Separation-Individuation Processes in Middle Adulthood: The Fourth Individuation

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Margaret Mahler’s separation-individuation theory is a monumental contribution to our understanding of the emergence of the human infant from a relatively undifferentiated psychological state at birth to that of a complex sophisticated person at age three: an individual who has a clear sense of self and other and possesses the ability to interact in the external and intrapsychic worlds with multiple objects.

Fortunately, she and her colleagues did not stop there. They also recognized that the process of separation-individuation was lifelong, profoundly affecting every phase of development throughout the life cycle. This theme was elaborated for the first time by three coordinated panels at American Psychoanalytic Association meetings in the early 1970’s. The following quote from the panel on infancy and childhood by reporter Muriel C. Winestine (1973) provides a set of hypotheses which in a broad sense outline the subject matter of my paper and the topic of this symposium.

“The growing-away process is a lifelong separation-individuation process, since inherent in every new step of independent functioning is a minimal threat of object loss. Consciousness of self and absorption without awareness of self are the two polarities between which we move, with varying ease and with varying degrees of alternation or simultaneity. This development takes place in relation to a) the infant’s own body; and b) to the principal representative of the world as the infant experiences it-namely, the primary love object. As is the case with any intrapsychic process, this one reverberates throughout the life cycle, and new phases of the life cycle witness new derivatives of the earliest process still at work” (p.136).

It is important to recognize that adult separation-individuation processes are not a replication of the infant and toddler’s experience. That is impossible. John Munder

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Ross (1994) expressed the difference between the two as follows: “Whatever its elasticity, it is not the core self representation that is being organized [in adulthood] but the more variegated and permeable layer of self closer to and more responsive to the social surround. The … ego identity achieved in its felt actualization and affirmation are more dynamically affected and volatile in adult life than this primordial structure laid down in infancy and toddlerhood” (ms. p.15).

These ideas from the 1973 Panels and Dr. Ross are very consistent with the ideas on adult separation-individuation phenomena which Robert Nemiroff and I began to elaborate seventeen years ago in our first paper on adult development entitled “Some Observations and Hypotheses About the Psycho-Analytic Theory of Adult Development” (1979). While discussing Hypothesis IV, The fundamental developmental issues of childhood continue as central aspects of adult life but in altered form”, we commented on the seminal 1973 panels as follows: “Margaret Mahler (Winestone 1973) described separation-individuation as a lifelong process because of the inherent threat of object loss in every stage of independence. The absolute dependence on the mother which is a characteristic of infancy becomes a relative dependence in later life. Leo Spiegel (Marcus 1973) did not equate self-object constancy with full maturity. He defined this goal, only partially realized even in the healthy adult, as ‘object’ independence (p.163). Namely, the recognition of the object in its own right without reference to the self; the recognition that both self and object have independence. What Speigel is describing, we believe, is the transformation of an infantile theme into an adult one. Other authors (Steinschein 1973) affect-laden junctures such as marriage, parenthood, grandparenthood, the climacteric, retirement and senescence (p.63).

In presenting our Hypothesis VII— “A central, phase-specific theme of adult development is the normative crisis precipitated by the recognition and acceptance of the finiteness of time and the inevitability of personal death”— we addressed a central theme which affects separation-individuation phenomena in midlife.

“The death of parents, friends and contemporaries must be dealt with. The death of parents in particular leads to a loosening of childhood introjects which has as a central component the internalization of a sense of unending continuance and security, provided in childhood by the good enough parent. One is left alone with the recognition that he will die as his parents did. The death of a parent is a major change in an adult’s life, bringing with it the opportunity for profound internal reorganization, including increased separation-individuation, further resolution of the Oedipal complex and a new or altered relationship with the remaining parent” (p.68).

My interest in separation-individuation phenomena in adulthood has remained
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constant over the years. I recently addressed the subject in a paper published in the Psychoanalytic Study of the Child in 1990 entitled "The Third Individuation: The Effect of Biological Parenthood on Separation-individuation Processes in Adulthood." In it I described the continuous process of elaboration of self and differentiation from objects which occurs in young adulthood, focusing in particular on involvements with children, spouse, and parents, i.e., the family, the same psychological constellation that shaped the first (Mahler) and second (Blos) individuations.

