MIDDLE TALES: FAIRY TALES AND TRANSPERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AT MID-LIFE

Allan B. Chinen
San Francisco, California

INTRODUCTION

Handed down from generation to generation, fairy tales contain deep insights about human nature (Bettelheim, 1976; Heuscher, 1974; Von Franz, 1972, 1974, 1977; 1980; Luthi, 1976, 1984). Through charming metaphors, these stories symbolize important developmental tasks in the life cycle. Tales about children, like "Hansel and Gretel" or "Snow White," reflect the psychology of youth, while stories about "old" people, like "The Old Man Who Lost His Wen" or "The Shining Fish," reveal the psychology of later life (Chinen, 1985, 1986). In this paper, I will discuss a third group of fairy tales whose main characters are neither young nor old. The protagonists are individuals who have married, learned a trade, and taken a place in society—they are adults in the middle third of life. These fairy tales can be called "middle tales," and my thesis is that they reveal the psychology of mid-life. In particular, the stories illuminate the transpersonal dimensions of development in what is probably the most secular period of life.

Middle tales are relatively uncommon in fairy tale collections, and comprise only 9% of some 4,500 stories reviewed. The majority of fairy tales are about young protagonists and can be called "youth tales." Like the latter, middle tales occur with about equal frequency around the world and depict similar themes no matter what the culture of origin. (shall focus on five
major motifs in five typical middle tales, relating the stories to contemporary research in the psychology of mid-life. Timeless tales and modern psychology converge in portraying the spiritual tasks of mid-life.

THE LOSS OF MAGIC

The first theme in middle tales can be seen in the Korean story, "The Magic Purse" (In-sob, 1975; Mayer, 1980).

Once upon a time, there lived a man and his wife who were quite poor. One day he and his wife decided to cut wood to sell in the village. With the money they obtained, they thought, they would get ahead in life. So they went to the forest, worked all day, and returned home with two bundles of wood, one for their own use, and one to sell. They were too tired to go to the village just then, so they left the wood outside for the night. When they awoke the next morning, they discovered one bundle of wood was missing! Since they needed the rest for themselves, they had nothing to sell. They were quite angry, but they could only go back to the forest and try again. So they spent the day cutting more wood and returned home in the evening. Too tired to go to the village, they left their two loads of wood outside for the night.

The next morning, another bundle of wood was gone! The man swore, and his wife lamented, but there was nothing to be done. So they went to the forest, gathered two bundles, and returned home. This time, the husband had an idea. He crawled into one bundle of wood, and had his wife cover him up completely. Then he waited, anxious to catch the thief. But the husband was so tired from his day's hard labor, he soon fell fast asleep.

In the middle of the night, the man awoke with a start. His bundle of wood had moved suddenly! The man peered through the sticks, and saw that a rope had descended from the sky and was looped around his cord of wood. Before the man could cry out, the rope lifted the wood into the air, and the man found himself above his house! With one more jerk, the man was alongside the mountain summit and with a final tug, he and the wood came to rest in the clouds themselves. The poor man stepped out of his hiding place, trembling with fear and astonishment. There he found an old man with a long white beard standing on the clouds. The sage greeted the husband and asked why the younger man collected so much firewood each day. The husband explained that he planned to sell the wood and get ahead in life. The old man nodded sympathetically, and then gave the husband a small leather bag. "This is a magic purse," the old man explained, "and once each day, but only once, you can open it and take out a silver coin." The poor man was speechless with amazement, so the sage simply lowered the husband back to earth.
The poor man lost no time in awakening his wife, and recounted his adventures. Neither of them could believe what happened, but there in the husband's hands lay the purse! So he reached in, and sure enough, he pulled out a silver coin! He and his wife rejoiced at their good fortune, but they soon bickered over what to buy. If he wanted chickens to raise, she wanted a cow, and if she wanted fish, he wanted sausages. So they spent nothing. After some time, they accumulated a handsome sum of money, and agreed that they should build themselves a new house. They hired carpenters and masons, and set them to work. Unfortunately, they soon ran out of money. So the husband went to his magic purse and took out a silver coin. Then he reached in and took out another silver coin. Forgetting the old man's warning, the husband reached in a third time—and found nothing. At that moment, their new house, only half-finished, vanished. And no matter how hard the poor man shook the magic purse or turned it inside out, he found no more money in it. The man and his wife were heartbroken, because they had lost their magic. But they still had their strength, so from that day, they returned to gathering wood in the forest and selling it in the village. And this time, nobody stole their wood so the pennies they earned over the years became a flock of chickens, a cow and even a small new house! (Adapted from Z.In-Sob, *Folk Tales from Korea*, 1979.)

The tale starts out with a man who is married, and settled down. He contrasts with the typical protagonist in tales of youth who is neither married, nor has a trade. So the husband in this story is somebody in the middle third of life. The man receives a magic gift, which is typical of fairy tales, but the story then quickly reveals its uniqueness: the man loses the magic. In most youth tales, of course, the young hero and heroine keep their magic reward and live happily ever after. So the loss of magic is a distinctive theme and one which occurs in middle tales from around the world—for instance, in the Welsh story of "The Miller and the Farmer" (Sheppard-Jones, 1976), the Japanese tale of "The Stork Wife," (Mayer, 1980), and the Arabian story of "The Falcon" (Burton, 1978).

Since the man loses the magic after he takes more money from the purse, we might think the tale is simply a warning about greed. But much more is involved here. In other middle tales the protagonist loses magic through no fault of his own. In the story of "The Elves and the Shoemaker" from the Grimms' collection, for instance, the shoemaker does something *generous and kind*, and that is the reason he loses the elves' help. The loss of magic is not simply punishment. What, then, might the loss represent?

First, we have to interpret the meaning of the magic. I suggest that the enchantment is simply—and profoundly—the magic...
when lofty ideals collide with limited realities of youth. It is the stuff of romantic yearning, and idealistic visions. Whether they involve true love, the reformation of society, or mystical experiences, these inspirations are essential to youth (Whitmont, 1969; Johnson, 1976; Levinson, et al. 1978); idealistic dreams motivate young adults to engage with the world, and fortify youth against inevitable disappointments. Youthful inspirations also typically represent the individual’s first encounter with transpersonal experiences (Van Kaam, 1979; Johnson, 1976; Von Franz, 1977), a point which the story of “The Magic Purse” emphasizes: it is an old man in the clouds-i-olearly a divine figure-s-who gives the husband the magic purse.

If idealism makes youth an optimistic time, middle tales introduce a sobering note: the magic vanishes in adulthood. That loss, I suggest, symbolizes how youthful inspiration gives way to practical necessities in the middle third of life. The hard realities of love and labor-simply making relationships work and earning a living-c-eclipse transcendent inspiration (Soddy, 1967; Maitland, 1981; Chiriboga & Thurnher, 1975; Thurnher, 1975; Livson, 1981; Clausen, 1981; Levinson et al., 1978; Whitmont, 1969; Van Kaam, 1979; Johnson, 1976; Young-Eisendrath, 1984; Labouvie-Vief & Chandler, 1978). The loss of magic is particularly painful in two periods. The first occurs when an individual enters a career or a relationship and lofty ideals collide with limited realities. Disillusionment, adaption and mature realism result. The case of a young minister who came to therapy dramatizes this normative process. Just a few years out of seminary, the pastor suffered from a vague, pervasive depression, as he struggled to reconcile his religious visions with the drudgery of everyday church work. He alternated between despair and inspiration, like many young adults just starting out in a career. Gradually he came to a quieter middle ground, as he translated his initial vision of a pure, spiritual life, into practical skills, like managing church finances, writing a good sermon, or organizing retreats for his congregation. This process of replacing inspiration with dedication is a task for most young adults, whether they are moved by a religious calling, personal ambition, or a desire to reform society. The fiery college radical becomes a cautious homeowner, and the altruistic physician starts to worry about paying for his children’s college.

