

**A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MIDLIFE STORIES: TRANSCENDING FROM  
CRISIS TO EPIPHANY**

by

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## DECLARATION

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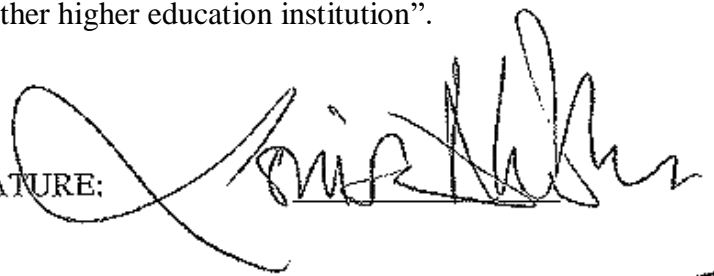
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## ABSTRACT

Midlife is stereotyped and often misconstrued. This study explores and challenges the conventional portrayal of a midlife crisis and its stereotypical dénouement into a state of lasting turmoil and negativity. The narratives of six participants undergoing a midlife crisis are examined through qualitative exploration using an ethnographic lens.

This study interprets midlife crises as transcendent journeys leading to epiphanies. The narratives of each participant's midlife crisis are explored in rich detail, eliciting both common and distinct themes emerging during midlife. These themes serve as the genesis of the participants' transcendent journeys and provide the insights to extrapolate the epiphanies they experienced.

These epiphanies facilitate maturation at midlife, soliciting endemic insights and equipping the midlife adult with hitherto unencountered and unique ways of navigating the world. Consequently, there is a potential to redefine the stereotypical perception of midlife and contribute to the emergence of a new midlife generation.

### Key terms:

Psychology; Qualitative psychology; Midlife; Midlife crisis; Midlife transition; Midlife misconceptions; Transcendence; Epiphany; Childhood adversity; Adversity at midlife; Midlife narratives; Self-awareness; Self-actualisation; Insights; Resilience; New midlife generation

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Have the courage to walk through what you think is the fire, for everything you desire is possible.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

I qualified as a Registered Counsellor in 2007 and completed an internship with the South African Police Services (SAPS), specialising in trauma counselling. I subsequently established a Victim Support Centre for the police. Following my internship, I established a private practice, working with adults experiencing burn-out, depression, anxiety, and general dissatisfaction with their lives, which, upon closer reflection, appeared contiguous with their life stage – midlife. I have a continuing interest in understanding midlife, fuelled not only by my clients' experiences but also by my own and my peers' midlife journeys. I completed my master's degree with a thesis focusing on exploring and understanding midlife experiences.

A key aspect of counselling midlife clients relates to the ongoing scholarly debate about viewing midlife as a crisis or a transition. In my counselling practice, it has become increasingly evident that midlife clients benefit from an approach that addresses midlife challenges as a transition. Positive, humanistic principles and an eclectic approach to therapy have made this approach possible.

A fundamental principle in my work with midlife clients is that individuals are not simply driven by drives and behavioural patterns. Individuals are continually becoming and shaping their experiences of the world and associated meanings within their contexts. As a midlife counsellor, I do not ascribe to the idea of "quick measurable results of symptom reduction" followed by mainstream therapy, as suggested by Plewa (2018, p.44). Being attuned to the client leads to improved sensitivity to the client's sense of place and embeddedness in a cultural, economic, and political context, and it is in sensitively addressing this context that the client's welfare as a whole can be enhanced (Schneider & Längle, 2012). In other words, I help my clients reframe and contextualise midlife by using approaches specific to their needs by viewing midlife as a period of life where growth and development are possible, as opposed to a crisis that needs to be resolved.

## 1.2 The research problem

According to Dziegielewski, Heymann, Green and Gichia (2002), as well as Lachman (2004), both men and women experience pivotal changes during midlife (40-60 years of age). When talking about midlife, the general population will use the term "crisis", which suggests that there are widespread cultural stereotypes and negative perceptions about midlife. According to Wethington et al. (2004) and Lachman et al. (1994), this generalisation is incorrect — competency, responsibility, knowledge, and power are positive aspects of midlife. Midlifers can experience success, peak functioning, and responsibility while also experiencing turmoil (Eichorn, Hunt & Honzik, 1981; Neugarten, 1968).

Viewed from a psychiatric perspective, Chandra (2011) advocates that a midlife crisis is preventable and should be seen and treated as a transitional phase — encompassing the opportunity for growth and innovation within it. Midlife can be a rewarding and ultimately beneficial period if viewed as a time of personal development. The MacArthur Foundation (2018) deems midlife as perhaps the least studied and most ill-defined of any period in life. Hayslip and Panek (2002), who have a similar viewpoint, emphasise the lack of research by stating that "little is known about these events and other key experiences in midlife" (p.111), despite vignettes of midlife that emphasise events like the empty nest syndrome, menopause, or the midlife crisis.

After extensive research and attending professional development courses to help me improve my therapy skills to serve clients better going through a midlife transition, I realised that the majority of academic literature and psychology related to midlife counselling is heavily biased towards psychoanalytic, life-stage, and behavioural approaches that view midlife as a crisis. Positive and humanistic therapy literature on midlife therapy is far more difficult to find (if at all), and even more so, are eclectic approaches to midlife counselling. I thus found myself identifying a gap in midlife research. Therefore, this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge on midlife by seeking to understand and reframe midlife by understanding the transcendent journey from crisis to epiphany. Tamir (1982) identified middle-aged people as a unique population who were neither young nor old and were the most powerful and wealthy group. Accordingly, they contributed the most towards maintaining the structure of society. Thus, further research into midlife will significantly contribute not only to the academic arena, but to society in general.

As narrative therapy is conducive to extrapolating the tapestry into which patterns are woven at midlife, it is well-suited for traversing the midlife journey. The nature of narrative therapy is such that individual differences in personality manifest through the stories people tell about their significant life experiences. This encompasses a gamut of experiences, from describing difficult experiences to essential turning points. Narratives communicate not just the events central to an individual's life but, more pertinently, the meaning these events hold for the narrator (Hiles, Cermak & Chrz, 2017).

Narrative therapy provides an individualised creation of meaning and serves to provide or reinforce a sense of purpose – a struggle that many adults at midlife encounter during their midlife crisis. It facilitates a more detailed and deeper understanding of the various struggles clients have to reconcile as to who they are, to imagine who they might be and to determine who they actually are. In addition, narrative therapy provides clients with the liberty and indulgence to explore their potential identities in their social environments (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe & Houle, 2015). Within a positive stance towards midlife, narrative therapy facilitates unearthing competencies, talents, abilities, and resources (Monk, Winslade, Crocket & Epston, 1997). Understanding and contextualising the midlife transition from transcendence to epiphany requires these elements.

Narrative therapy is inextricably tied to expressing purpose in addition to finding meaning. At midlife, adults are often in the throes of difficult life-changing decisions, such as wanting to leave their spouses or making dramatic changes in their careers or other aspects of their lives. The failure to provide fundamental requirements necessitates these seemingly drastic decisions, which may trigger a crisis. The primary driver of all behaviour and prerequisite for all other needs is love and belonging – connectedness with others – I have adopted nuances of a cooperative counselling relationship wherein my research participants feel connected to another "responsible" person (AIU, 2014).

### **1.3 Aim of the research**

The goal or aim of this research is to elicit the narratives of adults during midlife crises qualitatively and to extrapolate their route to epiphany or epiphanies through transcendence. This process is elicited through an ethnographic exploration of middle-aged adults.

## **1.4 Preliminary literature review**

### 1.4.1 Characteristics of midlife

Midlife or middle adulthood ranges from 40 to 60 years of age, yet the start and end boundaries are vague, allowing for a ten-year range on either side (Lachman, Bandura & Weaver, 1995; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Lachman (2004) advises against using chronological age to classify midlife because the age norms are less specific and strict during this period of life — social family, career and other responsibilities may differ amongst individuals and contexts.

According to Kail and Cavanaugh (2004), society increasingly acknowledges middle age as a time when adults can re-evaluate their personal goals, develop different relationships with their children and start grandparenthood. In addition to intra-personal and inter-personal relationship changes, midlifers also must contend with changes in appearance, physical agility – bones and joints, and reproductive changes. Salkind (2005) further identifies physical changes such as decreased eyesight and hearing, wrinkles, and sagging skin.

Kail and Cavanaugh (2004), Lachman (2004), and Salkind (2005) mention contrary to popularly held belief that cognition declines in midlife. The reality is that adults in midlife may experience heightened cognitive functioning concerning problem-solving and levels of expertise, as well as dialectical thinking and practical intelligence. In terms of the stability of personality traits, the general trend in middle adulthood is for individuals to be less neurotic and more open, agreeable, and conscientious, according to Salkind (2005). However, when a person has high neurotic personality traits, the likelihood of experiencing midlife as a crisis increases (Freund & Ritter, 2009).

Experiences such as divorce, the death of a loved one, the beginning or end of a career, and physical or mental illness may act as stressors during midlife and change how individuals behave (Salkind, 2005). Midlife may also be shaped by the journey towards retirement, reconciling to having adult children and caring for ageing parents (Salkind, 2005). The impact of these changes and the individual's ability to deal with them determine whether regular changes manifest as a crisis (Lachman, 2004; Salkind, 2005). This lends itself to a dialectical counterpoint of a midlife crisis versus a transitional conundrum in scholarly circles.



#### 1.4.2 Midlife crisis versus transition

In today's world, midlife is associated with stress and is viewed as an inevitable crisis period in life (Lachman, 2004; Salkind, 2005). However, research increasingly indicates that midlife adults can have increased levels of wellbeing, and the idea that all people will experience this crisis is mainly unfounded (Salkind, 2005).

The continued reinforcement of midlife as a period of inevitable crisis seems rooted in popular media. Druckerman (2018) proposes that popular media found resonance with the idea of a crisis, and it became part of the Western middle-class narrative. Furthermore, the term "crisis" was firmly conceptualised and imprinted within psychoanalytical and clinical case studies where patients' problems need fixing (Hunter & Sundel, 1989).

Contemporary research questions the idea that midlife is a period of inevitable crisis. According to Lachman (2004), some people might experience midlife as a crisis, whilst others experience it as a positive and represents a peak of their lives. Thus, it leaves us with a paradox or viewing experiences of midlife as purely dichotomous (Niehaus, 2019). Lachman (2004) advocates understanding midlife as a transition period along a continuum. In the trajectory of midlife, stress factors and individuals' abilities to deal with these stressors are influential in determining whether it is a crisis or an easy transition (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001; Clausen, 1998; Lachman & Bertrand, 2001; Whitbourne & Connolly, 1999). According to Ryan and Caltabiano (2009), individuals with the necessary personal resources, especially resilience, are more likely to cope with and adapt to changes and stresses. Chandra (2011) advises that a midlife crisis is preventable when seen as a transitional phase. This phase provides growth opportunities when individuals realise the initial experience might be confusing and complicated, but can change into an experience of growth and self-realisation.

I concur with O'Connor and Wolfe's (2007) proposition that a paradigm shift is needed to understand midlife and how midlife is researched. Midlife is far more nuanced than traditionally described, and the academic scope for transcendence and its resultant epiphanies are vast.

#### 1.4.3 Theoretical perspectives on midlife

Gerdes (1988) proposes that no single theory in psychology can explain all aspects of human functioning because humans and their social settings are too complex. Based on the discussion

by Hargrave (2006), Freud, although never focusing on midlife per se, would have focused on the role of women. Freud believed that women must renounce all things masculine and be passive participants in life – in their role as women. A woman's identity derives from her support function in the family, and therefore, the immature development of women and her rejection of traditional roles lead to neurosis. Jung was much more involved in the study of midlife. Jung (1933) theorised that midlife changes become apparent when there is internal disharmony and self-doubt and noted that these changes are not always apparent. When a person adequately prepares for midlife changes, the transition will be smooth, yet Jung noted that profound and unusual psychological changes could lead to a crisis in midlife.

According to Neugarten (1968), adults perceive time differently than children do. Instead of measuring life from birth, adults measure how much time remains until death, merging their past, present, and future psychological realities. He further proposed that due to cultural stereotypes and comparison with peers, individuals determine how successful they have been in facing the challenges of midlife. Erikson's seventh stage of generativity versus stagnation is associated with the midlife stage (Hargrave, 2006). A failure to reach generativity leads to a feeling of stagnation. As an expansion of Erikson's theory, Vaillant (2000) proposed that adults from 45-55 years of age could feel at ease if they met their goals. The key idea is that adults must be able to accept when they do not meet their goals and focus instead on creating meaning in their lives (Hargrave, 2006).

Gould (1978) believed that midlife is a turbulent time, a crisis, because of the individual's realisation that time is speeding by. Adults will successfully mature if they can navigate crises and realise that a sense of urgency is a normal reaction at that point in life (Hargrave, 2006). Levinson focuses on male adult development and describes the adult life trajectory as alternating phases of change versus stability. According to Levinson, middle adulthood is when men have achieved their earlier goals and, subsequently, search for meaning in their lives (Hargrave, 2006).

Contrary to stage theories, lifespan theory conceptualises human development as multidimensional and multidirectional, thus refuting the idea that midlife is a period exclusively focused on decline (Baltes et al., 1998).

In the mid-1980s, criticism of stage theories of human development and views regarding midlife crises emerged. McCrae and Costa (1986), personality trait theorists, were consistent

in their view that the big five personality traits remain stable over time and do not change. McCrae and Costa (2003) cited considerable empirical research into what they deemed a so-called midlife crisis issue and categorically stated that they found no evidence that everyone experienced a midlife crisis (Cooper, 1977; Farrell & Rosenberg, 1981; McCrae & Costa, 1986). McCrae and Costa (2003) propose little change in personality traits after age thirty. However, other significant changes after age thirty impact their experiences – a decrease in physical flexibility and strength, sensory alertness, and energy. Definite changes are visible in the external world of individuals that impact their internal world. For example, children grow up, parents grow old and die, and jobs and roles change. According to Lachman and Bertrand (2001) and Wethington et al. (2004), one-third of the time, what seems to be a midlife crisis is the result of outside circumstances like illness, financial difficulties, or job loss, which may happen to anyone at any stage of adulthood.

Folkman and Lazarus' (1980) research into coping with stress during midlife remains a crucial construct in the study of midlife transition. Stress-provoking life events such as the death or severe illness of a parent are inevitable and seem to occur more often during the middle adulthood stage of life for many people (Lachman, 2001). Folkman et al. (1986) determined that a stressful experience is an arrangement in which a person and their environment are in a self-starting, complementary, two-way relationship. There are two processes involved, cognitive appraisal and coping, which are important moderators of stressed person-environment relationships and, consequently, the instantaneous and long-term consequences. Faced with a stressful situation, an individual first cognitively appraises it by posing questions such as: "Will it affect my wellbeing or that of a loved one, and if so, how?" This cognitive appraisal can occur at a primary and secondary level (Folkman et al., 1986). The primary appraisal involves evaluating whether they have a stake in the situation: "Is there harm or benefit to my (or a loved one's) health or self-esteem?" The secondary appraisal: "What can I do to overcome or prevent the harm?" Coping encompasses cognitive and behavioural efforts that enable management or tolerance of the arrangement.

Gergen (1985) proposed that social constructionism, a form of postmodernism, is relevant to redefining lifespan psychology, particularly as it relates to women. The social constructionist perspective finds meaning in understanding how ideas and attitudes develop within the context of society and community. Social constructionism considers the development of cultural narratives people form, which influence their behaviour. It also considers normative views

against which people measure themselves. Cultural constructions are deemed the context that supports the development of specific problems (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

Researchers and psychologists ascribing to the Positive Psychology movement believe that people want to lead meaningful lives, as they desire to cultivate what is best in themselves and focus on positive characteristics and strengths in individuals to help them thrive (Bar-On, 2010). According to Ryan and Caltabiano (2009), stress accumulates and people face numerous challenges during midlife. However, it can also be a time of opportunity for positive change depending on the level to which individuals possess certain personal resources, such as resilience. Resilience is a crucial aspect of dealing with challenges and stress in life. Thus, the more resilient a person is, the more likely they are to transition to midlife successfully. Midlife can be a difficult transitional period, yet by adopting a positive perspective, individuals can accrue the necessary personal resources and coping skills to avoid this period turning into a crisis (Parsons, 2016).

O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) have shown that a positive perspective on midlife is a transition phase with great possibilities for growth and development. However, growth and development can only occur when a paradigm shift occurs, as midlife is a time when the adaptive capacity of the old paradigm becomes strained (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007). O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) define paradigm as "the system of assumptions, perceptions, expectations, feelings, beliefs, and values organised to understand an extensive range of situations and events" (p. 7). Individuals need to face the challenges of midlife transition and work through them to achieve a paradigm shift. Ego development, inner directness, and commitment to learning enable growth during midlife (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

#### 1.4.4 Eclecticism versus Integration

Historically, the application of a unitary theoretical model dominated research, training, and practice in counselling and psychotherapy. However, clinicians generated eclectic and integrative orientations after realising that psychological difficulties may have multiple causes that can only be addressed using different methods (Benito, 2018). Psychotherapeutic integration is the merger of affective, cognitive, behavioural, physiological, and other systems approaches to psychotherapy whereby different schools of thought are connected, and multiple views of human functioning are considered (Benito, 2018; Brown, 2008). Integrative psychotherapy requires theoretical and technical integration, whereas an eclectic approach is

more simplistic and impromptu (Brown, 2008). The eclectic approach focuses on applying different techniques from different approaches (Brown, 2008). I have inadvertently come to use an eclectic approach to address the client's challenges and needs in the best way possible by using the strengths of one approach to balance the weaknesses of the other (Ponzo, 1976).

## **1.5 Study design**

I will approach this study into midlife experiences and the development of an approach to understanding midlife transcendence into epiphany from an interpretivist paradigm, as I agree that there is no single truth and that there are multiple interpretations of reality and realities are socially constructed (Mertens, 2005; Parry & Doan, 1994).

This research is exploratory in nature. As per Robson (2002), an exploratory design is an appropriate method of finding out, "What is happening to seek new insights, to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light?" (p. 59). Exploratory research is a flexible and adaptable research design that enables the researcher to address various questions and generate new ideas or assumptions (Adams & Schvaneveldt, 1991; Cuthill, 2002).

Since the study is exploratory in nature and is being carried out within the framework of interpretivism, a qualitative methodology is being used, per Greener and Martelli's (2018) recommendation. A qualitative approach means that the research is interested in answering questions of "what", "how", or "why", as opposed to the "how many" or "how much" questions in quantitative, positivist studies (Bricki & Green, 2018).

A qualitative study can incorporate various application methods. Because I believe that people are nuanced and cannot be understood from only a unilateral perspective (Madden, 2010), I have chosen an ethnographic method for data collection and analysis. Per Spencer et al. (1993, p. 304), "in its broadest sense, ethnography is the work of describing a culture" and includes learning from and about people. A distinction can be made between traditional ethnography and focused ethnography. The former entails a large-scale, comprehensive study conducted mainly by sociologists and anthropologists (Spencer et al., 1993). Conversely, focused ethnography involves small-scale, concentrated studies focusing on a specific problem area (Spencer et al., 1993). Focused ethnography will be the method used in this study.

The selection process for participants for this study will employ purposive sampling. This involves the researcher selecting participants based on specific characteristics or qualities that are relevant to the study, ensuring that those chosen can provide detailed and pertinent information related to the research question. This was useful for research participants experiencing midlife crises as participants were sensitive to openly discussing their midlife crises. Heckathorn (2002) corroborates that this type of sampling is useful when the population being studied is unlikely to respond to advertisements due to stigmatising. As this study is concerned with midlife crisis and its transcendence into epiphany, it was necessary, as per Luborsky and Rubinstein (1995), as well as Patton (1990), to delineate a sample universe, a set of inclusion criteria or exclusion criteria, or a combination of both for the study. The inclusion criteria in this study were participants who had experienced a midlife crisis as an attribute qualified for the study.

#### 1.5.1 Study size

Robinson (2014) advocates that theoretical and practical considerations determine the sample size demarcated for a qualitative study. A provisional decision on sample size is made at the initial design stage by considering the practical scope of the research. A provisional number at the design stage means that the project's duration and required resource allocation cannot be determined, making planning impractical. A sample of six participants was deemed feasible for this study, given that in-depth, immersive, rich, and lengthy narratives were necessary to elicit the transcendent journeys into an epiphany.

Data will be analysed using thematic analysis, which "is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). The steps for thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) will be used to identify themes and subthemes in the data from research participants. Thus, these themes will provide the basis for the findings pertinent to transcendence and their resultant epiphanies.

The quality of my research will be judged using four aspects designed for evaluating qualitative research. First, credibility (also known as believability), according to Trochim (2006) and Winter (2000), is about establishing whether the results of qualitative research are believable from the perspective of the participants. The research participants are ultimately the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results. Second, transferability refers to the extent to which results can be generalised or transferred to other contexts and does not form

part of the aim of this research. However, other researchers can make a judgement call on its transferability through the eloquent descriptions of the research context (Trochim, 2006; Walsh, 2003).

The third aspect is dependability – whether the research can be replicated or repeated and still deliver the same results (Neuman, 1997). According to Lal (2001) and Trochim (2006), the objective of qualitative research should not be dependability because the social environment is dynamic, and the researcher conducts their studies in a way that takes this into account. Confirmability must also be considered as it relates to the degree to which others could confirm or corroborate the results through peer review (Trochim, 2006). My complete research process, including analysis and interpretation of results, will be peer-reviewed by a consulting Research Psychologist and my study supervisor.

Bias is part of all research studies, and from an ethical standpoint, it is critical to minimise bias, outline the limitations of the research and account for any forms of bias (Smith & Noble, 2004). Although there is no paradigm solution to eliminating bias, reflexivity addresses potential bias (Rajendran, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2010). The inspection of potential sources of bias and critically inspecting the research process, including taking a dual role of researcher-practitioner (Asselin, 2007), as well as debriefings and discussions with a consulting Research Psychologist, will be applied in my reflexive process.

### 1.5.2 Ethical considerations

As a Registered Counsellor, I follow the ethical guidelines of the Human Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and consistently practice ethical reasoning (HPCSA, 2016). The core ethical values and standards I always subscribe to are respect for persons, non-maleficence, beneficence, human rights, client autonomy, integrity, truthfulness, confidentiality, compassion, tolerance, justice, professional competence, self-improvement and community.

The COVID-19 epidemic is a second ethical issue pertinent to the period in which this study is undertaken. During the study, the South African Government implemented various lockdown levels, and subsequently, I could only conduct online sessions with research participants. Subsequently, I interviewed research participants in person. The third ethical consideration relates to the research process, entailing four aspects: UNISA ethical committee approval, securing informed consent, safeguarding confidentiality and anonymity, and ensuring no harm to participants.

Before starting to conduct any stated research, a prerequisite is to first obtain a clearance certificate from the UNISA Ethics Committee upon approval of this specific study. Second, informed consent must be obtained from participants. As per Nnebue (2010), informed consent has three aspects: information, comprehension, and volition. Participants will be requested to sign a formal consent form indicating that they agree to participate and understand their rights.

In the form of an information sheet and discussion with participants, informed consent will be explained to participants when first contact is made with them and again before the sessions commence. Participants must understand that their participation is entirely voluntary, and they can withdraw from the process without prejudice or penalty at any time (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, & Delpont, 2011). The information document must further explain the purpose of the study, the rights of participants taking part in the study, informing them of audio and/or visual recordings, as well as the use of all their counselling notes and assessments for analysis purposes, their anonymity and confidentiality as well as the rights of the researcher to share data with other academics for purposes of the research, and a non-coercive disclaimer (Greener & Martelli, 2010; Nnebue, 2010).

Pseudonyms will be used during the data analysis and presentation to ensure the anonymity of participants. Neuman (1997) points out that researchers protect privacy by not disclosing a subject's identity after gathering information.

Furthermore, Trochim (2006) says researchers are ethically required to ensure that participants are not in danger or harm's way. Harm can mean physical or psychological. By following all possible precautions to ensure confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent, as well as following the HPCSA ethical guidelines, any potential harm to the respondents will be minimised.

### 1.5.3 Chapter outline

Chapter 1 briefly introduces this research on midlife, its importance and relevance, and what I aim to achieve with the research.

With ethnography serving as the central paradigm, Chapter 2 will go into further detail about the idea of midlife and give a quick overview of the numerous ideas and viewpoints that can be used to study midlife as seen through the prism of narrative therapy. Chapter 3 provides a literature review and Chapter 4 positions this research in an interpretivist paradigm and



discusses the research design and methodology. This chapter discusses the application of a qualitative methodology, the ethnographic approach, the participant selection process, how data will be collected, and the analysis of the results. Confirmability, transferability, and dependability as quality measures will be elaborated on together with the ethical considerations given in this study.

Chapters 5 to 10 will annotate participants' narratives on their midlife stories. Chapter 11 will discuss and evaluate whether the aim of this research was addressed, provide a conclusion to the findings by linking the results with literature, reflect on the credibility and trustworthiness of the results, as well as any biases that need to be addressed throughout the research and counselling process. Limitations of this research will also be highlighted, as well as some elaboration on potential future research.

## **1.6 Summary**

People experience the period of midlife in various ways, and research has shown that a myriad of factors influence this significant period in life. Biological, physical, emotional, social, and economic changes affect how individuals navigate midlife. Accordingly, midlife is still mostly perceived as an inevitable crisis – a perception spurred on by the media. However, some scholars and therapists have taken a positive stance to view midlife as a transition and advocate that crises are not inevitable. My approach to understanding midlife focuses on the idea that midlife does not need to be a crisis. Early in my work with midlife clients, I took a positive and humanistic stance towards counselling them through their transitions. In addition, because I believed in carefully addressing each client's needs, I noted that there were several epiphanies that clients presented with that led them to transition and ultimately transcend crises that reached their apex at midlife.

Applying an eclectic approach to therapy greatly benefited clients in midlife, as did the identification and elucidation of epiphanies. As part of my continued professional development, I have identified narrative therapy as consistent with an optimistic and humanistic viewpoint to midlife counselling. My research aims to apply this approach in identifying transcendence through epiphanies during the midlife transition.

## CHAPTER 2: EPISTEMOLOGY

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I define epistemology and briefly overview its origins and developments that led to my final choice of postmodernism as my research philosophy. From their various philosophical vantage points, modernism and postmodernism are contextualised, and the nature of language is taken into consideration. The reality of social phenomena is investigated, and the development of different realities is described. As a paradigm, personal construct theory frames the epistemological definition - no single objective reality exists about a particular phenomenon and multiple realities are inherently constructed in people's minds. Constructivism further substantiates personal construct theory, the construction of our realities and the ability to reconstrue the world in which we live. The researcher retains an emic and subjective position, lending itself to an ethnographic stance.

### 2.2 Definition of epistemology

According to Steup and Neta (2020), the term "epistemology" is a derivation from the Greek words "episteme" and "logos". "Episteme" is traduced as "knowledge", "understanding", or "acquaintance", and "logos" as "account", "argument", or "reason". These different translations embody the nuances inherent in the meaning of these Greek terms.

Steup and Neta (2020) trace the origins of its lengthy history, stating that there are many facets to the philosophy of epistemology. Plato, for instance, based his epistemology on the question of what knowledge is and how the seeker should weigh knowledge against opinion. In contrast, Locke's epistemology was focused on unravelling the machinations of human understanding and Kant's epistemology was rooted in unlocking what governed the possibilities of human understanding. Russell's epistemology centred on understanding how sensory experiences may be utilised to validate modern scientific applications.

Steup and Neta (2020) determined that current interpretations of epistemology attempt to comprehend how our experience shapes our worldviews. Epistemology is thus an ontological pursuit of understanding the reality of cognitive successes or equally cognitive failures.

Ponterotto (2005) views epistemology as being more preoccupied with the relationship between the "knower" (the research participant) and the "would-be knower" (the researcher). Furthermore, Ponterotto (2005) states that constructivist-interpretivists take a transactional and subjectivist stance, thus establishing a socially constructed reality. In the context of the current study, this means that the dynamic interaction between a counsellor and a client is pivotal to detailing and describing what is regarded as the "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*) of the client.

Lazard and McAvoy (2020) further refine the definition of modern epistemology by positing that an epistemological focus assists in grounding the personal reflections of researchers in specific research studies. They posit that epistemological reflexivity transcends the personal worldview to reach into the complexities of the nature, scope, and limitations of knowledge. Lazard and McAvoy (2020) recommend that all researchers adopt an epistemological stance in their research studies via the theories they engage (or do not engage) with, in addition to the methodologies used to design their studies. As Willig (2013) observes, epistemological reflexivity considers how values and assumptions inherent in the researcher's methodological and theoretical decisions help shape and determine the knowledge deduced in research. Paradoxically, it is equally possible to under-develop a reflexive account using epistemological reflexivity. Epistemological reflexivity can be challenging to achieve, given that research projects are shaped by epistemology and reflexivity. Qualitative research requires the researcher to detail these frameworks in their methodology so that the process framework is clearly established. Lazard and McAvoy (2020) venture that linking personal beliefs to epistemological positions can provide deeper insights into the relationship between the self and the research study.

