

Experience Reports

**EXPERIENCING MY MID-LIFE CRISES AND
AFTERWARD: VARIOUS HERMENEUTICAL
ANALYSES OF LIVED EXPERIENCES***
Part 1

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ABSTRACT

This is the first of a series of experience reports exploring the interpretations of men at midlife from various hermeneutical perspectives. Part 1 is the first interpretation of what might be called “typical U.S. professionalism,” which is mostly concerned with “written in stone” laws, rules, procedures that are overly deterministic, constrictive, cultural deployments, and the resulting mid-life crises that occurred in my life. The second aspect of Part 1 is an interpretation of mythopoetic men’s work, which is more fluid, imaginative, creative, interpretative, and has been and continues to be emotionally healing for me. Part 2 to follow in a subsequent issue describes my experience with triple by-pass surgery and the emotional support I received from my men’s support group. Part 3, also to follow, though less poignant, considers several theoretical frameworks, including autoethnography, personal narrative, and images. Finally, the summary calls for an enlivened hermeneutics for men—interpretations that include feelings, connectedness, lived experiences . . . moistened by the power of the heart.

INTRODUCTION

This article grows out of a dialogue with my friend and colleague in human development. It is an exploration into various hermeneutics: the first mostly concerned with “written in stone” laws, rules, procedures, and is overly deterministic which also could be called “typical U.S. professionalism.” The second, after an explanation of men’s work in the context of the contemporary men’s

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movement, a mythopoetic interpretation which is more fluid, imaginative, creative, playful, and has been/continues to be emotionally healing for me, a man at midlife; and finally using autoethnography, story, and narrative (oral and written), in a hermeneutical analysis.

My Transformative Journey

I am from the all American Family
Therefore I am from a dysfunctional family
Which means I was expected to meet their needs

I had the all-American job
Therefore I had to perform and produce
Regardless of what it cost me emotionally

I was the all-American macho man
Therefore I was expected to hide my pain and tender feelings
And only show my anger (Barton, 2000, p. xi).

I graduated from law school in 1964, passed the bar in 1965, and started practicing in 1965. I practiced law in the county seat of my home county for 25 years. I was imbued with what might be called “typical U.S. professionalism” representing clients, using my skills of reading statutes, laws, and regulations written in stone, and reading and interpreting the written texts and opinions interpreting these laws and regulations. My specialty evolved into representing debtors in Chapter 11, 12, and 13 of the Bankruptcy Code. This is an area of law that is highly codified and, as with all texts, it is subject to interpretation. These chapters of the Bankruptcy Code deal with debtors’ attempts to formulate a plan for reorganizing their debts and making payments to their creditors in lieu of “straight” bankruptcy under Chapter 7.

My clients ranged from individuals to couples, and also included small businesses in dire financial circumstances. Individuals in financial difficulties often are troubled, having both emotional and/or physical problems. These troubles usually play out in the family system causing disruption, chaos, and often dissolution of the family system and any business associated with it.

A major part of my identity was that of being an attorney. I was providing high quality legal service to a group of people who were often not well represented. In many respects, I was the mythological hero slaying the dragons for the benefit of my clients. The dragons were the secured creditors who were always well represented by well paid attorneys and, at times, I had the same role with mythic proportions with respect to judges, with one bankruptcy judge in particular.

Probably the happiest time in my life was when I got married in 1979. I can still remember the big smile on my face. I was happy to be marrying the woman I was marrying and was also very pleased that her three children would be moving in with us into my family home. The stepchildren’s ages were 9, 11, and 12.

For the first time in my adult life, I felt loved and was able to love in return. I probably received love as an infant, although I have no memory of it, nor in all of my men's work have I ever regressed to the point of recalling that love. Furthermore, I had not shared with my fiancée all of the financial pressures I was under, chiefly because I had purchased a large amount of used farm machinery for a major expansion of the family farming operation, for which I was now responsible, as well as engaged in my full-time legal practice.

