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Dante's Commedia

### **Dante's midlife transition: Learning to live and love**

Transitions are part of life. Nothing in this world can remain unchanged partly because the world itself is in a constant state of transition. Transitions follow natural order – spring follows winter and caterpillars become butterflies. In nature, the only alternatives to change are stagnation, purification, and death. Humans are no exception to this rule but what about the inner world, the world beyond the biological, physical realities and laws? Fortunately, while these internal transitions may feel foreign and unknown, they too are natural and have a natural path to follow in order for growth to occur. When a person does not follow the natural order in psychic growth the result is the same, only psychological. A person can suffer psychological stagnation, purification, and death. However, unlike biological consequences, a person's inner consequences are not fixed and while the person may seem "dead inside" they can be resurrected. In order to grow, a person has to find their individual purpose and to do that, they have to discover their individuality. The most true self, psyche, or soul is individual and the transition will have different revelations for different people but the journey to enlightenment will not change. The natural path to inner light is through the darkness.

For the first half of life, a person follows the natural path of life, moving forward and upward. Suddenly, they reach the top of the hill and from this new perspective, they begin to see things differently. The urge to continue up is challenged and a new direction is introduced. This transition sets the tone for the second half of life. When a person is at midlife, they look forward and face death and realize that their time is limited. They feel lost and don't know

which direction to go. If they continue to climb, they find themselves no longer making meaningful progress and stagnate. If they try to go back and live in the past, they see themselves as less than their former selves and putrefy. Finally, if they refuse to change, they face the worst fate of all, psychological death. Growth at this point means to move down and make a descent into the unconscious. Instead of onwards and upwards the movement becomes inward and down. This transition is difficult. It turns everything upside down and inside out. Many people do not make it through this transition unscathed. Marriages, careers, and identities are in jeopardy at this point because the goals of the first half of life no longer seem the same. In the face of death, these world-based successes have different meaning and may lose importance. Creation is not without destruction and in order to grow at this point, some tearing down of ego and discomfort is necessary. The process is difficult but the rewards include continued growth and a life with meaning, love, and joy.

“When I had journeyed half of our life’s way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray” (59). This is the opening line to Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Commedia*, one of the most prolific pieces of poetry ever penned to paper. Dante wrote *The Divine Commedia* in the early 1300’s about the poet’s journey through all of the levels of hell, purgatory, and heaven. Dante describes in great detail the realms of the afterlife but the poem isn’t really about what happens after death. It is a guide to navigate the midlife transition and a warning of what can happen if a person doesn’t fully make the transition. The shades in the poem suffer or rejoice endlessly in their assigned places. Fortunately for us, we are still alive and capable of growth. We don’t have to remain stuck in purgatory or inferno. We can reach a psychological paradise. Just like Virgil guided Dante in his journey, Dante illuminates the way for the reader.

The afterlife can't be known. The only way to attempt to understand it is to look at it as a reflection of life. Dante uses this reflective awareness to reveal how to love and how to live. Centuries before Freud and Jung gave us the vocabulary for depth psychology, Dante wrote about the midlife experience as he transitions from darkness and fear to light and love. His quest for knowledge of the afterlife is a metaphor for the quest for knowledge of the unconsciousness.

The time setting of the poem is no accident. Dante begins the story on Good Friday during his own midlife transition. In the Christian faith, Good Friday is the first day of the Easter weekend. It is the day that Jesus is said to have died for the sins of the world. This is considered the ultimate act of love. He sacrificed himself in order that Christians would have eternal life. The final day of the poem, Easter, is the day that Jesus is said to have risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. This mirrors Dante's experience as well as the midlife transition all people go through. It is in this period that people experience a profound shift in the psyche. They are faced with their own mortality and it creates the need for a new way of being. All through life to this point a person follows the natural path, the "path that does not stray" only to find themselves lost in a shadowed forest. This period in life is often labeled as crisis because it can be jarring to have the world turned upside down. As Dante demonstrates through his poem, while the experience is jarring, it doesn't have to be a crisis. With guidance, it is possible to illuminate the darkness to find the path to light and love.

