

The Wellsprings of the Middle Years: A Filipino Perspective

Alexa P. Abrenica
De La Salle University

Many people associate the middle years with negative experiences and the proverbial mid-life crisis. But the middle years can also be experienced as a delightful, liberating, exhilarating period. The paper focuses on these positive aspects of midlife. A survey of midlifers found that majority of the respondents described the middle years as challenging, exciting, a time of great expectation, and fulfillment. The paper summarizes the various wellsprings of the middle years in the acronym SPACES which stands for Spiritual life, Physical health, Attitude towards life/aging, Confidence and creativity, Emotional health, and Social network and satisfying work. The paper proposes that the difference between people who seem to experience negative mid-life years and those who experience positive ones lies in whether they have filled up the SPACES in their lives.

The middle years are often associated with dissatisfaction (Perlmutter in Biehl, 1996), fear, discouragement, confusion, frustration, and even disgust. Biehl (1996) likens it to an "emotional blizzard" with many questions swirling in the mind, the answers of which cannot be readily given. Sheehy (1976), in her book *Passages*, raises the same questions: "Am I stuck here for the rest of my life? Is this all there is to life? What am I working so hard

for?" Mayer (1978) points to the 40s as turbulent years often equated with midlife crisis. Lock (1990), in her study of Japanese women, calls midlife as the "turning point" to growing old; the end of being of a woman (Abrenica, 1995).

The middle years starts chronologically at 35 on to 60 or 65. Depending on who is looking at it, these years can be viewed with much trepidation, anxiety, and gloom. It is the time when physical changes and the toll of the years become clearly visible—hair graying, eyesight blurring, hearing slowly getting impaired, muscular strength waning, hairline receding, reaction time slowing, reproductive functioning permanently lost, and skin wrinkling. These physical changes are invariable, inevitable, and non-negotiable. It is only the timing which is genetically dictated and varies from person to person.

It is also the time when one is confronted face to face with one's mortality, thus, poverty of time may be keenly felt. With friends dying and parents aging, one can clearly see the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel." As a consequence, there is a great sense of urgency to set matters straight, to accomplish and to resolve unresolved life issues.

The middle years is also a time of great responsibility and the demands exacted from the midlifer cannot be taken lightly. Responsibility, both financial and moral, by growing children, responsibility for the well-being of the family, the quality of life of aging parents, and the betterment of community and society are on the shoulders of the midlifer. He must also be responsible for his ownself and his self-actualization and fulfillment. Erickson's description of the great dilemma at midlife—the dilemma between generativity and stagnation—cannot be wrong.

The midlifer must also face psychological changes that oftentimes are not easily understood and therefore may send the midlifer reeling in confusion, struggling to make some sense out of the new aspects of the self that have emerged, asserting to be expressed. According to Gerzon (1992), who borrows from the Jungian perspective, issues or aspects of the self that have not been addressed or ignored in the earlier phase of

life on account of numerous concerns surface at midlife. These demand attention, even emerge with such a force that leaves the midlifer without any choice but to respond to it, at times unquestioningly. By virtue of man's natural tendency for wholeness and integration, these demands are confronted and allowed to be. I will cite some vignettes to illustrate the point.

Divina is the shy and reticent but devoted wife whose life revolved around home and hearth. Her home and family are her source of pride and joy. One day after her 49th birthday, she declared that she has had enough of it and has taken ballroom dancing seriously; has hired a personal dance instructor and goes to the Zu regularly, much to the chagrin of family and friends.

Tony is a similar case. He was a devoted husband and a father of four. He was a conscientious employee, comes from a closely knit, loving, and religious respectable family. He was 43 when he discussed with his wife the possibility of going to Australia and the advantages the family can derive from such a move. Together, they arranged the travel papers and other requirements. Proper good-byes were said. Ten years to this day, no word has been heard from him after he left. He just disappeared; he practically evaporated into thin air.

Such changes are not uncommon. Many midlifers undergo such drastic changes because time is perceived to be running out on them.

I painted a rather dismal picture of middle age, but midlife can also be experienced as a delightful, liberating, exhilarating period.