It turned out that I was not able to make the payments required by the farm machinery note and, under pressure from the bank; my wife and I quitclaimed the family homestead to the bank as additional collateral. Still, the extension of payments could not be made and the bank threatened to evict us. It was necessary to hire a lawyer, who was a FarmHouse fraternity brother, to represent me against the bank, which resulted in a determination by the circuit court that the deed was an equitable mortgage and therefore the bank had to go through mortgage foreclosure procedures, rather than the eviction, which the bank had attempted. There was neither enough farm income nor office income to redeem the mortgage after foreclosure, so the day before the equity of redemption expired I filed my personal petition for Chapter 11 reorganization under the U.S. Bankruptcy Code. The result of that reorganization was that I was able to buy back my family farm homestead on mortgage payments plus my law practice along with my law office building.

During this entire stressful time, my weight was continuing to increase. By the fall of 1989, I weighed 290 pounds, had been diagnosed with sleep apnea, and was on high blood pressure medication.

During the course of my Chapter 11 reorganization, one of my clients, who owed me a substantial amount of attorney fees for representing him in his Chapter 11, was charged with parole violation for having put through a stop payment order on a check for real estate taxes after the closing of the refinancing of one of his mortgages. In my judgment, he was being railroaded and I felt he had done nothing wrong, so I testified on his behalf at the parole violation hearing. As a result of my testimony, I ended up with a seven-count federal felony indictment for obstruction of justice.

It became necessary then for me to hire a highly qualified federal criminal defense lawyer. A plea bargain was negotiated which allowed me to plead guilty to two of the seven counts. My lawyer advised me that my license would not be suspended until there was a formal hearing by the state bar. This advice was inaccurate. The State Bar issued an automatic temporary suspension of my license on the day that the federal judge accepted my plea for those two counts.

The next day, with no notice and little preparation, I was unable to appear in court on behalf of my client. Fortunately I was able to find a couple who specialized in representing Chapter 13 clients to take over my cases and represent my client who agreed to be represented by them.

By this time, my marriage was starting to deteriorate, although my wife stayed with me through the sentencing hearing. At that hearing, I could have been

sentenced to a minimum of four months incarceration if the then-current federal sentencing guidelines (recently struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court) had been followed. In fact, this is what the U.S. Attorney requested of the judge. However, because my offense had occurred before the enactment of the minimum sentencing guidelines, they were not binding in my case. The particular bankruptcy judge, with whom I'd had so many issues previously, in fact wrote a letter of support on my behalf to the sentencing judge, indicating that I was the kind of lawyer, who, when a client needed my assistance, received it then, and that I did not worry about getting paid until later. I was given three years probation to be served concurrently and fines on each of the two counts.

At the same time, there were many clients who owed me attorney fees. The couple that took over representation of my most of my clients did not have an assignment for my attorney fees, so I was able to continue to work on collecting those fees owed me. In other words, I could appear in bankruptcy court on my own petitions for attorney fees and get approval for those fees.

I can still remember how withdrawn, estranged, imploded, and depressed I felt. I dreaded standing out in the court hallway waiting for my cases to be heard. I felt I had lost my identity as a lawyer. I was no longer able to practice law. I was not entitled to sit up front with the lawyers, except in those instances when my own petitions for attorney fees were being heard. In fact, one day my probation officer happened to look into the courtroom. Seeing me there she entered the courtroom because she was concerned that I might be violating my probation by practicing law. The judge assured her that I was not practicing law for anyone else, that I was not representing anyone else, and that I was only there on my own petitions for attorney fees, which was totally appropriate. With those assurances, she was satisfied and left. Notwithstanding that, I continued to feel utterly alone, lonely, isolated, depressed, and fearful that I might make another misstep and end up in a probation violation hearing of my own and face the possibility of incarceration.

The Sunday, October 23, 2005, episode of *West Wing* showed me that I had not fully grieved my loss of license and how that made me feel. In that episode Toby confessed that he was the staff person who had leaked classified information to a reporter for the *New York Times*. President Bartlett immediately fired Toby. Toby is required to turn in his badge and security information. His office is locked and sealed and he is escorted out of the White House. President Bartlett's voice is heard making the public television announcement of his firing. Then there is silence as the words of the President's speech roll down the teleprompter screen and the silence continued as Toby is escorted down the long hall, out the door to a waiting car, possibly to jail, banished from the White House.

