The Sabbatical Year in Jerusalem; Reflections on Transitional Periods in Adult Life

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It is suggested that the sabbatical year in academic life falls within the context of the growing literature on transitional states in middle years. The period for study and reflection in mid-life is similar to the moratorium of adolescence, allowing for change and growth. Three cases are presented to show how treatment at this period led to resolution of the emotional problems engendered in the transitional period.

As an English-speaking social worker trained and experienced in casework and living in Jerusalem, I have had occasion during the past number of years to counsel several people who were spending their sabbatical year in this city. The interruption of their regular academic pursuits, the more relaxed work schedule that allowed time for leisure and writing, the move to a different locale and change in routine precipitated these people into an emotional crisis.

Sabbatical year falls within the context of growing literature on the characteristics of transitional states in the middle years.[1] In such periods, changes occur in social status, physiology and emotional tasks for which previous adaptative patterns are not adequate. The homeostasis of both the individual and the family changes and there is concomitant discomfort and anxiety. Like all growth, this is generally a gradual process. External events, however, often serve to focus the reality of the changes that are taking place. Such external events: the birth of the first child, the "empty nest syndrome" when the last child leaves home, retirement, etc., are the milestones in the life cycle of the individual and the family.

The sabbatical year too may serve to focus the reality of the transition, as, in addition to external changes that occur in the life of the family and individual, the year allows time for reflection and introspection. Erikson[2] refers to a "moratorium" in the transition of young people to adult life. A year in which one can reflect, write and examine one's status in the perspective of a new academic and social milieu offers a moratorium in mid-life. This probably occurs in any sabbatical, but Israel has a special quality that is particularly felt in Jerusalem, a city of singular, stark beauty, rich in religious, historic and mystical significance. Although none of the individuals discussed in this article was religious, the stay in the historic homeland kindled an archaic affinity with their Jewish roots and forced them to confront the alienation they felt. Beyond this, however, a need emerged to re-evaluate the meaning of their lives and their marriages, to take psychological inventory, as it were. (Hebrew has an expressive phase for this: *heshbon hanefesh,* a spiritual reckoning.) Sufficient anxiety was created in the course of their struggle to come to terms with the content of their lives, to bring these people to seek professional counsel.

Growth Process in Adult Life

In calling attention to the continuing growth processes in adult life, Erikson refers to the conflict in middle life as "generativity vs. stagnation,"[3] a mature period following the development of

intimacy in eary adulthood. The ability to achieve intimacy and to "lose oneself in the meeting of bodies and minds leads to a gradual expansion of ego interests and of libidinal cathexis over that which has been generated." Vaillant[4] suggests an intermediate stage between intimacy and generativity which he terms "career consolidation." According to his view of adult development, a man who achieves intimacy early in adult life is then free to develop himself professionally. The problem of intimacy solved, his libido is freed to invest in various intellectual and career endeavors. Grunebaum[5] points out variations in the adult development of men and women. Although men experience an aggressive spurt to further their careers, they often reach a point after the age of 40 when their interest turns to nurturing pursuits such as being mentor to younger employees, assisting in the development of students, etc. Having proved themselves, they are ready to take on a more affiliative role. This is less true of woman aged 40 to 60 who, after completing murturing and mothering tasks, often seek a more aggressive role, looking for self-fulfillment in new career lines or educational experiences.

Levinson[6] has suggested that 80 percent of men in their fifties experience a crisis that "evokes tumultous struggles within the self and the external world." He states that this mid-life transition is often seen as irrational or pathological, whereas in reality it is a normal developmental period of reorientation to new tasks and mid-life.

In discussing women of this age group, Kernberg[7] indicates that a positive indication of their ability to grow is their willingness to challenge deeply ingrained feelings of resentment toward men. Having done so, they can develop a genuine interest in men as a source of "human as well as sexual gratification, without a predominance of dependent, changing or exploitive features." A woman in her late thirties or early forties who is beginning to achieve some freedom from the tasks of mothering, keeping house, chauffering children, etc., also begins to think of seeking fulfillment outside the home. During the sabbatical year her responsibilities are often less demanding than those she shoulders at home, and she may examine her marital relationship with a view to determining if it can stand the strain of her becoming more independent. Comparable developments occur in most marriages in the course of time, but the sabbatical abroad precipitates the couple's awareness of what has happened and is happening, the more sharply in that the husband and wife share a language and a private history in a country of strangers.

As a period of relative quiescence, the sabbatical allows for the opportunity to consolidate personal and intellectual gains. Vaillant[8] refers to a moratorium occurring in mid-life transitions (as in adolescence) and Talanian[9] notes a similar phenomenon in young adults who take time out for traveling. It would appear that the sabbatical year offers opportunities for differentiation and individuation, not only through physical separation from the usual environment, but through further differentiating of the mature self from earlier libidinal conflicts.