For this paper, I conducted a survey among 100 conveniently selected midlifers aged 35-60. Among my respondents were teachers of a private Catholic school, employees of a multinational company, residents of a middle-class village in the south of Manila, and faculty members of a Catholic university. In addition to the sample described, I interviewed 20 enthusiastic, energetic midlifers, both men and women, on what the sources are of their zest for living at this time of their life.

From the survey, I found that majority of the respondents described the middle years as challenging, exciting, a time of great expectation and fulfillment. Among the things they like about midlife are:

- (1) being clearer now about what is truly important in life
- (2) having a richer spiritual life and
- (3) having time for themselves to enjoy friendships, children, and even grandchildren.

The middle years have much to offer if only one is able to appreciate and identify its wellsprings. As a result of my study, I found that the wellsprings of the middle years, the seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy, enthusiasm and joie de vivre among selected Filipinos are presented here by way of the acronym SPACES, to stand for Spiritual life, Physical health, Attitude towards life/aging, Confidence and creativity, Emotional health, and Social network and satisfying work.

If we look around us, we can see midlifers who seem to be so burdened, who so keenly feel their bodies wasting away; midlifers who seem to have been sapped of energy, who are old beyond their years. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, there are those who describe their present stage as exhilarating, challenging, fulfilling. They seem to have boundless energy and enthusiasm and zest for life. What spells the difference between these two groups of midlifers described is having filled up the SPACES in their lives.

As we develop and mature, there are certain aspects in our lives that are neglected due to a variety of reasons among which could be lack of information, absence of models, lifestyle, belief system, or attitudes. These neglected aspects create spaces that make us less whole. These spaces, if not attended to, remain as blanks and weigh us down, affect our sense of well-being and quality of life. Gerzon (1992) points to a vital lesson one must learn. He says, "The price we pay for being out of touch with our

senses is enormous and it is a price we cannot afford to pay in the second half of our lives.”

Spiritual life

The respondents overwhelmingly cited spiritual life as a source of their zest for living. Faith in God who is in control experienced through a rich prayer life and meditation were responses to the question on their attribution of their description of their present stage in life. This finding is consistent with the results of two of my studies (Abrenica, 1994 and 1995) which looked into the coping strategies of Filipino women relative to menopause. Both studies showed that prayers are a formidable armor that can shield one from crisis or can be employed as a potent coping strategy.

Judette Gallares (in Kalaw-Tirol, 1994) in her reflections of her experiences saw that

mid-life is a time and an opportunity God offers every person to reappraise, review and evaluate his or her life so he or she can come to a greater degree of integration and fulfillment and so that more realistic expectations may be arrived at for the future.

When one asks, “*Ganito na lang ba ang buhay?*” (Is this all there is to life?) it is a spiritual question for it asks the meaning of life and the meaning of existence (Gallares in Kalaw-Tirol, 1994). These questions come to the fore when one enters the second half of life. Gerzon concurs with this by saying that “the second half of life is a time for spiritual awakening.” It is a time to experience the fullness of life (Gallares in Kalaw-Tirol, 1994).

Frankl (in Cherniss, 1995) wrote “what man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him.” Man will only be concerned with the quest for pleasure or power when the will to meaning is blocked. Marks (also in Cherniss, 1995) stated

Our energy tends to become fully available for anything to which we are highly committed, and we often feel more energetic for having done it. We tend to find little energy for anything to which we are not highly committed, and doing these things leaves us feeling spent, drained and exhausted."

This, according to Frankl is one of the three sources of meaning: a cause to which one commits oneself, the love of another person, and belief in God.

From my own perspective, I see that God has a grand plan for all of us humans. He knows what each of us will go through from infancy to old age. He has given us 40 or so years to prepare for middle age. He knows that physical deficits will gradually be made more clearly seen and felt. So he has armed us with the wisdom of the years, potentials and abilities that can be harnessed to enable us to cope with these developmental hazards and difficulties so that we can still be of service to Him through others and ourselves.