As for me, as I watched that ending, those scenes, it touched me emotionally. It put me right into my feelings of sadness and the tears started to flow. After allowing myself to feel those feelings, I started to process those feelings of

sadness. What came to me as an insight was that I had not fully processed the pain I felt at the time of the loss of my license and much of my identity.

My wife moved out in the summer of 1989, ostensibly to take care of her mother who was, in fact, very ill at that time; but it actually was a trial separation which culminated in divorce. Shortly after she moved out of my family farm home, I went to my minister and asked him for help.

In the dominant culture there is a socially constructed masculine stereotype of patriarchal masculinity (Real, 1997). That stereotype is that men are not supposed to ask for help and here I was asking for help. I felt that I had hit bottom and could not continue on alone. I was a typically socialized male in this culture assuming that I always had to stay in control, had to go it alone, fix everything myself, and not ask for any help.

My minister referred me to my first therapist, who, I learned later, happened to have been his roommate in divinity school. That referral started me on my mythopoetic journey and my active involvement in the mythopoetic branch of the contemporary men's movement.

My therapist, Bill, was facilitating a program called Living Relationships. He invited me to audit the last few sessions. He had previously done a program for the women who had assisted him in facilitating the Living Relations workshops, entitled, "Everything You Want to Know About Men." So in the fall of 1989, some of the men who were assisting Bill in facilitating Living Relationships said, "Bill, it's time for you to do something for us men."

So Bill set up a six-week series on "Everything You Want to Know About Women" for the men who had assisted him. I was invited and participated in that six-week session. One of the books that we were given to read was John Lee's *Flying Boy*. The other two books, which Bill asked us to read, were *He* (1986) and *She* (1977) by Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson.

At about week four, two things happened: a number of the men, including myself, indicated that they wanted to form a men's therapy group, and the second thing was that many of us felt that the group would not be done in six weeks and that there was more support that we could give each other as a men's peer support group.

At the end of the six weeks of Monday night meetings, Bill concluded his facilitation of the first group and then met with our men's therapy group, which continued to meet weekly. In addition, most of the men, including myself, continued to meet on Monday nights as an open men's peer mutual support group. For the next two and a half years, I did one hour of individual therapy, two hours of group therapy, and two hours of men's support group per week, plus participating in another mythopoetic weekend or activity at least on an every-other-month basis.

What this mythopoetic participation allowed me to do was to reinterpret my life, share my story with others, write some poetry, and listen to other men's poems and stories. I was able to define and redefine different types and aspects of my

identity and redefine my personal definition of what my own masculinity was and what it meant to me. Some of the things that became clear to me were that, in some respects, my family of origin was dysfunctional. I also learned and felt that I had suffered emotionally from an emotionally absent father.

While going through my own healing processes using my own reinterpretation of myths, poems, and old stories, I was able to support and help other men in their emotional healing journey. As a wounded healer, I was able to share, help others heal, and, in the process, further my own emotional healing and later my physical healing.

I still can remember one night in particular in group therapy. I don't remember what the topic was or what I shared, but I do remember that after being vulnerable in sharing something with the group, I sat back in my chair and just shook as I felt a wave of energy course through my body from head to toe. Bill said that I was opening new neuro pathways that hadn't been opened before. That may be the biological explanation, but I still sit here today and can remember and recall those waves of energy that rushed down from my head and spread throughout my body.

EXPERIENTIAL MYTHOPOETIC MEN'S WORK

My first mythopoetic men's weekend, a "Wild Man" Gathering, was the last weekend in April 1990, and was sponsored by the Austin Men's Center, facilitated by John Lee and Marvin Allen, outside of Austin, Texas. My older ex-step daughter was getting married that same weekend; I did not get an invitation. Later, I was told by my ex-wife that I didn't receive an invitation because she and my ex-step-daughter thought that I might cause trouble at the wedding because I did not like her fiancé (which was based on my past dealings with him and his very dysfunctional family). Even if invited, I would not have attended, as my "Wild Man" weekend was more important to me now as part of my personal healing journey.