Secular concerns gradually come to the fore in the middle third of life, and transpersonal inspirations go underground. This transition is related to what Hans Kung termed “the repression of the religious.” But transpersonal visions are not permanently destroyed-they return in later life (Chinen, 1985, 1986; Cook, 1985; Kohlberg & Power, 1981; Kohlberg, 1973; Kaplowitz,
So the loss of magic might be called "transpersonal latency," to draw on a childhood parallel: from five or so, children learn to repress their libidinal impulses in order to get on with the tasks of school. Years later, in adolescence, these sexual impulses reappear. In analogous fashion, transpersonal inspirations become worldly responsibilities in the middle third of life, only to reappear in the last third.

The legend of Parsifal dramatizes this pattern (lung & Von Franz, 1980; Johnson, 1976). As a youth, Parsifal stumbled upon the Castle of the Holy Grail, and beheld the Grail itself. Not knowing what to do with this transcendent encounter, he was summarily expelled from the Castle. After many years serving as one of King Arthur's knights, Parsifal went seeking the Grail, and, according to some versions of the legend, he beheld it once more, shortly before his death.

There is a second loss of magic in adulthood, which is perhaps more difficult because it seems more definite. This is the somber realization at mid-life that even limited goals may be impossible to reach. Or worse, one may have attained one's youthful ambitions, only to find they are not as rewarding as expected (Hassler, 1985; Tamir, 1982; Levinson et al., 1978). This is the classic "mid-life crisis," typified by a gentleman who came to therapy in his mid-40's. Although he had risen over the years to a well-paying, prestigious position in a corporation, he felt his job to be meaningless, his career at a dead end, and his family life in shambles. The magic of youth-ambition and romance had become only haunting memories for him. His predicament, like that of many other individuals at mid-life, propelled this man into a turbulent period of despair, self-searching and ultimately growth. And precisely that process is the next theme that appears in middle tales, typified by the Russian story, "The Lute Player" (Lang, 1966).

REVERSALS

Once upon a time, there lived a King and Queen, who were very happy with each other. But the King became restless after a time, and decided to go to war against a cruel and evil heathen lord. The King mustered his army and took leave of his Queen. He travelled far and wide until he came to the realm of the heathen lord, The King swept through the land victoriously. But the heathen lord gathered all his forces at a mountain pass, and when the King marched through, the King's army was routed, and the King himself captured.

The heathen lord threw the King into the deepest dungeon, and forced him to labor each day, pulling a plough in the fields, like a
mule or an ox. After three years the King finally managed to send word to his Queen, and in his letter he begged her to sell everything they had and ransom him from prison.

The Queen was devastated by the news, "What am I to do?" she wondered. If she sold everything and went to the heathen lord, the evil man would simply seize her and make her one of his many wives! And could she trust anybody else to go with a huge ransom? Finally, the Queen had an idea. She cut off all her beautiful hair, put on a boy's suit, took up a lute, and secretly left the palace.

The Queen travelled far and wide, earning her way by playing the lute, and looking for all the world like a young man. Finally she came to the land of the heathen lord. She sat down outside the castle, and played her lute. So lovely was her song, and so enchanting her voice, the heathen lord summoned her to play for him, promising her a great reward. He never suspected she was really a Queen! So each day the Queen played for the heathen lord, and each day he was deeply moved by her music. On the third day, the Queen made ready to leave and the heathen lord asked what reward she wanted. "One of your prisoners," she replied, explaining that she needed a companion for her travels, and since the lord had so many prisoners in his dungeons, he no doubt could spare one. So the heathen lord took her to the prison, and let her choose. The Queen recognized her husband, disheveled and gaunt though he was, and chose him. Then she left the castle with her husband, never revealing her identity.

The King and the lute player travelled until they came to the King's own land. He asked leave to return home, and promised the lute player a great reward. The Queen, still disguised, asked for nothing, and only bid the King farewell. So the King hurried on to his palace, while the Queen took a shortcut and got there first.

When the King returned, all the people rejoiced, but when the Queen went to greet him, he would neither speak nor look at her. Instead, he denounced her for not doing anything to rescue him. So the Queen retired to her chambers, put on her minstrel's clothes, and then stood outside the palace, singing. The King immediately summoned the lute player, and offered him any reward for rescuing his life. The Queen then stepped out of her disguise. The King was dumbfounded, but in the next moment, husband and wife embraced. Then the King declared a great feast, and for days afterward the King and Queen rejoiced with all their people. And if they have not died by now, they must still be celebrating! (Adapted from A. Lang, The Violet Fairy Book, 1966.)

The most remarkable development in this middle tale is the role reversals that the King and Queen undergo. The King goes off to war, in a typical heroic and masculine role. But then he is imprisoned and humiliated, forced to become dependent on others for help, in a caricature of the feminine role. The Queen, meanwhile, abandons the luxuries of the court, and embarks...
upon a dangerous quest. She demonstrates her resourcefulness, cunning and courage, essentially exchanging her feminine identity for a heroic one. Role reversals like this permeate middle tales, and occur in stories from across the world. The theme can be seen, for instance, in "The Handkerchief" from Morocco (Gilstrap & Estabrook, 1958), "The Stubborn Husband and Stubborn Wife" from Persia (Mehdevi, 1965), and "The Innkeeper of Moscow" from Germany (Ranke, 1966).

Carl Jung was one of the first to point out the importance of role reversals at mid-life (1925, 1929, 1930). He noted that middle-aged men begin to struggle with long-suppressed feminine elements of their personality, while women confront their masculine strengths. "The Lute Player" shows this process quite nicely, and contemporary research corroborates the point (Haan, 1982; Reinke et al., 1985; Livson & Peskin, 1981; Peskin & Livson, 1981; Brown & Kerns, 1984; Tamiel, 1982; Holohan, 1984; Fiske, 1980; Giele, 1980; Thurnher, 1975; Neugarten & Gutmann, 1964; Gutmann, 1964; Heilbron, 1984; Chiriboga, 1984; Solomon, 1982). The role-reversal process can be quite turbulent, especially within marital relationships (Gutmann, 1980, 1984; Gould, 1980, 1978; Rubin, 1979; Nadelson & Normant, 1982), but a more androgynous outlook, integrating masculine and feminine polarities ideally results (Boles & Charlotte, 1982).

