

THE TWO HALVES OF LIFE



We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.

—CARL JUNG, 2014 / TAYLOR & FRANCIS.

As I began to explore in the Introduction, the task of the first half of life is to create a proper *container* for one's life and answer the first essential questions: "What makes me significant?" "How can I support myself?" and "Who will go with me?" The task of the second half of life is, quite simply, to find the actual *contents* that this container was meant to hold and deliver. As Mary Oliver (1935–2019) put it, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"¹ In other words, the container is not an end in itself, but exists for the sake of our deeper and fullest life, which we largely do not know about ourselves. Far too many people just keep doing repair work on the container itself and never "throw their nets into the deep" (Luke 5:4) to bring in the huge catch that awaits them.

Problematically, the first task invests so much of our blood, sweat, eggs and sperm, tears and years that we often cannot imagine there is a second task or that anything more could be expected of us. "The old wineskins are good enough," we say (see Luke 5:37–39), even though, according to Jesus, they often cannot hold the new wine. As Jesus assures us, if we do not get some new wineskins, the wine and the wineskin will both be lost. The second half of life can hold some new wine because, by then, there should be some strong wineskins, some tested ways of holding our lives together. But that normally means that the container itself has to stretch, die in its present form, or even replace itself with something better. This is the big "rub," as they say, but also the very source of our midlife excitement and discovery.

Various traditions have used many metaphors to make this differentiation clear: beginners and proficient, novices and initiated, milk and meat, letter and spirit, juniors and seniors, baptized and confirmed, apprentice and master, morning and evening, “Peter, when you were young. . . Peter, when you are old” (see John 21:18). Only when we have begun to live in the second half of life can we see the difference between the two. Yet the two halves are *cumulative and sequential, and both are very necessary*. We cannot do a nonstop flight to the second half of life by reading lots of books about it, including this one. Grace must and will edge us forward. “God has no grandchildren. God only has children,” as some have said. Each generation has to make its own discoveries of Spirit for itself. If not, we just react to the previous generation—and often overreact. Or we conform and often overconform. Neither is a positive or creative way to move forward.

No pope, Bible quote, psychological technique, religious formula, book, or guru can do your journey for you. If you try to skip the first journey, you will never see its real necessity and also its limitations. You will never know why this first container *must* fail you, experience the wonderful fullness of the second half of the journey, and discover the relationship between the two. Such is the unreality of many people who “never grow up” or who remain narcissistic into their old age. This is not a small number of people in our world today.

“Juniors” on the first part of the journey invariably think that true elders are naïve, simplistic, “out of it,” or just superfluous. They cannot understand what they have not yet experienced. They are totally involved in their first task and cannot see beyond it. Conversely, if a person has transcended and included the previous stages, they will always have a patient understanding of the juniors and can be patient and helpful to them somewhat naturally (although not without trial and effort). That is precisely what makes such people elders! *Higher stages always empathetically include the lower, or they are not higher stages.*

Almost all cultures, and even most of religious history, have been invested in the creation and maintenance of first-half-of-life issues: the big three concerns of identity, security, and sexuality and gender. They don’t just preoccupy us; they totally take over. That is where history has focused up to now. In fact, most generations have seen boundary marking and protecting

those boundaries as their primary and sometimes only tasks in life. Most of history has been about the forging of structures of security and appropriate loyalty symbols to announce and defend one's personal identity, one's group, and one's gender issues and identity. Now, we seem to live in a time when more and more people are asking, "Is that all there is?"

In our formative years, we are so self-preoccupied that we are both overly defensive and overly offensive at the same time, with little time left for simply living, pure friendship, useless beauty, or moments of communion with nature or anything else. Yet that kind of ego structuring is exactly what a young person needs, by and large, to get through the first twenty years or so. It's also what tribes need to survive. Maybe it is what humanity needed to get started. "Good fences make good neighbors,"² Robert Frost (1874–1963) wrote, but he also presumed that we don't just build fences. We eventually need to cross beyond them as well to actually meet the neighbor.