In order to understand this transition, it is important to understand why it occurs when it does to people throughout recorded history. What is it about the late 30's to early 40's that makes people change their perspective so dramatically that a change of life occurs? Jung wrote that for a young person, it is not good to be too occupied with the self. When a person is young, they still need to climb up in order to grow. They are not ready to face the shadow. For a person

to face the shadow, they need to have a strong ego. “The journey into the unconscious – encountering, befriending, and integrating the shadow is not to be undertaken lightly. Nor can it be undertaken at all until one’s ego development is strong enough and consciousness truly valued and secured” (Brewi and Brennan, 261). Around midlife, a person has an established identity. All the conditions ripen to this point and it is “a duty and a necessity to give serious attention to himself. After having lavished its light upon the world, the sun withdraws its rays in order to illumine itself” (Jung, 109). What Jung so beautifully expresses using the metaphor of the sun, is this period of time is about shining a light on our inner selves. The thing about shining a light is that light creates shadows. The more light that is turned in, the more shadows are revealed. There are transitions through life but the midlife transition, by its very nature, is the point people are closest to their most creative (womb) and destructive (tomb) energies at the same time. Many people find themselves, like Dante, lost in a shadowed forest. The unknown and change are both scary and exciting. While the transition will be experienced differently by different people, the goal is the same – to find meaning beyond the natural functions of worldly successes.

Facing mortality does something to the psyche. Humanity is uniquely aware of the finite nature of existence but when the sands of time begin to be more plentiful on the bottom half of the hourglass, that awareness transforms. Time becomes so much more valuable and the question of wasting that time comes to the forefront. It is both a blessing and a curse to be aware that the time on this earth is limited. Steve Jobs gave a commencement speech to Stanford students after he had been given the diagnosis of terminal cancer. In this speech he told the audience “death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it, and that is how it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It's life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new” (2005).

Before the midlife transition time feels unlimited. The person before midlife is aware of their mortal status but when a person realizes that they are half way through this life; time takes on a whole new value and experience. Once a person realizes the precious nature of time they first look back to see whether they wasted their time. This is the time when they have to face their perceived inferiorities. If the person reaches this point and is not happy with how they spent their precious years, they may get stuck in a self-flagellating state similar to purgatory or refuse to turn inward at all and continue on a path of ignorance similar to the inferno.

This journey to the self is fraught with danger. Dante believes to get out of the forest, he needs to climb just like he had done through his life to this point. Virgil comes to him and tells him that in order to escape the forest, Dante will need to journey down. Dante can't make the passage on his own, he needs Virgil to point the way and keep him moving. Like Dante, we find that this path should not to be taken alone – even though the journey is a personal one through the inner workings of the soul, we need guidance and support to make it through. This is why works like *The Divine Commedia* are so important because they help guide us through the treacherous journey from the pits of hell to the heights of paradise. Dante often has to be told to keep moving by his guide, Virgil. Without guidance, it is easy to get stuck in hell or purgatory – it is only through others that we can reach the final level of enlightenment which is knowledge, acceptance, and ultimately – love.

This poem illustrates metaphorically what happens to the psyche during and after the midlife transition. There are three distinct realms for the soul, three possible outcomes for the soul in and after midlife. The first possibility is that the person can refuse to transition. This person will continue to chase worldly pursuits. Without the light, without change, these people have no hope, they will stagnate and die. Their soul will suffer a type of inferno. The second

possibility, as I have previously mentioned is purgatory. The shades from purgatorio no longer have a shadow because they are acting out their shadows through their punishments. The light created the shadows. They are acutely aware of their shadow but they fear it, they are unable to accept it. They spend their time looking back and punishing themselves over past transgressions. The final possibility, the desired outcome, is for the soul to reach paradise, love. This is where the person has successfully navigated the midlife transition, integrated the shadow, and learned how to love and live a life with meaning.

Dante uses the play of light and shadow as he travels from hell to paradise to explain concepts that psychology wouldn't 'discover' for hundreds of years. To talk about these concepts, I must first define some terms as I have come to see them through Dante. The first and most difficult term is love. Love is the key to living a meaningful life. Love is something that is not easy to put into words, it is complicated and mysterious yet also incredibly simple. In the poem, love is simply light and acceptance. Since this poem is trying to illuminate the path to enlightenment and love, it makes sense that light represents knowledge, specifically the quest towards knowing the self. With light comes shadow. The concept of shadow in the poem follows the concept of shadow for psychologists today, it is the unconscious, our inferiorities and inflations. Last, I would like to define fear. Fear is as hard to define as love. It is the opposite of love, simple yet complex. Just as love is knowledge and acceptance, fear is ignorance and denial. It is fear that in the poem, just as in life, blocks the path to love.

