

The Noon of Life: Mid-Life Transition in the Married LDS Priesthood Holder

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*Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all ladders start,
in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.*

—from "The Circus Animals' Desertion," by William Butler Yeats

THE ANCIENT CHINESE CURSE has plainly caught up with the LDS church over the past decade—never have the Saints lived in more interesting times. The recent whirlwind of world political changes has opened up mission fields undreamed of only a few years ago, faster almost than we can respond. It has also made us the target of anti-American sentiment and violence. Yet, in spite of all, church membership has now reached nine million.

Nine million living souls, of all ages and types, drawn from nearly every nation on the face of the earth. Nine million, embracing the same gospel teachings—yet each bringing to them his or her own experiences and viewpoints, and applying them to a set of troubles, trials, and triumphs totally his or her own.

Unfortunately, too many priesthood leaders focus on the gospel's universality, rather than the diversity and complexity of its adherents, in

attempting to counsel and instruct members. They tend to develop a pre-fabricated "tool box" of timely maxims, drawn from gospel teaching, into which they reach whenever a ward or quorum member faces a trial. Counselling becomes a process of probing and temporizing until an appropriate inspirational thought can be located, at which time the selected adage is delivered. Members often leave such counselling sessions confused, unfulfilled, unanswered. The priesthood leaders, when their sermonizing fails to solve the problem, shrug and conclude that the member is simply "not listening to counsel."

We are nine million strong, and growing. Too many, and each too unique, to be led by a scattering of wise sayings or sage quotations. The gospel's genius is not merely its underlying simplicity, but its ability to reach into the infinite complexity of the human heart. Its truths are clearly universal, yet as intimately diverse and individual, as is each soul who embraces it.

The business of priesthood counselling, reduced to its essence, is facilitating the interface between the individual and the gospel. And the time, place, and nature of that interface will never, never be exactly the same for any two people. It must be found "from scratch" for each Saint—leaders can ill afford to dispense off-the-shelf counsel, hoping it will fit the malady. It is in one-to-one counselling that the gospel message touches individual lives in the eternal scheme.

This essay was prompted by a particular problem which has been of personal concern to me (recently turned forty-two, by the way). Both the problem discussed and the suggested approach may serve as examples of problems which will face bishops, quorum presidents, group leaders, and home teachers—and Relief Society officers and visiting teachers as well—in these wonderful and troubled times, and may give Saints some guidance in their resolution. It is prayerfully hoped that it will be of some use, not just to the reader, but also to those few whose private pain gave rise to it.

Over the last few years, three women, all very special to me, have found themselves plunged suddenly and unexpectedly into divorce. The cases were all very similar. In each, the husband was of middle age, a bright, capable priesthood holder, the father of several children, seemingly a loving spouse and devoted head of a household. The announcement in all cases came like a thunderclap from a clear sky—he wanted no more of the family, no more of the marriage, no more of the church. Period. For reasons undisclosed, each man was making a precipitous, wholly-unexpected declaration of personal independence from the entire fabric of his life—a total about-face, and hang the consequences, to himself or anyone else.

My reaction to these tidings (in addition to anger) was total bewilder-

ment. Just what did these brethren think they were doing, tossing out everything that had structured and guided their lives to that point? What was this sudden, urgent call of personal freedom, that it justified the consequent toll on their children, their wives, their friends, and those who had looked to them as examples? How could they, possibly, see things so differently so quickly?

A little thought, discussion, and observation, though, quickly showed that my friends were not as unique as I assumed; they were examples (albeit extreme ones) of a problem remarkably widespread among adult priesthood holders. Bishops, quorum presidents, and stake presidents with whom I spoke each seemed to have his own story of mature men in their wards, stakes, and quorums who fell, or wandered, away. Strong, exemplary, and apparently happy, they suddenly faltered, and either broke away deliberately or just drifted, losing touch with the purpose and direction that church life had given them.

It was inconceivable, at first blush. These were men of an age at which the church depends most heavily on its priesthood holders. Mid-life is commonly regarded as a time when testimony has matured, when life generally has solidified into predictable patterns. The middle-aged man is the staid, no-nonsense foot soldier upon whose shoulders the church moves.

And it seemed odd to me, in talking with these leaders, that there was not more concern over the nature and extent of the problem. The church—rightly—devotes much energy and rhetoric to redeeming our young people. It is commonly recognized that adolescence is a crossroads, and we are at pains to furnish guidance and understanding to youth. After all, the balance of their lives is taking shape. But we assume that the end of adolescence finishes the “awkward period”; that once men reach adulthood, they settle comfortably into a life pattern and can assume responsibility for family, career, and church callings without much further attention.

In point of fact, we don’t know what to do with these odd cases. Strong, stable men whose spiritual circuitry suddenly misfires, baffle everyone. They are regarded, and often dismissed, as perplexing deviations, however numerous or true to pattern. Church leaders conclude that they have “given in to temptation.” Cynics outside the church conclude that they have finally “grown up.” And the families, quiet and bewildered, absorb the shock and try to pick up the fragments.

I

Psychologists, no less than church leaders (or anyone else, for that matter), initially assumed that adulthood was a time of developmental

stasis, that “maturity” meant the end of transition and instability. Psychological and emotional development was studied at—and presumed limited to—the level of childhood and adolescence.