### **2.3 The philosophical underpinnings of the constructivist paradigm**

It is necessary to consider a constructivist paradigm to substantiate the epistemological positions that encourage those insights between self and the research study. Gash (2020) defines Ernst von Glasersfeld's (1974) radical constructivism (RC) on its premise that mind-independent reality is an unknowable concept. Whatever an individual knows and experiences of a "reality" is merely a construction that is an accretion of the individual's experience. Von Glasersfeld (1974) positions constructivism in the following way: "It involves the demolition of our everyday conception of reality and, thus, of everything that is explicitly or implicitly based on naïve realism" (p. 2).

Nevertheless, decision-making in everyday life is grounded in the belief that one has a firm grasp of "reality". People find comfort in certainty and often forget how we construct the concepts we make. As a result, it becomes difficult to question what we know accurately. From an early age, we are also taught to take witness testimony at face value for various reasons, such as to support our preconceived notions or to satisfy our need to belong to our social group.

Leitner (2019) defines a constructivist approach as the construction of our realities and the ability to reconstrue the world in which we live. The basic premise is that we are only partially able to start from the premise that we can directly access any significant truth. Instead, we are fated to construct our own reality. Leitner's (2019) version of constructivism and experiential personal construct psychology (EPCP) is based on George Kelly's (1955) personal construct psychology (PCP). The experiential personal construct theory originates from the fundamental premise that humans are inherently relational. Connection with others denotes a life of richness and meaning. Contiguously, instead of the affirmation that others can give us, they can also injure us in relationships, resulting in a desire to withdraw and consequently protect ourselves from relational injury, culminating in a nexus between the richness of connection versus the potential terror of intimate relations. The definition of experiential personal construct psychology is the conceptualisation of individuals' processes of navigating this dialectic (Leitner, 1985; Leitner, 1995).

The "received view" or a positivist paradigm is seen as an alternative to the constructivist (or interpretivist) paradigm as understood by Ponteretto (2005). Constructivism is dialectically opposite to what Ponteretto (2005) defines as the naïve realism of positivism (possessing a single, objective, external reality). Constructivism lends itself to a relativist position that encompasses a multitude of apprehendable and equally valid realities (Schwandt, 1994). Fundamentally, constructivists posit that reality remains constructed within the individual's mind, as opposed to the notion of reality as an externally singular entity (Hansen, 2006). The constructivist position constitutes a hermeneutical approach, denoting that meaning is not obviously apparent and must be elicited through deep reflection (Schwandt, 2000; Sciarra, 1999). This type of reflection can be extracted through the means of an interactive researcher-participant dialogue. A defining characteristic of constructivism is its emphasis on the interaction between the investigator and the object of investigation. Leitner (2019) suggests that such interaction is the only way to elicit deeper meaning. The researcher and the research

participants co-create and co-construct the findings of their mutually engaging conversation and subsequent interpretation.

### 2.3.1 Historical genesis of constructivism

The goals of constructivism-interpretivism are deemed idiographic and emic by Leitner (2019). The origins of qualitative research and the genesis of constructivism-interpretivism can be traced to Kant's (1781/ 1797) *Critique of Pure Reason*. As per Hamilton (1994), Kant's view was that "human perception derives not only from the evidence of the senses but also from the mental apparatus that serves to organise the incoming sense impressions" and that "human claims about nature cannot be independent of inside-the-head processes of the knowing subject" (p. 63).

Kant's work elucidates a central tenet of constructivist thought: it is not possible to divorce an objective reality from the person (research participant) who is experiencing, processing, and defining the reality (Sciarra, 1999). Therefore, the research participant constructs reality. This ontological distinction is pivotal to understanding the fundamental difference between positivism and post-positivism (and quantitative methods), as well as constructivism-interpretivism (namely qualitative methods).

Schwandt (2000) refers to Dilthey (1894-1977) as a prominent figure in the development of constructivism and profoundly influenced by Kantian theory. Dilthey rejected Cartesian philosophy's reductionistic and objective dictates and delineated the distinction between *Naturwissenschaft* (natural science) and *Geisteswissenschaft* (human science) Schwandt (2000) describes how Dilthey helped to define both positivistic and constructivist approaches. The primary goal of *Naturwissenschaft* is that of scientific explanation (*Erklaren*), and the purpose of *Geisteswissenschaft* is that of understanding (*Verstehen*) the "meaning" of social phenomena.

Constructivism-interpretivism emphasises understanding the "lived experiences" (*Erlebnis*) from the perspective of those who live it day to day (Schwandt, 2014). Dilthey advocated that every "lived experience" occurs within the context of a historical social reality. He maintained that these lived experiences may not be immediately apparent to the individual, but could be brought into consciousness. It is important to note that Dilthey acknowledged that the concept of *Erlebnis* was empirical and lent itself to research in human sciences (qualitative) research.

Therefore, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm provides an anchor for qualitative research methods (Leitner, 2019; Ponteretto, 2005).

A different stance is taken by Chiari (2020), who makes provision for the "intersubjective epistemology for psychological science" and is explicitly "based on the phenomenological, constructivist, and sociolinguistic perspectives" (p. 30). However, this definition may need to be more precise. One feasible way to combat this would be to link components of "postmodern psychology" with the phenomenological, constructivist, and sociolinguistic viewpoints (Kvale, 1992). The inherent risk herein is that absorbing these aspects into postmodern psychology could dilute the distinctive stance of such philosophical and sociological perspectives, already vulnerable when incorporated into psychology.

Constructivism cannot be divorced from phenomenology. Tracking the phenomenological movement shows that each theorist definitively expresses a unique perspective, so much so that the broader use of the term "phenomenology" has evolved into a catch-all abstraction. A psychological perspective on phenomenology is far more diverse than individual theorists' narrow and rigid analyses. It can be evidenced that the word "constructivism" has devolved into a type of semantic extension and trivialisation, meaning that phenomenology tends to be misinterpreted, not from the perspective of being wrong but rather that it has drifted far from those specific interpretations deduced from an intersubjective corroboration between scholars. A pertinent example of such a misunderstanding can be found in Kelly, who, according to Armezzani and Chiari (2014), often confused phenomenology with idealism.

Kelly's (1995) constructivism is founded in the philosophical stance he called "constructive alternativism", which maintains that "all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement" (p. 15). This definition may allude to hermeneutic constructivism. However, Chiari (2016) maintains that Kelly cannot transcend the opposition between realism and idealism because he could not conceive a complete intersubjective framework. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Kelly's constructivism has unique consequences for the interactions across several fields because of his meticulousness in formulating his fundamental hypotheses. According to Kelly (2021), a recent focus has been on how experience and understanding influence how information is found, used, and represented.

Furthermore, the elucidation of language as a vital factor in allowing for a more holistic approach to dealing with scientific and everyday language uses has been significant. This

extrapolation has not occurred within the context of a rigid vacuum but rather within the framework of a broader theory developed within the social sciences to seek more accurate explanations of how human knowledge develops. Kelly (2021) attributes the range of approaches that have underpinned the explanation of this phenomenon (defined as constructivism, constructionism, and social constructionism) as having evolved from an interpretivist tradition in response to the nineteenth-century positivist stance of researchers like Dilthey, Rickert, and Weber. The interpretivist position rejected using natural science methods to study human experience as ontologically and methodologically flawed.

## **2.4 The development of modernism and postmodernism**

Hansen (2006) sums up the evolution of epistemology as postmodernism, proposing that people create their own realities. "Reality" is viewed as a human construction instead of merely objectively discoverable. This move away from traditional modernism posited a theoretical map as reflecting the territory - the postmodernist assumption is that "it is the map that precedes the territory" (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 80).

Both modernism and postmodernism are complex and multifaceted within the realms of the history of philosophy. When examined within the context of epistemology, modernism asserts that the only way to truly understand a phenomenon is through objective observation (Hansen, 2006). Only objective scientific observation was deemed a criterion to elicit the truth about phenomena. However, modernist epistemology is historically rooted in the assumption that observers are viewed as entirely separate from whatever is being observed (Hansen, 2004). During the twentieth century, critiques of the scientific epistemic position began to take shape as postmodern epistemology, crediting the fact that humans actively construct what they observe and are not passive receivers of information (Anderson, 1990). Postmodern epistemology posits that reality is never objectively discovered but is always, at least to some extent, created by perceivers (Hansen, 2004).

### **2.4.1 Essentialism**

According to Hansen (2006), modernism is founded on the premise that phenomena have essential properties that can be discovered via objective observation. This stance that objects of observation have particular true and potentially inherent discoverable aspects is known as "essentialism". An example of this theory is as follows: scientific research could provide a

wealth of information on cats, such as their reproduction, behaviours, and diet. Given these scientific discoveries, the question arises: Is it feasible, as per a modernistic approach, to surmise that the true, essential nature of cats will be ultimately discoverable? From a different observational vantage point, cats can be seen as companions, a food source, or even as deities in some cultures. What is, then, the essential nature of cats? Viewed within the context of postmodern epistemology, a cat's reality depends on the observer's mindset, not on discovering an implicit feline essence. Subsequently, it can clearly be seen that postmodernism, in contrast to modernism, is anti-essentialist (Hansen, 2006). A singular truth does not, therefore, lie within phenomena waiting to be uncovered by dispassionate investigators. Instead, in the act of observing, the observers imbue phenomena with meaning.

#### 2.4.2 Correspondence theory of language

As per Kelly (2020), Hansen (2006) views modernist epistemology as encompassing the order and structure of language, which in turn reflects the world it describes. This extrapolation is known as the correspondence theory of language. Postmodern epistemology has significantly challenged the correspondence theory of language (Kelly, 2020). For example, using the word heart as a marker, if heard within the context of a cardiac surgeon speaking, describing a person as having a big heart, it has a vastly different meaning to someone describing a friend in the same way in conversation. Language is wholly framed by context, described as "language games" (Kvale, 1992, p. 34), and linguistic participants engage in play. It follows, therefore, that language objectively mirrors the objects it appears to signify. A further supporting argument that challenges the correspondence theory of language is the idea of signifiers for musical notes. For example, does the linguistic representation of music correspond to the actual extralinguistic properties of sound? In the natural world that supersedes language, can it, thus, be assumed that sound is organised only in the way that the Western world has linguistically represented it? The clear answer is "no", because another culture may have the ability to develop an entirely different, yet equally effective, linguistic structure for the elements of music.

If this is so, then all systems of signification have the potential to be deemed as arbitrary and, in turn, culturally derived. In this light, questions arise about whether language is an inaccurate reflection of the extralinguistic reality it signifies. The correspondence theory of language leads to questioning the vernacular and inherent nuances of language used at midlife. The notes being played, as in the vernacular used to describe midlife experiences, do not necessarily represent



the actual tone of midlife experiences. It is, thus, necessary to deconstruct the subtext. As per Hansen (2006), one needs to counter the trap to the logical extension of thinking that language has a life of its own and, as such, is entirely disconnected from what it overtly represents.

Hansen (2006) proposes that language pertains only to words and not to things in themselves. Advocates of deconstructionism, the philosophical movement that has taken this position to the extreme, view language as an inherently self-referential system in which true meaning is thereby endlessly deferred (Derrida, 1995). This has led proponents of this school to conclude that "there is nothing outside of the text" (Derrida, 1995, p. 89).

Hansen (2006) proposes an intriguing paradox that provides substance for developing new counselling methods at midlife. Hansen (2006) contends that the idea that theories, as linguistic constructs, do not correspond with the counselling processes they are tasked with representing has far-reaching ramifications, even when it is carried to its logical conclusion and rejects the correspondence theory of language. These implications are evident in how practising counsellors consider and use theories. Hansen's (2006) questioning of the correspondence theory of language has significant implications for the status quo of existing counselling methods, as well as consequences for the anti-essentialism of counselling theories.

#### 2.4.3 Implications of postmodernist epistemology in elucidating epiphanies at midlife

Scholl and Hansen (2018) espouse that traditional counselling theories have been viewed within a modernist epistemic context. This means they were assumed to represent the essential elements of counselling phenomena accurately. However, if these self-same counselling theories are seen as merely linguistic phenomena that do not necessarily hold any value outside the realm of language, this alternative postmodern position would seriously challenge the use of theory within the counselling process. Hansen (2006) delineates three primary consequences of postmodern epistemology for the role of counselling theories: (a) theories as narrative structures, (b) theoretical truth redefined as pragmatic utility, and (c) egalitarianism in the counselling relationship.

##### 2.4.3.1 Theories as narrative structures

If the objective is for counsellors to bring about psychological change, it is natural to expect counsellors to possess objective truths about human nature through counselling theories. However, are theories even deemed useful if they are not true (in the modernist sense of truth)?

Hansen (2006) notes evidence suggesting that objective truth has little influence on the healing process. Cross-cultural studies of healing illuminate widely varied theoretical understandings of psychological suffering used to bring about healing (Comas-Diaz, 2012). Witch doctors, shamans, and tribal spiritual leaders, for instance, have vastly different theoretical models for understanding human conditions versus Westernised mental health culture. These methods, viewed within the context of their endemic culture, are quite effective at psychological healing (Torrey, 1972). Hansen (2006) views this proposition as "somewhat unsettling" and opens up three possibilities:

Premise 1: Despite the finding that theories from diverse cultures facilitate healing, westernised mental health models remain aligned more closely to objective truth.

Premise 2: All theories have inherent aspects of objective truth. This is why they are effective.

Premise 3: Truth is not contingent on healing.

A postmodern critique of objectivity, as presented in Premise 1, undermines the notion that any particular theory can assert that it is closer to objective, extralinguistic truth than another theory. Therefore, it is difficult to determine that Westernised models are inherently more aligned to the truth than, for example, tribal ones. Theories remain intrinsically entangled in culture, politics, and language. To assert dominance by giving weight to the inherent superiority of one over another seems epistemically naïve, particularly given twentieth-century developments in epistemology and the philosophy of language (Hansen, 2006).

Furthermore, if Western theories are seen as true and non-scientific theories based on spiritualism, for example, are false, how can both be viewed as helpful to people within their respective cultures? When dissected, Premise 1 does not appear tenable. As in Premise 2, each theory contains a fractal of truth when viewed through the prism of both the cognitivist and the shaman. Focussing on an objectively true aspect of a theory may negate a theoretical predisposition for white noise and, in its absence, create the possibility for healing. However, Premise 2 appears just as untenable as Premise 1, as theories are by-products of particular cultures. The dilemma is how theories can contain the objective truths that transcend the assumptions of the individuals and cultures that created them.

It is almost impossible to apply, much less find, criteria used to determine which aspects of a particular theory always remain objectively true for all people. This is because all theories and

attempts to research and investigate them remain ineluctably by-products of inherent cultural mindsets, meaning that investigative efforts at extracting truth from fiction are unavoidably loaded with the biases of the investigators. Even the gold standard of the supposed objective stance of science is suffused with particular communal assumptions (Gergen, 1991).

Premise 3, which suggests that theories do not always need to be objectively truthful to facilitate healing. As previously mentioned, this premise is evidenced in cross-cultural studies of healing. However, if the premise is that theories do not communicate objective truth to those in distress, then the question remains: How do theories facilitate healing? Frank and Frank (1993) and Hansen (2002) propose that theories are narrative structures used for rhetorical purposes, and these theories are designed to allow the client to contemplate their experience from different vantage points. For example, a depressed individual seeking counselling with a cognitivist would be privy to being told that certain thoughts are distortions. The client would be exposed to the notion of changing their distorted thoughts to alleviate depression. The client gradually becomes familiar with the cognitive narrative, and, in turn, the depression subsides.

If approached from a traditional, modernist perspective, the alleviation of a client's depressive symptoms means that cognitive theory would portray an accurate description of those processes responsible for depression and its subsequent cure. Hansen (2004) views this explanation as epistemically naïve. An alternative, postmodern stance is that the counsellor's theory serves a narrative structure, assembled to "restory" the client's experience. This "restorying" of experience is a central tenet of healing (Kenyon & Randall, 1997). Creating new structures of meaning requires experiences to be interpreted from other perspectives. This means reorganising elements of old storylines and creating new symbolic structures that promote an understanding of the lived experience and, in turn, facilitate mastery over previously unmanageable experiences (Hansen, 2004). An important caveat is that none of these healing processes are contingent on the transcendent truth of a new narrative.

Hansen's (2006) research provides a framework for supporting the identification and further extrapolation of epiphanies at midlife. Given that Hansen's (2006) central tenet is that successful counselling outcomes are dependent on the counsellor's ability to determine new narratives that will fit particular clients and, in turn, the counsellor's skill at implementing new storylines for clients, a pertinent new role that theories occupy, within the counselling process, is that of narrative structures to facilitate the counsellor's role in the rhetorical process of restorying a client's experience for the purpose of healing.

#### 2.4.3.2 Theoretical truth reframed as pragmatism

Restorying can only be viewed by contextualising its place within postmodernism. Postmodernism has led to a resurgence of interest in pragmatism (Rorty, 1982). Pragmatism is an American philosophical movement with its origins in the early twentieth century, and its central premise is that ideas are measured by their practical utility and not by their transcendent accuracy. Given that there are a multitude of competing ideas and systems of thought in philosophy that are cogent, persuasive, internally consistent and compelling, decisions should be based on the criterion of whether an idea is workable in a particular situation (Polkinghorne, 2000) instead of trying to make difficult choices between these systems based on logical appeal. Pragmatism was initially based upon a modernist premise - the underlying epistemic foundation of pragmatism presumed a potentially knowable, unified reality (Polkinghorne, 1992).

A deleterious side-effect of postmodern epistemology is relativism (Polkinghorne, 1992), and this, in turn, has led postmodern philosophers to draw on pragmatism to help resolve the relativistic conundrum. Considering that the epistemic starting point of postmodernism is that of a transcendent reality, which means that reality is inherently unknowable, how can it ever be true that one interpretation of events is superior to another? For example, a client's distress could be interpreted in various ways, as emanating from family dynamics, unconscious processes, or actual or imagined forces impacting the client. Unsubstantiated by an epistemic grounding in transcendent truth, all interpretations of events would be seen as having equal merit. This has led some theorists to label relativism as an inherent flaw of postmodernism, which can only be corrected by a realist epistemology incorporating an objective, known reality (Held, 1995; Osbeck, 1993). Postmodernist philosophers, occasionally known as sometimes affirmative postmodernists (Rosenau, 1992), have incorporated philosophical pragmatism into postmodernism to solve the interpretive problems that emanate from relativism without needing to fall back into a realist epistemology.

#### 2.4.3.3 Neopragmatism

Postmodern pragmatism, known as neopragmatism, is diametrically different from the original pragmatism, as it embraces an epistemology that does not presume a unified, knowable reality (Polkinghorne, 1992). Neopragmatism asserts that the best interpretation of events is fundamentally the one that is the most useful. Truth is redefined in terms of its pragmatic utility,

which signifies that to say something is true does not mean it neatly matches an objective reality, as transcendent truth can never be fully known. Instead, truth is determined by whatever interpretation is pertinent and workable in a particular situation.

The following is an example of how neopragmatism assuages the problems created by relativism. To assert that a client's problems can be attributed to demonic possession is generally considered untrue, as this interpretation is not deemed relevant in most Westernised societies. Nevertheless, this interpretation may give validity to a problem in those societies wherein such a reality is meaningful and, in attributing meaning, espouses healing. Therefore, rather than defining truth as purely objective and transcendent, neopragmatism redefines truth as both localised and utilitarian.

Therefore, neopragmatism has significant implications for theory utilisation in counselling practice and lends itself to developing new counselling theories at midlife. Historically, counselling has advocated for theoretical positions supporting an inherent truth in the value of their theories (Hansen, 2002). This has made choosing between competing theories difficult for counsellors, as most theoretical positions have some persuasive appeal, and ardent spokespersons advocate for their value as accurate representations of human psychology. Neopragmatism, however, helps to resolve the problem of choosing a "correct" or "true" theory inherent in modernism while tempering the post-modernistic dilemma of relativism. Adopting a neopragmatic perspective means that the criteria for theory selection are based on the suitability of a theoretical perspective in meeting the objectives of a particular counselling situation (Gert, 2021). Redefining truth within the context of pragma allows for resolving the problems of theoretical eclecticism inherent in modernism and gives practitioners a guide to theory selection.

#### 2.4.3.4 Egalitarianism within the context of a counselling relationship

Viewed within the context of modernism, the helping model traditionally supports an expert who has access to truth and a client who needs guidance from an expert. Ultimately, it rests on the expert's knowledge and expertise that result in healing.

Traditional conceptualisations of counselling follow similar conformity: healing for clients depends on counsellors' mastery of theories and associated techniques (McLeod, 2019). The accrual of counselling expertise, degrees, and certification is a mark of expertise that provides

evidence that the counsellor has specialised knowledge of the human condition that clients are assumed to lack.

Framing the counselling paradigm as that of expert and sufferer dyad, as seen in modernism, has far-reaching yet subtle consequences for the counselling relationship. To fully understand the relational consequences of sustaining a modernist epistemology, it is vital to consider the association between knowledge and power.

The twentieth-century philosopher, Foucault (1980), theorised that knowledge and power are inevitably linked, and within this, claims to truth have a deleterious effect in automatically suppressing alternative points of view. For example, to assert that heterosexuality is the only true expression of sexual intimacy automatically undermines the homosexual perspective. Similarly, the stance that chemical imbalances are central to all emotional problems suppresses the psychosocial perspective of psychological distress. The deduction is that if truth is inextricably linked with power, then the counsellor's claim to expert knowledge inexorably has a relational consequence of suppressing the client's perspective.

However, from the standpoint of a modernist epistemology, the impact of the therapist's perspective is an essential component of the healing process, because the counsellor is regarded as having access to theoretical truths that the client does not. Postmodern epistemology, however, cannot elucidate that one perspective is closer to ultimate truth than another (Mayrhofer et al., 2021), undermining the position of counsellors as experts possessing transcendent truths. Given the nature of counselling, most counsellors would align themselves as being partners with their clients in the therapeutic process – a "dyadic dance" (Li, 2022, p. 474) – not as the extreme of "truth bullies" imposing their superior views upon clients' perspectives. However, it is worth considering the postmodern critique of knowledge that is tethered to power (Foucault, 1980) and the subtle and overt relational consequences of power differentials within the counselling relationship.

An alternative standpoint to the power-knowledge differential arpostmodernist theorists, especially those who are social constructionists. They can reframe the counselling setting as a dialogic place that allows for the co-construction of meaning (Hansen, 2006). This is contrary to the expert who enlightens the client: in this setting, the counsellor is an equal partner with the client in a narrative construction (Logan et al., 2021). Within this context, theories are useful not just because they embody objective truth, but also because they provide the

counsellor with a set of narratives that can contribute to constructing meaning within the counselling relationship.

If one considers the perspective of a psychodynamically oriented counsellor, the goal is to assist clients in re-narrating experiences within the framework of a psychodynamic paradigm, with the structural narrative comprising elements such as unconscious process, defence, and transference (Hansen, 2000). Within a modernist context, the psychodynamic counsellor could argue that certain interpretations are correct and determine disagreements from the client as manifestations of resistance. In the post-modernistic context, in which psychodynamic theory is only one of many narrative possibilities, the counsellor has the liberty of reframing the theoretical narrative to fit the mutually constructive nature of counselling, thus allowing both the client and the counsellor to be equal partners in the process of constructing meaning (Li, 2022).

In some respects, egalitarianism and an emphasis on the meaning of human systems, including a repositioning of counselling theories within a postmodernist epistemology, are similar to the traditional values of humanism. These facets elicit the value of constructing subjective reality and portray the counsellor and client as equal within a counselling relationship (Elliott et al., 2018; Li, 2022).

#### 2.4.4 Differences between humanism and postmodernism

Humanism and postmodernism retain vital theoretical differences (Hansen, 2005). A central premise of humanism is that counsellors aspire to gain an accurate and empathic identification of their clients' experiences (Hansen, 2005). Conversely, postmodernism theorises that experience is almost always linguistically co-created within the counselling relationship and does not exist exclusively within the client, waiting to be discovered, as per McNamee (1996). From a postmodern perspective, the counselling process facilitates healing by creating new systems of meaning systems through linguistics and not by objectively discovering old ones.

Their respective distal conceptualisations of self, differentiate postmodernism and humanism. The humanistic perspective concludes that self-consolidation and actualisation form the premise of the goals of counselling (Hansen, 2006). Conversely, postmodernism rejects the notion of a unified self, relegating it to an antiquated and philosophically indefensible relic of the Enlightenment (Marzoni, 2015). The postmodernist vision venerates self-multiplicity and not self-consolidation as characteristics of a fully functioning person (West, 2022). Therefore,

there may be some similarities between postmodern and humanistic orientations as enacted in the counselling relationship, yet fundamental ideological differences exist between these perspectives.

The theoretical application of counselling is profoundly influenced by postmodern thought, emphasising anti-essentialism and rejecting the correspondence theory of languages (Storm, 2021). Consequently, if theories are not tethered to objective, indisputable realities, then theories possess liberty, as narrative structures, to be pragmatically and flexibly utilised to foster healing through the dialogic process of joint construction of meaning within a counselling relationship (Li, 2022). From a postmodernist stance, the counsellor does not need to adhere to the supposed truth of a particular theory. Instead, the process of constructing meaning within a counselling relationship and its subsequent pragmatic impact on counselling objectives is prioritised.

#### 2.4.5 Personal construct theory

Personal construct theory (PCT) has its genesis in a constructivist paradigm and forms a cogent progression into the theoretical framework of this dissertation because of its flexibility and exploratory nature. It further lends itself to an ethnographic stance because of its intersubjectivity prescient in the corollaries of commonality and sociality. The methodology of Personal Construct Theory both frames and allows for interpretations of the nature and meaning or derivations of alternative concepts. This contrasts with evaluating these concepts solely within the context of their inability to align with formal scientific concepts.

In Taber (2020), George Kelly is identified as the creator of PCT. Kelly's professional focus was centred on supporting clients experiencing difficulties with their stressful lives. The Freudian concepts given to him during his professional training gave him scant help in effecting change with his clients. Taber (2020) notes that Kelly was driven to develop his own therapeutic approach founded on a constructivist perspective of learning (a perspective he called constructive alternativism) that had at its centre, the core metaphor of the individual as a scientist.

Kelly's theory in Taber (2020) can be extrapolated as follows: People, like good scientists, should remain open and flexible to the possibilities of exploring new data and taking cognisance of alternative explanations and conceptions, as opposed to remaining rooted in rigid



or established ways of thinking. In this context, George Kelly proposed constructive alternativism, which evolved into PCT.

Constructive alternativism is a "philosophical position" (Kelly, 1969, p. 64): "the notion that one does not have to disprove one proposition before entertaining one of its alternatives" (p. 55). Kelly posited that despite wanting to cling to our existing understandings and beliefs, we should remain open to considering other options and alternative conceptualisations, even when they appear at odds with aspects of our current thinking.

This approach was reflected in Kelly's work with his clients, a few of whom had interpreted new ways of making sense of their worlds and, in turn, their relationships, their lives and their roles in the workplace. Areas in their lives were previously unproductive and, thus, negatively impacting them. Kelly (1963) believed that "no one needs to paint themselves into a corner; no one needs to be completely hemmed in by circumstances; no one needs to be the victim of his or her biography" (p. 15).

Kelly's theory shares constructivist notions as it proposes that an individual relates to the world by creating a framework of preconceptions (Taber, 2020). These constructs are personal and unique to the individual, forming the basis for interpreting experience. A construct is seen as encompassing a broad set of applications, as it is "an abstraction and, as such, can be picked up and laid down over many, many different events in order to bring them into focus and clothe them with personal meaning" (Kelly, 1969, p. 87).

This theory, first presented in the 1950s, may now appear mainstream, given the breadth and permeation of constructivist thinking in research. Kelly (1995) entreats us to look at the world through the lens of one's own constructs. This is reflected in constructivist theory by using the metaphor of people putting on different glasses to see the world (Pope & Watts, 1988). Kelly (1995) shares similarities with constructivist thinkers such as Piaget and Vygotsky in stating that paradigms of thinking are developed iteratively over time. This results in individuals collating their own personal apparatus for modelling the world. Kelly's conception of constructs veers towards collating somewhat discrete, but highly focused elements. On the other hand, Piaget's theory developed upon the construction of domain-general structures of cognition that are maintained under developmental control. These depend upon opportunities that enable one to engage in and gain feedback from interaction in the environment.

