



Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life

By Gail Sheehy

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At last, this is your story. You'll recognize yourself, your friends, and your loves. You'll see how to use each life crisis as an opportunity for creative change -- to grow to your full potential. Gail Sheehy's brilliant road map of adult life shows the inevitable personality and sexual changes we go through in our 20s, 30s, 40s, and beyond. The Trying 20s -- The safety of home left behind, we begin trying on life's uniforms and possible partners in search of the perfect fit. The Catch 30s -- illusions shaken, it's time to make, break, or deepen life commitments. The Forlorn 40s -- Dangerous years when the dreams of youth demand reassessment, men and women switch characteristics, sexual panic is common, but the greatest opportunity for self-discovery awaits. The Refreshed (or Resigned) 50s -- Best of life for those who let go old roles and find a renewal of purpose.

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

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"From the Paperback edition.

About the Author

To schedule a speaking engagement, please contact American Program Bureau at www.apbspeakers.com

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1.

MADNESS AND METHOD

without warning, in the middle of my thirties, i had a breakdown of nerve. It never occurred to me that while winging along in my happiest and most productive stage, all of a sudden simply staying afloat would require a massive exertion of will. Or of some power greater than will.

I was talking to a young boy in Northern Ireland where I was on assignment for a magazine when a bullet blew his face off. That was how fast it all changed. We were standing side by side in the sun, relaxed and triumphant after a civil rights march by the Catholics of Derry. We had been met by soldiers at the barricade; we had vomited tear gas and dragged those dented by rubber bullets back to safety. Now we were surveying the crowd from a balcony.

"How do the paratroopers fire those gas canisters so far?" I asked.

"See them jammin' their rifle butts against the ground?" the boy was saying when the steel slug tore into his mouth and ripped up the bridge of his nose and left of his face nothing but ground bone meal.

"My God," I said dumbly, "they're real bullets." I tried to think how to put his face back together again. Up to that moment in my life I thought everything could be mended.

Below the balcony, British armored cars began to plow into the crowd. Paratroopers jackknifed out of them with high-velocity rifles. They sprayed us with steel.

The boy without a face fell on top of me. An older man, wallowed on the back of the neck with a rifle butt, stumbled up the stairs and collapsed upon us. More dazed bodies pressed in until we were like a human caterpillar, inching on our bellies up the steps of the exposed outdoor staircase.

“Can’t we get into somebody’s house!” I shouted. We crawled up eight floors but all the doors to the flats were bolted. Someone would have to crawl out on the balcony in open fire to bang on the nearest door. Another boy howled from below: “Jesus, I’m hit!” His voice propelled me across the balcony, trembling but still insulated by some soft-walled childhood sac that I thought provided for my own indestructibility. A moment later, a bullet passed a few feet in front of my nose. I hurled myself against the nearest door and we were all taken in.

The closets of the flat were already filled with mothers and their clinging children. For nearly an hour the bullets kept coming. From the window I saw three boys rise from behind a barricade to make a run for it. They were cut down like dummies in a shooting gallery. So was the priest who followed them, waving a white handkerchief, and the old man who bent to say a prayer over them. A wounded man we had dragged upstairs asked if anyone had seen his younger brother. “Shot dead,” was the report.

Something like this had happened to my own brother in Vietnam. But the funeral took place in the bland Connecticut country- side, and I was a few years younger. So neatly had the honor guard tricornered the victim’s flag, it looked like a souvenir sofa pillow. People had patted my hands and said, “We know how you must feel.” It made me think of the strangers who were always confiding in me that they were scheduled for surgery or “taking it easy” after a heart attack. All I had for their pain were the same words: “I know how you must feel.” I had known nothing of the sort.

After the surprise massacre, I was one among trapped thousands cringing in the paper-walled bungalows of the Catholic ghetto. All exits from the city were sealed. Waiting was the only occupation. Waiting for the British army to perform a house-to-house search.

“What will you do if the soldiers come in here firing?” I asked the old woman who was harboring me.

“Lie on me stomach!” she said.

Another woman was using the telephone to confirm the names of the dead. Once upon a time I was a Protestant of strong faith; I tried to pray. But that silly game of childhood kept running through my mind . . . if you had one wish in the whole world . . . I decided to call my love. He would say the magic words to make the danger go away.

“Hi! How are you?” His voice was absurdly breezy; he was in bed in New York.

“I’m alive.”

“Good, how’s the story coming?”

“I almost wasn’t alive. Thirteen people were murdered here today.”