Physical health

I interviewed a 77-year-old lady doctor. She is still very much active in her medical practice, going to work and visiting work stations all over the Philippines. At her age, she continues to amaze people with her vigor, stamina, and energy at work. She attributes these to a strong body, no ailments, and good physical health. What is physical health? Physical health does not only mean absence of illness. It also means endurance, flexibility, vigor, strong immune system, and, above all, looking good. "It is a radiant state of inner well-being" (Walters, 1994).

In the survey, both men and women respondents are concerned about health. The majority of the respondents ticked off the response option "can no longer take health for granted" as a major concern at midlife. So how does one maintain physical health? One important prescription is physical activity and diet. The rule of the game is to MOVE and eat correctly. What we eat and do not eat make an enormous difference in what we are. Monte (1994) says that "the right foods can help protect against ailments

such as heart disease, cancer, osteoporosis, stroke, gastrointestinal problems, arthritis, and highblood pressure.”

Llewelyn-Jones and Abraham (1992) provide a set of dietary principles that one can choose to follow in order to have a healthy diet.

1. Limit amount of fat in the diet by choosing lean meat and grilled food rather than fried and by limiting quantity of cakes and biscuits.
2. Reduce the amount of sugar you eat, including hidden “sugars in cakes, confectionery, soft drinks.”
3. Eat more “complex” carbohydrates, i.e., more wholegrain bread, oatmeal, vegetables, and fruits.
4. Use less salt.
5. Increase intake of calcium from natural sources such as milk, eggs, and vegetables.

Dr. Nancy Appleton (1991) warned against using calcium supplements because they do very little good and they can do a great deal of harm, such as arthritis, arteriosclerosis, and kidney stones, among others, due to excess calcium deposited in soft tissues.

That one can not have the motivation/energy to create, and things if one is in poor health is an understatement. Good physical health is a gift that one can do without. All it takes is a decision, a commitment to say yes to life.

Exercise, according to Perry & O’Hanlan (1992) is “truly a magic portion. It can instill a vitality in your life no medicine can match.” Exercise can give more stamina and energy, give you a healthier heart, a help to minimize hot flashes, stronger bones and joints, a natural depressant/sedative, best defense against mid-life spread, smoother and healthier skin, increased libido, and more. Walk, run, swim, go bicycling, skip rope, dance, row, ski—your choice, but move.

Attitude

Midlife is a period of change and people will respond to these changes differently. There will be people who will be devastated by the changes and there will be others who will be able to take them in stride; take the changes as challenge rather than an inescapable turmoil. To the latter the middle years can be an exciting and exhilarating period of accelerated growth, renewal, and fulfillment.

Call it optimism, positive attitude, or whatever else would be appropriate, but looking at the bright side of things or viewing change as opportunity works. According to Seligman, there is a growing evidence that links pessimism and vulnerability to poor health. In a study of data gathered from 200 men, it was found that pessimists suffer in three ways: vulnerability to depression, achieving less, and poorer health.

Rather than view midlife negatively, the middle years can be viewed as being blessed with many years of life which others much younger would not be in a position to say they will have: having the enviable position of being able to see, appreciate the valley below; having more time to enjoy for oneself after the children have grown; having more money to spend and do and enjoy the things one always wanted to do; and being more relaxed to really see for the first time what is going on around.

The respondents in my survey felt that they now have a clearer idea of the more important things in life. Given this, one need not think about aging and the physical losses that accompany the middle years but rather, what one can still do for oneself and others.

Creativity

According to Monte (1994) "Creativity can be a big help at any stage in life; and it seems to have special benefits as we get older." He describes creative people as "more flexible, open to new experiences... independent, more appreciative of beauty, have broader interests and are more tolerant of situations that are not clear-cut."

Personal interviews I conducted revealed that expanding one's interests, exploring latent abilities and talents, and allowing one's mind to creatively think of solutions to help other people are reported sources of zest at midlife.

Creativity is something we may want to cultivate at midlife and beyond to help us enhance our satisfaction in life and find greater meaning in the life stage we are in.