Kelly's (1995) approach is complementary to both Vygotsky's and Piaget's when seen in the context of social situations (Veraska & Samuelsson, 2022). Piaget considers social influences but has been criticised for ostensibly neglecting these in his writing. According to Vygotsky, social context is crucial, because it shapes how higher psychological functions develop by the modelling gleaned from others. Kelly appears to take a middle ground stance, as many of his principles can be interpreted as relating to how an individual understands their experience to construct a framework that makes sense of the universe and, consequently, projects future events.

Taber (2020) observes that the notions of discussion and intersubjectivity are evident in the form of commonality and sociality corollaries, suggesting that for Kelly, social interaction was an aspect belonging to a more general process from which constructs are derived. Kelly's theory advocates no definitive distinction between those constructs based on interaction with the physical environment and constructs solicited from enculturation. Nor does his theory distinguish between those constructs that allow for explicit reflection and those that channel tacit cognition (distinctions that are vital in Vygotsky's theory).

Further motivation for integrating PCT in this dissertation is that Taber (2020) validates the theoretical underpinning of a paradigm rooted in ethnography as a means of extrapolating researchers' theories. In other words, a means of seeking to frame and interpret the nature and internal machinations or derivations of alternative concepts, instead of evaluating them purely on their failure to correspond with formal scientific concepts. This position was supported by Kelly's PCT theory, which did not portray personal constructions as fundamentally limiting or defective.

Kelly's theory resonates with Glaserfeld's (1993) Radical Constructivism, wherein an understanding of the world is deemed a construction of reality determined by that person's current interpretation of experience despite possible limited access to the external world. Kelly (1995) construed a "philosophical position" that he called "constructive alternativism". This perspective arises from the need to understand our world by placing our own interpretations upon it. This also holds true for how we alter our interpretations of the world. Kelly (1995) maintained that there are no finite ends to the alternative constructions we construe – only our imagination defines limitations. Kelly, cited in Taber (2020, p. 9), observed "that reality is subject to many alternative constructions, some of which may prove more fruitful than others".

Therefore, progress is seen as creating new constructions that may appear initially helpful, but would ultimately be determined as unsatisfactory, and ultimately be replaced.

Psychotherapy is defined by Musicki (2017) as an art of interpretation. It should be noted that he uses the acronym PCP, instead of PCT, but they mean the same thing. For clarity, the researcher uses the acronym PCT, designated as a primary means of communicating and understanding (Weiner & Bornstein, 2009). Therapists and clients are engaged in a relationship – the "dyadic dance" of Li (2022): this is unlike interpreting texts or theory in literature. In therapy, both parties establish new meanings via the therapeutic process. In both PCT, as well as narrative psychotherapy, the therapeutic process and the goal of therapy cannot be mutually exclusive. In PCT, therapists are focused on making core constructs more permeable and eliciting further proportionality, whereas in narrative therapy, the focus is on coherence, credibility and the anticipatory power of therapeutic stories.

It is the task of the therapist to recognise and acknowledge discourses that were marginalised in the client's life, emphasising those stories that are more therapeutic than others. This is not dissimilar to the role of a constructivist therapist, proposing new experiments fastidiously seeking evidence of validation and meticulously observing those incidental changes in peripheral subsystems of constructs to elicit changes in the core structure. Extracting stories that appear disparate or distant in relation to the "story about me" means that narrative therapists weave peripheral stories and integrate them with those narratives that are more aligned with identity (Heath et al., 2022). A change in narrative reconstruction veers from the peripheral to the inherent or core, or from subordinate to superordinate structures.

There are numerous similarities between PCT and narrative psychotherapy as they both operate, to an extent, on analogous perspectives. The encompassing approach of the PCT practitioner is similar to the stance of "not-knowledge" and deconstructive listening of the narrative therapist (Musicki, 2017). Both approaches share a therapeutic stance that ensures the client remains the ultimate expert on their behaviour. Both narrative and PCT therapies steer the therapist to accept the client's narrative and listen with empathy without looking to identify inconsistencies in clients' narratives. Therapists incorporating both modalities are attuned to extracting insights pertaining to the functions and personal meanings of narratives unique to clients' lives.

Novel to PCT is the narrative therapists' perspective of the externalisation of a problem (Crumb, 2019). From this perspective, an approach for characterising a dysfunctional problem is to consider it external to the client, allowing the client to re-author or redefine themselves, each other, and their relationships based on alternate stories or information. This approach opens an infinite perspective for human agency by soliciting awareness about the difference between "I and me" – the narrator and the protagonist (McAdams, 2020). This induces movement in alternative directions, from core or superordinate, to peripheral or subordinate structures. During the trajectory of the therapeutic process, these narratives, which were previously associated with an essence, are now modified and assimilated and, in so doing, create possibilities for new stories or structures. The inherent goal is to eradicate the dysfunctional problem derived from one or more core constructs, which presents as the focus of the client's complaint.

A key element of Kelly's interpretation of the human as a scientist was his willingness to engage with different approaches. In Musicki (2017), Kelly's reality of everyday therapeutic endeavours is more than merely applying theory into practice. Working as a therapist requires a consistent evolution of personal style based on uniquely personal experiences or "things that work" for therapists most of the time. Our preferences predispose us to use similar practices with which we feel comfortable. The question is whether these practices suit all clients and, if not, how they should be adapted.

An integration between PCT and narrative approaches, such as an ethnographic narrative, could evolve into a formulation of a hermeneutic stance in psychotherapy, providing an alternative to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or psychiatric-driven discourses, eliciting a dialogical as opposed to a monological mode of treatment (Goncalves & Guilfoyle, 2006). Hermeneutically oriented therapy primarily focuses on the client's strengths and agency and not pathology or dysfunctional symptoms. It is centred on how clients constitute objects versus viewing people as objects. This perspective can challenge the objectification and dehumanising of people, contrary to narrative approaches formulated in deconstructive listening and a position of "not-knowledge". The externalisation of a problem lends itself to a new outlook on a psychotherapeutic process for therapists and a perspective that can be understood in PCP (T) terms.

## **2.5 Ethnography**

The externalisation of problems and a dialogical narrative lend themselves to incorporating an ethnographic stance. Jocuns (2018) asserts that "True ethnography is rare" (p. 176) and that ethnography has been reduced to a methodology wherein the focus is mainly on paying attention to the minutiae in the world to extrapolate the human experience. The founders of ethnography couched its methodology in scientific terms. These views have now been seen as too narrow to define ethnography. Jocuns (2018) notes that ethnography encompasses a specific perspective leading to studying language and communication. This perspective requires a particular epistemological and ontological approach to understanding such experiences, a perspective beyond rationalised science's scope. Viewed in this light, ethnography requires that it should not be reduced to simply a method, but should be seen as a perspective or stance that ethnographers take towards their research. This perspective encompasses the role of history in ethnography, the implicit definition of language and the notion that language is devoid of meaning without context. This incorporates the data we use, the vernacular embedded within social behaviour, punctuated by ideologies and the stance that ethnography is merely a paradigm for observing behaviour. Ethnographers are intrinsically embedded within the communities of practice that they are studying. According to Jocuns (2018), Blommaert further argues that pivotal to this, is the fact that ethnography is a paradigm that can be used to counter the hegemonic stances and language ideologies defined by society.

Jocuns (2018) notes Bourdieu's interest in symbolic interactionism with its emphasis on fieldwork and participant observation. Bourdieu deviated from contemporary sociologicistic norms steeped in structuralism (which tries to reduce the complexity of human experiences to certain universal underlying structures) and veered towards reflexive sociology (Jocuns, 2018). This reflexivity originates in the notion of intersubjective engagement with research subjects (Li, 2022), wherein the researcher allows for the objective and subjective qualities of cohorts who are the object of the research.

## **2.6 Summary**

The analysis of the trajectory of epistemology from modernism to postmodernism and the role that language and its inherent meaning occupy were evaluated within the context of neopragmatism. Given that modernism and postmodernism incorporate the idea that reality is not an objective discovery but is instead created through the perceiver, this allows for research

into new methods of counselling at midlife. Essentialism and its contiguity with the correspondence theory of language form the basis of postmodernist epistemology in the role of counselling theories. Ethnography is emically aligned with theoretical truths reframed by pragmatism.

The researcher's capacity to fully immerse themselves in the participants' reality and to approach the research from a position independent of objective, undeniable realities allow theories to be used as flexible and pragmatic narrative structures that support healing and novel counselling techniques. This is facilitated through the dialogic process of joint construction of meaning within a counselling relationship. From a postmodernist stance, the counsellor does not need to adhere to the supposed truth of a particular theory. Instead, the process of constructing meaning within a counselling relationship and its subsequent pragmatic impact on counselling objectives is prioritised.

## CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Introduction

Conceptualising a contemporary analysis of midlife requires an overview of the theories of various researchers to see how the field has developed since Jung's collective unconscious theory was first mooted. Once the specific theories have been reviewed, the chapter takes a broader look at narrative therapy that applies to the discourse.

### 3.2 Specific theoretical perspectives on midlife

This section covers a broad spectrum of thought on midlife as a transitional period in the life of a human being. The theorists and theories reviewed in this section are listed in Table 3.1. Although the theories are dealt with chronologically, this should not be taken to imply that one theory automatically follows or relies on the previous one. Nevertheless, links between the theories are made where possible. The critical point is that each theory adds nuances to provide a detailed understanding of the phenomenon that encompasses midlife transitions.

Table 1: Timeline of theorists and theories on midlife development

<b>Theorist</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Theories</b>
Jung	1933	The collective unconscious theory
Sigmund Freud	1940	Theory of psychoanalysis
Anna Freud	1946	Sublimation theory
Erikson	1950	Developmental theory
Neugarten, Moore and Lowe	1965	Social clock theory

Jaques	1965	Midlife crisis
Vaillant	1971	Defence mechanisms
Gould	1978	Inner stages of consciousness theory
Levinson	1978	Transitional periods theory
Folkman and Lazarus	1980	Stress theory
Tamir	1982	Midlife myths
McRae and Costa	1986	Big five personality factors
Maslow	1991	Humanistic theory

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### 3.2.1 Jung's collective unconscious theory

An analysis of Jung's (1933) theoretical views vastly differs from Freud's. Palk's (2015) assessment of Jung's conceptions of midlife transition, which can be deemed a crisis, remain pertinent and are frequently cited in postmodern literature on midlife (Helson, 1997; Lachman & James, 1997; Levinson et al., 1978; McAdams, 1993; Parker & Aldwin, 1997).

Jung (1933) suggested that the ultimate purpose of any individual is to develop consciousness – that by the end of life, the unconscious should become fully conscious. This entire process is known as individuation. It is characterised by resolving and becoming fully cognisant of any and all underlying, repressed, traumatic and difficult memories. Jung viewed this process as enhancing and facilitating personal growth. This personal growth is not, however, the lien of everyone, and not all can reach individuation (Jung, 1933). Jung's observations were that society traditionally accords no value related to exploring and individuating the inner self. Only external accomplishments are deemed worthy of praise and recognition. He also supported the



theory that people should ignore the negative perception that life is pre-ordained and that nature has ordered things.

For Jung, puberty is the life stage where the ability to navigate psychological problems begins (Hargrave, 2006). This time is akin to a psychic birth wherein adolescents can consciously distinguish the self from their parents. In this stage, the potential for unresolved identity crises from adolescence is sometimes revisited in midlife.

Moreover, it sometimes happens that when children reach adolescence, it is a trigger for the parent's own midlife crisis due to unresolved issues (Palk, 2015). I have counselled many an adult at midlife who displays symptoms similar to a teenage rebellion. These can range from leaving the safety of a secure job to changing careers into a vastly different job and sometimes lower paying or supposedly more exciting and riskier work.

A dramatic change in appearance, changes in sexual behaviours and drives, changes in relationships, moodiness, confusion, and an inability to commit to responsibilities are all symptomatic of adult markers of unresolved teenage crises.

Jung (1933) further linked depression to those in midlife presenting with rigid and inflexible personalities. Midlife for Jung (1971) is a transition in the forties, or even the fifties. This transitional process can be delayed if parents remain alive. However, more pertinently for men, the death of a father has a much more significant impact, which Jung (1933) described as a "catastrophic ripening" (p. 107).

With a progression into the middle years, self-doubt and internal disharmony tend to surface (Jung, 1933). This midlife process can be relatively smooth if a person is well prepared, but difficulties present when people retain misconceptions rooted in childhood that are incongruous with the real world (Jung, 1933). A desire to maintain youth and its resultant mire in the unconscious manifests as problematic during midlife transition (Jung, 1971). In line with a commonly held stereotype of a midlife crisis, I have noted a persistent theme of clients determined to preserve a semblance of their youth. This presents as sexually promiscuous behaviour, such as engaging in relationships with significantly younger partners, a fixation with their looks, an obsessive approach to exercise and diet, wearing clothing that is edgy or different from contemporaries, and adopting a vernacular that is more suited to a younger generation.

A definitive transition to middle age is indirect and not overt: it emerges from the well of the unconscious (Jung, 1933). Some are ill-equipped to deal with midlife and seek to hold onto perceptions that the first half of life remains sufficient for the rest of their lives (Palk, 2015).

Jung (1971) believed that spending time on oneself in the second half of life, when the self is illuminated, was vital. Jung also suggested that the idea of an afterlife and the belief therein made transitioning into later years easier.

As a transition period, midlife has the effect of bringing gradual changes to the intrinsic interests people hold as well as changes to their characters (Jung, 1933). People may need to confront several aspects of their lives to realise that some of their efforts were not worthwhile and some aspirations were not realised. People can create new aspirations, take different paths, and search for new interests. However, this pivots on the acceptance that life does not always turn out the way we want (Jung, 1971).

Engaging with the concept of death and fear thereof at midlife is deemed abstract and remote, and Jung (1933) did not consider it to be a meaningful dilemma during middle age like other theorists such as Dickstein (1972) and Jaques (1965) do. Midlife difficulties result from significant psychological changes that are more transformational than physical changes.

### 3.2.2 Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory

A study of midlife development would be lacking if there was no reference to Sigmund Freud (Palk, 2015). A view of midlife from within the realms of a psychoanalytic perspective requires acknowledging the stages through which individuals transit. This is the counterpoint where people in midlife address the inherent conflict between their biological drives and social expectations. The pathways to these resolutions determine an individual's learning ability, shaping social interactions and formulating coping mechanisms for anxiety. Freud, S. (1940), in his place as the psychoanalytic patriarch, focused primarily on his patients' unconscious drives. These unconscious drives became the constructs of his psychosexual theory. Freud maintained that a strong emphasis was necessary on how parents manage their child's sexual and aggressive drives in the child's first few formative years. He maintained that this formed the basis for healthy personality development.

Freud's (1940) theory of psychoanalysis has three distinct parts to the personality – the id, ego, and the superego. These three discrete parts become integrated over a succession of five stages.

Psychosexual development makes its appearance during childhood, a stage wherein sexual impulses transition from oral to anal and then to the genital regions of the body. These stages can be treacherous for parents, as each stage requires careful assessment to avoid indulging in too much or too little gratification of their child's basic needs. Finding the right balance during this formative stage ensures that children develop into well-adjusted adults with a capacity for mature sexuality and an active, healthy participation in family life.

Freud was a pioneer in addressing the importance of a formative early parent-child relationship in development theory. However, his theory faced criticism because of its overemphasis on the determinants of sexual feelings in development. Freud's theory was also narrow in focus as it veered towards an exclusivity that emphasised dilemmas of sexually repressed, affluent adults and did not consider those cultures differing from nineteenth-century Victorian society.

### 3.2.3 Anna Freud's sublimation theory

"Sublimation" is a term conceptualised by Anna Freud (1946) that further expanded on Sigmund Freud's idea of defence mechanisms. She theorised that the mechanism of sublimation would only make its appearance later in life in the guise of developmental progress and a mechanism predisposed to "conform to social values that presuppose the knowledge and/or acceptance of such values" (Palk, 2015, p. 87). Similar defence mechanisms present during adolescence re-emerge during midlife because the id is more active than the ego during midlife (Freud, A., 1946).

Freud, A. (1946) predicted the emergence of a developmental stage in later adulthood, known as the "climacteric" stage (p. 152). It is described as a critical phase in which dramatic and significant changes in fortune and health occur – women experience the cessation of their reproductive abilities and completion of menopause in addition to other physiological and psychic changes, whereas men may experience reduced sexual activity. Other climacteric changes that I have seen in my practice have been a loss in libido in both men and women, a loss of physical vigour and a general feeling of loss of stamina, both physically and mentally.

### 3.2.4 Erikson's developmental theory

Erikson (1950) used Freud's basic psychosexual framework but expanded on the development at each stage, and his research on adult stage theories has contributed to the idea that midlife is a crisis in development. Erikson described the process that guides development through the life

cycle as the “epigenetic principle” – “anything that grows has its blueprint and a particular time of ascendancy” (Hargrave, 2006, p. 30).

Erikson’s theory is that human life happens in eight sequential stages where people face challenges, and only when they have resolved these challenges can they move to the next stage (Santrock, 1992). Each challenge requires the person to develop specific skills and abilities. Should this not occur, further development will be impaired (Ackerman & Kanfer, 2020; Gerdes, 1988). The cultural context (social influences and expectations) influences how people move through each stage.

The stages can be summarised as follows: The first stage of life is the contrast between trust and mistrust, and the second is autonomy versus shame and doubt (Lachman, 2001). The third stage contrasts initiative versus guilt, and the fourth deals with industry versus inferiority (Santrock, 1992). The fifth stage of identity versus role confusion precedes the sixth stage, intimacy versus isolation. In the seventh stage, the adult experiences generativity versus stagnation, which is the time associated with middle age (Santrock, 1992).

Erikson (1963) believed the individual first needs to gain a sense of self and how they fit into society before committing to marriage and investing time and energy in the well-being of future generations. Generativity is “primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson, 1963, p. 267). Generativity is about leaving a legacy, what adults aspire to do for future generations (Erikson, 1963) and is shown through activities such as teaching and leading that will benefit the broader society and the next generation (McAdams, de St Aubin, & Logan, 1993). Parenting is an essential expression of reaching generativity, but it also includes teaching and leadership or other creative activities, according to Lachman (2001).

If a person does not reach generativity, they fester in stagnation, impotent to leave a legacy and with a potential for self-preoccupation, a predilection to focus more on the self than others (Erikson, 1963). Lachman (2001) stated that there might not be differences in the strength of generative feelings among adults. Erikson (1963) advocated that adults must remain optimistic about the future to facilitate generativity.

Chakraborty, Chatterjee, and Das (2012) proposed that one of midlife’s challenges is that it is a developmental life stage. Chakraborty et al. (2012) maintained that the concept of generativity, coined by Erikson, is a vital and intuitive psycho-social construct inextricably linked with middle adulthood. It is a construct intrinsically linked to enhanced personal drives

to contribute in socially constructive ways and primarily driven by a voluntary feeling of obligation to care for others. The lack of this can be viewed as one of many contributing factors to the disease inherent in the makeup of some midlife angst. Part of the malaise is that if this need is not fulfilled, and a contribution in meaningful ways is not felt intra-psychically, the individual may become self-absorbed and face stagnation (Chakraborty et al., 2012).

Erikson maintained that men and women are most likely to be concerned about wellbeing and parenting and become involved in politics and social issues during the middle years of life (Chakraborty et al., 2012). This concern ultimately propels the individual into creating a positive legacy that has the potential to outlive the self.

During midlife, the primary developmental task, as seen by Erikson, is to contribute to society and help and establish future generations through guidance. When an individual contributes during this phase, either by raising a family or working towards the betterment of society, then generativity is manifest.

Considering the idea of a midlife crisis coinciding with this life stage, Chakraborty et al. (2012) note that Erikson believed this was when pressures start mounting for adults to be involved in the lives of future generations. This contrasts with the individual facing mortality and realising that life can end. Stagnation is a lack of growth or a lack of psychological movement. Instead of contributing towards the community, the individual struggles to assist their own family, and the ensuing stagnation divests the individual of the ability for self-growth or to facilitate the growth of others. Erikson's focus on generativity versus stagnation is pertinent to a midlife crisis and subsequent transition, as an individual becomes conscious of impending time remaining and what they would still like to achieve. This principle forms a cornerstone of my practice, as my work entails illuminating the stagnation (crisis) and morphing this stagnation into generativity.

### 3.2.5 Neugarten, Moore and Lowe's social clock theory

Lachman and Bertrand (2001) stated that previous theories of midlife were founded on an explanation of biological versus social causes. Parlee (1984) theorised that biological events, such as menopause, are vital in understanding adult development. Baltes, Lindenberger, and Staudinger (1998) pointed out that biological maturation plays a crucial role but that cultural, social, and environmental challenges and opportunities have a more significant influence in adulthood. Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965) pictured childhood metaphorically as being

measured on a biological clock, whereas adulthood is measured on a social clock. Neugarten et al. (1965) challenged the relevance of time in development – adults are predisposed to measure time in terms of how much is left. Considering that the past, present and future are psychological realities, they allow themselves the liberty of time for personal growth (Neugarten et al., 1965). A discernible point in Neugarten's theory is the concept that people are aware of their own life cycle and thus make comparisons between their own and others' progress based on previous expectations (Lachman, 2001). In support, Krueger, Heckhausen, and Hundertmark (1995) stated that research has shown that those who reach midlife hold stereotypical beliefs and expectations about what should have been accomplished.

Neugarten (1977, cited in Lachman, 2001) determined that important factors in midlife transition are the timing of significant events, such as an increasing responsibility for ageing parents and an awareness of the self as a bridge between generations. He further emphasised the importance of maturity at midlife so that individuals can step up and embrace the pivotal roles they need to play in society.

### 3.2.6 Jaques' theory of midlife crisis

Elliott Jaques, psychoanalyst and social scientist, was the first to introduce the term “midlife crisis” in 1965. (Jackson, 2020). His theories continue to shape Western understandings and experiences of middle age. It was after Jaques' (1965) work that a midlife crisis became intrinsic to describing how and why men and women become disenchanted with aspects of their lives, such as career and primary relationships, and in turn, detach from family responsibilities at approximately 40 years of age and onwards. It appears that a midlife crisis presents as a manifestation of either biological or psychological change, a defining moment in one's life trajectory, when perhaps, for the first time, people are confronted with impending death. Midlife has been a curious era, either minimised as a myth or satirised in novels and films. It has been stereotypically satirised regarding its accompaniments of rebellion and infidelity. Midlife literature needs to be viewed within the context of this reinforcement of stereotypical depictions of midlife and its endeavours to explain the peculiarities of the social, physical, and emotional challenges of middle age.

For Jaques (1965), midlife presents the ultimate paradox – that of entering the prime of life, a stage ripe for fulfilment, yet paradoxically, both prime and fulfilment are dated, and death awaits. He proposed that those who reach midlife without successfully navigating life and

establishing themselves in relationships and careers were ill-equipped to meet the stressors of middle age. This portends what has become clichéd features of a midlife crisis: a disillusionment with life, general dissatisfaction with work, and an acute desperation to preserve youth and delay mental and physical decline. It also results in alienation from family responsibilities and the allure of infidelity with a younger, more athletic mate. Jaques (1965) contended that psychological immaturity generates a depressive crisis at approximately 35 that was cloaked in a manic determination to stave off ageing.

These compulsive attempts to stay youthful when reaching middle age, cultivate an obsessive concern with health and appearance, and an emergence of sexual promiscuity to validate youth and potency. Jaques (1965) identified an emptiness and lack of authentic enjoyment in life and a frequency of religious concern as familiar patterns. These are viewed as attempts to stall the advancement of time.

Jackson (2020) noted that for those who did not work effectively through the psychological anguish that accompanies midlife, those impulsive strategies intended to stave off the tragedy of death were likely to be futile. Jaques (1965) insisted that defensive fantasies serve only to self-persecute instead of mitigating a chaotic and hopeless internal state of being.

As Jaques's midlife crisis concept became more familiar worldwide, he became regularly cited as the term's originator. His concept of midlife crisis was the forerunner of much additional research into life trajectories. It gave insight into self-help and therapeutic approaches to individuals at midlife and a better understanding of their relational challenges. By the late 1960s, Jaques's work had become known for attempting to understand and resolve the “search for meaning” that characterises a midlife identity crisis. For example, the impact of a midlife crisis on relationships, specifically marriage, became an impetus to confront personal, familial, and social determinants and their consequences as divorce levels increased.

The notion of a midlife crisis gained impetus in the work of researchers studying the impact of life transitions on marriage trajectories, personal identity, and physical health in men and women. Jaques's influence is most evident in studies by authors such as Roger Gould, George Vaillant and Daniel Levinson. The stereotypical fantasies of middle-aged men wanting to retain their youthful vigour have also featured in numerous literary and cinematic references to marriage, love, and loss during midlife.

### 3.2.7 Vaillant's defence mechanisms

Vaillant has been identified by Lachman (2001), McAdams (1993), and McCrae and Costa (2003) as an influential researcher. Vaillant (1971; 1977) researched defence mechanisms, which are adaptations of significant constructs in the life trajectory of humans. Vaillant (1971) was particularly interested in the different pivotal points in a person's life trajectory (career, marriage, health) where it became necessary to employ specific adaptations, whether or not they were successful in being used, and when they became unnecessary.

Vaillant (1977) designed a hierarchical model with four levels of adaptation:

- Level 1 embodies the primitive defences common to childhood, including denial, distortion, and delusional projection.
- Level 2 holds the immature defences occurring primarily in adolescence, seen in play, such as acting out.
- Level 3 encompasses the use of fantasy, projection, hypochondriasis, passive aggression, and neuroticism. It also includes intellectualisation or a tendency towards rationalisation, repression, reaction formation, displacement, and dissociation.
- Level 4 comprises mature defences common in healthy adults: sublimation, altruism, suppression, anticipation, and humour.

Key points from Vaillant's (1971; 1977) research findings are worth noting. Healthy adults have the same or similar adaptations to those found in abnormal populations. Some people's adaptations will remain fixed and steadfast over time, whilst others' adaptations are subject to change. Level 3 and 4 mechanisms described above appear more prolifically during midlife and later years. In addition, Vaillant (1977) did not see any correlation between the death of relatives and an impact on changing one's life course. However, there remains an interaction between the choice of mechanism and the people someone interacts with. This hierarchy of adaptations can predict mental health in adults and indicate how much the environment influences a person. Vaillant's research was fundamental in that it showed that adults do evolve.



Vaillant (1977; 2000) identified three discrete ways to achieve equilibrium. People actively seek appropriate social support, use intentional cognitive strategies that assist with navigating challenges, and reduce anxiety by using involuntary mechanisms that alter the interpretation of internal and external reality.

### 3.2.8 Gould's inner stages of consciousness

Gould (1978) viewed the human life trajectory as people in their twenties taking on new roles, people in their thirties being overburdened with too many responsibilities, and those in their forties weighed down by a sense of urgency – a sense that life is passing too quickly. Gould viewed midlife as a turbulent time, yet when people try to handle crises during midlife, it results in a healthy and happy life (Santrock, 1991). If a person chooses to navigate midlife crises by accepting a sense of urgency as part of this time of life, they can grow or mature (Gould, 1978).

### 3.2.9 Levinson's transitional periods

Levinson (1978) believed that social and biological influences temper midlife, and the ability of social and cultural influences to shape adult life is a given. According to Wolfe, O'Connor, and Crary (1990), adult life can be viewed within the context of alternating phases of stability versus change. It is a life structure that bridges the self and circumstances related to interpersonal relationships, physical settings, activities participated in, and roles adopted. Life structure, in turn, facilitates adaptability to surroundings and situations (Wolfe et al., 1990).

Levinson (1978) theorised that once acknowledgement of a life path is chosen, new perspectives and needs become apparent, and this often necessitates unexpected changes in the person's circumstances. Wolfe et al. (1990) noted that society and possibly the individual, interprets a life structure as a failure if the person does not appear to have fulfilled the archetypal demands of society, and even more so when it seems that a person has not significantly contributed to society.

When focusing specifically on men and midlife, Levinson stated that early adulthood (18-45 years) is the time frame when men establish their adult identity – life challenges such as building and settling into careers, seeking and developing intimate partnerships, and starting a family feature prominently during this time (Lachman, 2001). Lachman determined that men should have achieved these earlier goals during middle adulthood (45–65 years). If they fail to realise these goals, men face the abject jeopardy of striving to find meaning in their lives

(Levinson, 1978). A midlife crisis is then a result of reviewing their lives and priorities and reordering their priorities – midlife becomes a time of reviewing achievements gained thus far and evaluating the meaning of these achievements in terms of life lived and life left to live (Levinson, 1978). Levinson’s work did not address the issue of women in midlife.

