

**ON BEING FIFTY: A DEVELOPMENTAL CROSSROAD : Generativity vs. stagnation: a time to reckon with past , present and future.**

**by Hanna Turken LP, BCD, LCSW**

The fifties could be the best of times or the worst of times. In a country where youth is so valued, to be fifty and not accomplished in your love and in your work life, might lead to what Freud first defined as melancholia, or what Erickson defines as stagnation and ego arrest.

Freud tells us in *an Autobiographical Study* (1935) about his ten years of isolation after his break with Breuer, and given the poor reception of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900): “I was completely Isolated. In Vienna I was shunned; abroad no notice was taken of me. I was scarcely reviewed in the technical journals. However by 1906 a number of students gathered about me. Bleuler and Jung and others took an interest in psychoanalysis.” (p. 91)

After returning from America in 1909, Freud writes, at that time, “I was only fifty-three. I felt young and healthy and my short visit to the new world encouraged my self-respect in every way. In Europe I was despised but over there I was received by the foremost men as an equal” (Freud, 1935, p. 99) Freud’s melancholia was due to the narcissistic loss, the blow to his ego ideal in relation to his inability to impact on the professional establishment seems to have led to emotional stagnation for a number of years. This is consistent with Erik Erikson’s (1950) concept of generativity in mid-life, that entails: 1) the need to transmit what we know and the responsibility for the next generation, and; 2) the right to be respected by one’s young one’s, one’s peers and one’s elders.

If productivity and creativity are thwarted, stagnation ensues. These ego developments are, for Erikson, psychologically and sociologically related. For Esther Menaker (1950) ego development is always progressive. Ego represents the continuity of what the individual is in the dimensions of time and space. The ego-ideal and the maintenance of a stable self-esteem are the vehicles for social cohesion and the capacity for change and progress. Chasseguet–Smirgel (1985) indicates that healthy narcissism prevents regression and maintains psychological development moving forward. It defines reality and promotes mastery. It creates the stable connection between the individual and society. For the fifty-three year old Freud, it was the recognition of the importance of his work that restored a healthy narcissistic balance as demonstrated by his prolific accomplishment; *On Narcissism* (1914) and *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) amongst them, which I found particularly relevant to this paper.

At this time I have a number of patients in my practice that are entering their fifties. My two children and their cousins are in this age group as well. I have found that the difficulties they are encountering are quite different from those encountered when we reached a similar age in times past. When I turned fifty, I became aware of options opening for me and for other women. I had been busy working at a mental health clinic while also being a wife and raising children. Thanks to the women’s movement I felt that I could choose any path in life that I wanted. Marking this significant year I experienced a sense of freedom, and felt that time was on my side. A search into the person I had become, and the need to search for the person I was to become, led me to begin my

analytic training. I was lucky that the times were such that I was afforded the opportunity. In today's economy this does not seem to be the case. Being fifty in these times doubles the odds of difficulty for many. The present day fifty year-old is more likely to find his or her options narrowed and likely to encounter interferences with his or her creative ego ideal goals, therefore diminishing self-esteem.

D. will be fifty-two this year. He lost his full time job and full benefits when the company for which he worked for was taken over by another company. Although at first he was promoted by the new company, he was soon after fired in their effort to reduce costs. He now works as a copywriter for a book company on a three days per week basis without benefits. He feels defeated by his inability to make a decent living and the pain of a failed long-term relationship. From childhood, he had a vision of becoming a fiction writer but his motivation and commitment to fulfilling this ego ideal has been lost. In his words, "there is no point, I feel empty."

M., a fifty-two- year old, lost her job two years ago. She was the editor of a teen magazine that went out of business. M. is now self-publishing but generating minimal income as there is no editing job to be had at her age. She has been withdrawing funds from her retirement account rapidly just to cover bills, and as a result, she has been experiencing uncontrollable panics after awakening from very disturbing dreams.

