From: The Veiled Pulse of Time:
Life Cycles & Destiny
William Bryant

2

The Sacred Seven

"Time, like a brilliant steed with seven rays, full of fecundity, bears all things onward."

—Artharva Veda XII 53

"The seventh year always transforms man. It brings about a new life, a new character and a different state."

—Martin Luther

A serious examination of this cycle in biography will disclose its connection to the sequence of stages in the ego-self's movement toward a more mature perception of its own existence. In specific terms, it is the rhythm of psychological and spiritual growth, meaning the acquisition and digestion of life experience. It modulates the rapport between the growing mind and the deeper, unconscious levels of our being.

Just a glance at the universal presence of the seven in myth and religion will indicate its sacred quality. The significant seven is sprinkled throughout the Bible—for example, the seven years which Jacob served Leah to win Rachel, the seventy years of bondage, and the seven months the Ark of the

Covenant lay in the land of the Philistines. There is also the sevenfold circuit of Jericho, the sevenfold dream of Pharaoh, and the seven daughters of Jethro. The seven is also conspicuous in the Apocalypse of St. John, just as in Hebrew ritual with its seven altars, seven sacred wells, seven sacred lamps, the seven-branched candlestick, seven planets, and seven levels of Heaven. Likewise, the Hindu religion speaks of the seven Holy Rishis and the seven Sanskrit *Manvantaras* which denote the seven stages in the development of the universe.

We can also recognize the universality of this sacred number in the beings our ancestors knew as the guiding spirits of humanity. They were known as the seven Devas of India, seven Genii of Hermes, seven Amshaspands of Persia, seven Angels of Chaldea, and seven Archangels of the Apocalypse. The key here is that each of these high "intelligences" had a specific mission and time cycle of influence on evolution. The evolution of a microcosmic human is an image of the macrocosmic universe still evolving. It is no wonder the seven appears everywhere.

There is obviously something psychological and spiritual about the seven. For example, the initiates in the ancient Mystery Centers, those custodians of the sacred wisdom found in all the great civilizations, were taught that they could transform and expand their self-awareness through seven thresholds of consciousness. This is why the seven is known as the number of initiation or spiritual development. This mention of initiation may appear to have little in common with the subject of biography, but both initiation and biography involve a pattern of self-development, and both involve the seven. Indeed, our struggle through time is a crude but true form of initiation, inasmuch as it is a journey of self-discovery. It is no coincidence that initiation has seven degrees and that biography has a seven-year cycle. Would-be initiates, under strict surveillance, consciously strive for the supernal heights of consciousness. We, however, are initiated into the lower mysteries of ourselves by that remorseless

disciplinarian we call "life experience." But the aims are the same: to make us conscious of our reality and our true relationship to the world and universe. The task of the old Temple Mysteries was to change the disciples' relationship to self and cosmos; the disciples could be reborn and could learn the innermost secrets of their real nature, its origin, meaning, and mission. For us, however, our wise masters are the obstacles we meet as we blunder and limp our way along a path we barely recognize. *Aging* and its subdued heroism change our relationship to ourselves and life. Life commands us to awaken. More often than not, the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" are nothing but the ricochet of our own reflected errors and egoism, our ignorance, insensitivity, and half-knowledge. So, in a sense, each one of us follows the track of the hero, driven onward by some unconscious quest for fulfillment, some hidden law of our being.

Whether we like it or not, we must cross many thresholds of change. As heroes, courageous or timid, we must pursue our quest for new being. What the classical hero called "adventure," we call "crisis." We do not consciously select our crises, but something inside us, some psychic element or force has to devise the specific circumstances needed to wake us. I believe we tap an unceasing spring of courage and confidence when we know that our crises may arrive at more or less predictable times as stages in our emergence. More than likely we have to encounter and assimilate some kind of suffering before we pass over the thresholds separating completion and advance.

Death and rebirth are a central motif of mythology, initiation, and biography. Psychological crises tend to occur at the beginnings and the ends of the seven-year cycles, and in many cases the halfway points are marked by some kind of change or disturbance, i.e., at ages thirty-five, thirty-eight and a half, forty-two. We will look at this later in the chapter.

Every kind of psychological crisis is a *process in time*. For example, subliminal changes occur in the psyche long before

they reach the surface as a crisis. Many people notice a marked alteration in their dream life; their dreams often become more abundant and vividly intense. It later is apparent that the change in dream life was a prelude to an approaching crisis. Obviously, something is happening in levels below the waking mind. This stage is followed, more often than not, by a period of restlessness and disorientation when old certainties blur and dissolve. The whole process may be triggered by a death, accident, illness, or marital upheaval. This is when synchronicity plays a vital role.

Joseph L. Henderson and Maude Oakes, in their book, *The Wisdom of the Serpent*, describe the archetypal crisis as a threefold process of "separation, transition, and incorporation." The first phase is noted for its feeling of withdrawal and isolation, as we lose our bearings and suffer a gnawing discontent. As the inner turbulence increases, our anguish may reach panic proportions, which alienates us from friends or family. At such times, we may also be divided against ourselves. Feeling unprotected against fate, we become, for a while, "displaced" persons. No matter how hard we try, we cannot escape our predicaments by rationalizing them. Some make desperate but fruitless attempts to escape into work or pleasure, but the relentless change continues during the transition. Some stand in the eye of their storm, bereft of either anchor or compass, peering into the depths of their own abyss. The abating crisis leaves us numbed and will-less, yet strangely detached and at peace. Eventually, the passing of time pulls us over the threshold, and we can confidently expect the return of our lost enthusiasm and vigor; this is the "incorporation" or reorganization stage when the new experiences are "digested" and incorporated. We have passed through the purging fire. We are different, freer, more awake to ourselves and to our environment.

In some cases, the crisis may be severe enough to threaten the disintegration of the personality. Generally speaking, however,

most of the psychological upheavals typical of the seven-year cycle run their course in a lower key. They are nevertheless symptomatic of the difficult and painful emergence of a new sense of self. It is indeed a remorseless process; some obscure force in the psyche gives us no choice—these cycles of becoming, this helix of change, must turn. The worm must turn—but it is a glowworm!

Once Upon a Time: Seven in the Fairy Tales

Laurens van der Post in his moving book *The Heart of the Hunter* states that the Bushman of Southern Africa knew intuitively that without a story his life had no frame of reference to the whole, he had no clan or family: without a story of one's own, no individual life; without a story of stories, no life-giving continuity with the beginning and therefore no future. Life for him was living a story.

To further enlarge the personality of the seven, we will examine its vital significance in the fairy tale. Our ancestors lovingly held on to the precious myths and tales which fortified and guided them along their odyssey of time. Their education was largely dependent on these pictorial maps of the path to maturity. Multidimensional in meaning, artful in construction, the old tales were created by the imagination of the sage and spread abroad by the "teachers"—the storytellers.

Myth, legend, and folktale depict the psychological route to egohood by signposting the stages and marking the dangers which await the traveler. In other words, the tale is essentially an archetypal picture of a biographical process. The fairy tale prepares children for the stages of their growing up, their movement toward independence. The fairy tale forecasts the ominous thresholds at age seven, at puberty, and at egohood, and keeps children in touch with their own incorruptible and

eternal reality, which otherwise tends to be eclipsed by the child's immersion in the physical world.

But why are these old stories so durable? What is the reason for their irrepressible vitality? First, just as it is for our children, the pictorial idiom was perfectly suited to the nonintellectual, prelogical mind of the ancient. Second, the dramatic and emotional content easily engages the attention. Not only does the story stimulate the imagination, it also appeals to the child's love of action, and provides healthy emotional exercise. Above all, it implants pictures of the track to independence. We adults should remember that the gateway to a child's soul is not barred by fences of skepticism and cynicism. Pictures, unlike concepts and cold, hard, indigestible facts, appeal to the child's fantasy and are therefore easily absorbed and digested. The pictures are not obliterated but percolate through layers of memory into the interior life, where they become healing, integrating forces which strengthen the emerging personality. They give the child a *sense of path.*

Some adults shrink from giving their children the more disturbing tales. But removing the blood and guts from genuine tales to serve them with sugar and cream is a contemptible practice. Of course, we should select our stories with great care and respect for the child's temperament, but death, suffering, and adversity are basic features in our journey through time. Pruning all the grimness and horror, I suspect, puts children at a disadvantage. They will find it more difficult to accept the pain and death of real life, whereas children reared on real folk-wisdom have something in them which senses the meaning. After all, death in the tale does not refer to mortal death, but, rather to the loss of childhood and the gain of maturity.

With this in mind, we will look at some specific examples of how fairy tales illuminate the psychological character of the seven. The protective union of child, mother, and environment begins to disintegrate toward the end of the first seven-year

period, when the child experiences itself as a separate entity among other independent entities. This differentiation of self from the world means that the child must learn to *share* the world with others. The idyllic dream world is doomed the moment the story child leaves home to meet the dangers in the forest. In real life, this picture reminds us of our first step to independence: the challenge of school.