The reversals in middle tales, however, are not limited to gender roles. In other stories, the high and mighty are thrown down, and forced to learn humility, as in "The Tsar and the Angel" (Bain, 1895), "The Beggar King" (1983) and "The Dream" (Moss, 1979); or a poor, humble peasant suddenly becomes brave and cunning, overthrowing his feudal lord, as in "The North Wind's Gift" (Calvino 1980), and "Two in a Sack" (Lang, 1966). The essence of these mid-life reversals is, as Jung pointed out, the individual's confrontation with elements of the self that have been repressed or neglected for various reasons, whether these traits are masculine, feminine, timid, extraverted, etc. (cf, Gilligan, 1982; Bolen, 1984). A case from real life illustrates the point: a man came to therapy in his early 50's after a successful operation for cancer. Jolted by the experience, he had begun reflecting on his life, and realized how he had always given in to other people, acquiescing to their demands, and trying to be "the nice guy." He soon began changing his ways, insisting on what he wanted, and expressing his anger for the first time, despite his fears that people might not approve. His aggressive side, so long repressed, began emerging. The process, not surprisingly, was often confusing and painful to him, his family and to his friends. Rather than repress his "feminine" side in youth, this man had repressed his
aggressiveness and independence, and it was the latter he struggled with at mid-life.

"The Lute Player" contains another important insight, personified by the character of the heathen lord. This man is described as cruel and evil, and makes a good symbol for the dark side of human nature. Indeed, the sinister lord is almost demonic in stature. He defeats the King at the height of the King's power and this implies that the dark lord is more powerful than royalty. It is not too far-fetched, then, to relate the dark lord to Death: Death, after all is the foe no monarch can defeat. The dark lord thus symbolizes the underworld—the realm of death and the demonic—and his distant, "heathen" realm recalls the infernal regions.

Middle tales typically contain underworld figures like the heathen lord. "The Grave-Mound" and "The Godfather," from the Grimms brothers, illustrate the theme, as well as "What You Hate Most" from Japan (Ohta, 1955), and "The One-Eyed Evil" from Russia (Afanasev, 1945). These stories suggest that an important task at mid-life is coming to terms with the dark, demonic side of life.

Three literary classics dramatize such a mid-life confrontation—Horner's _Odyssey_, Dante's _Divine Comedy_, and Goethe's _Faust_. In the latter, Faust realizes at mid-life that despite his years of scholarship, he has really learned nothing important. So he sells his soul to the devil in order to learn the secrets of the world. In the _Divine Comedy_, Dante describes a journey at mid-life into Hell and Purgatory. This encounter with the underworld is partly autobiographical, because Dante was cut down at mid-life from his position of power and wealth, like the king in "The Lute Player." In the _Odyssey_, Odysseus is similarly cast down from the pinnacle of success: after the victory over the Trojans—which Odysseus engineered with his famous wooden horse—he was forced to wander many lands, unable to return home. He finally sails to the entrance of Hades, and consults the dead, in order to learn a safe route home (O'Collins, 1978; Stein, 1986).

Dramatic though they are, literary classics and fairy tales simply mirror real life: there is ample evidence that an encounter with death and the demonic is normal at middle-age. The fear of one's own death, for instance, precipitates the mid-life crisis for many individuals (Jacques, 1965; Klemme, 1970). Indeed, "middle-age" has been defined as the period when life becomes measured in terms of years till death, not years since birth-time remaining, not time elapsed (Nemiroff & Colarusso, 1985; Soddy, 1967). Friends and parents begin to die at
this point, and the individual starts to suffer from serious medical problems. Unstated and unconscious beliefs in immor­tality, so prominent in youth, succumb to the onslaught. The lives of artists and writers highlight this personal confrontation with death (Newton, 1984; Davidson, 1976; Anshin, 1976), but more systematic studies (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1985; Tamir, 1982; Chiriboga, 1984) demonstrate that fear of death increases at mid-life and prompts individuals to make major changes. (This was, in fact, the case with the inhibited gentleman mentioned above, who began to express his aggressive side after his brush with cancer.)

The demonic also emerges in middle-age. Jung observed that many individuals struggle with their inner evil at mid-life—what he called "the Shadow." More systematic research has confirmed his insight. From mid-life on, individuals become more aware of traumatic events in their past, and unsavory personal traits—things they previously repressed from consciousness because they could not tolerate them (Labouvie-Vief, 1986; Haan, 1981; Kuhlen, 1968; Grotjahn, 1955; Vaillant, 1977, J970, 1976). Again, writers and artists dramatize this general human development (Newton, 1984; Davidson, 1976; Anshin, 1976). Shakespeare, for instance, wrote his greatest tragedies at mid-life, with their portrayals of human evil, while Joseph Conrad began his writing career in his late 30's, motivated by dreadful conflicts over human cruelty (Segal, 1984).

The figure of the heathen lord in "The Lute Player" only hints at the meaning of the mid-life encounter with the underworld. Middle tales elaborate on the theme in surprising ways, as we shall see in the next story from Japan (Dorson, 1962).

THE BONESETTER

Once upon a time, there lived a man and his wife. The man was a brave samurai, and his wife was a beautiful woman, quite well known in her own right for her talent and accomplishments. One night, the woman went to use the outhouse, some distance from the home. As she sat down on the toilet, she felt a hand touch her buttocks. She shrieked in surprise, but she was a brave woman and did not run away. Instead she looked out the window and saw a shadowy figure scamper off in the moonlight. The woman finished her business and returned home.

The next night, she went to the outhouse, and again a hand touched her buttocks. "How dare you!" she shouted indignantly, prepared to run after the rascal. But by the time she put her clothes back on the shadowy figure was gone. The next evening, the woman went to
the outhouse, but this time she took a sword with her. Sure enough, a hand touched her buttocks just as she sat on the toilet. Without a word she drew her sword and cut the hand off. "Aiyeel" a strange voice shrieked, and the shadowy figure stumbled off into the darkness moaning piteously.

The woman finished her business and then examined the hand she had cut off. "My, but it is strange!" she murmured. It was webbed and looked like a turtle's foot. She showed the hand to her husband and told him what had happened. "Hmmm" he muttered, turning the hand this way and that. "This must be the hand of a kappa (a water gnome)!" Then he laughed and turned to his wife. "A kappa must have fallen in love with you!"

"Don't say that!" the wife scowled in distaste, but she, too, was excited to see the hand. After all, not everybody possessed such a thing! The husband locked the hand in a chest and the two went to bed. That night, somebody scratched on their house, and a low voice came through the window. "Please, kind sir, give me back my hand!" The man awoke, picked up his bow and arrow and plucked the bow-string as a warning. The creature scampered away.

The next night, something scratched on their house again, and a plaintive voice repeated its request, "Please kind sir, give me back my hand." The man rattled his sword, and the creature fled. The third night, someone scratched at the window, and asked for its hand back. By this time the man was curious, so he sat up, and opened the window. There before him stood a kappa who bowed very low. "Please kind sir," the creature asked, "give me back my hand." "But what use could it be to you now?" the man inquired, "the hand, after all, is cold and dead." The water gnome bowed low again, "I know the secret of joining severed limbs, so I can put my hand back on and it will be just like it was before." The man was astonished and decided he wanted to learn this secret. So he gave the kappa the hand back, and the gnome showed him the secret of healing broken bones and severed limbs. When the creature was finished, it flexed its fingers to show the man that its hand was back to normal. Then the kappa bowed low, thanked the man, and vanished into the darkness.

The next day, the woman found two beautiful fish lying on their porch. She and her husband knew the kappa had left them as a gift. And from that day on, the husband practiced the art of bone-setting, and became a healer known throughout the land. (Adapted from R. Dorson, Folk Legends of Japan.)

