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If done right, the second half of life is about wisdom and understanding

By **Kyrie O'Connor** | December 3, 2015 | Updated: December 3, 2015 4:04pm





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BY the time she hit her late 40s, Pamela Stockton knew her career and spiritual life were empty.

Oh, she was a successful Houston lawyer who'd passed the bar at 23. Raised a Methodist, she had a solid religious background as well.

"But I had the intense sense that something was calling me," she says now.

After the "incredible blessing" of a buyout from the law firm, Stockton began a *personal, spiritual* quest that may never end.

The first half of life is "acquire, compete, win," says Bill Kerley, a Jungian therapist with

a doctorate in theology who practices out of St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Houston. It's about "being very interested in winning, being right and having stuff."

The second half, if done right, is about "wisdom and understanding."

Sadly, Kerley says, the airwaves and highways are full of people stuck in late adolescence, regardless of their calendar age. Psychologist and writer Bill Plotkin, he adds, has pegged about 80 percent of adults as out of touch with nature and far too involved with themselves.

And you're not imagining it, Kerley continues: Many adults today fit the profile of the narcissistic personality.

"Success is understanding that life is not about them," he says.

'Finding a religious outlook'

Kerley likes to quote Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung on the topic of spirituality and aging:

"I have treated many hundreds of patients. Among those in the second half of life - that is to say, over 35 - there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life."

Nancy Gordon, director of the California Lutheran Homes Center for Spirituality and Aging, doesn't have statistics. "But it does seem," she says, "that the last quarter or half of life, the question is raised: What has it all meant?"

Often, that question arises when some of life's outward markers have been reached - or passed. If the kids are launched, the career goals met (or not), what next? "Who am I, and

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what does it mean when the labels don't apply anymore?" Gordon says. "If people get serious about it, they look to spiritual answers to help make sense of it all."

Stockton, the erstwhile lawyer, *tried* the Episcopal church, which she says had a "more expansive feel" than her earlier Methodism.

Still, she felt she didn't truly understand. She went to Perkins School of Theology (part of Southern Methodist University) in Galveston "to figure out what I didn't know," she says, and studied women in the early Christian tradition.

"By the time I graduated from Perkins, I figured out the problem was not that I didn't understand," she says.

As old as modern civilization

It's tempting to think of midlife spiritual questioning as a 21st-century issue, but that's just ego. The quest is at least as old as modern civilization and probably older.

Dante's "Inferno" famously begins: "In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself within a dark woods where the straight way was lost."

Is that a metaphor for midlife spiritual questioning?

Yes, says Cristina Giliberti, who teaches Italian at Rice University. At the time of the writing, around 1302, Dante was in exile from Florence, likely close to 35 years old ("the middle" of the biblical three-score and 10), uncertain of his future and writing a great poetic work on heaven and hell. His outer hopes dashed, he turned inward.

It's tricky, Kerley warns. The opposite of faith is certainty, and religion isn't an insurance policy.

"It's so ironic that many Christians treat religion like an evacuation plan to the next world," he says. "The Kingdom of God is not a place to get to, but a place to come from. In the second half of life we have to heroically pick up the tools and embrace that."

Earlier in her life, Stockton had explored holotropic breath work, which combines breathing and music. She decided to become a facilitator. "That's when the journey really deepened," she says. "I could get a glimpse of the patterns of life that caused me to go in search in the first place."

She went back to school again, this time to become a psychotherapist. "I love the work," she says. "It's so rich and meaningful."

Gordon believes learning to age well is one way boomers can help reshape the conversation. She plans to downsize and move into a tiny house on her daughter's property. "I want to strip down to what I need and love," she says.

Kerley thinks certain behaviors can help people live well during the second half of their lives.

"Learn to be less reactive," he says. "Learn how to accept life on life's terms. You have to be in some community. You can't love by yourself."

Stockton, who had "already been a little attracted to Buddhism," found herself visiting the Dawn Mountain Center for Tibetan Buddhism in Montrose. "I came to realize that the Buddhist path speaks to me in a way that the Christian path never did," she says. "Over the years, the Christian identity fell away."

Fifteen years on from the start of her quest, it continues.

"The spiritual journey keeps going on and deepening," Stockton says. "There are many, many practices" in Buddhism, she adds. "I don't think there's an end until we die."

And if, as Tibetan Buddhists believe, we are reincarnated, "it doesn't end there, either."



Kyrie O'Connor

Sr. Editor / Columnist,
Houston Chronicle

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