

## **Mortality? Use it to kick-start your dreams**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

"I HAVE so much greatness inside, I just don't know how to express it," a friend was telling me the other day. No longer in his youth, coming to the end of his prime, he said he felt like he was staring down the barrel of a gun.

"I'm bored doing what I'm doing now.

I need a challenge but I just don't know where to start. I am afraid. It's almost too late to start doing the things I really want to do. When you're in your 30s, you are a great, young talent. But now I'm too old to begin something new. To start fumbling about learning new skills or producing work which is substandard," he complained.

I watched him trying to say the things he could hardly say, witnessing a midlife crisis. And what became clear to me was an understanding of what a midlife crisis really means. It's a time in life where the things we were supposed to do, wanted to do, needed to do, but didn't -- for lack of time, courage or confidence -- come back to bite us on the bum.

There's a point in life where it is timely, fortuitous, perfect, to take a plunge into greatness. To write that grand opera, to creatively self-actualise. But consumed with procrastinations, distractions and obligations, we wake up to discover that time has almost run out. And then we plunge into panic or deep depression.

In the case of this particular man, I noted panic. The next few jumbled sentences were about forms of escape. Classic symptoms of panic include bonking people who don't belong to you, resigning from jobs, running away from family, driving around the country or world and other behaviours that generally involve uprooting and moving on.

Which has nothing to do with gender. Midlife crises have become equally common in women nowadays. Nor do they seem to be limited to people in their middle years. I have discovered that such crises of faith, confidence and identity can come at any time from the mid-30s onwards -- depending on how happy the primary relationship is, when offspring leave the nest, whether there's a religious belief system that underpins life and when issues arise about time or opportunities running out.

Mine happened after three young, female friends all died in close succession due to unexpected illness. I suddenly had a nauseating sense of mortality. I started to question every single aspect of my life. And felt compelled to make my short journey on this planet more fulfilling. But I did bring my significant others in on the secret.

And here's what I wanted to say. I think that midlife crises are wonderful opportunities for self-reflection, shedding of dead skin and finally taking that creative risk. But they seem to be divided into two distinct types: midlife breakdowns and midlife breakthroughs.

Breakdown happens when there is escapism. It's not that running off can't be useful. Newness can provoke insights into self that are invaluable and can also lead to a deeper appreciation of what one has. But often people risk too much.

Often spouses, valued friends and careers aren't there when people get back from their journeying because the energy driving the move is destructive, self-absorbed, hurtful and desperate.

The breakthrough is a midlife crisis conducted with awareness and dignity. It is sitting down with the energy of "What do I want to do now?" with honour, choosing a therapist or friend as confidant, who can tell you when you're losing the plot but can also give you courage to embrace those things you want to explore. It's also about remaining connected to loved ones, even if they don't approve of what's going on. From observation, it seems imperative there be continued negotiation and compromise with significant others, so that the proverbial baby isn't tossed out with the bathwater, destroying structures that are meaningful longer term.

In the East, it is considered a mark of enlightenment to reach a point of profound acceptance of mortality. For us, such acceptance can create an ideal time to take that plunge, really live out that fantasy. I've heard of women going trekking in the South Pole, a mum of three kids going back to university, lawyers who become farmers, people exploring their sexuality, all equally worthwhile if coming from integrity to self combined with respecting those around you -- not from panic, desperation or unreality that you can stave off ageing or death.

That's not to say it isn't scary to do the things that make us feel inadequate. As my friend so eloquently said: "I am afraid." But if we don't try and fail, or try and succeed, we will suffer, get more panicky, more resentful, more likely to retreat into those sad spaces so many older people live from -- the "if only" and "I should have" laments.

Je ne regrette rien spoken on our deathbeds must be among the most beautiful and fulfilling words we can utter.

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