Some tales point to the first seven-year span, while others deal with the thresholds of puberty (fourteen) and egohood (twenty-one). For example, the English tale, "The Stars in the Sky" depicts the period between seven and fourteen. Our fourteen-year-old spends all her time crying for her beloved stars, which in this case represent the blissful unity I mentioned earlier. So she runs away from home to search for them in nature—in brook, millpond, and meadow. Assisted by a horse and a fish who lead her to a rainbow, she attempts to climb her way back to the stars. Alas, the height makes her dizzy, and she falls. Wakened by the shock, she finds herself lying on the floor beside her bed! The dream is over; she is fourteen, and puberty means that she is now a resident of earth, not heaven.

Many tales go further and point out the dangers of puberty, particularly sexuality and the lure of material possessions. Adolescents are able to think independently and can grasp knowledge of the physical world. Many tales therefore warn them beforehand not to become *too* earthbound, *too* embroiled in their senses, lest they lose sight of their spiritual origin and reality. They must beware of the witch who would imprison them in the lofty towers of the brain. That dreaded old crone is nothing less than the chilly and deadening world of the intellect, divorced from the warmth of feeling and conscience.

Fairy tales, however do not condemn the cleverness of thought. The story of the audacious little tailor who cleverly stitches his thoughts together shows the value of cleverness and how easy it is to deceive clumsy, half-witted giants. Many

stories use the picture of spinning and weaving to represent thinking. The fourteen-year-old Sleeping Beauty, for example, pricks her finger on the spindle of thought and loses consciousness of her spiritual nature. She "dies" to childhood.

Adolescence brings with it a new feeling of independence, but also of temptation. Hansel and Gretel, after leaving home, discover a gingerbread and candy house in the middle of the forest. Their awakening desires, their fascination for the sweetness of life, tempts them to nibble at it. The evil witch within nearly devours them, but she is thwarted by their cleverness. Thus Hansel and Gretel, by applying their thinking, are able to return home bearing the witch's treasure.

The much-loved adventures of Snow White provide children with exceptional pictures of the seven-year steps to maturity. Snow White's natural mother, the protective, maternal aspect of motherhood, is replaced by the stepmother, who in fairy tale language, personifies the aggressive, domineering, and possessive side of femininity. So the queen, demonstrating the dark side of desire, plots to kill her stepdaughter who is as beautiful as a spring day and fairer than the queen herself. But the compassion of the huntsman foils the queen, and Snow White continues her journey to adolescence. Her discovery of the seven dwarves with their seven mountains, seven beds, seven plates and seven candles, marks another stage of her emergence. The path through the forest leads her into the world, where she has to *serve* the dwarves by cooking and cleaning; she has to *share* their world.

Once Snow White has passed the threshold of the seventh year, she has to face the cunning queen during the struggle through puberty. Despite the protection of the dwarves, she is tempted by her awakening desires. The disguised queen laces Snow White's bodice so tightly that it restricts her breathing and makes her lose consciousness. The lungs and heart form the physical foundation of feelings, so this picture tells us that Snow

White is cut off from the dreamy, feeling-dominated life of preadolescence. Although she is revived by the dwarves, she then has to face the temptation of the poisoned comb and apple. She discards another quality of her childhood when her head touches the poisoned comb of logical thinking, and her bite of the poisoned apple of sexuality concludes her passage through puberty.

Lying in her glass coffin, wept over by owl, raven, and dove, the ancient symbols for wisdom, intuition, and love, Snow White is eventually awakened by a kiss from the prince, who represents her own emergent ego. This happy union represents the achievement of adulthood at twenty-one; it signifies the union of body, soul, and spirit. What happens to the queen? She, alas, is condemned to dance to her death in red-hot slippers made of iron. Does she not represent the negative, one-sided aspect of personality which loses itself in the superficial *mirror* of appearances, or in the wild dance of desire which kills all sense of reality? It is not difficult to intuit the meaning if we know that the incidents and characters represent psychological aspects of the human personality and its seven-year cycles of development.

For a deeper understanding of the relationship between fairy tales and the physiological, psychological, and spiritual dynamics unfolding within the seven-year phases of childhood and adolescence, the reader should examine Rudolf Steiner's educational lectures. The highly meaningful connection between folklore and childhood development is well understood by the Waldorf school movement, where it is a vital ingredient in the curriculum of the early grades.

The First Seven Years: Trailing Clouds of Glory

With the fairy tales in mind, we can attempt a clearer understanding of the path to adulthood by briefly sketching the

seven-year stages of development from a physiological and a psychological point of view.

What do we mean when we say that a child "grows up"? "Growing down" is perhaps a more descriptive phrase since it better illustrates the way the self gradually penetrates body and soul and enters mortal space and time. Basically, our "I," the core of our uniqueness, takes twenty-one years to master all the primary functions of body and soul. To understand this miraculous process, we must first recognize the twin streams of *growth* and *consciousness* which lead us to physical and mental independence.

Although it takes the ego about twenty-one years to gain control of body and soul, its influence is present from the beginning. Even before birth, mothers can sense the irrepressible drive behind the embryo's intention to live and grow. This thrust dominates the first three years of the child's physical growth. Gradually, however, the baby's energies become more and more involved in psychological expansion, in the psyche's determination to act, to experience, to become conscious of itself. Mother knows full well that this relentless force will drive her child away from her toward adolescence and independence.

The baby's head at birth is almost full sized, while the rest of the body has yet to develop. It is easy to see where the forces of growth are concentrated. But these proportions soon alter when the forces of growth press downward, pushing, so to speak, the chest and limbs away from the head. The expansion of growth is simultaneous with another line of development: the sequential stages of standing, walking, speaking, and thinking, which represent the emerging consciousness. Any weakness or retardation in one stage tends to impair subsequent stages. That is why the first three years are immensely important for the life span as a whole. Readers interested in this sequence will find Dr. Karl König's book *The First Three Years of the Child* of great value. The physical instruments we use to act, feel, and

think determine much of the quality of our adult life. Many adults become ill in their prime, just when they are poised to convert all their training and experience into a meaningful contribution to life. Many of the organic roots of disease are embedded in the formative years between birth and seven, the period when children transform the genetic "model" of their bodies into their own property.

Many educators and parents too easily forget that the early childhood is built from feelings, imagination, fantasy, and dreams. Seduced by the mania of progress, they believe they should push for intellectual maturity as early as possible. Oblivious of the dangers, they overextend the child's nerve system, undermining both physical and emotional development. This sort of brain worship weakens the infant's health and freezes its natural creativity. Such abuse can lead to ill health, mental problems, and even premature senility. Early childhood should be sacrosanct, left untouched by all educators except those who leave their intellects behind when they step into the refreshing play world of stories, games, fantasy, and imitation.

Childhood is a series of separations. As we grow, so we gradually lose the union of self, family, and world. This is the only way we can establish a conscious and independent relationship to life. Our early appetite for life urges us to grasp the physical world with our senses. Thus, the joyful imagination of play, touching, tasting, running, speaking, etc., develops our orientation and self-mastery. Likewise, grazed knees, quarrels over toys, and disputes over bedtimes are the collisions with life which engender both a self and a social awareness.

The threshold between six and seven is marked physically by the appearance of the permanent teeth—the densest components in the human body. On the other hand, it signifies the beginning of a new phase of consciousness. According to Rudolf Steiner, the formative activity which has hitherto been

involved with building the child's physical body is now partially released from this task to stimulate the development of psychological activity.

Seven to Fourteen: from Light to Shadow

The forces of growth in this period are first located in the respiratory organs before they move down to the organs of reproduction. Accordingly, this vital cycle of childhood is responsible for the enlargement of heart and lungs, the four-to-one ratio of pulse and breath, and sexual maturity. Of course, the whole child is growing, but the *degree* of growth, of expansion, depends on the age of the child—it is not everywhere uniform. In the first half of this period, the expansion is more pronounced in the chest cavity, while the second half is concerned with the sex organs and lengthening limbs. Physical growth notwithstanding, we could also say that before seven the developmental emphasis is centered on physical activity, while between seven and fourteen it shifts to emotional and then mental levels.

This period is ruled by feelings. Children, therefore, need to exercise their feelings; they want to *feel* life during this supersentient, supersubjective time of fear, anticipation, joy, and sadness. Thus, for a while, they are submerged in a bubbling cauldron of feelings which they cannot yet judge or control. Also, in this period of emotional expansion and awakening of intellectual activity, the child's role models are of crucial importance. It is through the role model that the innate drive of the self translates experience into the manifestation of personality.

The child's development in this cycle is profoundly influenced by education—for good or ill. Bearing in mind the particular sensitivity of soul in this cycle, the educator would be well advised to introduce the child to the world by first translating the

world into pictorial, feeling-imbued terms. Few educators recognize the tremendous potential in the first half of this period. On the contrary, the intrusion which many call "education" merely marches legions of sterile facts across the fertile garden of imagination and feeling. No wonder the stunted feeling life of so many adults requires multitudes of psychiatrists to solve problems which should never have arisen. An education which takes into account the need for "emotional exercise" helps to promote a healthy emotional rapport between intellect and emotions, and between self and social world. During this second seven-year cycle, children become more self-conscious, more centered, more analytical. The amazing mental expansion about the twelfth year means that youngsters can now deal with more intellectual material. Their maturing sense of space enables them to understand geometry and geography, their sense of time makes history meaningful, and their sense of cause and effect enables them to tackle the sciences.