Levinson (1978) believed that one of the critical tasks during midlife is to strike a balance between love and work. Levinson (1977) further believed that “transitional periods aim to terminate existing structures and to work toward the initiation of a new structure” (p. 100), which, in turn, has the potential to generate a great deal of uncertainty and upheaval. Alternatively, it could be a catalyst for significant growth and maturation, even if this comes at the expense of emotional turmoil, stress, and self-doubt. Levinson identified three characteristics of midlife transition: self-appraisal (self-evaluation regarding shortcomings), values, and achievements (Fiske, 1980). First, this self-evaluation can be injurious, but the insights gained potentiate future development (Fiske, 1980). Second, it may become apparent that long-held beliefs and social norms were founded on false presumptions and concepts after a thorough review of the past, a re-evaluation of values and priorities, as well as accomplishments and contributions (Fiske, 1980). The third characteristic is the understanding that life is finite – this is the juncture where a person confronts their mortality with the potential realisation that time is fleeting and precious, prompting a person to create a set of new priorities, different commitments and possibly a new value system (Fiske, 1980).

Levinson (1980) posited that the morphing into middle adulthood would take five years. During these five years, the adult at midlife needs to confront several challenges: an acknowledgement that some changes portend the decline of physical power. The adult at midlife may still experience youthfulness in some respects, but there are areas in which they will begin to age (young-old polarity). A further challenge is evaluating their role in life – an understanding or awareness of how the individual has interacted in the world and how others have responded to them. This can be a jarring process if an individual becomes aware of negative impacts. Mastering the destruction and creation processes is critical (destruction-creation polarity).

An amalgamation of the masculine and feminine aspects of one’s personality results in a masculine-feminine polarity and, ultimately, an acceptance and integration of these aspects.

For Levinson (1980), an attachment-separateness polarity denotes a dichotomy between involvement with the external environment and an interplay with one’s internal world, resulting

in a new balance between external and internal participation. This paradigm serves as an important marker during middle adulthood.

This midlife transition to middle adulthood facilitates a deliberation as to new choices for a desired future, requiring the individual to modify life structures accordingly. Levinson (1978) noted that “the main tasks now are to make crucial choices, give these choices meaning and commitment, and build a structure around them” (p. 279).

### 3.2.10 Folkman and Lazarus’s stress theory

Lachman (2001) stated that stressful events such as illness or death of a parent would occur more often during middle adulthood. Therefore, Folkman and Lazarus’ (1980) research into coping with stress during midlife significantly contributes to the study of midlife transition. According to Schwarzer and Schwarzer (1996), Folkman and Lazarus are acclaimed for creating a tool to measure how people deal with stressful experiences. According to Aldwin et al. (1980) and Folkman and Lazarus (1985), the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ) is a research instrument to study coping processes people use when dealing with or facing stressful experiences.

According to Palk (2015), “a stressful experience is an arrangement in which a person and their environment are in a self-starting, complementary two-way relationship” (p. 85). Folkman et al. (1986) identified two processes involved in stressful experiences – cognitive appraisal and coping – and these are important moderators of tension between person and environment, as well as the short and long-term consequences.

Faced with a stressful situation, an individual first cognitively appraises the situation on a primary and secondary level (Folkman et al., 1986). Coping encompasses cognitive and behavioural efforts that enable management or tolerance of the arrangement. There are two types of coping strategies – those that are problem-focused and those that are emotional-focused (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

### 3.2.11 Tamir’s midlife myths

Tamir (1982), a pioneer in postmodern research, examined the differences between middle-aged men and their younger and older cohorts. Tamir (1982) identified a lack of research in this cohort and deliberately did not study women, as she maintained that considerable research

had been undertaken on women in midlife. She also maintained that men choose different paths to follow than women (Lowenthal, Thurnher, & Chiriboga, 1975).

Tamir (1982) maintained that midlife transition occurs between ages 40 and 49. Those in middle age are viewed as a unique population, neither old nor young either, composed of a wealthy and powerful population, meaning that their impact and contribution to maintaining the structure of society is more profound than that of others. As per Palk (2015), the middle-aged period is replete with a confrontation of specific problems and a peak in tension experienced in the individual's internal and external world, impacting their working experiences and social relationships. This results in reassessment, career evaluation, launching of children into maturity, an acceptance of flawed bodies, and the reality of facing death.

Tamir's (1982) focus on male midlife transition and her exploratory studies meant that she broke new ground in creating a greater understanding of midlife transition, specifically related to the quality of life, family relationships, and other significant social relationships, as well as career or work experiences. Her study was definitive in its focus on comparative studies of men in their midlife transition (40 to 49 years) with their younger cohorts (25 to 39 years) as well as older cohorts (50 to 69 years). Tamir (1982) controlled for the influence of social class based on education levels, as this had been deemed a determinant closely aligned with social class (Palk, 2015). Tamir's (1982) research was rooted in job satisfaction, work commitment, perceptions of job autonomy, work performance, work relations, and motives at work, which served as measures of relevance and status that career played. The following is a summary of key findings discovered by Tamir (1982).

#### Work:

- Results indicated that both education groups showed evidence of transition regarding job satisfaction, autonomy, and social connectedness at work (Tamir, 1982). This is probably due to men's perception that achievement peaks in middle age and that advancement is not expected after that.
- Men in their late forties with the highest levels of education show an increased desire for status and power when they are in their late forties compared to the less educated men in the study.

- There is a higher correlation between college-educated men's motives for connectedness and job satisfaction in middle age than other age groups.
- Similarly, the results showed that the fewer interactions, the lower the job satisfaction.
- To observe an increase in job satisfaction, enhanced social relations require job competency.
- Job satisfaction and wellbeing in midlife were not correlated, which could be because work, in the midlife transition, is seemingly less important to self-fulfilment than in earlier adulthood stages.

#### Family:

- The children of men aged 40 to 49 are becoming independent of their parents, and wives are changing from their primary role of caretakers in the family. Accordingly, family life will transform, and men in their forties must cope with these changes (Palk, 2015, p. 69).
- Marital roles became increasingly important in middle age for college-educated men, whereas the parental role lessened. This does not mean that "midlife men were more or less happy, but rather that if the marriage was unhappy, this would constitute a greater threat than at any other age" (Palk, 2015, p. 59).
- Happy marriages at this period were seen as more capable of enhancing wellbeing for college-educated men in their forties than other age groups (Tamir, 1982).

#### Social relationships:

- There were no significant differences amongst groups in terms of the numbers of friends, neighbours and relatives known or interacted with, yet there was a real difference in social connectedness (Tamir, 1982).
- There was a significant correlation between social connectedness and self-esteem variables for non-college-educated men in their late forties, suggesting that lower social connectedness leads to lower self-esteem. Middle-aged men acknowledged their need for support and were likelier to share their problems with others (Tamir, 1982).

### 3.2.12 McCrae and Costa's big five personality traits

McCrae and Costa (2003) criticised some researchers regarding their conceptualisation and positioning of the midlife crisis. Farrell and Rosenberg (1981) and McCrae and Costa (1986) were emphatic in their response saying that they found no evidence that everyone experiences a midlife crisis, because their research showed personality traits remain stable during adulthood. These big five personality traits are extroversion versus introversion, neuroticism versus emotional stability, openness to experience versus down-to-earthness, agreeableness versus disagreeableness and conscientiousness versus laziness (McCrae & Costa, 1986). McCrae and Costa's (2003) trait model of personality illustrates that the five personality traits are found in all people in varying degrees, but the stability of these traits in any given individual remaining stable after age 30 is particularly important.

Relevant to the study of midlife, McCrae and Costa (2003) found an increase in unhappy marriages, more suicides, mental health problems and changing jobs to be characteristic of a midlife crisis at 40 years of age. This represents their idea that little change happens in personality traits after 30 years of age. Still, other significant changes occur, such as a decrease in physical flexibility and strength, sensory alertness, and energy, a time when children grow up, parents grow old and pass away, and jobs and roles change.

Personality traits remain stable whilst behaviour changes, with the most complex component of the personality system being characteristic adaptations (McCrae & Costa, 2003). As discussed in Palk (2015), it consists of adaptations to attitudes and values, social roles, and interpersonal relationships.

### 3.2.13 Maslow's humanistic theory

The humanistic approach (Biruny & Horney, 2021) emphasises free will, with personal growth remaining essentially a private journey. A humanistic approach carries the potential to transcend bouts of unhappiness and achieve success in actualising human potential and expediting personal learning processes. This process will, however, not be successful if there is insufficient motivation and an environment conducive to supporting these.

Humanistic goals are designed to encourage an impetus that allows humans to express themselves creatively and, in so doing, realise their full potential. As per Biruny and Salsabila (2021), the humanistic approach focuses on the intrinsic goodness of humans and all that

encompasses them: potential, creativity, health, hope, a desire for meaning, connection, and purpose. It also emphasises the ability to achieve self-actualisation and for individuals to excel.

A humanistic approach is differentiated by its emphasis on the inherent goodness of humans and their human potential. Humanistic theory is rooted in understanding a subjective human experience, rejecting determinism over human choice. Maslow's (1991) original humanistic theory focused on how an individual can achieve self-actualisation as per their relative developmental stage, encompassing within this the ability to think consciously and rationally when controlling biological desires and, in so doing, achieving their maximum potential. This concept is considered to be one of the fundamentals of humanistic theory.

Maslow's humanistic theory (1991) remains the most prominent actualisation theory. Self-actualisation remains the zenith in the hierarchy of needs and can be viewed as the final goal and the primary purpose of human life. This concept of life purpose as a goal is similar to Jung's (1971) self-arsenal, Adler's (1954) self-creative power or Horney's (1940) self-realisation. Maslow believed life's goal is to attain actualisation and is inherent from birth. Humans already have the fundamental potential to develop pathways to achieve self-actualisation.

Uniquely distinctive qualities such as choice, creativity, personal values, and self-realisation, all innate and uniquely human qualities, delineate a humanistic approach and meaning and subjectivity are thus deemed more important than objectivity.

#### 3.2.14 A critical review

Most researchers have identified midlife as a period of intense change, coined by Jaques (1986) as a midlife crisis. It is a transition between the approximate ages of 40 and 50.

It has been determined that it is often a time of depression and anxiety for those at midlife presenting with rigid and inflexible personalities, more significant health issues, stress, unhappy marriages, suicides, mental health problems and changing jobs. Self-doubt and internal disharmony may be manifested in disillusionment with life, general dissatisfaction with work and an acute desperation to preserve youth and delay mental and physical decline. Thus, people in midlife set up a series of defence mechanisms as they search for new meaning in life. It is often a period characterised by confrontation of stereotypical expectations, conflict

with assumptions, stagnation, and regret about what they have not achieved. Anna Freud (1946) characterised this as a time of crucial climacteric change.

This is where the role of the psychotherapist can be influential, which leads us to the discussion in the next section of the therapies that can be used to help people in their mid-life transition.

### **3.3 Narrative therapy as a therapeutic tool to navigate midlife narratives**

Having seen that midlife is (a) a period of transition and (b) it is accompanied by a range of problems ranging from physical to mental and psychological health, narrative therapy is a theoretical framework to facilitate those in midlife to navigate this period of their lives successfully and positively.

Viewing life from a more positive perspective is one of the central tenets of narrative therapy, the purpose of which is to help clients view life events from a new, more positive lens or to “reauthor” the narrative of their lives (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). Therapists use the concept of reauthoring clients’ lives by recognising dominant discourses that the client has used to frame past events. These dominant discourses are frequently what society and those close to the client determine to be a “correct” and “normal” experience of events (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). Dominant discourses are challenging for clients as they often perceive themselves as inadequate in the face of the so-called status quo and unable to reach these heights. Within narrative therapy, therapists can navigate clients to elicit unique outcomes or exceptions that challenge the dominant discourse and, in turn, create a different, more positive discourse. In identifying exceptions or unique outcomes, therapists can co-create a subjugated narrative to the dominant discourse that may be more relevant to the individual. This subjugated narrative has, in turn, the potential for greater depth of analysis by asking questions that assist the client in elaborating their preferred narrative (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990).

A pertinent aspect of narrative therapy is that it considers the importance of socio-political factors that may reinforce and further influence the problematic ideology within current dominant discourses inherent in society (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). As Erikson (1963) showed, there are a multitude of ways to reach generativity, and narrative therapy (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990) also provides a way in which people can author their lived experiences (Moore et al., 2017).



A function of narrative therapy is to adopt and create new narratives that minimise the propagation of narrow narratives that minimise expansive or positive thoughts. These have the potential to further embed the client in dominant stories that tend to overwhelm all other narratives (Abedi, 2006; Yeganehfarzand, Zahraakar, & Mohsenzadeh, 2019).

Narrative therapy aims to expand on experiences and possibilities via a therapeutic narrative within which to reconstruct and retell new narratives. This assists clients in confronting their issues through engagement in therapeutic conversations that require retelling and rehearing. Narrative therapy posits that clients are not the sum of their problems and that issues exist outside them. Clients are given the status of specialists when it comes to their problems and possess many skills, beliefs, values, and abilities to assist in reducing the effects of these problems and provide a way to find meaning in their lives (Blanton & Vandergriff-Avery, 2001).

With the client's help, the therapist's role is to enhance and enrich their narratives, eliciting flexibility and pragmatism, which leads to new possibilities in their life (Rostami Sani, 2007). This is similar to what White and Epston (1990) stated: unpleasant feelings in couples alter by constructing new meanings. In the eyes of the external viewers, the question and answer between the therapist and the couple is perhaps the most evident occurrence in the treatment process. A question-and-answer discourse allows for the formation of further questions and broader responses and helps the individual to isolate themselves from the problem (Rich, 2018; Yeganehfarzand et al., 2019)

As per the principles of narrative therapy, people organise their experiences via their narratives. However, narratives are often so loaded with problematic stories that they leave little opportunity for individual initiative. Paradoxically, these narratives can also elicit different emotions in an individual. Therefore, clients can generate new emotions in themselves by changing their narratives. This is evidenced by clients narrating their stories innovatively by considering their experiences, results, and unique possibilities. Clients are also invited to generate novel opportunities by reading between the lines and considering hitherto unseen and marginal capacities of their current narratives. This reconstruction, however, is solely achieved through the innovative and persistent inquiries of the narrative therapist, who assists in separating the individual from the problem, and helps to elicit the richness of the story (Yeganehfarzand et al., 2019).

### **3.4 Summary**

Understanding the transcendent route from a midlife crisis to its unique epiphanies requires revising the traditional assessment of midlife narratives. Narrative therapy, with its broad brushstrokes, allows the research participants to describe their narratives freely and, in so doing, elicit unique epiphanies and reframe their narratives.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Introduction

Using Al-Ababneh's (2020, p. 77) guidelines, in the previous chapter, the researcher determined that the theoretical perspective, described as "the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria", is rooted in post-modernism. The epistemology defined as "the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology" is ethnography. The methodology described as "The strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes" is qualitative.

The methods described as "The techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis" are addressed in this chapter.

Research methodology is the strategy and its consequent plan of action that guides the research design, shaping the chosen research methods. This methodology is the rationale for selecting the research methods and determining how these research methods are utilised. The dominant types of methodology are experimental research, survey research, ethnography, phenomenological research, grounded theory, heuristic inquiry, action research, discourse analysis and feminist research.

Research methods entail techniques that mandate specificity to collect, collate and analyse data. The research question or hypothesis determines this data. Research methods encompass sampling measurement and scaling, questionnaires, observations, interviews, focus groups, case studies, life histories, narratives, visual ethnographic methods, statistical analyses, data reduction, theme identification, comparative analyses, cognitive mapping, interpretive methods, document analysis, content analysis, conversation, and analysis (Al-Ababneh, 2020).

Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016) describe the research process as an onion, faceted by pertinent layers, with each layer revealing itself to the other, uncovering the core of the "research" onion.

## **4.2 The qualitative approach**

A qualitative approach, as per Sanjeri (2014), notes the contemporaneous dynamics of change, as well as the dictates of the research population that transform trends in the production of knowledge. A qualitative research approach allows researchers to address the “why and how” questions relevant to developing concepts. Qualitative research is also referred to as interpretive research, despite these findings or interpretations sometimes being viewed as biased and the findings consequently being seen as questionable. Qualitative studies inevitably lend themselves to a methodology that results in text production and narrative expressions as opposed to numerical outputs. Qualitative research and its interpretive stance can be perceived as formative in its validation of phenomena, which allows for differing viewpoints on the same phenomena.

Sanjeri (2014) defines the researcher’s role in qualitative studies, seen from both a phenomenological perspective and an ethnographic perspective as follows:

### **4.2.1 Phenomenology**

Seen within the context of phenomenology, the researcher’s role is to transform data into an explanation of lived experiences. This is achieved by narrating the research participants’ experiences in the research report. Therefore, the researcher needs to decipher, make sense of, and collate themes inherent in these experiences based on the narratives.

### **4.2.2 Ethnography**

In ethnographic studies, researchers act as instruments to understand and, in turn, to analyse the inherent cultures of specific groups of people. This entails the ethnographic researcher’s immersion within the endemic research setting and culture.

## **4.3 Research design**

Abu-Alhaija (2019) states that the research design reflects the activities and procedures employed to achieve specific objectives. It is also regarded as the road map for a particular study, indicating which research concerns to address (Cooper & Schindler, 2008). This is defined as the procedures of inquiry (Creswell, 2014). Research design incorporates various research decisions, such as research purpose, investigation types, researchers’ interventions,

research setting, research measurements, unit of analysis, sampling design, time horizon, data collection, and data analysis (Sekaran, 2007). Research design reflects the main schema for research measurements, data collection, data analysis (Cooper & Schindler, 2008; Creswell, 2014) and data interpretation (Creswell, 2014). This design reflects the overall research scheme, which determines the researcher's required activities. Research design starts with a statement of the research problem and leads to an analysis of the data. (Cooper & Schindler, 2008). Identifying the appropriate methodological assumptions or research designs is integral to generating new knowledge in research (Hunt, 2015). Cooper and Schindler (2008) identified four stages based on the sequence of the research process. The first stage refers to the research design strategy: This determines the design of the data collection, sampling design, instrument development, and pilot testing. The second stage is the actual data collection, the third stage is data analysis and interpretation, and the fourth stage is the research reporting. Therefore, researchers must include the appropriate research designs to elicit significant understandings (Hunt, 2015). This first research stage (i.e. research design) is vital to the entire research process.

A basic premise of research is that it aims to enhance the understanding of specific issues or problems that occur regularly and to seek appropriate ways to traverse or solve these problems. The basic tenets of research focus on testing existing theories (Hale, 2011), and the knowledge generated from basic research has the potential to be used to solve specific problems in the future. Researchers mostly use this type of research to equip themselves with the knowledge or data relevant to the research question, intending to evoke appropriate solutions (Sekaran, 2007). Researchers are expected to use the practical implications, or the knowledge devolved from basic research, to enhance their understanding of specific outcomes and issues. In this regard, the purpose of the study might be exploratory, descriptive, or testing specific hypotheses (Sekaran, 2007) based on the nature of the study and research questions.

Research projects can be generally categorised into three approaches, namely, a) quantitative, b) qualitative, and c) mixed methods (Creswell, 2014; Petty et al., 2012). Concerning specific decisions in research design, researchers have the liberty to use one of these approaches to answer research questions (Creswell, 2014). Scholars determine the appropriate research approach based on the research question (Petty et al., 2012). Petty et al. (2012) conclude that interpretivism and post-positivism mainly underpin qualitative and quantitative studies.

#### 4.3.1 Quantitative research

Researchers equate “positivist or postpositivist” with a “quantitative” approach (Hunt, 2015). Quantitative research is a methodology used to measure participants’ knowledge, opinions, attitudes, or behaviours (Cooper & Schindler, 2008). Quantitative scholars also attempt to test the existing theories to answer specific research questions (Creswell, 2014). Researchers use established theories in quantitative studies to explain or predict the relationships between particular research variables (Creswell, 2014). “Quantitative research helps to explain phenomena by collecting numerical data. It tests hypotheses, controls variables, measures, identifies cause and effect, and through statistical analysis, aims to generalise findings to predict future events” (Petty et al., 2012:s.p.). Consequently, quantitative researchers largely depend on the numbers and the application of closed-ended questions.

#### 4.3.2 Qualitative research

In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative researchers draw on words and open-ended questions to explore and better understand a social dilemma or individual problem (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative studies assist researchers in better understanding human experiences set within specific contexts using textual information (Petty et al., 2012). Quantitative researchers use particular strategies, such as experiments, while qualitative researchers use methods, such as case studies (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research focuses on interpreting lived experiences and meanings that generate further understanding (Petty et al., 2012) and is focused on detail. Qualitative studies require researchers to play an essential role in constructing knowledge (Petty et al., 2012), as the researcher’s perceptions impact the explanation of a phenomenon. A deductive approach is a hallmark of quantitative research that tests research hypotheses or theoretical assumptions through observational and empirical methods (Petty et al., 2012).

The research problem primarily influences the selection of a research approach, the researcher’s personal experience, and the study’s audience (Creswell, 2014). In interpretivism, researchers use inductive reasoning strategies. They use their own data to build specific patterns, themes, and categories (Petty et al., 2012). Qualitative researchers use an inductive thinking approach (Creswell, 2014). This research approach allows for a comprehensive explanation of phenomena (Petty et al., 2012). The research process gravitates from specific to general themes (Creswell, 2014). Utilising inductive reasoning strategies, qualitative researchers draw on data to formulate theoretical assumptions and general research themes.

Al-Ababneh (2020) suggests that a qualitative method allows for an explanation, clarification and ultimately an elaboration of the varied meanings of a lived experience. Researchers can then interpret their participants' experiences because they, the researchers, are participants in life. This is especially pertinent to this study as the researcher forms part of the midlife demographic pertinent to the study.

#### 4.3.3 Mixed methods research

The mixed methods use both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2014). Researchers utilise mixed methods research depending on the nature and objectives of the research. Creswell (2014) posited that choosing mixed methods research assists in acquiring a deeper understanding of a research problem versus using a dedicated quantitative or qualitative approach.

### 4.4 Sampling

As per Lopez and Whitehead (2013), sampling is required to be specific. Efficacy in the sample selection process is crucial to qualitative research, as inappropriate or inaccurate selection could impede the findings and study outcomes. There are many sampling procedures in qualitative research, and the research design ultimately determines the sample choice.

#### 4.4.1 The target population(s)

Niehaus (2019) defines midlife as “the part of life between youth and old age” (p. 310), with the boundaries for midlife often seen as opaque and unclearly demarcated. Midlife spans a wide age range, and it is commonly perceived that midlife begins at 40 and ends at 60 or 65, which is purportedly when old age begins (American Board of Family Practice, 1990). However, these parameters are variable (Lachman et al., 1994). With 40 as an entry year and 60 as an exit year, the degree of variability in the expected timing of midlife is vast (Lachman et al., 1995). It is seen that there is an approximate 10-year range on either end, thus allowing for middle age to begin at 30 and end at 75 (Lachman, 2001). The National Council on Aging (2000) researched midlife and determined that nearly half of respondents aged 65 to 69 deemed themselves middle-aged.

As the population increases in longevity and remains healthier for a more significant proportion of the lifespan, it is feasible to expect the upper range of midlife to be further expanded.

However, middle age does not necessarily signal the middle of the lifespan. For example, it is unrealistic to expect a 60-year-old to live to 120. Therefore, the upper range of the middle-age period is viewed as a more accurate demarcation of old age. The beginning of old age is associated with a decline in physical health (Lutsky, 1980). Therefore, those who remain fit, well-functioning and healthy in their seventies may still consider themselves middle-aged.

Midlife markers are studded with significant life events, including teenagers leaving home (empty nest syndrome), becoming a grandparent, reaching career goals, or experiencing menopause. Social and socioeconomic factors also play a role in the midlife continuum. Earlier entry and exit years for midlife are seen amongst lower socioeconomic groups (Kuper & Marmot, 2003), which could contribute to health being affected by social class differences (Marmot et al., 1997). Earlier transitions into different life roles, such as grandparenting (Putney & Bengtson, 2001) or even retirement (Kim & Moen, 2001), also contribute to midlife parameters. In turn, health factors also play a role in determining middle-age parameters.

For example, in a longitudinal study by Kuper and Marmot (2003), participants who defined middle age as earlier than 60 correlated with a higher risk for illnesses such as heart disease versus participants who anticipated middle age to end after 70 years of age.

Using chronological age as a determinant of midlife is not a valid marker because age norms are less stringently defined at midlife than for earlier periods of life, such as school entry or graduation and later (e.g., retirement). Even if individuals are in the same chronological age, their life phases in terms of social, family, career or responsibilities may differ. Some individuals may experience parenthood at 40, while their contemporaries may have grown children and grandchildren or no children. Therefore, considering social or family events will place people of the same age continuum in very different contexts (Lachman, 2004). According to Heckhausen (2001) and Neugarten (1968), the perception of being early or late for an event, or life transition, or approaching a developmental deadline (e.g., biological clock), has a substantial impact on one's self-conception and midlife experiences.

#### 4.4.2 Types of sampling

As per Lopez and Whitehead (2013), non-probability sampling in qualitative research is contrary to its counterpart, probability sampling. Probability sampling is used in quantitative research as a means for researchers to solicit sample populations with characteristics representative of a wider community. However, non-probability sampling in qualitative



research entails researchers targeting specific populations to research a particular topic or use in a scenario where the total population remains unknown or unavailable.

There are four main types of non-probability sampling: 1) convenience sampling, 2) purposive sampling, 3) snowball sampling, and 4) theoretical sampling. I have used convenience and purposive sampling for this study, as these methods are the most suitable.

#### 4.4.2.1 Convenience sampling

This type of sampling is the most common method of qualitative sampling (Seetharaman, 2016). Participants are invited to participate in the study primarily due to their convenience and suitability. Participants are opportunistically available concerning their access, location, time, and willingness. Convenience sampling is a relatively fast and easy way to reach a representative sample size necessary for the study.

#### 4.4.2.2 Purposive (purposeful) sampling

Purposive sampling was used in this study because it has the potential to provide information-rich cases that lend themselves to in-depth research (Seetharaman, 2016). Participants in purposive sampling are often selected according to predetermined criteria relevant to a specific research question. This type of sampling is also known as “judgement sampling”, as participants have a required status or experience, or participants are seen as purveyors of unique or intrinsic knowledge, which is the selective data the researcher needs.

Two other types of sampling fall under purposive sampling. These are quota sampling and maximum variation sampling (Seetharaman, 2016). Quota sampling requires the researcher to determine the number of participants who will participate in the study. The researcher also determines which characteristics are necessary for participants to be included in a sample. Attributes for inclusion may range from age, gender, profession, diagnosis, and life experiences. Quota sampling within the domain of purposive sampling opens the inclusion criteria (see below) to allow for the recruitment of participants who are most likely to possess experience related to the research topic. The difference between purposive sampling and quota sampling is that quota sampling is more acute and specific regarding the size and proportions of sub-samples for each prescribed quota. The sample population in this study was purposively drawn from a sub-sample of participants who had consulted with me about their perceived experiences, tensions, crises and struggles at midlife.

#### 4.4.3 Sampling criteria

Qualitative research assumes that research participants are inherently capable individuals with the ability to self-reflect and clearly articulate their experiences, values, beliefs, and opinions. The sheer variety and scope of qualitative approaches denote many diverse sampling intentions for participants, and the selection of participants depends on the sampling criteria.

Sampling criteria are determined by identifying pertinent characteristics of the sample population and their subsequent eligibility to participate in the study subject to pre-selected inclusion and exclusion requirements.

Inclusion criteria are specific characteristics that the participant, the population, or elements should encompass. These could range from age (such as midlife), gender or life experiences. Choosing a specific qualitative methodology lends itself to “automatically” determining the inclusion criteria. For example, participants in phenomenological studies are included, as they are seen to have an intrinsic experience of the phenomenon being studied, and it follows that they can articulate that experience. In grounded theory, however, samples of events and incidents embody actions and interactions that remain accurate or pertinent to the research focus are sought. Criteria, therefore, define those participants that have had prior exposure or are currently involved in pertinent events. For example, in ethnographic research, the researcher is embedded in the field, with the researcher (in midlife herself) studying midlife phenomena. The ethnographer is an observer, annotating and documenting the events and behaviours of participants. This also means that participants must be in an observable location (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

#### 4.4.4 Description of the sample

Lopez and Whitehead (2013) determined that quantitative approaches provide statistical significance by sampling a predetermined number of subjects. In contrast, qualitative researchers do not generally undertake a project with a predetermined sample size. Qualitative research has no definitive criteria regarding sample size, and the researcher can decide whether the sample size is small or large enough for the study. The content and the depth or “richness” of data in qualitative research are deemed more valuable than the number of participants (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). The qualitative researcher is obligated to furnish insights as to the sample size necessary that will fulfil the purpose and context and, in turn, embellish the richness of the data collected (Patton, 2002).

