



# Archetypal Penetrance and the Midlife Crisis

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*Most readers are in the second half of life and will be familiar with some of the processes that Tim describes below in terms of a crisis of meaning. He forms his own bio-psycho-socio-archetypal (BPSA) model, adding the archetypal to the more familiar categories, and explains his theory of archetypal penetrance.*

## Bringing archetype in from the cold

SMN members will probably be familiar with the concept of archetypes as the great weather systems of meaning. Archetypes represent deeper organising systems of meaning rather than the superficial pattern of a stereotype. An archetypal experience invariably brings an intensification of meaning, a concentration of essence, but there is a spectrum of this intensification.

Attempts to define archetype present us with some difficulties if they are inherently unknowable and impossible to adequately describe. Historically we tried to understand them by personalising them as our Gods and Goddesses. Our understanding is deepened by the following five concepts:

- Plato's parable of the cave shows how we, the cave dwellers are transfixed by the flickering shadows, the pale watered down version of the fundamental reality that lies beyond our everyday experience. The goal of the philosopher is to gain experience of the primary (archetypal) reality outside the cave. Ultimately everything emerges from the Sun, which represents the Self archetype.
- The theologian Rudolph Otto gives us the crucial notion of numinous experience as an *overplus of meaning*. The numinous is bivalent, having both light and dark manifestations, blissful or dreadful.
- Carl Jung learned from *synchronicity*, where there is a correspondence of meaning between the internal and external world, that archetypes are truly transpersonal constructs.
- The physicist David Bohm developed the *soma significance* model where meaning is an integral part of the physical universe. We could think of meaning as a fifth dimension which can be concentrated to an intensity that is beyond our capacity.
- Aldous Huxley popularised the concept of the brain as a *reducing valve* so that our experience of meaning remains digestible and we are not overwhelmed.

There are a number of ways in which this hypothetical reducing valve can be bypassed to bring a greater intensity of meaning into our consciousness. We know that this occurs in various abnormal mental states that we classify as psychiatric illness. We also know that there are various techniques developed over millennia that have been prized for the ability to induce heightened meaning. These

techniques include ritual, the use of sound, movement, meditation, fasting, prayer and psychoactive substances. Sometimes, these intense meaning states may come upon us spontaneously.

Turning to our current (mis) understanding of unusual mental states - I do not actually know any psychiatrists who fit the current caricature of the medical reductionist where any unusual psychological experience becomes squeezed into a diagnosis according to the ICD10 or DSM5 classification bibles inevitably leading to the prescription of a drug. But I am sure such biological fundamentalists exist. There are psychoanalytical fundamentalists and social fundamentalists too, but mostly mental health professionals work to a thoughtful and considerate bio-psycho-social framework.

If we add an archetypal component – while avoiding an archetypal fundamentalist position – we form a *bio-psycho-socio-archetypal BPSA* model of the psyche. This adds the crucial missing dimension that helps us to understand states of heightened intensity of meaning, numinous experience and non-ordinary states of consciousness. Not only does this avoid unhelpful pathologising but the BPSA model also points to practical methods that can harness the power of archetypal crises so that the experience becomes useful and growth orientated.

## Archetypal penetrance

Although they cannot be known directly, archetypes permeate our daily lives. They are the hidden forces that shape our conscious experience and patterns of thought; they leave their traces and images in the fantasy material that flows through our dreams and our daydreams. But archetypes cannot be separated from the physical world; they are inextricably linked with the bio-psycho-social unit that we usually consider constitutes our self as an individual person, being expressed through the hardware that is our body, our nervous system, our sense organs and our genetic inheritance.

*Penetrance* is a term used in genetics to describe the likelihood of an underlying genetic predisposition (genotype) being translated into a characteristic of the organism (phenotype). Some genes have complete penetrance in that anyone with that gene will show the physical trait associated with it. Most physical traits are polygenic, associated with a variety of genes that are expressed in variable degrees and subject to environmental influences. I suggest that we can apply the concept of penetrance to describe a similar effect with archetypes. If we are indeed influenced by a polyglot archetypal ocean with tides, currents, waves and undertows,

then this may be more active – or penetrant – in some people than others and each person may be more receptive to different archetypal flavors at different times.

