reading, what might really be interesting me, what sections of the library and bookstore was I exploring. In response to some of my experiences with my daughter’s medical condition and my experiences in therapy, I had started some self-directed reading: Carl Jung, James Hillman, and others. I had not expected to either like or understand what I was reading but I became more and more interested (although probably only partially understood). I realized that I had not been reading my computer science journals for years; many sat with their mailing wrappers unopened. In April of 2000, I made the decision to take some psychology courses. I decided to explore two courses during summer session at UC Davis. After auditing two courses; one in cognitive psychology and one in psychobiology for several weeks, I discovered that while they were interesting, they were not what was really piquing my interest. It was the clinical side of psychology that I wanted to learn more about.

I took my first course in clinical psychology at The Professional School of Psychology (PSP) during the summer of 2000, loved it, and decided to continue in the program. Although I conceded to working part-time at CSUS that fall while I took courses at PSP, I was still unable to give up my position. I loved my courses at PSP but I was miserable at work. I had to submit my file for review at CSUS in September and when I looked at it, I felt like a fraud—I did not know the person whose file I was looking at. At this point, I began falling deeper into the well of depression. I was viewing the world from the outside rather than participating, and it became clear that I needed pharmacological help. It took this more serious manifestation of depression for me to listen to what my little

¹ Unbeknownst to us at the time, this story was not over and at the age of 18. My daughter finally received a diagnosis of juvenile diabetes. With this diagnosis the events of the previous ten years finally made some sense and she is now on her own path having just completed her second year as a student of naturopathic medicine. This path has been largely determined by her own experiences with traditional medicine.

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Hakomi Forum—Issue 19-20-21, Summer 2008
voice had been trying to tell me for years. I tried to figure out what it was that kept me at CSUS. The money? For years that was an issue, but the two older children were now through college and financially independent and that issue was no longer relevant. The students? Yes, I would miss them. My peers? No, we had little in common. Guilt? Yes, the department was short-staffed and I would be making a difficult situation worse, and I felt bad about that. Fear? Absolutely! I was very afraid of being judged; of being viewed as "unstable" or self-indulgent. (I am still working on this one.) The title? The title! I had to think hard about that one. Finally, I realized that retirement would not strip me of my previous accomplishments; I would always own them even if they felt foreign. Retirement would enable me to explore everything else.

I began to draw and take dance classes, both activities that I very much enjoyed as a child. I enjoyed writing in my journal as well as in my classes. I developed a passion for the use of creative and expressive art as a way of understanding. I was resistant to activities that required the use of my more logical and analytical thinking skills. This bothered me for some time until I came across the following passage in Carl Jung’s account of his own midlife experience.

After the completion of The Psychology of the Unconscious I found myself utterly incapable of reading a scientific book. This went on for three years. I felt I could no longer keep up with the world of the intellect, nor would I be able to talk about what really preoccupied me (Jung, 1989, p. 193).

I have been asked many times if I miss my former career and I can honestly say that I do not. I have never once regretted my decision to retire. I continued to struggle with “left brain” activities for several years and barely tolerated the quantitative methods courses required for my second Ph.D. It was the first quantitative thinking that I had done in over a year. Over the past few years, my willingness to engage in logical and analytical thinking has increased dramatically, and while I have no intention of returning to my former profession, I no longer avoid its trappings.

My goal became to be an art therapist. I believe that many people come to therapy to heal the soul and that expressive art is a viable path to growth and healing. I believe the arts touch the spirit of an individual and those processes are what I wanted to facilitate. While a major family move to the east coast did not position me to transfer to an art therapy program, the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Virginia Tech was supportive of my interests, and to the extent possible encouraged my use of art clinically. I struggled with many elements of this transition: being a beginner after so many years of feeling competent, being a student after so many years of teaching and research, taking course from new faculty who had less research and teaching experience than I did (it wasn’t easy for the faculty either!), the risks associated with being vulnerable, and more research coursework than I cared to take. I loved the clinical aspects of the program and it is there that I found my true self at home.

By this time, I have pulled together the fragments of the story that made this journey so difficult. Writing this paper has been one more step toward accepting the reality of this story, one more step in acknowledging the pain, and one more step toward healing. The writing was less difficult than I thought it would be. The harder part has been sharing it and “letting my life speak.”

I completed my studies in marriage and family therapy with a special interest in the integration of neuroscience, art, and family therapy. I have continued to explore various approaches to clinical work including Hakomi and energy psychology. I was intrigued by Hakomi’s focus on mind-body and its integration of neuroscience and family systems, all of these interests of my own. Participation in two Hakomi workshops reinforced my interest and I hope for an opportunity to continue my connection with Hakomi work in the future.

In 2005, I opened Willowbank Creative Center in Blacksburg, VA where I offer workshops in the creative arts, and maintain a small private practice. I maintain a connection with Virginia Tech as an Affiliate Research Professor and Clinical Associate and provide supervision to students interested in using the creative arts clinically, and more recently taught a course in expressive arts therapy. Some time ago a colleague asked if I was “living my dream,” and I am. I believe that experiences with the creative arts are metaphors for our lived experience. I enjoy providing opportunities for others to challenge themselves and the creative arts provide a path.

References


[The Sage] only helps all creatures
to find their own nature,
but does not venture
to lead them by the nose.
(Lao Tzu, 64)

He simply reminds people of
who they have always been.
(Lao Tzu, 64)

Humility means trusting the Tao,
Thus never needing to be defensive
(Lao Tzu, 61)

How do I know about the world?
By what is within me.
(Lao Tzu, 54)

Lao Tzu, quoted in Johanson & Kurtz, 1991