Carl G. Jung (1875-1961), founder of Analytical Psychology, is generally credited with the first theoretical work focusing on developmental changes during middle adulthood. Although devoted in his youth to the work of his mentor, Sigmund Freud, Jung (as part of a mid-life crisis of his own, he was later to claim¹) broke from the Freudian focus on childhood development and its impact on adulthood and examined developmental phases during “the second half of life.”² Jung’s emphasis was on the life cycle as a whole, including (as Freud had not done) social and interactive influences. He concluded that development in the adult male was not (as commonly believed) complete, or even very well under way, by age twenty when demands of family and career struck. It was at around age forty, the “noon of life,”³ when the next true opportunity for basic change occurred, a change which he termed “individuation,” and which extended over the next half of a man’s life.

Erik H. Erikson (1902-94), though by training a Freudian psychoanalyst, was likewise a great contributor to adult developmental theory.⁴ Like Jung, Erikson examined adult change and development from a social/interactive, as well as a clinical and internal, perspective. The result was the identification of a series of “ego stages” which arise at fairly defined intervals during the life cycle. Particularly relevant to this discussion is the ego stage occurring at about age forty, which Erikson termed “generativity versus stagnation.” At this time of life, he noted, men begin undertaking the initiation of a younger generation into responsible adulthood. They must learn to relate to the younger generation differently, treating those in their twenties and thirties as a generation removed, yet still adults rather than children. The resulting internal conflict forces re-examination of the role of self, and a triggering of Jung’s “individuation” (of which more later).

Numerous later studies addressed, to varying degrees, the various facets of adult development and change.⁵ In 1978, though, Daniel J. Levinson released the results of a ten-year study which offered the single most exhaustive examination of the adult male life cycle to date.⁶

1. See Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Pantheon, 1963).

2. Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1964).

3. *Ibid.*

4. Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950).

5. See, for example, Roger L. Gould, “The Phases of Adult Life: A Study in Developmental Psychology,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 129 (1972); George E. Vaillant, *Adaptation to Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977); and Robert Lifton, *The Life in the Self: Toward a New Psychology* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1976).

6. Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man’s Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978).

The Levinson study consisted of "biographical interviews" with forty men, ages 35-45, divided among four general occupational groups. Research concentrated on the isolation of developmental patterns along the whole life cycle, focusing most particularly on adult life (ages 25 and over).

The uniformity of result was striking. In each of their subjects, researchers were able to identify a series of distinctly characteristic life "eras": childhood and adolescence (up to age 22); early adulthood (17-45); middle adulthood (40-65); and late adulthood (over age 60). The age at which subjects moved from one era to the next varied by no more than five years one way or the other.

The transition from each era to the next lasted from three to six years and was characterized by some degree of change in the fundamental fabric of life. Most dramatic in this respect was the "mid-life transition," occurring in all subjects between the late thirties and mid-forties. During this period, men essentially complete the process of "becoming" adults—in career, parenting, marriage, and physical development, they reach the top of a development curve that has occupied their time and energies since they left adolescence. As Erikson suggested, they face the transition of generations as the next younger moves into young adulthood—they leave the generation of Initiation and move to that of Domination. They review their level of occupational success, determining whether they have realized the dreams of their youth (and if so, whether the dreams had the worth once assigned them). Finally, they revisit the fundamental values and relationships that structured their lives through young adulthood: marriage, family, beliefs, and faith.

Successful navigation of mid-life transition, according to Levinson (and Jung), entails a constructive approach to "individuation": the process of bringing the myriad elements, demands, and motivating forces of one's life into dynamic balance and becoming a more unique, integrated individual. Whereas youth is mostly characterized by external demands and expectations which shape and steer life, the transition to mid-life can (properly handled) tap internal seeds within the self, allowing a flowering of the individual in the middle years.

Transition typically entails some degree of re-evaluation and sacrifice. Each life period revolves around a stable "life structure" (consisting of the principal areas of focus in a man's life, the points at which he confronts the world around him, and those parts of the world central to his awareness and energy). At times of transition, essential components of the previous life structure are examined afresh; they may be reaffirmed, modified, or discarded altogether in the formulation of a new life structure which will characterize the next life period. The fundamental tasks facing a man in mid-life transition are the termination of the prior life pe-

riod, the modification of the life structure to one more appropriate to the middle years, and the cultivation of individuation.

This fundamental reappraisal and regrouping cannot be expected to come and go as a placid interlude. It will often engender some degree of crisis, some twisting and straining, as old beliefs and habits—not to mention jealousies, dependencies, recriminations, and fears—which have shaped early adulthood struggle to retain their grip. Yet the drive to reassess, to face the glass, and look into the self—thankfully—will not be repressed. As the season of life turns, the barnacles of youth and young adulthood need to be shaken off if a stronger, better integrated middle-aged adult is to emerge. The man must (willingly or not) return to the fundamental aspects of himself—perhaps to things cast off or stifled since childhood—in order to determine what clay his older self will be molded from. Levinson observed:

Every life structure necessarily gives high priority to certain aspects of the self and neglects or minimizes other aspects. . . . In the Mid-life Transition these neglected parts of the self urgently seek expression. A man experiences them as “other voices in the room” (in Truman Capote’s evocative phrase). Internal voices that have been muted for years now clamor to be heard. At times they are heard as a vague whispering, the content unclear but the tone indicating grief over lost opportunities, outrage over betrayal by others, or guilt over betrayal by oneself. At other times they come through as a thunderous roar, the content all too clear, stating names and times and places and demanding that something be done to right the balance. A man hears the voice of an identity prematurely rejected; of a love lost or not pursued; of a valued interest or relationship given up in acquiescence to parental or other authority; of an internal figure who wants to be an athlete or nomad or artist, to marry for love or remain a bachelor, to get rich or enter the clergy or live a sensual carefree life—possibilities set aside earlier to become what he is now. During the Mid-life Transition he must learn to listen more attentively to these voices and decide consciously what part he will give them in his life.⁷

Studies since Levinson’s treatise have confirmed that mid-life tends to be a watershed in the life of most men. The desire for “extended youth,” which has many middle-aged men going on crash diets, adopting frantic exercise programs, and even dallying with much younger women, is now thought less a desire to be young forever than a sense that there is no new, older self yet integrated, waiting in the wings to take over.⁸

Yet, with luck and courage, a man emerges from mid-life transition

7. Levinson, 200.

8. David Gelman, “A Kiss Is Still a Kiss,” *Newsweek*, 5 Mar. 1990, 53 (quoting Robert H. Binstock, professor of aging, health, and society at Case Western University).

more truly "himself" than he has ever been before. Fresh insights have been gained, lost visions and dreams recovered and seen in new and clearer light, clamorous non-essentials cast off, and the whole structure of life reconfigured, simplified, renewed.

II

All this transitioning and reassessment, of course, may to some seem out of place in a Mormon priesthood holder. Doesn't accepting the gospel message and living its precepts obviate the need for such painful metamorphosis? Once *we* are in at the strait gate, isn't it merely a matter of "enduring to the end" (2 Ne. 31:18-20), staying on the path, and not deviating?

In principle, yes. But the facts are clear—neither church membership nor ordination to the priesthood immunizes men from mid-life crisis. Worse still, such crisis strikes at a deeper, more fundamental level in a man seeking to live priesthood covenants; underlying the psychological turmoil and social readjustment there is often a layer of spiritual turmoil. Mismanaged, mid-life transition can cut to the very marrow of personal spiritual witness.

For many priesthood holders, at least the lucky ones, there is a spiritual awakening during the years immediately preceding and surrounding mission age. Through the late teens and early twenties, as adolescence moves into young adulthood, a man emerges from the rules-and-regulations perception of the gospel which characterizes childhood and reaches that marvelous moment of realization that there is a shining spiritual reality behind the system. The commandments, he realizes, are not just a behavioral code, but a guide for bringing calm and harmony to his life, establishing a direct link with his creator, and seeing the world through the eyes of the Spirit. Best of all, far from forcing conformity and repressing individuality, gospel tenets enable him to be more truly himself—his highest, divine self—than ever before. He looks into the plan of salvation, and sees there his own spirit. Through prayer (his first real efforts at divine communication, not just rote invocation), he begins to see, with his new spiritual eyes, how living the commandments can be fused into a single, integrated, spiritually-centered life.

Levinson speaks of the formation of "the Dream" as one of the major formative tasks of young adulthood.⁹ It consists of a generalized (often idealized) image of "self in the world," a vision of adult life in which all fledgling visions and desires are brought to fruition. By his early adult years, the young priesthood holder has perhaps crafted such a Dream, a

9. Levinson, 91-97, 245-51.

self-image and life plan, crystallized around his new-found vision of spiritual integrity. His adult years will be a steady, unbroken building on the vision. To be sure, time will add maturity and depth, to say nothing of endless opportunity for personal perfection through application. But the course is set. Whatever else the years may bring, he commits to the ongoing cultivation of his celestial self, keeping his eye single to God's glory (D&C 4:5).

If it were only that simple.

The years which follow bring pressure, confusion, chaos. Completion of education generally stretches into the mid-twenties or beyond. This usually overlaps the launching of a career. At the same time, the young man has probably chosen a wife and begun a family. His vision of celestial manhood, conceived in splendid isolation, must now accommodate the crowding press of other roles: husband, father, breadwinner, citizen, coworker, and so on. And *everything* clamors for compromise.

It can be a tricky business, this weaving of sublime vision into the fabric of such a multi-faceted existence. During those first ecstatic moments of revelation, everything seems to fall perfectly into place, each element dropping seamlessly into the grand, divine mosaic. But then comes the morning after, and all the mornings after that. There is endless adaptation to the demands of others, to the needs of the moment, to the bottom line and the end-of-quarter report. Paraphrasing the poetry of inspiration in the prose of daily habit and routine, focusing the vast and dazzling overview down into the specifics of work-a-day behavior, can be a task of great deception and confusion. As the man drifts into his middle years, much of his youthful idealism may be lost, not through sin or wickedness, but through the sheer difficulty of translation.

Perhaps the most severe point of erosion (though by no means the only one) is vocation and career. Mormon society, traditional in orientation, perceives a man's preeminent role as breadwinner. Friends, family, society, and the scriptures themselves (D&C 83:2-4) tell the head of the family that it is he who should provide for his family's physical wants (and in our possession-driven culture, even a modest family can want plenty). Such a role inevitably carries with it a certain mindset, a tendency to view life and reality with one eye on the balance sheet. Faced all too often with the unpalatable fact that outright devotion to gospel virtues may not be the most profitable alternative, the priesthood holder/wage earner is faced with a conflict of duties. On one hand, he knows that his principles demand that he "do what is right"; subliminally, he knows what this will cost him. This conflict pervades almost every vocation which a man can pursue, and can crop up on almost a daily basis. Inch by inch, his resolve to live an unsullied, spiritually pure existence gives ground to an imperious pragmatism.