The focus of this story is the kappa or water gnome. In Japanese folklore, these creatures are usually malevolent, delighting in harming people. Indeed, kappa often try to lure children into ponds or streams to drown them and eat them. So the kappa is a demonic underworld creature, and it is surprising that it knows the secrets of healing, and teaches it to the man.
The event is not idiosyncratic either, because it occurs in middle tales from around the world. In the Grimms' tale of "The Godfather," for example, the Devil himself gives a healing water to a harried father, while in the Russian story of "The Angry Wife" (Hodgens, 1890), a demon helps a husband become a healer. The power of healing is also associated with death, as in the Italian middle tale, "The Captain and the General" (Calvino, 1980) or the Moroccan story, "The Lapidation" (Dwyer, 1978). In such tales, an individual in the middle third of life learns the secrets of healing from an encounter with demons or death.

There are two important points here. First, middle-aged protagonists use their new knowledge of healing wisely, and contrast with young persons in fairy tales, who characteristically abuse their healing power if they receive such knowledge. The difference between these age groups in fairy tales is not hard to fathom: middle-aged individuals have suffered defeats and injuries, both physical and emotional, unlike youth. So the mature individual understands the meaning of suffering and knows the importance of healing (Von Franz, 1974; Kotre, 1984; Harner, 1980). Indeed, personal suffering often inspires people to become healers. A businessman in therapy dramatizes the point. He was diagnosed with a chronic form of leukemia in his mid-30's and responded well to chemotherapy. But the experience of suffering, and his brush with death, changed him profoundly. He gave up his highly successful business, and returned to school to become a psychotherapist. Although he had valued material success previously, he discovered the great importance of inner equanimity and strength, and the power to heal himself and others. Nor is his an isolated case. A mid-life turn toward a healing vocation can be seen in many cultures (Nason, 1981; Stein, 1986), from the !Kung tribesmen of Africa (Amoss, 1981; Biesele & Howell, 1981), to the Kirghiz of Afghanistan (Sharhani, 1981), and the Maori of New Zealand (Sinclair, 1984). Mary Baker Eddy offers a striking American example (Silberger, 1979; Johnson, 1979): after suffering for years from baffling health problems, she became the founder of Christian Science, and took up the vocation of healing.

The second point about these stories is the apparently paradoxical connection between healing and underworld figures—demons or death itself. The link is a deep one, and is dramatically symbolized in the shamanic journey (Stein, 1986; Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1980). In pre-urban tribal cultures around the world, the shaman's role and rituals are surprisingly similar. The shaman descends into the underworld and seeks the cause of a person's illness, which is usually, in shamanic lore, due to a
malevolent spirit attacking the patient, or the patient's own soul wandering offand becoming separated from the body. The shaman then deals with the spirits of the dead, or other demonic powers, and secures the patient's cure. Precisely these images often appear in the dreams of men and women going through mid-life changes (Perera, 1981; Stein, 1986)-images of descending into a pit, of great suffering, and then of healing renewal. Paradoxically, if mid-life is a time of turmoil, plagued by fears of death, the period provides its own cure-the inner healing resources. (The connection between mid-life development and shamanic themes may help explain the recent popularity of shamanism in contemporary American society: the baby-boom generation now enters the middle third of life, and confronts both the dark side of life, and the need for healing.)

Demonic figures, of course, appear in almost all fairy tales. Middle tales differ greatly from tales of youth in the manner of portrayal. Typically, the young hero or heroine battles the demonic character-a witch, dragon, or some other kind of monster. Eventually the hero or heroine vanquishes the under­world creature and seizes a valuable prize. In middle tales, by contrast, victory is not the issue and only rarely is direct battle involved. Usually, the protagonist and the demonic figure negotiate something, as in "The Bonesetter." Even more surprisingly, the underworld character sometimes simply gives the middle-aged protagonist a priceless gift, without any strings attached. The heroic mentality of youth, so fixed on conflict and conquest, is replaced by an emphasis on communication and consensus in middle tales.

Underworld figures in tales of youth also tend to be dramatic and horrifying. Dragons breathe withering fire, while witches are hideous and tremendously powerful. In middle tales, underworld figures take on much more mundane and human dimensions. In "The Bonesetter," for instance, the kappa skulks around the outhouse, like an ordinary peeping tom. In the Grimms' tale of "The Godfather," similarly, the Devil himself walks down the street, dressed like a bourgeois burgher, minding his own business. The ordinary appearance of these demonic figures, I suggest, reflects two changes at mid­life. First, as discussed before, magic disappears in the middle third of life. Numinous, archetypal experiences yield to pragmatic realities and this applies as much to demonic beings as to angelic ones. As a result, underworld figures lose something of the overwhelming appearance they have in youth tales. Second, after years of experience, the middle-aged individual recognizes that evil does not lie in distant monsters, and hideous witches, but in quite ordinary people like himself.
The mature adult no longer projects evil on other people, splitting the world into horribly wicked villains, and wonderfully virtuous heros (Mussen & Haan, 1981; Vaillant, 1978, 1986; Von Franz, 1974). Underworld figures in middle tales thus take on more familiar human forms, rather than the exuberant, phantasmagorical shapes created by youthful imagination.

Both "The Bonesetter" and "The Magic Purse" feature a married couple, but do not mention any children. This is a general feature of middle tales and poses something of a paradox. Erikson rightly observed that "generativity" - or concern for the next generation is a major theme of mid-life (Erikson, 1951). Parents worry about their children, or their students, or their apprentices. So the absence of generativity themes in middle tales is puzzling. One possible reason is this: middle tales, like dreams, may serve a compensatory function and bring up issues that are neglected in ordinary life. Since concerns for children dominate real life in middle-age, the individual cannot pay much attention to personal development. Middle tales thus remind parents of their own unfinished psychological business. In a sense, these stories really address the psychology of the post-parental period, after children have been reared and launched. I should note that if generativity is not an explicit theme in middle tales, there are overt warnings about people who do not adopt a generative attitude. Middle aged people who indulge themselves at the expense of their children come to dreadful ends in fairy tales. In a sense, middle tales assume generativity to be present, and move on from there.

Another striking element of "The Bonesetter" is its humor. Indeed, the drama is almost scatological, focused as it is on an outhouse! In general, humor plays a prominent symbolic role in middle tales. The next story, "Brother Lustig" from the Grimms' brothers, dramatizes the point.

THE SACRED CLOWN AT MID-LIFE

Once upon a time a soldier was discharged from the army after many years of faithful service. He was given only four silver coins and a loaf of bread. Having no place to go, he decided to walk the road. After a time, he came across a beggar, who was actually St. Peter in disguise. The soldier gave the apostle-beggar food and money, but St. Peter only hurried away and reappeared down the road as a different beggar. The soldier gave the second beggar more food and money but St. Peter went off and came back again, disguised as still another beggar. The poor soldier declared he had
hardly anything for himself, but he gave the beggar money and food anyway.

St. Peter then took the form of an old soldier and met Lustig a little ways down the road. They travelled together for a time, and came to a farm where the daughter of the house was gravely ill. St. Peter went up to the poor girl and cured her. The farmer was so happy, he offered St. Peter a reward, but St. Peter refused. So Lustig asked for something himself and took the lamb the farmer offered.