So, we need boundaries, identity, safety, and some degree of order and consistency to get started, personally and culturally. We also need to feel "special"; we need our "narcissistic fix." By that, I mean we all need some successes, response, and positive feedback early in life, or we will spend the rest of our lives demanding it, or bemoaning its lack, from others. There is a good and needed "narcissism," if you want to call it that. We have to first have an ego structure to then let go of it and move beyond it. Responding to John the Baptist's hard-line approach, Jesus maintains both sides of this equation when he says, "No man born of woman is greater than John the Baptizer, yet the least who enters the reign of heaven is greater than he is" (Matthew 11:11). Is that double-talk? No, it is second-half-of-life talk.

Basically, if you get mirrored well early in life, you do not have to spend the rest of your life looking in Narcissus' mirror or begging for the attention of others. You have already been "attended to" and now feel basically good—and always will. If you were properly mirrored when you were young, you are now free to mirror others and see yourself—honestly and helpfully. I can see why a number of saints spoke of prayer itself as simply receiving the ever-benevolent gaze of God, returning it in kind, mutually gazing, and finally recognizing that it is one single gaze received and bounced back. The Hindus call this exciting mutual beholding *darshan*. I will say more about this mirroring toward the end of the book.

Once you have your narcissistic fix, you have no real need to protect your identity, defend it, prove it, or assert it. It just is, and it is more than enough. This is what we actually mean by “salvation,” especially when we get our narcissistic fix all the way from the Top. When we get our “Who am I?” question right, all the “What should I do?” questions tend to take care of themselves. The very fact that so many religious people have to so vigorously prove and defend their salvation theories makes me seriously doubt whether they have experienced divine mirroring at any great depth.

In the first half of life, success, security, and containment—“looking good” to ourselves and others—are almost the only questions. They are the early stages in Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs.”³ In a culture like ours that is still preoccupied with security issues, enormously high military budgets are never seriously questioned by Congress or the people, while appropriations reflecting later stages in the hierarchy of needs—like those for education, health care for the poor, and the arts—are quickly cut, if even considered. The message is clear: We are largely an adolescent culture. Religions, similarly, *need* to make truth claims that are absolutely absolute, and we want them for just that—because they are absolute! This feels right and necessary at this early stage, despite any talk of biblical “faith” or trust, which can only be comprehended later.

We all want and need various certitudes, constants, and insurance policies at every stage of life. *But we have to be careful, or they totally take over and become all-controlling needs, keeping us from further growth.* Thus the most common one-liner in the Bible is, “Do not be afraid”; in fact, someone counted and found that it occurs 365 times—once for each day of the year! If we do not move beyond our early motivations of personal security, reproduction, and survival (the fear-based preoccupations of the “lizard brain”), we will never proceed beyond the lower stages of human or spiritual development. Many church sermons I have heard never seem to move beyond this first level of development—and do not even challenge it. In fact, to challenge it is considered heretical, dangerous, or ill advised.

The very unfortunate result of this preoccupation with order, control, safety, pleasure, and certitude is that a high percentage of people never get to the contents of their own lives! Human life is about more than building boundaries, protecting identities, creating tribes, and teaching impulse

control. As Jesus said, “Do not worry about what you will eat or what you will wear.” He then asks, “Is life not so much more than food? Is life not so much more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25). “What will it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your very soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

There is too much defensive behavior — and therefore too much offensive behavior — in the first half of life to get to the really substantial questions, which are what drive us forward on the further journey. Human maturity is neither offensive nor defensive; it is finally able to accept that reality *is what it is*. Ken Keyes Jr. (1921–1995) so wisely wrote, “You make yourself and others suffer just as much when you take offense as when you give offense.”⁴ The offended ones feel the need to offend those whom they think have offended them, creating defensiveness on the part of the presumed offenders, which often becomes a new offensive—ad infinitum. There seems to be no way out of this self-defeating and violent ping-pong game—except growing up spiritually. The True Self, you see, is very hard to offend!

STEPS AND STAGES

It was Carl Jung (1875–1961) who first popularized the phrase “the two halves of life” to describe these two major tangents and tasks, yet many other teachers have recognized that there are clear stages and steps to human and spiritual maturation. Process language is not new; it has just used different images.