Sample sizes in qualitative studies range from 8 to 15 participants, although variants are on either side of this continuum. There are those qualitative methodologists who do give sample size guidelines for qualitative research designs. Creswell (2007) suggests “3–5 participants for a case study, 10 for a phenomenological study and 15–20 for grounded theory study”, whereas Morse (1995), as cited in Lopez & Whitehead (2013), suggests a sample size in the range of six participants for a phenomenological study and 30–50 for an ethnographic study. The sample size in this study was four women and four men who fit the criteria and attributions of a midlife participant.

## **4.5 Data collection**

### **4.5.1 The chosen paradigmatic stance**

Kian and Beach (2019) view ethnography as a qualitative method incorporating a relative submersion into the studied setting. It is considered a suitable methodology spanning various research areas in healthcare and medical fields. Researching unique features inherent in “cultural beliefs” and the subsequent extensive field study required lends itself to using a qualitative research approach such as “ethnography”. The combination of ethnography and participatory observation allows for a shift in the centre of attention from observability to a more sympathetic and incisive understanding. Focusing on quality and depth requires the researcher to adopt a more holistic approach to researching social phenomena. This means using accumulative, naturalist, multipurpose, interpretive and non-predefined approaches.

Leung (2002) believes that ethnography is a social research method concerned with natural environments and hallmarked by curiosity and learning about the specificities of a group’s culture. Ethnography requires experiencing the group’s ways of life before explaining their attitudes or behaviour. This approach is rooted in the culture and endemic to the individuals’ ethnicity, nationality, gender, regional origin, occupation, and generation. Ethnographic studies are mainly undertaken within a single setting, and the data collection mainly relies on data elicited from the observation of participants and interviews.

Ethnographic research is based on “critical” and “interpretive” analysis. This method infers the theoretical principles of anthropology of “naturalism” and “deep holism”. Within these two approaches, human behaviour is evaluated within the context of semantic and behavioural paradigms. This means that individual actions are viewed as cultural tools of a dominant

sociocultural system, and to understand them better, these must be researched and explored within the context of the entire system.

Ethnography primarily focuses on observations and the subject's participation in social life. The researcher remains focused on analysing data based on participants' experiences, although the researcher's experience within the realms of the participants researched is of value. Ethnographic studies provide a detailed description of phenomena and realities of the society undertaken via a holistic interpretive approach.

The principal focus of ethnography is "observation" and "listening" to individuals. This requires the ethnographic researcher to emphasise first-hand experiences, focus on data that occur naturally, and use different methods such as keeping records of observations, conducting different interviews, or recording visual data.

Ethnographers express their interest in the multifaceted aspects of social situations. As such, ethnographers are defined by their ability to observe, ask questions, converse, write notes, and spend extended periods with research participants. A defining feature of executing ethnography is the ethnographer's "research within the field". This method allows the researcher to become embedded within the confines of the selected studied world. It also enables the ethnographer to deduce integral, inherent theoretical concepts that create and interpret these unique worlds. It also allows for the ethnographer, as a researcher, to determine the relationships within these worlds from experience-based data.

As with any research methodology, ethnographic research has its strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths are that rich and holistic cultural knowledge is obtainable from ethnographic research. The possibility of "direct observation" within the research field and the finding of "first-hand information" within a natural setting are unique strengths of ethnography. Data in ethnographic research is based on the direct observation of the culture of participants, which facilitates findings that lead to a more acute and direct understanding of the participants. Ethnographic research requires the studied events to remain the focus of analysis, as opposed to the use of abstraction. Observing and analysing actual studied events allows for hidden layers present in actions to be revealed.

Ethnographic research has its criticisms in that it cannot ensure data stability, meaning that this method cannot be used to generalise findings to other contexts. However, Hammersley and

Atkinson (1998) defend ethnographic research as being “accurate realism” and, within this context, deem it to be credible and stable.

#### 4.5.2 Data gathering in ethnographic studies

The overtness of its findings characterises data collection in ethnographic research. The ethnographic approach studies relationships between people and their subsequent interaction with life. These interactions include but are not limited to socio-political, cultural, and historical interactions. An ethnographic approach in social sciences focuses on understanding the relationship between people and their social environment (Hallet & Barber, 2014). According to Harwati (2019), ethnography requires the researcher to take part in the research. This can be done through engaging with or being embedded with cohorts in their real lives for extended periods (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003), thus giving ethnography a longitudinal perspective. A defining characteristic of this approach is the close relationship between the researcher and the researched.

The physical presence of researchers immersed within the culture requires researchers to maintain ultimate responsibility for their role and any potential consequences arising from being in the field. For instance, when criminals or a group of war veterans suffering from a disease are the subject of a study, the risks involved in living amongst them should be considered. Ethnographers must remain vigilant regarding any distractions stemming from close interactions that could harm participants. Researchers can pre-empt this by engaging in supervision sessions directed at learning, mentoring and skills development, which can foster their ability to conduct research without risking their health. Additional professional supervision may also be helpful to researchers in dealing with the potential stressors associated with the study.

To gain explicit data, ethnographers need to know the role of instrument details. There are eleven steps defined in ethnography which are meant to assist researchers. These steps include participant observation, ethnographic recording, descriptive observations, selective observations, componential analysis, extrapolating cultural themes, cultural inventories, and the annotation of the ethnographic research.

Researchers need to remain vigilant about the precise reason for their involvement in a study to prevent an ambush of undesirable personal issues. The probability of exposure to vicarious trauma as a result of the interviews needs to be evaluated. Interviews need to be adequately

scheduled to provide the researcher with sufficient recovery time, reduce the risk of emotional exhaustion, and allow for ample time to analyse the objective and emotional aspects of the interview. It is also necessary for the researcher to be familiar with signs of extreme fatigue and be prepared to take the measures required before too much harm is done (Sanjeri, 2014).

Asenahabi (2019) asserts that ethnography is a design of inquiry that has evolved from anthropology and sociology. Within this paradigm, the researcher studies the shared patterns of behaviours, language, and actions of an intact cultural group in a natural setting over an extended period. The data collection entails observations and interviews (Creswell, 2014). A distinguishing characteristic of ethnographic research is that it involves a rigorous description of the setting or individuals, followed by an analysis of the data extrapolating themes or problems (Wolcott, 2004).

As per Lopez and Whitehead (2013), data collection is a direct consequence of sampling. Data, seen in its simplest form, is sourced directly from an identified and selected sample population. The data collected is either “direct” or “indirect” data. Direct data comprises spoken and written words that can be annotated or recorded. It is also the sum of observable body language, actions, and interactions. These interactions and actions can be observed as human-to-human interactions or responses to inanimate objects, such as artificial intelligence. Data is described as observable or communicable and is further enriched by “thoughts, feelings, experiences, meaning of experience, responses, actions, interactions, language and the intrinsic processes of individuals and groups within their social and/or cultural setting” (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013, s.p.). Analysed within this context is the inherent data that qualifies the “context” of qualitative studies.

#### 4.5.3 Data collection tools

Data collection remains dependent on the type of data deemed pertinent for research, and the researcher can draw on various methods of data collection that can be used either independently of each other or in combination. To extrapolate direct data, methods may include interviews, observations, open-ended questionnaires, or free association. The researcher could also extract data by asking participants to keep a journal or a diary. Generally, the more common qualitative approaches involve acquiring data via interpersonal contact with participants through an interview or the researcher observing pertinent events or interactions. This is in direct contrast to quantitative research, where minimal interpersonal contact with participants or events exists.

#### 4.5.3.1 Interviews

Interviews are seen as the primary method for qualitative data collection, with the spoken “narrative” as the foundation of most qualitative data. This narrative is solicited via direct encounters between the researcher and participant/s through in-depth or focus group interviews. Interviews can be conducted either face-to-face or online. These qualitative interviews can be either unstructured, semi-structured or structured interviews. There is no set list of questions to ask or restrictions on the range or kind of potential responses during an unstructured interview. Their informality and conversational tone characterise them, the aim being to encourage participants to express themselves in a manner that promotes the flow of information. General questions frame unstructured interviews, but the researcher retains a focused overview of what issues need to be addressed. Turner (2005), as cited in Lopez & Whitehead (2013), described his unstructured interviews with Australian youths as “a free-flowing conversation with a definite focal point”.

Semi-structured interviews retain a more structured approach, with a set of questions designed to elicit discussion. These questions are formulated to ensure research questions or objectives are addressed, yet the flexibility remains to pose questions in any order. This is to facilitate an uninterrupted flow of tangents or to establish clarification of previous answers or further elaboration of responses. Semi-structured interviews have a semblance of structure with elements of flexibility. An ethnographic approach to this study requires the acknowledgement of the interviewer’s presence and their engagement with participants. As this is a recursive engagement, the interviewer (as an ethnographer) is similarly impacted in the interview process. Fundamental to the interview process is that the researcher gleans information from the participant, and it is not an opportunity for the researcher to express their thoughts and feelings. Central to effective interviewing is adopting an active listening position, focused on verbalised content and remaining open to other cues, especially non-verbal cues. From an ethnographic stance, the researcher will observe and reflect on their thoughts and feelings about the interview.

Qualitative interviews are recognisable by their ability to allow the interviewee to speak freely and to facilitate this further. Various qualitative techniques are designed to elicit in-depth and richness of responses. The following techniques can be used singularly or in combination:

- Funnelling allows the interview process to begin with a series of general and broad (non-threatening) opening questions, which narrow down to the topics specific to the progression of the interview.
- Probing is used to elicit more detail or to gain clarification. Price (2002, cited in Lopez & Whitehead, 2013) elaborates on an innovative probing technique called “laddered questions”. Pertinent questions are posed in a manner that begins with the least intrusive questions and progresses to more intrusive queries. This technique requires classifying questions, asking questions about “actions” deemed the least invasive, and progressing to more invasive or more profound questions pertaining to a “philosophy”. This also requires considering the participant’s feelings, values, or belief systems. Probing is also inherent in storytelling, which requires asking questions to encourage telling stories and elicit more elaborate answers. For example, “Tell me about your experiences in midlife?”.
- Paraphrasing entails repeating what the participant has said without inherently changing the meaning of the narrative. Probing provides clarity, assists in understanding, and facilitates further prompting.

Interviews are time-consuming and resource-intensive, so the researcher is exposed to participants for considerable periods. Data collection is rarely an exact science in qualitative research. Estimating how many interviews are necessary to gather a complete data set or limiting data collection to “one-off” interviews could lead to the risk of extracting insufficient information. It is essential to recognise that extended exposure to participants in qualitative research means that the interviewer is inevitably partly generating their own internalised data despite efforts to “filter” out their experiences, ideas, prejudices, and opinions before the interview. Consequently, the resulting data will always be partly influenced by the interviewer, whether through subtle body language or the nature of the questions.

Narrative research is a design of inquiry from the humanities where the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks them to provide stories about their lives (Riessman, 2008). The researcher then organises and retold the information as a narrative chronology. In the end, the narrative often combines views from the participant’s life with those of the researcher’s life in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher retold the participants' stories using structural devices, such as plot, setting, activities, climax, and denouement.



#### 4.5.3.2 Observation

Qualitative observation is traditionally adopted by ethnographers (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013), but this methodology can be applied to other qualitative approaches. Given the inevitable and inherent transferability in qualitative research, an ethnographic approach lends itself well to countering this by validating and making overt the researcher's experiences, ideas, prejudices, opinions, and observations.

This is most evident when using an interpretive/constructivist approach, allowing for exploring observed events, which are used to interpret and better understand behaviour (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). In qualitative research, observation methods are mainly unstructured, but qualitative observation is not limited to an unstructured approach. In unstructured observation, the researcher approaches observations with no predetermination as to what they may or may not encounter or observe. Rodon and Sesé (2008) propose that regardless of the paradigm approach adopted – positivism or interpretivism – researchers must reconcile the applicability of their research results that extend beyond their settings. This pertains to the transferability of research results (Lee et al., 2003; Seddon et al., 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the degree of transferability shows a direct correlation between the similarity and fit between settings. This also pertains to the applicability of research results in other settings and variables and is often dependent on the degree of similarity between the research setting in which the phenomenon studied occurs and the settings in which the results are deemed transferable.

### 4.6 Data analysis

Qualitative research is known for its naturalistic approach that aims to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as “real-world” settings [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2001, p. 39). Qualitative research, broadly defined, means “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17). Instead, the type of research that produces findings is derived from real-world settings where the “phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally” (Patton, 2001, p. 39). Unlike quantitative researchers who seek causal determination, prediction and generalisation of findings, qualitative researchers align with illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar situations (Hoepfl, 1997).

Qualitative analysis produces a different type of knowledge from quantitative inquiry. Qualitative research derives value from an underlying philosophical nature of particular paradigms, favouring detailed interviewing. At the same time, mixed methods focus on the apparent compatibility of the research methods, “enjoying the rewards of both numbers and words” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 8). This is why methods such as interviews and observations dominate the naturalist (interpretive) paradigm, whereas the use of a survey is more predominant in quantitative research.

#### **4.7 Validity, reliability, and trustworthiness**

Although it has been claimed (Winter, 2000) that quantitative researchers attempt to disassociate themselves as much as possible from the research process, qualitative researchers have come to embrace their involvement and role within the research. Patton (2001) endorses the notion of the researcher’s involvement and immersion into the research by maintaining that the real world is subject to variability and change, and a qualitative researcher should, therefore, remain present during such changes to record these events after and before any change occurs. However, qualitative and quantitative researchers must test the credibility of their studies. While the credibility in quantitative research depends on instrument construction, in qualitative research, “the researcher is the instrument” (Patton, 2001, p. 14). When quantitative researchers describe research validity and reliability, they refer to credible research. However, the credibility of qualitative research depends on the ability and efforts of the researcher. Even though reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not seen as separate in qualitative research. Instead, the terminology that defines both, such as credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness, is pertinent.

To better understand the meaning of reliability and validity, it is necessary to present the various definitions of reliability and validity given by many qualitative researchers from different perspectives.

##### **4.7.1 Reliability**

The term “reliability” is a concept used for testing or evaluating quantitative research and is widespread in many types of research. If testing is a way of information elicitation, then it follows that the most crucial test of any qualitative study is its quality. An excellent qualitative study can help to better “understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or

confusing” (Eisner, 1991, p. 58). This relates to the concept of good quality research, where reliability is used to evaluate quality in quantitative study with the “purpose of explaining” (Stenbacka, 2001, p. 551). In contrast, the quality concept in qualitative studies has the purpose of “generating understanding” (Stenbacka, 2001, p.551). The difference in the purposes of evaluating the quality of studies in quantitative and quantitative research is one of the reasons that the concept of reliability is irrelevant in qualitative research. Stenbacka (2001) maintains that “the concept of reliability may be misleading in qualitative research. If a qualitative study is discussed with reliability as a criterion, the deduction is that the study is no good” (p. 552).

However, Patton (2001) states that validity and reliability are two factors qualitative researchers should maintain while designing a study, analysing results, and then assessing the quality of the study. This corresponds to the question, “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). To answer this question, Healy and Perry (2000) assert that its terms should judge the quality of a study in each paradigm. For example, while the terms’ reliability and validity are essential criteria for quality in quantitative paradigms, in qualitative paradigms, the terms credibility, neutrality or confirmability, consistency or dependability and applicability or transferability (summed up as trustworthiness) are seen as essential criteria for quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). More specifically, the term “reliability” is replaceable with “dependability” in qualitative research, which closely corresponds to the notion of “reliability” in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). They further recommend an “inquiry audit” (p. 317) to enhance the dependability of qualitative research. This can be used to examine the study's process and end product for consistency (Hoepfl, 1997). Furthermore, Clonts (1992) and Seale (1999) endorse the concept of dependability intertwined with consistency or reliability in qualitative research. Data consistency is seen as achievable when steps in the research are verified by examining such items as raw data, data reduction products and process notes (Campbell, 1996). Trustworthiness is crucial to ensure reliability in qualitative research (Seale, 1999). Establishing quality in studies employing reliability and validity in qualitative research states that the “trustworthiness of a research report lies at the heart of issues conventionally discussed as validity and reliability” (Seale, 1999, p. 266). Even when assessing (testing) qualitative work, Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that the “usual canons of ‘good science’...require a redefinition in order to fit the realities of qualitative research” (p. 250).

In contrast, Stenbacka (2001) argues that as reliability is concerned with measurements, it has little or no relevance in qualitative research. She further posits that the issue of reliability is irrelevant within the context of a judgement of quality in qualitative research. Therefore, if this is incorporated into a study, the “consequence is rather that the study is no good” (Stenbacka, 2001, p. 552). Broadening the spectrum of conceptualisation of reliability and revealing the congruence of reliability and validity in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that: “Since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former [validity] is sufficient to establish the latter [reliability]” (p. 316). Patton (2001) states that the researcher’s ability and skill in any qualitative research means that reliability is an inevitable consequence of validity in a study.

#### 4.7.2 Validity

A wide range of terms in qualitative studies describe the concept of validity. This concept is not a single, fixed, or universal concept, but “rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects” (Winter, 2000, p.1). Some qualitative researchers have argued that the term “validity” does not apply to qualitative research. Nevertheless, they concede that there is a need for a qualifying check or measure in their studies. Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest that validity is influenced by the researcher’s perception of validity in the study and their subsequent choice of paradigm. As a result, many researchers have developed their own concepts of validity and have often generated or embraced what they consider to be more appropriate terms, such as quality, rigour, and trustworthiness (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mishler, 2000; Seale, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001). The notion of quality in qualitative research derives from concerns about validity and reliability in the quantitative tradition, which “involved substituting new terms for words such as validity and reliability to reflect interpretivist [qualitative] conceptions” (Seale, 1999, p. 465). The conundrum of validity in qualitative research has not been disregarded by Stenbacka (2001) as she did for the issue of reliability in qualitative research. She maintains that the concept of validity needs to be redefined for qualitative researchers

In the quest for the meaning of rigour in research, Davies and Dodd (2002) found that the term “rigour” in research surfaces in reference to discussions about reliability and validity. They argue that the application of the notion of rigour in qualitative research should differ from those in quantitative research by “accepting that there is a quantitative bias in the concept of rigour, we now move on to develop our reconception of rigour by exploring subjectivity, reflexivity,

and the social interaction of interviewing” (p. 281). Lincoln and Guba (1985) counter that sustaining the trustworthiness of a research report depends on issues quantitatively discussed as validity and reliability. The idea of discovering truth via measures of reliability and validity is replaced by the concept of trustworthiness (Mishler, 2000), which is “defensible” (Johnson, 1997, p. 282) and establishes confidence in the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

If reliability, validity, trustworthiness, quality, and rigour are viewed as differentiating “good” from “bad” research, testing and increasing the reliability, validity, trustworthiness, quality and rigour will remain essential to research in any paradigm.

#### 4.7.3 Testing validity and reliability

A fundamental question in research is how to test or maximise validity and its subsequent reliability in a qualitative study.

It is easier to generalise a finding that is more "credible and defensible" (Johnson, 1997, p. 283) if validity or trustworthiness can be increased or tested. This is one of the concepts suggested by Stenbacka (2001) as a structure for both doing and documenting high-quality quantitative research. It follows then that the quality of research is related to the generalisability of the results and, consequently, to testing and increasing the validity or trustworthiness of the research.

In contrast, Maxwell (1992) observes that the degree to which an account is believed to be generalisable is a factor that clearly distinguishes quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Even though the ability to generalise findings to wider groups and circumstances is one of the most common tests of validity for quantitative research, Patton (2001) highlights generalisability as a vital criterion for quality case studies dependent on the case selected and studied. In this regard, the validity of quantitative research is specific to the test to which it is applied and wherein triangulation is used.

#### 4.7.4 Triangulation

Triangulation is viewed as a strategy (test) to improve the validity and reliability of research and the evaluation of its findings. Mathison (1988) elaborates on this by noting that: “Triangulation has become an important methodological issue in naturalistic and qualitative approaches to evaluation [in order to] control bias and establishing valid propositions because

traditional scientific techniques are incompatible with this alternate epistemology” (p. 13). Patton (2001) advocates the use of triangulation by stating that “triangulation can strengthen a study by combining methods” (p. 247). He goes on to say: “This could mean using several methods or data, including using both quantitative and qualitative approaches” (Patton, 2001, p. 247). Barbour (1998) challenges the idea of combining methods, arguing that mixing paradigms and processes is impossible within one paradigm, such as qualitative research. It is problematic as each method within a qualitative paradigm has its own assumptions in “terms of theoretical frameworks we bring to bear on our research” (Barbour, 1998, p. 353). Triangulation is used in a quantitative paradigm for confirmation and generalisation of results. As such, Barbour (1998) does not disregard the notion of triangulation within a qualitative paradigm, but she does state the need to define triangulation from a qualitative research perspective. Healy and Perry (2000) argue that the triangulation of several data sources and their interpretations with multiple perceptions remains valuable in ensuring reliability and validity.

Constructivism's open-ended viewpoint, which permits study participants to help with both data gathering and research question answering, is consistent with the idea of data triangulation. Engaging multiple methods, such as observation, interviews, and recordings, will lead to a more valid, reliable, and diverse construction of realities. To improve the analysis and understanding of the construction of others, triangulation is a step taken by researchers to involve several investigators or peer researchers' interpretations of the data at different times or locations. A qualitative researcher may “use investigator triangulation and consider the ideas and explanations generated by additional researchers studying the research participants” (Johnson, 1997, p. 284). Triangulation can include multiple data collection and analysis methods but does not predicate a fixed method for all research approaches. The methods chosen in triangulation to test the validity and reliability of a study remain dependent upon the research criteria (Golafshani, 2003).

#### **4.8 Ethical considerations**

A fundamental principle of research is that of “no harm” to participants and, as such, must be duly considered by researchers, who must remain vigilant of potential harm that may befall participants. The researcher has to protect participants in a study from potentially harmful consequences that might affect them due to their participation.

Conflicts may arise between a right to know (defended based on societal beneficence) and the right to privacy (based on individual rights) (Sanjeri, 2014).

Human subjects require protection by applying appropriate ethical principles in all research studies (Arifin, 2018). However, in qualitative studies, ethical considerations have an increased resonance because of the in-depth nature of the research methodology. The pertinence of ethics becomes more salient when conducting face-to-face interviews with a group of participants, especially with a vulnerable group of participants.

The relationship and intimacy established between researchers and participants in qualitative studies can potentially solicit a range of ethical concerns. Qualitative researchers face ethical dilemmas such as respecting privacy, establishing honest and open interactions, and avoiding misrepresentation. Ethically challenging situations may emerge if researchers face contradictory issues and choose between different methodological strategies should a conflict arise. Critical ethical concerns that need to be considered while undertaking qualitative research are access, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

#### 4.8.1 Ethical approval and access to participants

Ethical approval for this study was sought and granted by the University of South Africa, Department of Humanities, School of Psychology Ethics Committee (Appendix A). As per Sanjeri (2014), informed consent has been recognised as an integral part of ethics in studies carried out in different fields. For qualitative researchers, it is of the utmost importance to specify which data will be collected and how they will be used. The principle of informed consent stresses the researcher's responsibility to inform participants thoroughly of different aspects of the research in incomprehensible language. Clarification needs to include the following issues: the nature of the study, the participants' potential role, the identity of the researcher and the financing body, the objective of the research, and how the results will be published and used.

Informed consent naturally requires ongoing negotiation of the terms of the agreement as the study progresses. Many people consider it necessary to participate in research that their peers, community and/or society may benefit from. Therefore, qualitative health researchers need to clarify that the research they carry out will benefit science and can contribute to improving health policy (Sanjeri, 2014).

There are several possibilities available to researchers to safeguard personal information. These include secure data storage methods and an absence of information that could identify participants, such as the amendment of biographical details and the use of pseudonyms. It is becoming the norm for research ethics committees to ensure that written proof of consent is obtained before conducting research. The University of South Africa required such protocol, and permission to undertake this study was given following the fulfilment of those requirements (Appendix A). It needs to be noted that there is a possibility of developing personal relationships with participants, which may be inevitable while collecting data. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers consider the potential impact they may have on participants and vice versa and that the details of these interactions remain evidenced in research. Articulating the role of the researcher, whether as that of a stranger, visitor, initiator, insider-expert or other, requires a full explanation and definition (Sanjeri, 2014).

The process of obtaining consent requires the following:

Consent must be voluntary, and participants must be determined to entirely comprehend what is being asked of them. All participants are, therefore, viewed as competent to give consent. This means that to participate in a research study, participants are required to be adequately informed about the research, understand the information presented, and have the liberty of choice to decide whether to participate or not in the study. This choice depends upon thoroughly explaining the research process to the participant. All participants are required to provide their informed consent in writing. All potential participants need to be approached individually and given an in-depth explanation of the purpose of the study and the subsequent data collection process. The informed consent process is detailed in Appendix B.

#### 4.8.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

The anonymity and confidentiality of research participants are maintained by the non-disclosure of names and identities in the data collection, analysis and reporting of the study findings. At all times, the privacy and confidentiality of the interview environment are maintained during face-to-face interviews, online interviews, and any other relevant communication, including data analysis and the subsequent dissemination of findings.



### 4.8.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a form of critical thinking that aims to articulate the contexts that shape the research processes and, subsequently, the knowledge produced. The point is to map the implications, possibilities, and limitations afforded by approaching the study of a topic in a particular way (Finlay, 2002; Tuval-Mashiach, 2017). Reflecting, questioning and evaluation are standard practices in psychological research. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, a phenomenon known as "the reflexive turn" (Shaw, 2010; Parker, 2015) made it possible to examine critically what and how precisely it was being reflected upon.

This reflexive turn exposed several critiques of the conceptualisation that subjectivity could be controlled through objectivity, which is the hallmark of good scientific methodological procedure. These debates highlighted the impossibility of leaving subjectivity at the laboratory door to fulfil the requirement of neutral detachment. Gilbert and Mulkey's (1984) work on how scientists talk about doing research neatly illustrates tensions produced by objectivity/subjectivity. They identified two distinct patterns of talking or repertoires about doing research that scientists drew on to discuss this process. The first described research practice as a set of operations independent of any researcher. What was subsequently implied is that objective knowledge can be solicited by applying neutral procedures. In contrast, scientists also referred to research as a craft fostered by speculative insights, theoretical and personal commitments, and the social network that comprised the scientific community as a whole.

These two distinct repertoires reflect specifications in the scientific method that delineate boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity. Paradoxically, they also highlight the difficulties of controlling subjectivity in the research process and the counter-productivity of maintaining this. The second repertoire suggests research as an endeavour hued with subjectivity (Parker, 2015). This objectivity requirement is rooted within a positivist epistemology, which, in psychology, is predominantly characterised by a hypothetico-deductive method. Positivism suggests that scientific enquiry aims to observe and measure phenomena to access an objective truth about them. The hypothetico-deductive method attempts to do this by attempting to falsify a priori hypotheses, typically through quantitative testing methods. Contemporary approaches to scientific psychological research acknowledge the difficulties in controlling subjectivity. Subsequently, objectivity is recognised as an ideal goal that can only be realised imperfectly in practice (Ponterotto, 2005). From this perspective,

reflection focuses on subjectivity as a source of bias that may interrupt the focus on the relationship between variables under study. This form of reflection, in which researchers ask themselves, “What is the research process, and how am I influencing it?” focuses on verification and accuracy. The point of reflection is to ensure as far as possible that the research speculates as to how things really appear (Woolgar, 1988). Good qualitative design aims to understand the self in research for different reasons to unpack how subjectivity becomes relevant to eliciting knowledge. Reflection and reflexivity have been conceptualised as a continuum (Woolgar, 1988; Shaw, 2010), which has the potential to avoid a split between reflection/reflexivity, quantitative/qualitative and science/non-science. This is vital as the epistemological approach taken in research shapes the reflective/reflexive evaluation (Willig, 2013).

These distinctive reflective/reflexive evaluation approaches are rarely well-articulated in psychology’s disciplinary training. Undergraduate degrees tend to invest more time teaching hypothetico-deductive quantitative methods, associated evaluative reflection, and less time in qualitative methodologies. Often, very little training is devoted to reflexivity. This may be because the hypothetico-deductive method is still the most used research procedure in psychology. Therefore, it is not surprising that so much time is spent teaching it. However, this uneven weighting in methodological training lends itself to an assumption that there is a straightforward division between quantitative and qualitative research. This often means that the former is more complex and, therefore, more important, and the latter is the subordinate “other” (Lazard, 2009). It is not surprising that researchers may feel both resistant to reflexivity when undertaking qualitative research and ill-equipped to deal with it when it is presented as a requirement. Braun and Clarke succinctly express this notion in an interview with Jankowski (2017), who “wonder if people really understand what reflexivity is, if they are bracketing it off from the rest of the text, which is written in the third person and the objective and dispassionate voice of mainstream psychology” (p. 46).