J. is a modern composer working as music teacher in an junior high school. He feels he is running out of time for his music to be performed because his genre, atonal music, is out of favor at this time. He has been working towards a Ph.D. in music but has no assurance that a teaching position at a university level will be there for him.

H. has a small business dependent on the insurance industry. She is not sure that her business will survive.

T. married a woman half his age. His second child was just born. The pressures of work and his sense of responsibility at a time when his industry is shaky has sent him into an emotional rut, experiencing a lack of pleasure and an inability to feel good about what he does have. T.'s main concern, after the death of an older brother, is questioning who would act as a father to his children if anything were to happen to him.

There was a prior time in which the expectation of working people was that their jobs would be there to provide income until retirement age; that their skills would be passed on, preserved and expanded by the next generation; and, that savings put away would be sufficient to get them through their later years. Now such predictability is gone and midlife has become a most uncertain time, yet while security is more uncertain the duties and responsibilities of this age group to themselves and their families have remained the same or increased. This dilemma has attracted the attention of the media.

On August 4, 2017 David Brooks wrote an article for the New York Times entitled: "Can People Change After Middle Age" (p. A23) in which two men were able to reprocess their lives and find new directions. He found that indeed, people can develop interests that balance their lives. In an opinion article in the New York Times on August 6, 2017, Sally Koslow (p. .L17) writes about losing a productive, well-paid job with full benefits in publishing. She is in her mid-fifties and "knows" that the reason she was fired

is “age related.” Koslow is resentful of the fact that employers ignore this mature work force because they do not want to pay the salaries that people with extensive experience deserves. On September 7, 2017, on the PBS News Hour, Elizabeth White was interviewed about her book, “Fifty Five, Unemployed and Faking Normal.” A Harvard graduate with a degree in finance, who having earned substantial money and “living high,” lost her job during the financial crisis of 2006. She has not been able to find work and finds herself financially impoverished. She hopes that her book might generate some income while doing a speaking tour and meeting with many people in the same situation.

William Sze in his book *Human Life Cycle* (1975) states that systematic and measurable changes occur in the second half of life. A self awareness, a sensitivity to the self, acts as the instrument by which to reach goals; it is a new aspect in self utilization that is the product of increased maturity. Middle-adulthood increases the awareness of physical vulnerability, the need to look at time left to live rather than time since birth, and the creation of social as well as biological heirs. There is an increasing of self processing, introspection, gained from observing aging parents and young adult children. One of Sze’s patients expressed it as akin to “looking at a three way mirror,” the self, the self in the aging parents, and the self in one’s child. It is a time of cognitive height, of decision-making. Accomplishment is not only appropriate at this stage of life, but expected to be carried out with not only self awareness, selectivity and mastery but also with introspection, reflection, and stock taking. Of out most importance is the structuring and restructuring of experience. Re-adaptation to a new phase in development could lead to either a constructive or a destructive psychological way of dealing with internal and external tasks.

For Erikson, society is organized by age and social status experience. Each class—middle, working, rural, urban etc., has its own rights, duties and obligations. As already noted early in this article, relationships between age groups changes with historical times. These changing roles affect identity. Identity and Self-realization involves love, sexuality, sexual procreativity and productive work patterns. To accomplish these ego ideals is essential.

According to Erickson, there are gender differences in how one experiences accomplishment and failure during middle age. Negative ego states lead men to feelings of being impoverished, a sense of losing autonomy, of being closed up, being restrained, and being attacked. Fear of being exposed, fear of remaining small, being immobilize, and of having no guidance. Female identity reflects being left, being left empty, and feelings as if being raped. Positive ego autonomy is the key to individual potentiality—the ability to play, love, work and grow.