Each realm of the afterlife has its own relationship to light and shadow as it pertains to this midlife transition. The first realm is the inferno. One of the most well-known lines from Dante's poem are the words above the gate to the inferno "Abandon every hope, who enter here" (68). The inferno is a place of hopelessness. In this realm, there is no light, no shadow, and as a

result, there is no personal responsibility taken by the shades and they are hopeless. Lack of introspection and responsibility diminishes hope. “By not accepting personal responsibility for our circumstances, we greatly reduce our power to change them” (Maraboli, 37). Since the shades are past the point of change, they are without hope but we are alive. This represents the psyche when a person does not make the midlife transition. These people are without hope because without light, they don’t even know that they need to change. They lack knowledge and without knowledge, there can be no hope, just endless action. When the shades enter the inferno, they are judged and sent to a level for eternal torment. They do not even know themselves enough to know where they are to be placed for punishment and often refuse to accept responsibility for their fate. They are doomed to suffer from the unenlightened actions of life for all of eternity. The inferno is a place that isn’t just absent of love, it is a place for love betrayed. The sinners in the inferno failed to love themselves enough turn the light inward. Without this self-awareness, they were incapable of loving others because they didn’t have knowledge. They were absent of light and thus absent of love.

The next realm, purgatory, has light and shadow but not love. Love is light (knowledge) and acceptance. The shades of purgatory started the transition but became stuck. This is the only of the three realms that still allows for movement because this is the only realm where the shades place themselves. The shades have the power to move up or down the mountain of purgatory and even have hope to move into paradise. This is because these shades have light, they have knowledge. They are lacking acceptance not knowledge. Once a person begins the transition into midlife and turns the light inward, they rarely like what they see. Every person has ugly truths they do not want to bring into the light because the shadows those truths cast can become so overwhelming they crush the psyche. The shades that exist in this dimension can’t get

over the past. Many of the shades in this dimension ask Dante to have people pray for them because they say this will help them move up the mountain. This is their biggest flaw, they are looking for acceptance from the outside instead of seeking it from within. The opposite of love isn't hate, it is fear. The shades are afraid they are not worthy of ascension, they fear that they can't be loved because they don't accept themselves. They have seen the shadow, they have faced the past, but they have not accepted it. They may have also faced the future – the possibility that there is hope but again, they can't accept it. In purgatory, the light, because it is absent of love leads to fear and rejection. Whether the light casts shadows on the past or the future doesn't matter – it is the lack of acceptance that makes purgatory absent of love.

Purgatory is the most complicated of the dimensions. The inferno represents the absence of love, it is a place of betrayal and fear. Paradise is love, a place of knowledge and acceptance. Purgatory can be summed up easily by saying it is knowledge without acceptance but what that means is much more complicated. People in life become stuck, usually in the past but also in the future. A person stuck in the future loses sight of the here and now. They fear to move forward because of some future that doesn't even exist. These people are passive in life, they are waiting for something to happen, and they do not truly live. Since they do not live, they do not love. Theirs is a life of purgatory.

The second way to live in purgatory is to know the past and not accept it. When writing about men at midlife, Levinson writes “If he is burdened excessively by his grievances and guilts, he will be unable to surmount them” (263). It is impossible to live tomorrow or yesterday – it is only possible to live today. The past has already happened, so in order to experience life and love it is necessary to accept it. This means to allow it to be as it is and move on. People stuck in the past are beyond passive, they are victims. They can't get over the transgressions of

the past and continue to see themselves as less than because of that past. This is the person that is still wounded by childhood abuse or angry at themselves for not pursuing a dream. They have the knowledge but instead of accepting these things they, like the shades of purgatorio, are doomed to relive these events over and over and allow themselves to be defined by them. Knowledge is the first step, turning the light inward, but knowledge without acceptance is as crippling and useless as knowledge without action. The key to accepting and overcoming the past is to embrace it and allow it to work for you. The purpose of shadow work isn't merely to expose the shadow, it is to accept that the shadow isn't separate from the self – it is a part of the self and has purpose and value. Often people find their greatest strengths in their perceived weaknesses. The shades of purgatorio have seen the shadow but they allow the shadow to crush them instead of integrating it to allowing for it to heal.

The final path is the one that leads to paradiso, to love. Paradiso is full of light, reflections, and acceptance. This is what happens when a person successfully integrates the shadow. The shades of paradiso know and accept the past so it doesn't have power over them like the shades of purgatorio. Accepting the past doesn't mean to condone it, it simply means allowing it to be as it is. It is only through light and acceptance that love can exist. Love is letting go of fear. When a person is able to know their true self, shadow and all, and accept themselves as they are, they will find to love themselves. Once a person can love themselves, they can love others. Love them in a way they deserve to be loved, completely, with knowledge and acceptance.

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