Gertrude and Rubin Blanck[10] stress the importance of the separation-individuation process on development in the marriage. Separation-individuation and differentiation of self-representations from object representations are internal processes. As the husband and wife confront their growing maturity and the changes ensuing in tasks and roles in the family, if the original object constancy was strong and appropriate, the marriage is

strengthened. If the relationship was predicated on more dependent, clinging or authoritarian connections, the marriage may find the strain of the new tasks of middle life somewhat precarious.

Every individual is unique and the pairing of a couple leads to idiosyncratic marital developments. Although the helping professional seeks common theoretical strands in these mid-life crises, one cannot generalize. Before describing a few cases to illustrate the variety of problems, however, it is in place to note here that I have known many professors, colleagues and friends, who found the sabbatical year growth-enhancing and enriching. The opportunity for re-evaluation helped them and their children reach new levels of development and they engaged in long-anticipated activities that left a lasting impression. On the other hand, those who felt impelled to seek professional help as a result of their year's soul-searching all had one aspect in common: when they confronted some of the difficulties they faced as a couple, their balance was upset and they began to rethink the direction of their lives and their marriages. Some examples follow:

Some Case Notes

Ilana B: A pretty, youthful-looking woman of 36, Ilana had come to Jerusalem with her husband, a university lecturer, and their two children. Fifteen years before, as a college student, she had spent a year in Israel. Having been an ardent Zionist, she was eager to revisit the country. She found the return exciting, enjoyed seeing the country, making trips to archeological digs, picnicking with the children, going to museums and Arab markets, and so forth. She joined an archeological study group and made new friends, finding the academic community hospitable. Her husband had not wanted to come to Israel. He found the people noisy and pushy, the Levantine atmosphere strident and abrasive. He complained about the library facilities and the inconveniences. He had planned to write a book, but was unable to work on it. After the first trimester he left to do some research in Europe. This was when Ilana sought help.

She described a poor marriage of fourteen years duration. She seems to have had a romantic involvement with a kibbutznik when she was in Israel as a college student, and after her return to her dull midwestern home town, everything seemed dreary and uninteresting. Her husband, a brilliant but difficult man, was a welcome change. She was fascinated by his intelligence and his good looks. She had an overbearing, sadistic father to whom she was alternately drawn and repelled while she was filled with compassion for her mother's suffering, mingled with resentment at the fact that her mother had never had the strength to break away from her father. Ilana's husband was attached to his own mother. He was authoritative, cruel and demanding, but at the same time, very dependent. He loved the children very much and overly identified with their son. Sex had become routine for him and she no longer experienced orgasm. She had made some accomodations over the years. Her husband had finally bought the house she wanted, although it was only in his name. His students adored him and she surmised that he had had some brief affairs. She had taken advanced training and was very successful in her career as a fashion consultant. They both loved the children and did not want them to suffer.

The past few months on sabbatical had made them both realize, however, how empty their marriage had become. He found no support in her and made increasing demands on her. She reveled in her independence, and relished her activities in what she considered an exciting city. When he wanted to go to Europe for further study, she encouraged him, saying she needed the time to sort things out. He became very frightened, begging her to accompany him, and now called her frequently from the continent.

She was seen for eight sessions, limited by the close of the academic year. During this time, her life was personally satisfying. The absence of constant bickering made for a relaxed time with the children. She was invited to many dinner parties and discovered that she was sought after as a single woman. One or two men found her very exciting and she was able to experience a strong sexual feeling for one of them. Initially, she had a fantasy of flight: she would stay on with the children and never go back. But when financial, legal and other considerations were faced, she struggled about what to do. She saw quite clearly that in some ways she had repeated her mother's pattern

and was angry at her own weakness in accommodating to the marriage. Her final decision was made after she sought the advice of an American lawyer who pointed out that she had to return to the home she and her husband lived in jointly, in order to get a fair settlement. She dreaded the return, but was able to start thinking realistically about separation and to prepare the children for the possibility of such an eventuality.

Discussion: Both partners here had made some adaptation to a poor marriage. It had been necessary for Ilana to look to her marriage to meet an unresolved reliance on an authorative and demanding father. Gaining insight into this, plus the maturity that came from mastery of the tasks of being a mother and a wife and then successful self-actualization in work, gave her the strength to extricate herself from her neurotic marital relationship. The process of individualization seems to have been occurring from the time of her marriage as a young adult. By the time she came to Israel for the sabbatical year, she had reached a stage where she no longer needed such a neurotic relationship. The period in which she was removed from the usual social structures, personal defenses and accommodations afforded her an opportunity to examine herself and her marriage and translate understanding into action.