#### **4.9 Summary**

Since epistemology is “The theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology”, the use of ethnography in this study facilitated a strategy, an action plan, and a design process to achieve the desired qualitative outcome.

Research methodology is the strategy and consequent plan of action in research, and choosing a research methodology shapes the research design, which, in turn, shapes the chosen research methods. Fundamental to this study is a qualitative research design, which allows for a richer and deeper solicitation of the “why and how” questions relevant to the development of concepts. The breadth of an interpretive, qualitative approach lends itself to the solicitation of a richer narrative and validates differing viewpoints on the same phenomena. The ethnographic approach to this study incorporates the importance of the interviewer’s presence and their engagement and interaction with participants. This recursive engagement with the interviewer as an ethnographer forms an additional narrative, further enriching the research.

## CHAPTER 5: THE LIFE STORY OF MARC

### 5.1 Personal data

Participant	:	Marc
Age	:	48
Occupation	:	Entrepreneur
Research Setting	:	The interview was conducted in a garden setting of a private home. The garden is large and has old, established trees. Sitting in the garden, I learn, is one of Marc's favourite pastimes. The setting is vast and private, and we are surrounded by the sounds of the birdlife and the lushness of the garden.

### 5.2 Identified themes

The researcher identified the following themes in Marc's life story:

- Fitting in
- Sexuality
- Blurred boundaries
- Sexual abuse
- Isolation
- Instability
- Alcohol abuse
- Resilience
- School years
- Splitting
- Positivity
- Authentic self
- Loss
- Marriage
- Midlife crisis
- Tumult
- Deception
- Religion
- Introspection
- Self-recrimination
- Insights
- Guilt

- Parenting
  - Boundaries
  - Self-reflections
  - Self-sabotage
  - Epiphanies
  - Transition
  - Spiritual awakening
  - Happiness
  - Self-awareness
- 

### 5.3 Introduction

In this chapter, Marc's story is related in transcribed excerpts, and the researcher's input and observations are included to allow for a fuller context of the data. Emergent themes pertinent to a midlife journey are identified. It may be seen that some of these themes extrapolated are not mutually exclusive and that the themes are shaped and coloured by the researcher's lens and responses during the interview. Therefore, these themes are not deemed to represent a finite truth about the participant's reality but rather an in-situ narrative that is influenced and enhanced by both researcher and participant. Every story of midlife has its countenance and will, therefore, be different. This story is not meant to represent a finite nor absolute truth about all midlife stories and remains an experiential narrative.

Marc had been having therapy to make sense of the midlife journey he had so far been trying to understand. Marc agreed to participate in my research as he believed that his story may have the potential to heal others and prevent similar pitfalls for others.

Marc is 48, a tall man with a presence and a gentleness and sensitivity to him that belies his physical appearance. Marc has been divorced for five years and has two teenage sons. He has led an interesting life, with a chequered career that allowed him to travel extensively and garner a variety of working experiences. His upbringing, role models and life choices have all shaped and added to the sum of Marc seeking therapy to make sense of work through and live a more harmonious life.

Marc, why is it important for you to tell your story?

*I think there are many men that go through similar experiences to me, and they don't talk about things. What I've learned is that I had a wound, and that wound needed healing. I wasn't sure what was going on. What I'm trying to say is, I was constantly looking for an*

*answer outside of myself and the answer was inside. There was a hole in my heart, a hole in my soul that I needed to heal. I think there are lots of other men or people that go through similar things, always looking for the answers or solutions outside of themselves, not realising that it lies within themselves. I have seen how it shows, especially in the way men interact with women in relationships.*

Marc set the tone for our interviews with his reasons for telling his story. He grappled at times with the telling of his story and the content but remained steadfast in wanting his truth to be known. I remain aware of the impact it has on Marc to speak openly of his life events and find myself conscious of Marc's discomfort at junctures in our interviews.

Marc's life choices have made for an unusual life, and even from our first interview, it was evident that Marc had numerous "big" stories to tell. The reason that Marc sought therapy was because he was in crisis. He had met a woman that he had fallen deeply in love with and wanted to assure her that he was committed, yet he had a history and a past that was his chequered life, which he was still trying to integrate. This woman was important to him, and he sensed that this would be a long-term and serious relationship. He was determined not to make the same mistakes that he had made in the past, but in the immediacy of our first session, he was more concerned with the conundrum of being truthful, yet not scaring off the potential love of his life. He began consulting with me at the start of his newfound relationship. Marc had canvassed his best friend and his brother and had been given different views on whether to "come clean" with her or wait until he had gotten to know her better. Marc had undertaken his journey of introspection prior to starting therapy and had harnessed what he called his "demons". He attributes the harnessing of his "demons" and what he describes as the reason for his fragmentation as a "hole in his heart". This introspection had led him through a trajectory that embraced religion, a loss of friends, the end of his marriage, a change in his family dynamics, the end of his career and a betrayal and fatal desecration of his professional reputation by a corporate psychopath.

#### **5.4 Childhood**

Marc described his childhood and early adolescence. Marc starts his narrative with humour, and then his vocal tone changes, becoming sombre. It's evident that Marc finds it difficult to relate these events. When Marc describes traumatic events, he tends to use euphemisms and allude to events. I am acutely aware of how painful it is for Marc to be talking openly about his life and am conflicted as to whether to probe him to elaborate on his euphemisms. In the

interests of my research, I ask Marc for clarification. Still, it remains difficult throughout my interviews for me to push Marc to elaborate on the more painful periods in his life.

Marc gives a brief synopsis of his childhood:

*My mother and father got divorced when I was seven months old. My father joked, he got married to get me a babysitter. In fact, I don't think it was a joke. I think it was real. He married her to look after me because he was travelling all the time for work. So obviously, the negative part of that was when he wasn't at home. They would, you know, get mad at him, and then they would take it out on me. So that was my experience with my stepmom, continuously. These women, all his wives, were unhappy with their relationship with my father and that continuously put pressure on me. They would take it out on me. I mean, I remember my first stepmom punishing me severely for something I didn't even do. Then, when my dad comes back home from work or whenever he's been away for a while, she'll tell him, and then he'll punish me again. That was a bit hard, you know. It was worse with the one he accidentally got pregnant with. She was 18, and I was 11. You know, so that was a different dynamic. She didn't know how to bring up a child, especially one that's becoming a teenager and she wasn't able to understand what's happening, what was happening to her. So, she got quite violent with me until I reciprocated, and that ended.*

Marc was raised by his father, who was at times loving and gentle and, at other times, violent, unpredictable, volatile and a heavy drinker. Marc was abducted from his mother by his father at the age of seven months. It is unclear to Marc why his father chose to leave the marriage and then abduct him. However, Marc seems to think that there may have been rumours of infidelity on his mother's part. These early years are understandably sketchy. Marc says he did not want to ask his father about why he left his mother. There was always an undercurrent of not wanting to anger his father as a child, and, in later years, this changed to great forgiveness on Marc's part and not wanting to bring up the past with his father. Consequently, some parts of Marc's life remain a mystery.

Yet, what is clear from Marc is that his childhood was one characterised by fear, violence, a lack of security and a series of different women in and out of his father's life that further contributed to the cruelty and punishment that Marc was subject to. These women were often much younger than Marc's father and were resentful of having to take care of Marc.

They were vying for Marc's father's attention and would often make stories up about Marc's behaviour and Marc's father would then punish him for these so-called transgressions. All this resulted in Marc honing his ability to read a situation, read body language, assess personality types, and generally try to keep himself out of trouble. It also taught a lifelong pattern for Marc, that of constantly experiencing an undercurrent of expectation as to what he was going to be called out for or what he had done wrong. It also led him to experience criticism as deeply wounding and that he is not "good".

What Marc does recall of his childhood are many memories that are both humorous but also inappropriate and sad. His father was a travelling salesman, and their financial status fluctuated between extreme wealth and then scarcity, forced at times to live in their car. Marc recalls how his father told him that he was allergic to milk as a baby. Therefore, the women that his father would call on as a salesman would masticate his food for him and act as surrogates.

Marc recalls anecdotes that are not necessarily chronological in order but that are elicited in our sessions together. He recalls that the woman he is in love with triggers a childhood memory for him when she wears a silky dressing gown. He recollects his father taking him to visit women who dressed in silky nightgowns during the day and how kind they were to him. They gave him milk and cookies and sat with him while his father disappeared. This memory, resurfacing in adulthood, allowed him to piece together that his father had taken him to a brothel. He speaks about the many parties his father used to have. The role that he played at these parties was to serve the drinks to the adults. This was such an entrenched role from a very early age that whenever Marc's father had a visitor, Marc would know to bring out a bottle of brandy. However, on one occasion, the local priest paid a visit to the house and little Marc, at 4, duly hauled out the bottle of brandy to present it to the priest. Marc laughs at the retelling of this story.

Yet upon reflection, the young Marc was being taught to partake in adult activities from an early age. Despite his being tasked at times with adult roles, Marc was still obviously a child and would frequently wet his bed. His father would become enraged at Marc for his bedwetting, which only resulted in Marc wetting his bed more. Help came in the form of a kind nanny, who his father employed during this time. The nanny would wash the sheets and in so doing, protect Marc from the rage of his father.

#### 5.4.1 Fitting in

*I had to learn to be adaptable. My father moved around often. I changed schools many times and had to make whole new friends.*

He developed a lifelong trait of “fitting in”. He also developed a hypervigilance around reading verbal and non-verbal cues. Both his father and, subsequently, his various stepmothers were cruel and volatile, and he learned to read micro-expressions to know when to disappear or when a violent or explosive situation was about to erupt. He also learned to assuage tempers and navigate moods. This learned behaviour manifested in the adult Marc, the gift of being an ingénue in his career in sales. It imbued him with the ability to be a peacemaker and a voice of



reason. However, its downfall was that Marc would, in later years, realise that he was unable to exercise boundary setting. His entire life was characterised by doing or being for “the other” (his children, his guilt at divorce, his guilt over his subsequent numerous infidelities.)

Marc flounders here and becomes emotional. It’s hard to see Marc confront and piece together the enormity of his childhood trauma and the ramifications thereof.

#### 5.4.2 Sexuality

It was sullied for you. I think that's what you're trying to say. Now that you are reflecting on this with adult eyes, you can see that something fundamental was taken from you. From the telling of your narrative, it seems to me like you've spent the majority of your life trying to conquer that and trying actually to harness your sexuality. Would you say that?

*Yes, that's accurate. It's warped my perception of it. My perception of sex is a lot different now, because I am in a good relationship for the first time. I didn't really know what it meant to say that you make love to someone. I am in an open and beautiful relationship, and I feel totally different to what I felt before. So, for me now, it's beautiful, and it's amazing, and it's spiritual. Sex is not something I'm ashamed of at all.*

In our interviews, it seems like you've carried a lot of shame, understandably, and remorse, but it really feels like you are now healthily embracing your sexuality. You describe yourself as sexually charged, but you say it in such a way that there is an element of normality to it. It feels like it's OK. It sounds to me like you have forgiven yourself.

*I've learned to live with them. Umm. I'm just in a different place because of my partner and because of the way we love each other, also because of the work that I've done before in healing myself.*

I'm really interested in that, about the work that you've done prior to meeting your partner and how you arrived at this place of acceptance and healing. Can you tell me a bit about that?

*Well, it's a simple question for very complex answer. It's just that, in short, I can say that for some time after my separation and divorce, I lived in isolation. It was through spiritual work, through introspection and through those processes, that I managed to come to some realisation around the things that were wrong inside of me. My heart, my soul, that I had a hole in my heart. I went through a process to heal and to allow myself to grow. Then, I grew into the man that I remember I used to be before so many things happened to me. This process also allowed me to grow into my strength again.*

#### 5.4.3 Blurred boundaries

His lack of boundaries seems to stem from his chaotic childhood and premature thrust into adulthood.

*My father had wild parties, and I think I was about 5 or 6 years of age when I was put in charge of the bar and pouring people drinks.*

Marc recalls these memories were with fondness, he was included in his father's world and allowed to partake in adult activities. This bonded him to his father, and he describes the years together when they would do everything together. Marc recalls riding shotgun with his father:

*My father would allow me to take the steering wheel of the car as a child. Often, he would wake me up at two or three in the morning when he had been drinking, and we would drive to the seaside to go and visit one of his girlfriends.*

This is why, when his father abandoned him in lieu of his numerous girlfriends, and finally for his father's teen bride, it was the ultimate abandonment for Marc, for both the acute loss of his best friend and his father.

His last stepmother was the youngest and the cruellest. She was 18, and Marc was 11. Marc describes her cooking as awful. He remembers her serving an uncooked chicken dish to his father. Marc anticipated his father's reaction and couldn't stifle his laughter. Cheryl, his new stepmother, was livid with him and told his father, who, in turn, severely beat Marc.

This became a pattern. Cheryl would always be jealous of the bond Marc, and his father had and invented misdemeanours that Marc had supposedly done and then inform Marc's father. She was also resentful of having Marc in the house. She was 18, and Marc later looks back on this period with an understanding that she was ill-equipped to parent an 11-year-old.

However, Marc's father would follow through on Cheryl's accusations, become enraged and punish Marc with familiar physical force.

*I really disliked Cheryl, I had no say, she could say what she liked to my father, and he would believe her. I never had the courage to tell my father what Cheryl was doing to me because he would punish me. She had the ugliest feet. I can never forget them.*

As a child, Marc despised his new stepmother. He had no voice, he dare not tell his father that Cheryl was lying about him. He had lost his father to Cheryl, and she had made his life hell.

Respite came when Marc was sent away to boarding school so that Marc's father and his new bride could enjoy their marital bliss. However, his father had other plans for him. Cheryl, his new bride, was pregnant and Marc was needed back home to take care of the new baby.

Marc, when you were growing up, you mentioned that your father moved a lot, and you never stayed at one school for longer than a certain period. That you never managed to make friends for longer than a certain period of time, that it was quite an itinerant time.

*So, what actually happened was I moved around a bit between my dad and my mom. So, I stayed for a short period of time with my dad, and then he would send me to my mom for a while, and then I'll go back to him. Inadvertently, what happens then is I change schools.*

*Then the situation came when my stepsister was born, and they then sent me to a boarding school for two years. So basically, in my primary school years, I attended five or six different schools. I sort of changed hands in a way, and also, when I was sent to boarding school, my dad went through a financial crisis, which ended up in him moving away. So, I finished my primary school years with my mom.*

#### 5.4.4 Sexual abuse

Marc, boarding school seemed like it was a shock to you.

*Yes, boarding school was bittersweet for me because of so it's, you know, it was hard to be sent away. It was hard to understand that.*

How old were you?

*Probably 11 and um. So, yeah, so that's... So, that was a bit of a shock. So obviously, I didn't tell anybody, and yeah...*

Marc becomes indecipherable, and I do not understand what he's trying to say. I want to ask him what happened, but Marc then counters with a positive. I am aware that Marc uses a positive as a deflection.

*But then, you know, at boarding school, they selected me as head boy in standard five, above any standard five pupil. So, I've always had to, I've always overcome everything.*

I want to understand better, Marc, you've alluded to something: you said certain behaviours weren't acceptable? I'm sensitive to this, but I'm also not entirely sure what behaviours weren't acceptable. Was it bullying? What was it that happened?

*No, they did things to me.*

So, you were sexually abused by boys?

*They were older boys.*

That must have been exceptionally traumatic.

*Well, like I said, I didn't really understand fully what was happening to me. It was a crash course to be introduced to sexuality and the capabilities of one's body. So, it was a bit frightening. It was scary. It was totally weird, and like I said, I felt ashamed about it.*

#### 5.4.5 Isolation

But the worst thing was that you were very alone in this because you'd been shuttled from one parent to another. You changed schools, and then you were thrust into boarding school. Which parent did you feel you could confide in? Or was there anybody that you could confide in?

*So, there was no teacher, there was no confidante. There was nobody. That's very difficult for an 11-year-old child to deal with. Yeah, and unfortunately, it had a negative effect on me.*

This is a very difficult part of our interview process. Marc is distressed. His body language is closed, and he makes a number of body movements that appear as if he wants to get up and

leave. I feel trapped between wanting to be deeply compassionate to Marc and wanting to hear the rest of the story. I do not want to appear insensitive, yet I know that Marc needs to tell his story.

I'm really sorry to hear this. I truly am. It must have been so painful to go through this alone that there was nobody that you could confide in.

#### 5.4.6 Instability

I am acutely aware of Marc's distress and my reaction to Marc's story and his discomfort. I want to remain centred and calm for Marc.

There was no one for you to check and balance this with, and it sounds like an excruciating, traumatic, lonely, confusing, and scary time for you. Also, that your sexuality was prematurely violated. I'm wondering how all this shaped your life going forward? Because in our interviews, there seems to have been a consistent theme of sexuality that runs through a lot of your adult life as well. It's as if there's been a desire to conquer your sexuality. Your sexuality seemed to have been a rampant part of you that appeared to have its impetus. It appears as if a great deal of your life was spent trying to understand and control your sexuality.

*I would agree with that. I experienced my body reacting in different ways that I didn't always understand. Obviously, now, when I look back, I realise that and that it probably stole something from me that was supposed to be beautiful and sacred and made it, um...*

In addition to Marc's sexual trauma, the years spent looking after his younger siblings were a tumultuous time. He was barely an adolescent, and he was now tasked with looking after two babies. Cheryl and Marc's father's marriage was now volatile. They both drank heavily, and the marriage was unstable. Marc moved into the garage with the children to protect them from the violence in the house, particularly from his father's temper, which Marc was all too familiar with.

#### 5.4.7 Alcohol abuse

*My dad's drinking got worse, and she, Cheryl, would disappear when my dad got violent. She would go away for days or weeks at a time, the kids were left with me, it got really rough. I would then take the kids to sleep with me in my room above the garage. I wanted to keep them safe from my dad. I guess I took care of them. I used to lock the door so that my dad couldn't get in when he was drunk.*

Cheryl cheated on Marc's father and evicted them from the house they were living in. Marc and his father moved into a caravan park, and this was where Marc finished his final year of school. In addition to this stress, Marc's father was obsessed with Cheryl and would coerce Marc to drive around with him to follow Cheryl as she met up with different men. These nocturnal jaunts would often continue until the early hours of the morning. These were

traumatic times for Marc; he was in his final year of high school. When I point this out to Marc, he seems surprised. Marc has become so used to survival that to entertain anything outside of these parameters is unusual.

#### 5.4.8 Resilience

It was during these traumatic times that Marc formed a decision that would shape his life. He decided that he would never be like his father. This decision was to have ramifications for Marc when he became a father.

Marc was an unknown entity to his father. Marc says his father never saw him as an individual with his interests and personality. Despite Marc being afraid of his father, he would still rebel against him. As a teenager, Marc relates how he would save his bus fare money by travelling on train carriages reserved for black passengers during the apartheid era. He did this regularly without getting caught by his father until he intervened in a knife fight between two passengers and returned home covered in blood. His father was furious, beat Marc, and Marc's illicit train journeys came to an abrupt end. This particular beating was brutal, and Marc ended up in hospital.

*Even though my dad beat me so badly, it never stopped me from doing things. I rebelled against my dad and even stole his car to go and visit my girlfriend. My dad found out and punished me badly again.*

Marc relays these episodes of violence with relative calm. It appears that the threat of violence was constant.

I struggle to maintain my composure when Marc recalls the following:

*Sometimes, my dad would laugh and beat me, and he would say he's hitting me in case I think about doing anything wrong in the future.*

Marc remembers when he was figuring out what subject choices to take at school:

*I loved writing and literature, and I wanted to choose typing. When I told my dad, he went crazy, he said it was a "girl" choice, and he beat me again and I never took the typing course.*

Yet, throughout all this violence, Marc remained stoic and unwavering. Marc found solace in sport and school, and despite the tumult in his home, he performed well in both these pursuits.

## 5.5 School years

*Basically, I think school substituted as my family if you like. I really did well at school and excelled was the top ten academically, and I excelled in leadership positions. So, I sort of, I was head of quite a few bodies or groups. There was a captain of the water polo team. I was captain of my rugby team. A sort of, yeah, so excelled in, in leadership. I also participated in quite a lot of school activities. Although my dad did try and reduce those activities because, you know, he felt that I needed to study more than anything else. Yeah, but so, yeah, so I don't think that my home situation reflected at all in my school life.*

Marc was a great water polo player and swimmer. He found refuge from his home life in water sports. He trained religiously for water polo every morning. One morning, his training would prove to be nearly fatal:

*I was swimming lengths in the pool, and I didn't know that chlorine had been put into the pool. I was swimming underwater, the pump kicked in, and then the pool water level dropped. There was a big chlorine-gas build-up, which was released underwater.*

Marc inhaled this gas and passed out. His water polo teacher, who was also his English teacher, Mr H, found Marc and resuscitated him but struggled to keep Marc conscious and called an ambulance. Marc was rushed to hospital.

### 5.5.1 Authentic self

Mr H contacted Marc's father to tell him what had happened to Marc. This interaction between Mr H and Marc's father led to Marc's father discovering a side of Marc that he had kept from his father. Marc's father became aware of what Marc describes as his other side:

*So, Mr H told my dad who I really was. Yeah, but so, yeah, so, I don't think that my home situation reflected at all in my school life.*

This incident happened to Marc when he was in his final year of school and coincided with a time when Marc was nominated for a literature prize. Marc's father had no clue that Marc wrote, let alone that he had been nominated for a prestigious award. At the end of Marc's final year, his father was invited to a special assembly where Marc would be receiving an award. Marc himself was unaware that he was nominated for this award. All this happened during the turbulent year when Marc and his father were living in a caravan park, following Cheryl and her lovers at night.

### 5.5.2 Splitting

Marc, what was it like for you when your father was forced to see who you really were in high school? That your father discovered how well you wrote and how your teachers and peers held you in such high esteem.

*School and home life were two separate things so. I think school for me was a substitute for family at that stage. There was, you know, and when my father found out about what I did at school and from teachers, etc. and, he was so surprised. The things he didn't know but it went too far to repair some of the damage that was done between us. I think he also looked at me differently then. Um, not. Maybe not always as a child, but he started looking at me as a man. Which was, which is a good experience. I mean, it wasn't always just bad. We had many good experiences as well. Alright, they were fearful often, but they were good experiences.*

*Mr H's words forced my dad to pay attention, to see who I really was. I had kept this part of me away from my dad.*

Marc remains forgiving and pragmatic regarding his father's lack of parental focus, explaining that his father was distracted by trying to reconstruct his own life after he had become bankrupt and what was happening in his personal life. This forgiveness remains an inherent trait in Marc. He is unremittingly forgiving of most people in his life, choosing rather to find fault within himself.

Marc was a young man who faced a violent and chaotic childhood. He was abandoned and left to fend for himself without any guidance or support, while subjected to extreme discipline, fear, and brutal corporate punishment. Despite these difficult circumstances, he defied the odds and emerged as an exceptional individual. He pursued his passion for poetry and writing, and became a leader and a mentor to his peers. He excelled in sports and was held in high esteem by his teachers and contemporaries. Without knowing, Marc had begun to be well-versed in splitting – learning how to separate one life from another without either life intersecting. This was to become a deeply entrenched pattern in Marc, ultimately resulting in his ability as an adult to split his home and family life from work and then his marriage from his numerous affairs.

*When I was nominated to be head boy, one of the teachers came to talk to me. They told me that I would be head boy, but that I couldn't be because of my dad's influence. They said my home life was too unstable.*

To this day, Marc's father is oblivious to the fact that his son would have been the head boy. The only information that he is privy to is that Marc was made a prefect. Marc remains consistent in protecting his father from knowing the full extent of his undue reach into Marc's life.

I ask Marc if he felt he needed to protect his father. Marc tends to be defensive about what he perceives to be negativity or criticism. In previous disclosures, he has explained that he had to strengthen himself every single morning mentally.

### 5.5.3 Positivity

*I make a decision every day of my life to be positive. I make myself believe that everything will be ok. I do suffer from depression, and I have had some really tough times in my life. Well, I think it's most probably a product of toxic masculinity. If I have to reflect now as a mature male, there was the sense that, you know, you can either make a choice that the things around you bring you down or you make a difference. For me, it was always that, you know, for some of my life, I believe that none of those things that happened around me would have an effect on me. I have a choice as to how I go, how I affect situations. I didn't allow really myself to be pulled back or brought down by things that happened to me because I realised on some level, maybe a subconscious level, I realised that if I'm going to get caught into that situation, it will destroy me. Or it would have a very negative effect on me. So, for me, it was always about making a difference, stepping up, and yeah, I have to remember my dates here. My Mom and dad got divorced when I was seven months. I can remember, back in my memory, there's been this duality in my life. I had to learn to adapt, you learned that. That's the way it is. You learn maybe to control it and to manage it and to be always sensitive around it and to see how people react and I guess I had to learn to survive.*

*But also, we were brought up in the sense that you, like, Cowboys, don't cry. We kiss our horses, you know, and so there was nobody. Who to complain to? You know, I didn't want at school for that to come out, because it was the one place where things were normal. You know, I spoke to my mom and stuff, but they had no way that they could even try and persuade my dad to let me go and stay there. So where do you go to? So, I made good friends that I spoke to, and I just made it better.*

Marc admits that he suffers from low mood and bouts of depression but that his morning rituals have sustained him, and without them, he says he may not have made it through life. I ask if he is referring to suicide, he says, “Yes”. Hence, I understand better Marc’s steadfast adherence to maintaining a positive countenance – this has been what has kept him alive.

Therefore, when I ask Marc about whether he feels the need to protect his father, he says it is not about protecting his father.

*I had to keep my life separate. My home life and my school life. It just wasn't safe for me for the two to meet.*

Marc was able to maintain two separate lives that did not intersect. There was his home life, in which he behaved a certain way with his father, and then there was his school life, where he was a totally different person. A leader, a poet, and a great swimmer, he kept what happened at home intact and what happened at school separately.

I note a distinct pattern of splitting. I point out to Marc that this was where the pattern started of keeping lives separate. He appears sad and forlorn as he says he just had to keep it that way. I sense that Marc had to do this to protect the sanctity of the other life he had constructed. He counters with, “Why should my dad bear this?” He deflects immediately by saying that it was wonderful to get an award at the end of his school year and to receive validation and recognition.



This deflection to a positive stance is something inherent that I get to learn of Marc. Marc's unpleasant experiences are balanced internally by positive ones.

Marc loved literature at school. He wrote prolifically and well. His poetry and prose were of such a high standard that he was encouraged to submit his work for a literary competition. Marc was forbidden by his father to partake in such "less masculine" pursuits, but Marc continued writing in secret and won the literary competition. Marc recalls asking his father if he could take up typing as a subject, as Marc loved writing so much. His father was furious with him, and again, Marc was subject to a violent beating for even entertaining such a thought. Both his father and stepmother were invited to the literary competition, and this is when Marc says his father first began to see him as a human being and that there was more to Marc than his father knew.

Marc was identified as head boy material. His teachers had noted his leadership abilities, the resilience and stoicism of Marc, his even temper, and his ability to adapt to group dynamics and to lead. This particular episode in his life is bittersweet for Marc. He is given recognition and is singled out amongst his peers. The caveat, however, was that the school expressed their concerns to Marc regarding the volatility, unpredictability, and negative influence of his father. This meant that Marc could not take up this role. His father's chaos seemed like it was inextricably linked to Marc's life.

In addition, Marc also received a prestigious award for the most proficient all-rounder, an award that usually gets bestowed on the head boy. Marc describes Mr H as a significant influence on his life in that Mr H was the first adult to validate and single Marc out for his talents. Mr H was also the one to back Marc, to have the authority to tell Marc's father exactly who his son was and how he was perceived at school. Marc describes Mr H as a literary giant, the head of English with a penchant for poetry and the audacity to introduce water polo into a school environment that valued rugby over water polo.

#### 5.5.4 Sexuality

There was to be a continual theme in Marc's life, that of his sexuality. Marc says, matter-of-factly, that he was a good-looking boy and then a good-looking man and that his looks got him into trouble from a very early age.

Marc's sexual history began at six. He was coerced into sexual experimentation with a group of older boys. What seemed at the time to be a game ended up in abuse for Marc. He is traumatised and deeply ashamed by this. He rationalises to himself that it was probably because he was such a pretty-looking child. Marc keeps this trauma to himself: there is no one to tell. He had no maternal figure, only a violent and volatile father, whom he was afraid of. Marc initially speaks of this incident in a subdued tone, leaving out details such as the severity of the rape, only to refer to its severity in later sessions. He struggles to articulate the incident and tends to downplay it.

