The Nature of Mid-Life Introspection

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James “Gus” Gustafson, Ph.D. May 2014
Chair

Committee Members

Thomas J. Griffin, Ph.D. Benedictine University
Justin Irving, Ph.D. Benedictine University
Robert Buford Buford Foundation
Lawrence Lang Lutheran Church of Hope
Abstract

I explore the nature of mid-life introspection with the goal of understanding the fullness, or essence, of the experience. I use research from interviews with nine people who have had deeply personal, highly intentional mid-life introspection experiences. In these interviews I seek to appreciate the motivation of the individuals, the dynamics of the experience, the role of others, lessons learned, and the impact on interviewees’ approach to questions of meaning and purpose. I also interview the spouses of six of the participants to obtain additional perspective on each introspection experience.

I employ a transcendental phenomenological methodology to discover whether any aspects of the mid-life introspection experience are common, regardless of differences in world view, background, gender, occupation, education level, or socioeconomic status. By learning the stories of each of these mid-life introspection experiences, I discover the nature of mid-life introspection and develop the following definition of *mid-life introspection*: a deeply personal quest for a fresh understanding of one’s identity, purpose, values, goals, and life direction, influenced but not necessarily constrained by one’s life history and present circumstances. This research will enable the reader to conclude, “I understand the nature of mid-life introspection and what to expect from a mid-life introspection experience.” The research also reveals a framework that depicts the mid-life introspection experience graphically and a collection of questions that can guide one’s own mid-life introspection.
Dedication

This paper is dedicated to three people. I am who I am because of them, and I am forever grateful. Bobby DeRemer was a loving, caring, giving, mother and model of sacrificial love. She spent her life helping others reach for their dreams. I wish to thank her through these words. Pastor Steve Cross helped me discover my identity as an adult. In the ensuing 21 years, he has been a listener, a spiritual guide, a mentor, and a friend. Marcie DeRemer has lived the story in these pages with me. She tolerated the relocations and the deployments. She gave so much to develop the character and minds of two wonderful people as a home-schooling mother for 12 years in six states. She told countless people with pride that she was a full-time mom and teacher. She has been a life partner with boundless grace and resilience. And Marcie never, ever wavered in her identity or her purpose. Today, she continues to give and to invest in others, in whole new ways.
Acknowledgments

Dr. Jim Ludema recognized how enriching this research would be for me, and he patiently guided my thinking as I narrowed the study question to the form in this paper. Jim’s vision for the Center for Values Driven Leadership at Benedictine University is already making the world a better place, one person and one organization at a time. Dr. Jim “Gus” Gustafson encouraged me through the research, analysis, and writing, with his teaching, his ever present smile, and his joy for life and learning. Even in the most difficult of circumstances, he finished this work with me. Dr. Tom Griffin provided critical insights that strengthened the presentation of this research and my own understanding of its value. Dr. Justin Irvin teamed with this committee to provide valuable insights to complete the work. Bob Buford’s literature on a wide range of mid-life topics for those wrestling with consequential choices was one of the catalysts of my interest in this field of study.

Deb Hellmuth’s order and cheer framed a tremendous experience for our cohort, and I am grateful for her friendship. Dr. Marie DiVirgilio, Dr. Kevin Lynch, Dr. Mike Mansfield, and Amber Johnson make the education, executive round tables, and research on values-driven leadership practices a sustainable and exemplary program that is gaining international attention. Bob Buford authored *Halftime* and other works that started me on my own mid-life introspection experience and seasonal transition. Finally I am thankful to our cohort for the goodwill and fellowship that accompanied our monthly time together; many are now friends.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

During mid-life transition, life structure comes into question, usually at a time of crisis in meaning, direction, and value. Neglected talents, desires, and aspiration seek expression. . . . Legacy becomes more important, choices must be made, and a new life structure formed.

—Daniel Levinson

This study examines the nature of mid-life introspection. This phenomenon is an opportunity for people to experience a rich, deep level of self-awareness and to consider fresh commitments to current vocations and callings, or a life change to pursue a new vocation or calling. A person who pursues a mid-life introspection experience should consider the findings presented in the following pages.

This research explores the nature of mid-life introspection. Few people seek such an experience. Those who do are often searching for meaning, fulfillment, or purpose, or they are examining their current circumstances to assess their sense of meaning, fulfillment, or purpose as they look to the years ahead. The literature review includes research that explores the difference between introspection at mid-life and introspection common to people in early adulthood. Literature explores self-awareness, motivation, subjective well-being, choice, and the role of others as dynamics influencing the experience, as well as the richness of the search for identity, meaning, and purpose. Finally, the literature addresses the outcomes common to the mid-life introspection experience.
I present the results of a transcendental phenomenological study of the mid-life introspection experiences of nine people selected for their diversity of world view, life experience, gender, race, education level, and socioeconomic status. I do not seek to measure the impact of any of these differentiators on the introspection experience; I sought this diversity to guard against the potentially negative impact of a homogenous study group. This phenomenological study also includes insights gained from interviews with the spouse of the person who experienced the mid-life introspection where possible.

The goal of this research is to identify those aspects of the mid-life introspection experience that are shared by the participants (the nature or “essence” of the phenomenon) and those aspects that are unique to the individual or at least not common to the group. I also present information discovered during the research that can help one manage a mid-life introspection experience. This information includes a list of questions proven to guide one’s introspection and a framework to help anticipate what to expect during a mid-life introspection experience. Finally, I will extrapolate lessons regarding the value of mid-life introspection for people in leadership positions in the discussion chapter.

**Context**

People who live long enough to have experienced what we refer to as an average life span pass through the period we commonly call mid-life. In advanced societies, a life span can be eight decades. Mid-life is more associated with circumstances than it is
with age; research shows that the time span generally falls between age 35 and age 55, but what is more important is the searching and reflection that occurs, rather than the precise age at which it occurs. Approaching mid-life, most people experience significant questions regarding identity, meaning, and purpose. These questions result from emerging disappointment or frustration over unmet goals or expectations, an unexpected relational crisis, a job-related crisis, or a significant health issue. Most people flee from facing the crisis or deny its existence and miss the opportunity for increased self-awareness and personal growth. Very few people facing these questions and issues address them in a serious way. These few represent the focus of my research interest. These are the people who are not derailed by a negative mid-life crisis experience, but instead are reenergized by positive mid-life introspection experience.

**Research Question**

This research answers the question, “What is the nature of mid-life introspection?” Related questions that will help me explore this research are questions that seem necessary to understand the phenomenon of mid-life introspection, such as these: What aspects of mid-life introspection experiences appear to be common? Why? What aspects of mid-life introspection experiences appear to be unique to that individual and why? How does one conclude that a mid-life introspection is successful? Are there any attitudes or values that are conducive to a successful mid-life introspection experience? Is there a body of core questions that are typically addressed during a mid-life introspection experience? If so, why? How long does it
take to go deeply into a mid-life introspection experience? What does it mean to go deeply? What compels a person to choose a mid-life introspection experience and then to persevere through it? Are there any common attitudes or values that accompany transition from a mid-life introspection experience? Why do so few people confronted with the opportunity or need to engage in mid-life introspection actually choose to embark on the experience? Is a deep, mid-life introspection experience beneficial for all people, or just some, and why?

**A Worthy Exploration**

This study is an exploration. Our culture encourages busy lives and fast living. It has little patience for people or experiences that would pause or slow down long enough to deeply understand something, including themselves. Leaders and people who do not consider themselves to be in leadership roles benefit from high measures of self-awareness (Northouse, 2010; Levinson, 1978: Conger & Riggio, 2007). This can occur through a mid-life introspection experience, but that takes time, patience, and curiosity. Today, time is measured in deficits, patience is in short supply, and curiosity is abandoned for quick answers. Those who desire greater self-awareness and the opportunities and freedom that self-awareness offers in mid-life can benefit from learning what this research reveals.

**Overview**

In Chapter 2, I review the relevant literature on the dynamics surrounding a mid-life introspection experience. This is a deep dive into a range of existential human issues
exploring literature more than 2400 years old, as well as current research on emerging theories of human meaning, wellness, strengths, motivation, purpose, and legacy.

Chapter 3 outlines the transcendental phenomenology research methodology and the interview techniques used in this qualitative study. This research relies on the ability for participants’ experiences to speak for themselves, allowing the researcher and the reader to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature of mid-life introspection by appreciating the fullness of each person’s story. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this research. In addition to achieving the goal of answering the original research question (What is the nature of mid-life introspection?), the findings provide a framework for understanding and anticipating the mid-life introspection experience and a series of questions to help a person conduct a deliberate, highly intentional mid-life introspection of their own. Chapter 5 provides discussion of the findings and their implications. In this discussion, I propose that there is a wide utility for the findings of this research and that much good could come of steering people away from negative mid-life crises toward more positive mid-life introspection experiences and transitioning to second half lives with increased levels of peace, confidence, and energy that comes from the closure afforded by a successful mid-life introspection experience. Finally, Chapter 6 suggests opportunities for further research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

One could say a key task in life is to discover and define our life purpose, and then to accomplish it to the best of our ability.
—David Cooperrider

Introduction
Mid-life introspection is not new. This reflective process usually involves refining one’s self-awareness of strengths, weaknesses, and personality attributes; pondering one’s place in the life journey; and reviewing one’s assumptions regarding the sense of identity, meaning, and purpose derives from life. The research streams that inform this literature review include the following topics: self-awareness and personal understanding; personal identity, meaning and purpose; motivation; the nature of choice; well-being and subjective well-being; happiness and flourishing; life transition; significance and legacy. Each of these bodies of literature was chosen for its value in laying the foundation for this study’s research on the nature of mid-life introspection.

Hollis (2005) identifies the nearly universal human sense of a requirement for mid-life introspection even as he also states how few people spend the time and the emotional energy to take this inner journey toward personal understanding. With three to five decades of decisions, victories, failures, rewards, disappointments, dreams, and delusions behind them, mid-life adults are able to ask more probing questions, reach deeper answers, and understand their interaction with the world in a more mature way than when they entered adulthood and first asked questions about
identity, meaning, and purpose. Mid-life adults are in a good position to evaluate the alignment of their passions, their aptitudes, and the knowledge gleaned through life experience.

This literature review explores important aspects of the phenomenon of mid-life introspection. These include the circumstances that bring one to realize the need for such introspection; the decision to engage in that search or flee from it; the experience of the search for identity, meaning, and purpose; and the perspective of the individual after the mid-life introspection experience. This literature review describes existing research on the relevance of exploring one’s strengths, weaknesses, passions, and sense of identity, meaning, and purpose. This review identifies something else: a gap in the research on the nature of the mid-life introspection experience in a holistic sense. Though this literature review includes a robust discussion of many dynamics relevant to the mid-life introspection, it also reveals the paucity of research into understanding what it is to complete a mid-life introspection. The findings and discussion presented in this paper fill a gap in the research and literature by describing the nature of mid-life introspection, providing questions to guide people who choose to engage in a mid-life introspection experience, and presenting a framework to help understand the components of the mid-life introspection experience and their relation to one another. The contribution of this research is that, in filling this gap, it helps more fully explain the nature of mid-life introspection and the value of pursuing the experience rather than avoiding it.
Our Uncommon Context
The 21st Century presents people in many countries with nearly unprecedented combination of good health, long life, and financial means. These factors can combine to present opportunities to pursue fulfilling, life improving activities that benefit individuals and communities. Western societies have aging populations that personify this trend. In 2004, Reeb (2004) pointed out that 10 to 12 thousand Americans turned 50 each day, one in four Americans were already over 50, and the age group from 50 to 65 years old was expected to grow by 50% between 2004 and 2015.

According to United Nations data, a 60-year-old American man can expect to live for another twenty years or more, and a 60-year-old American woman can expect to live for another quarter century. Trends are similar in other countries. In Japan, a 60-year-old man can expect to live past his 82nd birthday, and a 60-year-old woman to nearly 88. In France, Israel, Italy, Switzerland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and many other prosperous countries, people who reach 60 are likely to live into their 80s (Pink, 2009). Pink adds that in these cultures, with these lifespans, people usually stop and reflect on their lives at ages 40, 50, 60, etc. Their reaction typically includes the following stages. First, there is some alarm that this age arrived so quickly; they are surprised. Second is the realization that in the societies described here, there are still many years of productivity and contribution left. Finally, they begin to ask, “If I have that much time left, when am I going to do something that matters? What am I doing
to live my best life? When am I going to make a difference in the world?” Every 13 minutes another hundred people in America reach age 60, and the wealthiest, best-educated generation the world has ever known reckons with their mortality and asks deep questions of meaning and significance.

**Our Common Irony**

Many people who take stock at one of their milestone birthdays recognize in a deep and private place that they could be living more fully, leading more effectively, or bringing their organization to a better, more effective place that is more satisfying for more of their people. However, if there is no transformation inside each of us, all the structural change in the world will have no impact on our institutions (Block, 1993). So, if our goal is to so reshape our institutions so that they will survive and flourish in this century, our most immediate task is to shape ourselves (Thompson, 2000).

Instead, by some estimates more than 10% of Americans today suffer from depression, and stress-related illnesses were the fastest-growing category of workers’ compensation claims by 1990—And the problem has grown since then (DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998). An unprecedented two million people of working age simply dropped out of the workforce in 1996 at the height of the decade’s booming economic cycle. Others continue to dull the anguish of the compelling awareness that some of the most important aspects of their lives are disconnected from their deepest sources of value and meaning (Vaill, 1989). Still others dull the pain with workaholism, marital affairs, or extravagant purchases of self-indulgence. And, some just settle into
indifference, passive aggressive behavior, and devolving from truly living into mere existence. Clearly, there is good reason for people today to check their course—to take their pulse—and to measure their well-being at as they approach mid-life.

A prominent consultant described our culture’s broad sense of ennui this way:

A whole generation of baby boomers have hit mid-life. That’s us. Many of us have been successful by some standard. In many ways, I would characterize our generation as a generation of seekers. In the 1980s we externalized our success and meaning. We’re now realizing that emotionally, spiritually we need a place to dwell. Where are our roots? Where can we sink ourselves deep into something because we really care? Where am I grounded? (Earley, 1996, p. 5)

**Choosing a Mid-Life Introspection Experience**

Self-awareness is the starting point for the choices that lead to a fulfilling life, and introspection is the wellspring of self-knowledge. Serious self-reflection of our own motives, prejudices, actions, gifts, and passions is required for people to obtain the level of self-awareness necessary for a deep mid-life introspection experience. This is neither easy nor common. For many people, the mid-life transitional experience is an important reality check. The Herculean goals they had at 25 have not been reached, and it is becoming clear that some of those goals are now unrealistic. But, that does not mean that there are no worthy goals remaining and no new courses worth pursuing. A mid-life introspection can inform and encourage the person experiencing mid-life transition with fresh goals and ideas, and a renewed clarity of identity, meaning, and purpose.
Levinson (1978; 1996) provided landmark research on the seasons of life for men and for women. He advises that, after mid-life, work itself can become more interesting and point toward a valued legacy. Having realized that they will fall short of achieving their early Dream, people must decide to continue in their present job, doing work that is increasingly unfulfilling and perhaps humiliating, or change to a different occupation that offers more challenge and satisfaction. Levinson states that this is a crucial turning point.

In his later work, Levinson (1996) presented the unique challenges facing women during their mid-life transition. Both career women and homemakers had comparable dilemmas. Each recognized that the effort to combine love/marriage, motherhood, and full-time careers had not delivered as much satisfaction as they hoped, providing the requirement for reassessment in mid-life. Career oriented women and homemakers shared some dynamics, but some were unique to their paths. By their early forties, most career women’s lives come into question in important ways. Their two decade long pursuit of the Successful Career Woman as part of a breakthrough generation in the historical process of American society was founded on the highly hyped myth that “you really could have it all,” and that this pursuit would bring fulfillment and joy. For most, it was instead an invitation to burnout and frustration. Career women began to more seriously examine the difference between the reality and the illusion of the imagery of the Successful Career Woman. They come to
understand a challenge they now share with men—that they “have” both career and marriage/family but are enslaved by an externally successful career and are minimal participants in marriage and family.

Levinson (1996) found that women who had chosen the path of a homemaker experienced a common mid-life challenge. By mid-life, most had been through a “rock bottom” marriage experience. Typically, these women’s marriages are reported as stagnant or arid; the husband, though not a bad man, is emotionally absent and disinterested in intimacy. Homemakers during mid-life transition report feeling isolated and used up. Because they chose the homemaker path for the more positive goals of marriage, family, intimacy, and relationships, they face their own version of the same requirement for mid-life introspection and to ponder questions of identity, meaning, and purpose, but with a greater sense of urgency than ever before.

Lawrence Kohlberg’s six stages of human development include the Impulsive, the Opportunist, the Diplomat, the Technician, the Achiever, and the Strategist. Even among managers, only 40% score at the Achiever level, and among Americans, fewer than 9% score at the Strategist level. The problem with this information is that the type of expanded third-person perspective that allows us to objectively explore our true natures through introspection only exists in those who have reached the Achiever level, according to adult developmental theory (Cook-Greuter, 1990). Leaders who would seize the opportunity to re-imagine the second half of their lives can do so by
adopting an intentional approach to crucial transition decisions. Their search will need to be characterized by choice, rather than chance. They will focus on options more than on affluence. And, having demonstrated and developed their ability, they will now focus on availability. These are the components of a change in mindset for the leader seeking a mid-life transition to a balanced life that aligns gifts, passion and experience.

Nurmi and Salmela-Aro (2006) differentiate middle age developmental tasks from those associated with adolescence by identifying the importance of assisting children to become happy adults, achieving adult social and civic responsibilities, reaching and maintaining satisfactory performance in one’s career, developing leisure activities, relating to one’s spouse, and accepting the physiological changes of middle life. This list is incomplete, because it omits the role of identifying or refining one’s sense of identity, meaning, and purpose. To be fair to Nurmi and Salmela-Aro, they are merely referencing earlier research by Nurmi (1992), in which she reports that 45–50-year-olds mentioned goals concerning health, children’s lives, and leisure activities; and that 55–4 year-olds had many goals concerning health, leisure activities, and world politics. Nurmi also noted in this study that all age groups reported many occupation- and property-related goals. Note the absence of others-focused goals, altruistic goals, or goals focused on a cause greater than oneself. The power of these categories of goals in mid-life and beyond is evident in the literature I will present on positive psychology, meaning, happiness, and flourishing. Indeed,
related research efforts revealed that self-related goals are associated with low measures of subjective well-being (Salmela-Aro, Pennanen, & Nurmi, 1996) and life satisfaction (Cross & Markus, 1991), and that increasing one’s focus on such goals leads to an increase in depressive symptoms (Salmela-Aro, et al., 1996).

Nurmi and Salmela-Aro (2006) link goal-setting, motivation, happiness, and introspection in the following way. First, people who think their goals are in congruence with their inherent needs report a high level of well-being. Moreover, people who report that they are committed to their goals, who believe they can control their goals, and who estimate that their goals have progressed well also show higher well-being. In other words, being optimistic about one’s possibilities of attaining goals that originate out of one’s internal needs provides a basis for happiness. Second, the life-span approach to motivation suggests that those who have personal goals that help them to deal with the demands and opportunities of the particular life period in which they are living experience well-being and happiness. Moreover, the adjustment of one’s personal goals to match the changes in these demands and options owing to either new role transitions or the outcome of an individual’s efforts to attain his or her previous goals provides a basis for thinking that life is worth living. The authors add a caution, however, stating that their research shows excessive self-focus to be problematic. They speculate that this may lead to what they call ruminative thinking. They warn, “Although we all need to sometimes think about ourselves and evaluate our potential for changing ourselves,
continuous self-focus tends to lead to a low sense of well-being” (p. 193). These conclusions about the positive correlations between motivation, goal-setting, and optimism and measures of subjective well-being were validated in similar research by Sheldon (2006). Sheldon concludes that those who can learn how to adapt to the opportunities afforded to the second half of life can look forward to ever-fuller meanings and satisfactions in later life.

Consequently, a healthy approach to mid-life introspection should include balance of the many dynamics at play, as identified above. Nurmi and Salmela-Aro (2006) point out that even more important than individual motives or living conditions is the extent to which people are able to match their motives to the demands and opportunities they are facing, to adjust one’s personal goals in ways that optimize the likelihood of coping effectively with one’s current life context. People who have problems in making this adjustment and are unable or unwilling to change their previous goals may end up feeling unhappy. The value of a mid-life introspection experience makes intuitive sense within context of Erikson’s psychosocial theory of motivation, shown in Table 1.

Without sovereignty over our time, it’s nearly impossible to have autonomy over our lives.
—Daniel Pink
Table 1. Four Stages along the Road to Maturity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Level of internalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External: Because I have to</td>
<td>Least Internalized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introjected: Because I ought to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified: Because I choose to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic: Because I want to</td>
<td>Most internalized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Sheldon, 2006, p. 218

Pink (2009) provides a timely resuscitation of an important understanding of motivation that was largely overlooked for decades (Harlow, 1953; Deci, 1975).

Pink’s revival translates their work into a thesis that, once humans’ basic needs are met, what they seek from in life and organizational work are three experiences: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Pink concludes that “people are intrinsically motivated purpose maximizers, not only extrinsically motivated profit maximizers. . . . We’re full-fledged human beings, not single-minded economic robots . . . and for a growing number of people, work is often creative, interesting, and self-directed rather than unrelentingly routine, boring, and other directed” (Pink, 2009, p. 32).

Compliance is essential in an organization and in life, because it reflects discipline and dependability. However, while compliance is an effective strategy for physical survival, it is a lousy one for personal fulfillment. Living a satisfying life requires more than simply meeting the demands of those in control (Pink, 2009).

Intrinsic motivation is more closely aligned with transformational leadership theory, authentic leadership theory, and other emerging models that emphasize a more
respectful understanding of what it means to be human. External motivation is more aligned with the carrot-and-stick approach of transactional leadership theory and too often brings with it unintended negative consequences that undermine people’s intrinsic motivation (Kohn, 1993). Kohn identified the seven deadly flaws of extrinsic motivation as follows:

1. They can extinguish intrinsic motivation.
2. They can diminish performance.
3. They can crush creativity.
4. They can crowd out good behavior.
5. They can encourage cheating, shortcuts, and unethical behavior.
6. They can become addictive.
7. They can foster short-term thinking.

For Pink, the last item is especially troubling. He writes that “greatness and nearsightedness are incompatible. Meaningful achievement depends on lifting one’s sights and pushing toward the horizon” (Pink, 2009, p. 58). To achieve this level of motivation, people seek vocations and leaders that enable people to flourish (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Table 2 presents stages of maturity and the description that characterizes each stage.
Table 2. Four Stages on the Road to Mature Motivation, According to Self-Determination Theory’s Organismic Perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity (late adolescence)</td>
<td>The quest for one’s true character and proper role in society (Waterman, 1982)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy (young adulthood)</td>
<td>The quest for meaningful relations with others and also a life partner (Whitbourne &amp; Tesch, 1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generativity (middle adulthood)</td>
<td>The quest to help the young, create self-defining works, or leave public legacies (McAdams &amp; de St. Aubin, 1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego integrity (late adulthood)</td>
<td>The quest for ego transcendence or for an understanding of one’s place in the ultimate scheme of things (Peck, 1968).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Sheldon, 2006, p. 219*

When people do make positive adjustments, the resulting happiness often leads to the construction of more positive feelings about oneself and one’s life, thereby laying a foundation for a positive life trajectory. However, none of these positive effects occur by accident or through serendipity; they require intentionality and a thoughtful approach to mid-life introspection.

**Self-Awareness**

What people believe about the world and about themselves shapes what people achieve. People’s beliefs about themselves and the nature of their abilities are referred to as “self-theories” and to a great extent determine how people interpret their experience. Self-theories can also bound what people accomplish (Dweck, 1999).

Understanding oneself matters individually, and it matters to those we lead or otherwise engage with. Of all the characteristics essential for leadership of modern
organizations, the most important is self-awareness. A host of ills follow those who lack a fundamental knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, along with the self-mastery to handle them both. And it is only through assiduous attention to the inner life that such self-knowledge can grow (Thompson, 2000).

Some of the more common personal assessment resources include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory, the Clifton StrengthsFinder series, the Center for Creative Leadership’s Worklife Indicator, or any of the professionally-administered 360-degree-feedback programs.

**Personality Traits**

Seligman (2006) argues that the most important research finding in the field of personality of the last quarter of the 20th century is that personality traits are highly heritable (Pinker, 2002). This truth has profound implications. As it adds to people’s self-awareness and their understanding that much of their personality construct is established from birth, they are better advised to invest their energy learning how to apply their traits in a positive way rather than striving to become someone they were not created to be, with strengths and personality attributes they don’t possess.

Kroeger and Thuesen (1988) popularized the ground-breaking work of Katherine Briggs and Isabel Myers, who extrapolated their Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) theory from the work of Carl Jung a half century earlier. Kroeger and Thuesen help understand the 16 personality types and their unique value within the
roles and relationships that comprise one’s life. The MBTI identifies personality types and measures the strength of their expression based on a person’s responses to a batter of preference questions; the instrument does not evaluate them or claim that one is more useful than another. The value and utility is determined by the ability of a person to apply them within their various roles. One strength of the MBTI is that it identifies personality preference profiles based on a person’s self-identification along four spectrums of personality: extraversion versus introversion; intuitive versus sensing perception of the world about us; objective thinkers versus subjective feelers; and rigid judgers versus flexible perceivers. By juxtaposing types against one another, Kroeger and Thuesen explain the unique characteristics of each of 16 personality type combinations. This exercise, properly facilitated, can reveal crucial understanding of oneself, and it can help people appreciate the diversity of personality types in their many relationships. This is especially helpful in understanding team dynamics. If a person has not had the MBTI experience by mid-life, including it in a mid-life introspection is highly valuable.

Creativity
For decades the expectation has been to find a niche, fit in, and contribute effectively. One of the drawbacks of our cultural influence is the devaluation of creativity. Kirton (2003) developed and expanded our understanding of the ways in which people cognitively approach problem solving. His Kirton-Adaptive Inventory gives people the opportunity to learn not whether they are creative, but how they are creative, since his research is built on the premise that all people are creative—but in different ways.
Culture and organizations skew toward an unnecessarily limited view of creativity, depriving them of creativity that remains untapped. Likewise individuals unnecessarily get labeled and too often ignore their own creative approaches to things from engineering to art and policy making.

Creativity is in fact at the core of being human. It is what invites people to ask “What if we tried it this way?” and to see the world about them with a sense of wonder. Creativity is what causes people to be intellectually curious. Without creativity, there is no problem solving, no invention, no inspiration, no new-ness, and no talk of possibility. Without creativity, people might as well be considered automatons with their only goals being survival through continued existence.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes the interconnectedness of creativity in the arts, sciences, medicine, education, and engineering and helps us appreciate its ubiquity. Indeed research itself is a creative process. He walks readers through the nourishing experience of creativity in both youth and adulthood and identifies both amplifiers and barriers in its development. Creativity’s unique contribution to psychologically healthy and intellectually stimulating aging is enlightening and valuable to aging populations in developed societies. Csikszentmihalyi explains the creative process and the importance in recapturing it in both organizational life and in a more holistic approach to personal living.
Creativity is seen in the beauty of Creation, the order of the universe, and the unique approach people can take to each day, each challenge, and each relationship. Learning about, or gaining a renewed appreciation of, creativity is a crucial ingredient to mid-life introspection and well-being as people approach the second half of life.