The onset of puberty near the end of this cycle is often marked by a loss of natural grace, laughter, and openness. Young teenagers become more introverted, hidden, and isolated. Preoccupied with a startling new awareness of themselves, they can be secretive, hostile to criticism, moody, and easily embarrassed. This is the telltale time of blushing! This self-consciousness and sensitivity may well erode the communication between parent and young person. Our teenagers feel things very deeply, and it will take a while for them to become comfortable with themselves. The advent of sexuality makes them acutely aware of their own bodies, but it also signifies the "coming to ground," the death of childhood and the birth of independence. Even as the body grows stronger, denser, heavier—more and more a prisoner of gravity—the mind is opening to the limitless universe of ideas, ideals and meaning.

Primitive peoples regarded puberty as a form of dying, a threshold which some observed by burying their children in

ceremonial graves. Through such rites the candidates celebrated their rebirth and acceptance into tribal society. Indeed, some tribes give their adolescents new names to represent this new identity.

A young fourteen-year-old friend dreamed a particularly vivid dream which clearly symbolized her immersion in puberty. She remembered standing on a crowded beach—but it was a beach made of concrete! The sun, which was white and very brilliant, dazzled everyone else, but she could see that it was suspended by a thread. She recalled the blissful feeling of swimming, but when she swam around the sinking disk, she saw its dark and ominous side. Perhaps she saw (to use a Jungian phrase) the shadow side of her own emergent self. The radiant sun of childhood sank into the symbolic waters of her unconscious psyche. Or to change the picture slightly, the light of childhood was eclipsed by the shadow of earthly maturity. This is typical of the pubertal rite of passage, the entrance into another degree of self-identity.

Fourteen to Twenty-one: the Flush of Independence

Physical development reaches its conclusion between ages fourteen and twenty-one in the extremities of the upper and lower limbs. But physical growth during those years is less conspicuous than the explosion of consciousness; teenagers' rapidly maturing mental faculties enable them to concentrate for long hours, digesting staggering amounts of intellectual data. Inwardly, however, our teenagers struggle to fathom their emotions and come to terms with the exciting but disquieting expansion of their sexuality. They are also obliged to relate their subjective awareness of themselves to the outside world of high school, college, job, and personal relationships. Naturally, the adjustment to independence reduces the unconditional trust

they once had for adults; they still need advice and role models, but the source must command their respect. There can be skepticism, even cynicism, in this age of intolerance. Secretly hypercritical of themselves, teenagers can be outrageously critical of others, quick to draw premature conclusions and to adopt uncompromising stances. Like the heroes of mythology, they cut the umbilical family cords and reach out toward freedom. This sometimes becomes an overactive rebellion against all authority. Most of the momentum of this expansion will depend on the quality of the self-image and self-worth formed in the earlier cycles.

Besides the competitive demands made by education, career, and peer groups, teenagers are now more aware of the flaws in their temperament and upbringing. Also, the enhanced sense of their own uniqueness may make them feel uneasy and restless in social situations. On one hand, they recognize their individuality; on the other, they seek to balance this aloofness by congregating in groups they can identify with. This new feeling of self and the sense of isolation brings with it a need for community and the desire for relationships with the opposite sex. Toward the end of this period, when the ego has emerged from its whirlpool of feelings, it begins to yearn for personal meaning. Young persons begin to contemplate the meaning of their existence.

We have seen how each of the first three seven-year cycles produces a different quality of consciousness. We could sum them up by comparing the way a child, an adolescent, and a young adult might react to the death of a parent. Very young children experience the loss on a subliminal, organic, mostly unconscious level. They would not think about it or analyze their emotions. Little might be visible on the surface, but this would not mean that the separation would not affect their health and personality later. One might go as far as to say that it is built into their physiology. Adolescents, on the other hand, *feel*

their loss very deeply. In fact, their pain tends to swamp the self, because the emotional reactions in this period are very intense and obvious. Of course, I am speaking very broadly, considering that one young person may be driven inwardly while another rebels outwardly. It is a matter of temperament. Young adolescents are deeply affected by grief, but their awakening thought-life struggles to come to terms with it. Young adults are also engulfed by their anguish, but their consciousness enables them to look more objectively at their own feelings and at the feelings of others. Indeed, their pain may prompt them to explore the mystery of life and death and its philosophical-religious implications.

As twenty-one-year-olds, they stand poised on the launch pad of independent life, bearing the mandate of their own responsibility. In the simplest terms, their individuality has fashioned itself a physical body and psyche which can think, feel, and act for itself. From now on, the process of growth and consciousness is reversed. Up to now, most of the formative energy has poured into the unfolding of the physical body. From now on, the body will follow a hardening, devitalizing route while consciousness continually adds to itself through the pursuit of self-knowledge, experience, and the search for meaning.

Many a twenty-one-year-old is given a symbolic key of independence to mark the special occasion. This gift echoes the medieval rites of initiation celebrated by all twenty-one-year-old knights. The long arduous preparations for knighthood were solidly based on a view of human development which clearly recognized the seven-year stages. For example, male children up to the age of seven were called "knaves." Suitable seven-year-old candidates selected from the noble class were placed in the care of a preceptor knight. The little "page," no matter how illustrious his ancestry, had to learn the basic lesson of humility by serving in the refectories and waiting at table. Besides his menial duties, he was taught certain codes of behavior and

instructed in hunting, dancing, and music. Between fourteen and twenty-one, the adolescent "esquire" had to master the social graces of singing, dancing, and conversation. Even more important, he was encouraged to deepen his moral awareness and respect for womankind. These disciplines introduced him to the highest ideals of knighthood, while his combat training developed his physical prowess and courage. With the satisfactory completion of his physical, mental, and spiritual instruction, the twenty-one-year-old could prepare for the sacred ceremony of initiation. Dressed in white, he affirmed the ideals of his rank and accepted his spurs, gauntlets, shield, mail, and lance. The celebration reached its climax when the young knight accepted the accolade and the dedicated sword. Sworn to bring compassion and justice to all the evil places in his life's path, and armed with both material and spiritual weapons, he was permitted to leave the sanctuary and follow his quest and destiny.

Twenty-one to Twenty-eight: the Chase of Experience

Does twenty-one signify the end and conclusion of the seven-year progression? There is an overwhelming array of evidence to suggest that this rhythm continues to unfold until death. We should realize, however, that the degree of psychological advancement, especially after twenty-eight, is no longer automatic but depends largely on our own efforts. I do not believe that the development of the psyche ever stops completely, inasmuch as the seven-year cycles continue to regulate the "digestion" of experience, by which the outward experience becomes part of the inward self. But those who strive for self-knowledge and meaning obviously fulfill more of their potential in each seven-year span than those who do not—and they better transform their past experience.

We may call the effervescent cycle between twenty-one and twenty-eight "the period of enthusiasm and intemperance." It is the time when we celebrate our liberation from the somber introversion of adolescence by shaking our tail feathers at the world. Regardless of the cost, young adults spend prodigious amounts of energy searching for physical, emotional, and intellectual challenge and stimulation, accepting privation and sacrifice as a matter of course. They experiment with their newfound independence, testing and proving themselves, doing almost any crazy thing in the name of experience. In this process, the newly awakened self, swept along by the winds of optimism, tends to be flooded by a welter of impressions, all of which have to be digested later. At that pace we are easily fooled by the blandishments of pleasure and the counterfeit values of the seductive world. The voice of conscience, though stronger than it was in adolescence, is often smothered by the roar of action. On the other hand, the awakening sense of social responsibility drives many a flushed knight full tilt at the dragons of injustice and hypocrisy. These radical lances, however, are seldom tempered by perspective and wisdom. It is the exercise and experience of battle that counts as the young ego finds itself by pitting itself against the world.

For some, however, these venturesome years are far from happy, especially when the ego has been enclosed in an overprotective family sheath with little opportunity for self-expression and independence. Those who carry their adolescence into this period soon devise some form of identity crisis to wake them and expand their definitions of themselves.

This exploratory phase of life tempts us to taste the bittersweet fruit of the world. This is why ideals can become all-powerful forces at this susceptible time in our lives, although it is their emotional impact and appeal which makes them so irresistible. Consequently, it is natural to investigate weird and tantalizing philosophies and lifestyles, even though we rarely adopt them.

Likewise, our need for the emotional and intellectual food offered by human relationships plays a major role in this period. Some of us are profoundly influenced by older people who have achieved a firm standpoint in life; others discover a special sense of belonging with their peers. No less important is the emotional experience arising from serious romantic relationships. In love as in ideals, there are ecstasies and heartbreaks, false paths and dead ends, but the exercise of liberty prepares the still-emerging self for a greater challenge—destiny!