There are the foundational journey of Abraham and Sarah; the Exodus of Moses; Mohammed’s several key flights; Jesus’ four kinds of soil; images of the Way of the Cross on the walls of churches; John of the Ladder; the recurring schemas of Sts. Bonaventure, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Ávila; and, in the modern era, Jean Piaget, James Fowler, Lawrence Kohlberg, Clare Graves, Jean Gebser, Abraham Maslow, Erik Erikson, Ken Wilber, Carol Gilligan, Daniel Levinson, Bill Plotkin, and the entire world of Spiral Dynamics. They all affirm that growth and development have a direction and are not a static “grit your teeth and bear it.” *Unless you can chart and encourage both movement and direction, you have no way to name maturity or immaturity.* Most of these teachers, each in their own way, seem to coalesce around two key insights that continue to show themselves in almost every one of these constructs.

First, you can only see and understand the earlier stages from the wider perspective of the later stages. This is why mature societies were meant to be led by elders, seniors, saints, and “the initiated.” They alone are in a position to be true leaders in a society, or certainly in any spiritual organization. Without them, “the blind lead the blind” (Matthew 15:14), which is typified by phenomena like violent gangs of youth or suicide bombers.

Those who are not true leaders or elders will just affirm people at their own immature level, and of course immature people will love them and elect them for being equally immature. You can fill in the names here with your own political disaster story. But just remember: There is a symbiosis between immature groups and immature leaders, which is why both Plato and Jefferson believed democracy was not really the best form of government. It is just the safest. A truly wise monarch would probably be the most effective at getting things done. (Don’t send hate letters, please!)

If you have, in fact, deepened and grown “in wisdom, age, and grace” (Luke 2:52), you are able to be patient, inclusive, and understanding of all the previous stages. That is what I mean by my frequent use of the phrase “transcend and include.” That is the infallible sign that you are enlightened, psychologically mature, or a truly adult believer. The “adepts” in all religions are always forgiving, compassionate, and radically inclusive. They do not create enemies, and they move beyond the boundaries of their own “starter group” while still honoring them and making use of them.

Jesus the Jew criticizes his own religion the most, yet never leaves it! Mature people are not either-or thinkers, but they bathe in the ocean of both-and. (Think of Mahatma Gandhi, Anne Frank, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, and the like.) These enlightened people tend to grease the wheels of religious evolution. As Albert Einstein (1879–1955) is purported to have said, no problem can be solved by the same level of consciousness that created it. God moves humanity and religion forward by the regular appearance of such whole and holy people.

The second insight about steps and stages is that from your own level of development, you can only stretch yourself to comprehend people just a bit beyond yourself. Some theorists say you cannot stretch more than one step above your own level of consciousness, and that is on a good day! Because of this limitation, those at deeper (or “higher”) levels beyond

you invariably appear wrong, sinful, heretical, dangerous, or even worthy of elimination. How else can we explain the consistent killing of prophets; the marginalization of truly holy people as naïve; and the rather consistent racism, self-protectiveness, and warlike attitudes of people who think of themselves as civilized? You can be “civilized” and still be judging from the fully egocentric position of an early level of development. In fact, one of the best covers for very narcissistic people is to be polite, smiling, and thoroughly civilized. Hitler loved animals and classical music, I am told.

If change and growth are not *programmed into* your spirituality, if there are not serious warnings about the blinding nature of fear and fanaticism, your religion will *always* end up worshiping the status quo and protecting your present ego position and personal advantage—as if it were God! Although Jesus’ first preached message is clearly “change!”—as in Mark 1:15 and Matthew 4:17, where he told his listeners to “repent,” which literally means to “change your mind”—it did not strongly influence Christian history.

This resistance to change is so common, in fact, that it is almost what we expect from religious people, who tend to love the past more than the future or the present. All we can conclude is that much of organized religion is itself living inside of first-half-of-life issues, which usually coincides with where most people are in any culture. We all receive and pass on what our people are prepared to hear, and most people are not “early adopters.” Yet even the intelligence of animals is determined by their ability to change and adjust their behavior in response to new circumstances. Those who do not, become extinct.

