

**‘Music Engagement at mid-life on the Guitar’ by Bruce Stewart*****What phenomenon?***

What I have dubbed ‘fifties phenomenon’ refers to the psychological changes affecting adults entering their fifties. Peter A. O’Connor, in his book ‘Facing the Fifties’ refers to the transition as a ‘profound psychological change’ that enables men and women to more accurately, define themselves from within, rather than being defined by outer sources (O’Connor, 2000)[p16]. Typically, the early fifties are ambiguous and uncertain times characterised by children leaving home, loss of youthfulness and possible loss of work (O’Connor, 2000)[p11,25].

At the heart of the problem is the tendency for grown men in Western society to shrink ‘back from the second half of life’ because they want to ‘carry the psychic dispositions of youth beyond the threshold of the so called years of discretion (Jung, 1931)[p105,106]’. The difficulties associated with the condition are that the answers are to be found deep in the psyche of the individual (Jung, 1931)[p106]. Our psychic birth began as children with the conscious distinction of our own ego separate from our parents (Jung, 1931)[p99].

Mid – life transition is critical. Often the man is given ‘his first adult opportunity to reflect and renegotiate the identity’ he defined in adolescence (O’Connor, 2000)[p52]. Much like adolescence, fifty+ year olds are asking ‘who am I?’ and like the adolescent, there are also body changes (O’Connor, 2000)[57].

The successful shift from notions of ‘persona’ to an authentic self, involve processes of ‘letting go’ of the external measurement of self and embracing the more relevant and mature issues that connect us to adult life (O’Connor, 2000)[p16]. Those issues are ‘cultural’ according to psychotherapist Carl Jung - lying beyond the basic purposes of nature - money-making and tending to mere existence (Jung, 1931)[p108]. To be conscious of the present, means estranging oneself from the masses bound by such tradition (Jung, 1931)[p197]. To successfully enter the next stage of life, there must first be a separation – the first demand of any transition (O’Connor, 2000)[p21].

***Warning signs***

For the woman entering the fifties, menopause may well be the first sign of the transition – the loss of youth and redirection of energies (O’Connor, 2000)[p41]. For the man – there are no obvious warning signs, as the losses he experiences usually fail to elude him to the impending need for change (O’Connor, 2000)[p51].

## ***What causes fifties phenomenon?***

Firstly, Western society does not distinguish between aging and the infirmity of old age (O'Connor, 2000)[p4]. Without a recognisable rite of passage – or public acknowledgment that such a stage exists – many have succeeded in entrenching themselves in their personal views and social status, believing they have discovered the right course and the correct principles of behaviour (Jung, 1931)[p104]. Those in this category, fail to realise that their achievements, rewarded by society, are triumphs that are a cost to their personality (Jung, 1931)[p104]. Whether it be overtime or the enthusiasm building a new business, the time away from family is just one aspect or cost to the individual. Our achievements and usefulness thus far in life seem to provide little guidance to the consciousness we need beyond our fiftieth year (Jung, 1931)[p103]. Thus the transition may be thought of as, the distress we experience if we have failed to complete this important developmental task – hence the emotional disturbance (O'Connor, 2000)[p26]. The problem, is coming to an awareness that we have outgrown that stage of consciousness that belongs to the past (Jung, 1931)[p198]. What now may be described as ‘loss’, may well be later described, once the transition is underway, as selfish, adolescent egoism – the fact is our perspective at the threshold of mid-life can dramatically change if we are willing to let go.

## ***Impact of society***

Nineteenth century economists believed that through the abundance made possible by future technology, that man would emerge as a ‘post-materialist’ – with refined cultural, intellectual and spiritual insight (Hamilton, 2005)[p4]. Wrong, affluent countries are preoccupied with money – the richer they are the worse their mania (Hamilton, 2005)[p4]. Our achievements in such a society are never enough (Hamilton, 2005)[p6]. Canberra economist Clive Hamilton in his 2005 book ‘Affluenza’ believes Australians are in the grip of a collective psychological disorder – indulging in the illusion that we are deprived. No matter how much we spend or accumulate, our behaviour remains unchanged (Hamilton, 2005)[p6]. A better society according to Australian economic policies, is to promote higher consumption (Hamilton, 2005)[p7]. There is a price to pay for the rapid expansion of consumption – the toll falling on the over-consumers, society and the environment (Hamilton, 2005)[p7]. At the individual level, regardless of our socio-economic status, Australians have a dysfunctional relationship with money (Hamilton, 2005)[p7].

Close interpersonal relationships are polarised by materialistic pursuits – simply they divide rather than build society (Hamilton, 2005)[p14]. The danger for the individual is that in the pursuit of wealth, the real things that can make them happy, are sacrificed (Hamilton, 2005)[p17]. The notion that more money is the key to happier living means the affluent become more pre-occupied with themselves and less likely to sympathise with the dispossessed (Hamilton, 2005)[p18]. The emergence of the

marketing society is paralleled by the rise of depression, anxiety, obesity and a range of other disorders (Hamilton, 2005)[p38].

### ***Dealing with fifties phenomenon***

The integrity we should aspire to in the fifties, is not the result of our moral principles, but involves our ability to endure uncertainty and the acceptance of the co-existence of opposites – namely life and death (O'Connor, 2000)[p172]. Understanding mid-life will mean gaining some understanding of our psychic processes – our reflections and our doubts (Jung, 1931)[p95](Dillon, 1995)[p18]. Truly knowing ourselves is based on a conscious connection between our psychic contents (Jung, 1931)[p98]. Reflection enables bridge-building between our outer and inner conditions – we are able to define ourselves from the newness of what's within rather than being defined largely by circumstances of youth (O'Connor, 2000)[p158]. The process called 'reparation' is fuelled by love and is to do with our 'capacity to bear guilt and loss without falling into despair (O'Connor, 2000)[p187]'. The process involves accepting our psychic reality, renounce overly nostalgic thinking [whereby only positive traits are depicted], and resist splitting the world into good and bad (O'Connor, 2000)[p187]. Finally, realise that truth is something we are perpetually approaching – it's to do with 'being', not something in our custody (O'Connor, 2000)[p183].

### ***Outcome of fifties phenomenon***

A sign of maturity for those in their early fifties will be the tolerance of uncertainty, knowing fully well that opposites co-exist (O'Connor, 2000)[p172]. Keep in mind that this important transition initiates a more fully realised life, bringing with it new orientation – from outward focus to inward spiritual life. Should we decide to defend the old outer character, we will fall headlong into denial – denying the psychic reality and consequently our purchase on spiritual life (O'Connor, 2000)[p175].

Jung describes this attainment clearly: 'Only the man who is modern in our meaning of the term really lives in the present; he alone has a present-day consciousness, and he alone finds that the ways of life which correspond to earlier levels pall upon him. The values and strivings of those past worlds no longer interest him save from the historical standpoint. Thus he has become 'unhistorical' in the deepest sense and has estranged himself from the mass of men who live entirely within the bounds of tradition. Indeed, he is completely modern only when he has come to the very edge of the world, leaving behind him all that has been discarded and outgrown, and acknowledging that he stands before a void out of which all things may grow (Jung, 1931)[p197]'.

## **Bibliography**

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