Terminology

It may be useful at this point to address the use of the terms Third and Fourth Individuation which have begun to appear in the literature. I am aware of only three references to the term Third Individuation: one in a paper delivered by John Oldham (Panel 1988) and the second in my 1990 paper. Oldham defined the Third Individuation as "a midlife process involving structural change that occurs in reaction to the involution and death of one's parents" (p.78), while my use of the term focused primarily on the experience of becoming a parent in young adulthood. Oldham and I seem to be describing different, but complementary and interlocking aspects of complex separation-individuation phenomena which span many decades. The third reference to a third individuation was by Akhtar (1995) in a paper dealing with immigration and identity. John Munder Ross (1994) has utilized the term Fourth Individuation. I also used the term in my 1990 paper in reference to becoming a grandparent.

In an attempt to eliminate confusion and promote clarity I am suggesting the following utilization for these terms: reserve the term Third Individuation for the multidetermined, complex separation-individuation developmental phenomena which occur in the developmental phase of Young Adulthood (ages 20–40); and the term Fourth Individuation for the elaboration of these processes in Middle Adulthood (ages 40–60). The term Fifth Individuation could then be used for Late Adulthood (ages 60 and beyond). Such a formulation follows logically and chronologically after the well established use of the terms First and Second Individualizations to refer to early childhood and adolescence and provides a broad temporal framework for the entire life cycle. It is from within this context that I use the term Fourth Individuation in my title and will now proceed to address some major aspects of the normative, separation-individuation processes in midlife.
Interdependence and Loss

One of the most powerful influences on separation-individuation processes in midlife is the ironic awareness that one will die and be deprived of involvement with loved ones, at the very time that a mature understanding of the importance of others for one's health, happiness and security is at its peak. As Elliot Jacques (1965) expressed it in his seminal article "Death and the Midlife Crisis", "The achievement of mature and independent adulthood presents itself as the main psychological task. The paradox is that of entering the prime of life, the stage of fulfillment, but at the same time the prime and fulfillment are dated. Death lies beyond" (p.506).

The paradox of which Jacques speaks is particularly poignant in middle adulthood because fulfillment is based in no small measure on the incredible richness of involvements which grow by leaps and bounds between 40 and 60. Unlike the decade of the twenties, and for some the thirties, when in the midst of the Third Individuation one has left his or her family of origin and not yet created a family of procreation, experiencing what I called "the loneliness of young adulthood" (Colarusso 1990); midlife men and women are immersed in relationships with spouse, children, elderly parents, inlaws, friends and colleagues, and are forging ties with new individuals of great personal importance, namely grandchildren. At no other point in life is the potential for attachment- and loss- so great.

The acceptance of this juxtaposition of interdependence with others and the inevitability of total separation and loss is a central developmental task of middle adulthood which must be engaged and mastered if developmental progression is to continue. Although what I have just described is predominately a midlife experience the influence of loss on development is not. As expressed by Calvin Settlage, et al (1988), "In both childhood and adulthood, normative loss or threat of loss within the developmental progression and adventitious loss from life's unexpected experiences can stimulate and mobilize developmental processes" (p.354).

The Developmental Tasks of Middle Adulthood

It is my hypothesis that separation-individuation processes in midlife are influenced and shaped, indeed, embedded in, the major developmental themes of this time of life. In 1981 Dr. Nemiroff and I used the term adult developmental tasks to describe these themes for each developmental phase of adulthood. They are quasuniversal experiences
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which are encountered and engaged by most, and in some instances, all individuals in this age group. Because of their inevitable effect on intrapsychic processes they both stimulate normal developmental progression and produce psychopathology. In the remainder of this paper I plan to elaborate on some of the following midlife developmental tasks which influence separation-individuation processes. They are:

1) Accepting the aging process in the body;
2) Coming to terms with time limitation and personal death;
3) Maintaining intimacy;
4) Transforming the relationship to children by letting go, achieving equality and integrating new family members;
5) Becoming a grandparent;
6) Caring for aging and dying parents;
7) Exercising, and relinquishing, power in the workplace; and
8) Building and maintaining friendships.

