

# Who Invented The Idea Of Midlife Crisis?

The idea of midlife crisis has been around for seven hundred years, for Dante's first lines of *The Divine Comedy* are:

*Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.*

*Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say  
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,  
Which in the very thought renews the fear.*

*So bitter is it, death is little more; ...*

Dante, at 35 halfway through his biblically allotted seventy years, was recording the earliest contribution to the literature of midlife crisis.

Centuries later, Carl Jung provided a theoretical foundation when he published his ideas about predictable stages in life. He believed that before midlife, people focused on either thinking, sensation, feeling, or intuition. At about ages 35-40 (at a time when people lived to 60 or so) the others assert themselves, helping the individual achieve balance. "The task of midlife," Jung wrote, "is not to look into the light, but to bring light into the darkness." This was all part, Jung believed, of creating wholeness.

In the early 1960's, Canadian psychologist Elliott Jaques was researching the careers of composers and artists -- including Dante -- and discerned that many went through a period of midlife turmoil, frequently accompanied by major shifts in style and worsening productivity (Jung could have been included on this list!). In 1965 he published a paper in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* on this pattern, and when "Death and the Mid-Life Crisis" appeared, midlife crisis had a name.

Jaques' work was academic. It took the 1976 publication of Gail Sheehy's [\*Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life\*](#) for the idea of midlife crisis -- and the accompanying cliches -- to pass into popular culture.\*

Sheehy used interviews to create generalizations about the stages of life. *Passages'* jacket copy summarizes what to expect in the "Forlorn 40s:" "Dangerous years when the dreams of youth demand reassessment, men and women switch characteristics, sexual panic is common, but the greatest opportunity for self-discovery awaits."

While some think that *Passages* was either melodramatic or the obvious, written down, sometimes that's what it takes for a meme to take off. One of the bestselling books of the 1970's, millions of copies landed on nightstands all across North America, and it is still in print today.

Chapter subheadings like "seeing the dark at the end of the tunnel" and "letting go of

the impossible dream" highlighted Sheehy's assertions that the midlife crisis was practically apocalyptic:

"As we reach midlife in the middle thirties or early forties, we become susceptible to the idea of our own perishability. ... We are not prepared for the idea that time can run out on us, or for the startling truth that if we don't hurry to pursue our own definition of a meaningful existence, life can become a repetition of trivial maintenance duties. Nor are we anticipating a major upheaval of the roles and rules that may have comfortably defined us in the first half of life, but that must be reordered around a core of strongly felt personal values in the second."

Baby Boomers across the English-speaking world, then entering their early thirties, internalized *Passages'* drama and turbulence. "Midlife crisis" entered the common language.

Popular support for the notion of "hitting the wall" at midlife is seen in a 1994 survey that showed that 86% of the youngest adults believed there was such a thing as "midlife crisis." But only 50% of older respondents -- presumably those who would know -- agreed.

More recent scholarly work has emphasized the distinction between midlife transition, which many people seem to navigate comfortably, crises that happen in midlife (such as divorce or the death of a parent) and midlife crisis.