Family pressures can frequently exact a similar toll. I know I tread on thin ice here and hope I will not be misconstrued. We have made a long-overdue and healthy departure from the society in which the husband, lord of his private domain, never sullied his hands with “woman’s work” such as domestic chores and child rearing. Today, a young wife expects, rightly, that her new husband should share in the goals and responsibilities of family life, and that his own goals should be flexible enough to accommodate this. But when life is reduced to a revolving door between the demands of the workplace during business hours, and the demands of domestic chores during other hours, the priesthood holder can begin to sense that his best self has fallen through the cracks somewhere. As any mother of small children can attest, a steady regimen of diapers and child disciplining makes a poor catalyst for spiritual awareness. It is no better for a young husband and father. The family can become a ravenous beast, consuming the prime years of his life with incessant demands for money, maintenance, and domestic service.

One recent study suggests a further complication. Research at Brigham Young University reveals that, whatever contemporary thought may suggest, young fathers really aren’t placing themselves more at the center of the family at all. Even in two-career families the wife remains at the heart of the household, making the decisions, managing the money, putting in the time, all devolve on the mother as much as ever.

If this is so, if the father/breadwinner is not fulfilling his perceived parenting role despite an awareness of his need—and obligation—to do so, it may drive yet another wedge between his ideal self and his actual self. The vision of himself as, among everything else, a loving and involved family man might be tarnished beyond recognition by a career that keeps him from participation in family matters, or a well-meaning spouse who wants to spare him the bother of managing domestic matters (or herself the trouble of including him in decisions she can more easily handle alone). Amid the sea of roles and functions he never intended for himself, one which might well have been central to his self-image is left dark and empty.

The church and the priesthood, of course, seek to counterbalance all of this by their organization and programs. The underlying purpose of the priesthood, after all, is to vouchsafe to men a portion of God’s authority in order to develop and train their spiritual nature. Yet ironically even in this process a young man’s spiritual vision can suffer subtle injury.

Even in the matter of church activities a man can often lose sight of his spiritual focus. Bishops, stake presidents, and quorum leaders who concentrate more on programs and actions than on inner development can push members directly into the hands of spiritual atrophy. As atten-

tion shifts from the individual testimonies or members to the more external mechanics of church life, the worth and purpose of our doings can be lost.

"Activity" in church affairs may survive on such a diet of spiritual hardscrabble, to be sure. But too often it is a very different activity from that springing out of the young man's early Dream. Cultivating the glow of gospel light, the once-intended core purpose of existence is now crowded into a small corner of a busy life. Indeed, the gospel ceases altogether to be a source of illumination for the whole of life and becomes a series of tasks and maneuvers, motions to be gone through; ritual without function.

It is this form-only "institutional activity" which all too often counterfeits real spirituality in the adult life of the priesthood holder. As he focuses on career development, his religious doings are placed on a path of least resistance, set to auto-pilot and largely forgotten. "Living the gospel," ironically, is reduced once more to the rules and regulations of childhood. But now they are habits, outward relics of the Christ-centered existence he once longed to cultivate.

It should surprise no one that, as part of the transition period of his middle years, a priesthood holder feels a fundamental drive to revisit the nature, quality, and depth of his gospel commitment. In an ideal world, this sort of self-examination would begin as a conscious recognition that the religious observances of his younger adult years had been bleached of some of their former richness and meaning, and a decision to retrace, constructively, the course which his life has taken (and which of us could not benefit from such a process?). But as always, we do our living in the real world, where things are more complicated.

As a people, we are not at ease with the idea of reviewing our past in any depth. We believe in progression; in repenting of past mistakes, and then leaving them. Make the right choices, we say, then get on with life. We thus either ignore or stifle the urge to turn back to ground already covered. (Granted, we pay lip service to the notion that "the unexamined life is not worth living." In reality, though, the sort of "examination" we have in mind is little more than a behavioral survey: how closely do our actions mirror the rules of gospel living; how well are we conforming to the commandments? Anything more probing than this, any foray into how fully we are realizing our own individuality and dreams of youth, begins to sound uncomfortably like self-doubt or even abandonment of our beliefs.)

Thus an elder or high priest who begins to sense the early rumblings of mid-life discontent is brought to the brink of a Rubicon which he is initially reluctant to cross. His first reflex is to turn a deaf ear to his inclinations. He may even fling himself into his church routine with renewed

energy (if not conviction), assuming that “whatever it is that’s bothering him” will pass, if he just buckles down and magnifies his callings.