The degree of *archetypal penetrance* is highly variable. Sometimes the degree of archetypal penetrance is overwhelming for the psyche and the ‘overplus of meaning’ may cause a crisis. From this perspective, those mental states that we term psychiatric disorders occur when there is a failure of the homeostatic mechanisms that normally maintain archetypal penetrance within a comfortable range. The morbid fear associated with paranoid states, the excitement and amplification of manic states, the self-loathing and constriction of severe depression, the imminence of catastrophe found in post traumatic stress disorder all have an awe-filled quality, that could be called numinous.

Of course high archetypal penetrance (HAP) states often arise where the individual enters a numinous state without developing an archetypal crisis. This may be a life enhancing HAP state or it may be unintegrated and cause some turbulence downstream. Some conditions lead to a depleted range of archetypal sensitivity with low archetypal penetrance (LAP) so that the person endures a dull and grey world with a diminished intensity of meaning. Sometimes there is an unstable state where predominantly low archetypal penetrance is interspersed with breakthrough HAP experiences and archetypal crisis.

Most of us exist in a comfortable and tolerable level of archetypal intensity state mediated by our brain and our psyche. There are some peaks and troughs of meaning that add some spice and richness and which are usually tolerated without much difficulty. We could call this the normative range of archetypal penetrance (NAP) that represents consensus reality.

### Foundering ego and the mid life crisis

Birth, aging and sickness flow ever onwards  
A river without ford or bridge....  
Have you prepared a boat?

*Mahasidda Padampa Sangye*

I will focus here on the mid life crisis, perhaps one of the more common and potentially productive archetypal crisis that we can experience. Indeed, I suspect that a many of us have been drawn to and found sustenance from the SMN as a result or as part of this process.

The idea that I will explore here is that the archetypal midlife crisis is essentially a crisis of meaning. The term *midlife crisis* is potentially misleading as the process I am describing can occur at any age from adolescence to old age. However, the midlife crisis is most likely to occur in middle age when a person has successfully navigated many of life's hurdles, managed the basic issues of adult independence and achieved security. But somehow these things are not enough. There is a lingering feeling of dissatisfaction, of dis-ease. As Joseph Campbell once said, ‘you may have got to the top of the ladder, but perhaps the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall’. Surely there is more than this. But what else is there?

The midlife crisis classically occurs in association with a threat to the ego. Death is the ultimate threat and, by definition, the midlife period brings the realisation that we are closer to the exit than the entrance. We are on the downward slope to our extinction. The ego structures that have served their purpose well over the first part of life become less useful and need to be re-arranged. Sometimes this process flows smoothly, but the ego is nothing if not tough and resilient, and often it resists this process strongly. The midlife crisis then develops as a battle between the ego that was and the reconstituted ego that needs to be brought into being. It is a battle of ego death and rebirth. There is often a trigger that brings matters to a head as a challenge to the established ego regime. The trigger may be an important relationship change involving partner, family life or employment or there may be a change of role such as retirement or children leaving home. It may involve illness or an encounter with death. It may be a numinous experience or an archetypal experience of some kind.

I don't think many are spared one of the many manifestations of the midlife crisis. Often it is a nagging grumbling presence with mild dis-ease. For some of us it may be more severe. On the various retreats and transpersonal workshops that I have

done over the years, many of my fellow participants had certainly undergone some form of midlife crisis, and it was this crisis that led them eventually to some form of spiritual practice and thence to the retreats that we shared. A few of them have had encounters with psychiatry, which often left them feeling misunderstood and frustrated.

Many of them seemed to instinctively gravitate towards a community that seemed to hold some integrity and a promise of a deeper way of understanding and relating. Such a community may be simply an organisation that provides occasional seminars, a forum for some discussion and the proximity of like-minded people. It may be a more formal structure such as a church, a Buddhist centre or a training programme. It may be a yoga class or a meditation practice. The function of such a community is to provide a safe, encouraging and nourishing setting, a compass to show which way is North, if North symbolises the Self. It is much harder to navigate this territory alone and sometimes people get very lost.

