
Inner Conflict as a Path to Higher Development:

Mid-life Crisis Reexamined

Elizabeth Maxwell, M.A.

Elizabeth Maxwell, M.A. is Associate Director of the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado, and co-founder of the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development. She is also a psychotherapist who uses the principles of psychosynthesis in her practice.

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D.

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist, and Director of the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development and the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado. She edits Understanding Our Gifted and Advanced Development journals, and the major writer and editor of the book, Counseling the Gifted and Talented.

Abstract: Seemingly negative aspects of mid-life crisis are examined in the light of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration, a theory of emotional development. Five broad developmental levels are viewed to show the constrictive "normalcy" such crises may be moving away from and the enlargement of autonomy and authenticity they may be moving toward. The role of the therapist is seen as supporting the client in this transformational process.

A sometimes forgotten meaning of crisis is "a turning point." Rather than hardship thrust upon us, mid-life crisis may be an invitation to higher development and an indication that growth, issuing from deep within, is struggling to occur. This article reexamines such crises from the vantage point of a theory of emotional development (Dabrowski, 1964, 1967, 1972; Dabrowski with Kawczak, A. & Piechowski, M. M., 1970; Dabrowski & Piechowski, M. M., 1977a,b) which sees inner conflict in a positive light. This theory, called by its creator, Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980), "The Theory of Positive Disintegration," grew out of his own anguished wartime observations of the best and worst of human possibilities and is the basis of a new way of looking at what facilitates growth.

Mid-life crisis feels like the disintegration of the self, a loss of self-definition. It is as if the ground of former assumptions falls away; what was formerly important loses its "juice." The experience can often be terrifying, for the individual may believe that when the self is stripped away, nothing will be left. "Under all my facades, I am going to be revealed as a non-person." What causes it all to come apart?

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One factor may be loss. A spouse dies or exits through divorce. Parents die. A rebellious child leaves home. Youth fades in a culture that cherishes youth. Being needed, the role of the selfless nurturer, or the strong shoulder that's always there to provide comfort, becomes less important as children become independent or partners become absorbed in ever more demanding careers.

There is also stress. Along with experiencing loss, women may be juggling jobs and housecare, coping with adolescent offspring, dealing with ailing parents, and possibly watching a husband anguishing through his own mid-life crisis. Men also may be stretched between dealing with teenage turmoil and the pressing needs of eldering parents faced with their own decline; responsibilities mount and energy lessens. Both men and women may also be vividly aware that that many, if not most, of their dreams and expectations of what life would bring them are now unlikely to come true—a saddening prospect.

But there is often another, more mystifying component—that inner, undefinable sense of unease, that feeling of despondence, or even despair, for no good reason, of wrongness which one cannot put one's finger on. Having done all the right things and done them well, there now wells up a terrible, gnawing sense of unease and bewilderment. Those so stricken ask, "What have I done wrong? Why do I feel this way?" Depression clouds over everything. All of the people and activities which once gave life meaning have lost their power. There is a profound feeling of emptiness which nothing seems to fill (Firman & Vargiu, 1977).

In the past, people with such feelings, especially women, were often advised to ease the situation by taking up something new: a hobby, volunteer work, a cause—something to "take your mind off yourself." They were seen as temporarily disoriented by a lack of purpose, as brooding neurotics needing to be returned to normalcy. It was as if their feelings had no validity. It has been expected that people undergoing such anomie needed to come to their senses and "snap out of it."

Dabrowski's Theory speaks to these feelings in a new way. The theory describes a transformative process, a pathway to higher level development, which requires the disintegration of restrictive psychological structure in order that movement toward a new integration at a higher, self-actualized level of development may occur. It differs from more familiar stage theories; it states that the higher level structure and the lower level structure exist side by side; the higher one does not grow out of the lower one but, in fact, acts in opposition to it. This creates inner conflict between two different conceptions of reality. As the higher level structure expands, the lower level structure diminishes, but not without a fight for its survival.

The theory posits five levels of development, each of which represents a distinct psychological structure and creates a unique world view. At Level I, individuals are basically egocentric and there is little genuine concern for others except in the sense of care for one's property: *my* family, *my* business, *my* bowling team, *my* neighborhood. Individuals at Level I use others to meet their own needs as a matter of course; it is a natural and even a moral obligation—taking care of number one (and one's property). There is no self-reflection, no acceptance of guilt, no conscientious scrutiny of the results of their actions upon others, no emotional sensitivity. There is no inner conflict. All conflict is externalized, opposing whatever

obstructs the fulfillment of desires. Since there is no inner life to come between such persons and their ambitions, they may well obtain power by ruthless means. At worst, the Level I personality is psychopathic, with no indications of growth potential. At best, toward the upper end of Level I, are found a large portion of humanity: decent, hard-working, law-abiding people who are affectionate toward family and friends, hold beliefs that are strong but unexamined, and generally uphold the social fabric. Acculturated and accomodating, they support established ethics and values.