Personally, I found in my first attempts at art work a new source for energy, enthusiasm, and vigor. My work may not count as far as its artistic merits are concerned, but to me it holds much significance for it made me realize that there is still so much in myself that I can explore, things I never thought were there but which can be brought forth into being if only I dare. I'd like to echo Lorna Kalaw-Tirol's citation of Gail Sheehy—that truly. "midlife is often the beginning of the most creative period in a woman's and a man's life."

So, I dare the midlifers out there to take the brush and paint the visions long stored in your mind, take the pen and write that poem or novel wanting so long to come to being, write the music that can cap your years, take the needle and bring things to life.

Emotional health

Midlife is known to have numerous events which can throw one into a state of imbalance like the oft decried midlife crisis, menopause, retirement. All these can lead to depression. Chic Fortich (in Kalaw-Tirol, 1994) wrote that she could not accept being a menopausal woman, being old, in her words, at age 39. She went into depression, disabled herself for two months, and blamed God.

The midlife transition can also throw a midlifer in turmoil when he or she experiences deep psychological changes and come face to face with unknown areas of one's personality. Finding that the old ways of doing in the first half of life are no longer appropriate with the new emerging self

can be very confusing and frustrating to say the least. The physical changes just as well can be cause for anxiety, frustration and anger.

Children leaving the coop, spouses, friends getting sick, parents dying; relationships crumbling can throw a midlife into a crisis. Appleton's (1991) advice is we must learn to let go of "frustrations, resentments and anger." An angry or depressing thought or holding a judgement against someone can become toxic to our body.

Through all these, emotional health, psychological well-being, or emotional stability can be a balancing force without which one can lose control and keel over. Knowing that we have ego resources to fall back on can help us maintain an even keel, a better hold of ourselves even as we are buffeted by midlife storms. Having a confidential relationship with someone who can help, taking things in stride, focusing less on yourself and more on others will definitely have its rewards.

Social networks

My respondents have identified students, friends, and family as reasons why they feel challenged and motivated and why they find meaning in their present stage. Similarly, in my study on coping with menopause as a developmental transition, Japanese and Filipino women cited spending time with friends and family support as very important means of coping. They drew information from them to help them understand what they were going through; felt love and caring from family. Friends, family, mentors, confidants, protégés, people who meet our emotional needs enable us to maintain a healthy and balanced relationships (Biehl, 1996). This is especially underscored by a midlifer who wrote to Dr. Margarita Holmes in Kalaw-Tirol's book, *Coming to Terms* (1994). The letter said that "if a wife takes care of the husband she will find untold treasures and delights." Gerzon (1992) is of the view that our mate can become a guide to our soul; and our soul becomes a guide to a relationship with our mate.

Asuncion Maramba (in Kalaw-Tirol, 1994) described beautifully that among the things that she discovered that has given her security at midlife and which she advised should never be taken for granted are her husband, children, friends, her eyesight, and home. She also found that friends are precious so she has cultivated new ones, renewed old ones, both individuals and groups, neighborhood friends, and classmates. She, thus, look to school homecomings as rites of friendships that warm the heart. Roberto Mendoza, in an interview, cited also deepening friendships as one of the hallmarks at this time of his life.

Florina Castillo summed up her friendship with Naty Crame Rogers as a wellspring for relating more intimately with others, seeking "the hermitage within," making the moments spent with others as the oases of her days.

Satisfying work

Second to God and a rich prayer life, both male and female respondents reported work they enjoy doing as a source of energy and inspiration. Work where they find meaning and satisfaction are enough motivations to keep them going.

However, they also expressed concern that they have not advanced well enough and that financial stability is still something that they have to work for. These are the practical side of the picture. Inasmuch as work is very much part of our identity, there are societal and personal pressures that must be borne. There are expectations that at midlife, somehow one must have established oneself career-wise but pressures notwithstanding, the respondents have identified satisfaction with one's work as an actualizer. Truly, if work is done not out of self-conceit "but in gratitude for the free gift of life... and in gratitude, simply for our God-given power to be useful to our fellowmen" (Walters, 1994), it can inspire us to go on.