The soldier and St. Peter set off once again and that evening stopped for dinner. As Lustig cooked the lamb, St. Peter said he would go walking a bit and asked the soldier not to eat anything until he returned. The soldier stewed the lamb, and waited and waited, but St. Peter didn’t show up. So the soldier took out the lamb’s heart, which is supposed to be the best part, and ate it. Then St. Peter appeared and said he didn’t want any lamb, just the heart. The soldier fished around in the stew for some time, and then exclaimed, "I forgot! How foolish of me! Lambs have no hearts!"

St. Peter was astonished. "No hearts? But all creatures have hearts!" "Yes," the soldier said, "all creatures except lambs. You can believe me!" St. Peter let the matter rest. The next day they resumed their journey and came to a river. Lustig asked St. Peter to go first, thinking it better for his companion to drown than him, if the river were too deep! St. Peter walked through with no trouble. But when the soldier went in, the water quickly went up to his neck, and threatened to engulf him.

"Help me!" the soldier cried out. "I shall," St. Peter said, "if you confess you ate the lamb’s heart!" "I don’t know what you’re talking about!" the soldier exclaimed. St. Peter sighed and helped Lustig across the river.

They soon came to a kingdom where the young Princess lay sick. The soldier wanted to hurry to the palace so they could cure the Princess and get a large reward, but St. Peter kept walking more and more slowly. By the time they reached the palace, the Princess had died and the soldier was cross.

"Don’t fuss so much," St. Peter told the soldier, "I can raise the dead, too." So the apostle, still incognito, took the body of the Princess, threw it into a pot, boiled it until all the flesh had fallen off, and then gathered the bones. He arranged the bones together and then bid the Princess rise, which she proceeded to do, whole and healed. When the King saw his daughter alive, he offered St. Peter any reward he desired. St. Peter refused all offers, and told the soldier not to ask for anything either. But the soldier hemmed and hawed, and hinted, so the King had his knapsack filled with gold.

The two resumed their journey, and a little later, St. Peter said they should divide the gold between the two of them. So he took the
gold out and apportioned them into three piles. "This one is for you," St. Peter said to the soldier, "this for me, and the third is for whomever ate the lamb's heart."

..Ahh, but that was me," the soldier quickly said, sweeping the third pile into his knapsack. "But I thought lambs have no hearts," St. Peter exclaimed... Ahh, where did you ever get that silly idea?" the soldier replied, "Of course they do."

After that St. Peter said they had to go their separate ways. Lustig was saddened, but went on walking the road. He soon came to a kingdom draped in black. The King's only daughter had died just that morning. Lustig hurried to the palace, and offered to raise the Princess from the dead. The King was dubious, but heard about a soldier traveling about raising the dead, and thought Lustig was the man. So Lustig took the body of the Princess, threw it into a pot, and boiled her until all the flesh fell off the bones, just as he had seen his former companion do. Then he gathered the bones, and realized he did not know how to put them together. So he tried this way and that, but no matter what he did, the Princess would not rise from the dead. Lustig trembled, fearing the King's wrath. At that moment, St. Peter, still disguised as a soldier, walked past the window. He saw Lustig, and climbed into the palace, scolding the soldier for trying to raise the dead.

"Just this once, I will help you out," St. Peter declared, arranging the bones properly and raising the Princess from the dead. St. Peter warned Brother Lustig against ever trying to raise the dead again, but to keep the soldier out of trouble, St. Peter gave him his own knapsack. "This is magic," St. Peter said, "and whatever you wish to be in here, will be there."

The soldier set out on his way, and soon enough ran out of money. He came to an inn feeling quite hungry, and saw two geese roasting there. So he wished them both in his knapsack and left. The soldier ate one goose with relish, and gave the other to two poor hungry lads who chanced by. Then the soldier went his way. Meanwhile, the innkeeper noticed his geese missing, and saw the poor fellows eating one of them. So he beat them up for stealing.

The soldier then came to a town with an empty castle. Everybody warned him that the castle was haunted, but Lustig had nowhere else to go, and so he settled in the castle for the night. At midnight demons appeared and attacked him unmercifully. Lustig was a brave fellow but against so many devils he was soon getting the worst of the fight. Then he had an inspiration. "Into my pack, all of you," he cried out, and instantly the demons were stuck there. Lustig slept peacefully for the rest of the night. The next day he went to a smith and had the man hammer on the pack. When the soldier opened the pack, all the demons were dead—except one little devil, who fled, unnoticed, back to hell.

After many years, Lustig realized he would soon die, so he
consulted a hermit. The hermit told him the road to heaven was narrow and difficult, while the one to hell was easy and paved. "I would be a fool to take the hard road," Lustig thought to himself, so he took the easy road. He knocked on the gates of Hell, but who should open it but the little demon that had barely escaped from Lustig's knapsack! The devil slammed the door shut and refused Lustig entry, fearing the soldier would wish all the devils in his knapsack!

So the soldier labored up to Heaven. St. Peter sat inside the gate, and recognized his old companion, but refused him entry. "Well, then," the soldier said, "if you won't let me in, then take your pack back. I want nothing to do with you." So St. Peter took the knapsack and hung it up beside him. The soldier immediately wished himself in the backpack, was transported there, and climbed out. And once he was in heaven, St. Peter let him stay!

(Adapted from the Grimms' fairy tales.)

This charming tale begins-like other middle tales-with the theme of disillusionment and the loss of magic: after years of faithful service, the soldier is discharged with hardly anything to show for it. Like many individuals at mid-life, Lustig finds his chosen career financially and emotionally barren. Left at loose ends, like Odysseus and Dante before him, Lustig can only wander the land. Consider, too, Lustig's profession: a soldier is a warrior who has lost the magic and glory of the hero. So the tale underscores the loss of magic in subtle ways.

The theme of loss is not the major one, however-humor is. Indeed, the tale is something of a farce, poking fun at no less a figure than St. Peter. Humor is characteristic of middle tales, and can be seen particularly well in the Russian story of "Quarrelsome Demyan" (Afanasev, 1945), the Moroccan tale, "The Miser's Wife" (Dwyer, 1978) and the Grimms' story, "Master Pfriem." Tales of youth and elders, I should add, generally lack humor and more commonly adopt an inspired, or even moralistic tone. This suggests that humor is a developmental task for the middle third of life, rather than the first or last. What might this mean, psychologically?

First of all, humor provides an antidote to mid-life experiences of death and tragedy. Laughter provides a healing balance to what might otherwise become a morbid period in life, and allows the individual to triumph over unavoidable difficulties (Freud, 1928; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; O'Connell, 1976; Mindes, 1976; Pollio & Edgerly, 1976; Fisher & Fisher, 1981; O'Connell, 1968; McGhee, 1983; Janus, 1975). Humor also offers a powerful and socially useful channel for aggression, and thus provides an adaptive way of dealing with one's demonic side (McGhee, 1983; Zillman, 1983; Pollio & Edgerly,
Joking permits the individual to be "malicious with dignity" (Zillman & Cantor, 1976). Moreover, humor provides a widened perspective, especially when the individual laughs at him- or herself. To do so, the individual must step outside of his or her concerns, disidentifying with the self in a playful manner (Fine, 1983; Zillman, 1983; Suls, 1983; May, 1952; O'Connell, 1976; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986). This distance is essential at mid-life, when individuals are weighed down by authority over others, and responsibility for them: it is easy to take oneself too seriously.