Individuals at Level II have less self assurance. They have a gnawing sense that they lack some indefinable something and they look for fulfillment and validation in other people, in group movements and in being helpers and rescuers. They are very concerned with the question, "What will others think of me?" The essential ingredient of self development, an inner hierarchy of values that sorts out real convictions from accommodations to others, is lacking in such people. Since they have not wrought a means of directing their behavior from the inside, they rely on others to approve or disapprove what they do. They feel confused, powerless, uncertain about everything, and inferior to others. They conform to group standards out of a need for security, rather than out of a true commitment to those standards, but may move from group to group or from lover to lover seeking greater self validation.

A large group of people operate at Level II. They have ambivalent feelings and inconsistent behavior, reflecting their confused inner life. Often they are drawn toward self-improvement projects but have a difficult time making progress because they tend to jump from one technique to another, eager to try whatever is touted as newest and "best." Some become relativists as they develop a sophisticated realization of how values vary from culture to culture; they may tolerate a wide variety of moral climates without taking any set of values seriously.

Some people remain all of their lives at Level II and some with greater inner potential move on. Robert and Piechowski (1981) labeled those who stay at Level II "conservers" and those who go farther "transformers." Conservers tend to defend the homeostasis of the present organization of their lives. Transformers more readily move forward into the disintegrative process.

There are many important distinctions between conservers and transformers that have relevance to women and men in mid-life. Conservers tend to be insecure and in need of validation from their world. Much of their energy is consumed by their need for self-esteem. They continually seek to bolster their low opinion of themselves through achieving the approval of others or through convincing themselves that they are good people--self-sacrificing, giving, caring, responsible people. They may indeed be warm, sensitive, easily moved, motivated to work for the welfare of others, and extremely concerned with the search for ideal personal relationships. They may be focused on the needs of others to the point of being quite empathic, but often their empathy takes the form of overidentification with others, so that they lose themselves in the drama of others' lives. Empathy may quickly turn to disdain if they don't feel appreciated for their caring. Their emotionality may take the form of dependence on others, jealousy, or self-deprecation. They experience a great deal of

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guilt about possibly not living up to others' expectations, and they are also quite capable of using guilt to manipulate others. The classical picture of the "selfless" mother who peppers the soup well with guilt is one picture of the Level II personality.

Although by society's standards, Level II is considered "normal," there are striking clinical implications in this population. Individuals at Level II are more prone to psychosomatic disorders, alcoholism, drug addiction, phobias, and even schizophrenia. Their emotionality may not be well directed, but the very fact that it exists at all makes Level II developmentally advanced from the callous assurance of Level I. Their confusion is their first step in the disintegrative process of higher development. Many people stay in this confused state for their entire lives, clinging to their weak sense of self, and protecting themselves from further disintegration. But some move forward, risking everything they believe themselves to be to find a higher truth; these few are the transformers who move on to Level III.

The critical element of the Level III personality structure is the awareness of an ideal in themselves toward which they must strive. They have a sense of "what ought to be" which is self-defined, and they are dissatisfied with "what is." From this awakening there stems the beginning of an inner-directedness, a sense of personal autonomy, and an inner hierarchy of values. The vision of this ideal self has a transforming effect. There is no longer any contentment with oneself, with one's friends, with one's values, or with one's life. There is the knowledge that life holds something more and this fuels the processes of inner development.

Many of those who do make the transition to a higher form of existence do not consciously choose this path. Rather, they are "thrown into their destinies" by circumstances which seem beyond their control. The disintegrative process happens to them spontaneously, either through external events, such as the loss of a loved one, divorce, loss of employment, or a brush with death—all of which require a reevaluation of self—or through an internal, unconscious developmental process which does not appear to have an external cause. Suddenly or gradually, everything that the person is, everything that gave his or her life meaning, seems meaningless. There is a dim awareness that something is missing but it is difficult to discover what that something is.