For Menaker (1984) an ego nexus is developed within an interactional process. This ego nexus is composed of all the previous psychosocial stages and their resolutions brought together in our own individual way. According to Menaker, it is our unique creative ego process that leads to ego autonomy, ego differentiation and ego identifications that consolidate with maturity. Ego identifications are the core of self-image, of ideal and superego formations. It is the internal and external mastery of one’s self and socio-cultural demands that will ensure the fulfillment of one’s potential in self-actualization and introspection. It therefore follows that for the fifty plus these developmental achievements are of the greatest importance in order for this group to maintain stability and fulfilled the on-going demands.

As previously mentioned, each stage of development brings new processes. My patient A. is in a transitional stage. She will be fifty this month. She has encountered many changes in her life during her forties. She is entering this middle age stage with a realistic understanding of the tasks ahead. She is a poised, very attractive, and athletic woman who is compulsively drawn to people who make her laugh. She first came into analysis at a frequency of two times per week, soon after the attack on the World Trade Center, when both she and her husband lost their jobs. He worked on Wall Street, she worked in advertising. The following year he was back working in investments earning a comfortable salary. She stopped treatment, then return to treatment when her father, the only person whom she totally trusted to care for her emotionally and economically, died.

A. was, experiencing severe grief. Her mother (a judge) was too burdened by her work and the loss of her husband to attend to her daughter's grief. Since I last saw her she had given birth to a girl and had gotten training as a medical assistant, a position at which she worked at for a while but eventually decided was not for her. Again she stopped treatment after another year but then returned again. In the interim, she had gone back to school, was about to receive her degree in nursing and had given birth to a second child, a boy. Her husband, still working in securities had lost a second job, and the lack of income made her dependent on her mother for financing her education. Her mother was evidencing the beginning symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. A. has remained in treatment until now. She has been working through her anger at herself, her husband and her mother, and has been addressing her guilt for wishing herself free of the marriage, and for not fulfilling her father's expectations for stability in her life. She is cognizant of the reality that she is a middle age woman, with an unemployed husband, an adolescent child fighting for her independence, and an aging increasingly incompetent mother entrenched in fighting her about the possibility of moving to an assisted living facility. A. is currently working as a nurse assistant, earning enough money to get by and has gone back to school again, this time to get a master's degree in nursing. This will provide the credentials that should considerably increase her income, and she hopes will make her economically independent.

E. is at the verge of a later middle age life transition; she is now fifty-nine. She came into treatment seven years ago. She was angry and severely conflicted about the relationship with her husband of thirty-two years, whom she met and married after their graduations from the same college. She felt stagnant. Her two children were now grown up. Her son was a medical student at Harvard, her daughter was teaching English in Germany. Her job assisting her husband in his accounting business no longer satisfied her need for growth and creativity. She was in desperate need of a change. Her husband, was refusing to let her out of his sphere. When she found a job at a local college, he admonished her and predicted she would be back with him in the business within a couple of months. She divorced him the following year at a significant emotional cost. She hurt her mother, a devout Catholic who does not believe in divorce; her children have a troubled relationship with their father since he refuses to even speak with my patient on the phone. She does not regret the divorce but hungers for the company of a man. She has been promoted in her job to the highest position she can attain without a higher degree. She is well respected for her work by the administration and the academic community. She is an integral part of meetings and is looked upon as a creative contributor in the program to promote diversity in education. Having achieved, through

her work in treatment the restoration of her self esteem as an independent individual, E. is no longer dreading the years ahead. She is confident that she will make them productive and fulfilling.

At this time in our country we are contending with natural disasters, a chaotic situation in Washington with rapid fluctuations and uncertainty as to health care, education, funding for the arts and economic stability. The consequences to the developing adults is that self-reliance is necessary before they are mature enough to take charge.

For Fromm (1941), self reliance that is acquired too early produces a sense of individuality that is not true individuality. For Bly (1985) it is what he calls the emergence of the sibling society. The lack of mature guidance during important development leads to a society composed of perennial adolescents. For Menaker, to push too early for autonomy as a social value may lead to ungenune ego autonomy and not a true ego synthesis. This situation is marked by doubt, uncertainty and possibly ego paralysis. At present we are already facing such a breakdown that has caused a national emergency to be declared in regard to drug abuse and suicide amongst adolescents and young adults.