John Lee, the author, had a couple of other books out at that time, which I read after *Flying Boy* (1989). One was, *I Don't Want to Be Alone: For Men and Women Who Want to Heal Addictive Relationships* (1990) now republished as *The Flying Boy II: The Journey Continues* (1991b). John Lee came from the recovery movement to mythopoetic men's work. His books and his story resonated so much with me that I read everything he had written, especially *At My Father's Wedding* (1991a).

In *At My Father's Wedding* (1991a), John Lee describes his experience in encouraging a group of men to play like kids in the mud puddles after a rain. During the second "Wild Man" weekend, again sponsored by the Austin Men's Center, which he and Marvin Allen facilitated in the fall of 1990, I did not join in the fun. I had to get permission from my probation officer to leave the state and attend. I said to myself, "there is no way that I am going to

let it get back to her that I had been playing in the mud in the middle of the Texas hill country.”

I also read part of Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (1990) about this same time, as well as Sam Keen’s *Fire in the Belly* (1991), which was a very important book for me. At about the same time, I also read *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover* (1990) by Moore and Gillette, which is based mainly on Jungian archetypes and Jungian psychology.

After doing several men’s events, I participated in an anger workshop in Kalamazoo, Michigan, called “Taking It Lightly” (which had actually been created in Milwaukee, Wisconsin). What I remember most about that workshop was that the group leaders recommended that I take the next step for reaching my anger, by participating in the New Warrior Training Adventure (NWTa), an initiatory weekend for men (Mankowski et al., 2000; Pentz, 2000).

Bill Kauth (1992) author of *A Circle of Men* and one of the founders of the NWTa, and, whom I had met at other mythopoetic events was going to be one of the leaders for the NWTa weekend. Although I now existed on a very lean budget, I signed up for the July 1992 NWTa in Milwaukee, where the organization was founded. Bill called me to make sure I was coming for “the right reasons” (Sapiens, 1995), and to arrange a partial scholarship.

I am now going to recount the following story because of its impact on my anger and the intensity of my feelings in dealing with untoward occurrences. To conserve on gasoline as well as to begin bonding with the other initiates in the NWTa, it is a common practice to arrange car pools. My car pool assignment was to drive from Kalamazoo, Michigan, and pick up three men flying into the Milwaukee airport from Boston, Vermont, and British Columbia. I left in plenty of time, knowing exactly where I was going, but when I hit rush hour traffic in Chicago, it took me an hour longer than I expected. When I arrived at the Milwaukee airport, the men were not there and someone told me that he thought they had rented a car. In addition, I also had to buy food I had promised to bring for the weekend. I rushed to the small town, which was situated just before the site. I ran into a country store, grabbed some kielbasa, paid for it as I went out the door, and jumped back into the car. I got to the site just in time for the weekend event, and because I had been hurrying, I was definitely not in a good mood. I was, in fact, extremely angry and felt that it was not a very auspicious beginning for my “next step” on my path toward increased consciousness/awareness. In hindsight now, I find it very intriguing that I was intensely experiencing so much anger (Lee, 1993).

Saturday afternoon, during a psychodrama-type process, a man, old enough to be my father, was grieving about how emotionally absent his father had been in his life. As I stood in the circle watching him, I started to grieve too. The tears flooded out of me (and, as I sit recalling those intense feelings of sadness, I notice those tears once again slip down my cheeks). The next thing I knew I was being lowered to the floor and held in the sympathetic arms of a loving

man as I continued to weep the sad tears from many years of separation, isolation, and loneliness. This was a major healing experience for me on that NWTa weekend when men lowered me into the arms of a man playing the role of a loving man/father. I felt that love and, by then, had gained the freedom to cry more easily, shedding those tears which I had repressed and held onto for such a long time.