But if something *is* wrong, if the course of his life *has* taken him away from his Dream of “self in the world” (and more critically, “self in the gospel”), the priesthood holder’s transitional drive will not be dismissed so simply. Instead, as is typical with repressed urges, it will most likely manifest itself in some disguised form. A common form (and that which, I believe, lay behind the three cases with which I began) is doctrinal questioning and murmuring.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, in his general conference address of 10 October 1989,¹⁰ warned of the myriad evils which flow to ourselves and others from murmuring against the gospel. He addressed therein the murmurer’s desire to recast the whole of the gospel scheme in a format more to his liking:

Perhaps when we murmur we are unconsciously complaining over not being able to cut a special deal with the Lord. We want full blessings but without full obedience to the laws upon which those blessings are predicated. For instance, some murmurers seem to hope to reshape the Church to their liking by virtue of their murmuring. But why would one want to belong to a church that he could remake in his own image, when it is the Lord’s image that we should come to have in our countenances? (Alma 5:19)¹¹

A priesthood holder, sensing that something of himself is smothering, but daunted by the seeming heresy of the personal surgery needed for genuine healing, may begin to suspect, subliminally, that the fault must lie in the system as a whole. After all, if he is living the gospel in its fullness (and who could say otherwise of a 100-percent in meeting attendance, home teaching, and Family Home Evening?), yet still feels so joylessly adrift, the plan is failing him and must therefore be somehow flawed.

At the outset, the murmurer will not likely consider a wholesale divestment of his church-oriented existence. Instead, he begins to pick at it. Often, he finds a single point of doctrine, which he begins questioning (with, he insists, absolute intellectual honesty and integrity). Perhaps the authority of church leaders, those “inspired but imperfect” souls who make such grand targets because they must suffer in silence.¹² Perhaps an apparent point of contradiction in church teachings which grants him petty victory in gospel discussions. Perhaps (far more understandably) some personal loss, or even tragedy, which he cannot square with what

10. Neal A. Maxwell, “Murmur Not,” *Ensign* 19 (Nov. 1989): 83.

11. *Ibid.*, 84.

12. *Ibid.*, 85.

he has been taught of God's goodness. Whatever the issue, it acts as a focal point for his frustration at the fulfillment which "gospel living" has denied him, and soon looms so large that it casts a shadow on the church and everything in it.

For murmuring's prime evil is its poisoning of perspective. Like the "single-issue politician," who doubts the viability of an entire system of governance because it cannot come to grips with his patron problem, the murmuring priesthood holder becomes gradually obsessed with one intractable knot and grows more and more disillusioned with a gospel plan that apparently cannot undo it.

Yet even while all this is festering beneath the surface, everything may well appear outwardly normal. Still dogged in his determination to muddle through, or at least "keep up appearances," the priesthood holder maintains his outward shell of institutional activity. Even those in his own family may be only vaguely aware that something isn't quite right. For conviction dies from the center outward; we cling to form for form's sake, often long after the substance is lost to memory.

By this point, of course, the priesthood holder is deep in the midst of a crisis approaching an irretrievable flash point. His sense of transition, that force which should have been prompting him to healthy introspection and needed course adjustments, but bound by his all-or-nothing drive to endure unchanging to the end, demands immediate resolution. At a given point, triggered by some internal or external catalyst, the conflict explodes. The priesthood holder suddenly resolves that his life has become an empty ritual for which he can now recall no real meaning whatever, that his remaining years are limited, and that, if he wishes to salvage anything of himself, he must act quickly and precipitously. The once unimaginable, categorical rejection of the whole now presents itself as his last hope of redemption. The Christ-centered life he once dreamed of, which now includes wife, family, career, and callings, is sloughed off—not as a heartless or callous slap at his loved ones and lifelong values, but as one last desperate grab for personal integrity.

And what is left of his testimony cannot begin to hold him back.

III

This is all very grim, certainly. The portrait above may be extreme, but the spiritual decay described there is plainly at work (even if to a lesser degree) in all too many of the church's relied-upon priesthood brethren.

Advisors, counsellors, and leaders need to begin by acknowledging the problem. They cannot indulge the blithe assumption that mid-life discontent is a mythical creation of post-Freudian theorists; that it does not

touch the lives of the truly faithful; or that it is nothing but a sign of laxity or petulance (one advisor dismissed the whole question with the observation that middle-aged brethren who stray “really know better” and need nothing so much as “a good spanking”).

The problem is not only real, in fact, but (like all problems) the dark side of opportunity—meant not only to be surmounted but *possibly used* to bless the life of the sufferer. For mid-life transition can and should be a time of personal spiritual renaissance. Occurring as it should—not as described above—it is a time of deep, profound course correction; commitments to the self, perhaps long forgotten, are reaffirmed; life is unburdened of unneeded clutter and clamor; and the essential is gleaned from the superfluous and used to fashion a proper framework for the balance of the Second Estate. It is the leader’s task—with love and compassion—to guide confused priesthood holders through the sorting process, carefully avoiding the sort of categorical rejection that casts out the priceless with the expendable.

First, a few hard, obvious realities. Prevention and advance preparation are going to be far more effective in dealing with mid-life transition than is treatment after the fact—and the earlier the better. Faith promoting accounts of long-disaffected brethren brought back by inspired and loving leadership are well and good; the fact remains, though, that the farther down the path of apostasy a man journeys, the longer (and harder) his return is. A simple extension of Levinson’s modelling shows why this is so.

Mid-life restructuring, conscious or otherwise, is a process of change and becoming, not just of rejection. A man to whose life-dream gospel ideals have been central is unlikely to jettison them in a vacuum, with nothing ready at hand to put in their place. On the contrary, by the time his testimony has corroded to ruin, something else will have congealed in its place. His new self will have formed around new ideals, which will in fact “crowd out” what is left of his gospel beliefs as “no longer relevant.” Whether he has turned to some other orthodoxy or to his own philosophy, it will be (or at least seem) complete in itself, having no room for any “Mormonisms.”