Humor accomplishes all these tasks through incongruity-making abrupt shifts in conceptual framework, and juxtagposing previously unrelated viewpoints (Suls, 1983; Shultz, 1976; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Fisher & Fisher, 1981). Consider, for example, the following joke—"Doctor, doctor, our baby just swallowed a fountain pen!" "Good heavens! I'll send an ambulance over right away. But what are you doing in the meantime?" "Using a pencil." Here the incongruity comes from panic over the poor baby; the anxiety is unexpectedly changed into practical concern over the pen, and how to write without one. The incongruous shift in the framework of thought provides the humor.


Essentially humor allows the individual at mid-life to "transcend" conventional thinking, and all the dark, demonic aspects of life. At the same time, the individual remains wholly within the world, vulnerable to it, and committed to human endeavors. Humor thus offers a paradoxical combination of transcendence and engagement. It is not simply an escape from conflict or anxiety because humor actually requires both (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Godkewitsch, 1976; Fisher & Fisher, 1981; May, 1952; O'Connell, 1976; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986): a person totally detached from a situation finds little humor in it. Humor is thus a virtue uniquely suited to mid-life—when the
individual is thrown into conflict but cannot leave the field. Youth, by contrast, can rebel and leave the field; elders can retire from it. Caught on all sides, the middle-aged person would be crushed by circumstances except that humor provides an alternative.

A real life example highlights these points. A research scientist suffered a major tragedy at mid-life, with the death of his daughter in a car accident. The terrible experience changed him: he became closer to his wife and their remaining two children, more affectionate and supportive than he had been before. And most surprisingly, he developed a sense of humor. This was a side of himself he had not expressed before, caught up as he had been in the serious pursuit of his career. He began to play little jokes on his staff, composing limericks and singing hilarious tunes while dictating official letters. Instead of retreating from life, and withdrawing into depression, this man embraced the world more firmly, in a new way: humor freed him both from his personal tragedy, and the weight of his professional responsibilities.

It is not surprising, given these factors, that middle tales have more humor than youth tales or elder stories. Tales of youth are more serious because they portray a serious task for the first third of life—the establishment of a coherent sense of self, strong enough to override internal and external conflicts. Youth tales symbolize this challenge in the hero's battle against enemies, and his ultimate victory over them. Humorous self-mockery would only undermine the hero's self-assurance. Elder tales, on the other hand, depict experiences of awe and revelation, which integrate conflicts in a sublime way. Humor would obstruct this transcendent task, by mocking numinous experiences.

Indeed, "Brother Lustig" does just that: the story pokes fun at St. Peter, and makes a farce out of raising the dead, or getting into heaven. The story laughs at profound religious issues—death, resurrection, and redemption. This would be unheard of in tales of youth, or elder stories. But we already saw something similar in the middle tale, "The Bonesetter," which portrays the themes of healing and evil in a bawdy manner. A light-hearted approach to the mysteries of life and death characterizes most middle tales, and brings up an important archetypal figure in these stories—the sacred clown, or the holy fool.

Found in cultures as diverse as Native American tribes and central African societies (Apte, 1983, 1985; Erikson, 1951; Pollio & Edgerly, 1976; Fisher & Fisher, 1981), the sacred clown is usually a high-ranking, middle-aged member of the
tribe who mocks other dignitaries at important religious ceremonies—in lewd or scatological ways. Significantly, much of the clowning involves role reversals, with women dressing like men, or vice versa, and high-ranking individuals playing demeaning roles. Similar phenomena occurred in the medieval Catholic Church, with the Feast of Fools, and the Prose of the Ass (Apte, 1985; Fisher & Fisher, 1981), and, of course, in royal courts with the King’s jester. While the role of the sacred clown defies easy explanation, its basic psychology relates directly to that of mid-life.

First of all, the sacred clown provides comic relief in long tribal ceremonies, easing the seriousness of life-and-death mysteries. Middle-age, of course, is a long tribal ceremony, dealing with life and death issues. By mocking tribal dignitaries, the sacred clown—who is normally a high ranking person, too—prevents the chiefs and other officials from taking themselves too seriously. Such self-importance, of course, is a temptation at mid-life. The sacred clown also mixes up conventional categories, bringing lewdness to sacred events, and confusing secular and religious activities. By breaking up old patterns of belief and feeling, the sacred clown makes way for new perspectives—a vital function of humor at mid-life. Finally, the sacred clown reminds the tribe of opposing elements in human life—the sublime and the secular, the numinous and the absurd. This prevents a one-sided focus on transcendent inspiration, on one hand, and total absorption in material concerns, on the other. This in-between position is that of the individual at mid-life. Indeed, the sacred clown dramatizes qualities of maturity—the ability to integrate opposites, to hold deep personal commitments while being able to laugh at them, and to be open to the unconscious, however outrageous the result might seem (Fowler 1981; O’Connell, 1976). Essentially, the sacred clown balances out the two major concerns of mid-life—Freud’s “love and work”—by personifying two other poles of human life: play and worship.

The symbolism in “Brother Lustig” continues even deeper. Notice that Lustig is something of a rascal: he wanders the road with no home, tells lies to St. Peter about the lamb, asks for rewards when told not to, attempts to raise the dead on his own, steals two geese, and cheats his way into heaven. Lustig thus resembles mythological trickster figures (Stein, 1986; Apte, 1983, 1985). Nor is Lustig an isolated example in middle tales. For one, St. Peter is something of a trickster in this story, too, traveling in disguises, taking so much bread and money from Lustig that the soldier is left with nothing, raising the river to frighten Lustig into a confession, and giving Lustig a magic knapsack, fully aware of what Lustig might do with it! Indeed,
trickster figures appear with unusual frequency in middle tales, much more than in tales of youth or elders. "Master Pfriem" from the Grimm's, "Little Campsiano" from Italy (Calvi no, 1980), "The Tell Tale" from Japan (Ohta, 1955), "Harisarman" from India (Jacobs, 1890) and "Husband Pour Porridge on My Shoulder" from Bulgaria (Nicoloff, 1979) are but a few examples. And the wily Odysseus, from mythology, is also a trickster.

In fact, the psychology of trickster figures permeates mid-life, as Stein (1986) so perceptively points out: if the hero dominates youth, the trickster governs mid-life, Although tricksters are perhaps better known from Native American lore (Apte, 1985), the Greek god Hermes offers a particularly clear example: master thief, deceiver, inventor, wanderer, and guide to the underworld, Hermes is actually a more dramatic version of Lustig. Hermes and Lustig both steal from people, and thus violate normal social conventions. They have access to the underworld-Brother Lustig with his contact with the demons, and Hermes in his function as guide of the newly dead. This underworld contact symbolizes the mid-life encounter with human evil and death. Implicit here is the association between healing and the underworld-the shamanic dimension of mid-life. Indeed, in "Brother Lustig," St. Peter raises the dead with a rather macabre, demonic ritual reminiscent of cannibalism: boiling bodies in a cooking pot until the flesh falls off. Hermes and Lustig also wander the land, symbolizing the unsettled, transitional nature of middle-age, when individuals abandon old careers and conventional roles to travel, often with no definite end (Frenkel-Brunswick, 1968). Both men invent useful things: Hermes invented the lyre, and gave music to the world, while Lustig devises a clever way of ridding himself and the haunted castle of the demons: he has a smith beat the devils to death in his magic knapsack. Such inventiveness reflects the pragmatic challenge of mid-life when transpersonal inspirations must be translated into something useful to secular society.