Many sense some sort of inner change, especially toward the end of this period when the cycle swings from its active to its passive pole. We seem to run out of steam; the pace of life slackens, and some of our former pleasures, loves, and ideals lose their allure. Euphoria turns into disenchantment. We may become more introspective and feel differently about ourselves. We are not so sure we know who we are after all, although we sense our individuality more than we did at twenty-one. We look more intently at our achievements and failures, evaluating our personal relationships, our careers and personalities. This mood points to subtle changes in the psyche which forewarn us of the approaching threshold at twenty-eight. Obviously, there is a time for tasting life and a time for digesting it. All the experience gathered in this cycle must be assimilated and integrated for the emerging personality to evolve further.

At the close of this cycle we may feel stuck and need some kind of crisis to break the status quo. Henri Troyat, noting this period in the life of Dostoevsky, remarks that Dostoevsky was *waiting* for the crisis which threw him into prison six months before his twenty-eighth birthday. As Troyat, in his book *Firebrand: The Life of Dostoevsky*, points out, Dostoevsky did not bewail his misfortune; rather he felt relief. For some time he had felt the urgent need for a disaster of some kind, a tragedy to blast him out of his useless and indolent life. His imprisonment,

therefore, served to shatter the frozen monotony of his existence. Now he could breathe again, now he could wake up to himself. This sharp slap of destiny brought him to his senses and to a new beginning—it was a crucial threshold.

In the life of Charles Darwin, this period also was particularly significant. He was twenty-one when he embarked on his famous voyage in the *Beagle* which took him among the Southern Islands and along the coasts of South America and Australasia. From December 1831 to October 1836, the young naturalist observed, recorded, and collected enough new material for a lifetime of research. His mind and notebooks stuffed with exciting data, he returned home to digest the information. At twenty-eight, he began his research into the origin of species, but his vague, unformed ideas would take years of careful synthesis and testing before he could present his theory. As with Darwin, so it is with all of us. The experience we gather in one cycle has to be properly assimilated and worked on by the psyche before it can change our consciousness later in life.

To better evaluate the changes possible around the twenty-eight-year threshold, the reader would do well to study the period between twenty-one and twenty-eight in the life of William James, who later made significant contributions to American psychology. This period was so miserably burdened by psychological discomfort and a host of physical ailments that he seriously considered suicide. Despite his travels abroad to take the various "cures," he returned to his homeland as despondent as ever. He reached his lowest ebb as his twenty-eight-year threshold approached. But the tide turned when he discovered the re-creative, generative power of his own will. In one of his notebooks of his twenty-eighth year, he announced that he had faced and overcome his crisis. His first act of will was to believe in his own self-will. He decided to abstain from speculations and put his efforts into cultivating these feelings of moral freedom. Hitherto, suicide seemed to be the only way he could act courageously, but now he believed in his own individual reality and creative power. He had reached his turning point. This surge of will, this leap in self-awareness, released the psychological pressures blocking his relationship to himself. The health of his body and mind improved rapidly, followed by the expansion of intellectual power and the flowering of his personality. The end of his crisis is marked by his entrance into the academic world soon after his thirtieth year. This example illustrates the fact that our psychic thresholds can indeed affect mental health. It suggests also that many of our physical ailments have a psychosomatic connection to the seven-yea: cycles.

Twenty-eight to Thirty-five: Adjusting the Course

For most people, the crucial years between twenty-eight and thirty are particularly trying and can be a time of disorientation, stress, or even dramatic change. We enter a phase of *contraction*, and our inward-looking self-assessment primes us for the vital expansion which takes place close to the thirtieth year. Opportunities seemed to appear out of thin air in the previous cycle, but now life demands more exacting and thought-filled decisions in keeping with our emergent sense of self and our social responsibilities. The realization that we are now much more dependent on our own inner resources may make us anxious and unconfident for a time. Although we get less help from the external world, some kind of inborn stimulus in the psyche exhorts us to face ourselves on a deeper level. We are forced to reconsider our position: how and where do we fit into life? Are we on the right course? There are, of course, an infinite number of variations to this theme, but broadly speaking, the internal pressures making us restless and uncomfortable around twenty-eight precipitate a crisis sometime between twenty-eight and

thirty. This inner turbulence may be synchronized with an illness, conflict, or separation of some kind. This immensely significant turning point in life will be discussed at length in the following chapter.

At thirty, we have a past that we can look back upon and evaluate. Besides the disconcerting feeling of estrangement which represents our break with the past, many people are blessed with new and fruitful personal relationships at this time. Once the problems of the thirtieth year are overcome and the pace of life accelerates again, we settle down to the tasks at hand. Cautiously optimistic about our future and confident in our ability to make good, we adjust to new patterns of living. Many of us take on more responsibility and financial obligations as we climb the ladder of our ambition in this generative, competitive, and generally acquisitive phase of life. But this outer growth and the hardening routines of home and work tend to mask continuing changes in the psyche. The momentum of these productive years may obscure our deeper longings and our weaknesses because we have little time to develop a real rapport with ourselves or with others—life is just too busy, too outward. The seeds of future crises are being planted at this time.

Take marriage, for example. More than likely, matrimonial bliss will fade somewhat as husband and wife grow used to each other and settle into their respective roles. By now, they have probably worked out a practical routine of family life. Marriage being a multilevel relationship with physical, emotional, and spiritual overtones, tensions can be expected to arise from the emerging egos of husband and wife. This is all the more probable if the man has repressed his deeper feelings or built barricades of insensitivity to protect his inner life from the burdensome rat race.

Most women undergo some form of self-emergence between twenty-eight and thirty-five when the ego begins to work more intensely within the personality. A woman may no longer allow

herself to be molded by circumstance or tradition to fit a role which denies her emerging individuality. She becomes aware of another level of independence which recognizes her right to personal fulfillment. Obviously, this insistent "new" self has to adjust to the family milieu. But can the husband learn to communicate with his "new" wife? Can she, in turn, help to melt the frozen crust of his perhaps desensitized feeling life? Failure to recognize and express their changing attitudes will eventually inhibit the ripening of their relationship. Marriage obeys that law of life which states that a relationship which cannot transform itself destroys itself. Thus, the living process of marriage breaks down if it cannot, in time, become a true partnership of egos. A stagnant marriage literally produces "stale mates," and the egos diverge instead of achieving new levels of union. It may be possible to smooth over or ignore the crises brewing during this period, but they will return with a vengeance in the next cycle. Of course, much depends on the age difference, especially if the partners are in different seven-year periods.

What then is happening in the psyche between twenty-eight and thirty-five? Infants are unaware of their own egos, but adults are self-conscious; not only do we recognize our own ego, we have learned to relate it to the egos of others. This statement, however, is true only insofar as individuals are acquainted with their own authentic self. Remember that our trail to independence took us through three basic levels of consciousness of childhood and the waking consciousness of adolescence. But the term "waking consciousness" covers a wide range of awareness stretching from the mindfulness needed to drive a car to the superconsciousness of the mystic. Now our level of wakefulness determines how deeply and clearly we perceive our own ego. Our level of wakefulness, however, is never fixed; not only does it fluctuate during the day, it changes as we grow older.

This chapter suggests that the seven-year cycle is essentially an "ego rhythm" seated in the nocturnal depths of the self which continues to work on one's personality throughout life. In other words, one's attitude to oneself and to life should be qualitatively different in each of the seven-year periods. This subtle development in our awareness is reflected in the quality of our thinking. As our self-consciousness deepens, thinking establishes greater autonomy over our feelings and actions. Between twenty-eight and thirty-five, thought begins to occupy the judgement seat where it can overview the experiences which stormed the psyche in the previous period. Its light begins to cut away some of the illusions which festoon the personality, since we have by now plenty of experience which can be examined and assessed in terms of our ideals, goals, and conscience. So, all things considered, we should have a more thoughtful and realistic picture of ourselves by the time we reach thirty-five.

Thirty-five to Forty-two: under Self-power

This cycle, for the most part, continues the major expansion begun at thirty. The conversion of our psychic potential into reality depends on our own efforts. Our development, the deepening of our humanity, is now a matter of fate or freedom—it is our choice.

Many readers would claim that they notice nothing particularly unusual happening to them at thirty-five—or any of the other seven-year points, for that matter—but this does not preclude the possibility of internal adjustments occurring at such times. After all, how many of us are aware of subtle changes taking place in our consciousness? How closely do we monitor our inner life, especially when our condition appears normal and we are fully preoccupied with the business of living? Generally

speaking, we are not exposed to the subliminal world of the psyche and its rhythmic tides, except for the occasional surge which influences our dreams, feelings, and intuitions, or when the untransformed past erupts in our present and demands attention.

The consciousness which tells me I am an individual represents only the first step to my psychological independence—or so the poets, sages, and seers have told us from time immemorial. Obviously, their insight reveals a more detailed picture of their personal reality than of ours, which is foggy and incomplete. Yet despite our inner blindness, we have enough consciousness and common sense to recognize bits and pieces of our own reality, and we know that this is somehow connected to our search for meaning. Carl Gustav Jung said, "Human consciousness created objective experience and meaning, and man found his indispensable place in the great process of being." But surely everyone has to make this discovery through a slow and sometimes painful process of living.

