

soul stages



*Surviving and Thriving
in the Second Half of Life*

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CHRISTOPHER
CHAMBERLIN
MOORE
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To Janice, who has supported me through all my soul stages and who helps make the second half of life well worth living, and to our children Alice and Douglas, who are embarked on their own life journey.

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INTRODUCTION

The Plaque on the Wall

What would it be like to live the second half of your life with real enthusiasm? What would it be like to live with purpose and direction, to be fully present at this stage, enjoying what life has to offer, neither dwelling in the past nor deferring your real life for some imaginary time in the future? What would it be like to live in such a way that you are fully open to whatever life brings?

Several years ago, a friend of mine visited an old country church in England. On the wall was a plaque dedicated to a former pastor who had ministered to the congregation during a time when another denomination was making inroads into the flock. From the point of view of the existing church members, these new believers showed entirely too much fervor for their religion. The members had a word to describe it: enthusiasm. From their point of view, it was a matter of pride that they should avoid this type of enthusiasm at all costs. Accordingly, the plaque on the wall read:

“To our beloved former pastor, who led this church for forty-seven years, with no enthusiasm.”

I have known people who lived the second half of their lives with no enthusiasm, or at least no enthusiasm I could detect. I have also known people who faced the second half with a sense of dread, seeing it as a step on the road to decline and irrelevance rather than an opportunity for new life experiences and for spiritual, emotional, and psychological growth.

The fact is that people of all ages today are struggling. News stories highlight the number of people succumbing to what some have called the “diseases of despair”: alcoholism, substance abuse, and suicide. Even those who seem to have done well according to the standards of our society find themselves asking, “Is this all there is?”

I believe most people, whether they consider themselves successful in the eyes of the world or not, experience some degree of difficulty in transitioning from one life stage to the next. For many, the passage of years seems to threaten a loss of vigor, of physical attractiveness, of relevance. It threatens their image of themselves usually formed at a much younger age and reinforced by society. It is amazing to me how many words used to describe stages in the second half of life are negative in tone. We hear about the midlife person “in crisis” or the senior as a “geezer.” Not only are these terms negative, they also provide no road map for negotiating each new stage, and they leave us blind to the treasures as well as the potential challenges of each new chapter.

The subject of this book is to look at adult life stages, especially those in the second half, and ask some basic questions: What’s going on here? What are the challenges of this stage? What are the pitfalls? How is this stage preparing me for the next chapter of my life?

More than a generation ago, journalist Gail Sheehy gave us such catchy terms as “The Trying Twenties,” “Catch-30,” and “The Age 40 Crucible” to describe adult life stages in her bestselling book, *Passages*.¹ Many books by other authors followed that explored various aspects of the adult life journey. But while most discussed the

psychological characteristics of each stage, few related spirituality to psychology or looked for the interconnections between the two.

There is a book that does just that. It shows a young person struggling to gain a sense of himself and of his life path as he enters adulthood. It shows men and women grappling with personal crises and changed perceptions of themselves at midlife. It shows older adults finding meaning and purpose in the senior years. That book is the Bible. It is probably the single most overlooked resource for people struggling to make sense of their lives and of the changes they experience during the passage from youth to senior adulthood.

The Bible offers no theory of adult life stages. It does give us portrayals of individuals at various ages struggling with the same issues people face today—issues not particular to any age or place or culture but universal to all human beings. These men and women portrayed in the Bible, these siblings under the skin, help give us insight into the challenges we face as we journey from young adulthood to the senior years.

In this book, I draw upon my own life experience and the life experiences of others I have known, as well as the remarkable personalities of scripture. I approach the Bible not only spiritually but *psychologically*. By that I mean I look at these individuals of the two testaments in terms of their psychological dynamics and how that speaks to the lived experience of people today.

The stories in the Hebrew Bible about the young Joseph stumbling his way into adulthood, the midlife Jacob struggling to reconcile two sides of his personality, or the older adult Nehemiah creating a legacy to pass on to the next generation are stories that could be about ourselves or our neighbor next door. These stories are universal. They shed light on our path as we negotiate our own confusing adult life journey.