Accepting the Aging Process in the Body

Although physical decline begins to have an effect on psychological development in the 20’s and 30’s, it is not until midlife that the universal, obvious evidence of physical aging becomes a major, sometimes dominant, influence on mental life. As psychiatrist Marcia Goins (1990) expressed it:

"The appearance of one’s body takes on a different significance … The struggle is to retain body integrity in the face of anxieties about aging, the vulnerabilities of failing health, and the potential loss of independence" (p.524).

This change in significance is brought on not only by the obvious differences in vision, hair color, reflexes and skin tone; but also by the more private aspects of physical functioning such as the cessation of menstruation, increases in urinary frequency and diminished force of the urinary stream, and alterations in sexual functioning.

Because of these changes each midlife individual must mourn for the lost body of youth. This process of intrapsychic separation from mental representations of a physical reality which no longer exists is experienced mentally as body monitoring— a continuous, conscious and unconscious, narcissistically injurious comparison of the midlife body with the body of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. This normative conflict between wishes to deny the aging process and acceptance of the loss of a youthful body (Colarusso & Nemiroff 1981) is experienced to a large degree as a separation-individuation phenomena. Fruitless and sometimes pathologic efforts to deny aging include attempts to possess and fuse with younger bodies and the acquisition of transitional object-like possessions such as art, exotic automobiles or clothing which become narcissistically gratifying substitutes for a youthful body. A more normative "resolution" (there is no actual resolution since the process continues for the rest of life)
lies in the midlife individuation which is achieved when the body image becomes more realistic; leading to the possibility of new experiences and the achievement of developmental potentials which the healthy midlife body can facilitate if it is cared for properly.

**Coming to Terms with Time Limitation and Personal Death**

Stimulated by the aging process in the body, the death of parents, the growth of children into adulthood, grandparenthood and the approach of retirement: every midlife individual comes face to face with his or her mortality and struggles to accept the painful, unavoidable recognition that the future is limited and that he or she will die, leaving all that is known behind.

I am suggesting that the preoccupation with the awareness of a limited time left to live is an extremely powerful psychic organizer which forces a significant examination of all aspects of one’s experience and powerfully influences separation-individuation processes.

A critical difference, due in significant measure to the acceptance of personal mortality, exists between the separation-individuation processes in Young Adulthood and those in midlife. The need for a deep, lasting attachment to a heterosexual object and the drive to replicate the self through the creation of children are at the core of young adult experience. Both of these new relationships propel the young adult toward intense intimacy, toward fusion and emotional symbiosis. As previously noted, I have described these processes in detail in my 1990 paper on the Third Individuation.

In contrast to the Third Individuation, what is added by the Fourth Individuation is an awareness of and a dynamic focus on loss. Just when one’s life is filled to overcrowding with spouse, children, grandchildren, elderly parents and friends, one is struck by, sometimes stunned by, the realization that all of these relationships will be lost, the irrevocable separations being forced upon the mature adult and the toddler within by death.

This painful awareness can produce significant pathology, as described by Guttman, Griffin, and Grunes (1982): but it can also produce enormous individuation and the fullest realization of what it means to be human. Since normal development is the main focus of this paper I would like to describe the developmental promoting aspects of this universal struggle by referring to the work of two psychoanalysts who have taken a significant interest in midlife.
In his work on the mourning process George Pollock recognized the growth promoting power of loss. For him, as for me, separation from important objects and losses of other kinds can produce rather spectacular individuation. To quote Pollock (1979): mourning is a universal transformational process that allows us to accept a reality that exists, which may be different from our wishes and hopes, which recognizes loss and change, both externally and internally, and which ... can result in a happier life, fulfilled and fulfilling for ourselves and for others (ms. p.10).

Later, in the same article he said, commenting on his work with patients and their mourning processes:

"The basic loss is the loss of parts of the self that once were that one hoped might be but will not any longer and with the working out of these mournings for lost self, others, hopes, aspirations, and other losses and changes ... There can be new relationships with old objects as well as with new objects. Past truly can become past and distinguished from present and future" (1979, ms. p.54).

Robert Lifton (1979) also recognized the growth promoting, phase specific power of the midlife confrontation with death. Like Pollock, he framed his ideas with repeated references to separations and individuations.

