

## Individuation: Learning to Live

By the late Nancy B. Millner

*Summary: In Jung's models of psychic development and life stages, we have a map by which to measure our individuation journeys. The MBTI® type development model also marks our paths, and when these models are combined we have a superior map indeed.*



Nancy B. Millner

---

When we have lived for many years we often notice that the events of our lives have a flow, a flow that emerges into patterns that form, shift and reform. In addition, we may become aware that our psychological type has developed over time, often on its own schedule and with its own special flavor. Yet in spite of the personal differences of our life journeys, we may also sense at a deeper level that there are discernable patterns underlying the development of type and growth over the life span. The theoretical work of Swiss psychologist C.G. Jung and the work of Katharine Briggs and Isabel Myers, who have made Jung's work accessible, help us speak of universal patterns. These patterns provide valuable markers against which to plot our specific journeys.

It can be said that the psychology of Jung is the psychology of individuation. Individuation, a process of becoming the unique individual one always has had the potential to become, is a lifelong endeavor. In Jung's models of psychic development and life stages, we have a map by which to measure our individuation journeys. The MBTI® Type Development model also marks our paths, and when these models are combined we have a superior map indeed.

In writing about life stages, Jung used the metaphor of a rising and setting sun. Imagine the sun rising and setting as it makes an arc each day across the sky.

### Morning: Early Life

"In the morning it (the sun) rises from the nocturnal sea of unconsciousness and looks upon the wide, bright world which lies before it in an expanse that steadily widens the higher it climbs in the firmament." (Jung, "Stages of Life" Collected Works, Vol. 8, Paragraph 778)

Earlier life is especially concerned with the development of consciousness, bringing light out of darkness. In this stage of life we are called upon to form an ego that gives us a sense of identity, the ability to make choices and find a place in the world. This is a time for preparing for and entering into work, for making relationships and establishing a place in community and culture. Type is a function of the ego and an adequate ego with a well developed four-letter MBTI® type code enables us to form a clear sense of identity, make choices about such

important matters as education, careers, relationships, family and social participation. In this period we often find ourselves striving and trying to catch hold of life. In order to achieve what we desire and “fit in” we accommodate our parents, teachers, peers and later our employers, mates, friends and social communities.

## Noon: Midlife

“At the stroke of noon the descent begins. And the descent means the reversal of all the ideals and values that were cherished in the morning. . . .we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life’s morning; for what was great in the morning will be little at evening and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.” (Jung, “Stages of Life” Collected Works, Vol. 8, Paragraphs 778, 784)

Psychic energy (psychological life blood) is dynamic and when tasks have been sufficiently completed, energy shifts. Often somewhere around the middle of life, after a sufficient amount of early life expansion and establishment, a period of reevaluation may be called for. In the heat of midday sun those things important to the morning begin to lose their meaning. The hard earned four-letter MBTI® code and other well developed aspects of personality may begin to feel incomplete. And other aspects of our lives and psyches, including our undeveloped inferior type function(s), often become compelling and/or distressing.

The middle passage, which can occur anytime but usually around the middle of life, often begins with feelings of confusion, loss, drifting, reorienting and yearning. These feelings invite a time of reevaluation and change as do most transitions. But this transition requires deeper change and a different orientation toward one’s self and one’s world than earlier transitions. If the early life question is “What does the world require?” the midlife question is “Is this all there is?” The good news is that the answer to this question is “No, this is not all there is.” In fact, much of the midlife problem is that development has been too one-sided and too much has necessarily been left out. The psyche wants everything included. Psyche wants wholeness. Psyche desires to know what else there is.

The amount and nature of midlife change required seems to vary from person to person depending, perhaps, on personality structure and outer conditions. Yet, in the middle years, without some adjustment there is great risk that later life will feel like a dull rerun of outdated material. Knowing this, unfortunately, does not make it easy to relinquish a hard won sense of identity and those things which have provided recognition and achievement. Western culture confirms and supports the development of personality to accommodate the world, but rarely nurtures those changes which lead individuals beyond accommodation.

People in the middle passage often find themselves in limbo. They need to know it is acceptable to remain in limbo for a while. During this period people are often torn by conflict between heavy responsibilities (work, family, and community) to which midlife people owe allegiance and the need for private time for reflection and rest. They also feel much denial or pain around the conflict of following what one is called to and at the same time resisting the changes required which can be disruptive. Our egos have choice. We can deny and resist or try to be open to the

dying and emerging of psychic energy. If we can be open and aware, we can participate in the process of individuation. We can move beyond our personal agendas and the unexamined adaptation to the agenda of society. And, in doing so, we may be delighted to find our egos more in line with our authentic selves and more able to make new, often joyful, commitments for later life.

## Afternoon: Later Life

“A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the specie. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own...” (Jung, “Stages of Life” Collected Works, Vol. 8, 787)

When the middle passage has been navigated the sun begins its slow descent. If the middle passage has been well navigated, and unfortunately it often is not well navigated in our culture, there can follow a long period when people are not young and not yet old. I call this period the time of coming to authenticity.

This later life period is a period of re-integration. If development has gone well, the psyche can now manifest that which was always “in potential.” Our sense of identity is expanded. We know more about our authentic selves and have come to some peace with our mistakes and limitations, including our inferior type function(s). We can become more fully who we were created to be, and we can make choices from a place of authenticity and integrity. In our culture, this long coming-to-authenticity period can be filled with health, energy and personal freedom and can offer unexpected joy, peace, acceptance and love.

As the darkness of evening falls, the question is not “What does the world require?”, or even “Is this all there is?” Rather the question is “What does soul require?” Almost as a gift of a well-lived life, aging people can find themselves deeply connected not only to their authentic selves, but also to others, to nature and often to the Mystery we call God. Perhaps this is the special afternoon significance of which Jung speaks. And perhaps it is only this which enables older people to perform the special task of age, bringing renewal to culture.

---

*Nancy Bost Millner, PhD, LPC worked for more than 30 years with people seeking to live more fully. She authored numerous articles on life stages and type development, including [Creative Aging: Discovering the Unexpected Joys of Later Life](#). She was the co-author (with Eleanor Corlett) of [Navigating Midlife: Using Typology as a Guide](#). Her work can be found at: [www.capt.org](http://www.capt.org).*