Hermes and Lustig both defy conventional morality. Indeed, the moralistic tone so familiar in youth tales vanishes in middle tales. Like any trickster, the protagonists of middle tales often cheat, lie, steal, and even murder all without the punishment typical in tales of youth. This amorality reflects another development of mid-life: the ethical ideals of youth give way to pragmatic compromises. Clear-cut, absolute rules become complex, relativistic moral judgments (Maitland, 1981; Mus sen & Haan, 1981; Sinnott, 1984a,b; King et al., 1983; Kohlberg, 1984). But middle tales do not advocate anarchy: Lustig may lie and cheat, but he also has a generous heart. And
although Hermes steals and deceives, he gives what he takes to other people. If ethical concerns decline at mid-life, the need for good will does not: a compassionate heart supplants a stern super-ego. This is a critical point. Both Lustig and Hermes deviate from traditional trickster figures because the latter are usually greedy, ego-centric and cruel (Apte, 1985; Fisher & Fisher, 1981). Traditional tricksters generally delight in the suffering of other people, constantly seek their own ends, and act in a manner reminiscent of juvenile delinquents. The protagonists of middle tales, by contrast, are not greedy or malicious, even if they do lie or cheat. They are mature versions of the trickster, who have mastered generativity. They might best be called "mature tricksters" to distinguish them from their more traditional, and less savory counterparts. Interestingly, contemporary research supports this suggestion: the psychology of the trickster closely resembles the psychology of adolescents and longitudinal research demonstrates a resurgence of adolescent themes at mid-life (Peskin & Livson, 1981)—but within a more mature personality.

Trickster figures and sacred clowns are also closely allied with healing: the two, seemingly separate themes of middle tales relate in deep ways. In many cultures, for instance, like the Zuni and Navajo (Apte, 1985), sacred clowns function as healers. And many modern comedians describe their work in terms of a healing calling: just as the physician heals the body through medicines, the comedian heals the spirit through laughter (Fisher & Fisher, 1981). Indeed, from antiquity onward, humor has been associated with both physical and psychological healing (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986). The Biblical Proverbs, for instance (17:22) comments: "a merry heart deeth good like a medicine." And a growing body of modern empirical research confirms the healing effect of humor (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Fisher & Fisher, 1981): a sense of humor appears to moderate the effects of stress, and serves as a marker of successful adaptation to incurable physical conditions. The seemingly odd association between healing and humor in "Brother Lustig" contains accurate insights.

So far we have discussed a bewildering variety of themes in middle tales—the loss of magic, role reversals, the encounter with the underworld, shamanic healing, humor, the sacred clown, and the trickster. Underlying these many motifs, however, is a single theme—that of transformation. At mid-life, the individual must translate youthful inspiration into pragmatic solutions. Traditional masculine and feminine roles are changed into new, more integrated ways of life, and the innocent, optimistic worldview of youth must be enlarged to include the darker side of the human heart. Emotional, cognitive, and
social transformations dominate mid-life. Indeed, the shaman's healing journey into the underworld sums up the transformation process: old patterns must die before new ones can appear. Previous commitments, convictions and values are boiled away, to use the image in “Brother Lustig,” until only the bones are left. Then new forms of life can emerge. The sacred clown fosters the process of transformation by calling into question even the most holy things. In the ensuing confusion, growth can occur. (Indeed, sacred clowns most commonly appear during rites of passage [Apte, 1983], ego marriage and puberty-times of major transformations.) The trickster, in turn, represents constant and unexpected change: no rote is fixed for the trickster, no rule safe from violation. In fact, tricksters have been called “transformers” (Apte, 1985), both of themselves, and of their culture, highlighting a central insight for mid-life.

The many forms of transformation are captured by a striking image in a final middle tale (Schwartz, 1983).

**THE TREE OF LIFE**

Once upon a time, there lived an Emperor with five wives. Above all others, he cherished the fifth and youngest of his wives, but she bore him no children, and the other four queens murmured against her. Finally the Emperor heeded the whispers of the four queens, and banished the young woman.

The poor queen had no place to go, so she wandered about until she came to a great forest. There she met an old man, who asked her what she was doing alone in the wilderness. The queen explained how the Emperor had banished her from the palace, heeding malicious gossip, even though she was just then expecting his child. The old man took pity on the young queen and led her to his hut. He offered her shelter until such time as the Emperor came to his senses.

That night, the queen dreamed she walked in a beautiful garden, and came across a tree with leaves of gold, and flowers of diamond. As the young woman gazed at the lovely tree, an old man in a white robe came to her, and he was the same old man who had befriended her in the forest. In the dream, the old man gave her a golden amulet in the shape of the golden tree, and when the queen awoke the next morning, she was astonished to find the same amulet around her neck. So she knew that the old man had been sent to comfort her in her suffering.

Each day, the old man spent his time fashioning jewelry, and his most beautiful works were golden amulets shaped like a tree. But the old man never sold any of his handiwork. He only melted the
jewelry down, and started anew. When the young queen asked why he did that, the old man smiled and explained that he enjoyed creating things, not possessing them. The queen soon bore the Emperor’s son, and mother and child lived in comfort with the strange old man.

Back at the palace, the Emperor became troubled by a dream that visited him each night. In the dream, he glimpsed a tree, more beautiful than anything he had ever seen, with leaves of gold and flowers of diamond. But whenever he went toward the tree, it vanished. The dream haunted the Emperor so he called in his soothsayers and wise men. They counseled him to find his banished wife, concluding that her absence caused the Emperor’s dreams. But when the Emperor sent out soldiers, they found no trace of the queen, and his dream became even more disturbing to him. His soothsayers advised him to build a tree, just like the one in his dream, and predicted that would stop the nightmare. But no matter how many goldsmiths and jewelers tried, none could duplicate the tree and the Emperor fell ill for want of rest at night. At last the wise men counseled the Emperor to go himself to seek the tree, because only in that way would he find relief.

So the Emperor left alone one day, seeking the golden tree, and he wandered far and wide, without any success. Then he came to a great forest and met an old man. The old man asked him what he was doing in the forest, and the Emperor explained his search for the golden tree. The old man led him to his house, where the young queen and her son were. The Emperor did not recognize either of them, because his wife wore a veil, and he had never seen his son. Nor did the queen say anything. The old man then told the Emperor that the golden tree grew deep within the forest, at the head of a stream. But the waters of the stream were boiling hot near their source, because they sprang from deep within the earth. The old man warned the Emperor that all who tried to reach the golden tree perished. The Emperor was undaunted, so the old man pointed the way to the stream. Then the sage took off his shoes and gave them to the Emperor, telling the monarch to wear them when the water became too hot: the shoes would protect him. But the Emperor had to bring the shoes back, the old man added, or he would lose the golden tree forever.

The Emperor left immediately, following the stream to its source. And just as the old man predicted, the waters grew warmer and warmer, until they scalded the Emperor’s feet. So he put on the old man’s shoes, and the heat no longer bothered him. Finally the Emperor came to the head of the stream, which boiled mightily. In the center of the maelstrom, upon a circular rock, grew a golden tree, exactly as the Emperor had dreamed. Protected by the old man’s shoes, the Emperor swam to the rock, and there he discovered that the tree was really a fountain of molten gold. It sprang from deep within the earth and its spray took on the shape of a tree. The Emperor marveled at the sight and reached out to touch the tree. Instantly, a branch of gold solidified and came off in
his hands, more beautiful than anything he had seen. The Emperor clutched the branch with him, and swam away. Then the Emperor retraced his steps back to the old man's hut, carefully carrying the golden branch and the old man's shoes.