In a study on professional burnout by Cherniss (1995), it was found that meaningful work, work that is intellectually challenging, was one of the things that kept professionals going over a long period of time. Variety, and

professional autonomy and support were likewise noted as reasons why the professionals in the study thrived on work. H.L. Neri wrote, "If you like your work, your desire to do it will be like a wind to propel your ship with much less fuel. If you like your work, you work no more, for work when you like it is work no longer but sheer enjoyment."

To sustain this as a wellspring for well-being, it is recommended that even as one enjoys one's work and derive pleasure from it, one should broaden career options, continue professional and personal development, pursue on-the-job training because nothing is permanent. Creative options must be set in place if satisfying work is to continue to be a source of zest at midlife and beyond.

What I have discussed are areas that we can pay attention to if we are to outsmart the midlife blues. We can continue to nourish and nurture these aspects and march on to the 50s, 60s, and over the hill with zest and well-being.

It is my hope and prayer that listening to me has stimulated you to map out the directions you will take in living out the middle years. I would like to end this paper with a poem by Harry Emerson Fosdick on what composes successful living.

To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.

This paper was presented as the author's Professorial Lecture for the Gokongwei Distinguished Professorial Chair in Asian Studies, 1996-97.

References

- Abrenica, A. P. (1994). *Socio-psychological factors in the menopausal experience of selected middle class Filipino women*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, De La Salle University, Manila.
- Abrenica, A. P. (1995). *Coping with menopause as a developmental transition among Filipino and Japanese women: A comparative study*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Appleton, N. (1991). *Healthy bones*. New York: Avery Publishing Group, Inc.
- Biehl, B. (1996). *Weathering the midlife storm*. USA: Victor Books.
- Cherniss, C. (1995). *Beyond burnout*. New York: Routledge.
- Gerzon, M. (1992). *Listening midlife*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc.
- Kalaw-Tirol, L. (Ed.) (1994). *Coming to terms*. Manila: Anvil Publishing.
- Llewelyn-Jones, D. & Abraham, S. (1992). *Every woman's middle years*. Victoria, Australia: Ashwood House Medical.
- Lock, M. (1990). Konenki means "menopause" in Japan. *Healthsharing*, 11, 5-27.
- Mayer, N. (1978). *The male mid-life crisis*. New York: Signet.
- Monte, T. (1994). *Staying young*. Berkeley, CA: Rodale Press.
- Perry, S. & O'Hanlan, K.A. (1992). *Natural menopause*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Sheehy, G. (1976). *Passages*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc.

Smoke, J. (1994). *Facing fifty...A view from the mountain top*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Walters, J. D. (1994). *Affirmations for self-healing*. CA: Crystal Clarity Publishers.

NOW AVAILABLE

**Psychological Association of the Philippines
Module Series**

Module
No.

- | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Portrait of Filipino Culture | <i>Dr. Amaryllis T. Torres</i> |
| 2 | A Brief History of Philippine
Psychology | <i>Dr. Patricia B. Licuanan</i> |
| 3 | Philippine Child Psychology
Current Trends | <i>Dr. Elizabeth R. Ventura</i> |
| 4 | Code of Ethics | |

STILL AVAILABLE

**Back issues of
Philippine Journal of Psychology**

Volume

- | | | |
|----|----------------------|--|
| 19 | (1986) | Focus on the Filipino Family |
| 20 | (1987) | Fr. Jaime Bulatao's Modes of Mind |
| 21 | (1988) | Research in Personality and Social Psychology |
| 22 | (1989) | Papers in Clinical Psychology |
| 23 | (1990) | Papers in Applied Psychology |
| 24 | (1991) | Papers in Social Psychology
Papers in Development Psychology |
| 25 | (1-1992)
(2-1992) | Papers in Clinical Psychology
Recent Research in Experiment Psychology |
| 26 | (1-1993)
(2-1993) | Recent Research in Philippine Psychology
Recent Research in Philippine Psychology |
| 27 | (1994) | Problem Areas Among Filipino Families |
| 28 | (1995) | Cross-Cultural Concerns of the Filipino
Psychologist |