Mr. & Mrs. Leonard: Mrs. Leonard was referred at a time of acute crisis. She was experiencing severe depressive symptoms, loss of appetite and obsessive thoughts. She cried constantly and was unable to sleep. Her husband frantically sought help, driving across the country with her for the first appointment. When he had called to make the appointment, he indicated that his wife had a severe problem but it was, in fact, a marital problem that had surfaced very dramatically.

Mr. and Mrs. Leonard were an attractive couple who had known each other since childhood. They were Jewish but had been brought up in a very assimilated community in the Bahamas. The daughter of a British civil servant, Mrs. L. was a rather fragile woman who seemed most comfortable at home, serving tea. Her husband's parents were not educated, but had succeeded financially and had been able to send their son abroad for advanced study. He was an agrarian scientist and was spending his sabbatical in a remote village in the desert helping the local people develop better crop yields. The couple and their two children were living in a development town that had few social amenities. (Development towns were created in Israel in the 1950's to absorb immigrants, most of whom were from Asian–African countries. Few Westerners live in them, and the level of education and culture is quite limited.) No one had prepared the Leonards for the fact that they would be so isolated socially. Mrs. Leonard's only friend was the wife of the local doctor. The only elementary school in town had no facilities for English-speaking children, so Mrs. Leonard was teaching the children at home, with the aid of home instruction kits from America. In the afternoon the children went to the local community center and they were just beginning to make some friends.

Mr. L. enjoyed his work, admired the people he worked with and found the experience stimulating. He felt he was making a contribution to "his people." He identified with their lack of education and poverty, since when he was a child his own family had been in a similar position. Before coming, Mrs. L. had had the impression that they would be living in a community near a city, but she now found herself in an isolated town and her life was altogether empty. The nearest university was over an hour away, which ruled out the possibility of taking courses. Hurt and angry, she was tied to the house and to the children's lessons. In the midst of this, she learned that for the last few months before leaving the States, her husband had been having a love affair. He felt called upon to confess to her and seek support, as he was having difficulty tolerating the separation from his lover. This threw his wife into such a panic that he became concerned about her and about his marriage, and sought help.

Mrs. L., poorly concealing her tremendous rage at her husband, was filled with self-blame. She described a very loving early marriage for them both, even though she was sexually blocked and had never experienced orgasm. After the birth of the children, particularly the second, she withdrew from her husband, was depressed and excessively involved in the care of the babies. He even sent for his mother to help her, but this move proved disastrous. She emerged from the depression, began to work and acquired a very responsible administrative

position in a large corporation. They had lived in one or two college towns and, short of psychotherapy, had tried various experiments to overcome her frigidity. At one time they entered into a "swinging" liaison with another couple. She grew quite attached to the other man, who became a confidant and a father figure to her. Her husband then decided to abandon the arrangement, as it had ceased to be a "fun thing."

I saw Mrs. L. regularly for six months, her husband less frequently. There were also periodic conjoint interviews, to help establish more direct communication patterns. Mrs. L. had identified with her rather cold, "ladylike" mother, although she described her as withholding and not sufficiently loving. She admired, even idealized, her father, who was an interesting and intelligent man, and her husband shared her admiration for him. He described her family's household as nevertheless somewhat pompous. He admitted to having had several affairs during the marriage, saying that she drove him to it. In the early weeks of treatment, Mrs. L. was able to give vent to her rage, almost overwhelming both her husband and herself with the depth of her feelings, not only about his current affair, but about many other things as well. The depression lifted somewhat and the obsessive thoughts about her husband and the "other woman" disappeared. Her interviews with me assumed the nature of an outing. I would see her first thing in the morning, after which she would go to a museum or a concert, have lunch in an interesting place. When both she and her husband came, they would bring the children and arrange for a family outing.

Mr. L. had been corresponding with "the other woman" and both had decided that they did not want to break up their marriages. The couple began to work on their sexual problems and other mutual problems as well. It was my feeling that Mrs. L. was in such a depressing social situation at that time that treatment was like paddling upstream. However, she formed a deep relationship to me and courageously explored the tremendous anger and aggression hidden behind her frigidity and gentleness. As things improved, she began to wonder if she wanted to continue the marriage, feeling that she had married for some very wrong reasons. This led her to wonder if she could fulfil herself while maintaining these marital bonds. Her husband felt very threatened and his dependence on and need for his wife, who was basically very strong, emerged. When my contact with them terminated, they had been experiencing some pleasant times with each other and the whole family had a wonderful vacation on the shores of the Red Sea. She still felt some tentativeness about the marriage, and wanted to see how matters would evolve when they returned to their old routines.