When my turn on the carpet came, my process was to take a “trust fall.” I was blindfolded but sensed what was being set up for me. Being over 250 pounds (I had lost some weight by then) I had some definite concern and fear about not being able to be caught, but instead would be dropped as I fell back. But the men caught me and it felt great!! (I was also very much aware of how much work it was for the men to catch and hold me.)

Since that weekend, I have continued to move ahead on my personal healing journey. I have staffed 39 NWTa weekends and attended many other mythopoetic men’s events, New Warriors (now known as the ManKind Project) advanced trainings and other men’s movement events, including pro-feminist, men’s rights, and Promise Keeper events.

Besides serving two years as Chairman of the Board, I have served two years as the Community Elder of ManKind Project (MKP) Windsor/Detroit Centre. Thus I have evolved into being an elder and grown into my eldership (Jones, 2001). I have also served as Ritual Elder on several NWTa weekends locally and in other MKP centers in the United States, Canada, and Germany. This elder energy is further manifested in the mentoring I do.

I am definitely in the stage of generativity as described by Erikson (1968). Erik Erikson’s “ethical rule of adulthood is to do to others what will help them, even as it helps you to grow” (Snarey, 1993, p. xii). Snarey then cites Korte and Hall (1990) who define generativity, as “the desire to invest one’s energy in forms of life and work that will outlive the self” (p. 310). This leads me to a recent incident of emotional healing as I was mentoring another man. I called a recently initiated New Warrior, whose weekend I had staffed, and who was not currently in one of the closed men’s peer mutual support groups, which Warriors call I-Groups. We talked a few minutes, and he told me that in about two weeks he would be taking a class locally, which would last a week and asked if I would like to get together for dinner while he was in here. I accepted enthusiastically and asked him to give me a call when he got into town. When he got into town a week later, he did call. I picked him up at his motel and we drove to a restaurant for a meal.

We had over a year of catching up to do and shared how our respective lives were going. As he talked about his life, I periodically would ask him questions. He told me about his family of origin and about recognizing his leadership abilities and his fear of stepping into this natural role. As it turned out, his fear was related to how he was treated as a first-born son of a large family, his parents’ expectations of him to care for his younger brothers and sisters, and also what

he undertook to protect his younger brothers and sisters from violence in the family. Receiving his permission, I continued to ask him questions about that fear and what he felt was at risk in his life—whether, as an adult man, he was able to parent himself and then step into his sense of leadership.

As I was asking those questions and inviting him to look inside thereby processing him, I suddenly felt a wave of sadness sweep over me, so I stopped and took a moment to “process” myself. I realized that I was feeling the sadness of my lost childhood. I remembered the “little boy” who had been afraid to play in the mud in Austin, Texas, in 1990 (described by John Lee, 1991a), and who had rationalized it at the time as being something else. Here was the adult man re-living the sad feelings that he had felt as the first-born son on a family farm, driving a tractor pulling a hay baler at 10 years of age. Here was an adult man of 64 grieving my lost childhood. I sat quietly with tears flowing as I grieved in the company of another initiated man who empathetically understood.

My question to him about what was at risk for him to grab the golden nugget of leadership, in addition to responding to his exact words, brought memory to the foreground of my own awareness. I found myself immersed in my own leadership issues, fear of loneliness/separateness/and lack of support, just as I was heading off in two weeks for Leadership Training 3 (LT-3), an intensive MKP advanced leadership training weekend.

CONCLUSION OF PART 1

In this article I have shared several of my mid-life crises and my experience through the use of therapy, social support, support groups, and mythopoetic activities to start on my healing journey. As painful as the divorce was, it was just what I needed to have happen to me at that time. In addition I believe the federal felony indictments had a purpose of forcing me to stop my patriarchal cast in stone conduct. I believe that my subconscious, inner knowing, or spirit knew that something drastic was necessary to get me off that office tread mill with four full time secretaries whom I kept busy by my self as a solo practitioner. If I had not been forced to stop, I suspect I would have been stroked or heart attacked out of commission, if not dead, by now. This is then the segue into Part 2 about my heart disease and the social support I received.

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