Whether the choice is conscious or unconscious, individuals at this level are most in need of, and most ready for, therapy. They are dissatisfied with what is and are ready to take the next step in their development. They are very different from the clients who only want to be patched up so that they can adjust more efficiently to their worlds, or the ones who want to complain how terrible the world is, but who seem to have little motivation to change themselves. *This is a true turning point in their lives*, and the struggle they are engaged in is extremely painful. They must let go of their need for approval, let go of their insecurities and learn to believe in themselves, trust their own judgments, risk being different, and even face hurting everyone who depends on them to remain the people they were. Some can make this full transition into autonomy, and some cannot. To begin this journey into self takes great courage.

Some clients have referred to this period of their lives as "the pit." Others call it "the desert." There is a pressing desire to become something other than what one

is, but all one can see is blackness, nothingness. There may be a fear of becoming psychotic. Although Dabrowski (1972) stated, "Psychoneurotic experiences, together with conscious inner transformation...create basic immunological dynamisms against both psychotic dissolution and negative regression" (p. 137), persons at Level III feel as if they are dissolving. Depression, despair, despondency accompany this lonely journey. At times it seems as if no one can help. The individuals leave everything they formerly counted on behind to seek an uncertain future. Enormous feelings well up and become confronted: feelings of guilt and shame at what one isn't, astonishment with oneself, anger at the injustice of the world and the suffering and the lack of values in others, feelings of inferiority toward one's own ideals. All of these emotional reactions serve to further development; they are the inner tools of growth. Inner conflict rages between the less developed, approval-seeking structure, and the more developed, autonomous structure.

In traditional therapy situations, the person would often be counseled to eradicate these "neurotic" symptoms. Disintegration has not been valued as an important developmental step. In a Dabrowskian developmental approach, the individual is applauded for the same symptoms and given encouragement to continue on the journey. The therapist serves to support the presence of inner conflict, rather than attempting to cure the symptoms or solve the problems (Ogburn Colangelo, 1989). It is important, however, that the therapist be able to distinguish between two possible types of disintegration: positive and negative. Where there is no incipient hierarchy of values, no aspiration toward what is viewed as "higher," no deep emotionality and intensity, there may, indeed, be a downward slide into psychosis. Where there is intensity, concern about self-improvement, conscientiousness and even the rudiments of reflection and the ability to observe oneself, there is strong probability of the disintegrative process being positive (Dabrowski, 1972; Gallagher, 1983). The aware therapist acts as a guide, holding a light at the end of the tunnel for the struggling client. Naturally, those therapists who have had the courage to enter their own pits and have emerged on the other side are in a better position to aid a counselee in this process. They have been there, and they have an intuitive sense of what is needed: when to sit quietly, when to step in, and when to be on call as the crisis hits its peak.

There is light on the other side. Transforming individuals develop a sense of self unlike anything they have previously experienced. They are no longer at the mercy of their environing worlds. They begin to create their own lives. Their self-esteem goes from negative to positive. Their relationships with others become emotionally richer, more meaningful, more satisfying, more equal. They are not using relationships as a means of proving themselves to themselves but have a rich sense of self that is available to share with others. Because they are meeting their own esteem needs, they have more energy left to see the other person as a unique individual. Their ability to love increases since they are not manipulating others' emotions to serve themselves; they truly care about others.

A paradox occurs in the area of empathy which is difficult to understand. If a person—often a woman, but the same truth holds good for a man—has identified as a selfless "helper," a nurturer of others, there will be a fear of development. There will be a strong sense that growth will take one away from the people one loves.

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There will be fear that concentrating on one's own development will lead to becoming selfish. There will be a fear of detachment. One of the authors remembers in her own therapy, her therapist repeating over and over, "You will be able to do everything you do now, just your attitude about it will be different." The therapist was right, of course, but it took years to understand what she meant.

The empathy at Level II—an overattachment to others, a living through others, a need to be needed as an identification of self—gives way to an empathy in a different form. The higher level empathy involves a degree of detachment and a larger perspective. Level III individuals have faced their own suffering, understand its meaning to a greater degree, and are able to give comfort to others in their pain, rather than just wanting the pain to go away for their own comfort. Although people operating at Level III may appear to themselves and to others to be moving away away from caring about others, they are actually going through a process which will bring them into deeper, richer contact with their loved ones than they have ever envisioned.

Another by-product of the transformative process is the development of creativity. Probably the creativity has been there all along, lurking beneath the surface, awaiting the ability of a more autonomous self to express its natural originality. Now its energy is ripe for expression. Individuals at Level III tend to be highly creative and may use their creativity to further their own growth. With their more abundant energy, they can become contributors to society, eloquently furthering the cause of justice in their writing, art, dance, drama, invention, and interactions with others.