Discussion: The crisis here was precipitated not so much by the sabbatical as by the final breakthrough of all the acting out in the marriage. Mr. and Mrs. L. had been considered an "ideal," "story book" couple. The love affairs, frigidity, swinging, had all been swept under the rug. The isolation, her lack of work and other sublimatory mechanisms, plus her need to face openly the pathology in the marriage, caused a major break. The depressive symptoms were quite severe but as she recovered, she sought to evaluate the totality of her marriage and her life. The husband's social supports were somewhat better due to his work, but having no "other woman" through and with whom to express the problems of the marriage, he was lost and forced to confess to his wife. The couple's real love and mutual respect provided a base for successful conselling.

Martin G: Martin was 60 years-old when he decided to take a year off for reflection and "fun." He had been married 25 years and was childless. His wife did not wish to join him, flying over for only two weeks during Christmas vacation, when she did not have to teach. Martin was a pedantic, somewhat compulsive man who was moderately successful, although one felt that he had more talent than he exploited. He described a routine, empty marriage, controlled by his wife's neurosis. His work entailed quite a bit of travelling, he had an occasional casual affair, enjoyed music and art, lived in an interesting community in the United States, and had no further ambition. He had decided, however, to take his sabbatical outside of the U.S., to which his wife, refusing to leave her work and go along, raised no objection. She treated him like a little boy who wanted to have his fun.

However, while in Jerusalem, he met a woman who fascinated him. She introduced him to a variety of pleasant activities: nature hikes in the wilderness, snorkeling in the Red Sea, camping in the Galilee. He found himself part of an interesting international social set

and attended parties and teas with many different and special people. The friendship developed into an intense love affair, briefly interrupted by his wife's visit. After this hiatus, when Martin began to think seriously of leaving his wife, he became completely impotent.

In treatment, Martin described his wife and marriage with so little feeling that it was hard to get a picture of what had held them together for so many years. He maintained that their sexual relationship was good and he was accustomed to the routine, although he now saw how much he had missed. His wife managed most of his personal and financial affairs, leaving him free to concentrate on his work. But now he wanted to do things for the woman he loved, and enjoyed sharing walks, looking at sunsets, and so on, like a teenager. Ostensibly, he sought treatment to decide whether to return to his wife. Although he was in treatment for three months, it was not productive. He idealized his girlfriend and could give few reasons for returning to his wife. What emerged, however, was a weariness, as if, after this "last fling" he really wanted to return to the mother who would take care of him. He realized that this new relationship put too many demands on him, and he felt he was too old to start again. When he left the country he ended the affair, but with tremendous pain.

Discussion: For Martin, the sabbatical was an exciting period of play, although not the kind of playful regression that can lead to growth. He enjoyed the "game" during the first few months and it may be that previously in the course of the marriage he played the same "game" of the little boy having his "fling." However, as more positive fellings for the loved one developed, he became guilty, frightened and impotent, so he returned to his safe, albeit restrictive marriage, within which he could feel superior, competent and more potent. In this instance treatment did not lead to further individuation, but enabled him to take the decision to return to his wife. The marriage was of long duration and Martin's patterns were rigidly set. His character structure seemed too fragile to tolerate the kind of breakthrough which leaving his wife might entail, and he needed help to enable him to return to the safety of his home.

Summary

Psychological growth takes place throughout the life cycle, as energy fettered by unresolved earlier libidinal conflicts is freed and becomes part of an ever-expanding ego. Resolution of earlier conflicts can take place in adult life as the individual masters the tasks of love and work. Throughout the life cycle there are periods when the individual may regress to "provocative playfulness,"[11] permitting the ego to regress and reintegrate experiences at a more mature level. A sabbatical year, during which an individual or couple is free of some of the responsibilities of everyday life and can enjoy new and different experiences, may offer such a period to adults.

When the consolidation or reevaluation precipitates anxiety because of the fear of change, counselling may be necessary to help the individual evaluate and deal with the perceptions he has acquired. These perceptions are usually not new, but have been suppressed in the everyday bustle of work and in the defensive maneuvers the individual has developed. Treatment should be geared to helping the client determine if prior defensive behavior is adequate to deal with his present state, and if he is ready for more courageous pursuits which he now sees are possible. The caseworker must develop a clear diagnostic evaluation to avoid pushing clients into steps toward "growth" they may be flirting with, but are not quite ready for. The worker can help the client formulate and put into proper context, his choices, understand the patterns that have developed and the implications of change. As in all treatment, the choices remain in the hands of the client.

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