**Strengths and Weaknesses**
There are tools that can help people understand more about their strengths, creativity styles, personality preferences, and aptitudes. An emerging understanding of the power of focusing on leveraging one’s strengths rather than obsessing over developing one’s weaknesses is rapidly gaining acceptance.

Rath (2007) developed a series of self-assessment instruments to help people learn, understand, and leverage their strengths. His research resulted in a list of 34 strengths and the understanding that people variously gifted can develop themselves individually in unique ways, but come together in community with their complementary strengths. The resulting synergy builds a stronger whole by developing stronger individuals and avoiding the wastefulness of acting as though each person has or should have the same strengths.

Individual strengths exist within a broader context of community. Peterson and Seligman (2004) linked strengths to virtues and happiness to discuss the nature of a truly meaningful life. By their own account, they challenged the conviction of “their relativist friends” that there is no such thing as a set of ubiquitous strengths and
virtues endorsed by almost every culture, religion, and political view. Their research indeed revealed six such virtues and a set of 24 strengths nested under those virtues, shown in Table 3. The first virtue cluster is wisdom and knowledge, with curiosity, love of learning, judgment, creativity, and perspective as the nested strengths. Second is courage, with valor, perseverance and integrity as its strengths. Third is humanity and love, including the strengths of intimacy, kindness, sociability, and intelligence. The fourth is justice, with strengths of citizenship, fairness, and leadership. Fifth is temperance, including the strengths of forgiveness, humility, self-regulation, and prudence.

Table 3. Ubiquitous Virtues and Strengths, Endorsed by Nearly Every Culture, Religion, and Nation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtues</th>
<th>Associated Strengths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>curiosity, love of learning, judgment, creativity, perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>valor, perseverance and integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanity</td>
<td>intimacy, kindness, sociability, intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>citizenship, fairness, leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>forgiveness, humility, self-regulation, prudence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, playfulness, spirituality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 39

The sixth virtue is transcendence, with appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, playfulness, and spirituality nested in it.
Building on this research, Seligman (2002) achieved something rare in today’s literature: He linked this understanding of virtues and strengths with a forgotten—but crucial—understanding of the concept of happiness, and he distinguished three classes of happiness. He differentiates between a classical understanding of happiness articulated by Aristotle and adapted many generations later by Thomas Jefferson and today’s more common understanding of the concept. Seligman identifies three forms of happiness. He describes the first as the “pleasant life,” which consists of feeling as many pleasures as one can and having the skills that amplify those pleasures. People become more adept at amplifying pleasure by controlling the timing of their experience (at first, having the experience as frequently as possible, but later, learning to space and vary them, thereby enhancing the experience through variety). People learn “savoring techniques” (sharing the experience with another person, taking mental photographs, taking physical souvenirs, and storytelling). A third technique for amplifying pleasure is to adopt the Buddhist techniques of mindfulness, to thoughtfully and intentionally weave the sense of pleasure into one’s being. While Seligman comments that this is a perfectly legitimate way to live, he warns that the pleasant life consists merely of having as many of these positive raw feelings as possible, and employing amplifying techniques as one learns them.

The pleasant life, however is not remotely what Aristotle meant by happiness when he expressed the concept as “the engaged life,” or eudaimonia. When one is experiencing happiness in this context, they are experiencing more than pleasure.
They are experiencing the joy of contemplation, of being so fully consumed with an activity that time seems to stop. They are completely absorbed and immersed in what they are doing. People can experience this professionally when their gifts and passion are poured into a calling, whether they are an architect, a teacher, a painter, or myriad other pursuits. This feeling of eudaimonia is also commonly experienced during hobbyists’ unrushed pursuit of their chosen activity, from the woodworker to the seamstress to the backpacker. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls this experience *flow*, and it has extraordinary regenerative effects. The concept is shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Csikszentmihalyi’s Concept of Flow](image)

*Source:* Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 74
While experiencing flow, one is neither bored, nor anxious, one doesn’t question one’s own adequacy. The key to flow is to pursue an activity for its own sake, not for the rewards it brings. In flow, a person “could work around the clock for days on end, for no better reason than to keep on working” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 58). Of this same phenomenon, others have written that the joy of performing the task is its own intrinsic reward (Pink, 2009). Flow often occurs in conditions in which people become independent of the social environment to the degree in which they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments.

Flow requires a heightened sense of autonomy. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) also says this of the experience: “Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, where the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act” (p. 71).

Seligman (2006) hypothesizes that the engaged life consists in identifying one’s signature strengths and recrafting one’s life to use them as much as possible in as many roles of life as possible. According to Seligman, signature strengths have the following hallmarks:

- A sense of ownership and authenticity
- A feeling of excitement while displaying it, particularly at first
- A rapid learning curve as the strength is first practiced
• A sense of yearning to find new ways to use the signature strength
• A feeling of inevitability in using the strength
• Invigoration rather than exhaustion while using the strength
• The creation and pursuit of personal projects that revolve around it
• Joy, zest, enthusiasm, even ecstasy while using it

Leveraging one’s signature strengths increases the experience of flow, but not necessarily pleasure. Seligman (2006) posits that the engaged life is vastly less biologically constrained than the pleasant life and that an essential key to success is to be creative enough to learn more and better ways to employ one’s strengths and virtues.

Seligman (2006) does not leave the issue of happiness there. He identifies a third kind of life that humans crave—a life with no biological constraints at all. He calls it the meaningful life, in which people feel attachments to something larger than themselves. According to Seligman, the larger the thing to which you can credibly attach yourself, the more meaning your life has. The meaningful life takes people beyond the pleasant life or even the engaged life, which he says leave
many people with the gnawing fear that they are “merely fidgeting away unto death” (p. 235). When people live a meaningful life, they apply their signature strengths to the service of something they believe is larger than they are.

**The Concept and Role of Meaning**

A critical mass of empirical evidence supports our increasing awareness that personal meaning is important not only for survival, but also for our health and well-being (Wong & Fry, 1998). Frankl (1959) expounded on the will to survive and the role of meaning in our lives, and we have since seen evidence that meaning seeking is a primary human motivation deeply rooted in human nature. Frankl’s work influenced the medical profession to look beyond negative health issues requiring treatment, and in addition, to include emphasis on positive health measures. Korotkov (1998) describes how Antonovsky (1979) proposed the metaconcept of *salutogenesis* to replace the more conventional, pathogenetic, study of the origin of disease. This more positive approach to wellness led him to introduce the Sense of Coherence dispositional construct, a composite measure comprised of three variables—comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness—which he called the measure’s core sub-construct. Meaning and meaningfulness are directly correlated with healthy living.

The main characteristic of a meaningful life, according to Leontiev (2006), is that it is mediated by mental contents, by the world we build. His theory on personality development measures agency (or spirituality), freedom, and responsibility, and he
concludes that the greater the measure of each of these three axes, higher the level of autonomy and meaning a person experiences, as shown in Figure 2.

*Source:* Leontiev, 2006, p. 57

**Figure 2. Leontiev’s Autonomy Measure**

Activity mediation is the heart of personal autonomy and agency. He emphasizes that at least half of the positive psychology core virtues (Seligman, 2002) are associated with the strong capacity to mediate one’s actions. Leontiev cites challenge of such mediation as the reason that it is difficult and rare for people to achieve this level of human function—the building of a meaningful world.
Personal attributes such as creativity, flexibility, adaptation, intelligence, inquisitiveness, and responsibility are central to meaning seeking (Wong, 1998b). Inquisitive people who reach out to others and are open to new experience are more likely to find meaning in their lives. Thus, research is revealing an emerging value in being inquisitive about life to find greater meaning.


Wong (1998a) concludes with some sweeping statements relevant to this paper. Fair treatment emerged as an important source of personal meaning, suggesting a social responsibility to promote justice and equity and that people cannot achieve fully meaningful lives in an unjust, discriminating or oppressive society. He adds that hedonistic pursuit is not part of an idealized meaningful life, suggesting that happiness does not depend on the pursuit of pleasurable activities, but results from meaning seeking activities defined in the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP). He argues that his research has revealed a prototypical structure of a meaningful life that

*Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom. But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand.*
—Job 32:7–8
provides an objective frame of reference to assess the meaningfulness of individuals’ life pursuits.

This is a crucial understanding for considering decision making, meaning, and value-centered commitments to life paths. This view makes it possible to dismiss negative or antisocial decisions and leadership styles from the body of life-meaning or fulfillment discussion. It places a positivist requirement on the notion of meaningfulness. Thus, Hitler’s genocide and Stalin’s purges are not “meaningful,” even though each had a clear and plainly spoken purpose. Likewise, the meaninglessness of nihilism has no place in the conversation. The same is true of sociopathic leadership associated with cult movements. The requirement for fair treatment, community relationship, and self-transcendence has been demonstrated by empirical research, and this evidence corroborates the major role that personal meaning plays in well-being. Wong (1998a) concludes that “a meaningful life is necessarily a fulfilling life” (p. 131).

Baumeister and Vohs (1991, 2002) asserted that our enduring quest for meaningful lives has been shaped by four needs that comprise our sense of meaning: purpose, efficacy, value, and self-worth. Baumeister and Sommer (1998) argue that a sense of purpose

*Meaninglessness inhibits the fullness of life and can, therefore, be equated with illness; meaningfulness makes a great many things endurable, perhaps everything.* —Carl Jung
comes closest to people’s conceptions of life meaning. Their discussion of forming new goals when old goals have been reached is especially relevant to the notion of transitioning from early career success to later notions of significance and aligning one’s purpose, gifts, and passions. A sense of purpose exists when a person believes they are here for a reason, whether that reason is self-chosen, assigned by society, or revealed by God. Purpose is often characterized by a continual pursuit of higher meaning, which is again particularly relevant to mid-life searches and career decisions. Pink (2009) synopsizes the notion of purpose well:

We’re not destined to be passive and compliant. We’re designed to be active and engaged. And we know that the richest experiences don’t occur when we’re clamoring for validation from others, but when we’re listening to our own voice—doing something that matters, doing it well, and doing it in the service of a cause larger than ourselves. . . . It is an affirmation of our humanity. (p. 146)

People desire a sense of control over their circumstances and outcome. This need for control, often described in terms of efficacy, is integrally related to purpose. It provides a logical connection between events and choices—a connection that reveals a sense of predictability. Heatherton and Nichols (1994) relate life narratives that link success to life goal reappraisal, and in turn, to shifts in life meaning. This reinforces the notion that people often follow goal achievement with new goals as a means of maintaining a sense of purpose.

Ebersole (1998) argues that discovering life meanings often demand complex skills that the beginner does not have and for which they will not receive early external
rewards. In this context, dreaming performs a valuable role in helping people persevere toward their goals as the necessary life skills emerge. This is another reason to focus on the unique nature of mid-life introspection and sense making. The motivational function of meaning helps people decide what is worth pursuing and what needs to be removed from their lives. Over time, there is only room in life for what we understand to be central to our personal meaning. Tyson (1994) provides a valuable service by commenting on Ebersole’s research on “obtaining.” She warns that people are vulnerable to cultural pressure to establish values, some of which are not conducive to a positive understanding of a meaningful life.

**Meaning and Being Human**

Frankl (1959) introduced *logotherapy* to the world. “Therapy through meaning” was the result of his experience in Nazi concentration camps and his conclusions about what differentiates human life and meaning from all other existence. He concluded, among other things, that people’s innate “will to meaning”, rather than their striving for pleasure, power, or wealth is the strongest motivation in the human race. Even in cases where people do not have freedom or the possibility of chosen experiences to find meaning, they can still express meaningful attitudes in meaningless situations. According to Frankl (1967), life challenges people with demands to which they must respond if they are to lead a fulfilled life. Additionally, he argues that a misplaced desire for homeostasis is not healthy, and that instead, a reasonable amount of tension is necessary to arouse the search for meaning that is inherent in human existence. In other words, we need the challenge to actualize our meaning. Frankl thereby makes a
significant argument against the mid-20th century’s momentum toward an assumed right to unlimited self-actualization regardless of the consequences. Logotherapy presumes instead that the freedom to find meaning is limited by people’s obligation to respond to the demands that come from some suprahuman dimension (Fabry, 1968). Some people see these demands coming from God. Others respond to what they see as a life force in the universe. Still others believe they come from nature, science or morality. Wong (1998a) argues that whatever people’s motivation, their search for meaning is occurring in an orderly universe.

Fabry (1988) links the human spirit to the discussion, calling it a resource from which people can draw strength and fulfillment. The human spirit is composed of the search for meaning, goal orientation, an awareness of the past that teaches people and a future toward which they can plan, self-transcending love, and a conscience that tells them how to advance beyond instinctive reaction to thoughtful responses to the demands of life. According to Fabry, whatever the motivation or source of inspiration, each person must respond to this call to meaning in order to lead a life worthy of being called human. He expresses the concern for meaning this way: “Unless we do change our whole way of thinking about work, I do not think we shall ever escape from the appalling squirrel-cage of economic confusion in which we have been madly turning for the last three centuries or so” (p. 68). Willis Harman (1991) argues that no need is so compelling as the need we all feel for our lives to make sense or to have meaning.
Reker and Wong (1988) stress the increasing importance of the concept of meaning in the second half of life. As people age they tend to integrate their personal biography into a larger context of meaning. Some sources of meaning are moral and religious ideals and altruistic and socioemotional goals. For example, they cite friendship, love, and intimacy as examples of these more-intrinsic, time-transcendent dimensions of meaning.

Tillich (1963) emphasized religion and spirituality within the quest for the ultimate meaning of human existence: “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life” (p. 6). Allport (1950) adds that religion enables people to understand an incomprehensible universe and is essential to their total health:

The single fact that weighs against [a] secular solution is the ever insistent truth that what a person believes to a large extent determines his mental and physical health. What he believes about his business, his associates, his wife, his immediate future, is important; even more so, what he believes about life in general, its purpose and design. Religious belief, simply because it deals with fundamentals, often turns out to be the most important belief of all. (p. 76)

Emmons (1986) speaks of a spiritual quest for the sacred, stating that there is nothing inherently different about religious and spiritual goals in comparison to any other type of goal. Religious and spiritual goals, like other goals, are internal mental
representations of desired states toward which a person has committed to working. Religions recommend the ultimate goal of binding with the sacred and prescribe rituals for its realization. By identifying and committing themselves to spiritual goals, people aspire to develop a relationship to the sacred. He adds that participants report typically trying to “be aware of the spiritual meaningfulness of my life,” “discern and follow God’s will for my life,” “bring my life in line with my beliefs,” and “communicate my faith to other people” (p. 69).

Others studies have affirmed this research. Mahoney and Pargament (in press) found in their study of 150 adults that people tended to place a high priority on strivings they viewed as sacred. They devoted more time and energy to spiritual strivings and derived greater satisfaction and sense of meaning from them relative to strivings that were more self-focused and materially oriented. As Pargament (2002) argued, identifying that which is sacred and striving to protect and preserve the sacred lends deep significance to human existence—one that is difficult to explain through more basic psychological or social levels of description. Emmons cites Bergin (1997), who he describes as a distinguished clinical psychologist for his assertion that if we omit spiritual realities from our account of human behavior, it won’t matter much how we behave.

**The Pursuit of Happiness**
Meaning includes subcategories such as motivation, happiness, and subjective well-being. Nurmi and Salmela-Aro (2006) link motivation to people’s needs and the
values and environments that satisfy those needs. Individuals differ not only in what they find appealing or what they value, but also in their life situations, which provide them with options for satisfying their needs and achieving their goals. This means that there is a range of needs, values, and goals peculiar to those engaging in mid-life introspection. The greater the ability to meet needs and achieve goals, the higher the level of well-being. Early humanistic theories emphasized the role of self-actualization, autonomy, and spirituality in influencing people’s behavior (Maslow, 1987; Rogers, 1961). However, these frameworks have been complemented by emphasis on cognition, self, and social environments in influencing individual motivation (Mischel, Cantor, & Feldman, 1996; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). These newer approaches emphasized the importance of self-constructed personal goals (Karoly, 1993; Nurmi, 1989), projects (Little, 1983), strivings (Emmons, 1986), life tasks, and hoped-for selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) as dynamics that guide people’s motivated behavior. These theories all conceptualize people as forward-looking, self-motivated beings who are capable of determining their own destinies by constructing personally meaningful goals and directing their activities and energy toward attaining these goals.

**Subjective Well-Being**

According to Nurmi and Salmela-Aro (2006) much research has occurred in the United States and Canada to understand the connection between how people think about their personal goals and their subjective well-being. Here are some results: Sheldon and Kasser (1995) found that people who report that their goals are in
congruence with their inherent needs report higher well-being than those who report that their goals are incongruent with their needs. People with intrinsic goals such as self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling report a higher level of well-being than those who report more extrinsic goals such as financial success, materialism, and physical attractiveness (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2000). People with higher levels of commitment and involvement in their goals show higher levels of well-being and lower levels of distress (Brunstein, 1993; Cantor & Fleeson, 1991; McGregor & Little, 1998). Likewise, there is a positive relationship between greater control over the ways in which people’s goals proceed (internal locus of control) and higher levels of well-being (Heckhausen, 1999). People who appraise their personal goals as having progressed well, report high measures of well-being and low stress, whereas those who appraise their goals as having progressed less well report low measures of well-being and high levels of stress and depressive symptoms (Little, 1989; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1996). There is also research demonstrating that resilience and subjective well-being across the lifespan involves the interplay between two different types of adaptive processes (Brandstätter, 1992). One includes the activities through which the actual situation or course of personal development is brought into congruence with personal goals and life themes. The other is the adjustment of goals and ambitions to contextual and personal resource changes. These are referred to as assimilative and accommodative adaptive modes and are integral to a lifelong process of intentional self-development and regeneration. (Brandstätter & Rothermund, 2002a, 2002b; Brandstätter, Wentura, & Rothermund, 1999). They are
also protective mechanisms through which people construct personal continuity over their life course (Brandstätter & Greve 1994), just as the assimilative modes aim at the active realization of desired courses of development and the accommodative processes, by contrast, help people to disengage from barren or unproductive paths or activities. This discussion thread reflects people’s nearly continuous attempt to realize their desired self (Higgins, 1996).

Diener and Seligman (2004) researched subjective well-being in a different way and validated the body of research with complementary work. Seligman moved beyond happiness theory largely because of the results of this study of life satisfaction in various groups. Asking respondents to state the level to which they agree with the statement, “You are satisfied with your life,” Diener and Seligman advanced from the more transient, mood oriented question that had been at the center of previous measures, “Are you happy?” The results are notable, because they defy the long-presumed association between wealth and life satisfaction: Forbes magazine’s 300 richest Americans did in fact score highest, registering 5.8 out of a maximum score of 7.0. But, so did the Pennsylvania Amish and the Inughuit people of northern Greenland. African Masai scored 5.7, above the Swedish probability sample of 5.6. Clearly, something more than wealth accumulation is responsible for people’s measure and report of life-satisfaction.
Additional studies have found important correlations relevant to adult life choices. Studies by Belk (1985), Richins and Dawson (1992), and Kasser and Ryan (1993) all found that people with higher levels of materialistic orientation experienced lower levels of happiness, personal well-being, life satisfaction and vitality than those with lower measures of materialistic orientations. These studies also reported a positive correlation between highly materialistic people and higher rates of depression, anxiety, and narcissism. They also found lower levels of personal well-being and higher levels of distress.

Another problem with strong materialistic value orientation is that it is associated with objectification of people, building a tendency to manipulate others rather than treat them as unique individuals with their own desires, needs, and subjective experiences (Kasser, 2002). This might not concern a self-absorbed person in mid-life, but it would be a concern for a person seeking to align their life toward a more relationally rewarding, socially responsible, community-oriented set of values to guide their choices during the second half of life.

Kasser (2006) suggests three principles to help people increase their well-being and life satisfaction by reducing the negative impacts of materialism. First, decrease the internalization of and institutionalized encouragement for materialistic values. Second, build people’s resistance to materialist actions, values, and influences.
Finally, increase the likelihood that people will act consistently with the healthier, intrinsic values that oppose materialistic values.

Cameron (2012) approaches well-being from the lens of positivity. His research demonstrates how well-being can be variously manifested in both individuals and organizations among a range of measures of negative and positive deviance from “normal.” The result provides a valuable lexicon to understand the current conversation of personal and organizational growth. Taken together, the column in Table 4 portrays virtuousness in the pursuit of a fulfilling life individually, in an organization, and within a community.

**Table 4. Cameron’s Deviance Continuum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Negative Deviance</th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Positive Deviance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiological</td>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Vitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Unprofitable</td>
<td>Profitable</td>
<td>Generous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
<td>Ineffective</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Inefficient</td>
<td>Efficient</td>
<td>Extraordinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Error-prone</td>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>Perfect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Unethical</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td>Benevolent</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative Deviance</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Positive Deviance</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Harmful</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Honoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td>Threat-rigidity</td>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>Flourishing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Cameron, 2012, p. 9

**Well-Being Theory**

During the last few decades, happiness theory has matured to include broader issues of engagement and meaning, as well as subjective well-being as described above.

Most recently, well-being theory has taken positive psychology to a new level (Seligman, 2011). Seligman develops five elements of well-being theory: First, positive emotion includes life satisfaction and happiness as described in happiness theory (Seligman, 2002). Second, engagement is the state of *flow* described by Csikszentmihalyi. Third, positive relationships demonstrate the role of other people in one’s life. George Vaillant of Harvard calls this the capacity to be loved.

Research shows that successful positive relationships are characterized by a positive-to-negative statement of 5 to 1 (Cameron, 2012). Fourth, meaning contributes to well-being because it offers an objective and dispassionate judgment of history, logic, and coherence to balance the subjective state of joy brought by the satisfaction of pursuing meaningful activities. Last, accomplishment not for achievement or even enjoyment, but

*Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.*

—Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization, 1946
accomplishment for its own sake demonstrates what humans will do when free from coercion and free to choose how to invest their energy. As Seligman shows in Table 5, the goal of well-being theory is to increase flourishing individually and on the planet.

**Table 5. Authentic Happiness Theory and Well-Being Theory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authentic Happiness Theory</th>
<th>Well-Being Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic: happiness</td>
<td>Topic: well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure: life satisfaction</td>
<td>Measures: positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal: increase life satisfaction</td>
<td>Goal: increase flourishing by increasing positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Seligman, 2011, p. 12*

Well-being theory states that to flourish, a person must exhibit all the core features and three of the six additional features. Felicia Huppert and of the University of Cambridge measured the level of flourishing in 23 European nations by administering asking questions about the six additional features to more than 2,000 adults in each of those 23 nations. She found that Denmark leads Europe with 33% of its adult population experiencing the condition of flourishing. By way of reference, 18% of the United Kingdom is flourishing, and Russia is last, with just 6%. The implications for a fulfilling second half of life are clear by this extended research on happiness,
subjective well-being, and well-being theory. Features of Seligman’s (2011) well-being theory are shown in Table 6:

Table 6. Seligman’s Features of Well-Being Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core features</th>
<th>Additional features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement, interest</td>
<td>Optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning, purpose</td>
<td>Resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Seligman, 2011, p. 27*

The Nature of Choice

People conducting a mid-life introspection do so to inform a future of their choice.

Researchers have learned two important links between decision making and life meaning: Large decisions matter because the larger the decision, the greater the impact on personal meaning. But, the accumulation of small decisions builds personal meaning as well. What matters most is whether the decisions point us toward new experience (Kierkegaard, 1954; Maddi, 1970; May, 1967). These authors assert that deciding in a way that projects us into the future requires us to use symbolization, imagination, and judgment to construe our ongoing experience as either different or similar to earlier ones but warranting a course of action that is different from what was done before. Other researchers provide further context, having discovered that
what makes life worth living depends to a large extent on what people themselves consider desirable (Brandtstadter, 1992; Greve, 2001).

Choosing the future is inherently stimulating because it provokes new observations and insights, because it requires dreaming of a vision of that future, and because merely sharing the idea with others results in a response from them and thus changes them in a small way. Understanding this dynamic can help us appreciate the nature of mid-life career change or recommitment. Focusing on the future energizes people, keeps them mentally and physically vital, and improves their overall wellness through the excitement of new experiences we anticipate. In fact, Maddi (1970, 1998) argues that continuous engagement of realistically dreaming about the future can be such a vigorous exercise in symbolization that it produces streams of new ideas of what is possible and desirable as people align their values with emerging preferences. The result is that each person over time becomes more “thoughtful, complex, and individualistic” through this process of psychological growth, leaving behind the “herd mentality of simplistic, static aspects of cultural values and social norms” (Maddi, 1998, p. 8).

This experience contrasts sharply with the experience of one who stagnates in mid-life and excessively relives the past, instead of continuing to think of future opportunity. Maddi (1998) warns that choosing the past
produces an information-starved central nervous system and mind, where everything seems increasingly the same and cognitive acuity declines. . . . Desperately attempting to overcome this malaise is a reason why some people who regularly choose the past end up continually criticizing and complaining, though they would never risk doing anything to solve the problems they identify. (p. 6)

This is the tragic profile of too many of today’s senior citizens, who were once successful by culture’s materialistic measure but who now find themselves unsatisfied, and often alone, confused, and bitter.

**Alignment**

We are entrusted with gifts and a certain amount of time to align them with our passion to make a positive difference. Reeb (2004) explains the importance of alignment this way:

For the first half of life, it did not matter how I felt about my work; what mattered was my effectiveness. . . . [Many of us] turn our attention to our careers after college. We enjoy the thrill of early wins, the promotions and good performance reviews, mixed in with periodic disappointments. Our all-consuming focus is our work. If we are married, we spend these years learning to adjust to each other. Little children often add to the challenge of just making life work. It’s about creating our identity and building our career. . . . I benchmarked myself not on how enjoyable the experience felt, but solely on my productivity. I did not understand that the two are inextricably connected. . . . If you delight in your God-given passion, He will give you the desires of your heart, because He put them there. (p. 31)

Cain (2012) discusses the power of mid-life reconsideration of our identity, passions, and desires. She identifies three key steps to understanding one’s core self and personal projects. First, people should think back to what they loved to do when they
were a child and what their childhood dreams for grown up vocations were. She asserts that those dreams also included a more pure, less cluttered, understanding of people’s passions and gifts. Second, people can pay attention to what work they gravitate to today. Things that recapture our attention tend to do so because they reach something deeper inside our psyche than the daily items on our task list. Finally, people should take notice of what they envy. She writes, “Jealousy is an ugly emotion, but it tells the truth. You mostly envy those who have what you desire” (p. 172). Some of these things merit scrutiny, because they might indicate a responsible new direction that aligns one’s passion, gifts, and life experience.