The philosopher Michael Washburn describes a model that describes this process in *The Ego and the Dynamic Ground*. For Washburn, there is an underlying layer of undifferentiated archetypal energy that he calls the Dynamic Ground. This is primal life force, the source of energy and creativity, the bedrock of consciousness. In this model, the ego is a personal construct that emerges from the Ground and, as the ego takes shape, we increasingly identify with it so that we repress the Ground, which becomes the deep unconscious. Washburn describes how the over-identification with ego eventually becomes counterproductive, as we become disconnected from the nutritive energy of the Ground. We lose vitality and our mood tends to become depressed. For Washburn, the midlife crisis holds the difficult but essential task of loosening the grip of ego and reconnecting to the dynamic potentials of the Ground so that psychospiritual growth can continue.

The problem is that the ego is a crucial part of who we think we are, the very basis of our identity — so it is not surprising that the death throes of our ego structures can be associated with such a profound sense of meaninglessness and alienation. This is a low archetypal penetrance state bringing a bleak flatness of spirit; an anhedonia where pleasure is lost. This is the long dark tunnel of life with no light at the end of it. We may redouble attempts to find some pleasure in the things that have served us before. We may buy the red sports car, go partying or have an affair. But these attempts to support the foundering ego by rekindling the relics of our youthful ideals don't work for us any longer and the consequences of such behaviour may deepen the crisis.

Thus the midlife crisis is part of an important developmental process that allows the redundant ego structures to properly perish as a prelude to a regeneration or rebirth. This can be a complicated process.

## Egolescence

For many of us, the turning away from the flickering shadows of our cultural trance is not an intentional process. We do not stride confidently through Plato's cave towards the exit; we hesitate, we slouch and we stumble. In mid life crisis there is likely to be a powerful undertow of low mood. It is a state of unstable archetypal penetrance, where the pervasive greyness of the LAP state may be interspersed by periods of higher archetypal penetrance. These higher penetrance states hold the potential for various forms of numinous experience that may accelerate the mutative process.

In mid life crisis, the ego has to begin to fail significantly to stop the repression of Self. So the process needs to be supported in two crucial ways, firstly to allow the ego to fail in a safe and supported way and secondly to allow an emergence, an uncovering of Self. A developed mid life crisis has elements of both — while ego is foundering, the Self may be beckoning — if we can only become aware it. It follows that any practice that amplifies the beckoning Self by increasing archetypal penetrance, may be very helpful, but correct *mindset (set), setting and integration* are absolutely crucial for this endeavour.

This is so important that it deserves repetition. The lessons from therapeutic work with non-ordinary states of consciousness emphasise set, setting and integration as the most important determinants of outcome. The mindset needs to be orientated towards understanding and growth. The setting needs to be supportive, altruistic, containing and compassionate. The set and setting pave the way to integration, which is often neglected. Integration requires a sustained effort, it means going after the high hanging fruit; Jung's own heroic endeavours during his own crisis show that non verbal methods of integration tend to capture the symbolism of the archetypal in a way that mere words cannot. The more the archetypal material can be brought into consciousness, understood, worked on and integrated, the greater the reward. Integration takes time and effort, as there is layer upon layer of meaning to be mined. An experience without the integration is an experience wasted.

The midlife process fundamentally changes the ego. The familiar ego structures are found wanting and new ego structures, new ways of being in the world, are tried on for size. Sometimes this is a straightforward process, following the examples set by role models or by a community. Sometimes, it is a more precarious process that can amplify and perpetuate the midlife crisis before a more stable equilibrium is found. Ego death and rebirth are like the weeding of a garden. The constricting and growth depleting parts of ego, like the weeds, have a powerful tendency to grow back. Sometimes it is the same type of weed that reappears and sometimes they are different weeds. The point that I want to make is that the weeding process needs repeating.

*Egolescence* is a term that captures that period of precarious uncertainty between two phases of ego. As we move uncertainly from dying ego to ego reborn, there is great potential for mistakes as we veer off the established pathway with its familiar stability towards the less certain path of the new ego structure. The natural tendency is towards a more organised state, but once again much depends on mindset, setting and integration. Egolescence is the adolescence of

the midlife crisis. However, the direction of ego travel is in opposite directions; the fledgling adolescent fledgling moves towards establishing strong and viable ego structures, while egolence is towards diminishing redundant aspects of ego, in favour of an enhanced relationship with the Self.