"There is a special quality of life-power available only to those seasoned by struggle of four or more decades. That seasoning includes extensive cultivation of images and forms having to do with love and caring, with teaching and mentorship, with work combinations and professional creativity, with responses to intellectual and artistic images around one, and above all with humor and a sense of the absurd. The seasoned psychic forms are by no means devoid of death imagery. Rather they are characterized by ingenious combinations of death equivalents and immediate affirmations, or melancholic recognition of the fragmentation and threat surrounding all ultimate involvements, along with dogged insistence upon one’s own connections beyond the self-one’s own relationship to collective modes of symbolic immortality. Like the despair, the life-power of this stage can be especially profound" (p.5).

Marriage-The Great Facilitator of Separation-Individuation Processes in Adulthood

One of the most significant influences on separation-individuation processes in adulthood is marriage. A developmental task of adolescence which is related to adult separation-individuation is a psychic construction which Robert Nemiroff and I
have called the idealized, fantasized mate. Rooted in preoedipal and oedipal relationships with parents and adolescent sexuality, this construction develops in late adolescence as a result of the second individuation process. With its formation, some of the narcissistic investment in the mental representations of the parents of childhood is transferred to the idealized-mate representation.

After marriage, a continuous painful process occurs as the idealized spouse representation is influenced by actual experience with the new partner. As the real spouse is reacted to and internalized, a second narcissistic transter takes place from the idealized spouse representation, which is diminished in importance but never completely abandoned.

This process occurs in every long lasting marriage and is conflictual because separation from the aggrandized infantile images is painful and the real spouse representation never approximates the idealized state. This gradual narcissistic transfer is a prerequisite for the emergence of mature love.

The real and fantasized spouse representations, repositories of the infantile experience with the all-powerful, all knowing preoedipal mother (Brunswick) of the symbiotic and separation-individuation sub-phases, become intrapsychic bulwarks protecting one against the growing realization of the ultimate, and final separation from the first loved one and her later surrogates.

A Developmental Assessment Model of Marital Pathology

Mahler’s Separation-Individuation theory has been used very effectively by clinician Sheila Sharpe (1991) to describe various forms of marital pathology.

After stating clearly that Mahler’s phases are not replayed in dysfunctional adult marriage relationships in a form identical to their original occurrence in early childhood, but instead are “recapitulated” in more advanced patterns; Sharpe goes on to describe a symbiotic mode, an oppositional mode and a collaborative one.

Those couples who utilize the symbiotic mode exhibit an extreme form of mutual dependency and a desperate need to sustain the fantasy of fusion through starkly polarized perceptions of each other. These couples tend to use primitive defenses as they furiously engage in sadomasochistic interactions with each other and their children.

This level of object relating appears to have its roots in the symbiotic phase, “… wherein the infant perceives and relates to the mother as an extension of the self and the establishment of basic trust in the self and the human world is the major deve-
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Developmental task—a task that has not been mastered by couples operating in the symbiotic mode” (p.392).

The oppositional couple functions at a more differentiated level of object relating but is still struggling with a powerful conflict between wishes to be totally taken care of, to merge with an idealized parental figure who is represented by the spouse; and a striving for independent identities within the marriage. They characteristically engage in battles over power to determine who is right and superior.

Their interaction is reflective of the rapprochement subphase, wherein the toddler alternates between clinging and defiant behavior in relationship to mother.

“Developmentally beyond the oppositional mode of relating is the relatively mature level of object relations wherein perceptions of self and spouse are more realistic and differentiated. These couples are operating in the collaborative mode, indicating that they have achieved libidinal object constancy, which like the three year old in relation to the mother, allows them to tolerate ambivalent feelings and sustain loving feelings during periods of frustration and deprivation. Independent ction and intimacy are not usually experienced as a threat to either spouses’ marital security.

The Midlife Relationship to Children-A Stimulus to Further Individuation

Healthy middle aged parents gradually abandon the wish to hang on to their children. Separation and individuation from the role of parent is essential if the middle aged adult is to focus energies on new adventures and the developmental tasks of middle age.

The developmental tasks of young adulthood must be centered on others—particularly fusion with spouse and children. In a similar vein, it is a developmental imperative that in middle and late adulthood one must separate from these very same objects. But at the same time, and for the same developmental reasons—there is also a strong pull toward fusion with youthful objects and their offspring who represent genetic immortality and a mechanism for denial of aging, loss and death.