The sequence I follow is roughly chronological. I begin with our experience of young adulthood and our active adult years, discuss midlife, and conclude with a focus on the second half of life and

the senior years. Although the issues are presented chronologically, many are common to all stages; these issues accompany us throughout life. The good news is that each stage of life is a “soul stage”—a chance to start over, to get it right, or at least a little righter than we did the last time.

In this book, we will explore:

- What challenges did we experience as a young adult? How did we find our own path? What mistakes did we make? Did we avoid getting “stuck,” and how did we get out of it if we were? Is failure always a terrible thing, or can it lead to greater rewards and life satisfaction?
- What did it mean for us to gain some measure of worldly success during what society calls the “prime of life”? Is “success” always a good thing or are there pitfalls? Did we give up something to follow the expectations of society? How do we discover what we gave up and how do we reclaim it for ourselves?
- What really happens at midlife? Did we experience a “crisis,” or did we use midlife as an opportunity to change direction? Did the things that once satisfied us begin to seem hollow? How do we discover a new path for the second half of life and rediscover new aspects of ourselves? How does spirituality come into play, and how do we integrate it into our life?
- And finally, in the senior years, how do we reinvent ourselves? Where do we find energy and passion? Do we have a legacy to leave for the next generation, and how do we figure out what that might be? Are the senior years a time for retreating from life, or can they be something much more?

As I investigate these questions, I will use examples from my own life and from my pastoral experience gained over forty years as an ordained leader in the church. I will use the narratives of biblical personalities as reference points. Above all, I will ask you to bring your own life into the discussion. What have you experienced? Where have you failed? Where have you succeeded? What is the next chapter of your life? What will it look like when you are there? And how can you begin preparing for it right now?

The adventure is ready to begin. Let us explore what God has in store for us.



CHAPTER 1

What Are You Seeking?

I only wanted to try to live in accord with the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?

—Hermann Hesse, *Demian*

Think of yourself at seventeen. Who were you? Where did you live? What were your concerns, preoccupations? How did you spend your day? What were you *seeking*?

If you had to choose one item from when you were a teenager—a photo or a memento—that would suggest who you were at that time and what you wanted to be, what would that be?

I know what it would be for me.

It is a newspaper column pasted in a scrapbook with a brown cover on the bottom shelf of a bookcase in my study. When I was a junior in high school, I achieved a small personal milestone. I had a letter published in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The *Post* had run a cover showing a teenage boy at a school dance walking across the floor when he finds himself in a dilemma. There are two girls sitting,

watching him expectantly. Which one should he choose? I wrote to the editor suggesting he should sit down between the girls and initiate a conversation. It probably wasn't the most brilliant suggestion in the world, but it was good enough to have my letter featured in the "Letters to the Editor," where it was read by six million people across the country.

I experienced a tiny burst of fame, at least in my own mind, and it was associated with writing. Shortly after it appeared, a friend of my mother who lived out-of-state phoned to say she had seen a letter by a Christopher Moore. Was that possibly me? I went down to the local pharmacy and saw a whole pile of *Saturday Evening Posts* stacked up on the newsstand, all with my letter in it. I thought to myself, "If I were in Seattle this week, or Portland, or Atlanta, there would be a similar stack of *Saturday Evening Posts*, all with my name in them." It absolutely blew my mind. And I'm sure it was a formative influence because later in my life I wrote and published four books and became a newspaper columnist as well as a priest in the Episcopal Church.

What was your formative experience? What is the iconic photo or keepsake from when you were a teenager or young adult? What does it say about you, about who you wanted to be, or who you wanted to become? What does it say about what you were *seeking* at that time in your life, and maybe even today?

A friend of mine had her formative experience at Yellowstone Park on New Year's Eve. She was in her late twenties and was working as a successful stockbroker in New York. She had come to feel, however, that her job was not what she was called to do. Something else was demanding expression in her life and it seemed to have something to do with serving God. Accordingly, she took a year off from work and went to Yellowstone to live and work while she sorted things out. That particular New Year's Eve, she made her way from the hotel through the snow to Old Faithful Geyser, a spot where thousands of tourists gather each summer. There, on New Year's

Eve, in the snow and the silence, she watched the geyser erupt. That evening she made the life-changing decision to leave her work as a stockbroker and enter the Christian ministry. Her decision was the result of questions she had been asking herself: What am I seeking? Where is God calling me to be? What am I meant to do with my life? What is my sacred dream? What is my mission?