Beyond Level III there are two higher stages of development. Both of these stages are rare, but they have been attained by various members of our society, and so they remain possibilities. Level IV is the stage of self-actualization. The individual is autonomous, responsible, and in control of his or her life. All of the characteristics which Maslow (1970) has identified in self-actualizers apply to this group:

- 1. Clear, more efficient perception of reality
- 2. Acceptance of others, self, nature
- 3. Spontaneity; simplicity; naturalness
- 4. Problem-centeredness rather than ego-centeredness
- 5. The quality of detachment; the need for privacy
- 6. Autonomy; independence of culture and environment
- 7. Mystical and peak experiences
- 8. Deep sense of identification, sympathy and affection for humanity
- 9. Deeper and more profound interpersonal relations
- 10. Democratic character structure
- 11. Discrimination between means and ends, between good and evil
- 12. Philosophical, unhostile sense of humor
- 13. Creativeness
- 14. Resistance to enculturation; transcendence of any particular culture (Maslow, 1970, pp 153-172).

Individuals are able to actualize those higher values that they became aware of in Level III. They can commit themselves to service, but not at the expense of self. Their own growth is dependent upon their compassion for others. Concern for self and concern for others are no longer polarized; they are synchronized. As Maslow (1965) says, they are "synergistic."

The shame and guilt of Level III is replaced by greater self-acceptance, and the "striving" for higher level development is replaced by the recognition that the development is occurring. Inner conflict, fear of failure and resistance all diminish as this inner security is gained. Those at Level IV do not have to force inner change; they are able to use their directive skills to allow the evolution to happen naturally. Frequently those at Level IV are more concerned with social transformation and work in the world—a perspective into which they fit their ongoing inner work and ever deepening autonomy.

This equanimity filters into perceptions of others as well. People at Level IV genuinely appreciate others, loving their limitations as well as their strengths. They have great compassion for the pain of others, which motivates them to devote their lives to service as a natural outcome of their concern. Compassionate detachment allows them to face a great deal of suffering and aid others without becoming lost in that suffering. It is a condition much to be wished in therapists.

Beyond self-actualization, there is even a more advanced level of existence, one that has only been reached by a cherished few. Dabrowski called this "Secondary Integration," and it is the attainment of the personality ideal. For most of us, it remains a vision of perfection, rather than a potentiality in this lifetime. One transcends the ego at Level V, and becomes in harmonious unity with the universe. There is no split between "what is" and "what ought to be"; the individual is a living manifestation of "what ought to be." Among the individuals who have attained Level V are counted Dag Hammarskjöld, Peace Pilgrim and Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Although the full attainment of Secondary Integration occurs only rarely, it is significant that Dabrowski's Theory includes it as a development possibility. The theory gives psychological credibility to the highest of human experience. The acknowledgment of an ideal is the first step in its actualization. As we understand more about the psychological factors involved in higher development, we may be able to nurture that development, and evolve to a race of compassionate beings.

It is important that the therapist recognize the difference between a set of societally imposed "shoulds" and an inner vision of a personality ideal in assessing a client's level of development. "Shoulds" are a Level II phenomenon; self-chosen ideals are Level III phenomena. They are quite different.

Another important factor in this theory is that it sees development in a very broad scope, from the vantage point of what is possible for the full range of humanity, not just for a given individual. This means that one person's growth from Level I to Level V is impossible. A person may stay within a single level for an entire lifetime, growing within that level, but not undergoing the agonizing transformation to a higher level. Quite often a person will function on two levels simultaneously, and, at most, three levels, but the structure of one level will always be dominant.

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Against the background of this theory, the positive value of supposedly neurotic traits which may surface during midlife crisis can be seen. The dark underside of the crisis, those often surprising feelings of "wrongness," of guilt for no reason, of nagging depression and senseless despair take on new meaning. They can be signs of growth, growth away from adapting to societal norms toward the beginnings of interiorized, self-grown values and gropings toward autonomy.

What is the role of the therapist then, in this situation? First of all, simply viewing the conflict and anxiety as positive signs of growth and health has itself an ameliorating effect. The long overview becomes hopeful even though the immediate process remains painful. The therapist can support clients during the transformation process, helping to reframe the elements of the situation in a positive light. The thrust of Dabrowski's Theory of Emotional development might suggest validating these genuine feelings, allowing the disintegrative process but noting indications of new growth in such areas as owning one's experiences, examining one's values, asserting one's rights and beliefs. Emerging sensitiveness and reflectiveness are to be celebrated. Knowing that the ordeal is a necessary part of growth toward a higher integration can help both client and therapist to manage more wisely and to continue--each of them--along the long road to authentic self-actualization.

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