Others assert that alignment is about congruence through all aspects of one’s life (Thompson, 2000). He advances four points. First, he explains the importance of meaning and purpose in the context of people’s work or vocation in the 21st century. Second, he identifies a growing need for spirituality in work, though he cites that people rarely call it that, and he qualifies his principle: “It is not the substance of the work that makes it more or less ‘spiritual’ but our approach to it” (p. 6). Third, congruence recognizes that organizational leadership is about unification, development, growth, and maturation focused on inner spirit more than outer strivings. Finally, he writes that such inspired leadership won’t just be a differentiator among competitors or a luxury among comfortable organizations, but an essential element to meet the challenges of the future. Thompson summarizes his theory, asserting:
Not only does personal spiritual growth foster qualities and traits that both adult developmental theory and depth psychology have identified with the highest stages of human development, but these are just the qualities and traits most needed for life and leadership in the workplace of the 21st century. (p. 69)

For Thompson, it is crucial that we challenge the assumptions of Cartesian duality that guides our assumptions and reconsider life in a panoramic, holistic oneness as it once was and can be again. A 20th- and 21st-century perversion of this return to oneness has been to make all of life part of our work. Instead, Thompson offers two exemplars with truer and more sustainable models: Saint Benedict famously stated *Ora et labora* (‘To work and to pray’), reflecting the early monastic tradition that work was life and life was work. Likewise, Clement of Alexandria instructed the religious to weave physical labor with spiritual reading and prayer, as recorded in the words of a monk working in the monastery’s kitchen:

> The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and the noise and clatter of my Kitchen . . . I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament. (Brother Lawrence, 1989, p. 55)

Thompson reminds that this point of unity between life and work was among the foundation of Martin Luther’s theology that all vocations could serve God equally valuably [meaning and purpose]. With this mindset, no kind of work is more valuable than another, and all work is capable of meeting core needs for meaning and purpose, since people give meaning, value, and importance to work, rather than drive meaning from it, as is so often mistakenly conveyed today (Thompson, 2000). If society can
recapture this understanding, we can value those in the trades as we once did, and people do not need to be told by culture and our most senior political leaders that those among us who did not achieve a certain, culturally assigned level of education are not worthy of respect.

Thompson (2000) proceeds even more boldly with a three-point explanation of what alignment means for a meaningful life. First, he asserts people must be open to a higher power, paving the way for an encounter that transcends their “personal concerns and petty fears” (p. 67). Allowing spirituality into one’s life is a decision to search beyond what one can do within oneself, to see the inadequacy of the self that would otherwise tackle life’s challenges alone or solely with material props, and then to be open to a transcendent source of meaning (Vaill, 1996). Second, he says spirituality requires that people acknowledge the higher power they’ve opened themselves to as the ultimate source of meaning and value, removing the human ego and almost all precepts of secular humanism from the discussion. Finally, people open to the existence and role of a higher power must be prepared to align themselves with that power and its aims. He describes this as more than a covenant relationship than a mere commitment, and he offers an Eastern perspective as an example:

To those identified with Tao,
Tao will gladly extend welcome.
To those identified with virtue,
Virtue will gladly extend welcome.
To those identified with failure,
Failure will gladly extend welcome.

This description of alignment in both Eastern and Western religious tradition helps people to understand it as a quest or a journey that one pursues but never masters.

**Discovery**

In the late teens and early adulthood, many people experience a period of discovery, during which they learn about themselves and find their identity. This occurs during mid-life introspection, too, but the experience is often more profound because learning this time is built on a foundation of decades of adult experience that provides context for the revelations. Much of this discovery occurs during a period of introspection that some call “halftime.”

Reeb (2004) and Buford (2008) refer to mid-life transition as “halftime,” leveraging culture’s understanding of sporting events’ built-in time to rest, reflect on the first half, and make adjustments to improve performance in the second half. Reeb identified some important questions leaders should consider as they embark upon a journey of discovery during their transition period.

1. Is there more to life than just this?

2. Is being an ethical leader in the marketplace enough?

3. Could I really make a significant difference in people’s lives by taking an active role in service to others, or should I focus on making money and giving financially to support the work of others?
4. Given all the obligations in my life, such as my marriage, family, work, and lifestyle choices, how can I create enough space in life to pursue significance?

5. What have I been equipped and prepared to do, that can make an eternal difference in the lives of others? (Reeb, p. 23)

These questions can help people thoughtfully experience a self-assessment process, develop a personal mission statement, and conceive a vision for the best fit of their goals. At halftime, most of us know ourselves much better than we did a couple decades earlier. Reeb (2004) discovered three realizations: First, a person of faith must look at their scriptural guidance for direction. Second, those not equipped as strategic thinkers probably need assistance with the process and its emotional component. Third, people in transition need to temporarily set aside all the legitimate life constraints that keep them from dreaming or being creative. Reeb recommends the following steps in the process. To develop a vision statement, leaders should ask,

1. Why am I here on Earth?

2. What gives my life meaning?

3. How much material wealth is enough?

4. What people or causes do I feel most strongly about? (Reeb, p. 58)

To guide reflection, leaders should ask themselves,

1. What are my core values and my strengths?
2. In what efforts have I been successful?

3. What are my spouse’s thoughts about this introspective experience?

4. What am I passionate about? (Reeb, p. 59)

To expose themselves to diverse opportunities for considerations, leaders should ask themselves,

1. Am I best suited for service in business, in a ministry, in education, or in non-profit organizations?

2. How can I find sustainable margin and balance in my life so that I can offer the best of my talents to my new endeavor?

3. What legacy do I plan to leave to my children and grandchildren?

4. What responsibilities do I have to my aging parents? (Reeb, p. 60)

To experience enduring impact, leaders should ask themselves,

1. How do I choose among serving opportunities?

2. What are the best ways to align my gifts, passions and experience?

3. What is my highest and best contribution?

4. How do my choices honor my God and give Him a chance to honor my new direction?

5. What impact do I want to make? (Reeb, p. 61)

Thompson (2000) reports that many affluent people who embark on this journey of discovery soon learn that they have become trapped in what he calls a gilded cage:
the lifestyle afforded by their salary. Though they are sensing a call to change vocations or pursue a path that would better align their gifts and their sense of purpose or meaning, they have accrued too much debt or become too wedded to too many luxuries to make the change without making a sacrifice larger than they are willing to make.

Discovery during a mid-life introspection experience requires the ability to continue learning. Learning, in turn, requires the willingness to accept and acknowledge failure. By mid-life, people have experienced failure and tragedy, and in most cases, at least one of these losses has been very serious. Loss by itself is not tragic, though. What is tragic is the failure to grasp the opportunity which loss represents (Greenleaf, 1977). Finding and pondering that opportunity takes time and patience. Every loss recapitulates earlier losses, but every affirmation of identity echoes earlier moments of clarity. New beginnings don’t happen overnight, and often continuity is only visible in retrospect (Bateson, 1989).

When an emotionally mature, reasonably well developed adult experiences mid-life, disappointments, failures and tragedies are still learning opportunities. In the Western tradition, people of faith typically agree with St. Augustine that “God permits evil only in so far as he is capable of transforming it into a good” (St. Augustine, trans. 1991). This is an abiding optimism and positivity that appears as a compassionate and graceful presence to others. Mid-life introspection can be the learning and self-
discovery experience that redefines a person’s life for decades. This is not about learning skills for work or for a hobby; this is *learning how to live* (Thompson, 2000).

**Significance**

Reeb (2004) argues that pursuing significance requires people to give themselves away. M. Clark (personal communication, 2004) puts it this way: “We can live lives of significance or lives of comfort, but not both.” There are many ways to measure significance: newly found life balance, spiritual renewal and development, family financial stability, restored marital or other family relationships, or a re-emerging priority—lives changed for earthly quality of life improvement and eternal benefit.

Those who live the most fully realized lives— giving back to their families, societies, and ultimately themselves— tend to find meaning in their obstacles. Generative adults see setbacks as blessings (Cain, 2012). Levinson (1978) produced research in which executives told his research team “with quiet eagerness” of their intention to retire from business early, perhaps at 50 or 55, so they could devote themselves not to making a profit or achieving production objectives, but to working on improving the quality of life for others. Such decisions rarely happen on a whim but are instead a result of careful thought and preparation. Mid-life introspection can accommodate those prerequisites.
Pink (2009) applies his understanding of human motivation to direct the notions of autonomy, mastery, and especially purpose toward transcendent living. He cites as examples the mid-life person who leaves a lucrative job for a low-paying one with a clearer sense of purpose and generativity and the person who works to master the clarinet with no intent to ever perform for pay.

Clearly there is more to motivation in the long arc of life than some balance than some activity-based, profit-based, or outcome-based balance sheet.

Motivation can come, instead from an “aligned” understanding of one’s work as self-development or life growth, as service, and as vocation or calling and in all three cases using one’s gifts as exemplified in the parable of the talents recorded in Matthew 25:14-30 (Thompson, 2000). People can see this as reimagining and rebuilding their lives. For Americans today, composing a life means integrating one’s own commitment with the differences created by change and the differences that exist between the peoples of the world with whom we increasingly come into contact. Because we have an altered sense of the possible, mid-life introspection can reveal new meanings and new life choices (Bateson, 1989).
Legacy
A basic human need is to create a legacy and to extend one’s influence beyond the immediate time frame (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002). Legacy is also linked to meaning, demonstrating the interconnectedness of all these concepts associated with leadership, organizational performance, and adult development (Cameron & Lavine, 2006).

Imagery of the legacy tends to flourish during mid-life, as one ponders the emerging arc of his or her life. A person’s legacy is what they pass on to future generations: material possessions, creative products, enterprises, or (often most enduringly) influence on others. People differ enormously in their views about what constitutes a legacy, and the real value of a person’s legacy is difficult to measure, but in one’s mind, it is powerful because it defines to a large degree the ultimate value of a person’s life—and their claim on immortality (Levinson, 1978). For many people at mid-life, their work is the most significant component of the life structure and the major source of legacy. However, legacy can also include familial and community priorities. Levinson adds that metering the desire for legacy is important, because too unchecked a pursuit of legacy can become obsessive and destructive, whereas a legacy desire that is stifled by levels of failure or disappointment that one is unable to overcome can lead to a loss of belief in one’s value and a denial that anything is worth bequeathing to family or community. In every season of life, a person is likely to feel the need to generate a legacy. But, the time during the mid-life transition offers the greatest meaning of legacy and the greatest development significance, and
approached properly, the effort to create a valued legacy can be a tremendously enriching aspect of middle adulthood.

Reeb (2004) asks “What does God have for us to do that will outlast us? How can I hold what I have loosely enough that it can be transformed into something that can never be taken away?” (p. 35) The Apostle Paul counseled in 1 Timothy that those who have resources to do good should be rich in doing good deeds, and to be generous, and that this is true life.

**Gaps in the Research Literature**
Existing research does not explicitly address the essence of the mid-life introspection experience. As the text above demonstrates, there is abundant research on issues related to mid-life introspection, generally among the precedent or antecedent experiences. However, the existing literature does not take us inside the mind of those who have experienced a mid-life introspection. It does not describe the difference between a difficult-and-destructive mid-life crisis and a difficult-but-empowering mid-life introspection. Current literature does not provide a framework or a methodology for conducting a thought, highly intentional mid-life introspection experience. Finally, it does not describe the outcome of a successful mid-life introspection experience. This research begins to fill this gap by addressing all these aspects of the mid-life introspection experience.
Chapter 3: Research Approach and Methods

People naturally have a tendency to go on autopilot. . . . We fall into ruts. . . . Once you start making the effort to “wake yourself up”—that is, be more mindful in your activities — you suddenly start appreciating life a lot more.
—Robert Biswas-Diener

Research Approach

This research required the use of a qualitative approach, because the topic is especially well suited to address the nine arguments laid forth for qualitative research by Maxwell (2005). Within the body of qualitative research, I employ a transcendental phenomenological study methodology to explore the research question, “What is the nature of mid-life introspection?” Using a phenomenological approach is appropriate because of its prominence in the fields of sociology (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992) and psychology (Giorgi, 1985, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Exploring the nature of mid-life introspection draws heavily on the literature of both sociology and psychology. Creswell (2013) explains that a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences relating a concept or phenomenon . . . describing what all participants have in common during their experience . . . The inquirer collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals [to understand] what they experienced and how they experienced it. (p. 76)

The purpose of phenomenology is to reduce conscious, individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence, or as Van Manen (1990) states, to attain a “grasp of the very nature of the thing” (p. 177).
The phenomenon explored in this research is mid-life introspection. A phenomenological study offers neither explanations nor analyses of the experience. Instead, it is a description of the experience. Stewart and Mickunas (1990) ascribe to phenomenology a philosophy containing certain philosophical assumptions. First, it is a method of research that avoids presuppositions, thus requiring the suspension of judgment. Therefore, I began the study with no hypothesis and no expectations of what I would find. I entered only with the desire to learn from the information that emerges. Second, phenomenology assumes that the reality of an object or experience (in this case, the mid-life introspection) is inextricably linked to one’s consciousness of it, reaching back to the dual Cartesian nature of subjects and objects. Thus, the reality of the object or experience reveals itself only within the meaning of each individual experiencing the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

My research is further described within the body of phenomenological research as transcendental phenomenology, in which Moustakas (1994) explains that the researcher attempts to express the description “freshly, as if for the first time” (p. 34). Moustakas uses Husserl’s (1931) concept of epoché, or bracketing, to set aside one’s experience to focus as much as possible on the phenomenon under examination. In my study, I follow Creswell’s observation by describing my own experience with the phenomenon of mid-life introspection and bracketing out my views before proceeding with the study of the experience of others. Later in this paper, I will convey the results
of this transcendental phenomenological research with procedures illustrated by Moustakas (1994) and earlier by Colaizzi (1978) and Van Kaam (1966). After collecting information through interviews as described in the research design below, I continued to follow Creswell’s explanation of the presentation of transcendental phenomenological research, analyzing the data by reducing the information to significant statements and quotes, combining statements in to themes, and developing the following descriptions:

- An historical description of the journey leading to a mid-life introspection decision (backgrounds of the participants)
- A textural description of the experiences (what participants experienced)
- A structural description of the experiences (how the mid-life introspections were approached, encouraged, and facilitated)
- A textural description of the outcomes of the experiences (what the participants chose to do as a result of their mid-life introspection experiences)
- Textural descriptions to convey by inductive reasoning a proposed definition of mid-life introspection (what the participants perceived as their own definition of their experiences)
- A textural description of the overall essence of the mid-life introspection experience

To capture the results of the research, I present a descriptive passage as described by Creswell (2013) and Polkinghorne (1989) that will allow the reader to conclude, “I
understand better what it is like for someone to experience the phenomenon of mid-life introspection” (p. 46).

**Methodological Considerations**

**Role of researcher and participants**
In this study, I take a scholarly approach to researching a phenomenon that is very personal to me. I am both the researcher and a participant. I am emerging from mid-life introspective experience, which has been a deep, revealing experience leading to a confident commitment toward a calling in the next season of my life. Thus, I am a participant, since at least some part of this research must be influenced by my own experience. Importantly, however, my primary role is that of scholarly researcher. I have taken steps to avoid unduly influencing the research results, by taking care to bracket my experience from the research, phrasing interview questions without anchoring them or driving toward preconceived notions; by using interviewing techniques that ensure the participant has multiple, unconstrained opportunities to share their experience; and by conducting multiple coding exercises to avoid arriving at a subconscious, pre-determined conclusion.

**Research Strategy**
The research design includes interviews of nine people who have experienced a deep mid-life introspection. Additionally, I interviewed spouses of six of those nine people to obtain a different perspective of the same phenomenon. This volume of interview activity fits within Polkinghorne’s (1989) recommendation of 5 to 25 interviews. Moreover, although phenomenological studies require all the participants to have
shared the experience being studied—which necessarily narrows the sampling range—within that range, I have been able to ensure a measure of diversity of participants’ backgrounds, following the practice of seeking understanding from as broad a spectrum of perspectives as possible (Creswell, 2013).

My research relied primarily on purposeful sampling, both random and stratified. Random purposeful sampling provides credibility in a participant population that could have grown large. Although I knew some of the participants, I did not know all of them, so when a person was presented to me who shared the common requirement of a deep, mid-life introspection experience, I included that person to add the randomness. Stratified purposeful sampling allowed me to identify subgroups of experiences within the phenomenon of mid-life introspection while enabling comparisons within the body of interviews. In addition to purposeful sampling methods, I employed a subset of secondary sampling methods. Confirming and disconfirming narratives allowed me to elaborate on initial analysis, as well as understand exceptions and variations. Intensity sampling provided information-rich exploration of the phenomenon of mid-life introspection. Finally, opportunistic sampling helped me follow new or unplanned leads to take advantage of unexpected interview opportunities (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By building three qualities into my research design, I further enhanced my ability to obtain the data I needed to write a rich narrative of the nature of mid-life introspection. The research design was continuous, flexible, and adaptable. Even though I began with an approved research
design, the naturalistic approach and interpretive constructionist philosophy (see interview design below), it was appropriate to this research to continuously redesign the study throughout my project, not in fundamental ways but in the pursuit of emergent pathways toward my goal that I had not anticipated at the outset of the research. Flexibility enabled me to explore new insights as they emerged from interviews with my conversational partners. Adaptability made it possible to accommodate the unanticipated loss of two interviewees and the addition of three new ones. It is under the notion of adaptability that I also realized the importance of the pre-interview conversation to help participants understand how and where they would like to meet me, conversationally, as they prepared to tell their stories (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Deep, detailed interviews encouraged the participants to tell share pieces of their mid-life introspection experience through an initial explanation, followed by clarifying questions in a conversational format. Interview depth was possible only by getting past superficial answers to a point of trust and vulnerability. Once there, the interviewee provided rich examples and stories of the history, context, and conflicts in their own mind as they walked the road of mid-life introspection. This allowed me to understand layers of meaning and to begin to see parts of the narrative emerge. Detail was gained through the use of follow-up questions to learn more of the finer points in the mind of the interviewee. Only by probing and clarifying was I able to get data buried in the mind of the participant to reveal itself through the spoken word
The combination of depth and detail provided the richness and nuance required of qualitative interviews, and the responsive interview was the best tool to use to obtain those qualities in data for this research topic. During these interviews, I suspended my own understanding and expectations as a sign of respect for the interviewee’s authority on the subject and as an acknowledgement of the truth and value of the experience as they lived it (LeVasseur, 2003). Interviews yielded data in multiple levels of detail. Examples illustrated an event or incident that provided meaning to that part of their mid-life introspection. Narratives involved interviewees’ telling of what they experienced, as they recalled it. Narratives are told as completely as possible, but they are not assumed to be the entire story—merely true and accurate as understood by the interviewee as they experienced their mid-life introspection. Finally a story is an interviewee’s very clear, frequently repeated version of a narrative, often altered slightly to reemphasize an earlier point from a different angle (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

**Interview philosophy and approach**

This research effort relied heavily on interviews. Therefore, structuring the interviews properly and approaching the interview process with a philosophy and style appropriate to phenomenological research was crucial to achieving reliability and validity of the results and to the overall success of the research itself. Because this research was so interview-reliant, I provide a detailed description of the interview philosophy, approach, and process below, in order to provide the reader as clear a picture as possible of the unique experience that these interviews represent.
The philosophy informing my approach to interviewing in order to understand the nature of mid-life introspection is important because it frames every aspect of the research, from specifying the research question, choosing interview questions and techniques, and analyzing and interpreting the data. The philosophical frame of reference for these interviews is described as follows. First, I adopt a post-modern and a post-postivist approach, instead of a modern and positive approach. Rather than seek a quantitatively precise answer or a universal truth to the research question, I begin with the assumption that the conclusions from this research are not universally true and cannot be extrapolated to all of society or to other societies (Willis, Jost, & Nilakanta, 2007). Some logical consequences follow: I am not attempting to build grounded theory from this research but only to understand the essence or the nature of mid-life introspection through the lens of these participants. I am not pretending that as a researcher, I am—or can be—neutral. My world view and my own mid-life introspection experience inform my approach; there is no avoiding it. As stated elsewhere in this paper, the dynamic of my own influence is accounted for by bracketing out my own experience, acknowledging it, and then focusing on others’ experience in their own words. Finally, I assert that truth does exist in this research, but only as it pertains to the experiences of these interviewees and the lessons offered by their narratives. The voice given to the participants and the presentation of their viewpoint is part of a rigorous, qualitative analysis (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 2001).
Second, within the post-positivist philosophy, this research adopts a naturalist and interpretive constructionist perspective. As an interpretive constructionist, I approached the interviews (participant, process, and content) by emphasizing the role of the complexity and contextual setting of each interviewee. This approach also recognizes that people within a group (in this research, those who have experienced a deep, mid-life introspection phenomenon) create their own understanding of the experience, and that in some case, it is a shared understanding (Vidich, 1970; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As a naturalist constructionist, I tried to elicit interviewees’ views of their worlds, the context of their introspection experience, and their feelings of, or reactions to, that introspection experience. I kept the strength of our culture in mind, understanding that culture can mask the forces and relationships behind many people’s life choices and understanding of them, and appreciating the added challenge this provides to any researcher seeking to understand and derive meaning, rather than merely recording data (Schutz, 1967; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). My goal was to learn the perspectives of interviewees toward their world and their mid-life introspection experience, and how they assign meaning and value to that experience.

I structured the interview process to provide a common framework (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), but I used the responsive interviewing model to permit me to adapt questions to changing settings and to adapt the flow of questions in response to emerging opportunities during an interview. Responsive interviews represent a
specific variety of qualitative interviewing, with emphasis on flexibility of both design and execution. Responsive interviewing requires the interviewer to accept the interviewee as they are and adjusts the interview to match their personalities and conversational style. This is especially important for the interviewer who is attempting to access someone’s world who does not share the same lens; it requires the interviewer to suspend their own cultural assumptions long enough to accept and appreciate those of the interviewee (Gergen, 1999). This model is based on the assumption that interviewees’ experiences are true and valid in their minds solely because they occurred and because they have intrinsic value and meaning, and that it is therefore the task of the interviewer to enter the interviewee’s world and understand it. The responsive interviewing model is gentle, unthreatening, and cooperative, and it emphasizes the power of listening, accepting, and encouraging on the part of the interviewer. It often results in new information, startling candor, and unanticipated interpretations (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Responsive interviews are conducive to building an open and trusting relationship between the interviewer and interviewee as “conversational partners.” Conversational partners share a climate in which the interviewer demonstrably respects the interviewee’s experience and insights and in which both partners recognize they are on a joint process of discovery. Within this context, I sought what Geertz (1973) termed “thick description” of the mid-life introspection experience, by searching for both depth and detail in the participant’s responses and conversation. I employed in-
depth qualitative interviewing techniques in combination of main questions, targeted probing questions, and follow-up questions (Creswell, 2013). These techniques included the avoidance of “yes/no” questions in favor of open ended questions inviting examples, events, experiences, and narratives. I asked for elaboration of some answers and near the end of each interview, I invited the participant to address any topic not yet covered or to readdress any topic already covered, so they could expand on a point, clarify a point, or approach the question from a new perspective. This was a manifestation of the shared ownership of the interview, and each time, it yielded a valuable, fresh insight to one or more questions.

In the responsive interview process, I assumed the role of gathering narratives, descriptions, and interpretations from each conversational partner to build an understanding of their experiences individually and more broadly, of the nature of mid-life introspection. I combined attributes of both semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Under the umbrella of a semi-structured interview in which I used a limited number of prepared questions and an abundance of follow-up questions, the unstructured aspect of the interview occurred when I asked impromptu questions in response to a point the interviewee had made. The prepared questions were then reduced for my own use in a conversational guide (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), which for me consisted of a note card with a few key words I used as memory jogs and from which I could audible as a quarterback would do at the line of scrimmage, to redirect the interview to follow the energy and direction of the conversation, rather than to
adhere to a restrictive script. Having only a card and key words enabled me to focus my attention and body language on listening to the interviewee, rather than to cause a distraction by referring at length to a detailed guide. It was also useful for me to employ aspects of the topical interview and the cultural interview within the combination of semi-structured and unstructured format, since I needed both examples of their mid-life introspection experience (topical) and an understanding of the norms, values, and rules that underlay it (cultural). I found that investing time in a stage-setting "pre-interview" helped interviewees understand the context of the research and what aspects of their stories I sought. Invariably, the richer our pre-interview was, the earlier the participant opened up with candor and vulnerability, the longer and richer their answers were, and the more vivid their detail was.

I focused the interview process on answering the research question, “What is the nature of mid-life introspection?” I identified interviewees based primarily on purposeful sampling of people who had all experienced a deep mid-life introspection. Each interview was one-on-one, because this fostered a candid discussion of such an intimate and deeply personal experience. While some interviews were telephone interviews, most were face-to-face (Creswell, 2013). All were digitally recorded and stored; face-to-face interviews were video-recorded. My interview protocol included an introductory letter, a letter of consent, and a list of the open ended questions. One set of questions focused on the participant’s understanding of their experience. A second set of questions focused on the observations of the spouse of the participant.
(for those cases in which spouses wished to participate), to learn from the spouses’ perspectives. Both the participant and the spouse had access to the questions in advance, so that they could reflect on the subject before the interview, feel at ease, and have confidence that there would be no surprises. All questions were developed collaboratively and then pilot tested and refined during practice interviews (Sampson, 2004). Each question is phrased simply, so as to avoid anchoring the participant’s response and to leave maximum permission in the mind of the participant to speak openly. Each question is also designed to pursue sub-questions if the participant presents the opportunity through their initial response. Throughout the interview process I took care to respect the authority of the participant, specifically to recognize their ownership of their own experience that was the subject of this research (Moustakas, 1994).

**Interview questions and participants**

Interviews were the primary method of gathering data for this research. Therefore, I took care to build an inviting, open interview climate with gentle or encouraging language in a semi-structured framework to maximize positivity and flexibility. The types of questions I used can be categorized into three groups: main questions, probing questions, and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In my responsive interviews, the pre-interview set the tone and prepared the interviewee specifically for an initial, open ended main question inviting them to make a sweeping initial contribution to our conversation (“Tell me the story of your mid-life introspection.”) (Lieblich, Zilber, & Tuval-Mashiach, 2008). I used another main question toward the
end of the interview to invite the participant to proffer their own definition of mid-life introspection (“Based on your experience, how would you define mid-life introspection?”) (Robertson, Griffiths, & Cosin, 1977).

Probing questions helped me manage, interpret, and clarify the conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This immediately became important, because of challenge of covering a wide range of conversation points to understand mid-life introspection within a minimally structured interview. Without probing questions and follow-up questions, the interviews would have been very difficult. Steering probes enabled me to bring the conversation back into focus after allowing the interviewee to wander from their own narrative in the course of an answer (“I think I might have steered us off track. Could you go back to your discussion of having a sense of exhilaration late in your introspection experience?”). Confirmation probes allowed me to reassure myself that the words from a previous statement provided the meaning the participant intended. (“Wow, I didn’t see that coming. That’s interesting. So, your mentor actually tried to talk you out of going on the retreat you had planned?) I used clarification probes to ask the interviewee to restate an answer, sometimes in different language, so I could be sure I understood their point. (“I’m confused, so help me understand. Tell me again how the work dynamics drew you to conclude you couldn’t continue at that location.”) Continuation probes and elaboration probes were two ways to pursue a specific point more deeply. (“Can you tell me more about the impact that your daily meditation was having, as you understand it?”)
I used follow-up questions to dig more deeply into answers provided by open ended questions. Though Rubin and Rubin (2012) list eight reasons to ask follow-up questions, I employed only a few of them. I needed follow-up questions to fill in missing pieces in the interviewee’s story. (“I think I must have missed your explanation of the unexpected emotions of marrying off your daughter. If you care to, would you share that experience with me?”) Follow-up questions also helped me pursue a story or answer that appeared to link to a specific theme that was emerging. (“Interesting . . . so you’re career path and its mandated mid-life termination actually drove you to figure out what you wanted to do next, because you had a built-in key life decision point. How did you leverage that required transition?”) Follow-up questions allowed me to narrow down overly broad generalizations. (“I concluded that everyone should own their own business.” “Oh. Why is that? Can you elaborate?”) Finally, some answers introduced new ideas that would inform the question, “What is the nature of mid-life introspection?” (“Interesting. So, mid-life introspection means relearning to dream.” “Tell me about dreaming.”)