For such brothers, the ideas which follow will probably be as sound as any other counsel. But their implementation will be a process of undoing and rebuilding, not merely redirecting. Priesthood leaders will be confronting substantial barriers, and successes, frankly, will be rarer and less profound. Those most fully brought back are those not yet fully out.

As a preface, then, to all which follows: be alert to the problem early on and address it in its embryonic stages. By the time the signs and symptoms become obvious, leaders may be facing more catch-up ball than they want to play.

The first and central step has already been suggested. Without preaching, and certainly without condemnation, the man must be brought to focus on a single, absolute reality: his own personal witness of the Spirit. Somehow he must be helped to separate out, from the clamor of demands competing for his energies and attention, the central fact and reason for his existence, totally inseparable from who and what he is—a spirit son of a loving Father, with an absolute witness, borne of the Holy Ghost, bearing record of God.

It may be necessary to overcome a difficult hurdle here. A priesthood holder, even a lifelong faithful one, may claim in the midst of crisis that he has never really received a spiritual witness, never really had a testimony. How to answer such a declaration will vary with the individual, but the fact is that it is probably untrue. Men who are strong in the priesthood as they enter adulthood have usually gone through a spiritual emergence of the sort described above. The Lord spoke to Jeremiah of the powerful internalization his law would assume among the Saints in the last days:

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord:

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer. 31:33).

It just becomes simpler, when the vision has faded through time and erosion, for a man to pretend that it was never there to begin with. He needs, somehow, to be jogged in his personal recollection, to have his spiritual vision cleared, to see that it is the intervening years, pressures, and confusion that have caused him to mislay his knowledge. His moment of realization needs to be revived and re-experienced. Perhaps it was long ago, buried now beneath years of neglect. Perhaps it was only a moment as he left childhood. But however brief, weak, or remote his first brush with the Holy Ghost may have been, it is here that he needs to return—to that moment (even if it was only a moment) when the Spirit bore witness of God's reality, and of who and what he really is.

Because spiritual witness is pure knowledge, once obtained (and until forgotten) it becomes the irrefutable first principle. Questions, doubts, even disillusionment and suffering can create questions and wondering but cannot disprove or displace the single, central certainty. Joseph Smith

taught that all facets of the gospel are appendages to the central fact of Christ and his atonement¹³; modern church teachings call us back to this fact again and again. It is because Christ's divinity and mission—and what they tell us of our own selves—are the reality to which each of us is entitled to personal, absolute knowledge through the Spirit. And until we know that, what else we do or do not know matters little.

So where is the gateway to such personal rediscovery? How does the leader break through denial and refusal to rekindle the Spirit's voice? Simplistic as the suggestion may appear, the place to begin is a carefully-focused return to the first principles: personal prayer, scripture study, and righteous living.

A little inquiry may find these rudiments of the faithful priesthood holder's life in disrepair. As noted, spiritual observance tends to be reduced to outward essentials by the press of other demands. In the life of even the most observant, the sense of God's reality—his presence—may have been decaying for years. A man must be brought to rediscover the substance behind the forms he has preserved. And such rediscovery can spring only from direct and *genuine* communion with the Father.

Scripture and prayer—simple, basic, yet indispensable, and irreplaceable by any amount of practical advice or secular guidance. But note the difficulty: it is something which the priesthood holder must ultimately do on his own. Leaders and advisors cannot do it for him. Indeed, this first step back is as intensely personal and individual a task as anyone can undertake. Advisors can motivate, urge, and hope, but re-establishing the primary contact must take place in private, between the man and his maker, while priesthood leaders sit back and worry. Small wonder the Lord listed persuasion among the cardinal priesthood virtues—followed immediately by longsuffering (D&C 121:41).

The next step flows naturally from the first. As the priesthood holder, communing with the Father, moves closer to the Spirit, his awareness turns away from himself to those he loves. The closer the Spirit's influence, the broader sweeps the circle of love and concern. The scriptures tell of Enos, hunting in the forest alone, being moved upon to kneel in prayer for the welfare of his own soul: "And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed. And I, Enos, knew that Cod could not lie; wherefore, my guilt was swept away" (Enos 5-7). The Spirit having borne witness of his own redemption, Enos's awareness moved suddenly beyond himself: "Now, it came to pass that when I had heard these words I began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren the Nephites; wherefore, I did pour out my whole

13. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1977), 121.

soul unto God for them" (v. 9).

Once again, the Spirit spoke assurance to him, promising blessings according to the Nephites' diligence in keeping the commandments. At this, Enos moved yet a step further beyond himself: "And after I, Enos, had heard these words, my faith began to be unshaken in the Lord; and I prayed unto him with many long strugglings for my brethren, the Lamanites" (Enos 11). Ultimately, Enos sought and obtained assurances that should the Nephites be destroyed through their own transgressions (a sobering bit of foresight) their records might be preserved for the Lamanites' redemption (vv. 12-18). What was begun as supplication for the redemption of a single soul ended as a covenant impacting the salvation of whole nations and of generations not born.

When the priesthood holder—steeped in the personal turmoil of transition at mid-life, unable to love or consider those around him, thinking only of saving what is left of himself—finally recovers enough of his spiritual sight to recognize himself as he really is, his consciousness will shift to those close to him: wife, children, family, and friends. His desires for their welfare will revive—not out of duty or obligation, but out of love. He will see, as an inseparable part of who he is, the stewardship which he (like all of us) bears for those who depend on him.