HAP states often include epiphanies, to a greater or lesser degree. If we are lucky enough to have an epiphany we pass through a threshold, we cannot go back to the pre-epiphany state, although some people may try. Epiphanies are by their very nature antagonistic to ego structures. The spiritual awakening, as opposed to the sexual awakening of adolescence, affects fundamentally how you see the world, your place in it and your interpersonal relationships.

Both adolescence and egolence tend to be periods of intellectual and moral awakening with a compelling shift in perspective and relational attitudes towards the world and its people. In egolence there is inevitably a revisiting of some of the unresolved themes of adolescence. Both phases are typically suffused with a heightened archetypal imagery and a numinosity that may be vague but pregnant with potential. Both phases are prone to introspection and narcissism. Both represent a shift from the concrete. Both can lead to a cynical alienation from norms, parental ideals and society. Both can predispose to naïve idealism, looking to abstract principles and ideals as offering solutions to ethical difficulties.

The Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli has something very interesting to say about the complications of peak experiences. The influx of energy from the Self, he says, will cause the sharp edges and less agreeable traits of the personality to recede into the background and we see a new and lovable individual. Sometimes the integrative energy of the Self and the maturity of the ego is sufficient to allow a permanent transformation. However, sometimes, as the energy of the Self recedes, the personality traits reassert themselves with renewed force. All the rocks and rubbish of our ego and personality, which had been covered by the high tide of energy, emerge again.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the advantage can be that this shadow aspect is now available to be worked upon, if it is recognised for what it is.

## Emergence

How does one start to emerge from midlife crisis? How does the failing dispirited ego respond constructively to the whispers from the deep? Sometimes the charge of archetypal energy and spiritual insight can be followed by a disappointment, an alienation and abandonment, as the connection to the numinous is lost. For some who go through this process, it can indeed be a long dark night of the soul

that seems interminable and never-ending. The reassurances that this is a natural healthy process, that the dark night will be followed by bright dawn, sound naïve and fantastic. Yes, it makes sense to practice kindness, to do yoga or meditation, to listen to beautiful music and to spend time in nature. But sometimes this just doesn't seem to work. What, then, is there but to wait and hope that there may be something inchoate, something emergent, and something gestating?

This is where the idea of pilgrimage is helpful. It could even be a physical pilgrimage such as the Camino or a more nebulous non physical pilgrimage. The key points are that the pilgrimage, whichever form it takes, is a journey that is well supported, clearly signposted and done in good company. The journey has an intended endpoint while recognising that the real fruit of the journey is likely to take an unexpected form and will emerge from different sources. Above all the pilgrimage allows a letting go, a surrender and an opening.

In modern times we have the advantage of plurality of approaches and we each need to find a form of pilgrimage that feels right for us. Perhaps because of my own background as a psychiatrist, I felt naturally drawn to the high intensity of non-ordinary states and trained with Stanislav Grof in holotropic breathwork – although nowadays I prefer my retreats to be silent. Grof's method deliberately raises archetypal penetrance in a highly supportive setting that is geared towards integration. I think such methods, if done properly, have the advantage of allowing a more complete integration of shadow material. Many of the younger generation are drawn to ayahuasca workshops, where I fear the integration is often sub optimal. Others will prefer a more traditional, contemplative approach.

And what of institutions? Perhaps we should start with our own dear Scientific and Medical Network. Bernard Carr's editorial in the Spring 2015 Network Review was entitled *crisis and opportunities* and highlighted divisions, declining resources and uncertainty of role and direction in a changing environment. Is this a potentially fruitful mid life crisis or is it ossification and senescence? Are we in a low archetypal penetrance state?

If there are redundant aspects of ego then clearly the SMN structures (representing ego) need to be carefully considered and addressed. But are we neglecting the aspect of the mid life crisis that involves opening to Self? Yes, we can all agree to the vision of a rigorous open-minded approach to science and spirituality, but do we need to tweak our archetypal penetrance? And if this is so, how indeed can we best address this crucial task together?

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“Happiness often sneaks in through a door you didn't know you left open”

John Barrymore