“Hold on. CBS News is talking about Londonderry right now—”

“It’s called Bloody Sunday.”

“Can you speak up?”

“It’s not over. A mother of fourteen children was just run down by an armored car.”

“Now look, you don’t have to get in the front lines. You’re doing a story on Irish women, remember that. Just stick with the women and stay out of trouble. Okay, honey?”

From the moment I hung up on that nonconversation, my head went numb. My scalp shrank. Some dark switch was thrown, and a series of weights began to roll across my brain like steel balls. I had squandered my one wish to be saved. The world was negligent. Thirteen could perish, or thirteen thousand, I could perish, and tomorrow it would all be beside the point.

As I joined the people lying on their stomachs, a powerful idea took hold: No one is with me. No one can keep me safe. There is no one who won’t ever leave me alone.

I had a headache for a year.

When I flew home from Ireland, I couldn’t write the story, could not confront the fact of my own mortality. In the end, I dragged out some words and made the deadline but at an ugly price. My short temper lengthened into diatribes against the people closest to me, driving away the only sources of support who might have helped me fight my demons. I broke off with the man who had been sharing my life for four years, fired my secretary, lost my housekeeper, and found myself alone with my daughter Maura, marking time.

As spring came, I hardly knew myself. The rootlessness that had been such a joy in my early thirties, allowing me to burst the ropes of old roles, to be reckless and selfish and focused on stretching my newfound dream, to roam the world on assignments and then to stay up all night typing on caffeine and nicotine—all at once that didn’t work anymore.

Some intruder shook me by the psyche and shouted: Take stock! Half your life has been spent. What about the part of you that wants a home and talks about a second child? Before I could answer, the intruder pointed to something else I had postponed: What about the side of you that wants to contribute to the world? Words, books, demonstrations, donations—is this enough? You have been a performer, not a full participant. And now you are 35.

To be confronted for the first time with the arithmetic of life was, quite simply, terrifying.

It is unusual to find yourself in the middle of a shooting war, but many of life’s accidents can have a similar effect. You play tennis twice a week with a dynamic 38-year-old businessman. In the locker room a silent clot throttles an artery and before he can call for help, a large part of his heart muscle has been strangled. His attack touches his wife, his business associates, and all his friends of a similar age, including you.

Or a distant phone call notifies you that your father or mother has been hospitalized. You carry with you to the bedside a picture of the dynamo you last saw, clearing land or dashing off to the League of Women Voters. In the hospital you see that this dynamo has passed, all at once and incontrovertibly, into the twilight of ill health and helplessness.

As we reach midlife in the middle thirties or early forties, we become susceptible to the idea of our own perishability. If an accident that interrupts our life occurs at this time, our fears of mortality are heightened. We are not prepared for the idea that time can run out on us, or for the startling truth that if we don’t hurry to pursue our own definition of a meaningful existence, life can become a repetition of trivial maintenance

duties. Nor are we anticipating a major upheaval of the roles and rules that may have comfortably defined us in the first half of life, but that must be reordered around a core of strongly felt personal values in the second.

In normal circumstances, without the blow of a life accident, these issues affiliated with midlife are revealed over a period of years. We have time to adjust. But when they are thrust on us all at once, we cannot immediately accept them. The downside of life comes too hard and fast to incorporate.

In my case, the unanticipated brush with death in Ireland brought the underlying issues of midlife forward in full force.

If I tell you about the week, six months later, if I report the observable facts—while dashing out the door to catch a plane to Florida to cover the Democratic National Convention, a healthy, divorced career mother finds one of her pet lovebirds dead and bursts into uncontrollable tears—you might say, “This woman was cracking up.” Which is precisely what I began to think.

I took the aisle seat in the tail of the plane so that when we crashed, I would be the last one to see the ground.

Flying had always been a joy to me. Plucky one that I was at 30, I had taken to parachuting out of bush planes for sport. It was different now. Whenever I went near a plane I saw a balcony in Northern Ireland. In six months the fear of airplanes had blossomed into a phobia. Every news photo of a crash drew my attention. I would study the pictures in morbid detail. The planes seemed to split at the front; I made it a rule to sit in the tail. From the safety of the entrance canopy I would call in to the pilot, “Have you had experience with instrument landings?” By now I had no shame.

I did have one comfort. The upsets of the first half of my 35th year were vaguely classifiable. I could attach the anxiety to real events. My flight phobia fell under the convenient umbrella of conversion reactions (the process by which a repressed psychic event is converted into another symptom). The sense of uprootedness could be explained by the fact that I’d had four different addresses in the previous two years. All my life-support systems were in flux.