Sometimes this defensive response may focus on a new son or daughter-in-law: reactivating the oedipal complex in adulthood (Colarusso and Nemiroff 1981) and reenergizing youthful sexual and aggressive fantasies. But the stimulus for such a profound developmental shift away from the role of parent of dependent children is not limited to death awareness, it is also pushed by a growing middle age drive for new adventures, new experience, new direction: in other words by an imperative

Illegal character encoding
urge to individuate while there is still time. In many cultures this urge is blocked by a lack of options and opportunity and by bias, particularly against women. Increasingly in Western culture, especially in regard to mothers who consider requests to care for children and grandchildren, the response is “No thank you- been there, done that. It’s time for me!”

1. The middle age mother

Mahler (Winestein 1973) noted that during middle age a woman may experience as a loss akin to death the increasingly distance from her children. To the extent that she has centered her life around her children and incorporated the notion that her worth and purpose as an individual are related primarily to the maternal role, she may endure intense feelings of loss and a sense that her useful life is over. We may now be observing this phenomena for the last time in Western society as this stereotypical mother of the 1950’s disappears from the scene and is replaced by the young women of today who increasingly form their identities around both work and parenthood.

2. Middle-aged mother-daughter relationships

The autonomy and independence of her young adult daughter stimulates, even forces, the middle aged mother to separate from her. Because of the pace of sociocultural change, daughters usually have more options in regard to familial and extrafamilial roles than their mothers. Just as she is recognizing the limits imposed on her drive for individuation by culture, family obligations (such as the care of aging parents) and the passage of time; the middle aged mother is confronted by her daughter’s present and future opportunities to simultaneously express and develop all aspects of her personality. This realization evokes memories of abandoned adolescent and young adult dreams and heightens the pain of the middle aged mourning process of unfulfilled wishes and missed opportunities. Moreover, her daughter’s increasing separation and individuation, superimposed on internalized sociocultural attitudes about women, may be experienced as a rejection of herself and her values.

3. Middle-aged Mother-son relationships

A mother’s ability to modify her relationship with her young adult son depends, in part, on her acceptance of his increasing independence, and her response to his sexual partners and eventually his wife. The son’s drive for separation from his mother and fusion with another, younger, woman forces his mother to give him up, as well as to experience pride in his growth and accomplishment.

The strength of this universal conflict, as well as a lack of resolution, is illustrated in the following poem by Anne Sexton (1966):

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4. Two sons

Where and to whom
you are married I can only guess
in my piecemeal fashion. I grow old on my bitterness.

On the unique occasion
of your two sudden wedding days
I open some cheap wine, a tin of lobster and mayonnaise.
I sit in an old lady’s room
where families used to feast
where the wind blows in like soot from north-northeast

Both of you monopolized
with no real forwarding address
except for two silly postcards, you bothered to send home,

One of them written in grease
as you undid her dress
in Mexico, the other airmailed to Boston from Rome
just before the small ceremony
at the American Church
Both of you made of my cooking, those suppers of starch

and beef, and with my library,
my medicine, my bath water,

both sinking into small brown pools like muddy otters!

You make a toast for tomorrow
and smash the cup,
letting false women lap up the dish I had to fatten up.

When you come back I’ll buy
a wig of yellow hair :
I’ll squat in a new red dress : I’ll be playing solitaire
on the kitchen floor.
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Yes … I’ll gather myself in
like cut flowers and ask how you are and where you’ve been

As previously described, women also experience the separation from their grown children as a developmental stimulus and as a source of pleasure and relief. In fact, given the complexity of the dynamic issues involved in appropriate separation from one’s children in midlife, it is difficult to maintain the myth of the empty-nest syndrome. In a study of 160 early middle-aged educated women of moderate economic means, Rubin (1979) found not one instance of a cause and effect relationship between children leaving home and maternal depression. Instead she discovered that the crisis of that period revolves around the necessity to develop alternatives to mothering; i.e. the need for further individuation. Whereas a man may prepare for one career and pursue it to retirement, a woman may need to master three: a first career, motherhood, and then a third career.