During this cycle, we are still more interested in the future than in the past and we are not yet unduly disturbed by the growing gap between our expectations and our actual performance and achievements. Although our goals may be unrealistic, we give no thought to renouncing our potential. In the preceding period, the turning point at thirty was largely conditioned by the psychological change at twenty-eight. Likewise, in many lives the mental change at thirty-five may not manifest itself as an outer change until thirty-six or later. We will consider this in detail when we come to the twelve-year cycle.

Despite the expansive character of this cycle, we can expect some form of tension, particularly at the beginning, the middle, and the end. The more we become "habit-trapped," the more automatonlike our responses, the less we are aware of the demands of our still-emerging self. The psyche, more than likely, will devise some form of crisis to break us free from our

straitjackets. We may hasten to blame life for our misfortunes, but our crises obey the law of our being—we have them when we need them. Worldly success and its self-inflation mean little on this level. A rapid climb to wealth or prestige will have added plenty of new illusions to those we already have, and a setback may be needed to clear a space for reassessment. Crises may take the form of marital conflict, illness, "accident," or blighted hopes, but the real causes, more often than not, are internal. The stress may be acute enough to force a change of course or even what is euphemistically labeled a "nervous breakdown." These internal pressures are likely to reach crisis proportions halfway through this period, at about thirty-eight and a half. Indeed, many people have a rough time of it between thirty-eight and forty-two.

The pattern of these rhythms suggests that thirty-five, thirty-eight, and forty-two are critical points where interior change presses upward into our waking life. This intervention from below can cause severe disruption. Take, for the example, the extreme case of Vincent van Gogh, who failed to fully complete the psychic transition from adolescence to adulthood and was driven to suicide at age thirty-seven. Van Gogh's terrible psychic disturbance at thirty-five was more than his constitution could handle. His disabled ego, undermined by years of acute depression, malnutrition, exposure, and alcohol, was incapable of transforming his chaotic yet sensitive and vigorous personality. His earnestness, moral sense, and desperate desire to serve and be loved were swamped by a ferocious temper and fits of despair and self-loathing. Bitterly divided against himself, van Gogh could not control his intense and disruptive emotions nor come to terms with his awakening spiritual perceptions. He might have managed it had his health not been so eroded by years of physical neglect and hardship.

Van Gogh, from all accounts, must have been a rather startling character with his glittering eyes and bristling red hair.

Thoroughly confused and lost between twenty-one and twenty-eight, he searched furiously for love and meaning, but met only disappointment and rejection. His amorous hopes failed to materialize, and even the wretchedly ill prostitute he nursed for a time eventually turned him out. He tried to enter the priesthood, but what could the Church do with such a temperament? Society had no place for him. Yet his letters show that he knew he had something of worth in him. He saw himself as a bird in a cage, but he knew he was changing—he saw himself in a molting period. Van Gogh realized that this harrowing period of psychological hibernation was part of his personal transformation—discovering his real identity. He felt that this painful self-discovery would lead him to a new beginning if only he could last it out.

Van Gogh began to devote all his time to art when he was twenty-eight. His childlike sensitivity could intuit something of the generative energy pulsating in nature and in the simple folk of town and country, forces akin to those raging unchecked in his own soul. Despite his emerging genius, however, peace, love, and recognition eluded him. His ego simply could not withstand his destructive habits, accentuated by his poverty and the anxiety and passion which tyrannized his inner life. He put every scrap of his being into his work. Only in that way could he force his almost perpetual depression to serve his creativity instead of utterly swamping his spirit.

Van Gogh's tempestuous worship of Paul Gauguin brought everything to a head when he was thirty-five; he cut off his own ear. His failure to build a lasting friendship based on cooperation and free from jealousy and strife drove him to this terrible act of desperation. Despite his battle to salvage the remains of his sanity at the hospital in Saint Rémy, his poor ego was shattered by its anguish, and his broken body and mental torment made self-transformation impossible and suicide inevitable.

Gauguin was thirty-five when he abandoned his job to commit himself totally to his art. He was forty-two when his distraught

friend Vincent triggered his own upheaval. In fact, van Gogh's suicide and the death three months later of Theo van Gogh completely upended Gauguin's career. Heartbroken by Vincent's suicide, Theo, who was Gauguin's friend and patron, rapidly crumbled into paralysis and insanity. Thus, Gauguin's crisis at forty-two marked a major turning point in his life, for it was then that he decided to leave for Tahiti.

Albert Schweitzer had a strange connection to van Gogh although, unlike the Dutchman, Schweitzer's life was unceasingly supported by a strong sense of destination which, together with his abundant inner resources and physical vitality, carried him through this turbulent cycle. His career, up until he was thirty, was a brilliant amalgam of religion, music, and philosophy, but he then altered course to prepare for a life of medical service. After passing his final medical examinations at thirty-five, Schweitzer struggled to raise money for his African venture. He embarked for "the Dark Continent" when he was thirty-eight and a half to establish a hospital in the primeval forests of the Congo. But despite all his sacrifice and industry, at forty-two he found himself incarcerated in a European prison—in the same mental asylum once occupied by van Gogh!

38½

In many lives, the middle of this cycle (thirty-eight and a half) appears to be crucial to the development of the cycle as a whole and is likely to be marked by important happenings. A few notable examples illustrate the difficulties which often underscore this time in life. For Marie Curie, the beginning, middle, and end were marked by synchronistic events—deaths. Her father died when she was thirty-five, her husband and scientific collaborator was killed when she was thirty-eight and a half, and her father-in-law died when she was forty-two. Franklin Delano Roosevelt suffered his crippling polio attack when he was thirty-eight, and Albert Einstein at the same age had a nervous collapse. Michelangelo was thirty-eight when his patron, Pope Julius, died; Robert Kennedy also was thirty-eight

when his brother President Kennedy was assassinated. Marconi was involved in a scandal at that age and also lost the sight of one eye.

The deep-seated adjustments in the psyche during this cycle suggest that the ego is now becoming more aware of its own presence at the center of its psychological life. When Rudolf Steiner called this seven-year cycle the "period of the consciousness soul," he meant that the ego, our spiritual nucleus, can then begin to penetrate and purify our thinking, feeling, and willing. Most people are unaware of these subtle psychogenic changes, but they open the way to greater self-understanding and self-mastery. They enable us to become aware of the antagonism between the instincts and desires of our lower life and our ideal or higher self. Thus we begin to perceive ourselves in an entirely new and more objective way.

To sum up, in this cycle we can observe a subtle change in the quality of our mental relationship to ourself and to the world. The patterned methods of thinking and reaction conditioning our intellectual connection to our inner life and the outer world are less satisfactory. The self-observer senses that he is deeper and more enigmatic than he previously thought. This deepening perception stirs new doubts and hopes in the soul.

Forty-two to Forty-nine: the Dark Wood

> "Midway this way of life we're bound upon, I woke to find myself in a dark wood, Where the right road was wholly lost and gone."—Dante

In many cases, forty-two brings the challenge of a fresh opportunity, a new expansion, but it also represents the psychological entrance to Dante's "dark wood of the soul "—the passage into middle age. Progress through this seven-year cycle, perhaps the

most confusing and troublesome in adult life, depends largely on our previous experiences. The following observations present a rather distressing scenario of snags and thorns, but they are only possibilities. Many will negotiate their obstacles without too much trouble.

This period is crammed with all sorts of psychological phenomena, and only a far-gone materialist would try to ascribe these psychogenic changes to hormones. Even the so-called "menopausal" activity beginning in the second half of this cycle should also be considered an organic reflection of psychic change. It makes more sense to see the "change of life" as yet another example of the skin-shedding process which exposes us to another level of ourselves. Middle age is a drama of self-discovery which, more often than not, involves some kind of disorientation and a sense of emergency, sometimes a general loss of confidence and creative intellectual power.

For some, the Dark Wood is a dismal region of lost sunshine where few birds sing, but it symbolizes a vital stage of transition, an interval separating our past from our future, our youth from our old age. It is a condition darkly described by T.S. Eliot in "The Dry Savages" (written when he was forty-seven):

"Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
and piece together the past and the future,
Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is never ending."

Life, which hitherto was inclined to thrust us into all sorts of experiences, now threatens to leave us stranded, bereft of our sense of direction. Middle age forces us to look *inward* into the mirror of ourselves—and few of us like what we see. Some are benumbed by it and others become panic-stricken; even the most buoyant of souls feel uncomfortable. Despite all past

achievements, we now meet ourselves on a more fundamental level. This is where we face all those unfulfilled aspirations; this is where we ask, "Where am I? What have I done with my life?"

Many in this bleak wood shiver in the chilly winds of disenchantment. Ideas and opinions which once lifted and consoled may suddenly become stale and lifeless. Old convictions may crumble into dust just when they are needed most. This is the time of life when we uncomfortably note that much of our potential has not been fulfilled. Have we outgrown our ideals? Have we, in the struggle with our daily responsibilities, blighted our potential by discarding our once all-important ideals?

Those of us who have earned no spiritual income for years have nothing put aside for these rainy days. Our comfortable lifestyles, like our convictions, may have hardened into concrete straitjackets. In other words, we discover that we are exiles; the life we lead seems to move on another level to the one where we really exist. All things considered, life in the Dark Wood may appear to be short on options and long on uncertainty, full of agony but empty of ecstasy. Some souls have such a bad time of it that they number themselves among the living dead!