I begin to piece together Marc's sexual history. Marc was subsequently groomed at age 13 by an older woman who took advantage of him. Marc says he didn't quite understand what was happening, but before he knew it, he had a sexual encounter in a public place. Marc expresses deep regret at what should have been a special experience. Marc believes that this set a pattern for him in his life – that of always searching for the thrill of a new sexual encounter. His good looks and easy way with women made him sexually attractive, and this was a powerful tool for him. I venture to say that his sexual power was also a way of reclaiming the sexual powerlessness that he had experienced from sexual abuse.

Marc struggles with his sexuality. He explains that he lived in a coastal town that was well known for its liberal attitude towards sex. Marc expresses regret during our interview and wishes that it had never been this way. He says this liberalism meant that, in general, sex was not sacred. The theme of sex being sacred would be a strong focus for Marc when he begins to reclaim his life.

Marc's home life remained chaotic. Sex intruded yet again in the form of a betrayal by a friend.

*My dad and stepmother were always arguing. She would leave the house and leave the two kids behind, and I would have to look after them. Or my dad would leave the house, and I would still be left to look after the kids. I had a best friend at school, his name was David, and we did everything together. The one day I couldn't find David, he was visiting me, and I looked everywhere for him. I eventually looked through the stepmother's window, and I saw David having sex with my stepmother.*

*I didn't really like my stepmom, so, um, in many ways, I didn't really care about it. In fact, I felt quite strongly about it, but in a way, it was almost normal when it happened. I don't know if that sounds if one can state it like that, but I was never mad at him because, you know, I disliked her. I, I was mad at him because it was her, because like he could have chosen someone better. But she was, she was very sexually charged, which I couldn't always recognise it then, but afterwards, you know, afterwards my dad shared information with me after they got the divorce that she was a sex addict, and then things made sense.*

### 5.5.5 Betrayal

There seems to be a theme of betrayal for Marc. There are few sanctuaries for him, whether it is his home life, family life or even friendships. School was the only constant for Marc: this was an environment he could control.

## 5.6 Midlife crisis

*I think that's the thing for me about midlife crisis - you only know when you are in it, when it's done. I lived my life in compartments, so work was really going well, but I mean, the alarm bells should have gone off like when I used cocaine, for instance.*

*Alarm bells should have gone off when had a car accident while driving drunk after spending 12 hours on the road drinking. It should have been when I had an overdose of pills, and I had to pump out my stomach. So, the thing that I managed to do really well was I managed to keep my, my private life and my work life separate. So, at work, I kept on excelling, I kept on doing well from the outside in, there was nothing wrong.*

*Yes, I was a bit wild. Yes, I like to party, but so did a lot of other guys. Nobody would have looked at me and said, okay, you know, that's a mess about to happen and I think on its own should have been an indication to me that something's not right because there was no equilibrium in my life. I was moving from compartment to compartment and managing my chaos and I managed it really, really well. You see, running on that sort of treadmill, it goes all faster and faster and at some point, you lose the ability to balance it all because my life wasn't built on proper principles around that time, you know, it was a mess.*

*My sexuality was influenced by various factor factors, but it played a role in me acting out my emotions. I think it was one part of it. No man crumbles overnight. I think it was a combination of factors that led to my midlife crisis. Of which afterwards, looking back, one of the biggest factors was this wound that I had from my dad and from my childhood. I think that wound caused me to look outside myself to try and fill that void, and then I did try to fill it. I tried to fill it through impulsive spending, crazy behaviour, drugs, women, driving false cars.*

Sexuality is a dominant theme in Marc's life. It intruded in the form of infidelity and led to the demise of his marriage. In midlife, Marc questions his ever-present theme of sexuality. I point out that he often refers to his sexuality, either from the perspective of being deeply ashamed or from the perspective of grappling with the concept of returning to a state of love and purity that he yearns for in a sexual union.

He refers to the shame, shock, and lack of understanding as to his sexual abuse at six, and we piece together that this could have contributed to his dysfunctional sexuality, as he describes it.

Frequent sexual encounters characterised Marc's earlier years, and he says he was trying to find himself by seeking love through sex. Marc was craving intimacy; a quest for intimacy dominated his later sexual encounters. He describes a contributing factor to the demise of his

marriage as a lack of intimacy – how his ex-wife would turn her back on him. Marc’s sexuality becomes a metaphor for his life: if he can master his body, he achieves self-mastery.

Marc appears disconsolate, and there is an element of helplessness when he says he has no idea how to now manage his sexuality, especially in midlife, as he has no control over how his body will react sexually. I ask him to elaborate on this. He describes himself as being out of touch with his body, that his body is similar to a “lucky packet”, meaning that sometimes there are surprises, where his body is able to respond sexually sometimes and at other times, not. Marc expresses confusion around his early childhood sexual abuse and his feelings of deep shame – shame that he has never openly expressed but has been inherent in all his sexual interactions. It was as if the more sex Marc could have, the more opportunity he might have to reclaim his body. Instead, his body responded with erectile dysfunction, as if the feedback loop became inverted.

This sexual erraticism is particularly challenging for Marc within the context of his current relationship. At this stage of our therapeutic relationship, Marc and Jenny’s relationship is firmly entrenched, and they are in a committed relationship. Marc believes that this is the union he has been looking for all his life, and it’s an opportunity for him to right some of his wrongs and to gain mastery of his life and his sexuality in a way that is appropriate for him.

#### 5.6.1 Loss - Death of Marc’s mother

*I loved staying with my mother and stepfather. It was the closest I ever got to a normal family life. I got the chance to spend a whole year with my mother when my dad married his fourth wife.*

Marc recalls with great affection the year he spent with his mother and stepfather when his father married his fourth wife, who was 18 years old, to Marc’s 11. Marc was sent to live with his mother so that his father could cement his relationship with his new bride. Marc experienced many contrasting feelings when his father married Cheryl: he lost his position as friend and confidante. Marc was effectively cast out when his father married her. There was a positive element to this casting out, as Marc was sent to live with his mother and stepfather – a family that was unknown to him but a period that was recalled with deep yearning, love, and affection by Marc.

The year spent with his mother and stepfather was idyllic. Marc had become accustomed to moving schools and homes often, a hedonistic trail of parties, fluctuating fortunes and a trail

of women in and out of his father's life. In comparison, spending time with his mother and stepfather was solid, stable, and the closest Marc had experienced to family life.

*I remember my mother's cooking. She would make amazing roasts. It was really traditional home cooking. My stepdad was really kind.*

Marc is profoundly affected by the kindness of his stepfather and the opportunity to stay in one school for a year and develop real friendships. Of the few possessions he has, he still has his mother's casserole pot and continues to cook roasts in it, as per his mother's recipe. Marc was devastated when his father summoned him back home. Wife number 4 was pregnant, and they needed someone to babysit.

Marc's mother died of cancer when Marc was in his thirties. At the time, Marc was dating Tracy, whom he had met at university. Marc describes his relationship with Tracy as "ok", she was one of a series of women he dated, and Tracy was the one that his mother had gotten to know. Marc asked his mother shortly before her death if he should marry her, and Marc's mother gave her a blessing. Marc did not feel particularly strongly about marrying Tracy. She had given him an ultimatum: propose, or we break up. This coincided with Marc's mother's illness, and he wanted guidance from her before she died. Marc says he married Tracy to fulfil the dying wish of his mother.

## 5.6.2 Marriage

Marc, can you just give me a little bit more detail about your marriage to Tracy? Apparently, your mother asked Tracy if you were intelligent before you got married, and it was really quite shocking for you to realise that your mother didn't know you that well.

*Remember, for the largest part of my life, I was brought up by my dad. I only saw my mother very rarely, maybe once a year, twice I was if I was really lucky. We also stayed quite far away from each other. So yes, I think my mum, although we knew each other, we didn't know each other. I think the same can be said for me, knowing her. Then me and Tracy, we sort of inserted ourselves into my mom's life, if you like. After university, my mum was very sick. She had cancer. My stepdad died in a car crash, and we went to stay with her. We both worked in the area. I got to experience more of my mom, but she was in a very painful place because she was dying, and I was working long hours, 12 hours a day. It's not a great recipe for any type of family. I got to a point where I had to make a decision, Tracy said. You know, she needed to move on in life. So, you know, I should marry her, or we need to break up, and I asked my mom what she thought, and I think, you know, my mom said she liked her, and she thinks it would be the right thing to do to marry her, although I wasn't 100% ready yet. You know, I obliged, and I got married.*

Marc had been dating Tracy for quite some time before he asked his mother's permission for marriage. Marc describes Tracy as devoutly religious. They were living together, and Marc says sexual tensions were high. Tracy was vehemently opposed to sex before marriage, and

Marc was under pressure from Tracy to marry. Marc's mother's illness, combined with pressure from Tracy to marry her, led to Marc agreeing to marry Tracy. He also wanted his mother's sanction, in addition to her impending death, he also wanted to re-establish closeness with his mother given that they had never had a particularly close relationship because of his childhood circumstances. Marc recalls that his mother asked if Tracy was intelligent. This is an interesting recollection, as Marc and his mother had been involuntarily separated for the greater part of Marc's life. Yet, his mother knew him well enough to know that Marc needed to be intellectually stimulated. This memory also shows that Marc held onto his mother's observations, whether he consciously understood or not that his mother knew Marc to be intelligent. Intelligence was one of the prerequisites that Marc sought out in his relationships, and he refers to this trait in his current relationship.

Marc elaborates that he felt some sort of obligation to Tracy and her family and that, over time, he had formed a close relationship with Tracy's family. He got on well with them, and they became a surrogate family to him during some difficult and lonely times in his adult life. Marc's mother gave him her blessing before she passed away and encouraged Marc to marry Tracy.

*I discussed this with my mum, she may not have said exactly that, she just said how she felt about Tracy. But she did say she's a really good woman, and it's maybe a good idea. I didn't want to just go ahead with it because my mother said so, but I mean, I was faced with this thing. I think I was also vulnerable because I had a good relationship with her parents. I also felt some responsibility there because they looked after me in a very difficult time. My stepdad died, and my mother was so sick, so they were family before they were family in a way. Then, I just figured it was the easiest thing to do. Maybe now, I shouldn't have done it. I really don't know what to say about that situation. There were so many different emotions I was trying to deal with at the time. I was also working really long hours, there was a lot of pressure all round".*

This did not bode well for the marriage. Marc was initially emotionally invested in the marriage, but the cracks started to show when Marc started his career ascent. Marc was wildly successful as he climbed his career path. He was promoted again and again and rose up the ranks into more senior roles with greater responsibilities. The increase in responsibilities meant that Marc needed to focus more on work. He spent more and more time away from home, on business trips, and working long hours. He earned well and built up a vast collection of cars, lived in an expensive home, and, as he describes it, hedonistically enjoyed his financial success.

Marc, what was marriage like for you?

*Well, I was married for 20 years, so in those 20 years, there were really good times and bad times, and there were a lot of things in between. So, you know, we did love each other. I think we got married prematurely, but we did love each other. Marriage life for me was something that I was looking forward to. You know, I was building a career and. I was very*

*focused, and I jumped. There were quite often big jumps in my in my career path, and yeah, being married was, you know, was it a good support system? I think I had things to deal with that I wasn't aware of, and that most probably came from my youth. It started coming up into my marriage, into my private life, and I think it affected my marriage in a negative way.*

Marc, you tend to shoulder a lot of responsibility. This may be difficult for you in the context of the responsible role you assume, but would it be possible for you to entertain the thought that Tracy may have played in your marriage? What I have seen from our interviews is that you tend to assume a fairly responsible role in life, and I think that that is still a residue from your childhood. Have you considered that possibility?

*Well, looking back, you know, looking back now, yes, I can agree with you. Obviously, when you're in it, it's different.*

Can I ask you why? When you're in it, it's different?

*Well, I didn't. I wasn't maybe that fully aware of the role she was playing in the destruction of our marriage. It was always very evident, the role I was playing...*

Could you maybe consider the possibility that you're acting out could have been symptomatic?

*Yes, I thought it was symptomatic around my past and my youth and upbringing. But yes, I mean, things were strained between us. You know, I'm a very intimate person, and intimacy, and I'm not only referring to sexuality. I'm just saying intimacy and, closeness and togetherness is something that really drives me. It's my love language, so you know when there's a lack of that.*

*So, you start looking for it in different ways, to find intimacy in your friends and you'll find intimacy at social events, and then you find intimacy and other women. All the while, I was chasing the shadow in my life. That's what I alluded to earlier when I said I continuously tried to fix something that was outside of myself. The problem was actually part of the problem that was inside me. So, living from the inside out and not from the outside in. Obviously, there's two people in a relationship and it's never just a one-sided affair. I never really considered that because I thought it was because of my actions, my bad judgment of the things that I did, that ruined things. It's only years later when I am still interacting with the woman through my kids, that I realised what role she's also played also in those years. So, you know, it was toxic. It was a bit of a toxic relationship in a way.*

*Although there's been really good times, and we have two beautiful kids. Unfortunately, we didn't do them any favours.*

### 5.6.3 Tumult

Marc describes this period of his life, preceding the demise of his marriage, as intense: he seemed untouchable, omnipotent. He was, at the height of his career, wildly successful, a corporate maverick with the ability to motivate and drive his staff. The more invincible he felt, the more Marc pushed the boundaries, and he acted outrageously at corporate events and in meetings. He accrued a large group of friends whom he would pay to fly abroad with him for sporting events. No one could restrain Marc – he seemed invincible.

Marc started to split his personal life from his home life. He began having numerous affairs with women. He describes his home life as unfulfilled and how Tracy would turn his back on him in bed. Marc craved intimacy and sought it out in multiple encounters with women. When these women would fall in love with him, he would summarily end the relationship, maintaining that it wasn't part of the agreement. Ultimately, Marc resorted to paying for encounters with prostitutes, sometimes not having sex with them, merely sleeping with them for comfort. Marc ultimately became very ill after a series of these paid-for encounters. This period of his life would prove to be his undoing.

Marc was burning the candles at both ends, and the splitting that he had been able to maintain his entire life was becoming impossible to maintain.

Marc describes many lonely weekends when he discovers that he and his wife have little in common. He describes listening to music, making food alone, drinking and listening to music. He would turn the volume louder and louder, and Tracy would come in and turn the music softer.

Marc would drink more to try and obliterate what was happening, but this led to more and more arguments between Marc and Tracy, and they became further isolated. Marc is unable to communicate with his wife, and as time goes by, they end up living more and more separate lives. Marc is able to continue with his splitting, and his wife is unaware of any of his extramarital affairs. It reaches the point where Marc starts to get physically ill from his interactions, especially with the prostitutes. No medical expert could pinpoint what ailment he was suffering from. Marc believes that he is suffering from a spiritual malaise.

Marc discusses his personal life with one of his close friends, who encourages Marc to tell his wife the truth and come clean. The news is received very badly by Marc's wife, despite Marc's hopes that telling the truth would provide a fresh start. They agree to separate. Marc then moves out of the house. Tracy subsequently develops a medical condition, and between them, they decide that Marc will move back into the house to take care of her temporarily. Marc describes this as a period of trepidation and confusion. He is keenly aware of what he perceives as his wrongdoings, but Marc and Tracy are able to coexist in the family home as Marc takes care of Tracy and nurses her through her medical condition.

Their marriage is in a state of suspension, with both agreeing to be separated, yet they are not divorced, so the rules seem somewhat unclear. It is during this time that Marc is approached



through social media by a much younger woman. She pursues Marc, and Marc feels he was coerced into a relationship. This is an unsettling and confusing time for Marc as he's deeply lonely, he is looking for change, his marriage is in a state of flux, and he is now getting attention from a much younger woman. He admits to feeling flattered. He and Jane, the younger woman, embark on a series of adventures. Marc finds himself doing interesting and fun things that he never did in his marriage, and he admits to enjoying the time spent with this younger woman.

At the time, Marc remains married, although he is separated. Marc describes the relationship with Jane as feeling somewhat unsafe. Jane admits to Marc that an older relative has sexually abused her. Marc admits that he is much older than Jane and describes going to university to fetch her after classes. He admits with some embarrassment that he realises what it must have looked like and that he fits a stereotype.

*It was a combination of things. I started a new work endeavour. I had to start my own business, I was in a mess, and then there were all these relationships that I had over a period of time. All the other women. I ended up having a relationship with an 18-year-old girl. This is also when I started feeling so sick.*

Yes, that's when you described yourself as feeling physically sick, and you went to a number of doctors to try to find out why you were so sick, and nobody could figure it out.

#### 5.6.4 Deception

*I couldn't sleep, I. I started seeing these things at night in my room ... then, the one day I just said that's it, and then I stopped seeing the 18-year-old. Oh, there's so much that's happened. To this day, I think that Tracy and the 18-year-old were working together.*

You told me that because she was the one that said to you. "Oh. I've got you now". This was because her stepfather had abused her?

*Her mother's boyfriend? Yeah.*

Do you think Tracy did that to you, to catch you out?

*I think so, I remember she phoned Tracy, and they spoke like they knew each other. I can't really recall what happened. Tracy said the police had contacted her. They were concerned about this older man and this young girl. And then I, you know, I even said, OK, give me the policeman's number. Let me speak to him. There were so many things that were going on and there was no contact with them.*

It felt like a set-up to you?

Marc describes Jane (the 18-year-old) as toying with him. He describes how Tracy confronted Marc with evidence of his affair with Jane. Marc is completely astounded by Tracy's knowledge of his affair with Jane. Tracy seems to know an excessive amount of detail about the affair. Marc's suspicions are raised, and he admits that he thinks Tracy and Jane may have colluded in enticing him into a relationship. He believes that Tracy solicited Jane in order to test Marc

and to have a relationship with him in order to prove that he was untrustworthy. This is very distressing for Marc, as there are threats made by both Tracy and Jane that Marc will be reported to the police for having a relationship with a much younger woman. When the relationship comes to an end, Jane confesses to Marc that she's delighted she has caught him. She says to him that she has finally gotten her own back on an older man and that she has now gained victory.

*Yeah, then Tracy had to go for an operation. And she needed some time to recover. I had to move back and look after the kids. Maybe that was maybe where some of the healing started because I stopped going out. So, I was married, but I wasn't. You know, I was like helping with the kids, making sure there was food, and we had to get along. I think the kids saw that there was a relationship between me and her. I slept in the spare bedroom, but she came to visit. But then I couldn't do it anymore. I think after that period, it was a period of calming down, and we talked about things, and then we said that we're going to get divorced. After a few months, I moved out into my own place. And then I just stopped it all. I didn't date anyone. I didn't go out.*

*I just knew that there was stuff that I needed to do for myself. Things were starting to break in me. There was also some influence from a friend at that time. His wife cheated on him. He told me I needed to tell Tracy, so I told her everything that she deserved to know.*

This final affair seals the end of Marc's marriage. Marc is devastated, and he keenly feels the loss of his marriage, of his children, and of his family life. Marc enters into a very deep depression, and he attempts suicide. However, his suicide attempt is not successful: he is discovered semi-comatose and admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Marc is mortified at this. He speaks of this period with deep shame and embarrassment as he describes being diagnosed as bipolar. He is prescribed a number of what he calls numbing drugs. Marc describes his stay in the psychiatric hospital as devastating. He recalls that he cannot identify with anyone else in the hospital and that he feels he does not belong there. He manages to get himself discharged, and so begins a new chapter of life for Marc.

Tracy and Marc divorce and Marc moves into his bachelor flat. It is during this period that Marc loses his successful career. Marc's personal life and his professional life have collided, and he is no longer able to sustain the splitting. Marc embarks on a series of entrepreneurial ventures. He is successful at some of these ventures, but his last entrepreneurial venture resulted in great financial loss and placed Marc in dire financial straits. Marc reaches the point where he finds himself in deep debt and is unable to claw his way out.

### 5.6.5 Religion

During this time, Marc becomes devoutly religious. In some way, Marc feels that he has to redeem himself in God's eyes. Marc feels as if there is a lot that he needs to make up for. Religion is not new to Marc: he was exposed to religion at school and university. His religiosity is comforting to him, and he describes how he enjoys being part of a group of people who care. The religious group that Marc affiliates himself with consists of a number of people from different professions. Marc admits to having felt lost and that he drew great comfort from this group.

The group are well aware of Marc's financial and familial situation, and Marc finds a pseudo-family in this group. There is a sense of ritual and familiarity to their gatherings, and it anchors Marc. Understandably, Marc would want to find a family given that he had lost his own and especially given that he had such a volatile and chaotic home life. He believed that those practising religion would all have a similar value system, and he put his trust and faith in this group to provide solace and comfort during this very traumatic time, wherein he had lost everything: his family, his marriage, his career, his home, his financial wellbeing, and ultimately, himself.

Marc trusts the group so much that he entrusts a life policy to one of the members. As this is a period of great turbulence in Marc's life, he cannot accurately recall what the circumstances of this life policy are. Marc is in debt, and his financial situation is extremely precarious. He has a temporary job, which provides him with a very small income. At the same time, he is contributing financially to Tracy and the family, as well as trying to pay off his debt.

You describe a period of your life when you were very religious...

*Religion was always a part of my life, but yes, I became very religious. It was at this time when I started looking at my life and kind of cleaning things up. I became more entrenched in the Bible and going to church. In a way, it sort of aligned me. But I also started realising there's more. Like what is beyond religion? But it was a time of consolidation.*

You also talk about a betrayal that that happened, not because of God but because of the people involved in the church that. A group of people knew about an investment that you had, and they wouldn't release it until they thought you'd atoned. Or were you just sufficiently atoned?

*There was this group that I used to go to regularly. They were a bunch of guys, successful guys at the church. One of them worked at X Investment Group, and that's where my pension was invested. He knew exactly that my pension was there. They knew our stuff. I was struggling with money and even with work. I didn't even have money for food. They knew it. And then? They never told me that I could access that money to pay off my debt. I've never*

*really spoken to them about it. It's just what I've gathered, what I know now. That's what they did. They most probably wanted me to get my life right. I don't know.*

So, then you were able to access the funds after you found out you could. Tell me about what happened after that.

*I started to slow down a lot. I even got my sleeping patterns better because I could sleep again. I started doing exercise. Yeah, just, I was forced to slow down because I didn't have a car, so sometimes I had to walk wherever I wanted to go. So, maybe in a way, life was conspiring to put all of these factors together, because I had to go through this.*

### 5.6.6 Introspection

Marc enters a period of great self-introspection during this time and begins to do a lot of reading, research, and self-exploration. Marc weans himself off all medication. He questions his diagnosis as bipolar and begins to pray and meditate devoutly.

Marc finds himself at odds with some of the teachings of his religion and he begins to question both the religious aspects of the group as well as the group principles. This does not go down well with the group, and Marc begins to feel isolated. Despite the resistance from the group, Marc continues with his self-exploration and discovers a newfound spiritual awakening that seems to have far more resonance with him than the rigidity of the religious beliefs to which he has been exposed. Marc finds himself growing away from the group and it reaches the point where Marc begins to separate from them.

However, he retains a friendship with one member of the group. This member, John, takes Marc aside and explains to Marc that his life policy has matured and has been available to him for quite some time and that Marc had funds available in this policy. These funds would have alleviated a great deal of Matt's debt, yet the group had made a decision that Marc needed to learn his lesson and that he should be paying some kind of penance by suffering financially. The group had taken on the role of a deity, deciding when, where and how Marc was to be absolved. Unbeknown to him, Marc's fate was at the behest of this group. Marc was devastated when he found this out. Again, the familiar themes of betrayal surface again. He is betrayed by a family, albeit a pseudo-family.

This theme of betrayal continues with the rescue of Marc from his financial predicament by a friend at the time:

*You describe a friend of yours at the time. He was the one who then exposed the financial deceit and allowed you to gain access to that money. This same friend of yours betrayed you differently. You were very close to him, and you really thought he was there for you, but he ended up then going behind your back and pursuing your ex-wife.*

*Well, he was my friend. He understood investments and so forth. I met him through another thing. We just started spending time together and he said to me, "Let me have a look at your stuff. I can see you are suffering." And I said, I said, "Yeah, you can go for it." And he phoned me and said you can access this money.*

How did you feel? Were you angry? Did that affect your relationship with the church?

*Definitely, but it was in a time when I wasn't moving away from the church yet. I never thought that religion is a bad thing, but I think people make it a bad thing. How can you be so high and mighty? My friend was always asking questions about my life, he was always interested to know what's happened and what's gone wrong and this and that, and I shared some personal stuff with him. I never realised he was finding out stuff for himself. He was actually finding out information so he could manipulate the situation. So yeah, so that friendship then ended.*

It was to be this final deed that resulted in Marc cutting himself off from this religious family, and in so doing, Marc was free to start embarking on a journey of self-discovery. No longer held ransom by a familiar authoritarian figurehead that appeared in his life in different guises, Marc was now able to discover his depths fully. He returned to writing and he filled many diaries and journals with his thoughts, his poetry, his ruminations, and his prose.

During these dark, solitary days, Marc chose to introspect. He had lost contact with many of his friends who had been merely superficial, staying with Marc for his benevolence and his generosity. Marc also entered into a period of celibacy, and this further contributed to his clarity of thought in his introspective process. These were important times for Marc because he began to experience great change, but the change was his own doing, based on his values, his true north. Marc describes how he began to see his self-worth: celibacy was an important aspect of discovering his self-worth. Marc realised that his body was sacred and that to share a sexual union with another person was a sacred act. This was the start of Marc reclaiming his sexuality. Previously, it had been his rampant sexuality that had defined him. Mastering his sexual desires was a deeply liberating path for him. From this, Marc was finally able to experience his self-worth and, in so doing, begin to liberate himself from deeply held beliefs of shame he held of himself.

#### 5.6.7 Self-recrimination

However, Marc still suffers from enormous feelings of guilt. Marc had been hardwired as a child to make things right and Marc struggled with what he perceived as his wrongdoings. This is especially heightened when Marc made what he believes were so many mistakes in his life. The more mistakes Marc perceived himself to have made, the more ashamed and anxious he became. Marc lives with a constant undercurrent of generalised anxiety. I suggest that he may

unconsciously be reverting to his traumatic childhood of being violently punished for what often seemed like trivial mistakes. Marc admits that he wouldn't even allow himself to admit when he is unwell, as he would be punished for not attending school if he was ill. One particular incident such as this resulted in Marc collapsing at school, only then for his father to realise Marc was genuinely ill.

This belief system has taught Marc inherent feelings of guilt. During our interviews, Marc struggles as a guilty father, and he grapples with guilt over his infidelities during his marriage. It seems like Marc is always waiting for the proverbial axe to fall. Marc lives with the constant fear of being called out for doing wrong. Marc discovers in therapy that marriage is not a solitary road – that it is the sum of two individuals.

#### 5.6.8 Insights

I suggest to Marc that he had entered into a marriage out of duty, and therefore, he may have felt obligated. It dawns on Marc that he felt pressured by both Tracy and, indirectly, his mother by wanting to do the right thing before his mother died. Marc tends to forgive anyone else's wrongdoings, and for a large portion of his marriage, Marc was unable to see that Tracy did not fully participate in the marriage. For Marc, the sum of his infidelities completely blanked out any contribution that Tracy may have made to the demise of their marriage. Marc admits that if Tracy was indeed behind Jane's pursuance of him, then there was evidence in the marriage of Tracy's coercive and manipulative capabilities and that she was capable of lying. This is a turning point in Marc's narrative, as Marc begins to grasp that there are external loci of control. Marc appears ego-centric, not from a perspective of self-absorption but rather from the perspective of believing that the fate of everyone close to him, is around him is affected by his perceived wrongdoings and mistakes. Marc seems to persecute himself:

#### 5.6.9 Guilt

*There was no equilibrium in my life. I was moving from compartment to compartment and managing my chaos and I managed it really, really well. You see, running on that sort of treadmill, it goes all faster and faster and at some point, you lose the ability to balance it all. Then, because my life wasn't built on proper principles around that time, you know, it was a mess.*

*Guilt became like cause and effect, and back to the point where I say no man crumbles overnight. It doesn't matter who you are, you always know, whatever you are busy with, that's what the potential result could be. You know, that's where I have to take ownership of what's happened to me because I knew there were certain things I was doing. That were gonna [sic] eventually lead to a bit of a mess. Maybe subconsciously, I wasn't able to stop it because it was driven at a level which I maybe didn't understand at that time.*

*Now it's easy, not easy. But now, after I've done some work and I can look back, I can understand what was driving me, but I think the guilt comes in because there's, there's always collateral damage when an individual implodes, and that collateral damage was around my family, it was around my kids, was around my personal relationships. It was financially, and also my personal growth, my success, everything I worked for. I used to say to my dad, I don't know how it's gonna [sic] end, but I know it's gonna [sic] be spectacular.*

*There was the realisation that whatever I was busy with was not going to end well. There is guilt at a very certain level, my kids, when it happened were, it was in their formative years. It was when they were very young and could have sort of recuperated, or it was later in their life or in their 20s. You know they've gone through their development, and they've got a better capacity to maybe understand and process it. It was when they were really in their formative years, I was a very, very proactive dad. I was very active with the kids, you know, we were very close, so it sort of left a gap. It left a black hole. To this day, I feel the guilt of it, because I can see the effect of it in their lives.*

Marc struggles with guilt. At times, he is aware that this holds him back from actualising. However, he is now able to recognise the importance of individuation and separation from the other. Allowing others to take responsibility for their own actions absolves and liberates Marc from carrying their pain, disappointments, and mistakes. Marc was never allowed an opinion; he was always punished for it, first by his father and then by his ex-wife. Marc would then unconsciously find ways to express himself. He expressed his dissatisfaction with his marriage by engaging in infidelity. His religious group then punished him. Therefore, it is novel for Marc to raise an opinion that is contrary overtly.