By that July, however, I had put on the brakes. Things appeared to have quieted down. On the contrary, very little was going on near the surface, but no less than everything was shifting below it.

An outburst of weeping over a dead lovebird was the signal. What was wrong with me that I couldn’t even keep a lovebird alive? Somehow, I connected this loss to the unexpected departure of my housekeeper. Could I ever replace her? If I couldn’t, my own work would have to cease. How would my daughter and I survive?

For the moment Maura was safely installed with her father. Despite our divorce, or perhaps as a result of it, we had the kind of long-running love that transcends pettiness because it is built on a shared conviction. Even in the raggedness of pulling apart, we had agreed that we would know each other forever as the mother and father of a child. Together we had made this contract; it was unalterable; it superseded all others. And so we had come to enjoy the special qualities of respect and friendship that grow out of putting another’s well-being first. There was nothing out of the ordinary in Maura’s spending a week with her father, but I missed her severely. The power to discriminate between a temporary separation and an absolute ending had abruptly left me. A dark thought took its place: Whatever it was that had ruptured inside me had released a sinister force that threatened to destroy my whole jerry-built world.

On the flight to Miami, no sooner had I single-mindedly willed the 727 to clear Flushing Bay than the intruder was back, rummaging around in my psyche and sniffing at the value of my resources: You've done some good work, but what does it really add up to?

Too nervous to eat, what I didn't know was that a combat between two opposing medications had begun in my abdominal zone. One had been prescribed for a lingering intestinal flu; the other, by a different doctor, after the Ireland trauma. Onto the angrily separating oils and waters of that digestive system, I threw cognac and champagne.

Once inside the hotel room, to be mindlessly mechanical seemed the best idea. Fill the closets. Clear a work space. Set up, as they say, a new "home base." Open the suitcase. But right there, opening my suitcase: paralysis. I had thrown in on top of a white skirt a new pair of red leather sandals. They had bled into the skirt with a blazing stain. I shrieked. Suddenly I couldn't coerce myself into making schedules, taking phone messages, meeting deadlines. Which story was I writing for whom anyway? Unknown to me, the clash of medications had begun to register. The dizziness, the gouging stomach cramps. My heart lurched into manic rhythms and began leaping around inside my chest like a frog in a jar.

The room was on the twenty-first floor. Walls of glass opened onto a balcony. The balcony hung recklessly over Biscayne Bay. Beneath it was water, nothing but liquid. There was an eclipse that night.

I was drawn out onto the balcony. With morbid fascination I monitored the eclipse. Even the planet was suspended in an unstable condition between intervening forces of the universe. I watched the heat lightning spark off the towers of Miami Beach. The impulse was to let go, float with it. Parts of myself buried alive with an unreconciled parent, severed husband, misplaced friends and loves, even my unexplored ancestors, broke the surface and heaped on me in a mass of fractured visions, all mixed up with the bloody head of the boy in Ireland. I sat through the night on that balcony in Miami, trying to get a fix on the moon.

The next morning I called both doctors who had given me pills. I wanted a nice, neat medical explanation that would make sense of this free-floating fear. Once I had the diagnosis, I could lie down and make it all go away. They confirmed that the two drugs (one a barbiturate and the other a mood elevator) were colliding in a violent chemical reaction. I should stay in bed for a day. Keep stimulation to a minimum. Rest. Yes. But the medical diagnosis did not make it go away because "it" was much bigger than a day's illness.

Then I tried an old technique. I would write the demon out of me. Writing had always served as a way of understanding what I was living. For what seemed like no appropriate reason, I had brought along notes for a short story. In fact, I felt almost compelled to write this particular story while I was in Miami. It was taken from an incident described to me by an intern ten years before. These were the notes:

An exceptionally alert and active woman of 60 had lived a long and comfortable married existence in the Fifth Avenue Hotel. Her husband died. She found herself, overnight, without the funds to carry on. She had no choice but to leave her home and all her friends of forty years. The only relative who could take her in was a disagreeable sister-in-law down South. Despite this abrupt and total dislocation, the widow went gracefully about closing up her New York life. At dinner the night before she was to leave, her minister and friends praised her remarkable strength of character. The next morning they came by to drive the widow to the airport; no one answered the door. They broke in and found her sprawled on the bathroom floor in her underclothes. No bump, no bruise explained it as a slip. She was simply unconscious.