Let us then scan some of the typical aspects of the middle-age syndrome. First, though the Dark Wood may tempt us to grasp silly recipes for renewal, we should realize that middle age represents not only a psychological death but also a magnificent rebirth. We should accept the fact that our painful self-interrogation at this time is a necessary phase of self-realization. We get nowhere by grasping for our lost youth and its feckless delusions. For some of us, life has turned into a tyranny of regimentation. Many of our cherished dreams have not come true and our careers have ceased to flourish and advance. We are weary of those trendy eager beavers treading on our heels, eyes fixed on rapid promotion. ("No one seems to value

experience these days!") Fresh schemes and innovations no longer spring to mind when needed. Colleagues make it to the top while we tread the same old mill of mediocrity day after day. We feel abandoned to the rubbish heap, or at best, stuck on the shelf. We know we need a lift, but change for the sake of change would be foolish.

Above all, this is a time to accept our limitations and clear out those old asphyxiating illusions and guilt we have cradled for so long. This is the time to take a frank and honest look at who and what we are. What can we still give to life? What do we really need for fulfillment? What adjustments should we make?

Shall we find consolation in our family life? Many have to accept the fact that the living process, the creative relatedness of their marriages, have been dormant for some time. Years of respectability and conformity have blocked their sensitivity and stifled all real communication. Children may have grown up, and husband and wife are thrown back upon themselves to discover just how far apart they have drifted and how little they really share. Such a home is no sanctuary for middle age but rather a comatose or vindictive mortuary of dead hopes. This psychological separation of husband and wife gives marriage a dismal and threadbare look compared to the freshness of a marriage where communication has been nurtured, a still developing partnership woven by two independent yet mutually integrated personalities.

The intense deprivation felt by some in the Dark Wood may suddenly throw their family life into disarray. Some attempt to drown their insecurity and inner barrenness with alcohol, while others abdicate their responsibility by striking out in search of their lost youth. For example, often without warning, a husband may begin wearing outlandish clothes and a trendy hairstyle. Blind to the absurdity of his behavior, this mutton-dressed-as-peacock may chase the bright young things at the office and

experiment with infidelity. Such sexual protests may well wreck his marriage, no matter what its previous achievements. This alarming lunge for *La Dolce Vita*, this throwback to juvenile shallowness, represents a refusal to face the mirror, a refusal to accept the still-awakening self. Instead of maturity, we see the immoderate and self-defeating resurrection of the old complexes and traits of puberty.

Women have to contend with and adjust to their menopausal changes, while some men have to overcome the physical side of their own psychogenic changes. Both sexes, therefore, may suffer from periods of irritability, impotence, insomnia, hypochondria, and various degrees of depression. Despite these hardships, middle age is essentially a time of psychological death and rebirth. Many people view the change of life as an unwelcome invitation to senility and not maturity. Their fear of oblivion, their loss of creative hope, tempts them to see the future as nothing more than a dreadful drift to the grave. This negativism has to be countered by their own psychic resources. Those who fail to recover their sense of purpose are doomed to wander in the wood with only their phobias for company. They should see the wood for what it really is: a tremendous psychological opportunity. It is here that we tackle our shadow, the shadow which hides the beacon light of our true self. It is here we can begin to redeem the dark angel of our past. As T.S. Eliot points out in his *Hollow Men*: "Between the potency / And the existence.../ Falls the shadow."

Middle age challenges us to disperse the shadow of our psychological past, which includes all the character weaknesses and imperfections imprinted in our youth and reinforced throughout the years. It is a time for change, for self-examination and self-acceptance, a time for truth, a time to stop fooling ourselves. We should feel different when we have passed beyond the wood. Torn and tattered perhaps, but reborn out of the phoenix fire, many people feel completely reorganized and

rejuvenated. Their newly found self-reliance can reshape their lifestyles and relationships because they have come to realize that real security resides not in things or other people but in the self and its sense of purpose.

Take, for example, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy and his psychological conflict between forty-two and forty-nine. Tolstoy's waking vision of his own death is a marvelous example of the change at forty-two, which, in this case, initiated seven years of torment that undermined his health and almost drove him to suicide. During that time, Tolstoy's sense of the meaning of life vanished altogether despite his growing family and great literary successes. He found nothing he could hold on to, nothing that could offer him peace, nothing that could silence the infernal demon of his conscience. In desperation, Tolstoy searched for any kind of religious experience which might confirm his existence and give his life relevance and meaning. Describing the change at forty-two, he recorded that something very strange was happening. He felt perplexed, lost, and dejected; his life had come to a standstill and these moments of confusion recurred at an increasing tempo. Everything he had stood for lay in shambles; he saw nothing ahead but destruction and extinction. Despite his position and talents he could no longer live; he felt compelled to rid himself of his life. Tolstoy had reached that terrifying barrier which looms between reality and Reality. It is the hinterland between the sense world and the spiritual world, between the waking mind and deeper levels of individuality. But Tolstoy also tells us that he managed to break through his threshold at the end of this cycle. Upheld by a new feeling of certainty and renewed in spirit, Tolstoy's life and writing display a distinct change of emphasis and direction. This suggests that he was inspired by the mental and moral energy released by his psychic upheaval.

Another example of this is found in the life of Rembrandt. The human soul instinctively strives to convert its experiences

into new capacity, into new awareness, and Rembrandt was no exception. Rembrandt's Dark Wood was a disastrous slide into bankruptcy, which led to the auction of his prized collection, his personal belongings and even his home. But several biographers have drawn attention to the curious connection between these misfortunes and the development of his art. Despite all the anxiety and financial juggling in this period, Rembrandt's deepening religious awareness lifted his art to new heights. It was as if his creditors liberated his spirit as they stripped him of his material possessions. His uncertainty and turmoil appear to have wrought the inner changes which gave his art more insight into human nature. For example, Robert Wallace, discussing Rembrandt's portraits of that period, alludes to the fact that the artist sought models in whom he could perceive the workings of the human soul rather than the exterior characteristics of beauty or ugliness. Rembrandt, more than any other artist, worked to express the facial impress of suffering, love, redemption, and the relationship between God and humankind.

Forty-nine to Fifty-six: a Second Wind

In many lives, each seven-year point also marks the end of a particular task, a phase of activity, or a commitment of some kind. The feeling of letdown, of anticlimax, typical at these junctures, signals the psyche's need for an interval in which to digest its past and marshal its forces for a new burst of activity. A good example is Tolstoy's death vision and confusion at forty-two, following the completion of his epic labor on *War and Peace*. That period of *arrest* enabled him to absorb the previous cycle and release fresh energy and consciousness for the following stage, between forty-nine and fifty-six. A similar psychological pause can be seen in the life of Isaac Newton. After completing his great work *Principia*, written when he

was forty-four and forty-five, Newton suffered a nervous disturbance which reached its climax at fifty-one. There are many striking parallels between the life and work of Newton and those of Albert Einstein. Although separated by two centuries, both were fascinated by the mysteries of light and gravity; both were inspired by unshakable belief in a universe fashioned and maintained by cosmic laws; both experienced phenomenal explosions of mental insight between twenty-three and twenty-five years of age, and both suffered breakdowns at forty-nine. Einstein's heart condition, like Newton's nervous disturbance, inserted a necessary pause for personal reassessment. Of his long convalescence in 1928, Einstein wrote: "Illness has its advantages; one begins to think, I have only just begun to think."

Michael Faraday, the brilliant English chemist and physicist, was another famous scientist troubled in body or soul at forty-nine. But all three felt refreshed in spirit and intellectual vitality when their crises abated. For example, Frank E. Manuel mentions that "Newton's crisis was followed by a dramatic reorganization of his personality and a re-channeling of his capacities that enabled him to manage his existence successfully for more than three decades."[1] Although these great men at the time may have regarded their crises as unwelcome interruptions to their work, we can evaluate their breakdowns in the light of their overall psychological development.

Obviously, the ups and downs of great individuals have a considerable bearing on humankind as a whole, while the crises we encounter from time to time affect only those close to us. Nevertheless, our personal upheavals are part of the psychological journey of the self and are just as necessary as the "crises" of birth and death.

1. Frank E. Manuel, *A Portrait of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

Our endurance and courage in this cycle depends on our inner stability and inner resources, not on the heroism of youth. Our inner gains at this time depend on our acknowledgment of what we have learned about ourselves and our acceptance of our past. Only by developing the capacity for change will we find fulfillment in the autumn and winter of our lives. On the other hand, the forlorn souls who have failed to find their way out of the Dark Wood will need all the help they can get. One notices, for example, that many cannot handle change creatively because their battered egos are too weak to provide a firm anchorage to ride out the storms. They are caught in a vicious circle; unconsciously they engineer their crises to bring them face to face with the need for change, but they are too depleted to accept the challenge. Our crises and suffering are the catalysts for the transformation which alters our relationship to ourselves and to life. No matter what our life condition, there is a compelling force in every soul which urges it to grow. An unexpected upheaval may appear to interfere with the established pattern of our lives, but on a psychic level, there is no discontinuity whatsoever.