Millenia before her, a teenager was asked these same questions. His name was Joseph, and his story is told in Genesis.

Joseph's Story and Our Story

Before we meet Joseph, we need to ask: What does a Hebrew teenager living in the ancient Near East have to teach us about our formative years growing up in the modern world?

Two things. First, the human psyche has not fundamentally changed in the thousands of years that modern humans have been on the planet. Culture has changed. Society has changed. The physical environment has changed. Technology has changed in unimaginable ways. But the actual human psyche—that mental and emotional hardwiring of what it means to be human—has not substantially changed, if at all, in thousands of years.

Put Joseph in a Phillies sweatshirt, give him a fashionable haircut, and teach him American English, and there is no reason why he could not pass for a twenty-first-century American teenager. His psychological dynamics as he came of age are not dissimilar from that of a kid coming of age in Cincinnati or Detroit or Los Angeles in twenty-first-century America. Despite social and cultural differences, psychologically Joseph is our sibling under the skin.

Second, Joseph's story is relevant because it is a product of what is called the oral tradition. Joseph's story, like all the stories in the Bible, was told word-of-mouth from one person to another before it was written down. An oral tradition has an important characteristic. The story becomes more effective every time it is told. Extraneous elements are eliminated. The parts of the story that resonate

more strongly with the hearers are given greater emphasis. Over time, the story becomes a better and more truthful perception of human nature.

Joseph's story was told repeatedly over many centuries. Over time, the story evolved from that of a teen living in a particular time and place to become a story of all teens living in all times and all places. Joseph's story is *our* story of the difficult journey from late adolescence to young adulthood. It is a template for becoming an adult: the timeless human drama of venturing forth, facing trials, and coming of age—what Joseph Campbell called “the hero's journey.”²

When we first meet Joseph in Genesis 37, he is seventeen. The Bible says this specifically, four lines into the story. The specificity about age is unusual for scripture. Even with Jesus, only one of the Gospels says that he was “about thirty years of age” when he began his ministry.

Second, he comes from what today would be considered a dysfunctional family. Joseph and his eleven brothers are the products of his elderly father and three different women. Joseph is the son of the beloved Rachel, his father's great love. His father's preference for him is obvious to his brothers and, as Genesis notes, “they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Genesis 37:4).

Finally, Joseph is a dreamer. He is one of those people who is in close contact with his unconscious. He also lives in a society in which dreams are taken seriously and often acted upon. Joseph, unwisely as it turns out, shares one of his dreams with his brothers. “There we were,” he tells them, “binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; and then your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.”

The brothers immediately recognize the implications of the dream. One can imagine the reaction of his brothers who already aren't that crazy about Joseph.

As if this weren't bad enough, he shares another dream. In this dream the sun, the moon, and the stars bow down before him. Talk

about inflation. This dream is too much even for Joseph's indulgent father, who rebukes him and says, "What kind of dream is this . . . ? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" (Genesis 37:10).

Joseph's self-absorption is getting out of control. He is "cruising for a bruising," as the mother of a friend of mine used to say, and the bruising is about to come. But first let's look closer at the nature of the sacred dream itself.

The Sacred Dream

Psychologist Aaron Kipnis distinguishes two kinds of dreams in the lives of most adults.³ One is the practical dream that focuses on the demands of living out an ordinary life in the world, along with the rewards that come with living it out. The other is the sacred dream, which he describes as the "secret ideals of what we would really like to do with our lives," ideals that are often "irrational, unreasonable, illogical, impractical." The practical dream puts food on the table. The sacred dream gives fire to our life. The sacred dream and the practical dream are often in conflict. Providing for the day-to-day necessities of life keeps us tied to the practical dream, while our heart pulls us toward the sacred dream.

Probably most of us do not live out the full dimensions of our sacred dream, whatever that may be. Many of us find outlets for elements of their sacred dream in hobbies and part-time activities. The practical-minded accountant goes to the office by day and plays in a rock band by night. The marriage between the sacred dream and the practical dream is not necessarily easy. It drives many crazy. But for some fortunate few, living out their sacred dream becomes their life.

John Muir was one of those. This nineteenth-century American naturalist, sometimes called the "Thoreau of the West," was probably more responsible than anyone else for establishing America's great system of national parks.