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Title: 60 and the Cycle of Life

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3/27/2011—A friend of mine told me it was not easy making your way in the world by yourself when you are “almost sixty”. His comment caused me to think about the rhythm of the life of a human being, especially since I am almost 60 as well.

A human life seems naturally to divide, if one is healthy, into four stages: youth (to 20)/adulthood (20-40)/prime (40-60)/ending (60-80). (With apologies because I vaguely remember that a number of people have recently discussed such divisions in books). There are other important year markings—30 seems a big one in our culture—but this four stage seems to me to be the more basic cycle.

In terms of identity, youth is a plastic time in which my identity—my genuine self—begins to coalesce. It is in adulthood that I work out, or life does it to me, who I am and what my life is about. I have notions about this earlier, but in the years 20-40, I decide, or again life decides for me, the basic issues of sexuality, family and work. I don't think these basic decisions or outcomes change much after 40.

Prime seems to me potentially to be the easiest stage of life, though of course divorce in our culture sometimes unsettles the pattern (although not necessarily: at 48, my wife decided to divorce me and in hindsight this did not change the basic rhythm of my life—children and work—in my case that is probably the result of meeting a wonderful woman shortly thereafter).

The ending stage seems to demand change, however. Change is demanded physically, psychologically and spiritually. I am not thinking of imminent death or even precipitous physical decline. However, as energy begins to wane, those aspects of life that are not rewarding become burdensome. For example, I could put up with a deadening job before, but at sixty, that becomes much harder to do. Such a job also begins to seem pointless. At sixty, a healthy person wants to put away anything that is not significant, both because time is getting short and because figuring out the purpose of life becomes a higher demand.

My colleague and teacher Robert Taylor has always preached the wisdom of preparing for death when one is young. (Socrates said that philosophy is preparation for death). As I approach sixty, the need to do this is apparent, though it can be too late. Sixty casts a harsh light. If one has lived a superficial life, one can feel a vast emptiness that youth and vigor hid before. If one has harmed others, the weight of guilt (or, if one is still insensitive to others, the consequences of broken relationships) begins to wear you down. If one has lived for others without ever really choosing to do so, the loss of self can manifest in a feeling of injustice over their ingratitude.

It is rare that a person can say at sixty, I lived as well as I could and I am satisfied overall with my choices and actions. I am ready for death, but not in any hurry. (And of course, there will be those who feel able to say this because their egomania still shields them from the truth about themselves. Maybe they will be lucky enough to die with their illusions intact. But woe to them if they wake up very late in life—that is what hell is).