Baffled, her friends drove the widow to a hospital. The intern found nothing on preliminary examination. The widow, by now conscious, had to be set to one side of the busy emergency room. Her freshly coiffed

hair became disheveled. Her eyes grew vacant. She let the johnny coat fall open. Her friends sat patiently, waiting for those with knife wounds to be cauterized; but confronted with life in the raw they were wholly out of place. They were nice silk-print-dress people, as was the widow—before this. Now she began to alter even beyond the recognition of her friends. She fumbled over simple questions, confused names and dates, and eventually lost her orientation altogether. Her minister and friends retreated in polite horror. Within a matter of hours she had disintegrated into a babbling old woman.

I couldn't write a word of the story.

Watching television was about all I could do. At midnight I snapped off the TV. For what happened next there is a simple mechanical explanation, but at the time, the steadying handle of cause and effect was beyond my reach.

I passed in front of the TV and bent over to pick up a metal belt. A hissing sound escaped from the set. With head over toes I looked back, and saw an apparition. A jellyfish of fiendish hues was spreading across the screen, eely blues and poisonous greens, stinging hairs of sulphuric yellow—stop! I bolted upright, reeling, and felt an explosion go off inside my head.

“That's it,” I said aloud, “I've come unstuck.”

The phone was in the other bedroom, beyond the window wall with its balcony hung over the water. The sliding doors were open. Wind sucked at the curtains, teasing them out over the bay. Suddenly, I was terrified to walk past that window wall. If I so much as went near that balcony, I would lose my balance, go over the edge. I crouched down. Crablike, clutching at the feet of furniture for handgrips, I edged across that gaping room. I tried to tell myself this was ridiculous. But when I stood, the simple fact was that my limbs collapsed. The thought persisted: If only I can reach the right person, this nightmare will go away. I was hanging on to shreds and I knew it.

Ireland could be explained simply: Real bullets had threatened my life from the outside. It was an observable event. My fears were appropriate. Now the destructive force was inside me. I was my own event. I could not escape it. Something alien, horrible, unspeakable but undeniable, had begun to inhabit me. My own death.

Each of us stumbles upon the major issue of midlife somewhere in the decade between 35 and 45. Though this can also be an ordinary passage with no outer event to mark it, eventually we all confront the reality of our own death. And somehow, we must learn to live with it. The first time that message comes through is probably the worst.

We try to flee the task of incorporating our own shortcomings and destructiveness, as well as the world's destructive side. Rather than accept the unacceptable spooks, we try to drive them away by resorting to the coping techniques that have worked before.

The first is: turn on the lights. It always made the spooks go away in childhood. As adults we translate that technique into acquiring the correct knowledge. I looked first for a clear and simple medical explanation. Only part of my symptoms were ascribable to a chemical reaction to pills; I wanted that part to be the whole explanation. It wasn't, and turning on the lights did not take the fear away.

A second technique is to call for help. When the child is afraid he calls a Strong One to interrupt the fear and

make it vanish. Then he learns the technique for himself and is able to dismantle most irrational fears. Now what happens when we come to a fear that we cannot make vanish? No one has any magic against mortality. Everyone to whom we assign that task disappoints us. My call from Ireland, of course, failed.

A third method is to ignore it by keeping busy, pretending to carry on as if nothing has changed. But the same sensations are likely to persist. I couldn't shake the questions about where I had been and where I was going, the overall feeling of losing balance. Balance is, speaking symbolically, standing on one's own two feet. It is the status we first achieved as children breaking in our first hard soles. Even then, by virtue of learning how to take over some of the responsibility for ourselves, we felt both winners of grand new powers and losers of our protective supports. The major task of midlife is to give up all our imagined safety providers and stand naked in the world, as the rehearsal for assuming full authority over ourselves.

The fear is: What if I can't stand on my own two feet?

The thought of death is too terrifying to confront head on, and so it keeps coming back in disguise: as pitching airplanes, swaying floors, precarious balconies, lovers' quarrels, mysterious backfires in our physical equipment. We elude it by pretending to function as before. Some people press down harder on the career accelerator. Others play more tennis, run more laps, give bigger parties, find younger flesh to take to bed. I flew on to a political convention. But sooner or later a rockslide of thoughts, distorted and sharp-edged visions of aging, aloneness, and death, can gather enough force to temporarily crush our most basic assumption: My system is in fine working order and I can stand up whenever I wish. What happens when we cannot rely even on that? The struggle begins in earnest between a front-door mind that tries to brush them away and the piercing questions of the second half of life that keep tumbling down the backside of the mind, saying: You can't forget about us!