I know some of this seems implausibly Pollyanna-ish to those who have suffered, with men they loved, through the turbulence of middle age. Let me hasten to add that a man, by regaining his spiritual vision, has not *avoided* mid-life transition; neither has he necessarily lessened its intensity. Advisors, spouses, and friends hopeful that a "quick dose of religion" will put all matters back exactly the way they were are missing the point, and may yet drive the priesthood holder away.

Mid-life transition will not, and *should* not, be skirted so simply. Rather, once the foundations of his spiritual existence have been restored and stabilized, a man should be encouraged to evaluate, and redirect if necessary, the balance of his life. Because once the foundation has been saved, what remains is flexible. It may be that a change of occupation or career is warranted. It may be that new avocational interests should be cultivated; that some not-yet-tried avenue of community or humanitarian service should be explored; that family obligations and duties could be redistributed. It is in revisiting such incidentals (and in the long view they *are* only incidentals) that the process of transition, of individuation, can be carried to fruition.

IV

To recapitulate, then, this time with a few specifics:

1. *Refocus the priesthood holder on his personal witness of the spirit.*

Nothing is more important than this. The man's spiritual identity as offspring of divine parentage must be lifted from the fabric of the life he is questioning and shown to be inseparable from himself—something he can perhaps ignore but never walk away from. More even than the face in his mirror or the breath in his lungs, his personal witness must be part of him.

Where this personal rediscovery begins will vary with the individual. Leaders should be prepared to devote all necessary prayer, fasting, and meditation to bear upon an appropriate course of action. The focus, though, must be to persuade the troubled priesthood holder to seek his Father alone in personal, secret prayer.

The point of departure should probably *not* be a piecemeal inquiry into individual complaints; a casual survey of "what's bothering you." Where a priesthood holder is dealing with mid-life crisis, he will doubtless be able to produce a lengthy list of things that are bothering him, and certainly an advisor cannot hope to be of much use unless he is willing to listen, carefully and openly, to such complaints. But they must be seen in context, and for what they are—effects, not causes, of underlying discontent. Even well-meant suggestions aimed at solving isolated grievances miss what is wrong with the whole picture—the priesthood holder has ceased to see through spiritual eyes. Until his spiritual sight is restored, such spot touch-up work will only frustrate him.

Neither does the answer lie in listening to problems and gripes until they trigger some ready-made sermonette. Pearls of wisdom have their use. But without re-established contact with his divine origins and parentage, a man will ultimately gain nothing by them.

Finally, do not automatically assume that the answer lies in giving the priesthood holder more responsibility, to take his mind off of his problems. Too often, a well-intentioned bishop or quorum leader has assumed that discontent was simply a byproduct of idleness. But it may have been too much doing, with too little meaning, that has been the crisis's principal fuel all along. As the Spirit dictates, the leader may even be prompted to release the priesthood holder from current callings and give him a new and special one: re-establishing contact with his spiritual roots and identity.

The beginning step will almost always entail study of the scriptures. Focus on the Book of Mormon, which promises a knowledge of "the truth of all things" (Moro. 10:4-5). The leader may want to meet together with the priesthood holder regularly for the first while, although the scriptures speak most intensely to us when we read in solitude.

Actual extended time alone, away from work and other responsibil-

ity, may be indicated where practicable. Most of us have read of men spending a few days or weeks of solitude, closeted with the scriptures and their prayers, returning to their lives with a renewed outlook. If the priesthood holder is willing (and able) to go off alone, seeking the Lord through fasting and prayer, the experience may leave him altogether changed. (Such a sabbatical may take some promotion with employers and family members, who may at first be inclined to look upon the idea as an unwarranted "vacation" at their expense. If it can be done with the support of colleagues and loved ones, though, a personal retreat is unmatched in its ability to focus the soul on the things of the Spirit.)

Regardless of what leads him to do it, a man will come to know himself again when he presents his central question—who and what he is—as a prayerful petition to his Father. Not before. Humble, sincere, and pure inquiry is what the Lord asks of each of us.

2. Help to reestablish his awareness of his primary stewardships.

I suggested earlier that once a man's spiritual perspective begins to clear, his awareness of his primary stewardships follows as a matter of course. That is not to say, though, that a counsellor ought to treat the reunion between man and maker in isolation, trusting that what follows will see to itself unattended. On the contrary, an advisor must begin at once, both extracting the priesthood holder's wife and family from the perceived "problem" and building them into the solution.

From the moment a man commits to reassess his faltering commitment to once-cherished spiritual values, his partner and children should be part of the process. His renewed resolve to regular personal prayer should be accompanied, from the first, by daily prayer with his wife, petitioning the Father together for rebirth as a couple, and as an eternal family. Regular family prayer should likewise be reinstated, with all children (who are old enough to understand) briefed thoroughly on the fact that the whole family has begun an all-out effort to rediscover the spiritual realities which hold them together. (Think, incidentally, of the powerful example in the lives of teenage children as their father steps aside from the accustomed paths of career, school, etc., and shares with them his drive for spiritual rejuvenation.)