**Interview questions**

Each interview focuses on two broad lines of questioning that explore the participants’ experiences in terms of the phenomenon, as well as the contexts or situations of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Main questions and pre-planned follow-up questions are shown below:
Questions about the participant’s mid-life introspection experience:

1. I’d like to explore your own introspection experience. Can you tell me your story?
2. Did you seek your introspection experience, or did it “find you,” or was there a blend of both?
3. What dynamics prompted your introspection experience? How did it begin? When? Was it abrupt? Did it surprise you?
4. How deep would you say that you went? Why?
5. Did you spend any time intentionally looking inward?
6. What sorts of questions where you asking yourself? Do you recall any specific questions you wanted to explore?
7. What resources did you use? Did you travel or remove yourself from your usual routine and environment?
8. Do you have a sense of how long your experience was, from realization for the need/desire to a decision to act on it, to attaining a sense of completion?
9. There might be some definitions of “mid-life introspection,” but if there are, they are likely to be very contextual. How would you define mid-life introspection?

Questions about the influence of others

1. What was the role of your spouse? Of close friends? Others?
2. Who else was involved in your introspection experience? What was their role?
3. Did anyone steer you the wrong way or distract you?

4. How did you manage your career or family responsibilities during this extended introspection experience?
   
   or

   How did these things constrain, bound, reinforce, or otherwise influence your experience?

5. Did anyone guide you during key aspects of your introspection experience?

Questions about lessons and conclusions

1. Did you come to any conclusions about life or other things “outside yourself?”

2. Did your introspection experience change you? If so, how?

3. What did you choose to do with the things you learned?

4. Were there any decisions or events within your experience that made subsequent aspects of your experience better? Easier? More revealing?

Questions about a spouse’s role and observations

1. What role did you play in your spouse’s experience?

2. Did your spouse invite you to share his or her experience? Did they resist your involvement? Were they ambivalent toward the notion of your inclusion?

3. What did you observe?

4. How long do you think your spouse’s introspection experience lasted?

5. What do you think prompted your spouse’s introspection experience?
6. How do you think your spouse is different as a result of their introspection experience?

**Interview participants**
Each interview is protected by the use of aliases for each participant describing their mid-life introspection experience and each spouse describing their observations of the participant. The people who agreed to interview for this research have all experienced a deep mid-life introspection. Most did so over an extended time. The spouses who are interviewed witnessed and experienced the mid-life introspection from their own perspective and have valuable insights to offer.

**Biographical sketches of interview participants**
“Jeremy” is the president of Chester County (Pennsylvania) Futures, a not-for-profit poverty prevention program that provides scholarships, academic tutoring, and life-skill mentoring to but disadvantaged young people in the Philadelphia area. He is 49 years old. This highly successful entrepreneur grew up as one of seven children with two working parents and difficult circumstances. He cites his own childhood experience as being formative in his initial decision to join this program and in his subsequent decisions to take on more expansive leadership roles in the program. He has a passion for helping young people discover and reach their potential. Jeremy was jolted by a cancer diagnosis in his late twenties, and that caused a period of introspection and reassessment of life goals. He made a career change based on that experience and another one some years later. He is transitioning from two decades of career success as an influential businessman in the greater Philadelphia area, where
he founded a company that provides clinical electronic data capture software and related services, to a professional model that splits his time between his business and deep involvement in Chester County Futures. He and his wife of 26 years have four children.

“Maureen” is a psychological therapist in [location masked], who experienced a significant life transition after decades of marriage and raising a family. She and her husband enjoyed [information masked] work overseas, a successful transition to a life in academia and multiple relocations. One relocation of the family was especially difficult for her. She didn’t prefer the homogeneity of the area, her husband worked too much, and their home maintenance work fell to her. As their children approached adulthood and her husband continued to enjoy professional success, she increasingly experienced a sense of frustration that there was more she wanted to do. During a long, deeply spiritual mid-life introspection, she found her new purpose for her next season of life. She attained her educational and certification goals, and aligned her passion and gifts in the field of psychological therapy. She also freed herself from years of frustration and began to experience healing and reconciliation.

“John” came to his mid-life introspection after two fulfilling career experiences—one in the mission field and one academia and consulting. He is 55 years old and is married. He and his wife have three grown children. As a result of his own deeply spiritual mid-life introspection experience, he made a life commitment to build on his
previous experiences by introducing a combination academic/leadership/consulting center within a mid-sized university in the [location masked]. He determined to build a team and generate a series of graduates who would spread a legacy of better led and more sustainable communities and businesses.

“Bill” describes himself as a social entrepreneur who owns a health-care referral company in Illinois. He points to a small staff with a big community impact. Family relationships are an important dynamic in his historic context. He recently married and is experiencing a great deal of positive, but significant, life change as a result. His mid-life introspection experience changed his outlook on business and key life choices, and led him to re-vision his organization with the goal of developing a unique health-care option for people, and then sharing it free of charge, to change the face of health care nationwide.

“Claire” is the president and CEO of a global business that manufactures and sells fine pottery. She frequently travels overseas and brings a unique perspective from her birth and upbringing in India. Spirituality is important to her, but she experiences it differently from many of her American-born and Western friends and colleagues. After managing a family business successfully, her mid-life introspection experience led her in a different direction, with the attendant challenges of family and community. She recently concluded that she is in the midst of a second mid-life introspection experience with a new round of life turbulence.
“Harry” is 59 years old. He and his wife live in Richmond, VA and have three grown children. Harry spent 25 years as a successful global sales manager for a large medical device manufacturer. In his 50th year, he concluded that he could not remain in the company and that he would instead begin a new journey as an entrepreneur small-business owner of his own company. He had never previously considered such a large change and only chose to do so because his work-life level of satisfaction had become unacceptable. In his 10th year of entrepreneurship, he boasts 43 members and their families as part of his team and says with a smile that he cannot imagine ever retiring.

“Desi” is an accomplished author, leader, and Air Force pilot, aged 60 years. He transitioned from a career as an Air Force officer to teacher in a faith-based private school to public policy director for a non-profit, national family advocacy organization in Colorado Springs, CO. His transition to public policy advocacy occurred only after a lengthy mid-life introspection during his second career in private education, which he refers to as a step along the way to his current position. He describes his work today as a true calling and one that promises a legacy of significance and impact. It is worth noting that Desi’s wife expresses in her interview that Desi in fact experienced an earlier mid-life introspection while serving in the Air Force, which Desi did not originally identify.
“Lucy” is 59 years old. She spent her adult years raising four children, homeschooling three of them for much of their education, and relocating with Air Force moves of her husband, both in the United States and overseas. A deep faith forms her worldview and informs her life choices. As she reached the years she refers to as the “empty nest” years she recognized that she wanted to be challenged anew but struggled to consider how and where to do so, since she had not been in the workforce for approximately 25 years. She knew only that she wanted to “honor God” with her choice and that she would have to overcome a fear of the unknown as she looked ahead to a world that had not been part of her experience for decades.

“Jenny” is a 45 year old, unmarried senior vice president of a major international bank in Boston, Massachusetts. She has spent nearly seven years in a deepening and unfinished mid-life introspection. During this time, she has been providing medical care, elder care, and end-of-life care to a series of relatives. While she recognizes the power of her selfless giving, she also recognizes that it has drained her. She seeks to restore balance and to find a new direction that will be more fulfilling in her next season of life than her present, highly successful career in the financial industry are providing to her.

These interviews and the follow-up interviews with many of the participants’ spouses provided the rich body of data from which I drew codes, themes, and subsequent narratives of the nature of mid-life introspection. It is my hope that the result is an
extension of existing research and an improved understanding of the nature of mid-life introspection as a component of self-awareness and leading of oneself. Better understanding of the nature of a deep mid-life introspection experience can help people prepare for, manage expectations of, and retain a sense of direction during the process, thus increasing the opportunity for growth.

Data collection
Transcribing interviews into data (codes, from which themes, narratives, and ultimately, understanding of the phenomenon of mid-life introspection) was an important aspect of this research. Since this is qualitative research, and since I approached it from a naturalist constructionist perspective, each code has meaning, and each sentence of each interview required a patient search for codes. For this reason, I chose to transcribe each interview myself from the digitally recorded video. My goal was to maximize my immersion in the experience of each interviewee’s narrative in order to best understand their mid-life introspection as they described it. My decision not to have someone else transcribe the interviews, and my decision to type it myself rather than use one of the available technical tools to have it transcribed for me from the recording combined to help me maximize my goal of immersion. I found that manually typing all the transcription embedded the interview experience deeply into my mind, facilitating immediate recall during subsequent interviews, and it became a valuable ability to access during the responsive interviews with conversation partners. And, transcribing after each interview ensured that I was building knowledge of, and sensitivity to, mid-life introspection issues as I progressed
through the series of interviews even though I was not conducting any formal data analysis until after the final interview was complete.

**Data analysis**
I performed much of the formal analysis of the research data after completing the body of interview work (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). However, the nature of the research involved my learning people’s stories of their mid-life introspection experiences; some early informal analysis and understanding occurred simultaneously with the accumulation of data from successive interviews. Formal analysis was facilitated by tailoring my data collection and analysis to the specific needs of my research and my interview participants and by revising it as the research process evolved (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, I was guided by my data analysis plan but not bound by it, and I learned a great deal about both the data and the process of data analysis by conducting the analysis (Dey, 1993). The loose structure for my data analysis and representation followed Creswell’s (2013) proposed model represented in Table 7. I began by fully describing my own experience with the phenomenon of mid-life introspection in order to include, and then set aside to the extent possible, my personal experience (Moustakas, 1994) in order to direct my focus on the study participants. I then developed an evolving list of significant statements from the interviews, valuing each one equally.
I grouped the significant statements into themes (referred to as meaning units by some). Themes enabled me to write a description (“textural description”) of what the participants experienced during their mid-life introspection, using direct quotes from the interviews. Each participant’s experience occurred with a process, in a setting and context, so I next wrote a description of how they experienced their mid-life introspection. Finally, I authored a composite description of the mid-life introspection phenomenon incorporating both textural and structural elements to present the “essence” of the experience and the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013).
I discovered that the interviews on this topic led me to take a holistic reading approach, examining every sentence for codes and themes. This turned out to be especially useful as I began to understand how the process and the experience (the *how* and the *what*) were so closely woven together interviewees’ descriptions of their mid-life introspection experiences. Data analysis required much circling back to the data to seek to understand it in new ways as more data was considered (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990). During this process I repetitively reviewed, coded, categorized, and studied data from field notes, interview transcripts and memos (Agar, 1986; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Spradley 1980). Samples are provided in Figures 3 and 4.

Desi’s narrative started in his childhood, and he spoke non-stop for close to ten minutes. The video will confirm, but I’m just glad I resisted the urge to interrupt him during that time, because he had clearly spent time preparing to tell his story based on the questions I provided. I need to remember to allow others to speak this freely, especially in their opening narrative of their story, because Desi showed how the many aspects of his life are integrated into a whole. I didn’t realize that, and if I had redirected questions early in the interview, maybe we would have lost that aspect of his story.

I am struck by how hard Desi’s loss of career field affected him. I knew the story from earlier references, years ago, but I never realized the impact on him and how it influenced some key future decisions. And I sure didn’t know this was a point of introspection for him. Follow up and exploratory questions drew this out in our friendly conversational format, and I need to try to set the conditions for that in future interviews.

Desi’s wife understands him at a very deep level. It’s amazing what three decades of marriage can do. Some of her insights on Desi were deeper and richer than even his own observations on the same subjects. I can’t believe I almost didn’t choose to interview spouses. I must continue to take advantage of these sources of wisdom and alternative perspectives.

**Figure 3. Sample Memo**
Maureen is so revealing, transparent, sharing.

Huge responsibility. Must protect identity at all costs.

Interrupted too much because I was too excited and enthusiastic. Temper it.

Stop telling pieces of my story just to build connection. She’s talking. Listen.

Cannot share this with Maureen’s husband, per request of both of them.

Transcribe immediately to see what I can learn from my first interview.

Scary to learn this much from people. What will the rest of the interviews be like?

| Figure 4 Sample Field Notes |

These two samples show a few dynamics. One is the depth of the interviews from both the people experiencing the mid-life introspection and their spouses. Significantly, another was the steep learning curve I underwent between the field note above (first interview) and later interviews.

During the data analysis process, one additional person provided alternate coding of interview transcripts to offer alternate interpretations of some of the data and to corroborate other pieces of the data. The reconciliation process of the dual coding process was informative and clarifying while demonstrating a great deal of convergence among the codes.
To support the identification of codes, themes, and textural and structural descriptions, I employed taxonomic analysis within the interpretive framework discussed above. The taxonomy supporting this phenomenological research includes different levels of data, all of which exist within the single domain, “mid-life introspection.” The taxonomy reveals the subsets of information as they are related to the whole (Spradley, 1980), as shown in Figure 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composite Narrative Mid-Life Introspection “Essence”</th>
<th>Structural Description</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Family of Data</th>
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<td>Textural Description</td>
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*Source: Adapted from Spradley, 1980, p. 114*

**Figure 5. Taxonomy for a Transcendental Phenomenological Study of the Nature of Mid-Life Introspection**
Using the interview transcripts to build this taxonomy required me to follow the steps outlined by Rubin & Rubin (2012). After transcribing and summarizing each interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994), I wrote memos drawing my attention to a comment in the transcript that identified a possible theme or suggested I follow up the topic in a book or scholarly article. I made a file of quotes to inform my sense making and to become part of the textural description of the phenomenon. Early in my coding, I recorded concepts, themes, events and examples. Certain language on specific topics stood out because of its unusual nature and its recurrence at the same point in different interviewees’ story telling. For example, more than half of the participants used language such as “take a leap of faith” or “jump off the bridge” when describing their decision to act on a major life decision they were considering as a result of their mid-life introspection. Quotes such as this helped me understand what the data was saying, and they are rich additions to the research narrative.

I conducted the coding hierarchically by organizing codes into groupings that moved from less inclusive categories to more inclusive categories as reflected in the phenomenology taxonomy above. I followed Boyatzis’s (1998) approach to defining and labeling codes, striving to remain as close as possible to the meaning given by the interviewees. Color coding codes throughout each transcript helped potential themes emerge very early in the interview process.
Reliability, validity and evaluation

Reliability and validity are equally important in both qualitative and quantitative research. However, reliability and validity are pursued and demonstrated differently in qualitative research from the ways they are in quantitative research. Evaluation is the process of judging the value or merit of the research.

Reliability

Reliability is a measure of the quality of the research. According to Yin (2003), researchers must demonstrate that the study can be repeated with the same results. In this study, high reliability would require sound interview strategy, effectively responsive interviews, transcription that is true to the interviewees’ meaning, and coding that accurately reflected that meaning. I pursued the following actions during the course of the research to strengthen reliability.

Field notes

I wrote field notes following the completion of each interview in order to leverage the memory and learning principle of recency while the excitement and impressions from the interview were still fresh and before they faded into the din other life activities. Field note writing often occurred on a return flight from the interview location or in a private room on the same day. I wanted to capture ideas that leapt out at me, either for their centrality or their peculiarity. I also wanted to retain expressions of emotion (excitement, fear, frustration, pain) and nuance that seemed to influence the meaning that interviewees ascribed to their mid-life introspection experiences.
Interview protocol
I designed an interview protocol to structure the experience and to place interviewees at ease, so that I could maximize the similarity of the interview experience in terms of process while maximizing the individualization of the content to capture and interpret the participants’ meaning in their responses. I provided the questions to interviewees in advance, so that they could reflect on them and to assure them of the cooperative nature of this interview. I conducted an extensive “pre-interview” so they understood the context of the research and could thoughtfully provide their comments in a more relevant way.

Verbatim interview transcription
I typed my own transcripts in order to more fully absorb the information as a kinesthetic learner. While transcribing, I was sure to capture every colloquialism, every stutter, every pause, side comment, and laughter. This fit well with the naturalist constructionist philosophy. It assisted in retaining the richness and nuance of such a deeply personal experience from the interview all the way into the write-up.

Coding
I coded each of the interviews twice and then had another person code all of the interviews except two which I had committed not to share. As a result, I could measure convergence of the coding and pursue the development of my phenomenology taxonomy with greater confidence in the soundness of the data collection.
Immersion
I immersed myself in the data to absorb it as completely as possible. For months, I watched and rewatched each interview on the digital recording. I coded, recoded, and color coded each interview transcript. During these months, I also returned to reread all the sources that formed my review of the relevant literature, essentially conducting a second literature review. This was particularly illuminating, since the scholarly work resonated in a new and deeper way during and after the interviews than it had prior to the start of my research.

Validity
Validity of qualitative research is the measure of how much sense the study makes to readers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I followed the examples of a handful of naturalistic researchers. Since I did not conduct quantitative research, I focused on credibility and transferability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), understanding (Wolcott, 1994), and authenticity, integrity, and credibility of the data (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001).

According to Lincoln and Guba, confirmability is more appropriate a goal than objectivity in naturalistic research such as this. Each of these goals is obtained through a disciplined following of the responsive interviewing model. As a researcher, the more I sought to respect the authenticity and accuracy of the participant’s interview answers, and the more I encouraged them to assign meaning to the experiences they conveyed, the more valid the entire process and the results were.
I provided transcripts to participants to solicit their views of the accuracy of the record and the credibility of initial findings (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Finally, and as described elsewhere, the rich, thick description of the data and its meaning can provide such detail that the reader can transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

**Evaluation**
Qualitative research is evaluated against a range of established and emerging standards. Here are some of the measures I used to consider the value of this research from early in the process (topic selection) through data analysis and presenting the findings.

First, my research question drove the data and not vice versa. Second, I made my assumptions explicitly known, through the bracketing of my own mid-life introspection experience and thorough pre-interview dialogues. Third, the study adds value by further informing the literature (Howe & Eisenhardt, 1990)—in this case, the literature on self-awareness, life change, and leading oneself.

I adhered to the standard of positionality by ensuring that the textural description of the data honestly and authentically reflected both the participants’ thoughts and only minimally, my interpretation of those thoughts. The subject matter and my own interest in it ensured that I maintained a heightened self-awareness throughout the
research process and that I was open to personal transformation. And, I shared
reciprocity during the interview and follow-up process, with a mutual sharing,
vulnerability, and trust (Lincoln, 1995).

I adhered to two of Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) measures of value: substantive
contribution and impact. I wanted this completed research to contribute to our
understanding of social life and of ourselves, and I wanted it to be able to affect
people emotionally or intellectually.

According to Polkinghorne (1989), the phenomenological researcher should be able
to positively answer the following questions: Did the interviewer ensure accurate
transcription of the interview, so that it conveys the meaning of the oral presentation?
Did the analysis reveal all the conclusions that could reasonably be derived? Did the
researcher identify any alternative conclusions? Is the structural description situation
specific, or does it hold in general for the experience of other situations?

Finally, Creswell (2013) suggests these questions to guide the phenomenological
researcher: Does the author convey an understanding of the philosophical tenets of
phenomenology? Does the author have a clear phenomenon to study that is articulated
in a concise way? Does the author use procedures of data analysis in phenomenology,
such as those recommended by Moustakas (1994) and Van Manen (1990)? Does the
author convey the overall essence of the experience of the participants? Does this
essence include a description of the experience and the context in which it occurred? The ideas offered by the prominent researchers identified above guided my effort to add value to the body of literature during this research to ask the question, “What is the nature of mid-life introspection?” (Creswell, pp.193–194)

**Research limitations**
There are two aspects in which this research is limited. The first is longitudinal reliability. With more time, it would be helpful to track each participant for a follow-up interview two to five years in the future to learn more of their stories as they progress on their journeys from their mid-life introspection experience. The second aspect is cultural diversity. This research benefits from having two participants who profess an Eastern faith and one who was raised in India. However, the research does not benefit from obtaining the perspectives of a people from South America, Africa, Eastern Europe, or East Asia. Within the constraints I built into the research design, the research stands on its own.
Chapter 4: Results

We are products of our past, but we don't have to be prisoners of it.
—Rick Warren (2002)

Overview

This chapter presents the findings of my research. It begins by reviewing philosophical assumptions informing a transcendental phenomenological study, since they are key to framing the research. I then present my own personal experience in order to bracket it and distinguish it from the data discovered during the research process (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). This is an extension of Husserl’s original development the concept of epoché, and it is now considered essential to valid and reliable phenomenological research. After setting the stage with a philosophical review and a bracketing of the researcher’s own experience, I then define and discuss codes, themes, and categories revealed by this research. Finally, the themes frame two descriptions of the phenomenon of mid-life introspection: structural and descriptive. I close the findings with a narrative of the essence or the nature of mid-life introspection.

Philosophical Assumptions

The research undertaken to learn the nature of mid-life introspection follows certain philosophical assumptions. For example, the study of the lived experiences can provide useful descriptions of those phenomena. These are not explanations or analyses, but descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The underlying philosophy is also one without presuppositions; it suspends judgments, in accordance with the naturalist’s
perspective. Participants share their experiences in a deep, revealing manner as encouraged by a collaborative interview style, because it is understood that both the researcher and the participant share ownership of the results.

**Epoché (Bracketing)**

In this transcendental phenomenological study, I bracket myself out of the study (Creswell, 2013) by presenting my own personal experience with the phenomenon of mid-life introspection. Though it is impossible to completely remove myself as the researcher, it is helpful to record my experience in order to try to acknowledge it and then set it aside. The goal is not to forget or ignore the researcher’s experience, but to bracket it so that it does not unduly influence the research (Giorgi 2009).

**Background**

I entered a period of mid-life introspection as I approached the end of a 26-year career of service as an Air Force officer, commander, and pilot. During those decades, my wife and I raised a family, relocated 14 times, and had to make many quick adjustments to new living arrangements, new responsibilities, and vastly different duty environments. Keeping this pace required a disciplined approach, thinking ahead, knowing and remaining true to our values and priorities, and learning from others as we traveled on our journey. In short, we planned. In keeping with our faith perspective, we also prayed and prepared to adjust our plans to God’s leading, but the key point is that we did not want our path to be the result of merely responding to the next opportunity or the next force of nature or the next thing someone assured was the right thing to do. We assumed moral agency for our
decisions. This led to some unusual but highly impactful decisions. Marcie elected to teach both our children at home, which was an enormous opportunity cost for her but a huge investment in the children and the family. It required her to become acquainted with appropriate laws in six states over the course of our years. Our home-schooled children went off to college, got married, and found their way in early adulthood. The purpose of this background is to present the extent to which we determined to have a say in the direction of our story. It worked, and because we saw its effectiveness and had shared it with others, we exercised forethought as we approached the end of our Air Force career and the beginning of the next season of life.

I had observed many people take a casual approach to military retirement and the life changes and opportunities that accompany it. We understood, to the contrary, that many dynamics were converging to make our coming decisions quite consequential. We had to choose where to live and what vocation to pursue with more than twenty years of healthful working time still available. We had to determine how to weave our extended family into our decisions since we now had more opportunity to engage with them if we chose to do so. Financial considerations and decisions on purchasing a home were factors. Our church involvement and our desire to be close to our children and their spouses also entered the picture. This is the tapestry in which our faith, our family, and our values were all tightly woven. It is the context in which we prayed about a direction for our next season. Each of these decisions had some impact
on the other decisions, by expanding or contracting the option space in the remaining
decisions, and all of these decisions would occur in the span of just a couple years.
We understood that this mid-life series of life-choices would be the most
consequential series of decisions since our decisions for college, career, marriage, and
children, almost three decades earlier, and that it would likely be the last series of
decisions with such gravity in such a short period of time.

Our final Air Force assignment allowed us to return to our home town in
Pennsylvania while serving this final tour of duty and use this as our stepping off
point into whatever was next, because so many of our priorities were well aligned by
this choice. We were positioned to assist family members in need. Marcie’s mother
was alone, threatened by an abusive adult son, and needed financial help and physical
protection, so we moved her in with us. Both my parents were ailing, and our
presence and provision of elder care would help them through their final years. A
cousin was became the widow and single mother of seven internationally adopted
children, with limited means to support them, so we stepped in to help. The relatives
who had cared for Marcie’s mentally handicapped aunt for 17 years needed relief, and
we were the only ones in a position to receive her, so she moved in with us. In the
span of three years, we transitioned from marrying off our two children to providing
er elder care for two live-in 70-year-old relatives and two more 70-year-old relatives
immediately next door, while assisting a single mother and preparing to transition
from the Air Force to a second career. We had prayed to be of use to the Lord in His
work, and it became clear during this quick unforeseen sequence of events that His work was family care, so we embraced it.

These were important and enduring frames of reference for our decision regarding a second career during the fourth year of this introspection, because they bound some of the key decisions that were in play just a couple years earlier. We would remain in Pennsylvania because of our ties to family and our continued desire to give back to the community in which we grew up. We would remain in our present home because it provided the space for elder care. The primary questions to be answered were: (1) What career could follow my Air Force duties as a commander, director of strategic leadership and senior Air Force representative at the Army War College in Pennsylvania, and Pentagon staff officer, without relocating the family and those who depended on us, and (2) What did we feel called to do to honor God in joining Him in his Kingdom work?

Two career paths appeared—each well-suited, but also very different directions. One involved a new direction with opportunity for growth and new challenges, but it required me to accept the risk of working on my own in a contracting environment on a part-time, telecommuting basis. The other opportunity was a government funded faculty position at the Army War College, where I was already well established. This position paid less and had little opportunity for growth, but it was “known,” secure,
and stable at a time when many of the other family dynamics required the security of a more “knowable” future.

**Ennui**
I almost immediately experienced a deep regret. Though I had made a fully informed decision, once I was in place I could not imagine being fulfilled over the next 10–20 years in the environment I chosen. In months, my formal role became minimalized, two additional full-time roles were added to my own without promotion or compensation, and the leadership had begun to recraft faculty positions to fill staff officer roles in support of Headquarters U.S. Army requirements. The difference between my vision for the next season of life and this reality led to a sense of ennui; I became restless.