As one of Rubin’s subjects explained it:

“What has been and still is traumatic is trying to find the thing I want to do, and being able to pursue it to a successful conclusion … it’s hard to make the kind of commitment that real success requires. I’m afraid of what it’ll do to my marriage, and also to the rest of my life. And I suppose I’m afraid to really try and fail. But that’s the stuff that’s so hard and painful right now; it’s not knowing what I’ll be doing, or even that I can do. And from 45 to 75 is a lot of years if I don’t have something useful to do” (pp.39-40).

5. The middle-aged father

The father’s role in the second and third individuation processes of his children (Blos 1967; Colarusso 1990) is quantitatively and qualitatively different from his involvement in the First Individuation (Mahler 1975). Unlike his partner, the psycho-biological events of pregnancy (Bibring 1959) do not prepare him for the extremely intimate, symbiotic tie to the child which his wife experiences. While primarily a participant observer in the first individuation, father serves as a buffer for both mother and toddler as they struggle against the powerful regressive pull toward symbiosis.

During the second individuation of adolescent children, their movement from psychological and physical independence to autonomous young adulthood forces the male progenitor to mourn for loss of his role of protector of young children and replace it with a new paternal identity as an interested facilitator, neither as necessary nor as powerful.
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This intrapsychic process is influenced by 1) paternal interaction with adolescent and young adult children around separation issues, 2) the father’s reaction to separations and losses in his own life, and 3) his important involvement in the separation processes occurring between his wife and their children.

One adolescent’s response to the intrapsychic struggle over separation facilitated his father’s adult development as well. A high-school senior, he insisted on handling all aspects of his application to college. He researched, filled out applications, and made a final decision entirely on his own, succeeding admirably in this task. His father’s response to being so pointedly excluded was initially one of dismay and anger and only later of begrudging admiration. The appreciation of his son’s growing competence and the awareness that he would soon be leaving home, precipitated a mourning reaction which gradually moved the fatherson relationship toward greater equality and mutuality and redefined his man’s role as a parent.

The depth of a second man’s conflict over letting go of his role as director of his child’s life was revealed when he suggested to the wife of his 28 year old son that she should not follow her husband to a distant city where he planned to accept a job promotion. If she and the grandchildren stayed at home “where they belonged”, he would support them. At first this usually insightful 58 year old man, an analytic patient of mine, saw no connection between this painful reaction to his son’s adult individuation and his own experiences with loss in his own life; particularly the death of his mother at age 10 and his intense homesickness when he left home for the first time to go to college.

Grandparenthood- Rapproachement in Middle and Late Adulthood

In the 1990 paper on The Third Individuation, the final section was entitled “Intimations of the Fourth Individuation”. It read as follows.

“Margaret Mahler described how the breaking of the symbiotic tie between mother and infant is as inevitable as biological birth. That same sense of irreversible change, for child and parent- is evident during the third individuation. Normal, sexually mature children will inevitably leave their parents and reproduce, thrusting the parents into a new relationship with another child who is a further genetic extension of themselves. The result of this new relationship, which can have such a powerful enriching effect on the middle- and late-life development of the new grandparents, is the fourth individuation.
When their child becomes a parent, new grandparents must define their standing among the generations, alter their internal representations of their “child,” and develop new object ties to the grandchild. Because they are struggling with the middle- and late-life developmental tasks of dealing with retirement, illness, deaths of friends or spouse, and other experiences attending normal aging, new grandparents are developmentally primed to turn their attention toward children and grandchildren, objects who represent their (genetic) future, a future which will endure even after death, the final separation (pp.193-94).

In the midst of the twilight of their lives, and because of their position in the life cycle, grandparents tend to idealize their grandchildren. The grandparental tendency to engage their grandchildren with intense love and devotion reminds me of the toddler’s undeterable need for his or her mother during the rapprochement crisis. The similarity is explained by the fact that both toddler and grandparent have an intense developmental need for fusion with the objects of their attention as they face an immense developmental challenge: the toddler’s to be refueled before venturing out into the ever expanding world beckoning beyond the symbiotic membrane, and the grandparent as he or she faces the collapse of the world and the great unknown void beyond the end of mortal existence.