Needless to add, there needs to be some careful counselling with the wife (and, if warranted, older children as well). If the family members are excluded from the process, they will at best be unable to support it; at worst some may feel resentful (as noted below) that the bishop, high priest group leader, etc., is meddling with the status quo and encouraging the head of their household to "rock the boat." Nothing could more effectively reinforce the priesthood holder's perception of his family as a

personal albatross to be jettisoned along with all the other barnacles of his stifling, outmoded existence. Wives, sons, and daughters need to work with the process of change, not against it. They need to be committed, just like their husband and father, to the need and desirability of regrouping the life of the family around its primary, transcendental values.

But there needs to be give and take on both sides, too. If a man sets out on his personal odyssey predisposed to view his loved ones as more burden than benefit, it will quickly foul his efforts at spiritual rediscovery. He needs to be urged from the start to be thinking of mid-life transition as a vehicle for salvaging his family, along with himself, from the meaningless, busy-work facets of their existence—not as an occasion to declare himself independent of them.

It may be that casting some fresh light on the whole notion of “freedom” will be in order—so few of us really grasp the full meaning of the concept. Freedom (as a wise personal friend once pointed out) is a basis for order, not a license for chaos. A man who, in the name of personal freedom, is willing to plunge his loved ones into the pain, confusion, and sorrow of a shattered family is showing nothing so clearly as that he has no idea what personal freedom is or how to begin to handle it. Sensitive, loving counsel, hand in hand with personal prayer, will hopefully shift a man’s perspective from such a selfish, world-oriented approach, to the gospel-oriented awareness which came upon Enos. The willingness to walk away from everything of value in freedom’s misused name will then be seen, with the eyes of the Spirit, to be an act of self-abandonment, not self-redemption.

If a priesthood holder has used the impetus of a man’s mid-life transition to resurrect his spiritual awareness; if, incident to that discovery, he has resolved to renew his commitment to his family; and if they are behind his efforts, the journey is nearly done.

3. Encourage and assist in reevaluating the other elements of his life and making necessary changes.

It bears repeating that once a family’s spiritual foundations have been effectively shored up, the rest of its existence—job, school, routine—can be changed about as needed. A family can adjust to differing responsibilities in the house or less leisure time. They can even adjust to less money and fewer possessions.

I am of course aware that this aspect of the transition process (particularly the prospect of a possible career change) may generate some consternation in family members and close friends. After all, men are supposed to have settled down by mid-life—shouldn’t friends and loved ones (and particularly dependents) be entitled to some consistency and

continuity? Has their associate, husband, father, and breadwinner any business upsetting the apple cart this late in the game? Shouldn't a priesthood advisor be taking *their* well-being into account in sorting through all this?

Yes and no. Preserving—indeed, enhancing—the stability and well-being of the family unit must be a strong priority in any priesthood advisor's doings. But that does not necessarily mean locking the head of the household into an established life pattern purely in the interest of preserving his domestic tranquility or economic solvency. If his vision and understanding of himself, and his stewardships, have been reinforced as discussed above, his family's real needs from him—love, guidance, example, heritage, protection, and sustenance—will be foremost in his mind, perhaps for the first time in years. If family members are then asked to endure a few alterations to the remaining trappings of family life—job, activities, routines—count the cost small in comparison to the peace and spiritual renewal to be gained. Think for a moment: how many such aspects of your family system couldn't stand to be improved?

Be fearless and creative in this aspect of counselling. Now that you have established, together, the things worth saving, don't hesitate to plunge into the next question: what needs changing? Unless you are ready to tackle this issue head-on, your ward or quorum member may be inclined to turn from all the progress you have made, or to bury ongoing problems and resentments in the name of preserving his new-found personal and family harmony, only to have them go on festering until they foment a new crisis.

Don't be afraid, incidentally, to call on professional counselling to help a man explore his changing needs with a slant that priesthood advisors cannot offer. No one should hesitate to take advantage of modern learning and techniques in these areas, and priesthood advisors should be ready both to refer ward and quorum members to professional advisors, and to work with them on a continuing basis.

CONCLUSION

"Imitation," wrote Eric Hoffer, "is often a shortcut to a solution. We copy when we lack the inclination, the ability or the time to work out an independent solution."¹⁴ Uniqueness and individuality are not anathema to gospel living. It is easy to see conformity—in all facets of life—as the safest, most predictable means of assuring ourselves of righteousness. Yet in this we show too little faith in the inherent worth of our individualness and diversity. The gospel was not given to make us all safely the same. It

14. Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951), 96.

was given to permit each of us the freedom to be the best of who and what we are. The Celestial Kingdom will not be a realm of faultless but indistinguishable clones. Each of us will shine forth there in all of our perfected, yet unique, glory. The prepackaged system of often-irrelevant norms which pass for personal righteousness, the accepted gridlock of behavioral conformism, is a shallow counterfeit of the divine maturation for which we were intended. Ultimately, it can be spiritual toxin.

The natural urge to pause and take stock at the "noon of life" can afford the ideal opportunity for retooling the bond between what we are and what the gospel can bring to us; for cultivation of "individuation" in its highest and best sense. The advisor or leader who retreats from this opportunity, seeking only to restore or preserve "normalcy" in the lives of troubled priesthood holders, has at best missed a priceless and perhaps unduplicable chance to bless the life of another; at worst, he may sacrifice a salvageable priesthood holder. But if he will seize the moment, using the unsettled time wisely, he may find himself opening a door to a time of new beginning for the second half of life.