This pattern of resistance is so clear and even so defeating for Jesus that he makes what sounds like one of his most unkind statements: “Do not give to dogs what is holy or throw your pearls before swine. They will trample them, and then they will turn on you and tear you to pieces” (Matthew 7:6). We can save ourselves a lot of distress and accusation by knowing when, where, to whom, and how to talk about spiritually mature things. We had best offer what each one is ready to hear, and perhaps only stretch them a bit! Ken Wilber says that most of us are only willing to call 5 percent of our present information into question at any one point—and again, that is on a very good day. I guess prophets are those who do not care whether we are ready to hear their message. They say it because it has to be said and because it is true.

If there is no wise authority capable of protecting them and validating them, most prophetic or wise people and all early adopters are almost always “torn to pieces.” Their wisdom sounds like dangerous foolishness, like most of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount does to Christians, like Gandhi to Great Britain, like Martin Luther King Jr. to white America, like Nelson Mandela to Dutch Reformed South Africa, like Harriet Tubman to the Daughters of the American Revolution, and like American nuns to the Catholic patriarchy.

OF GOD AND RELIGION

Theologically and objectively speaking, we are already in union with God. But it is very hard for people to believe or experience this when they have no positive sense of identity, little courage yet, no strong boundaries to contain Mystery, and little inner religious experience at any depth. Thus, the first journey is always about externals, formulas, superficial emotions, flags and badges, correct rituals, Bible quotes, and special clothing, all of which largely substitute for actual spirituality (see Matthew 23:13–32). Yet they are all used and needed to create the container. Yes, it is largely style and sentiment instead of real substance, but even that is probably necessary. Just don’t give your life for mere style and sentiment. Pope John XXIII’s motto (possibly originating with Augustine) might be heard here: “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things, charity.”⁵ That is second-half-of-life, hard-won wisdom.

In the first half of our lives, we have no container for such awesome content, no wineskins that are prepared to hold such utterly intoxicating wine. You see, *authentic God experience always “burns” us yet does not destroy us* (see Exodus 3:2–3), just as the burning bush did to Moses. But most of us are not prepared for such burning, nor are we even told to expect it. The Islamic mystics seem to be the most honest here, as we see in the ecstatic and erotic poetry of Rumi, Kabir, and Hafiz. By definition, authentic God experience is always “too much”! It consoles our True Self only after it has devastated our false self. We must begin to be honest about this instead of dishing out fast-food religion.⁶

Early stage religion is largely preparing us for the immense gift of this burning, this inner experience of God, as though creating a proper stable into

which the Christ can be born. Unfortunately, most people get so preoccupied with their stable, and whether their stable is better than your stable, or whether their stable is the only “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” stable, that they never get to the birth of God in the soul. There is no indication in the text that Jesus demanded ideal stable conditions. In fact, we could say that the specific mentioning of his birth in a “manger” is making the exact opposite point. Animals, at least, had room for him, while there was “no room for him in the inn” (Luke 2:7) where humans stayed.

As a priest for over half a century, I have found that much of the spiritual and pastoral work of churches is often ineffective at the levels of real transformation. Instead, it calls forth immense passivity and even many passive-aggressive responses. As a preacher, I find that I am forced to dumb down the material in order to interest a Sunday crowd that does not expect or even want any real challenge; nor do people exhibit much spiritual or intellectual curiosity. “Just repeat what I expect to hear, Father, and maybe a joke or two!”

As a spiritual director, I find that most people facing the important transformative issues of social injustice, divorce, failure, gender identity, an inner life of prayer, or any radical reading of the Gospel are usually bored and limited by the typical Sunday church agenda. And these are good people! But they keep on doing their own kind of survival dance because no one has told them about their sacred dance. Of course, clergy cannot talk about a further journey if they have not gone on it themselves.

In short, we have not found a way to do the age-appropriate tasks of the two halves of life, and both groups are losing out. The juniors are made to think that the container is all there is and all they should expect—or, worse, that they are mature and home free because they believe a few right things or perform some right rituals. The would-be maturing believer is not challenged to any adult faith or service to the world, much less mystical union. Everyone ends up in a muddled middle, where “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity,” as William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) put it.⁷ I am convinced that much of this pastoral and practical confusion has emerged because we have not clarified the real differences, the needs, and the somewhat conflicting challenges of the two halves of our own lives. So, let’s try.