**Catalyst for mid-life introspection**
I made an important decision early in this career transition: Since my first year of employment was probationary, I chose to consider the position to be probationary from my perspective, as well. I would extend my mid-life introspection in order to resolve the incongruity between my vision and my reality. During the coming year, I would continue to take a deliberate approach to an introspection experience that I only thought I had completed. There was more to do. Principally, I had to determine whether to accept my decision with all its risks and disappointments or admit my mistake to myself and others, change course, and take a fresh start at a second career. Either way, I could not merely leave the situation unaddressed.
Approach to mid-life introspection
I didn’t want the next part of my introspection experience. I thought I had already made a thoughtful, informed, safe, responsible decision I would be able to live with for a long time. Since it was clear that I was now uncomfortable with the outcome of that decision, I determined to re-enter the introspection experience and pursue it to completion. I continued to engage with my spiritual accountability partners in church and in my men’s group. They were enormously insightful, supportive, and encouraging. They helped me explore my motives, expectations, and the fears that had drawn me to take the safer decision just months earlier. I regularly conferred privately with two peers at work to challenge my observations and my evolving thinking. I asked them to make it as difficult as possible for me to justify changing my mind, so that if I should do so, it would not be a decision made by accident or as a ricochet from my previous choice. I prayed and discussed the issue with my wife. She was understanding, insightful, and agreed to support either a decision to remain in what she described the suboptimal environment of my existing situation or the riskier, unknown environment of the choice I had turned down but which might still be available to me. I sought solitude for prayer, meditation, and time for God to speak to me. He did—when I was backpacking alone, hiking alone, canoeing alone, and stargazing alone. For me, it seemed that solitude removed clutter and cleared a channel for my spirit to receive Him. But, God held me most captive during the first night of an overseas vacation Marcie and I had planned for years, which happened to occur during this final year of introspection. While Marcie lay beside me asleep, God
kept boring deep, sometimes unwelcome questions all the way to sunrise. “Are you going to keep traveling farther away for vacation, to avoid the questions you won’t answer in your own back yard?” “What fears are keeping you from stepping out of your comfort zone?” “You’ve said you trusted me for some 15 years; when are you going to show it?” “In all your consideration for a second career, you put My work on the back burner. Are you afraid to bring it to the fore?” “I have so much in mind for you, but I will never force it on you. But, if you don’t ask for it—if you don’t want it—you’ll never know what could have been.” “You’re approaching one year in this position. Look around you. If you want to make a change, do you think it’s going to be easier to do so in five or ten years, when you’ve become used to what is bothering you? When you’ve accepted being underused? When you’ve given up on dreaming or forgotten how?” “I’m the one who planted this unease in you. I let you make your choice, and then I gave you the sense of ennui because I know as you did not, that you chose a good path, but not the best path. And, I want you to reconsider. And if you don’t do it now, you never will. I know, because I’ve seen many men and women through a life choice much like this.” “There are transitional points between seasons, and this is one of them. You might get another transitional opportunity, but this one will never come again. Most people don’t get a ‘do-over’ in something like this; I’m offering you one.” “You may keep the job you have, and I will not curse you. But, you deserve to know that you need have no fear of the other choice. I have told you in scripture that ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ (Hebrews 13:5). Ask yourself how far you think I will go to keep that promise.”
That is what solitude did for me. I was shaken, but I was clear on the options. A couple days into the vacation, I shared that night’s experience with Marcie. She supported a change, and we would pray about it for another two months before I would finally choose.

**Revelations of my mid-life introspection**

Four things happened after I gave myself the freedom to rethink the assumptions and realities that informed my decision to accept the secure, known position on the Army War College faculty. First, I recognized the mismatch between the organization’s human capital management philosophy and my own long term goals in a way that I should have seen earlier, but did not. Second, I concluded that the institutional complacency that I had accepted as something I could work around to achieve my own sense of fulfillment in the coming years, was in fact going to be far too constraining. Third, it was becoming increasing clear that I was not setting myself up to invest in Kingdom work or in the community as I had envisioned and that this career choice was going to make that effort harder, rather than easier. I had lost focus on that goal. These three dynamics combined to give me a clear sense that my current path was likely to lead me to a place in which I would look back at age 70 with disappointment at having eschewed a future of dreams, growth, and greater service, in favor of security and comfort. That was not the way I had spent years exhorting others, so I became curious why I had allowed it to be such a seductive choice for me.
The fourth thing that deeply informed my mid-life introspection during this final, extended year, was financial, and it came in three doses. Living expenses and supporting our planned tithing and other giving became more expensive. Likewise, elder care was more expensive and drove more opportunity costs than we had planned. Finally, though, in God’s tremendously clarifying manner, a house fire combined with other unplanned debt to make it obvious that the financial framework on which we had based our decision to accept the position I now held was precarious.

Together, these four revelations refuted the assumptions that guided my decision making a year earlier, even as they presented our new reality in a way that both reflected our present circumstances and held promise to use my gifts and passions in a more fulfilling way. Perhaps I could have reached this conclusion a year earlier in my mid-life introspection experience, but I did not. This one year extension made it possible. It was a year that was an illuminating, freeing, painful, frustrating, embarrassing, exhilarating, learning experience. I had been whittled down to my core values and priorities, and I was raw. There was nothing left to hide and nothing to hide behind. In the summer of 2011, I knew myself better than I ever had before.

Thirty years earlier, I knew my dreams, but I was of course invincible then, and I had barely been tested. By age 50 though, I had enjoyed tremendous success in some of those dreams, along with family joys, professional achievement and high adventure—along with failure, tragic family medical issues, and the pain that comes from bad
decisions. This is what self-awareness looks like to me at mid-life. I discuss its implications below.

**The outcome of my mid-life introspection**
I completed my mid-life introspection after solitude, prayer, professional peer counseling, discussions with my spouse, and a great deal of visioning and dreaming about the future that might include what Socrates called “a life well lived” and Jesus called “the abundant life.” Both these teachers proposed that such a fulfilling life would be defined by character as classically understood, service, others-focused, and pursued with courage. I completed my mid-life introspection on all these things with a decision to flourish. I would pursue these idealized lives.

Instead of telling God my plans and asking Him to bless them, I’ve asked Him to reveal to me one or more directions that would honor Him and use my gifts, and to change my heart to align it with His direction. I will make this transition in 2014, and I have confidence and calm regarding that outcome, even though I still have not heard and chosen the direction. I have a new spirit that impacts my leadership approach and attitude. I have enjoyed becoming more truthful, vulnerable, transparent, unapologetic, gracious, risk tolerant. And, I feel refreshed by trusting more, fearing less, and holding things and people loosely.

The above narrative expresses my mid-life introspection experience as a required aspect of transcendental phenomenological research methodology. This process
brackets the experience by employing the technique of époché (Husserl, 1931) to acknowledge its role and influence in the experience of the researcher, and then setting it aside to focus exclusively on the experience of the research participants. Those findings follow.

**Background Family of Codes and Themes**

Nine interviews provided 13 perspectives of mid-life introspection. While all the participants’ stories were highly integrated with some overlapping of experiences and some revisiting of mid-life introspection experiences during people’s overall processes, they did occur within a time frame, and there was a sense of sequence to many of the reported experiences. Therefore, I chose to present the findings in a chronological manner. Though the chronology is in some ways contrived, it serves as a useful framework for the presentation of the findings below.

**Codes**

Codes discovered during interviews established an understanding of the backgrounds and contexts of the participants as they approached their mid-life introspection experiences. 84 codes began to tell the story. The following list provides a sample of relevant codes; a complete list of these codes is included in Appendix A.

- Married
- College degree
- Successful in my profession
- Making good money
• Enjoyed influence
• Business with my father
• Spiritual life was important to me
• Ran a family business
• Developed a chemical company
• Grew up in India
• Felt a responsibility to give back
• Marriage is a partnership
• Dysfunctional extended family
• Good vision for business
• African American
• Strong emphasis on values
• Strong faith walk
• Military career
• Stay at home mom
• Years of providing medical care
• No close relationships
• Dreamer and deep thinker
• Father of three
The findings revealed few consistent codes or themes in the background information gained during the interviews. As the above table shows, the only thing in common was the age (ranging 35 to 50 at the time of people introspection experience), but that commonality was part of the research design. Most were married, but the fact of being married does not show in the data below any special influence on one’s decision to embark on a mid-life introspection experience. It will prove to influence the experience itself, but not the choice to engage. The range of national origin, gender, profession, relative wealth, education, and life station don’t reveal any patterns. The sample of participants included men and women; entrepreneurs, teachers, military officers, bankers, stay-at-home moms, artists, sales representatives, and public policy activists; upper class, upper middle class, and middle class; and education ranging from Ph.D. to M.A., B.S., and no college education. Within this sample there seems to be no evidence that typical demographic information either influences one toward a mid-life introspection or dissuades one from it.

**Themes**

One theme did emerge, however, from these codes. I identified a theme of spirituality. Seven out of the nine participants spoke of the role of their spirituality in their mid-life introspection and in their personal history before that point. It is important to note that these seven expressions of spirituality were not similar. That is, there were Western, Eastern and other traditions, and some not-traditional expressions. In keeping with the philosophy informing this type of research, it was important to recognize the role this influence had for the participant. Their faith walks
were valid and relevant, simply because they were their own. (Moustakas, 1994). Whatever their faith perspective, those who had one were strongly impacted by it. John’s perspective is a useful example. While he expresses it more strongly than some others, he identifies the foundational influence that would resonate with all seven of the spiritually informed interviewees.

I know a lot of colleagues and friends that if they were in my shoes they would have stayed where they were, because I was making more money then, than what I’m doing now. But there’s something about, you know I imagine it’s my Christian upbringing, and I imagine it’s my parents and all my other Christian influences teaching me my whole life that we really are here for a purpose. God put us on the planet for a purpose. God calls us to be His ambassadors in the world and to make a positive difference. And you know that gives your life meaning beyond just making money. At least it does for me. You know, sometimes I wish I were more able to just chase the money. But I’m not. I wouldn’t be happy. (John, interview, 2013)

The two interviewees who did not have a spiritual influence completed their mid-life introspective experience in a way that satisfied them, though in a distinctly different experience. Again, the philosophy of this research methodology is not to evaluate but to describe the experience, and to the extent possible to do so in the words of the participants.

**Ennui Family of Codes and Themes**

When interviewees spoke of their feelings and experiences as they grew in awareness an approaching mid-life introspection opportunity, they spoke freely, often quickly, and always with increased passion. It was clear that this was a transitional experience that bothered them. The literature on ennui best describes this feeling in its fullest
sense. They expressed having felt restlessness, frustration, dissatisfaction, and a
general sense that things should be different—and could still be. With ennui, there is
a growing sense that the status quo, is becoming less and less tolerable—perhaps
pointless. Ennui is not like ambiguity; many people can develop coping techniques
for living in ambiguity in personal and working relationships. Ennui is different in a
nuanced way. Ennui will not let a person alone; it insists on being addressed, until a
person chooses to either mask their dissatisfaction with the status quo with one of the
popular methods of denial or confronts the issues that are troubling them until they
find resolution and a new course (Early, 1996).

**Codes**

In Table 8, I provide just a sample of relevant codes and the themes that emerged
from analysis of the hundreds of individual codes. Appendix B shows all 150 codes
that resulted from my analysis. The key to appreciating the data in Table 8 is noting
the density of coding in parentheses within the themes. These numbers indicate how
many of the nine interviewees expressed experiences reflected in the codes that are
aligned with the themes that emerged. A remarkably consistent picture begins to
reveal itself.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t enjoy what we did</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No longer deeply satisfying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restless</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betrayed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emptiness</td>
<td>Unhappiness (8 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woundedness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resentment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turmoil in side me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My soul needed comforting</td>
<td>Spiritual urgings (7 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duking it out with God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t want to miss an opportunity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our work should make a difference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needed to get my life together</td>
<td>Future orientation (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted to avoid life regrets in later years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sought significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could not go any further like this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days were not energetically generative</td>
<td>Depletion (8 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is too draining</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Themes**

Five themes emerged from the analysis of the data within the ennui family of 150 codes. The themes are dissatisfaction, unhappiness, spiritual urgings, future
The dissatisfaction theme reflects statements of unmet expectations or a waning sense of joy in what a vocation that was once joyful.

For Desi, the realization was abrupt, surprising, and unsettling:

It became clear to me that what I had defined myself as was going to change. And it didn’t sit well with me. . . . Either I was going to have to change the foundation by which I would define myself, or it was going to happen to me. I didn’t want the change to be imposed, but I wasn’t much more pleased by how it went down in the first place. It was good, and it was necessary, but I was thrust into it, and it just didn’t sit well. (Desi, interview, 2013)

Bill’s work dissatisfaction began crossing lines into his home life.

I finally took it seriously when my fiancé confronted me. She said “Your stress is showing up at home. I just want to let you know and I know you’re in the middle of a lot of stuff, and you’ve laid out where you’re at and what’s going on. I just want to let you know it’s showing up at home. You have my support. My one question is, because you’ve been in the middle of this since I’ve met you, is: Is it really a temporary thing as you say, or is this really how life is for you and you’re just hoping that it’s temporary?” (Bill, interview, 2013)

John’s thinking about his circumstances did not disrupt his home; it just would not go away, and he realized he needed to address it.

It was just sort of going flat. If I look out to the future—this is what I was thinking back when I was 48. If I look out to the future and I’m still doing what I’m doing now in five to ten years, that’s not going to be satisfying. I’m not going to be using my gifts in the best possible way. It won’t be challenging. It won’t be as meaningful as I would like it to be. (John, interview, 2013)

The unhappiness is more personal and reflects interview statements of unhappiness or dissatisfaction with a broader life assessment. It more closely resembles what authors
have called subjective well-being (Deiner & Biswas, 2008; Seligman, 2006).

Maureen offered this insight from her experience and observations.

I think most people are really afraid of their emotions. And that’s a big part of what’s inside. Not everyone has really strong internal emotions, but when you’re at the mid-life point and you’re dissatisfied, there are a lot of strong negative emotions that you have to confront…. Our culture does not encourage anyone to pay attention to their internal worlds. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

Maureen was among the seven of nine participants who reported struggling with strong emotional reactions to their circumstances. Each described in their own way their decision to continue forward toward the challenging introspection experience rather than to bury their emotions in an attempt to deny them and their sense of ennui.

Maureen described her personal frustration associated with relocating her family back to America and again within the U.S.

It just feels like that whole part of your life almost didn’t happen, because nobody really gets it all, you know, when you come back. So, but at least there was this cross cultural milieu in [city], and so I had some people who kind of get some of that. But then when we moved here to [city] it was like nobody got it at all. And I was feeling like ‘What about this? And how do I bring this into this community?’ And it was really hard to figure out. And I thought, I don’t know, I just think I’m slow or something because none of this stuff—it just took me a long time to figure it out. There was so much wrestling with it. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

The theme of spiritual urgings captures interviewees’ sense that there was a spiritual force guiding their journey into this uncomfortable time and pulling them to a place
they were called to be. Lucy reflected at length about her growing realization that she and her workplace were moving in opposite directions in an irreconcilable way.

I felt in some ways betrayed to a certain degree, because it was basically almost like saying “What you’ve brought to the table here is not really that important any longer.” I didn’t feel like I was needed or necessarily appreciated for the job that I was doing. I think God was pointing out to me that I had let my job become an idol. And it had become more about me than it was about him.” (Lucy, interview, 2013)

Future orientation was a strongly expressed theme. Every participant talked about the past only as a point of departure to look forward. Jeremy said it this way.

I never wanted to get to the end and look back and say, “Gee, I really wish I would have done this and I wish I would have done that.” (Jeremy, interview, 2013)

Maureen described it this way:

I had a growing sense of dissatisfaction. It was like being a coiled spring, and sometimes I felt like that—a coiled spring, needing to go, to get out, and I have met a lot of women in roles like mine, who have the same kind of experience. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

Depletion surfaced as a theme among every interviewee but one. In each case, the ungenerative situation in which they found themselves did not merely trouble them; it became one of the catalysts in their choice to no longer accept the status quo. Here is Bill’s description.

I found myself in the middle of a lot of toxic relationships. I found myself loving what we did but not enjoying at all what I do. I found that my days were not energetically generative for me at all, and I didn’t like that and that wasn’t sustainable. (Bill, interview, 2013)
Jenny’s description was a little more startling.

I got to the point where I was closing off completely from the world. Because up until that point everybody around me was pulling from me. And it was just too much. You know, all that care that was required from folks around me and I’m like ‘I got nothing left.’ And I wasn’t finding any way to get nourished, except going to church and sitting by myself, and not really even there, looking for anyone to interact with because I couldn’t afford another person to draw energy from me. So I stopped dating, really. I limited even my best friend since, you know, I’ve known her since 1986. I limited conversations with her. I just started closing myself down. I had all this success at my job but I just needed to shut it all down. (Jenny, interview, 2013)

These 150 codes and their five themes present an important understanding of the thinking and feeling that make up the experience of ennui preceding a decision to pursue a mid-life transition or to turn from it. Each of the nine interviewees could clearly identify and passionately discuss specific aspects of their approach toward a mid-life introspection experience. They were qualitatively measurable, unique to each individual, and yet common enough within the participant group to form the foundation for the narrative discussions later in this paper.
Catalyst Family of Codes and Themes

Interviewees described the catalyst aspect of their mid-life introspection experience with greater clarity than they expressed in any other part of the interview. They conveyed a sense of urgency—regardless of how distant they were from the event—that compelled them to find resolution. Their passion about the emotional intensity to take this deep dive was still very real and very present to them. It was clear that they sensed their coming point of decision would be one in which they would choose an unsatisfying status quo as our literature review identified as the cultural norm, or a personally challenging, revealing exercise in self-awareness with lessons they might want to learn. These nine interviewees expressed that in their decision to move forward into an introspection experience, they sought completeness and depth over speed for the sake of closure.

Codes

58 data codes captured their description of their catalyst decision, and they all bundled into two themes. The complete list of catalyst family codes is contained in Appendix C. Selected codes are presented in Table 9, aligned with two themes: conjuncture and desideratum. These codes and themes continue to add to the portrait of a mid-life introspection experience.
### Table 9. Catalyst Related Codes and Themes (and Density of Codes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction became unbearable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need structural changes at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensing a transition point in my life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needed to make immediate change</td>
<td>Conjunction (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My strengths were irrelevant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hated the suffocating bureaucracy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was a miserable place to work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was diagnosed with cancer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do something about it or stop complaining</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My company was not speaking to the world’s need</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man, it’s time for a change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My family history wasn’t going to work for me</td>
<td>Desideratum (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My career field was going away completely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I needed to start my own business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor insisted that I get attention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sold my chemical company</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Themes

The two themes that emerged from data coding are conjunction and desideratum.

Conjunction captures the depth and types of feelings experience as participants reached their desideratum point or event. Some extracts from interviews help personalize the intensity of the emotions leading people to conjunction.
Harry was blunt, and still passionate.

I was global marketing manager for diagnostics ECG, which means that I got six weeks of vacation; I made a pretty good living. I got two trips abroad each year, at least. Really nice trips. And um I had 401 K, I had pension, I had good health care . . . and I hated it. So I wanted to make a career change out of [company]. And the reason I wanted out was just the bureaucracy was such that I had 14 people who reported to me, all of which could basically say “we can’t do that, because this is too hard or this takes too long, or whatever.” So we used to be able to make customers happy, and now we couldn’t make customers happy. So that was a problem. [Company] initiated it. If [company] hadn’t been a miserable place to work, I probably would have stayed there for years. (Harry, interview, 2013)

Lucy’s story culminated in a simple, tearful statement.

I tried as hard as I could, for a very long time, to find another explanation for their decision to change to the practice, but I could only conclude one thing. It became clear that I wasn’t valued and my strengths were irrelevant. (Lucy, interview, 2013).

Maureen captured most eloquently a sentiment expressed by five of the nine interviewees. It is the disillusionment associated with the nearly universal mid-life realization that life sometimes fails to live up to some of our most treasured expectations and that even in a very blessed life, some disappointments can be deeply unsettling.

I was surprised by that. I didn’t expect that. I thought, you know, I would be perfectly happy. And the people I see—everybody expects that. Everybody’s expecting that everything’s gonna be perfect when you get there, and it’s not. It never is, right? And so, these sort of life events kind of unfold in that direction so yeah, I do think—I do think it’s surprising to me. (Maureen, interview, 2013)
The desideratum theme identifies the specific decision or decision-provoking event that marked the point of embarkation into the mid-life introspection experience.

Jeremy explained the catalysts for his two introspection desideratum.

Cancer changed a lot of things. And a lot of things about that. And so in short, what it did is kind of remove from me this fear of failure. So, in a sense, it allowed me to think about what I really wanted to do, without worrying if I couldn’t do it. Because to me at the end of the day it became clear to me that our days were numbered and we really didn’t have control over it. With my second introspection, it was simple: I didn’t want to report to anyone else any longer, and I wasn’t afraid to change that. (Jeremy, interview, 2013)

Maureen referred to her decision rationale this way.

… because I just felt like there were parts of me that were not able to be expressed. There were so many parts of the job that I was doing that weren’t to a level of intensity or depth that I wanted to be able to do. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

The rest of the desiderata were clearly expressed, too. John felt compelled to step out in a new, more impactful direction and needed to take a disciplined approach to imagining what that should look like. Desi’s first introspection was externally driven because his professional niche disappeared. His second was internally driven as he chose to discover a second career after military service. Harry was driven to start his own company. Clair could no longer countenance the fact that her successful business was not contributing to a broader well-being for humanity as she had become convinced that she should be doing. Bill had to reconcile work-life balance to stabilize his most important relationship in a sustainable way.
Jenny was compelled to get well. She had been running too hard for too long. So, suddenly I went from being a single person living a pretty carefree life, kind of flying all over the world in a job that I was kind of digging at the time, to suddenly being a heavy, heavy dose of caretaker that was unexpected, and persistent. And being sort of a front row seat to that much death by people pretty close to me. So it’s tough. I wasn’t stopping to take it in. I was running on automatic pilot. But at some point in there, I had enough sense to say ‘you’ve gotta go at least start to reset your life a little bit.’ And so I ended up going to . . . I hadn’t even been to the doctor in years for myself even though I’d spent my life in the doctor’s office with other people. I hadn’t been in a couple years and I had to sort of reset all that. I went to go see my doctor, and I changed doctors. And that first session with her, she’s a very thorough physician, went through sort of a two hour sort of briefing with her. And at the end of that, she looked at me and said, “You need to go talk to somebody, because you’re caring too much and you’re not even reacting to what you’re saying. You’re just saying it, like you’re going to lunch.” And I was like, “Oh, she’s a crazy lady, you know.” She’s like, ‘No, you need to go see a counselor.’

The catalyst family of codes and themes advance the narrative of these nine interviewees’ decisions to follow a mid-life introspection to a new, unforeseeable level of self-awareness and set of life decisions. In the text below, I transition to the processes these participants used for their journeys of discovery.

**Process Family of Codes and Themes** Data coding showed that interviewees used a wide range of processes to work through their mid-life introspection experiences. The process family was also a tremendously robust data pull, with 283 codes and such richness that 11 themes emerged. No single process for approaching the mid-life introspection experience
emerged. Each person did what worked for them, and their methodology was informed by their worldview, life practices, and networks of friends and structure already in place. Some differences were obvious and anticipatable. The unmarried interviewee and the married interviewee who was unmarried at the time of her introspection did not have a spouse involved. The two members who expressed no spiritual life component did not have a spiritual component to their mid-life introspection experience. There was not even a common or standard duration. The variety of approaches revealed in the codes and themes demonstrates the power of pragmatism in this exercise. Each interviewee expressed that they did what worked for them. Commonality in this data would be much less expected than individuals’ alignment between process and their established life practices, tools, and resources available to them.

**Codes and questions**
Table 10 provides samples of the 283 codes that informed 11 themes. The numbers in the themes represents the number of interviewees who provided data within these themes. In the succeeding list, I provide the complete list of codes that comprise the theme titled “questions” because the list so valuably informs the discussion on process. A complete list of these codes is included in Appendix D.

**Table 10. Process Related Codes and Themes (and Density of Codes)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We underestimate the power of dreaming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Codes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visioning exercises with my counselor</td>
<td>Visioning/Dreaming (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reset a vision for myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagine self/environment/activity in 30 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-Driven Life book</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What am I learning about myself?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I really want to do?</td>
<td>Questions (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where does this path lead?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is my contribution to the world?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why am I here?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journaling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing it all down</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual disciplines were very deliberate</td>
<td>Intentionality (5 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities to validate or challenge assumptions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s influence was a huge obstacle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House [refurbishment] was an impediment</td>
<td>Obstacles (4 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt over considering this different path</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was my own obstacle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer retreat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely alone</td>
<td>Solitude (5 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended weekend at the monastery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did a silent retreat</td>
<td>Solitude (5 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreat was definitive and confirming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectio-Divina</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn’t go a day without receiving prayer</td>
<td>Spiritual Component (7 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study God’s word</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I never prayed so hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poured out my soul to my husband</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive spouse was all in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bounced ideas of one another</td>
<td>Spouse Involvement (7 of 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability of marriage helped</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We talked for hours one night</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vented to my husband daily</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three years under a spiritual director</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor pushed me to uncomfortable zones</td>
<td>Mentor/Counselor Involvement (7 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend, author, mentor—I NEEDED him</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal talk therapist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 year history with my men’s group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend was on her own journey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5 structurally supporting things per month</td>
<td>Support Network Involvement (5 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible Study Fellowship - stabilizing network</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give your spouse all the room they need</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitude would have helped me</td>
<td>Reflections (5 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should have spent more days at the retreat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three months or so</td>
<td>Duration (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s been seven years and I’m not quite done</td>
<td>Duration (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions informing participants’ mid-life introspection experience:

**Identity**
- How did I arrive here?
- Where am I at?
• What is it that I would love to do?
• What is my life dream?
• What is my life goal?
• What do I want? Why?
• How does this link to who I am professionally?
• Purpose

**What is my contribution to the world?**
• What am I supposed to be doing?
• Is this what I'm really supposed to be doing?
• Is this really where I'm supposed to be?
• Have I made a difference?
• Am I making a difference
• Am I doing things that will matter in the future?
• What am I doing here?
• What can I do to serve?
• Where can I serve most?

**Values**
• What is it that I value?
• How do I find relationships that are generative?
• How do I find work that is energy giving?
• What excites me?
Openness
- God, what do you want to show me through all this?
- What can I learn from this?
- What am I learning about myself?
- What would this business look like?

Challenging assumptions
- What did I just spend the last decade for?
- What unconscious tradeoffs did I make?
- Would I make that choice consciously?
- Is what I'm doing worth it?
- Do we need to be making a major change here?
- What am I risking?
- What happens if this fails?
- What are my alternatives?

Capabilities
- What am I good at?
- God, can I take every thought captive?
- Could we raise enough money?
- Do I have the capability to take this other path?
- Do I think I can be successful?

Direction
- What's next?
• How can I serve?
• How should I engage the world?
• What do I want to do with this company’s model?
• What do I want to do in this program?
• How do I integrate the program in my life in 20-30-40 years?
• What area do I want to focus on?
• How do we create communities of innovation and learning?
• Where does this path lead?
• What are the potential branches and sequels?
• What's the end game?
• Who else is on this path?
• Do I know any of them?
• How do I compare to them?

**Themes**
The 11 themes that emerged from analyzing 283 data codes tell most of the structural description in answer to the research question, “What is the nature of mid-life introspection?” They are process oriented, and they reflect clusters of data codes that exist only because they helped participants structure their introspection experiences as they felt appropriate. The 11 themes are visioning/dreaming, questions, intentionality, obstacles, solitude, spiritual component, spouse involvement, mentor/counselor involvement, support network involvement,
reflections, and duration. Theme names indicate some inevitable overlapping, but I am hopeful that the contexts of the supporting information will help differentiate the content within and among the themes.