What prompted my interest in doing this paper is the remarkable and difficult position in which my colleagues, my children and my patients who are in their fifties have on their hands, as well as could have in shaping the future. This is the connective generation between the young and the old. They are in the unique position of having a physical and psychological advantage in creating change. Often we seem to disregard their developmental needs as inconsequential, when, in actuality, the continuous maturity of those in middle age is the key to the mental health of all in our society. I have often been asked what my favorite, most enjoyable time of my life has been. My spontaneous response is, I would have liked to have remained in my early fifties for a bit longer.

Esther Menaker was my training analyst. Many times in expressing my-self, she would pick up my trying to relate to my patients as if I were Freud or Stallorow, etc. She would always address my elocutions by reminding me that to be an effective therapist I could only do it well as Hanna Turken. I needed to maintain what she referred to as self-constancy. John Klauber (1987) indicates that it is the spontaneity in the analytic process that is responsible for the artistic and most creative aspects of the analysis. It is the listening and exploration of creative thinking in our patients that can lead to their understanding of who they truly are. I have written and presented papers on different subjects but the impact of the ego ideal and the role of father's have occupy a large part of my developing maturity as a therapist. Through my practice I came to learn that one of the most important factors in maturation is the quality of the attachment and the completion of the process of separation from the father. It is this process that is responsible for creating the developmental impetus in the transitional space and in finding the way to the next life experience.

As it has been said throughout this paper, growth never stops, time is always changing and demanding that we keep in mind the past, concentrate in creating a productive present, and to be confident of the future. For the fifty-plus, the past is not the priority; instead it is the exploration of the present self that is prioritized. I was able to create my future in an era of forward movement that sustained my ego development. I found what Betty Friedan calls *The Fountain of Age* (1993). Productivity in the last

stage of life can only be sustained if the middle age years lead to a true understanding of the self. Erikson calls it ego integrity. Hopefully I've created what Irving Yalom refers to in his book, *Staring at the Sun*(2008), as "ripplings." Yalom wrote, "Often without our conscious or unconscious intent or knowledge we create concentric circles of influence that may affect others for years and even for generations" (p.83). The fifty plus generation is entering a developmental ego stage in which the building of resilience and the transmittion of knowledge to the next generation is their developmental task. These are the "ripplings." It is the responsibility of knowing we have to consider the welfare of the next generation that sustains productivity in the later part of life.

### References

- Bly, R. (1985). *The Sibling Society*. New York, NY: Norton
- Chasseguet-Smirgel, J. (1985). *The Ego Ideal*. New York: Norton
- Erikson E. (1950). *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton
- (1977) *Toys and Reasons*. New York: Norton
- Freud S. (1935/1955) *The Biographical Study*. Standard Edition
- (1914) *On Narcissism: an Introduction*. Standard Edition
- (1917) *Mourning and Melancholia*. Standard Edition
- Friedam, B. (1993) *The Fountain of Age*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster
- Fromm, E. (1941) *Escape from Freedom*. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Co.
- Klauber, J. (1987) *The Role of Spontaneity in Psychoanalytic Therapy in Illusion and Spontaneity in Psychoanalysis*. Free Association Books: London
- Menaker E. (1965). *Ego in Evolution*. New York: Grove Press
- (1995) *The Freedom to Inquire*. New York: Jason Aronson
- (1979) *Masochism and the Emergent Ego*. New York: Human Science Press
- Sze, W.C. (1975) *Human Life Cycle*. New York: Jason Aronson
- Yalom, I.D. (2008). *Staring at the Sun*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Hanna Turken may be contacted at: [HJLTurken@gmail.com](mailto:HJLTurken@gmail.com)