Work is another way of keeping busy. In my case, fear made work impossible. The story that I was trying to write in Miami concerned a woman coming to the end of her rope. One who is left alone, falls unconscious, loses her faculties, and is transformed with a Dorian Gray stroke into an old lady.

The story was the inner psychic drama that I was living. My structure, too, was disintegrating all at once. I was leaving that whole world of the girl I wanted to think I was—the loving, generous, fearless, ambitious “good” girl who lived in a silk-print, sensible, humane world—and now I was seeing the dark side. The unfathomable fears were: I'll lose my stable pattern and all the skills that work for me . . . I'll wake up in some alien place . . . I will lose all my friends and connections . . . Suddenly, I won't be me anymore . . . I'll be transformed into some other, execrable form . . . old woman.

Well, i wasn't. I survived. I grew up a little, and all that seems a hundred years ago. An awesome life accident had coincided with a critical turning point in my own life cycle. It was this experience that made me eager to find out everything I could about this thing called midlife crisis.

But no sooner did I begin seeking out the people who are the case histories in this book than I found myself drawn into a subject infinitely more complicated. There were crises all along, or rather, points of turning. The more I interviewed the more I noticed similarities in the turning points people described. Not only were there other critical points than at midlife, but they came up with a relentless regularity at the same ages.

People were baffled by these periods of disruption. They tried to connect them to outer events of their lives, but there was no consistency to the events they blamed, whereas there was a striking consistency to the inner

turmoil they described. At specific points along the life cycle they would feel stirrings, sometimes momentous changes of perspective, often mysterious dissatisfactions with the course they had been pursuing with enthusiasm only a few years before.

I began to wonder if there were, in fact, turning points in the lives of adults that were predictable?

Is There Life After Youth?

It occurred to me that what Gesell and Spock did for children hadn't been done for us adults.

Studies of child development have plotted every nuance of growth and given us comforting labels such as the Terrible Twos and the Noisy Nines. Adolescence has been so carefully deciphered, most of the fun of being impossible has been taken out of it. But after meticulously documenting our periods of personality development up to the age of 18 or 20—nothing. Beyond the age of 21, apart from medical people who are interested only in our gradual physical decay, we are left to fend for ourselves on the way downstream to senescence, at which point we are picked up again by gerontologists.

It's far easier to study adolescents and aging people. Both groups are in institutions (schools or rest homes) where they make captive subjects. The rest of us are out there in the mainstream of a spinning and distracted society, trying to make some sense of our one and only voyage through its ambiguities.

Where were the guidelines on how to get through the Trying Twenties, the Forlorn Forties? Could folklore be trusted, for instance, when it tells us that every seven years we grown-ups get an itch?

We have been taught that children develop, by ages and stages, that the steps are pretty much the same for everybody, and that to grow out of the limited behavior of childhood we must climb them all. Children alternate between stages of equilibrium and disequilibrium. As parents, we are educated not to blame these extremes of behavior on a teacher, the other parent, or the children themselves, but to accept them as essential steps to growth.

Yet having applied this understanding of personality growth chapter and verse to guide our offspring from crib to college, we leave them at the door to adulthood like windup dolls: technologically proficient, geared for problem solving, trained to maneuver around obstacles. But equipped with any real understanding of the inner works, of the notion that even as grown-ups we may alternate between being in step and being off balance both with ourselves and the forces in our world—no, that's not part of the cultural programming.

The years between 18 and 50 are the center of life, the unfolding of maximum opportunity and capacity. But without any guide to the inner changes on the way to full adulthood, we are swimming blind. When we don't "fit in," we are likely to think of our behavior as evidence of our inadequacies, rather than as a valid stage unfolding in a sequence of growth, something we all accept when applied to childhood. It is even easier to blame our periods of disequilibrium on the closest person or institution, our mother, our marriage, our work, the nuclear family, the system. We seize on the cop-out.

Until recently, whenever psychiatrists and social scientists did address themselves to adult life, it was only in terms of its problems, rarely from the perspective of continuing and predictable changes. The concepts handed down by Freud were based on the assumption that the personality is more or less determined by the time a child reaches the age of five.

What do these concepts have to offer the 40-year-old man who has reached his professional goal but feels

depressed and unappreciated? He blames his job or his wife or his physical surroundings for imprisoning him in this rut. Fantasies of breaking out begin to dominate his thoughts. An interesting woman he has met, another field of work, an Elysian part of the country—any or all of these become magnets for his wishes of deliverance. But once these objects of desire become accessible, the picture often begins to reverse itself. The new situation appears to be the dangerous trap from which he longs to take flight by returning to his old home base and the wife and children whose loss suddenly makes them dear.