The visioning/dreaming theme involved the core process of challenging oneself on issues of identity, purpose, values, goals, and a life narrative at a future date. Each person believed this was central to their experience. John exuded enthusiasm as he described his personal experiences with visioning.

The book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, was very meaningful, because it reconnected me with God and reconnected me with knowing and loving and worshipping God. This Lectio Divina exercises were incredible, and I would talk to my former Pastor. The [self-awareness] workshop was very meaningful because that was the first time I ever did the Strengthsfinder. And that blew my mind. I mean it was so spot-on for who I am. You know, futuristic, activator, relator, maximizer, and significance. (John, interview, 2013)

Jeremy’s visioning looked 30 years out.

I tried to envision myself 30 years in the future and try to envision my environment and people and what I was doing and then try to work back and try to figure out how I got to that point. Rather than look at the immediate effects of the decision to your left or your right, you kind of look at the decision in terms of what will get you closer to that 30 year out vision. (Jeremy, interview, 2013)

The questions theme captures the personal searching at the core of the mid-life introspection process. The questions are varied, though they show a few common thrusts, such as identity, purpose, direction, and resolving issues that are not
generative. Lucy’s description shows the intersection between this theme and the spiritual component theme.

So I’m like, ‘Okay, I’m 50. Gee, what have I done so far? Have I done it well? Does it matter? How will I know? What have I done? Have I done anything that made a difference? What have I accomplished? And what do I have to show for my time here?’ So of course, why not ask God. Then I’m like, ‘Okay, Lord what is it you want me to do? Is there something you want me to be doing consistently in another job, whether it be volunteer or otherwise? Or is it to really pour into the lives of people you’ve already given me, i.e. parents or granddaughters or just to be available to help people I love more? Or are DESI and I just supposed to do something different? Whatever it is, I’m ready.

(Lucy, interview, 2013)

Jenny’s tough questioning helped her challenge her own assumptions and link some of her questions to visioning/dreaming.

… and then starting to reset for me what my vision was for myself. Like, ‘What did I always want to do? What is my sort of life’s dream, my life’s goal?’ And then, ‘When did I make THAT choice? What did I just spend the last decade for? What unconscious tradeoffs did I make?’ I will never have [event described]. I will never have kids. I will not have that life. And I traded that for what? The BANK? You gotta be kidding me! Did I mean to come into banking? How did I end up here? How did that happen? Oh, I think I just kind of fell into it.

(Jenny, interview, 2013)

I include Jeremy’s questions for the sake of contrast. They were part of a quick, efficient, business-oriented mid-life introspection with no spiritual component. These questions guided Jeremy’s introspection experience to a very satisfying outcome with blunt, unsentimental, get-to-the-point urgency.

I just kept drilling myself. ‘Do I have the capability to take this other path? Do I think I can be successful? What happens if I’m not? What
are my alternatives? What would this path lead to? What are the potential you know other tributaries to this path down the road? What’s the end game? What do I really want to do? What are the potential paths from there?” You know, whether or not I could make it, etc. ‘Who are the other people on that path? Do I know any of them? What do they look like? What do I think about them and their capabilities compared to mine? If I jumped off a cliff into the world, would I live?’ (Jeremy, interview, 2013)

The intentionality theme was closely linked to the visioning/dreaming theme. Codes such as journaling, writing, and daily meditative practices differentiate these shorter term, discipline-oriented aspects from the longer term visioning/dreaming theme that are made possible and more meaningful by the intentionality. Maureen’s daily discipline was essential.

I couldn’t go a day without it. On days when I, I mean I also do intercessory prayer as a regular practice, but I will skip that in order to I do not want to miss a receiving prayer. So that was just a really powerful, contemplative inner experience. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

John was determined to make this effort count.

This was different. I thought, you know, if I’m gonna do something significant here, if I’m gonna really listen to God about what the next step is gonna be, I need to take it seriously and I need to do it. (John, interview, 2013)

The obstacle theme included completely unrelated codes that impeded people’s mid-life introspection process.

I was in my own way because I was so introverted. So this intentional change was part of me trying to go back to finding myself to say, “Am I really this introverted, or am I really this closed off, or have I just closed off because this has been easier in my life?” So, yeah, it was too
easy for me to cocoon. You know? Keep all that interaction away because it was too hard. (Jenny, interview, 2013)

I began to feel like it was wrong to want or seek something different. Like, I shouldn’t feel dissatisfied with my job as a job, like that was supposed to be satisfying for me, and then, plus, I have a pretty strong legacy in my husband’s family and in mine, of stay-at-home mothers, and so for me to think about not doing that was hard, because it was against everything I’ve been taught and against other family norms, and so it took me a while to get over this sort of guilt about it. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

I would say my father was an obstacle. I mean, I think in some ways he was very helpful because he made me as strong as I am. You know? I think there are always jewels in our woundedness. . . . And there were always people who pushed back. And there were always the skeptics. . . . And the other piece of it though, in terms of my evolution, because of my family of origin, I was very much an island. So I didn’t go out for advice, and I just kind of barreled forward and put my blinders on and went down that path. (Claire, interview, 2013)

The solitude theme was relevant for five of the nine interviewees. They sought time to unclutter their thinking, to remove themselves from the busy-ness of life, or to create the opportunity to listen to God. Lucy needed a distinct experience with God.

In the process of—and there was a lot of introspection in it—in the process of doing that, I went and had a silent retreat—which I had not heard of before—a day of silence in Glen Erie. It was sponsored by our church, but I did a lot of praying and asking God. You know, am I supposed to stay? Things were going in the wrong direction. They got that way because of changes that clearly weren’t going to be undone. And I just needed time to think and to ask God about it. It was in October and it was a beautiful day. And I went and they actually had some activities in the middle of the day where you could get together and do—they had a lectio divina, but I decided I wanted to spend the day truly alone. And at the end of the day they had—they came back together and we talked out experience. But I chose, because I had hiked way up, I decided not to come back down, just because I was kind of having my own mountain top experience. So that was really
neat. That was really special. I could have used a couple more days there. (Lucy, interview, 2013)

Bill took advantage of the solitude that was already common to him.

Um, I didn’t seek additional solitude for this, but solitude has always been a very important part of my daily routine—whether that be the solitude of a regular meditation practice, or the solitude of long distance run, or the bike. Whether it be any of those, all of those are places where the reflection happens. And I used it for this mid-life introspection. (Bill, interview, 2013)

The research does not indicate that solitude is necessary for everyone, and Jeremy’s answer to the question of solitude is instructive.

Yeah, my uh, . . . no. I tend not to be a get-away-solitude type of thinker. I’m thinking all the time. So on commutes in to work or any time that I’m doing something else I’m almost on autopilot and I’m running through a scenario in my head, and I’m thinking about options and I’m trying to play them through to their logical end and then rerun it and rerun it. (Jeremy, interview, 2013)

The spiritual component theme was equally individualized. The seven interviewees who provided this coded data did so from a long-established faith walk, though certainly not from the same faith traditions. None of them had a “vending machine” attitude toward their spiritual source. They were relying on an established, trusting, deeply personal relationship that they knew would guide their decision making and their lives: “I didn’t know where it was going to end up, but I deeply trusted it would end up someplace good” (Bill, interview, 2013). John succinctly linked a few themes to the spiritual component theme: “Reflection on God’s word and listening to what
God was telling me and coming back time and time again to trust” (John, interview, 2013).

Desi’s explanation was part of a broader discussion within the interview, so it was wider ranging. It too links the spiritual component theme with visioning/dreaming.

I had seen so many guys—I had heard so many stories—in a stadium of 60,000-70,000 guys, and I’m going ‘Man, we’re all going through similar things, but not quite so. It’s just, God what do you want to show me through all of this?’ And it was to have the confidence that I could be a man, that I could weather storms. I had what it took to continue dreaming, to continue hoping. I’ll draw you a little diagram here. It’s Hebrews. It says, “Faith is the stuff of—it’s being sure of what you hope for. This is me and this is hope. There’s stuff in here. It’s populated by college or getting married, kids… paying for their college. And other things. There’s stuff (substance) to our faith. You can be sure of it. You can grasp it. And I did. You need to know that God has never let me down. He does not disappoint. (Desi, interview, 2013)

Claire speaks of making room for God in order to have a deeper connection.

Well, in my own spiritual quest, for me it’s about myself getting out of the way of . . . me. And one of the ways that I try and deepen my own personal spiritual quest is to have more of a connection with God. So I constantly struggle with myself around getting in my way. And but I find there are certain really divine moments when I can truly say I have a very deep connection with God. And my hope for myself is that that connection deepens. (Claire, interview, 2013)

The spouse involvement theme emerged in interviews with all seven participants who were married at the time of their mid-life introspection. Support, listening, and sharing ideas were commonly coded data. So were patience and frustration.
Here are two reflections from Desi on communicating and patiently supporting one’s spouse. The first is an overview, after which he took a deep dive into the nature of supportive communication.

We prayed about it. We didn’t go to any counseling. We had talked enough about it and bent our ears over it. I was frustrated by it, to the point where I was supportive of her leaving. I think it wasn’t good for her, health-wise, to stay there any longer. But there is a quantity of communication there that you have to get past. You need to be an active listener. You need to hear what your spouse is saying. You need to engage. And that means it may not be a good time to communicate other than when you’ve set it up. She might want to vent immediately and I’m going ‘You know, on this ride home, at this hour, just might not be the best time.’ You’re not ready to be an active listener. There might be something else going on. There’s traffic. You might not have had the greatest days. You know something of what she might tell you, and you want to sit down and be ready for that. It’s about kairos time. It’s about opportunity time. Kairos opportunity time. And I think she’s seen the value of opportunity time, She understands when she hears from somebody else, what I’m trying to tell her about the right time. It’s about readiness. It’s about being ready to receive. (Desi, interview, 2013)

The receiving end of strong spousal support is a good place to be. Here is Maureen’s description.

He coaches others, but he had no idea how to coach me. So, but he definitely tried. And he definitely gave me room. Supporting me through doctoral school was no small thing. It cost a lot of money, and he supported me with that. And a lot of time and a lot of putting up with me being really frustrated. When I was writing my dissertation, I was not fun to be around, you know. And he was just great support for me in my dissertation. He was fantastic. He was really good. I mean compared to my faculty at [college] he was way better. He, um, well that’s a time when he could coach me because. . . . [A setback happened, and] It was crushing. And he was such a support at that time. He was just an amazing support, and he was also like really mad and I loved that he was so mad [about the situation]. . . . And he really did help me. So that was a time when he was just amazingly helpful, is
through my dissertation process. He was really encouraging about it, too. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

The mentoring/counseling theme represented seven of the nine participants. Notably, the two quickest, mostly business oriented mid-life introspections are the ones who did not access this resource. They did not view it as necessary at the time, and in retrospect, they affirmed that choice. Desi made it clear that he could not have navigated these waters without the sounding board provided by a longtime friend and mentor, even by relying lessons learned from him.

Mentors prepared me for [the mid-life introspection]. A gentleman named Dave MacCasland. David’s an author, has won awards. He wrote an autobiography on Eric Little, and before that, Oswald Chambers, Abandoned to God. Dave MacCasland was my Bible Study Fellowship discussion leader in the early 80s. Dave impressed upon me as a guy who probably could take every thought captive, knowing that not even Paul could do that. But if the end was to take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ, Dave appeared to me to be that kind of guy. So I started striking up a relationship with Dave, which lasted about 12 or 13 years before Dave moved away. Dave would tell you he’s just a guy and that he had his issues, his struggles. He’s just one of the guys. And it impressed upon me in such a way that it got me wanting to see if I could do it. Could I take every thought captive? It led me deeper into scriptures. It led me deeper into how we’re supposed to engage the world. So Dave is part of that journey, whether he realized it or not. (Desi, interview, 2013)

Maureen engaged a spiritual director.

So I did then seek out a spiritual director. I found one . . . she’s right here in [city], and was such a support to me during that time. She was just such a spiritual companion and helping me. I came to her and said “Look, I need some help with discernment. I can’t figure out what I need to be doing next with my own life.” And, she helped me with that. (Maureen, interview, 2013)
The support network involvement theme followed a similar profile as other resource oriented themes. What help is in place? What available help seems relevant to my needs? Bill had a combination of support network and counselor, merging two themes once again.

I have for decades engaged in a relationship with a personal talk therapist. So I have a cadre of support that invites reflection in different domains of my life. And I relied on both of them probably right after I saw this coming. (Bill, interview, 2013)

Claire said it this way.

I had tremendous, sort of guardian angels along the way, like these people in [city], who helped me to be more of who I am, as opposed to playing out my life for someone else. . . . And then there was [well known author] who just kept saying, ‘Call me. I’m here. Call me.’ In fact, he’s still always there, offering to help, to listen. (Claire, interview, 2013)

The reflections theme is about lessons learned or thoughts on what the interviewees might do differently if they were to engage in this experience again. No one thought they had approached the mid-life introspection experience completely wrong. One would have sought more solitude. Another would have extended her retreat a couple more days. Another reports that it would have been helpful to journal their thoughts and their days. None prescribed any steps for anyone else’s mid-life introspection experience, with the exception that having a mid-life introspection experience—whatever it looks like—would be valuable for anyone. Here is John’s perspective.
I just learned that it works, because it connects me to the source of everything. You know, I recommend it for everybody, because everybody can benefit from it even if they’re quote ready for it at different levels in different ways. For example, my daughter is graduating from college in May. I think she would benefit greatly from spending some time in daily prayer and reflection about what God is calling her to be and to do. Whether she’d do it exactly the way I’d do it. But any little bit would be good. (John, interview, 2013)

The duration theme shows the range of experience in the time dimension of mid-life introspection experience. There is no trend. Even the notation that most the experiences described in this study cluster in the middle might be misleading. Thoughts of bell curves, median or mean durations, etc. are terms associated with quantitative measurement. This sample size is far too small to convey any validity to such a conversation, and this research methodology was qualitative, not quantitative in the first place. Therefore, it should only be said that these nine people had experiences that lasted from a couple months to many years in length. They engaged in mid-life introspection until they were satisfied, and then they stopped. Shorter experiences might be guessed to be too brief, but not in the mind of those two interviewees, even in retrospect. Longer ones might be judged to be inefficient or unfocused, but not in the minds of the interviewees. Some needed that much time to address their situation. Others had significant life events change the circumstances and extend an introspection that likely would have concluded earlier. To personalize the range, here are two contrasting statements about very different experiences. Jeremy talks about his two introspection experiences (one was the result a cancer diagnosis at age 27 and the other was a business/career decision made in his early
40s.) He says “It was, it was short each time. It was you know, weeks, to you know, a month or two” (Jeremy, interview, 2013).

Maureen speaks of a much longer process, slowed by life circumstances such as raising children, managing home repairs, and supporting a spouse’s career.

And mine [mid-life introspection experience] was more like ten. That’s what I’m saying—it was a LOT longer [than her husband’s mid-life introspection experience]. His was a fairly nice tight chunk of time for you there. And in some ways mine started earlier, although we were going through this, kind of at the same time, although mine started earlier. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

**Insights Family of Codes and Themes**

The introspection family of codes and themes reveals the depth and breadth of personal discovery associated with each of the researched mid-life introspection experiences.

**Codes**

356 codes build the story of the insights captured within three themes. The conversations peaked in intensity discussing these topics. Interviewees’ descriptions of this phase of their mid-life introspection made it clear that they were talking about a distant end of the continuum that began with their own earlier sense of ennui. A great deal of life energy, commitment, success, failure, and frustration resides in life stories by this age, and the interviews were reliving their approach to reaching closure on important decisions. They describe a challenging, frightening, and revealing journey. According to these interviewees’ experiences, we cannot expect the
revelations of self-awareness and future direction without the challenge and fear that accompany the journey. Table 11 below shows codes selected to demonstrate their alignment with the three themes of the insights family of data. A complete list of codes is contained in Appendix E.

**Themes**
Self-awareness, emotional fervency, and identity emerged as three themes that help in sense making for the large body of data in the insights family of codes shown in Table 11. The interview extracts below the table illustrate the emotional intensity of the experience and the perseverance required to complete the journey. They show the increased self-awareness and the firmness of the concluding insights.

**Table 11. Insights Related Codes and Themes (and Density of Codes)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learned/validated strengths</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing solitude and silence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Created</td>
<td>Self-Awareness (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renewed sense of self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased strength and confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woo—strength of personality, confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cried and released like never before</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhilarating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agonizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energized</td>
<td>Emotional Fervency (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own my life and my decisions, including changing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel the love of God into people’s lives</td>
<td>Identity (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This business is legitimate and it can work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serve in a different way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t want dysfunction anymore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t waste time on this; sense of urgency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding what’s generative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The self-awareness theme demonstrate that it is possible to reach mid-life without understanding ourselves and that it’s possible to get there having forgotten our sense of purpose, identity, and values. Each interviewee expressed discovering, rediscovering, or reaffirming them. No participant stated that they had not learned something crucial about themselves as they prepared to move forward. John’s learning experience was freeing and empowering.

When I began to understand that [strengths] profile, it, like liberated me to say, “Man, I’ve been trying to be somebody that I thought I should be for a number of years, and it hurts.” And I don’t have to do that. I’ve got this cluster of strengths that God gave to me, whether it was through birth, or whatever . . . and it can contribute so much more when you’re leaning into your strengths rather than trying to correct your weaknesses. You know that had tremendous power for me at that point my life. (John, interview, 2013)
Claire linked increased self-awareness with the second theme—emotional fervency.

I think that the deeper I go into looking at myself, no matter how frightening it is, because sometimes there’s a lot of tension with that. . . that there are always things to learn. I’m not the same person I was before. (Claire, interview, 2013)

Jenny rediscovered the power of a once dormant spiritual relationship, and she was energized by the positivity it imbued in her.

I remember being in church one day and we were having sort of praise and worship in the beginning. It was one of those days when I was feeling all used up by people. And I remember hearing very clearly God speaking to me in my head, ‘I see you. I see you. You’re not invisible. I see you, and I value you.’ You know, that kind of thing and I was like well, you know. . . . Then He said to me, ‘Even in the midst of everyone singing the same song, you have your own voice, you are your own person, you are my creation.’ Very kind of validating, reaffirming comments. . . . I don’t know, the story was just . . . see, for me, my introspection started with a doctor making a suggestion to go, help me manage the stress, because I was not managing it. I was just coping by not flunking it, to me being linked up with a person who tapped into you know a more spiritual place which is what resonated with me and allowed me to go back to trusting what I originally believe and understood about myself. (Jenny, interview, 2013)

Maureen linked her insights regarding increased self-awareness and a glimpse at what she discovered God might be calling her to do.

The depth of personal reflection, and I don’t even know how to begin to tell you about that, because there’s so many dimensions of it, you know . . . But that helped me—helped ease the guilt that I was talking about and helped me understand some of my strengths and helped me understand how I value relationships and helped me understand, you know, the dynamics of [my husband] being a workaholic and me being “stay at home.” And helped me begin to understand how to use some of that to better other people’s lives and as a channel really of the love of God into people’s lives. . . . I learned about my flaws as well as my
strengths . . . I learned a lot about other strategies to manage the
difficulties in my life . . . I learned to monitor my internal process in a
way that helps me understand my responses to other people . . . I’ve
become more introverted, and [I value] solitude and silence . . . I
learned that I have a very strong contemplative side. That’s a very
small minority of the population. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

Jeremy learned an affirmation of his capabilities.

I think that I learned that I was more capable than I thought I was. You
know, everybody has their experience in school, their experience early
in life . . . and what I found is that the more higher level things I tried
to do, the more success I had and the more people I ran into along the
way, you know, the more I understood that I belonged where I was.
(Jeremy, interview, 2013)

The theme of emotional fervency shows what a trial the mid-life introspection
experience can be. Jenny was transparent about what she felt and how she reacted
during one of her sessions with a doctor.

I had not cried in years, not even during all those deaths we discussed.
And then I get into [the doctor’s] office and I’m crying like a crazy
person. Like uncontrollable. And I’m like what’s going on here? And
she said, like, “Why won’t you even let yourself cry?” I’m like “I
don’t have time for crying, you know?” It was so foreign, so
uncomfortable. Because I had never really felt safe. But I couldn’t help
it. I was crying all over the place, which was also uncomfortable.
(Jenny, interview, 2013)

John captured the impact of his wife’s mid-life introspection experience concisely:

“[It was] very difficult for me. Very painful for me . . . and very difficult for her . . .
very turbulent . . . very unsettling.” (John, interview, 2013)
The identity theme marks something of a closure to the searching encompassed within the continuum of the ennui, catalyst, and insights families of coded data. These are portions of the interviews during which the participants expressed that their satisfaction with the things they had learned. For many, as they spoke, their countenance began to lighten as they spoke of these positive results within this theme.

Jeremy emerged with something of a life philosophy.

I came to understand that we all have self-doubts. And everybody is to an extent motivated by fear of whether or not they can succeed. We all have a lot we can offer. We should do everything we can to maximize our time. I have seen more things in my past than I will in my future. So If I’m going to have an impact, now is the time. So if I’m going to look back some day with satisfaction, now is the time. (Jeremy, interview, 2013)

Jenny waxed philosophical as well.

So, you know, the question you have to ask yourself is not, ‘Would you do that again?’ Because you can’t. You don’t get a do over. But, “Would you make the choice consciously? What is it that you value?” Then, make that choice. Not out of fear or out of obligation, but based on the thing that you think is really important—the thing that you feel called to do. It’s about making more conscious choices and being aware of the choices you’re making. (Jenny, interview, 2013)

Desi emerged into a good place.

It’s interesting. I am content as I have ever been. It doesn’t mean that I don’t have drive or ambitions. It’s just different. Changed. Focused. My dream now is to teach other people how to dream. My hope rests in something far more eternal. That hope is something no one can take from me, no matter how bad the culture out there gets, no matter what the news reports are that populate my desk top every day. (Desi, interview, 2013)
Maureen emerged with a fresh appreciation of the role spirituality could have in her life if she chose to leverage it in greater ways.

[I learned] forgiveness. And that’s a very useful life topic. . . . I learned, probably the biggest thing I learned through this is the spiritual dimension of midlife that opened up to me through this process was to be able to receive the grace of God in those points of my flaws, in a way that I never had before and learn how to rely on God’s strength, instead of my own and being self-reliant in order to do what I needed to do. I learned to rely on God in that process in a way that makes it much more powerful than it ever could be if I just rely on myself. So I’m starting to distinguish between these times when I’m relying on myself and the times when I’m in the flow of the spiritual energy in the room. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

Lucy began to see a calling back to her treasured relationships.

I don’t want to have the regrets of saying I didn’t spend more time with my parents when they just live right up the road. I need to be available for them. And I wanted more opportunity to be with them, and I’m trying to make opportunities for that. But I still feel God has something more. There’s more coming. I guess I’m in the process still, right now, just waiting to see what. (Lucy, interview, 2013)

John completed his mid-life introspection with a stronger understanding of himself and a fuller awareness of his social obligations emanating from his spiritual reality.

His sense of duty looking forward is unmistakable.

So I’m hearing from God. ‘I haven’t given you all these experiences and all this knowledge for nothing. You know I want you to go in that direction. And it’s an important direction. [Future mission] is essential in the world today, and that is a worthy mission. A mission worth dedicating your life to. It’s in your sweet spot. Trust me John. Put yourself in my hands. You know I will not fail you. I will not let you down. Trust, trust, trust, over and over again. I created everything.’ You know, this is God talking right? ‘I’m the creator, I’m the sustainer, I’m the life-giving force. It you know it doesn’t start and end
with you, and I’m in control. Even if there are lots of bad guys around, even if this happens, and even if that happens, I’m still in control.” And I’ve had such a deep and profound experience of the greatness and vastness and power and ultimateness of God and God’s presence and God’s being and God’s goodness. “Look John, you have had every privilege, your whole life. You had a great loving family. You grew up in a rich and prosperous country. Your family was well off. You got a great education. You know I mean you had the opportunity to travel all over the world, and you got to get a Ph.D., and you’re making lots of money. . . . You had every opportunity, and you know, and I want you to deliver. I want you to use it. I want you to use your life to make an impact.” (John, interview, 2013)

**Manifestation Family of Codes and Themes**

The nine participants in this study intentionally pursued a mid-life introspection experience for a purpose. The purposes were unique to their circumstances, but each of them wanted to achieve an outcome, broadly defined. One thing common to each person was the desire to reach closure on a key life question that was puzzling them. The findings to this point have presented many of those questions. These findings describe the closure associated with those questions.

**Codes**

144 codes present the data that is binned into four themes. Many of the codes are part of stories of people who have emerged from personal trauma or a restraining set of circumstances to have a refreshed, renewed, re-energized vision for the future and for themselves. Almost all report that by taking these inward steps toward personal leadership, their outer world is much more others-centered and much more impactful in both their personal and professional spheres.
Themes
One hundred forty four codes align with one of four manifestations themes: clarity, decision, vigor, or peace. These themes complete the story, so far as code analysis is concerned. The themes represent the end of a search and the decision point that allows nine deeply thoughtful people to identify a strategic inflection point from which they can look back to a history and forward to a future of their choosing with hope, optimism, and resolve. Table 12 presents the manifestations. Again, their words tell their stories.

Table 12. Manifestations Related Codes and Themes (and Density of Codes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defining moment for me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our days are numbered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God will take care of my legacy</td>
<td>Clarity (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I care deeply about people at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a vision now</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resigned from the company</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommitted to do anything I do as unto the Lord</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create an endowment of running capital</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing psychologist</td>
<td>Decision (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sell my business interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grow and revamp [urban youth futures program]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition company to one of shared ownership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to say how blessed I am</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave me energy</td>
<td>Vigor (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excited at work</td>
<td>Peace (9 of 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incredibly more self-assured</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel better more often</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removed fear of failure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filled with integrity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No more choices out of fear or obligation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suddenly all that matters is what I’m called to do</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back to the basics of what brings the most joy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The clarity theme includes the codes resulting from answered questions during the mid-life introspection experience. Doubt, worry, and ambiguity are gone—not from the world or from the interviewees’ lives, but from their seeking a direction for their next season of life. For Lucy, that meant a reaffirmation of her number one life priority.

> Whatever I do I want to do unto the Lord. Because in the end that is all that really matters. Because if I’m obedient and do what He’s leading and calling me to do, whatever that is, then as long as He’s honored and glorified in it, He’ll make out of it what it’s supposed to be, and that’s really my legacy. (Lucy, interview, 2013)

The decision theme includes specific decisions—decisions to stop doing this, to start doing that, or to correct an ungenerative life situation. John followed God’s calling and trusted His promise related above.

> Aligning my life with God’s call and what I understand to be the gifts that God has given me has given me a tremendous amount more confidence and a tremendous amount of desire to do more. [There was] also just the rightness. Just the rightness of feeling like yes, this is
what God is calling me to do. And yes, these are the gifts that God has
given me and so just run with it, because God can bless your efforts
despite your own foibles and your own weaknesses, and if not me, if
not you, then who? (John, interview, 2013)

Jeremy speaks of his two mid-life introspection outcomes first and then elaborates on
the decision resulting from his second one.