The sage rejoiced at the Emperor's return, but the Emperor still felt unhappy. The Emperor then confessed how he had wrongfully banished his youngest wife, and how he pined for her, realizing that he loved her above all his other wives. At that, the young queen took off her veil and revealed herself. The Emperor fell upon her feet, and begged her forgiveness. So the young queen forgave her husband, and showed him their son. Then the two returned to the palace, and the Emperor sent away his other wives, declaring his youngest queen, Empress. The Emperor took his golden branch into the garden, and planted it. Over the years, it grew into the most beautiful tree anyone had ever seen, and the Emperor and Empress lived in contentment for the rest of their days. (Adapted from H. Schwartz, *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Fairy Tales*).

The central image in this middle tale, repeated like a musical motif throughout the story, is the golden tree. The story tells us, near the end, that the tree is actually a fountain of gold, taking on the shape of a tree, but changing constantly. We have a contrast here, then, between an underlying source which is formless and unlimited, on one hand, and manifestations of that source, which are fixed, limited and concrete, like the branch the Emperor takes away. The story repeats the contrast in several ways to underscore its importance. The old man makes jewelry, for instance, only to destroy his handiwork, and start all over. He revels in the creative process, not the product.

The image of the golden tree, I suggest, sums up the theme of transformation. The leaves and branches of the tree are like the roles and beliefs adults must commit themselves to by mid-life, the identities each individual must form. These convictions and commitments are melted down at mid-life and reforged. Like humor, which mixes up conventions and emerges with refreshing new perspectives, the golden tree obliterates its old leaves in order to grow new ones. And like the trickster, the golden tree is constantly in flux, symbolizing a pure process of transformation. The healing encounter with the underworld, like the shaman's journey, also finds a parallel with the golden tree. It grows in a place that is deadly hot. And just as the individual descends to the underworld and gives up old, ailing structures of life, the golden tree melts down old manifestations to forge new ones. The golden tree thus reminds us that conventional roles and conscious identities do not comprise the total self, but are merely exfoliations of a deeper, inner self. The message is essential to development at mid-life when one can easily
become absorbed in social conventions and conscious commitments, losing contact with the central self.

On the other hand, the story also emphasizes the importance of conventional roles and pragmatic secular concerns. Notice the significance of the old man's shoes in the story. The Emperor has to wear them in order to reach the golden tree, and then must bring the shoes back. The monarch can reach the numinous tree only by attending to something as mundane as shoes. An ordinary article of clothing often taken for granted, shoes connote *grounding* and represent all those small everyday matters that make or break grand ventures. So while the Emperor seeks a deep inner source of renewal, he cannot ignore concrete practicalities. This is the paradox of mid-life transformation and transcendence: they remain tied to the practical world.

The golden tree is really the "tree of life," symbolizing the inner resources to which individuals must return for renewal at mid-life. The image of this tree of life also occurs in middle tales from other cultures. An analogous story can be found in the Italian tale, "The Siren Wife" (Calvino, 1980), where a man throws his wife into the ocean, during a fit of rage. She is rescued by Sirens, who guard a magic plant that has power over land and sea. When the man repents of his deed, he searches for his wife, and learns that she can be freed from the Sirens only if their magic herb is stolen. The wife steals the plant, the two are happily re-united, and a spell is broken over all the land. Here the story depicts an herb of life, rather than a tree of life, but the two are symbolically equivalent. The image of an herb of life is probably older since it occurs in the most ancient written literary work—the epic of *Gilgamesh*.

Note that the drama of "The Golden Tree" and "The Siren Wife" occurs in the context of a marital relationship. Both husband and wife play essential roles in approaching the tree of life. So although the tree is clearly a transpersonal symbol, access to it is possible only through an extremely personal relationship. This fits the nature of middle tales: they are not about sublime revelations, but irrevocably human difficulties. Jung (1925) emphasized the importance of human relationships in transpersonal development, and even earlier, Catholic doctrine equated working out the relationship between husband and wife with working out the relationship between man and God. Middle tales echo the theme: at mid-life, transcendent issues are resolved in mundane ways.

If "The Golden Tree" sums up the many themes of middle tales,
it does not explicitly address the dark side of human life. The only allusion to the underworld comes from the heat of the molten fountain which suggests an infernal origin. Another middle tale, however, conveys the image of the Tree of Life, in a dark, demonic way. This is the Vetala story cycle from India (Riccardi, 1971; Bhavan, 1960; Emenau, 1934; Zimmer, 1948) in which a King, at the height of his powers, is charged with retrieving a human corpse hanging from a tree. Here the tale begins with a tree of death rather than life. Each time the King cuts the corpse from the tree, it talks to him, telling stories and asking questions. Whenever the King answers the questions, the corpse flies back to the tree. The content of the corpse's stories vary greatly depending upon which version of the tale is used, but all the stories deal with violations and paradoxes in conventional thinking. In the end, the King cannot solve one riddle (having to do, incidentally, with human relationships), and so the corpse decides to help the King defeat an evil magician. When the King slays the necromancer, the King becomes master of all magical powers: the tree of death is revealed as the tree of life, and the corpse, the spirit of transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

In the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and are exiled from Eden. They become self-conscious, and learn the meaning of shame, guilt, work, love, and suffering. In many ways this event symbolizes the transition from childhood to adolescence, when self-consciousness first arises painfully and awkwardly (Datan, 1980). The task of youth is to fortify this new sense of self by conquering the world. Fairy tales reflect this struggle: the hero and heroine leave home voluntarily, or are kicked out. They must struggle through great ordeals, until they prove victorious. Then they live "happily ever after." But that familiar conclusion reflects the optimism and idealism of youth, rather than reality, and middle tales take up the real story.

When youth gives way to maturity, middle tales tell us, magic vanishes, usurped by confusing changes, painful reversals, and turbulent transformations. Yet middle tales promise hope: in this disorienting time, the individual comes to the Tree of Life-to the source that makes transformation possible. Eating the fruit of this tree does not give immortality, but the possibility of an authentic mortal existence. The individual is fully committed to roles and beliefs, on one hand, but able to abandon them, when needed, for the sake of new perspectives. The individual becomes the sacred clown and the trickster, and
undertakes the shamanic journey of healing. He or she learns to appreciate the humor of mankind's absurd situation, without ignoring the darkness and tragedy of the human condition.

The hero and heroine dominate fairy tales of youth. Struggle is the essence of this time and triumph the outcome. The figure of the sage animates elder tales, and transcendence of earthly life is the goal for the latter years. Middle tales differ from both: the trickster takes center stage, and transformation is the challenge, not triumph or transcendence. The individual stands squarely in the middle, with half of life gone forever, and half yet to come, full of uncertainty and anxiety. Enmeshed in real relationships and pragmatic realities, he or she confronts archetypal visions of death, resurrection, evil, healing, and renewal. This is the locus of middle tales, and of mid-life: the Archimedean point between this world, and the worlds above and below.

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Requests for reprints to Allan B. Chinen, 340 Spruce Street, San Francisco, CA 94118.