All the old vultures of our past come home to roost somewhere in the branches of our physical and mental constitution. Body and soul now reflect all the errors and excesses of our past and we must watch out for the more extreme forms of sickness, which often strike at fifty-six or thereabouts. This, perhaps, is especially true for those who have failed to replace the vanished enthusiasm of youth with new qualities of soul and spirit. At that stage of life, many an old ideal or cherished principle, once so fresh and invigorating, is in danger of becoming hardened, dogmatic, and intolerant.

Whatever our predicaments, there is no cause for pessimism. Despite all our inner and outer wear and tear, we are still *emerging*, if only we can recognize the fact. Age offers its own unique compensations, so why envy the young? Why dwell on

wrinkles, fading appetites, and hoary failures? Do we not have our victories? Let us stop picking the scabs of our conscience and give ourselves a medal! Why? Despite our mental limitations and our physical frailty; despite all the catastrophes which politicians, generals, and bureaucrats have committed in our name; despite the cruelty of this at-times demoralizing planet; despite the seemingly tyrannical laws of a seemingly disinterested universe; despite even those spiritual creators who concocted this whirlpool of change, we have survived! We still move forward in our time and we can call our souls our own. Yes, we should give ourselves the tribute we deserve—give ourselves a medal!

Fifty-six to Sixty-three: Reaping the Harvest

The crisis point at fifty-six sharply scored the life of the poet-playwright-scientist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who reached that age in August, 1805. At the beginning of that year he had a premonition that either he or his dear friend Schiller would die before the year was out. Both men were ill at the time. Their relationship is one of literature's most celebrated friendships, and each had worked in his own way to inspire their nation through the revelation of literature and drama. Strikingly dissimilar in physique and temperament, they were, nevertheless, united by their ideals. Indeed, Schiller's provocative genius had inspired much of his friend's work during the cycles between forty-two and fifty-six. Schiller had stood at his thirty-year turning point when he met the illustrious Goethe, and their creative liaison spanned fifteen fruitful years. The premonition proved true, and Schiller died in May, 1805. Goethe's sense of loss cast him into the abyss. "Half of my existence is gone from me," he wrote. "My diary is blank at this period, the white pages intimate the

blank in my existence. In those days I took no interest in anything."This calamity, however, also coincided with the publication of the first part of *Faust*, which was undoubtedly an autobiographical mirror of the movement of his consciousness between twenty-one and fifty-six. His continuing work on *Faust* from then on, though lacking its former fire, diffuses a gentler glow, a deeper spirituality, reflecting the further ascent of his consciousness. He completed the second part of *Faust*, the fullest "confession" of his life, at the very close of his life, at age eighty-two.

Another interesting case is that of Charles de Gaulle, whose forty-ninth year was synchronized with the national emergency of his nation in 1939-40, which drove him to London to direct the French Resistance. This crucial turning point in his career signaled his transition from soldier to politician. The rapid ascent of his star crested in the second half of the forty-nine to fifty-six cycle when he reentered Paris to establish himself as the central figure in France's return to independence. But, as his fifty-sixth year approached, de Gaulle's political fortune waned dramatically. His reverses pushed him into a retirement which provided a valuable period of reflection. This was when he wrote his memoirs. So, the cycle between fifty-six and sixty-three provided a needed interlude in de Gaulle's intense career, during which his personal destiny disengaged itself from the national destiny of France. On a deeper level, it represented a necessary psychological pause for inner change. De Gaulle was sixty-three in 1953, beginning a seven-year cycle which saw the Algerian revolt and the collapse of the Fourth Republic. During the second half of his sixty-three to seventy cycle, he was recalled to power and given a mandate to form a new constitution. Once again, in de Gaulle's case, the metronome of the seven was synchronized with the volatile pulse of French politics.

Most of us by age fifty-six have trimmed the sails of our unfulfilled ambitions and unrealized hopes. During this phase

the quality of resignation indicates the level of our maturity. This spiritual resignation can sharpen one's sense of self-recognition, or it can sour the soul and blunt its appetite for the bounty of life still to come. When considering the psychological importance of this cycle, we should not forget the very special conjunction of the thirty-year and twelve-year cycles which occurs at age sixty. This cardinal point in human life represents the completion of what I have termed "the constructive period"—between thirty and sixty (see Chapter 3). It represents the portal to a more contemplative phase of life which prepares us for our final crisis—the ultimate transformation at death. Sixty, then, opens a phase of introspection where we have the opportunity to evaluate the past, plan our retirement, and acknowledge the growing specter of our own death.

The ancient Greeks regarded sixty-three as a particularly dangerous time for health. By that stage, one's physical, emotional, even moral, past is well and truly stamped on one's organic systems, and there is little we can do about it. Likewise, to some extent, our awareness, our mental clarity, and self-understanding are indications of our inner activity in the previous cycles. This implies that minds neglected for decades, untouched by curiosity, interest, or involvement, are now likely to show clear signs of degeneration and petrification. Obviously, a sterile, unquesting mind cannot release the imprisoned faculties of the psyche. Despite this apparent psychological standstill, however, development has not ceased. Even the most unawakened soul moves ever onward, shaped by events and pushed forward by the river of passing time. Sickness, bereavement, and loneliness are typical challenges which demand a response from the soul at this time of life. It is a terrible thought, but perhaps for some, suffering is the only creative element which gives meaning to their lives at this time. The last great victory is their *endurance*. Just to have entered time means that we change, be we pygmy, murderer, handicapped child, or saint.

As conscious still-evolving beings, we enjoy a valuable advantage during the autumnal stretch of our time: a sense of *process*. We are not so easily fooled into believing that every problem has a fixed and instant answer, if only we can discover it. We distrust the "experts" who mainly spend their time and our money spinning abstract solutions to problems they do not understand. Our experience helps us to realize that within every problem something is working itself out, not only on a personal level, but even on the global level. We suspect moreover, that it is the *process*, not the solution, which is important.

Older people's withdrawal from many of the temptations and superfluities of the external world further personalizes their existence—they should feel more connected to themselves. Aging helps us to sense that our biography is an inner journey through the outer world. The ultimate fact is that souls appear on earth, follow their pilgrimages, and then move on. So, we sense the real movements of life more clearly when we come to old age, the sanctuary where our center of gravity shifts from body to soul and our attachment to the mortal world lessens. If aging represents a process of physical decrease and spiritual increase, then sixty-three is a door to new opportunities no less important than the one we opened at twenty-one.

The conscious mind is a matchless analytical instrument. The psyche, on the other hand, in its invisible depths, can be thought of as a master of synthesis, and the development of the self is totally dependent on the psyche's complicated process of assimilation. All our experience, the reactions and conflicts which come to us by way of the external world, sinks into this interior cauldron of synthesis. It is there that experience is distilled and assimilated into the self. Cycle after cycle, our thoughts, feelings, and actions are the seeds planted in the inner continuum of the psyche, and in our sixties we begin to reap the harvest.

To illustrate the natural ripening of the psyche and its life's task between sixty and sixty-three, let us take a glance at the

life of Alfred Nobel (1833-1896). Nobel was the famous industrial magnate who revolutionized the explosives industry by taming nitroglycerine. He was thirty when he and his family were shattered by the death of his brother Emil, who was killed while experimenting with the volatile explosive. His father suffered a stroke soon afterward, and Alfred took the helm of the family business. After his invention of dynamite and later the detonator cap, the production of dynamite climbed rapidly during the restless and nerve-wracking cycle between his thirty-fifth and forty-second years. Always in motion, Nobel traveled the length and breadth of the globe, protecting his patents, building new factories, and replacing others wrecked by accidents. His ever improving explosives placed unprecedented power in the hands of men and made possible such engineering feats as the Corinth and Panama canals. To his horror, however, Nobel saw this power also diverted to munitions, feeding the reckless ambitions of rampant nationalism. Although he worked hard to find the ultimate explosive, his hopes for a deterrent to war faded behind the acrid gunsmoke of international conflict. Thus, in a sense, his financial success and global influence became more and more at odds with his deepest aspirations. The desperate need to resolve this contradiction began to dominate his psyche in the last third of his life.

Nobel's brief but auspicious relationship with Bertha von Suttner, at the beginning of the forty-two to forty-nine cycle, was a landmark in the inner course of his life. She was his secretary for a while, and he even had hopes of a romance. But it was not to be. Although this first contact occurred long before either of them had a conscious interest in the international peace movements, Bertha, over the years, encouraged his involvement in the cause. They met again in his sixtieth year. By that time he was deeply preoccupied with the peace problem, and Bertha bombarded him with advice, literature, and appeals.

Another significant incident, a curious twist of synchronicity, marked Nobel's fifty-sixth year. His brother died but the press wrote Alfred's obituary! This bizarre error triggered intense self-examination and a pitiless review of his past achievements. The impact of this peculiar event becomes understandable if we realize that it was synchronized with the changes taking place in his psyche at that time.