[They were] two of a handful of the best decisions of my life. . . .
Well, I think there’s an opportunity to grow the [urban youth futures
organization] to add more school districts and to grow into middle
school. But there’s an opportunity to revamp it. There’s an awful lot of
inefficiencies. And I see opportunities where the organization can be
modified to do more with the same amount of fund raising. That’s
what I’m going to do. Right now there’s about 420 kids with 20 staff
working for me to run it. That’s good, but that’s not our destiny. Just
watch. (Jeremy, interview, 2013)

Desi’s decision is a combination of romanticism and a pragmatic need.

My dream now is to teach other people how to dream. There’s a whole
generation who has not been taught how to dream, or even taught to
dream. Imagine what you lose when you lose that. (Desi, interview,
2013)

The vigor theme describes lives recovered from mediocrity, dissatisfaction, trauma,
or frustration. Bill’s optimistic outlook stems from his own renewal.

Total. Total. As opposed to looking at every time the lease came up at
one my five offices I would dread trying to figure out how do I make a
commitment for just one more year because I never know where it’s
gonna go. Versus a few months ago, I up and extended my current
lease here so it would go through four years from now, because I’m
not worried about that. Total change. So what’s changed? Is me—how
I look at it, how I engage with it. (Bill, interview, 2013)
Lucy has greater assurance of her identity and her abilities. Here is her husband’s description.

She’s incredibly more self-assured. She went into it wondering if she could make it in the workplace. That has never come up again. She knows she can do it. She was the focal point of the office. She knows she can do it in any setting, really. But, in one particular one, she proved it to herself. (Desi, interview, 2013)

Jeremy was freed from the one thing that had held him back: “I didn’t have the fear of failing anymore” (Jeremy, interview, 2013).

After a seven to ten year process, Maureen is flourishing. Here is her husband’s description.

She’s flourishing. And you know, obviously, she’s very successful in what she does. She’s got lots of clients. She’s got a full docket. People want to come to her, specifically. . . . And she’s brand new; she’s two years in [the practice]. She’s a superstar, and so she’s flourishing in every way. (John, interview, 2013)

The peace theme describes a steadfastness of purpose as participants discuss their approach to life and vocation after their mid-life introspection experience. Bill’s cornerstone is integrity.

Now I am willing to engage with integrity. Because at the end of the day I ended up exactly where I started as a small business owner. I come to the same job. I work with the same people. Our business as defined by our clients today is the exact same that it was before I started this process. And yet, it’s a totally different place to work. (Bill, interview, 2013)
Desi is resolved to trust. He states a guiding principle for every aspect of his life:

“Faith is being sure of what you hope for” (Desi, interview, 2013).

Jenny’s personal healing has changed her entire approach to her managerial role and the lives of the people she leads.

Well, before, I wasn’t a task manager. But I was only an approachable manager. I only provided thought leadership. I set direction for people. I solutioned for people. And I peripherally cared about them. Now, I am certainly providing context and all that, but I go out of my way to make sure folks have some understanding of the meaning why they are here. These people know I care about them deeply. I am invested in their lives. I follow up on their career development and their fulfillment. So our performance conversations are different. I am all about creating a positive organizational culture, so I’ve latched onto that material like nobody’s business. And started to drive a different environment in this place over the last couple years. People talk about loving each other here, and it’s not just talk. It’s real. (Jenny, interview, 2013)

Data analysis identified 991 codes and 25 themes. They are described above and portrayed in the words of the interviews as required by phenomenological methodology. The 991 codes are listed in full in the Appendixes A–F. The 25 themes are listed in Table 13, organized by data family. These themes captured the richness of the full mid-life introspection experience as expressed by the nine interviewees. The reader will note the differentiation between themes in the six families of coded data. Three additional points are appropriate here.
First, some of the themes overlap in time, even though they are clearly distinct from one another in the data. For example, the insights and manifestations families’ themes often occurred in closely related experiences, but I separate them because they are qualitatively different from one another. Another example is important: the process family of data, with its 11 themes, occurs throughout the entire experience in degrees unique to the participant. This structural aspect of mid-life introspection is essential to enabling the experience.

The second point is that all movement and growth within the mid-life introspection is ultimately toward the manifestations family of data and its four themes. Clarity, decision, vigor, and peace are those qualities that the participants expressed in a range of language that they lacked during their ennui phase as they approached the decision to pursue a mid-life introspection. These four themes represented a deficit and a source of dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and depletion at one point, but they represented a manifestation of renewal and optimism because of their recovery. This is crucial to appreciating the power of the mid-life introspection experience.

The third point involves the spirituality theme within the background family of data. Coding revealed spirituality as a theme in the background family of data in this study. However, there is reason to believe it may have emerged merely as an artifact of the participants’ life history. The reader should note that the two participants who made no reference to spirituality in their background and who mentioned no spiritual
component in their reflection on their mid-life introspection experience nevertheless reported completely satisfying outcomes from their mid-life introspection.

Table 13. Aggregation of Themes Experienced in Mid-Life Introspection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Family</th>
<th>Ennui Family</th>
<th>Catalyst Family</th>
<th>Process Family</th>
<th>Insights Family</th>
<th>Manifestations Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction</td>
<td>Conjunction</td>
<td>Visioning/Dreaming</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhappiness</td>
<td>Desideratum</td>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Emotional fervency</td>
<td>Decision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual urgings</td>
<td>Intentionality</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Vigor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>Obstacles</td>
<td>Solitude</td>
<td>Peace</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Depletion</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>component</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>urgings</td>
<td>Support network</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflections</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Duration</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Phenomenological methodology also requires a structural description, a textural description, and a composite narrative of the findings, followed finally by a discussion of the nature—or essence—of the phenomenology studied. These sections follow.
**Structural Description of Mid-Life Introspection**

The structure in this study is the process presented by the process family of codes and themes. The structural description integrates the structural qualities and themes of the data (Moustakas, 1994). This data reveals that structure was an important and widely varied aspect of the mid-life introspection experience. Process is important in that each interviewee emphasized the deliberate nature of their journey. While they did not map out their introspection experience in advance, they had a plan and a goal in mind. Moreover, while many experienced examples of serendipity—benefits they had not sought or expected—their experiences were far from random or chaotic. They knew what they wanted, they were intentional in their pursuit, and they achieved their goals.

Process was also varied widely for the participants. It is important to note that there is no prescribed, required or standard approach to mid-life introspection. The mid-life introspection experiences in these findings are highly individualized. Consider the wide variation in time. Maureen took seven years, whereas Jeremy and Harry required only a couple months. John’s lasted two years, Lucy’s lasted about a year, Bill’s took a year, Claire’s first one took seven years and her second one took two years. Jenny’s is wrapping up now after seven years. Desi’s first one took three years, and his second mid-life introspection lasted two years.
Regarding assistance, all who were married included their spouses, and all who claimed a faith walk relied strongly on a spiritual influence, but both their spousal and spiritual aspects of their introspection were unique to their own relationships. Some spouses were only involved to the point of satisfying their security interests, while others were deeply involved in prayer, challenging of assumptions, and visioning. Three introspections were completely founded on the notion that God was calling them to a specific future, while two began with just a casual approach to the participants’ faith and ended with a renewed and deeply meaningful spiritual relationship.

Support from professionals or social networks varied to meet the interviewees’ needs, too. Bill availed himself of a professional talk therapist, his men’s group, a recently formed academic cohort, and robust network of friends. Alternatively, Jeremy availed himself of no assistance other than his spouse; he had a continuous dialogue with himself, and he found it completely sufficient to his needs. In between these extremes; Maureen had a spiritual director; Lucy had a Bible Study group; John had a mentor and a former pastor; Desi confided in a long time mentor; Claire had a mentor and hired a career counselor; Harry talked with his dad and his business partner; and Jenny relied a counselor and a pastor. None was alone or wanting of more assistance than they had. While the experience was challenging for each of the nine interviewees, it was never challenging as a result of a sense of isolation. They found the support they needed.
Finally, as demonstrated by the long list of collective questions the study group reported, they asked questions. They asked questions of themselves, of their spouses, of professional acquaintances and friends, of counselors, and in seven of the cases, of God. Their questions were deep. They required answers to fundamental questions of identity, purpose, values, goals, boundaries, calling, significance, and vocation.

**Textural Description of Mid-Life Introspection**

The textural description is an integration of the individual themes of each research participant (Moustakas, 1994). In the context of this research question, the textural description of the nine interviewees captures their thoughts and their feelings as they expressed them, free from interpretation (Van Manen, 1990). Therefore, this description summarizes the participants’ themes during their actual mid-life introspection experience, including the catalyst family of themes, the ennui family of themes that preceded the catalyst event, and the insights family of themes and manifestations family of themes that followed the catalyst event.

Whereas the structure (process) shows highly individualized findings, the text (introspection experience) does not. In fact, there is a high degree of commonality. The ennui family of data included four themes—dissatisfaction, unhappiness, spiritual urgings, future orientation, and depletion. Each person’s dissatisfaction with their circumstances was building toward a conjuncture or crisis. Each person was unhappy by any measure; they would have scored on subjective well-being (Diener &
Biswa-Diener, 2008), motivation (Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 2006), and life meaning (Fabry, 1988; Wong, 1998b). They were not flourishing (Seligman, 2011). The seven people of various faiths were asking for spiritual help with increasing urgency. Each person was trying to orient themselves toward a more desirable future. Finally, each person was in an ungenerative situation. They reported feeling drained, enervated, and losing hope. They were clearly not experiencing the sensation of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). A summary textual description the sense of ennui in these nine interviewees is that, during their period of ennui, they had become unhealthy in the holistic sense, they realized it, and they understood the implications of this growing problem in increasing measure.

The catalyst family of data included two themes—conjuncture and decision. Each person reached a conjuncture point. They realized they could no longer accept the nagging ambiguity associated with the sense of ennui that was plaguing them. At their conjuncture, they knew it was time to make a decision; they would have to bury or deny their concerns and accept their situation in order to have the peace they sought, or they would have to move forward into an introspection experience they knew would be personally challenging. Each person decided to advance into their particular mid-life introspection experience. A summary textual description of these catalysts is that all nine interviewees reached an unacceptable point and decided to assess their world and change their place or role in it.
The insights family of data included three themes—self-awareness, emotional fervency, and identity. Once again, a matrix of three themes and nine interviewees would show data in each block. Each participant experienced all three themes. The learned things they had not known, and they affirmed attributes about themselves they had suspected were still relevant. Three relearned crucial views toward identity, values, and purpose they had forgotten. All nine interviewees experienced intense emotional responses to their mid-life introspection experience along a wide range of feelings, including anger, fear, exhilaration, and optimism, to name a few. They did not all feel the same emotions, but they did all feel a range of emotions, with intensity. Finally, they reached identity. Each interviewee chose to go forward into a mid-life introspection with the intent to make life choices, and each reached identity about future directions and life philosophies that were relevant to their own experiences. A summary textural description of these insights is that each person was changed by their mid-life introspection experience; they were wiser, they were tested, and they were equipped with a vision for their future.

The manifestations family of data included four themes—clarity, decision, vigor, and peace. While each experience was unique to the interviewees, all of them expressed thoughts that coded into each of these four themes. Each had a refreshing clarity regarding the subjects that mattered most to them – personal relationship, career decision, life direction, etc. On the key issues, no ambiguity remained. Similarly, all had reached a decision; no ambivalence remained. All nine participants reported a
revival and a resurgence of energy and optimism regarding the future and confidence in their ability to impact the people or endeavors on which they focused their talents and effort. Finally, they expressed resolve. It is clear from the interviews that each of the nine was determined to remain on their positive trajectory. A summary textual description of these outcomes is that each person was equipped, prepared, and along the new journey they had chosen as a result of their mid-life introspection. A complete list of these codes is included in Appendix F.

**Composite Narrative: The Nature of Mid-Life Introspection**

The structural and textural descriptions tell the stories of nine people who shared their mid-life introspection experiences. When combined, they form a composite narrative of mid-life introspection itself. This narrative is what philosophers and psychologists refer to as the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This section provides the answer to the research question, “What is the nature of mid-life introspection?” It turns out that the answer to this question is more than a mere description. A mid-life introspection is a deep, highly individualized search within oneself. Each search is unique to the individual, and the capability to conduct this search for identity, meaning, and purpose is a gift that accompanies being human. So far as we know, no other creature can contemplate these questions or intentionally seek to make a greater contribution or live a more fulfilling life. These outcomes are unique to humanity, and this composite narrative reveals a series of introspective questions and a set of themes that apply uniquely to the experience of mid-life introspection. We can
conclude from the findings presented here that, despite much room for individual variance, mid-life introspection has predictable, knowable, definable qualities. I present this information in two ways. In the following paragraphs, I will describe the nature of mid-life introspection in text. I will use this opportunity to give a final voice to some of the interviewees. Then I will provide a framework to help imagine the experience.

The nature of mid-life introspection is paradoxical. For the philosopher, it speaks to both the particular and to the general. That is, mid-life introspection is simultaneously unique to the individual and reasonably predictable and knowable. Employing terms used above, data codes are unique to each person’s experience, but with only a few exceptions, the themes and families were common, and they represent the DNA of the mid-life introspection. Within the ennui family of experiences, almost every interviewee experienced all of the themes—dissatisfaction, unhappiness, spiritual urgings, future orientation, and depletion. Within the catalyst family of experiences, the two themes of conjuncture and decision were universally expressed. Within the insights family of experiences the self-awareness, emotional fervency, and identity themes were universally reported. Within the manifestations family of experiences, the themes of clarity, vigor, and peace were expressed by every interviewee.

Mid-life introspection has not been defined in dictionaries, books, or scholarly articles. Mid-life crisis has been defined, but that term is rife with negative
connotations from poor judgments to unfulfilling lives associated with a lack of
closure, decades of low subjective well-being and scores of hurt people.

The mid-life introspection experience is, by these participants’ measure, a decidedly
positive experience marked by closure, healthy choices, and high subjective well-
being. Therefore, toward the end of each interview, I invited the participant to offer a
definition, and some did. For Jenny, it is a chance to create your own reality.

A mid-life introspection is a process of understanding clearly your values, your purpose, your intentions, and your contribution, and being convinced of those things sufficiently to start to change your life to make those things a reality. (Jenny, interview, 2013)

For Bill it is an invitation and a gift: “When the universe offers an invitation, it wise
to strongly consider it” (Bill, interview, 2013).

Desi associates it with dreaming.

It is the tweaking of dreams. For those who aren’t dreamers, I don’t
know how they deal with it, but it’s the tweaking of dreams. It’s the
rediscovery of your hope. For those who don’t have faith and don’t
have much hope, I don’t know how they deal with it. It’s not a shaking
of your faith, but it’s a reshaping of it inasmuch as it’s a different
context. You still have it. It’s a rediscovery of the fact that you still
have the hope that you have. And it’s discovering that your dreams are
different. And you still have the capacity to dream them. (Desi,
interview, 2013)

Maureen reflected on people’s ability to engage in a mid-life introspection experience
and the wide range it might include.
Most people do not seek or find this level of self-awareness. That’s my experience. . . . [One reason] that is because of the way different people relate to their emotions and express them. I do think a lot of people will go through some type of crisis. A lot of people are afraid of their internal processes. And not everybody has insight, the capacity, to observe themselves. That capacity for insight really varies by the person, their ability to observe themselves, so that subset is completely off the table, in terms of going into depth in the population. And then within the people who have the capacity for insight, not everyone has the interest. [Some] are more interested in the external world and less interested in the internal world. So that whole chunk is off. So it really ends up being a small population. . . . With regard to meaning and purpose, I’ve heard other people talk about a process that sounds similar [to mine, but] without talking about God. They use reference the energy of the universe, or you know, that kind of spiritual language. But it doesn’t necessarily have to include God. (Maureen, interview, 2013)

Based on these findings, I offer the following definition: Mid-life introspection is a deeply personal quest for a fresh understanding of one’s identity, purpose, values, goals, and life direction, influenced but not necessarily constrained by one’s life history and present circumstances. This definition is distinctly positive. Moreover, it helps fill the literature gap and can be the foundation for a life changing mid-life introspection experience.

I now offer a graphic depiction of the chronology of mid-life introspection to help describe its nature. Mid-life introspection is sequential but without distinct boundaries. For example, the sense of ennui necessarily precedes the catalyst event and the insights and manifestations of the phenomenon. However, the boundaries between ennui and insights are blurred, and there is often a continued uneasiness
associated with ennui even as the person is learning important but unexpected things about themselves.

I hope the framework presented in Figure 6 is helpful, but at the same time, I wish to emphasize that I am not presenting it as a model. To do so would be a violation of the research philosophy I provided at the beginning of this paper. A transcendental phenomenological study is a description that attempts to be a composite, accurate narrative of the phenomenon shared by those who participated in the study. This is not grounded theory, and I want to be clear that I am not presenting the data above or the framework below as anything more than a tool to imagine the composite journey of these nine interviewees.
Figure 6 shows the flow that all nine interviewees experienced. It is worth noting that, although the findings present a sequence to the flow of a mid-life introspection experience, the sequence is loosely defined, with a great deal of overlap between some themes in one family of data and some themes in the “next” family of data. The framework also demonstrates the power of language to show the personal movement from an undesired place to a much better one. Two additional notes on this point are that this dynamic of overlapping themes occurred more for some, and that the themes within the insights family (self-awareness, emotional fervency, and identity) and manifestations family (clarity, decision, vigor, and peace) of data showed the most
overlap. While it remains true that the four manifestations themes were preceded by the three insight themes in each participants, and although the four manifestations themes are clearly distinguishable aspects of the mid-life introspection experience, data codes for the four manifestations themes began to emerge during the participants’ experiences with the insights family of data within the mid-life introspection experience, indicating the overlap. With the self-awareness, emotional fervency, identity, clarity, decision, vigor, and peace of their successful mid-life introspection, they were equipped for their next season of life with confidence and optimism.

As a result of these findings, I conclude this chapter by answering the research question, “What is the nature of mid-life introspection?” The answer includes both a definition and a description. Mid-life introspection can be defined as a deeply personal quest for a fresh understanding of one’s identity, purpose, values, goals, and life direction, influenced but not necessarily constrained by one’s life history and present circumstances. Further, mid-life introspection can be described as the quest described in the definition occurs in a way that is unique to the person, that often includes multiple, overlapping themes simultaneously, and that can end with clarity of purpose and environment, a decision for future direction, renewed vigor, and a personal peace.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.
—Oscar Wilde

In presenting the research findings, it was important to provide the data and the participants’ own descriptions of their experience with the phenomenon of mid-life introspection. Phenomenology research methodology requires that the researcher take a descriptive approach to reporting the findings. In this chapter, a discussion of the findings allows for extrapolation and interpretation of the findings.

*Mid-Life Introspection versus Mid-Life Crisis*

Mid-life introspection is a seldom heard term, whereas most people have heard of a mid-life crisis and have an image of it in their mind. Clarification and differentiation of the two terms is appropriate.

There is abundant literature on mid-life crises. Most of it describes a negative experience, a range of negative choices to deal with a negative experience (Wethington, 2000), negative impact from those negative choices (Sheehy, 2006; Levinson, 1978 & 1996), and an unhealthy, unhappy second half of life as a result (Fry, 1992). The term I denotes a problem, and its combination with the term I in western cultures carries with it a connotation of unsuccessfully addressing the crisis. Generally speaking, discussions of mid-life crises are negative stories with negative outcomes. In terms of basic definitions, mid-life crises do not have to tell exclusively bad stories; after all, some crises result in good decisions with powerfully positive
results. However, our national dialogue on mid-life crises has from the beginning been skewed sharply toward the negative—confusion, frustration and fear yielding to unwise choices with predictably hurtful result. The poor results stem from a lack of understanding of one’s circumstances, ineffective support structures, or an inability or unwillingness to engage a deeper, more thoughtful, more deliberate personal exploration. Those poor results include replacing problem solving strategies with coping strategies and replacing problem identification with denial and a range of choices mistakenly believed to be capable of removing the pain of the crisis, from marital affairs to workaholism, irresponsible large purchases, drug abuse or alcohol abuse (Kasser, 2006; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Peck, 1968).

Addressing the common dynamics of mid-life in an unhealthy and unsuccessful way is a story we know well. Though it unfortunately remains too common, it is well-documented and well-understood. This is the reason I did not study mid-life crises or even juxtapose mid-life introspection against them. However, it is appropriate at this point to use the brief description of mid-life crises above to differentiate the concept of mid-life introspection.

In contrast with the mid-life crisis, a mid-life introspection connotes a more deliberate, more complete, deeper experience with richer insights and more positive outcomes. The findings in this study reinforce each of these positively differentiating attributes of the nature of mid-life introspection. Although the literature on mid-life
crisis and this research on mid-life introspection include some commonality during what I call the ennui aspect of the phenomenon, the catalyst, insights, and manifestations aspects of the phenomenon are decidedly different. The mid-life introspection data family of ennui includes the themes of dissatisfaction, unhappiness, spiritual urgings, future orientation, and depletion. These themes largely describe the experiences of people approaching a mid-life crisis. The difference is seen in what happens next.

When a person reaches the catalyst aspect of their experience, they are at a cross roads. All people who follow their sense of ennui this far reach the point of conjuncture at which the present circumstance is no longer tolerable. Conjuncture quickly translates to desideratum, and it is time to decide to go forward to an unknown challenge of inner searching for personal insights and unknown outcomes or to choose the more expedient solution of stopping or turning back. A fear of the future and of the unknown influences most people facing the conjuncture and desideratum of the catalyst event to take refuge in the unfulfilling, but known, circumstance of their present life. The result is a life of coping with a satisficing solution and masking pain and dissatisfaction. It is a life measured by low subjective well-being (Diener, Napa, Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Suh, 2009). It is a life that may lack meaning and purpose (Baumeister & Sommer, 1998; DeVogler & Ebersole, 1981; Wong, 1998a). It is a life of unnecessary constraint and low motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Such a life is unlikely to include a high frequency of experiences with
flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and by definition, this life cannot be one of flourishing (Seligman, 2011). We have seen these people; they reach their later years, and they are depleted of energy and joy (Brandstader, 1992). They may have driven away friends, and they suffer some combination of loneliness, anger, and embitterment. These are tragic outcomes of mid-life crises and decisions that do not lead to fulfilling second halves of life (Gotlib & Wheaton, 1997). Almost none of this is necessary. Most mid-life crises could have become mid-life introspection experiences with the attendant benefits.

If, at the catalyst point of conjuncture and desideratum, the person described above were equipped and disposed to go forward, rather than turn back, they could potentially experience the full mid-life introspection phenomenon. There is the possibility that they could change their minds after deciding to go forward into the insights aspect of mid-life introspection. But, if they continue through to completion, the findings above suggest that they would arrive at a far better place, psychologically than the one unsatisfying and potentially dangerous place to which they would consign themselves by refusing this opportunity.

Those who continue beyond the catalyst aspect of mid-life introspection and complete their journey would have the opportunity experience heightened self-awareness and a recaptured or new personal identity. It would require time, perseverance, and the willingness to endure the highs and lows of the emotional fervency. The resulting
manifestations of clarity, life decisions, vigor, and peace appear to be a substantially more desirable description of the second half of life than the one associated with coping poorly with a mid-life crisis. It seems that, as a general rule, either path is available to anyone who asserts free will, moral agency, or an internal locus of control (Cantor and Fleeson, 1991).

**Implications for Healthy Living**

The research findings and the discussion above offer implications for healthy living. The World Health Organization (1946) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (p. 1). Those stuck in a mid-life crisis or coping indefinitely with the results of poor choices during a mid-life crisis are unlikely to reach this standard (Levinson, 1978; Sheehy, 2006). Those who pursue and persevere through a mid-life introspection are much more likely to attain higher levels of health in the second halves of their lives. Two categories of information support this assertion.

The first is the body of research in this paper. The findings stand alone, but the component parts of the findings are consistent with the scholarly literature. Abundant research supports the health-promoting effects that accompany internalized themes of self-awareness, emotional fervency, identity, clarity, decision, vigor, and peace. Self-awareness helps us work toward our strengths and our priorities, and it helps us avoid efforts that we find enervating or dangerous (Vaill, 1996; Higgins, 1996; McGregor and Little, 1998; Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Emotional fervency confirms the
intensity of the experience—the discomfort of finding our vulnerabilities and the exhilaration of reimagining our dreams for the future (Sheehy, 1995, 2006). A clear, healthy sense of identity removes ambiguity and contributes to confidence and direction, making one less vulnerable to destructive choices (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Wong, 1998a). In other words, a person completing a mid-life introspection can choose to become any one of a number of “possible selves” (Cross & Markus, 1991). The key is to become one of those selves that is well aligned with one’s values and identity (Thompson, 2000). Clarity also removes ambiguity and doubt. It protects us from second-guessing our choices as we emerge from the mid-life introspection experience into the next season of life (Dweck, 1999; Seligman, 2011). Decision separates the many things we could choose to pursue during the next season from the one or few things that we will pursue (Gould, 1978; Bridges, 2001). Vigor reflects the renewed sense of energy that accompanies a clear, decisive way forward. It has a high correlation with positivity and often exists in a synergistic relationship with a renewal of healthier nutrition, sleep patterns, and fitness leading to a more energetic work life and more enthusiastic relationships (Cameron, 2012). Peace is the inner stability and confidence in the future and in one’s present circumstances. It is the antithesis of the sense of ennui that began the mid-life introspection in the first place (Rohr, 1996; Guinness, 1998; Nozick, 1999; Pierce, 2000).

There is a second category of information to support the improved overall health of those who complete a mid-life introspection. It is the body of literature that describes
how people are pursuing healthy, fulfilling lives after making a successful transition to the second half of their lives. There exists a group of endeavors that can comprise a fulfilling, healthy second half of life, but many of them require a person to begin from a healthy starting point. One can choose to transition from a life of financial success to a life of service to others, but it likely requires a period of mid-life introspection with healthy outcomes (McGee, 2003; Reeb, 2004; Buford 1997, 2008). One can choose to answer a calling, not without first engaging in some kind of mid-life introspection to benefit from the themes within the insights and manifestations of the experience (Ebersole & DePaola, 1997; Fabry, 1998; Guinness, 2003; Hollis, 2009). One can achieve congruence between one’s passion and vocation, but it rarely occurs by happenstance (Thompson, 2000). One can proceed into their advanced years with a meaningful legacy of significance that influences a great many people, but that life is most likely to include a mid-life introspection that offers the opportunity to revisit issues of identity, purpose, and values, and the possibility of a change in direction (Gould, 1978; Buford, 2004; Reeb; 2004; Hollis, 2005). For those with a spiritual component informing their world view, choosing these positive approaches to the second half of life is impossible without settling any outstanding spiritual questions of identity and purpose or reaffirming those already held during a mid-life introspection experience (Schaeffer, 1976; Hillman, 1996; Wong, 1998a; Thompson, 2000; Pargament, 2002; McGee, 2003; Russell & Bucher, 2010).
Recommendations

This is a brief section in which I offer two recommendations. The first is to suggest openness to the experience of mid-life introspection. The second is to suggest a few very loosely defined process suggestions for those who embark on a mid-life introspection.

To invoke the thought of Bill in his assessment of the value of mid-life introspection, “When the universe extends you an invitation, it is wise to consider it.” There is evidence that not every person is equipped to successfully navigate a thorough mid-life introspection; there are emotional and psychological barriers for some that have accumulated over the previous decades. However, for the remaining majority of adults, this can be an enriching, enlightening, empowering personal journey that can open otherwise unavailable opportunities for the second halves of their lives. As the discussion above shows, the positive reward can improve our lives and countless lives of those around us.