Thus the intense investment in- and idealization of- grandchildren serves several defensive and developmental purposes: a) a narcissistic buffer against the stings of old age and the inevitability of death, b) a chance for magical repair of one’s own life through genetic immortality, and c) a denial of unalterable imperfections in the self through selective identification with particular qualities in the grandchild. The healthy grandparent sees the falseness in this idealization but deeply enjoys the intensity of the rapproachment which accompanies it.

Two psychoanalysts have made particularly significant, pioneering contributions to our understanding of the critically important relationships among the generations. In Adolescence and the Conflict of Generations, long before there was a recognized field of study called Adult Development; Gerald Pearson (1958) began to flesh out the powerful dynamic themes and conflicts which fueled middle-aged parents’ reactions to their adolescent child.

In his landmark 1989 paper on the relationship between the experience of grandparenthood and mid and late life separation-individuation processes Stanley Cath noted that becoming a grandparent activates aspects of the first individuation. “Lifelong repressed yearnings, for an ideal father’s or mother’s love become intensified when one becomes a grandparent” (p.101).
Midlife separation-individuation processes are also stimulated by the alliance between grandparent and grandchild against their child and parent, respectively. “⋯ both may be struggling with autonomy, from the middle or ‘sandwich’ generation, both searching for new identities, greater independence and new anchorages” (p.104).

He was also aware of the similarities between the rapprochement subphase and the grandparents’ mid and late life experience.

“Thus, ambivalences notwithstanding, of all loving relationships, the grandparents may possess the greatest overall potential for late-life emotional refueling, and this comforting relationship simultaneously contains and screens one of the most virulent forms of separation anxieties in the whole life span namely that of a shrinking self and selfobject world” (p.16).

The Final Separation

A very brave psychoanalyst, Martin Grotjahn wrote exquisitely and poingntly about the final separation in The Race Against Time : Psychotherapy and Psychoanalyses in The Second Half of Life, written and edited by Dr. Nemiroff and myself in 1985. I can think of no more fitting close for this paper than to quote some of his amazing prose.

How to Face the Nothingness of Being Dead

When I was born, the old and wise woman from the neighborhood came to foretell my future. She listened to the screams of my rage and said : “He will love the yellow of eggs, but he will learn nothing”. My mother loved the poetry of these words, and I have heard them often.

I did not do badly in the almost 80 years of my life. I even learned how to live a little from the people who did not know and came to me to learn. But not I am stuck again. I am not ready to die, not ready to say goodbye to this life. I am not ready to say goodbye to myself. That seems to be the worst : to say goodbye to myself. Through all the years, I have built myself, and in that way I am a self-made man or a ‘self-found’ one.

I know dying is unpleasant, for to be dead is Nothing. I like that even less. Sure, I am a narcissist. Who in our profession is not? I think of all the investment I have made in myself : the analysis, endless training, the continued self-analysis, the drive to understand, to give insight, and the wealth of knowledge accumulated in a lifetime. All this I should give up?
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Fifty-five years of marriage were built with care, study, insight, learning, and patience, and grew to ever deepening love. I am a most impatient person of genuine bad temper, but I worked on myself: I tried to deepen my insight, to become a better therapist and a better person. And finally, all should turn to ashes? Just because my heart does not want to do its part anymore? One does not need to be a narcissist to find that unacceptable. To say goodbye to myself and vanish into nothingness? Well, it shall be done. Nobody claimed it would be easy.

I would not want to live my life all over again. I would not want to go to a Prussian school again- to worry about being loved or not. I am equally certain that I would only accept the offer to live a much longer life, in relative health. I would so much like to see ‘who wins’ or what happens next.

...When I came home from the hospital, I had become old. Etelka smiled at me and said: ‘I have adopted you’.

It is this kind of tender love I needed and to which I tried to respond in kind. To have that kind of love makes use both happy. Life becomes worth living all over again when such tenderness is the final renewal.

My story would be incomplete if I did not mention my son, who has become my friend in these times of sickness. He saw me when I was closer to death than to life in the intensive care unit. It seems that to feel the nearness of death washes away all aspects of ambivalence in old and in young. With a different intensity, this is also true in my feelings to my friend who was with me and still is.

I hope when my time comes to say goodbye to this world and to myself and when I sink into nothingness, I will have enough presence of mind left to say my last words. I would like to say once more and for the last time to my wife: ‘I love you’.

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