Despite his incredible financial success, Nobel remained a lonely, reclusive soul, prone to soul-searching and ill health. By the middle of the fifty-six to sixty-three cycle, however, his ideas were mature enough to be voiced to friends and representatives of the various peace movements. Although he died at the close of this cycle (sixty-three), his wishes were inscribed in the will which formed the basis of the Nobel Peace Foundation. Thus his vast fortune, in a sense the harvest of destruction, was reseeded in the hopeful future of humankind. Although Nobel was truly a son of the Age of Technology, his ideals nonetheless eventually emerged to champion the cherished virtues of the human spirit. In other words, this terrible contradiction engendered the impulse which strove to redeem his life's work.

Sixty-three to Seventy: Drawing the Threads

This seven-year span, the ninth, marks a certain cyclic conclusion, a release from the remorseless drive of destiny as the will's flame begins to withdraw to interior regions to prepare for the approaching expansion across the great divide. This does not mean that the cosmic rhythms cease their faithful beat. These years can offer as a blessing, a grace, the opportunity to complete the tapestry of destiny and pass our contributions to those who follow. This is particularly evident in those souls who are still synchronistically engaged in world destiny.

The lives of Copernicus and Galileo were not only synchronized to external events, but their life spans appear to be synchronized with the "mind at large," the "world-mind." The question is: Were they *chance* instigators of a new kind of thinking? Or were they the first among many great souls at that time to be touched by profound changes taking place below the surface of human consciousness?

If we accept Plato's approach to the mysterious appearance of new ideas, we learn that we do not create our thoughts but rather respond to them, reflect or recollect them, when we are psychologically and physiologically prepared to receive them. This would mean that the personal is synchronized to the transpersonal. Perhaps, then, ideas, like events, have their proper time too, a time to lie fallow and a time to engage human interest and involvement. This infers that great ideas, world-changing ideas, also belong to a universal time organism and its zeitgeist.

The lives of Copernicus and Galileo reached a certain conclusion at sixty but then completed the finishing touches, so to speak, between sixty-three and seventy. Copernicus's rather uneventful life was ruthlessly ruled by a single compelling idea, that the sun, not the earth, is at the center of our planetary system. This view, taken for granted today, repudiated the old geocentric view of the universe prevalent at that time, a view which had arisen in the old prescientific prelogical consciousness. By "removing" the earth from its exalted position, Copernicus threatened the very sanctuary of knowledge zealously guarded by the scholastic authority of the Church. Fear of persecution, therefore, prevented him from publishing his "heretical" bombshell. Eventually, however, he relented to the pressure of his disciple Rheticus, and the book was published as the seventy-year-old astronomer-priest lay on his death bed. Little is known of the personal crises of Nicolaus Copernicus, but there is no doubt that his personal destiny was poised at the mighty threshold of a new age of human consciousness and prepared the way for such men as Brahe, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, and Descartes.

The river of life generally becomes more tranquil as it approaches its outlet, but this is no reason to expect old age to be free of crises. Few of us, however, will suffer the humiliation of Galileo at seventy. Standing on the shoulders of Copernicus, his acute awareness of the physical universe was destined to collide with church dogma. Committed to the study of astronomy, physics, mechanics, and mathematics, Galileo wrote his first book at forty-two and at sixty began work on the "heretical" treatise which affirmed the Copernican image of the heavens. Although ill at sixty-three, he completed it at sixty-six and then went to Rome to seek permission for its publication. The tragic second half of this cycle was dominated by the merciless interrogation of the Inquisition.

It is nearly impossible today to imagine the cataclysm which struck the theological establishment when the frontier minds of that time shifted the earth from its center of celestial glory. This sudden shift in perception and thinking, this urge to explore and observe the physical universe, was a cardinal threshold in the history of human thought, and it turned science and religion into antagonists. The old cosmology and mythological geography were superseded by astronomy and physical geography.

Meanwhile, poor old Galileo, while ill and despondent, was torn to shreds by a conspiracy of obsolete minds resistant to change. Seventy is no time to challenge such dragons, and we can understand why the old fellow, under the threat of torture, bent to the will of the Inquisition. "My error, then, has been—and I confess it—one of vainglorious ambition and of pure ignorance and inadvertence." Despite this tragic setback, however, he continued to work on his great book on mechanics until fate dealt him another cruel blow by taking his sight from him. Although his life ended in rejection and pain, his mind, like Copernicus's, was midwife to the new age of exploration.

The Closing Years

"So the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning..." —Job 42:12

"Better is the end than the beginning thereof."

—Ecclesiastes 7:8

Freed from the yoke of ambition and responsibility, released from the hunger of destiny, the elderly have time for themselves. Those who have preserved their mindfulness can at last pick up some of the interests which have long lain fallow. Moreover, they have time to stand and stare, to sense and review their past in a new way. A spry, unwearied soul, still with its sense of expectation, will overcome the natural discomforts of age. If, on the other hand, the closing years offer nothing but hopelessness, the life-sapping feeling of uselessness will inevitably accelerate the decline. Those who cannot help themselves to this precious winter fruit will need help, especially if they carry the problems of their youth unresolved into an old age, which brings its own troubles.

Although we may fear old age and the natural change from responsibility to dependency, the meaning of life remains, and so, to a certain extent, does its creative possibilities. The seventy-seven-year-old is as impelled by the infinite within as the seven-year-old is. This time of life, as valuable to the psyche as any other, deserves far more sympathetic understanding, planning, and guidance than it generally receives. For many, the closing years are bereft of compassion, companionship, and dignity. Therapy for the elderly is greatly overshadowed by our lavish concern for the young, which in effect polarizes the community into camps of young and old, productive and nonproductive, relevant and irrelevant.

What is the reason for this one-sidedness? Perhaps it stems from both our inability to interpret the phenomenon of the

human being and our horror of death. Unlike the ancients, who venerated age, the modern, pragmatic person is absolutely confounded by death. This fear of extinction springs from our ignorance of the meaning of life. We have lost our sense of *destination* because we do not understand time and our spiritual continuity. Thus we maneuver our old people into the stagnant backwaters of life to await the heaven of the nihilist: nonexistence.

But a society which isolates its old folk does itself and them a great disservice. This is one reason why modern communities lack balance and cohesion; they are too preoccupied with the bright new flowers of life to notice the mature fruit that follows. Thus the old have to do their best with the scraps of compassion they can find. True, we keep them alive, even beyond their natural time, but they cry out for our understanding and involvement, not our pity. This problem can only worsen as the falling birthrate of the Western world swells the geriatric sector.

What does old age represent? The old offer us the fruit of their time. This is why, in the ancient world, the old were the keepers of mysteries and sacred truths. They are the "graduates" of life, the teachers standing on the high escarpments of their time. This innate grace and wisdom is something which can shine through their dependency and vulnerability if we would but notice. The elderly are pictures of our future. Where they have preserved their faculties, we can sense the emergence of selfhood, the wealth of experience and trials overcome. Where they are senile, we can sense their return to simplicity and innocence; decrepitude itself confronts us with the reality of life and death and heightens our own "sense of path."

Time and toil, the unceasing, unconscious labor for selfhood, has wrought qualities in the old which mature only when the cycles of life have turned. They have planted the seeds, served the shop, lain the bricks, and raised their children. Strange as the

idea appears, perhaps we should also value their failures. The "leftovers" of one generation give the following generations something to overcome, something to learn from and transform. In other words, their past offers our present a "resistance" which can sharpen the wakefulness of our ideals. No matter what they have done or left undone, they have in one way or another served their tiny corner of the world's becoming.

The essential value and meaning of old age can be found in its disengagement from the demands of the external world. This stage of life deserves the kind of environment which fosters the activity of contemplation and reflection, a place where memory images can be brought up, relived, and reviewed. This is the way the psyche sustains its sense of continuity—as a preparation for after death. After all, old age is the embryonic phase of the afterlife.

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In conclusion, looking at the individual as a being of body, soul, and spirit offers us a three-dimensional view of biography, one which gives the time element a vital role. The immense psychological importance of the seven-year cycles is twofold. First, they regulate the relationship between the inner metabolism of the soul and the conscious mind's experience of itself. Second, they regulate the "digestion" of experience, the conversion of experience into psychological capacities and faculties. Thus, these cycles lead us deeper into ourselves and out again. Swallowed by time at birth, we are disgorged at death into other dimensions of time—even timelessness. Time is merciful after all! Old age is far more than a chronicle of decline and something to be feared. The self is indestructible and holds all its experience ready for other spirals of advancement after death. It stands to reason that the cycles which influence, sustain, and guide the human soul are totally meaningless if all our

gains in self-development are lost at death. This is a crucial point we will deal with in the last chapter.

How can we best understand the nature of a cycle? We have marked the beginning, middle, and end, but we need to sense the whole. One way to imagine the whole process is to look at its organic, its biological qualities. Each seventh year marks a completion and new beginning. We can imagine it as a seed from the fruit of the previous cycle. As the new cycle unfolds so the seed becomes a plant; it is a growing expression of itself. The emphasis begins to change at the midpoint, and the second hemicycle is a phase of internalizing, digesting, absorbing, inhaling the experiences of the first hemicycle. The second half produces the fruit and seed formation. In other words, there is an exhalation-inhalation rhythm behind our changes in consciousness. This is the primary mission of the seven-year cycle.