No wonder many wives stand aghast, spectators at this game of chance, able only to label it “my husband’s craziness.” No one ever told them that a sense of stagnation, disequilibrium, and depression is predictable as we enter the passage to midlife.

And what do traditional Freudian concepts have to say to the 35-year-old mother who, having tried to provide the ideal Petri dish for the growth of her children’s egos, suddenly feels her own to be about as solid as a boiled turnip? No matter what your age, you might identify with the apocryphal experience of a 35-year-old woman named Doris.

For the fifteen years of her marriage, Doris’s husband had never pressed her to entertain or to go with him to business affairs. One night he came home with the news that he was being considered by his firm’s major competitor for its top spot.

“And listen to this,” he said. “The retiring president has invited both of us to a dinner party next week. This will clinch it.”

“Omigod,” Doris said. “I haven’t had dinner with anybody above waist height for years. What’ll I talk about?”

“C’mon, honey,” her husband said, “all you have to do is glance through last week’s newspapers.”

Dutifully, Doris read four weeks’ back issues of the news of *The Week in Review*, and every night before she went to sleep, she memorized the name of another Arab leader.

The party was studded with the worldly and the wise. Her dinner partner was the company head. “Oh no,” she thought, but valiantly she plunged in and began expounding on the problem of air rights when cities start using solar energy. The man’s mouth was full, so she went on to explain Hubert Humphrey’s philosophy of democracy for the Third World. Taking a breath, she noticed to her delight that she had the full and transfixed attention of all the dinner guests at her end of the table. Encouraged, she ad libbed for five more minutes. The president was obviously impressed. In fact, he couldn’t take his eyes off her.

She looked down modestly. And discovered that all the while, out of habit, she had been cutting up the man’s steak.

The pith of this story, and the man’s predicament before it, concerns something we might have sensed but were never told to expect: that life after adolescence is not one long plateau. Changes are not only possible and predictable, but to deny them is to be an accomplice to one’s own unnecessary vegetation.

A new concept of adulthood, one that embraces the total life cycle, is questioning the old assumptions. If one sees the personality not as an apparatus that is essentially constructed by the time childhood is over, but as always in its essence developing, then life at 25 or 30 or at the gateway to middle age will stimulate its own intrigue, surprise, and exhilaration of discovery.¹

The mystics and the poets always get there first. Shakespeare tried to tell us that man lives through seven stages in the “All the world’s a stage” speech in *As You Like It*. And many centuries before Shakespeare, the Hindu scriptures of India described four distinct life stages, each calling for its own fresh response: student; householder; retirement, when the individual was encouraged to become a pilgrim and begin his true education as an adult; and the final state of sannyasin, defined as “one who neither hates nor loves anything.”²

The first psychologist to view the life cycle by stages was Else Frenkel-Brunswik. Drawing on the intellectual opulence that was Vienna in the 1930s, she later brought her insights to theorists at the University of California at Berkeley. Hers was a pioneering effort in the linking of psychology with sociology. Working from the biographies of 400 persons—a dazzling cast that included Queen Victoria, John D. Rockefeller, Casanova, Jenny Lind, Tolstoy, Goethe, and Goethe’s mother—she examined their histories in terms of external events as well as subjective experiences. Frenkel- Brunswik’s conclusion was that every person passes through five sharply demarcated phases.³ The phases she described foreshadowed the eight stages (three of them for adults) in the life cycle later outlined by Erik Erikson.⁴

It was Erikson who began to make the life cycle a clear and popular concept with the publication of his first book, *Childhood and Society*, in 1950. We know only obliquely of Erikson’s own suffering in the lifelong effort to build a personal identity. The son of a Jewish mother and a father who abandoned the family before his birth, he repudiated the name of his German Jewish stepfather. He created his own name—Erik, son of Erik—thereby casting himself as his own father. After leaving Europe in 1939, a victim of Nazism, he became an American citizen in California and at Berkeley began to concern himself with the universal crises of development.⁵

Erikson constructed a chart showing life unfolding in observable sequence. Each stage was marked by a crisis. “Crisis” connoted not a catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential. He was careful to point out that he did not consider all development a series of crises. He claimed rather that psychosocial development proceeds by critical steps—“critical” being a characteristic of moments of decision between progress and regression. At such points either achievements are won or failures occur, leaving the future to some degree better or worse but in any case, restructured.

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