Those who show the personal courage to engage in a mid-life introspection experience should consider some of the following process-oriented aids that enabled successful experiences for the participants in this study. Intentionality and forethought work better than randomness and a lack of direction. Accessing multiple resources and sources of support works better than doing this alone. Allowing whatever time is necessary works better than imposing a time constraint on oneself,
when an open ended time frame is an option. Starting is better than not starting, and finishing is better than not finishing. This may sound trite, but if there was a nagging sense of ennui that causes a person to start a mid-life introspection, imagine the continued, larger frustration from a lack of closure after investing time in the endeavor and then quitting. One of the most effective ways to ensure effective closure is to enlist the help of a closest friend, a spouse, a mentor, a coach or a counselor who will not allow a person to quit. For the spiritually inclined, prayer, journaling, meditation, and solitude work. In the end, what works is what matters in the deeply personal effort to pursue a mid-life introspection to its conclusion and open the door to a fulfilling future and a fully healthy life.
Chapter 6: Recommendations for Future Research

*Knowing oneself is not so much a question of discovering what is present in one's self, but rather the creation of who one wants to be.*
—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Researching the question, “What is the nature of mid-life introspection?” has been a rich experience. This study filled a gap in the literature, and it has helped fill a gap in understanding. Some of the mystery of reflection and introspection is removed. A negative image associated with mid-life crisis is slightly more offset with this positive narrative of mid-life introspection and the life-giving outcomes that can result.

Finally, a framework, questions, and suggested resources now exist to guide someone interested in embarking on this important journey of discovery. However, this research did not complete the work. Opportunities exist to advance the study of the nature of mid-life introspection either by challenging the findings of this research or by broadening the research footprint.

**Challenge these Findings**

I invite additional scholarly research on the nature of mid-life introspection. Another scholar could advance the study of the nature of mid-life introspection by conducting their own transcendental phenomenological study of the subject. They could use the questions within this paper that guided my interviews, and I invite them to do so. They could develop additional questions that they believe will result in a more robust or more relevant data field. They could narrow the study to more deeply explore just
one aspect of the findings I presented. For example, they could focus exclusively on one of the families of data—ennui, catalyst, insights, or manifestations—that informed the textural description of the phenomenon of mid-life introspection. Alternatively, a scholar could focus on the one family of data—process—that informed the structural description of mid-life introspection. That person might discover more resources to assist people in this life changing experience.

Only positive outcomes can come from additional research. If another’s findings refute those presented here, then there is the foundation for an academic dialogue focused on more accurately or more fully understanding the nature of mid-life introspection. If another’s findings are similar, then this scholarly research can be said to benefit from validation.

**Broaden the Research**

This body of research on the nature of mid-life introspection would benefit from extending the research protocol across a broader demographic. The research methodology for this study exceeded the standard for validity, reliability, and number and variety of examples of the phenomenon. However, there are whole groups of people I did not study. For example, my cross section captured a wide range of vocational backgrounds, worldviews, and socioeconomic levels from middle class to upper class. Future research could include a cluster of interviewees from lower socioeconomic strata to determine whether fewer resources or fewer career mobility options affect the mid-life introspection experience in a different way.
One of the participants in this study was born and raised in India, but she has spent her adult life in America and traveling internationally. The body of research on mid-life introspection would benefit from exploration in different cultures in different parts of the world. For example, would the findings in this study be replicated in Eastern Europe, South America, Pacific Island cultures, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, or the Middle East? Such global discovery of the nature of mid-life introspection was beyond the scope of this research, but learning similarities and differences within such a study would be an important contribution to this scholarship.
Appendix A: Codes within the Background Family

**Personal**
Married
Father of three
Two of three girls in college
Christian home
Single
End of life care provider\last 7 years
focused on others
Never developed close relationships
Married
Got married
Tested maximum on “achievement”
Mental illness in family
Well known circle of friends
Grew up in India
Indian father
Privileged
Introvertive
Supportive family
Didn’t experience much
disappointment
Strong faith walk
Married young; had to learn a lot
Faith was tested
Challenging life issues
Relied on God
Another faith walk
Always confident in God
Found myself digging again
Indian heritage powerful
Family is crazy dysfunctional

**Age**
50 at introspection. 59 now.
Age 45
Age 48
Age 43
Age 55

**Quality of Life**
Great salary
Great pension
Plenty of vacation
Business trips
Hated work environment
Never felt replenished by God
Life has been tough
Influence
Air Force spouse was fulfilling role
Enjoyed traveling with assignments
Needed a break from home schooling

**Education**
Harvard
Completed college
Earned doctorate
Published
Average student
Air Force Academy
Didn’t excel
Successful at Naval War College
Got a degree, then a job

**Vocation**
Never imagined starting a company
Never desired to start a company
Always in marketing, product
development
Always worked for a small company
Global marketing manager
Vice president at bank
Mission overseas
College professor
Consulting firm
Established Ph.D. program
Business with father
Partnership
Built a model to transform people’s lives
A couple bad partners who were just crazy
Family business
Developed a chemical company
Good business acumen
Want to shift global consciousness
Financed social responsible businesses
Okinawa was the best career move
Ready to excel at Doctrine assignment
Stay at home mom
Thought I’d become a teacher
Chairman of Board, [non-profit]
Role changed after kids left home

**Priorities**

Spiritual life always important
Always felt responsibility to give back
Witnessed eye opening poverty
Introspection is important to me
Traditional values always taught at home
Christian home
Spiritual relationship at 11
Wanted to be an astronaut
High school didn’t challenge me
Big on dreaming and following the dream
He’s a thinker and a dreamer
Appendix B: Codes and Themes within the Ennui Family

**Dissatisfaction**

Earned lots of awards  
Amazing clinical work  
Responsibility to employees  
Our work made a difference  
All the good wasn’t enough for me  
Distracted  
Short of patience  
Less present  
Less engaged  
Tired of just “funding” social responsibility  
Others left profession but we stayed  
Questioned career during soaring job  
Not dissatisfied at home  
Built practice from ground up  
Great challenge  
Part of making decisions  
Made a difference  
Satisfying  
Doctor contradicted values and policy  
Busy-ness wasn’t satisfying  
Loss of vision  
Strayed from mission  
No longer deeply satisfying  
Used to love it, but not anymore  
Partner relationship deteriorating  
Mothering became less satisfying  
Volunteer activities did not fulfill me  
Felt guilty for being dissatisfied  
People didn’t understand what we had experienced overseas  
Dissatisfaction with myself  
Husband knew of my dissatisfaction  
I was frustrated

**Unhappiness**

Didn’t enjoy what we did  
Too many toxic relationships  
Didn’t like it  
Dread  
Very toxic circumstances  
Emptiness  
Not good enough to be an astronaut  
Enjoyed making others feel better  
Talked with patients and connected  
Very fulfilling  
Enjoyed patient interaction  
Very relational  
Became concerned at work  
Informed of change by email  
Felt betrayed  
What I did was no longer valued  
Conflicted over leaving patients  
Removed self-doubts  
Was restless at home  
Fear of failure  
Afraid of what I might see in myself  
Avoided introspection to long  
Unease  
Discontent  
Boundary issues  
There was so much work to do on our house  
Lots of women in roles like mine felt the same way as I did  
Worried about betraying my mom  
I was in pain  
Frustrating to dedicate so much time to move  
It was a very difficult family move  
Cultural shift  
Unhappy kids  
I missed being overseas
Felt abandoned
Had resentment for a long time
My spouse really didn’t get it
Like a whole part of your life didn’t happen
Really hard to figure out
Still had this turmoil inside me
Family conflict
Husband didn’t understand much of my situation
Husband knew I was really unhappy
Most people are afraid of their emotions
Lots of strong negative emotions
Lots of nights at home alone

**Spiritual Urgings**

Spiritual quest
Connection with God
Need to get myself out of the way
Must address my woundedness
Duking it out with God
God: “I can do anything with the people you know.”
God strengthened us through miscarriage
Needed to escape that town’s spiritual community.
Condescension from church establishment
Culture discourages our paying attention to our internal worlds
Tired of doing stuff on my own steam

**Depletion**

Days are not energetically generative
Not sustainable
Work is too draining
Not generative
Burned out
Didn’t look forward to coming to work
Tired

Endured 5 years of changes but no more
Taking the life out of her
Drained of energy
Stopped dating because I had nothing left
Directed to see a counselor
Not even reacting to my own warnings
Needed to get my life together
Closed down
Limited even my best friend
Too easy to cocoon myself
Stopped listening to my own instincts
Needed a way to understand my situation
My brain needed an explanation
My soul needed comforting
Was losing my identity and purpose

**Future Orientation**

Willing to risk my own money
We need a receptionist. You’d be perfect.
Decided my teaching days were done
Learned more about using computer
Frightening, but in a good way
Needed something after kids left home
Wondered if I could do something else
Sought significance
Explored what other things I could do
Wanted to tap into earlier understanding of myself
Had significant career change
Successful sales career
Wanted to avoid life regrets
Didn’t want to report to anyone any longer
Didn’t want to miss an opportunity
Wanted to add value
Didn’t want to be looking for another job in my mid-50s
Knew absence would hurt the practice
Didn’t want to leave patients
Patients didn’t want her to leave
Just teaching in Ph.D. program not enough
Just doing consulting was not enough
There was more that I needed to do

My time was valuable
Like a coiled spring, needing to get out
Like a race car, with so much under the hood, but just creeping along
Started thinking about psychology
Appendix C: Codes and Themes within the Catalyst Family

**Conjuncture**

Warning  
Needed to make immediate change  
Wanted change  
Needed structural changes at work  
Dissatisfaction became intolerable  
Boss shifted everything  
Started with a lot of dissatisfaction  
Discontent  
Parts of me were not able to be expressed  
Not enough intensity in my job  
More and more frustrated  
Family history was not okay with me  
Surprised my unhappiness  
Expected mid-life to be perfect  
Grand introspection was incomplete  
Strengths were irrelevant  
What defined me was going to change  
Didn’t discuss with me  
Didn’t value me  
Size, growth, and change were more important than boss’s core values  
Departing from the mission statement  
I wasn’t stopping to take it in  
Running on autopilot  
Not managing stress well  
Focus on making customers happy was gone.

Really just frustrating

**Desideratum**

At a transition point in my life  
“Man, it’s time for a change”  
Do something or stop complaining  
Considered selling chemical company  
My 2002 vision was no longer pertinent  
Different crossroads now  
On the floor at  
After Promise Keepers event  
Career field disappearing  
Replacing me with electronic registry  
Wake up call from God  
Had to reset my life  
Doctor suggested I get help  
Staying there would have compromised my entire reason for the job  
First introspection triggered by cancer  
Cancer changed my perspective  
Second introspection caused me to start my own business  
Hated suffocating bureaucracy at [xyz]  
The company really made this happen  
If [xyz] hadn’t been a miserable place to work, I would have stayed here for years
Appendix D: Codes and Themes within the Process Family

Support Network Involvement

Warning
Needed to make immediate change
Had a good business partner
Flew around the country talking to people
Friend on her own journey helped me
Patients were part of my support network
Sister is very close to me
Elderly patients befriended me
My adult daughter was a big help
Bible Study Fellowship
High school friend
Incredible resources
Support group in [city]
Prominent author
“Call me. I’m here. Call me.”
Friend helped me craft resume
Cohort was a generative place
Men’s group for 15 years
Alternate weeks and monthly support
Good structure of support
4-5 structural things per month

Intentionality

Live deliberately
Don’t be distracted by immediate effects
Series of small choices; not one big one
Asking questions of self, futures, options
Intentionally sought the introspection
Needed to remove veils

Needed to explore deeper into myself
Needed to challenge the self that was created in childhood
Journaling
Deliberate exploration
Engage with integrity
Too much happenstance
Could have been more formal
Should have been more intentional
I wasn’t serious enough at first
Astounded by his quickness
It took a long time to choose to do this
Very complicated process
Attended a workshop

Mentor/Counselor Involvement

Went to the doctor for help
Counselor was essential
Do something or stop complaining
Only discussed with business partner
Imaginary person as proxy with counselor
Reference my “ideal self”
Wanted to argue but I couldn’t
Assigned exercises to take me out of my comfort zone
Stopped me from closing myself off
Forced interaction
Counselor very respectful
Counselor pushed me and challenged me
Counselor would not accept my excuses
Sought out a spiritual director
Activities to validate or challenge my thoughts
Author and mentor was close for 13 years
Counselor helped with job search
Did two year personal development program
Worked with previous pastor
Had some faux coaching
Did a self-awareness assignment
Read a couple books on self-awareness
Professional talk therapist
Three years under a spiritual director

**Solitude**

Prayer retreat
No solitude; continuous thinking
Asking questions of self, futures, options
Monthly travel gave me time to myself
Day of prayer
Truly alone
Christian retreat center
Beautiful October day
Did a silent retreat
Should have done a couple more days
Time just passed
Solitude would have helped
Internal
Quiet
Going solo
Recharging
Solitude
Integrity
Extended weekend at a monastery

**Spiritual Component**

At a transition point in my life
Journaling with God
Decided to test God
Talking spiritually fit me needs and life
Prayer retreat was very helpful
Day of prayer

Christian retreat center
Finished Bible Study
Retreat was definitive and confirming
Promise Keepers event was instrumental
Rich, deep experience
Went deeper in scripture
Spiritual disciplines added to my routine
Never prayed so hard
Sought to be crystal clear
Wanted more rigorous spiritual discipline
Meditation practice
Spiritual reflection
Spiritual gifts group with other women
Couldn’t go a day without receiving prayer
Need to spend time in prayer
Others doing this without a Christian God
Really powerful contemplative inner experience
Some people’s talk of the energy of the universe is not like a personal God
Study God’s word
Seek God’s direction for the next ten years of my career
Meditative
Reflective
Scriptural focused
God-focused
Meditating on God’s word

**Reflections**

Evaluating the risk at that point in my life
Considered competing with my old employer
No excuses not to do this now
Probing questions about values and identity
Realized I really value security
Need to create communities of innovation and learning
Reflection took on a more formal process
Sense making became important to me
Trusted my intuition
Figuring out what I was good at
Wrestling with it
In depth personal reflection
Reflection really helped me
Did the Purpose Driven Life exercises
Lectio Divina exercises
Wrote lots of notes for reflection

**Visioning / Dreaming**
At a transition point in my life
Envision myself in 20 to 30 years
Envision future environment, activity, people
How to run this type of business
Had to conceive an HR plan
Look 30 years into the future
Pick a time in the future, and work back to the present from there
Visioning exercises
Reset a vision for myself
Dreamed up my new business
Ideas just came into my brain
We underestimate the power of dreaming
Total transformation
Learning what I might want to do with myself
Classes at the university were helpful

**Spouse Involvement**
Vented to husband
Needed to make immediate change
Wanted change
Bounced ideas off spouse
Spouse was very supportive
Spouse took me to lunch every day
Poured out my soul to my husband
Made me feel special
We went to church as a couple
Talked for hours one night
Supportive spouse was all in
Worked through it together
Conferred on big decisions
She cautioned me against making decisions based on others’ negativity
We had life changing conversations
Wise counsel
I don’t think I was supportive enough
Husband was a great help
Supportive
Direct feedback
Mutual support
Bounced ideas of one another
Give your spouse all the space they need
Husband knew I was unhappy
Supported my grad school decision
Financial cost showed his support
He couldn’t coach me but he tried
His dissertation support was fantastic
Was there for me when I needed him most
Gave me lots of space
Wasn’t as enthusiastic as I pretended to be
I saw it was a perfect fit for him
He was going to take it anyway
Didn’t fully support him in his goals
Dragged my spouse back sometimes
Negotiated his decision with him a bit
I wasn’t cheerful enough, but I did the right

**Obstacles**
Warning
Needed to make immediate change
Wanted change
Wasn’t ready to confront it all
Desires were hard to identify because I just met others’ expectations for so long. Distractions come from everyday life. Father was an obstacle. Some people pushed back on my ideas. Skeptics. Only 10% were unsupportive. Home repair took a lot of time, energy. That house was an impediment.

**Duration**

At a transition point in my life. “Man, it’s time for a change.”

Three months. Short each time, maybe two months. Had to take a break; it was too intense. Two to three years. It started years before I realized it had. Still in the last part of the process. Slower to reach conclusion than I expected. Started at a particular location. Seven years. Seven to eight years. Ten years, and that was too long. Just beginning another massive introspection. Three years. Second introspection was two years. Two years. Still going on.

**Questions**

**Identity**

How did I get here? Where am I at? What is it that I would love to do? What is my life dream? What is my life goal? What do I want? Why?

**Purpose**

What is my contribution to the world? What am I supposed to be doing? Is this really where I’m supposed to be? Have I made a difference? Am I making a difference? Am I doing things that will matter? What am I doing here? What can I do to serve? Where can I serve the most?

**Openness**

God, what do You want to show me through all this? What can I learn from this? What am I learning about myself? What would this business look like?

**Challenging assumptions**

What did I just spend the last decade for? What unconscious tradeoffs did I make? Would I make that choice consciously? Is what I’m doing worth it? Do I need to make a major change here? What am I risking? What happens if this fails? What are my alternatives?

**Capabilities**

What am I good at? Could we raise enough money? Do I have the capability to take this path? Do I think I can be successful?
**Direction**

What’s next?
How can I serve?
How should I engage the world?
What do I want to do with this company’s model?
What do I want to do in this program?
How do I integrate the program in my life in 20, 30, 40 years?
What area do I want to focus on?
How do we create communities of innovation and learning?
Where does this path lead?

What are the potential branches and sequels?
What’s the end game?
Who else is on this path?
Do I know any of them?
How do I compare with them?

**Values**

What is it that I value?
How do I find relationships that are generative?
How do I find work that is energy giving?
What excites me?
Appendix E: Codes and Themes within the Insights Family

**Self-Awareness**

- Returned to understanding my wisdom
- Rediscovered innovation
- Make a cognitive leap
- Realized I wasn’t ready to let go of the now
- I was distracted
- Had tremendous stress
- Multiple agendas
- Time compression
- Whole planet is going through a shift
- Confidence
- Introspective
- More to learn
- Need to be challenged more
- Going against the grain
- Historic inflection point
- I can change, or change will happen to me
- This was transformation, big time
- Not going to let this be a mid-life crisis
- Could work in different career fields
- Confident in allowing dreams to be pruned
- I could weather storms
- Faith is being sure of what you hope for
- Confident I could be a man
- Realized I’d been through and had passed the test
- Realized that some dreams won’t come true and that’s okay
- Psalm 128:6 is a good metric for life
- Learned I could challenge the church
- Willing to raise hackles
- Power of prayer
- Focused
- Surprised at how much I embraced this Air Force way of life stuff

- I was strongly influenced by a few others
- Wanted to make a difference
- Wanted work to matter
- Multi-talented
- God was really moving
- I was having influence in the church
- Gifts affirmed
- Had let my job become an idol
- Didn’t want regrets regarding family
- Wanted more opportunity to be with family
- Sensing God has more coming my way
- Realized my heart was in the right place
- Proved something to myself
- Learned a lot about my strengths
- Not a visualizer
- Not a dreamer
- Became more introverted
- Work ethic of 1970s out of place today
- Future oriented
- Professional bearing needed and wanted
- Touched people God wanted me to touch
- Learned that quiet people can be impactful
- Ready for God’s redirection
- Learned about society’s values
- Learned I have lots to offer
- [Re] learned about my strengths
- I liked my “ideal self”
- Church became a different experience
- God was talking to me
- God answered my questions as fast as I could write them
- Got exactly what I needed
- Needed to understand what I was doing
Just fell into my current life choice
Cohort believed in me
Too easily wooed by fear and expectations
Realized I can change negative things
Realized I have a God-given ability to motivate people and help them
I care more about what people think about me than I realized. I don’t like that.
Put my career in perspective
Refocused on people, not the job
More sensitive than I realized
Wanted to avoid life regrets
Didn’t want to report to anyone else anymore
Didn’t want to miss an opportunity
Conscious of the fact that there is an end date
More time in my past than in my future
If I’m going to look back some day with satisfaction, now is the time to act
Security mattered to my spouse and me
Learned my constellation of strengths
Discovered how to use strengths to God’s glory
Futuristic activator
Strong mental acuity
Would like to work past 70
Understand some of my strengths
Understand how I value relationships
Was not fun to be around
Learned a lot about myself
Learned I am very creative
Learned about my flaws
Learned about my strengths
Learned other strategies for managing difficulties
Learned to monitor my internal processes and to understand my responses
Learned forgiveness
Learned the spiritual dimension of mid-life
Learned to receive the grace of God
Learned to rely on God’s strength
Learned not to insist on self-reliance
Learned that God is more powerful than I am alone
Learned about the power of being in the flow of spiritual energy
Experiencing power in a new way, like never before
I conserve energy now, a lot
Need time in silence
Harder to engage in superficial conversations
Valuing solitude and silence
Re-appreciating being outdoors
Very strong contemplative side of me
There is a very small minority of people who are contemplative
Learned that a sensitivity to God is not in everyone
More aligned with what God is doing
Learned I want to do work worth doing
I value reflection
Became very self-aware
I value choice
Don’t want to do something just because I have to
Want to build trust in customers
Becoming a balanced extrovert
Finding what’s generative is important to me
Actively figuring out how to change
Avoiding a “future by default”
Too many people become numb
Too many people lose connection with their dissatisfaction
Society encourages stagnation
Society encourages complacency
Unhappiness becomes a blame game
I have responsibility for my “self”
A five-year review would be good for me
Need more mindfulness
Didn’t want a non-profit experience
Wanted to make a direct contribution
Felt more alive
Didn’t want any more dysfunction
Wanted to serve in a different way
Had to get myself out of the way
Increased strength
Increased spirituality

**Emotional Fervency**

Powerful
Ambiguity
Excitement
Tension
Miraculous
Felt like an island
Sense of grief
Sense of loss
Scary
Sense of urgency
Internal tensions
Fantastic
Frightening
Churning
Privileged
Surprised. Didn’t see it coming
Talked her ear off for hours
Gentle
Affirmation
Not afraid to dream
It frightened me
Encouragement
Felt the blessing
Deep searching
Didn’t feel valued
Didn’t feel needed
Didn’t feel appreciated
Didn’t feel respected
Grateful for my spouse’s perspective
Mountain top experience

Beautiful experience
Use of a proxy was comforting
God: “I see you. I see you. You’re not invisible. I value you.”
Surprised
Cried and released like never before
Foreign
Uncomfortable
Comfort came through confirmation
Mourning
Grieving
Friends were affirming
Began to trust again
Validation
Frustration
Dissatisfaction
Fear of change
Woo
Anxiety
Perfectionist in me caused problems for me
Jealous of my spouse
Angry
Passion
Amazing
Excited
Energized
Motivation
Felt synergy
Felt alive
Felt like I was running a marathon
Joy
Agonizing
Difficult
Fear of risking it all
Courage emerged
Wanted to put soul into my craft
Very validated
Like a dream
Divine moments
Identity

My own development is informing me
My whole focus is what comes next for me
No longer on any advisory boards
Less ego-centric
More attached to the spirit
Scientist
Married this time
Lost part of myself
Designer
Artist
Tested
Need to be more authentic
Deep sense of compassion
Hindu principle of reincarnation
Soul cluster
Losing career field didn’t sit well with me
Dreamer of first order
Command
Leadership
Developmental assignments
Volunteered for an uncharted course
Continued dreaming
Legacy of dad and grandfather
Writing to retain a positive legacy now
Involved in social policy
Wrote a monograph on truth
Deepened connection to God
We felt a partnership
Became a confidant to the pastor

Mentor
Identity expanded beyond Air Force now
God’s revelations
Spoke into the hearts and minds of men
Significance
Legacy
First priority is honoring God
Needed clarity on what was true for me
Had to process never having children
Identity was in my choices
When did I make that choice?
Others’ expectations were too influential
Responsible for the life I created
Own my life and my decisions
Wanted to be in control of my destination
Lots of identity and purpose wrapped up in this decision for me
43 families work for me
Payroll and 43 hospitals depending on us
Channeling God’s love into people’s lives
God used family relationships to change me
Becoming more introverted
The God gene people talk about has grown in strength
Stronger sense of identity and of self
Appendix F: Codes and Themes within the Manifestations Family

**Clarity**

Focused
Our hope cannot be taken from us
Values have been clarified
Culture can’t diminish true hope
Seeing God’s opportunities everywhere
Highly intentional
I didn’t realize I had these gifts
Whatever I do, I do unto the Lord
Serving the Lord is all that matters
Obedient to His calling and leading
Strong work ethic
You don’t get a do over
Clear vision of the future
My time here is coming to an end
Glad to know what I’m supposed to do
All that matters is that I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing
Priorities are clear
My days are numbered
The higher I reach, the more I realize that I belong
Total change
Totally new direction
Clarity in my direction
Defining moment for me
Only one purpose now
This is what I want to do and this is how I will do it
Insisting on recovering my humanity

**Decision**

Took the leap
Pursued job as publication editor
Going to teach others how to dream
Let people know there’s a better way
Getting involved in social policy
Legacy that’s positive and good
Intentionally spending more time with kids
Taught BSF children’s program
God has opened more doors
Decided to honor and glorify God
Totally recommitted after the retreat
Job with clear medical mission statement
Office manager
Make choices more consciously
Make choices out of importance, rather than fear or obligation
I know I’m not supposed to be here but I have to play this out a while longer
I help people understand the meaning of their work
Started a company
Two of the best decisions of my life
Sold my business interest
Growing and revamping the charity
Conceived an idea too good to pass up
I leapt off a cliff because I had confidence in a really good idea
Incorporated the new company fast
Will do this as long as I want
Decided to build the [institution]
Decided to go to graduate school
Became a psychologist
Shared company ownership with team
Immediately change the situation
Committed to giving back
Made a leap of faith
Create a Nobel-like prize for business as agent of world benefit

**Vigor**

Never been busier
Never been more productive
Was the go-to person in the office
I care deeply about people at work
Creating positivity at work
Excited at work
Making a difference
Gives me life
Gives me energy
Lots of excitement
Living for the future
Creating what he loves to create now
Informing something greater than myself
New sense of spirit

**Peace**

Contentment
More content than I’ve ever been
Hope rests in something eternal
More confident in who he is
More confident in God’s work in his life
Confidence
I know I have lots to offer
God will take care of my legacy
Incredibly more self-assured
She knows she can do it in any setting

Making progress, but lots of habits to break
I feel better, more often
Speaking affirmation directly to people
Back to things that bring me joy
No more worries
Removed fear of failure
Taking things more in stride
It’s okay to admit self-doubts
Enjoying free time more than before
Great fit
Choose the doctoral program
Joined faith based practice
Not worried
Confidence
Feeling real freedom
Comfortable with not knowing where this ends
I ended where I started, with the same people, same job, and same clients
What changed is . . . me, my perspective, and my engagement
Liberated
Comfortable with vulnerability
Spirituality is my touchstone
References


Vaill, P. B. (1989). The Rediscovery of Anguish. Keynote address at the annual meeting of the Association for Creative Change, Cincinnati, OH.