This has the effect of creating an “over-correction” in Marc’s life. He suffers from a lack of boundaries, and this is especially evident in his relationship with his eldest son, Derek. Marc decided early on not to be like his father. He did not want to be cruel or violent. He wanted to embrace gentleness. Neither did he want to be a racist, as he had many arguments with his father over race. Marc did not want to use his fists to settle arguments. The legacy of this was that when Marc had his children, his forswearing of violence, rules, rigidity, and the absence of boundaries would come back to haunt him. Marc felt overwhelmingly guilty that he got divorced and believed he alone broke up the family. That, together with Marc’s decision never to be like his father, resulted in an unforeseen set of dynamics with his eldest son.

#### 5.6.10 Parenting

*Boundaries were not an issue when I was living in the house when I was married, you know, I was, I was quite strict, but I wasn't like anything like my dad was. There was a system running that was there was understanding, and then I think I started struggling with boundaries when I was out of the house, and my marriage ended. Only afterwards, I saw that, in a way, I was being emotionally manipulated and sort of blackmailed, sometimes knowingly, and sometimes unknowingly, by those that I loved. Because, you know, suddenly I was out of the house.*

*I wanted to see the kids, then they didn't want to see me, then they wanted to see me. Then, I am allowed to see them on one night. I have to make everything perfect and make sure it's perfect because I'm desperate for them to come back again. So, I think I just started sliding around it, and it was also very hard for me because setting up boundaries meant that I had to be very strict. Being very strict reminded me a lot about how I grew up, and I've realised now that those things showed up a bit of a trauma aspect for me. So sometimes, yes, I chose maybe the part of less, what's the word that I'm looking for...of less resistance. Always hoping that it'll make things better, you know.*

*My eldest son, Derek, was really difficult as a child. He hated school and would refuse to attend school. One of his teachers even said to me that I was going to have a difficult time getting him through school. He never wanted to go to school from an early age.*

Marc describes his relationship with his son as incredibly close – how they would sit together and listen to music and play endlessly in the swimming pool together. He describes his son as very affectionate and constantly seeking out his father. Derek's aversion to school became problematic when he insisted on changing schools frequently. It seemed that every time Derek had a negative interaction with a school friend and then subsequent altercations with girlfriends, Derek wanted a clean slate and a new school. Derek appeared unable to cope with social integration and interactions and turned to drugs to self-soothe.

#### 5.6.11 Boundaries

Marc was confronted with an impotence within himself. He was unable to stop his son's use of drugs. He had an incredibly soft spot for Derek, which was compounded by Marc's guilt at breaking up the family. In addition, Marc had an aversion to imposing discipline on his son for fear of losing whatever tenuous connection remained between the two of them. The relationship had become increasingly fractured since Marc had expressed his dislike of Derek's drug use. Nevertheless, Marc continues to find himself drawn into complicity around Derek's drug use. He explains that his children are his soft spot, and the last thing he ever wants to do is to jeopardise the relationship.

So, Derek continues to use drugs, and Marc turns a blind eye. Marc has negotiated this with himself as a way to keep his relationship with Derek intact. However, Marc begins to see that his lack of boundaries is beginning to impact his relationship with Jenny. Jenny has two children and is firmly boundaried. Her children have been exposed to a different value system, which is at odds with Marc's. Jenny chooses not to expose her children to Marc's approach as, although she loves him, she expresses her discomfort with Marc's liberal parenting.

Derek has become quite problematic for you. Derek has moved back home with you, and you took Derek away from his mother. This was because Derek had been sent to boarding school, which you were against, and Derek was experiencing trauma. However, you've also



described your distress at Derek moving in with you because he suddenly transformed into a boy that you no longer recognise. Not only that, but Derek has a number of habits and traits that you're not comfortable with. Can you describe this period of living with Derek and what it's been like for you?

*Me and Derek were very close. When I was still in the in the house with them, we were very, very close. We did a lot of things together. And when his mother and I separated and divorced, it really affected him severely, so much that he threatened to kill himself at school at a very young age. He was severely traumatised by us splitting up. Um, so there was a really difficult adjustment when I left the marital home. There were times when he would come and see me, and then sometimes, he wouldn't want to see me. Which was really hard for me, and as he grew a little bit older, we started realising that he was suffering with certain circumstances and certain activities and situations. He also became difficult to manage at school.*

*He also showed suicidal tendencies. He was dysfunctional in his relationships. Then there was a distance that was growing between him and his mother's relationship up to the point where she decided to send him away. I didn't agree to it, but that's what we decided. Him being away at boarding school, also knowing what I went through at boarding school, was really hard for me. He begged me to come home. That he had enough that, that things weren't going great. I was really torn between what was happening and what I was feeling, and what I was remembering from my own experience. So, I eventually decided to bring him back. Into my house, which had a profound effect on my personal life, my relationship, um, with my partner. Even my work life, my health. Derek came back damaged. It wasn't the same as it was before. I could see it and it was very hard for me to process that. I was always hoping that that little boy would come back. So, in this process, in this situation, I found myself being less boundaried, lacking the discipline, allowing him to most probably deteriorate further into bad habits that he picked up when he was sent away. I was continuously hoping that he would just show up and come back, that the boy would come back. In many ways, I almost lost myself, because I love him so much, and he means a lot to me. It's affected my life in a bad way, and so yeah, in coming back to live with me in a way, I believe that it saved him, but it's really destroyed me.*

### 5.6.12 Self-reflections

Marc's good looks and his natural charm with women resulted in a lifelong push and pull/difficulty/obsession with women. Marc describes his interactions with women as an eternal quest to find intimacy. However, this pursuit of intimacy was often unfulfilled, and Marc was left feeling empty and unrequited.

Marc's pursuit of women and their reciprocal pursuit and attraction to him led to Marc sabotaging his marriage, his career and, in Marc's eyes, his own family. After Marc's numerous infidelities were confessed to his wife, Tracy told the children of their father's indiscretions, and Marc remains convinced that it was he alone who broke up the family. Yet, during our sessions, it became apparent that Marc never fully trusted Tracy - he saw that she could lie. Marc describes her as cold, and because of this, their lives take separate paths:

*Tracey was really cold towards me. All I ever wanted was physical touch, a hug. She would turn her back on me in bed. I started doing my own thing, listening to music outside on the veranda, turning the music up. She would come out and turn it down, and I would turn it up again, and I would drink to shut things out.*

The colder Tracy became, the more compelled Marc was to seek intimacy and comfort from other women. Marc yearns for a friendship with his then-wife, and in the absence of that, he starts to unravel, drawing on his ability to split or compartmentalise. He becomes a workaholic, throws himself into corporate functions, and takes on a heightened position of leadership, in which he can motivate his team to become the most highly successful team in the company. He is flying by the seat of his pants, and his sense of invincibility and willingness to break protocol and boundaries aids him in his success. He feels like Icarus, flying too close to the sun.

Marc's easy way with women, his natural charm and his good looks got him into trouble, as he explains it. These traits had a cascade effect on his career, as his quest to find intimacy and unconscious desire for sexual self-mastery led to career sabotage. It was an eventual coalescing of his personal life with his professional life and the intrusion of unconscious desires into his conscious world that caught up with Marc. There have been a series of signposts along Marc's path. The storyline seems the same but with different characters. Marc is repeatedly identified as a leader, in various guises, as head boy, numerous promotions at work, and identified as a leader within his church group.

#### 5.6.13 Self-sabotage

Marc reflects on many of these lost opportunities with a great deal of regret and frustration. Marc asks "why", as he is keenly aware of his ambition and drive yet is unable to harness it.

This consistent theme in Marc's life is a vignette of the head boy scenario. Marc is identified as a leader, and his traits are recognised and validated. Yet, Marc is unable to step into the role because of his father's negative traits and the concern that the teachers had over what influence Marc's father would have over his leadership role. Therefore, Marc remains trapped in a Sisyphean dilemma. If he embraces and succeeds in a position of leadership and prominence, what negative consequences will he bring to others, and will he expose his father? Marc remains trapped in an eternal cycle of shame, doomed to maintain his father's reputation and, in so doing, perpetually sacrificing himself.

Marc describes his fracture in midlife as stemming from a hole in his heart. This led him to seek solace in sex, drugs, and alternately both riding the crest of his career, with a devil-may-care attitude and a fearlessness and then having to face the consequences thereof.

Marc describes numerous examples of self-sabotage:

*I don't think anyone crumbles overnight. I don't know, maybe this thing in me has been there from the start.*

*Now that I can look back, I know exactly what it was. At that stage, I was thinking I was looking for something outside of me to fill the hole that was inside. It has a lot to do with what's happened to me when I was a young boy, and I was never good enough so always trying to find that outside of me. So, I started to look for risks in life. I even used to drive on the highway with the lights off to see how fast I can go.*

*The funny thing was that I was able to work well in my job. I really did well, but there were issues in my social life that were worrying.*

*....in between all of that, diagnosed as bipolar. A lot of medicine doesn't go well with alcohol. So, in a way, it was a bit of a time bomb, and then the bomb eventually went off.*

## **5.7 Epiphanies**

### **5.7.1 Transition**

Marc is struck by his own insights. These insights and inner exploration lead Marc to a place of both vulnerability and strength. He describes his feelings of acute vulnerability at revealing aspects of his life. Yet he sees the benefits of opening these hitherto locked areas.

It seems that Marc has been on an eternal search for safety. Subconsciously, the search is for the safety of being himself, free from the hypervigilance of reading others, free to be accepted for himself. He describes the journey of how he comes to acquaint himself with himself and his value system. These insights are mirrored in several areas of his life. Marc discovers who he is in relation to his new partner. He finds a sense of purpose in a different career. He moves away from religion to a spiritual awakening. He experiences a change in relationship with his children and ex-wife. He confronts his guilty father syndrome and finds release from indebtedness and guilt with his ex-wife. Marc's finances start improving, and he experiences a reinstatement of status. He still admits to grappling with regret at his loss of career status and his previous earning capacity. These are themes that surface frequently in our interviews.

*You know, I read this book that had a big influence on my life. It's intertwined with Christianity. It's about the wounds men have, and they almost always somewhere pick up the wound, mostly from their father. They see themselves falling short. These things that make them a man. Like you know, wanting to rescue people, we are programmed to rescue. There's a lot of you that's damaged and broken. You start looking outside and then I started looking inside. I saw it. I could understand this book because I started realising, oh, that's why I acted like this all my life. I was constantly looking for approval, constantly looking for it. Even those times when it was like I was hunting, you know? Because I wasn't living from the inside out, almost living from the outside in this problem. Things never change but*

*if you make changes inside you for yourself, then it will take those things to make the changes.*

What are some of the fundamental changes you made for yourself?

*Oh, it's respect for myself and respect for who I am to focus on the why. Not the how and the what and to basically learn from the inside out. Like I said before, you don't cheat on somebody because you have a girlfriend. You don't cheat because that's not what you do. It's not because of another person. You do it because of you. I also started gaining more self-respect for what I have to offer and to question who I am and what makes me special.*

You have spoken a lot about not feeling good enough. It sounds like you are the one who needs to give yourself this validation? Or the inner knowing that who you are is enough?

## 5.7.2 Spiritual awakening

*Oh, you got it. I kept on saying. Who am I? Who am I really? Then it started for me this way that I'm a child of God, that grew to understanding that the power lies in me. I'm part of the great, the whole.*

It also sounds like a spiritual awakening as well as a spiritual connection that happened because of your journey through the church, but not exclusively. That you found yourself, your inner path home and that was a very important launching point for you. That it led to you improving your life?

*That's why I said it all started there, and it sort of started to layer. Because as I was sort of dealing with one issue and working through it. Then, there was growth.*

So where are you now?

*A very good space.*

Tell me about this.

*So, what happened to me was that as I started getting back into myself. I started attracting things that were more for me. I first had a relationship with somebody I knew from university, and it was a good relationship in one sense. But then it was also toxic. What made it good was that I realised that I was ready to love again and that I was good enough. That I could love again. There was also a spiritual growth going on that assisted me to move beyond where I was. After that relationship was over, I was ready for the next stage of my life, and that's when I met this new woman. I believe it was someone that I manifested. I had an idea of the type of woman I wanted to meet and then it happened, and she was what I had imagined and dreamt of. Then, there were things at work that also started to cement. I started really doing better there. I started being able to focus. There was a lot of power in my life that was falling into place. You know this woman has made a huge difference. This is hard for me to say, but I often hear men say they want a strong woman, and I mean, they don't want that strong woman, but for me, it's true. I wanted this.*

*I asked for it. Always say you want the queen. Because, unlike a princess, the queen is an equal, you know. I've always wanted this as a partner. Then I know, that in some areas, I'm strong, in some areas, she will be strong. It's like when you put your fingers through like this (intertwines his fingers). It makes it stronger, but then also with the understanding that it will challenge you. But I also know that I need to be challenged because I can get complacent, and I do procrastinate with certain things.*

You have told me that in your life, you have been criticised for being too intense. I think that's been a theme that you've been told you've been too much, too intense to this, to that. The way you describe it, it sounds like you feel safe, and you feel supported in this relationship, and you feel like you can rest.

Marc admits that every single day of his life, he awakens with a feeling of dread and anxiety and a depressed state. Yet he presents as cheerful, positive, and optimistic. He explains that he has taught himself to counter these feelings as he would never have survived life without doing this. The longer he remains in his current relationship, Marc begins to confront these repressed feelings. The sanctuary of his relationship is teaching him vulnerability and the possibility of being emotionally safe in a relationship for the first time in his life.

Marc is initially disconcerted by this vulnerability surfacing and the possibility of experiencing congruence in his feelings, not having to mask his feelings, emotions, or reactions. He is constantly surprised by the novelty of not being hypervigilant regarding his self-expression nor constantly safeguarding and monitoring his feelings with his partner. This congruence is initially frightening and unfamiliar to Marc. He describes it as a tightness or pain in his chest that builds up, and he has now come to recognise that these are signs of unexpressed emotions or anxiety. He finds comfort in discussing the build-up with his partner, Jenny, and together they talk it through. Marc is also becoming familiar with expressing his feelings in what he describes as the sanctuary he finds in his therapy sessions. The safe space in which he can express himself in therapy is becoming familiar, and he trusts himself enough to extend that into his relationship with his partner. Discussing his emotions, a previously taboo subject, is now a territory that is being entered into with delicacy and some trepidation. Marc needs reassurance and nurtures to ensure that his feelings will not be seen as weakness, nor that he will be punished for them. However, the learned behaviour of shutting his feelings off remains strong, and Marc must consciously remind himself that he is permitted to talk about his feelings.

Marc took a decision early on not to be like his father. He did not want to be cruel. He wanted to embrace gentleness. He did not want to be a racist, as he had many arguments with his father over race. Marc did not want to use his fists to settle arguments. The legacy of this was that when Marc had his children, his forswearing of violence, rules, rigidity, and boundaries would come back to haunt him.

Marc continually feels overwhelmingly guilty that he got divorced and believes he alone broke up the family. That, together with Marc's decision never to be like his father, resulted in an unforeseen set of dynamics with his eldest son. Marc has a strong desire to reduce these guilty feelings and to gain some perspective on this dynamic.

### 5.7.3 Happiness

Marc describes his relationship with Jenny and speaks of “coming home”:

*Jenny is very special to me. I met Jenny when I was at the stage of my life when I found myself again. I was back on my feet, life was flowing through me again, and this beautiful universe brought us together. I wanted somebody that makes love to love, and if I must define Jenny in those few words, that is her. She also brought a few realisations into my life that I didn't have before. For the first time, I realised what they mean when they're saying that your lover should be your best friend because she is. Also, what it means to say that you make Love, and it's not just sex. It's really making love. Then, on a spiritual level, to be so connected to somebody. So much deeper than anything else that you've had ever in your life. So, in many ways, Jenny is multi-layered, in so many beautiful ways, she's my friend, She's my lover. She's my confidante and my queen. She's highly spiritual, which is such a beautiful thing. She lives for experiences, she's living for laughter. She's living for love because she knows herself. She's experienced a lot of pain and hurt and has evolved through her process to meet me in that beautiful space where we met each other. So, words cannot really describe or define what Jenny is to me.*

Marc is surprised to discover himself in his new relationship. He finally feels that he has met someone who he is worthy of and that this worthiness is reciprocated, as Jenny validates Marc's worth. Marc describes with deep emotion the depths of his relationship with Jenny - how they are the best of friends, the freedom that he experiences in the relationship and that this freedom extends to Marc being his authentic self, even if that authentic self presents as sad, vulnerable, or depressed. Marc experiences feelings of liberation, adventure, fun, intellectual compatibility, and great happiness in his current relationship.

Marc feels that he has finally paid the price for mistakes made in his life and that after doing the necessary internal work. Whether this was through periods of solace, darkness, or introspection, it led him to a place where he was able to make choices based on his own needs and desires versus coming from a place where Marc was dictated to by his unresolved impulses.

He describes for the first time in his life that his partner does not curtail him. He finds in Jenny a playmate, someone who is willing to go on adventures, someone who matches his emotional intensity. But most of all, Marc is struck by the sacredness of their sexual union. This was a quest for him, and finally, with Jenny, he finds what he calls home. Marc describes himself as being utterly committed to Jenny: no other woman exists, and he only has eyes for her.

He describes Jenny as fulfilling many needs that had been unanswered for him thus far. Jenny is nurturing. She teaches him self-care, an aspect of himself that he has been totally unfamiliar with. Initially, Marc finds it a challenge to be this vulnerable as he has been taught that to show

vulnerability equals weakness and he has spent his entire life trying to conquer any signs of weakness or vulnerability. This was the legacy of his father.

Marc opens up to Jenny and is both surprised and validated by her support of him. She encourages him to challenge long-held beliefs that were mired in guilt. Marc and Jenny grapple with differing boundaries. Marc explains how he and Jenny have some difficulties in negotiating Marc's boundaries or Jenny's perceived lack of boundaries in Marc's life.

At times, Marc finds himself becoming defensive when Jenny points out that Marc tends to put his own needs last. Marc explains that as a father he does need to put everybody else first, especially his family. However, Marc does question whether he needs to remain deeply apologetic to his ex-wife and has stopped doing certain chores, such as looking after the family dog and house-sitting for Tracy when she goes away. Jenny points out the inappropriateness of Marc sleeping in Tracy's bed when he is house-sitting, and Marc begins to realise that, indeed, some boundaries are too lax and that he is allowed to say no.

Marc stops making excuses and apologising to his ex-wife for being able to afford holidays. Jenny points out to Marc the largesse of the gift that Marc is about to bestow on his youngest son for his birthday. Marc had a collection of very expensive cufflinks, and when Marc fell upon hard times, he was forced to sell a lot of his personal belongings. However, he had kept back one or two items that were of great value to him. For his youngest son's teenage birthday, Marc had decided to give James, his youngest son, the gift of these remaining cufflinks. To Jenny, it seemed like an inappropriately large gift for a birthday that didn't have the gravity of an eighteenth or a twenty-first birthday.

In Jenny's eyes, Marc's children tended to capitalise on his feelings of being a guilty father and, seen through Jenny's eyes, it seems that Marc was being taken advantage of. Marc describes this as being particularly difficult to hear as he deeply loves his children and would give them anything that they asked. Marc describes Jenny's frustrations as he navigates the path between beginning to put up new boundaries and allowing himself to accrue material things. With Jenny, Marc begins to enjoy a whole new world. Marc says Jenny encourages him to participate in life and to move away from being self-sacrificial.

#### 5.7.4 Self-awareness

This has the uncomfortable effect of Jenny holding Marc accountable for feeling guilty about going on holiday, buying himself clothes, or, in general, doing things for himself. Marc admits that he does struggle with this, and he realises that he's been shaped a lot by his life falling apart, the loss of significant income and his guilt at feeling that he could not provide sufficiently for his children.

It remains difficult for Marc to spend money on himself, and there remains a residue of Marc apologising or feeling guilty for enjoying the good things in life. It seems that in Jenny, Marc has found a woman that, as he describes, he has been looking for his whole life:

*Jenny woke up my spirituality, this spirituality that I started to go into after everything fell apart. I collected photos of a woman who looked like Jenny, but I didn't know it at the time, and I never knew why. I used to collect photos of black cats, and I never knew why. Until I met Jenny, and she had a black cat that she loved so much. I know this was a sign I had been looking for. It was like a divine sign that I knew Jenny existed before I even met her.*

The first gift that Jenny bought Marc was a pair of shoes. Marc had been wearing the same pair of shoes for about five years. He'd had them repaired many times, and although they were well polished, they were worn. They seemed to symbolise an era or a chapter in Marc's life, and with the gift of a new pair of shoes, the symbolism was profound for him. Marc admits to loving beautiful suits, shoes and shirts and that Jenny awakens in him the desire to embrace parts of his old life without the destruction that was omnipresent in his old life.

Marc is beginning to see that it is possible to integrate parts of his old life into his new life, that he is allowed to enjoy the finer things in life, that he does not need to be an apologist, and that others have their role to play as well, and that he is not entirely responsible for the wellbeing of others.

#### 5.7.5 Epiphanies

Reflecting on your process, you had your religious period, you had your period of introspection, you started dating again, and you met somebody very important to you. You speak a lot about self-awareness, which has come into play now. Things that you can now reflect on and look back on and have perspective on what's happened to you, whereas you didn't have the insights or liberty to do that before. I'm wondering what some of the epiphanies are that you have discovered about yourself during this process that have gotten you from a midlife crisis to a point of transcendence?

*Well, I think when, when everything happened, there's a few things that played a role after I left. I left the house, my ex-wife had had an operation and she needed help, and I moved back in. I stayed in the spare room. She needed help of the kids. So, we, like, we were not married, but we were responsible for the children in a way it helped us to relate to each*



*other in that area. It also had a really good effect on the whole separation and divorce, friction and potential issues that would have come out of it because we were sort of forced to live as adults together.*

*We had to focus on the kids and put our differences aside. So, I think that that was one of the areas that helped me. So, when I moved out the second time, I was a lot calmer and more focused around the principles of maintaining a good relationship with the kids and with my ex-wife. I also knew what I wanted in life, and I realised that I need, there's these areas of my life that I needed to explore and understand why certain things happened in my life. Also, through self-introspection and reading books and, and yes, the religious experience helped up to a point.*

*I started sort of putting this picture together around the wound, that there was this inner healing that I needed. I stopped dating. I didn't see anyone. I spent a lot of time on my own. I spent a lot of time growing. Writing, writing helped really a lot, and reflecting and started working on, on myself internally up to the point where I could actually face the world and face the things that's happening around me and be my own entity, and not be affected by it. This was part of the process which then opened me up two or three years later, the ability for me to start dating again.*

*Then when I did meet this very special person that I'm currently with. It was almost like it was the next layer for me to, to start working through because obviously then in a relationship, you know, when there's two people close, there's a lot of things that come up. There are shadows, and there's triggers and there's trauma that presents itself. So, it's been a journey for me. There was an initial journey where I sort it out, you know, the pain inside of me, the hole, the gap, whatever you want to call it, that was inside of me.*

*Then I moved on to start drilling deeper and going deeper and starting to do the finer work the, the areas where you know one could lie so easily to yourself or that you avoid or. That you don't even know exists. That has been my journey is to see myself clearer, to start feeling myself and not to act my feelings, but to feel my feelings because I've come to realise that's what I used to do. I used to act out how I feel and that made me feel better, and that's how I managed a lot of my emotions.*

*Then, for a while, I stopped acting out how I feel, but I also didn't totally feel what I feel. I don't know if it makes sense. So, that caused certain frustration and, pressure and stress in me, and I think it came to a point where my body also told me it's enough. I'm now in a space where I'm learning to be with my feelings, act on it, but maybe to talk, to talk about it or understand it. To learn some empathy around when I deal with inner self even, you know, even my, my younger self and the mistakes that I've made and what's to my... I don't know if that answers your question, but there's actually a lot going on in that area right now.*

*I'm really most probably the best place that I've ever been if I look at myself, and I make sense. So, I mean, I still have anxiety around things. I still feel fearful around certain things. Physically, I have been sick. I'm not one hundred percent well, yet, I can still feel the pressures like I've always done. But it's possible for me to take a step back and look at it and understand it better, maybe, than I ever done before my life. I don't have the, the need any more to just act on it, and it's really difficult for me because I'm, because I know I've never done it, and I've never allowed myself to talk about it or about it.*

*It's almost like it's poised. It's beautifully poised, and it's okay, it's okay to feel the fear. Sometimes it's okay to feel that anxiety and to have someone that you can share it with, it's quite frightening sometimes because you're always expecting there's that sort of program that's, that's installed in you over a period of time that you're expecting a person to react to, to some of the things, but it's, it doesn't happen. It's actually really a beautiful place, and it's a good place to be.*

## CHAPTER 6: THE LIFE STORY OF KATE

### 6.1 Personal data

Participant	:	Kate
Age	:	45
Field of Occupation	:	Beautician
Research Setting	:	The interviews were conducted at the research participants' beauty salon. The salon is small and intimate, and we are surrounded by the tools of Kate's craft, with tranquil music from Kate's phone streaming in the background. The interviews were scheduled when Kate did not have clients.

### 6.2 Identified themes

The researcher identified the following themes in Kate's life story:

- Family life
- Trauma
- Sublimation
- Isolation
- Alcohol Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Traumatic school years
- Religion
- New relationships
- Loss
- Shame and outsider status
- Midlife Crisis
- Unhappy marriage
- Spiritual/Sexual epiphany
- Taking control
- Extrication from marriage
- Regret
- Betrayal
- New love and sexual liberation
- Epiphanies

### 6.3 Introduction

In this chapter, Kate's story is related in transcribed excerpts, and the researcher's input and observations are included to allow for a fuller context of the data. Emergent themes pertinent to a midlife journey are identified. It may be seen that some of these themes extrapolated are not mutually exclusive and that the themes are shaped and coloured by the researcher's lens and responses during the interview. Therefore, these themes are not deemed to represent a finite truth about the participant's reality but rather an in-situ narrative that is influenced and enhanced by both researcher and participant. Every story of midlife has its own countenance and will, therefore, be different. This story is not meant to represent a finite nor absolute truth about all midlife stories and remains an experiential narrative.

Kate fills the room with her vivaciousness. She is a petite brunette with a quick smile, sparkling eyes, bouncy curls, and an ever-present cigarette. Her favourite stance when she is thinking is to cross one arm under her elbow and hold the cigarette up to the side of her face. Kate speaks quickly and is highly articulate, she is fascinated by the field of psychology and has taken it upon herself to learn as much as she can about psychology and has undertaken several courses in her quest for self-growth. She is particularly interested in Jungian psychology and dream analysis. Her psychological insights give the telling of her life story an added layer of depth, as Kate offers insights and her own analysis into her experiences.

Kate is generous and open with her stories and experiences about life. There is no defensiveness to her narrative, no area of her life is off limits. Our interviews are filled to the brim with her input, and we often run out of time. I get the impression that Kate thoroughly enjoyed engaging in analytic discourse, and even when we tackled the grittier areas of her life, she displayed resilience and tenacity to push through and understand as opposed to becoming defensive and reticent. The interviews with Kate are different to other interviews, as I do not have to ask questions to solicit information from Kate. The format of our interviews is characterised by allowing Kate to talk freely, without interruption. Kate's narrative is convoluted, and it's clear that there is much that Kate needs to say. I sense that Kate has been hitherto unable to fully articulate what she has needed to, less so be heard. The opportunity to talk, be heard and make sense of her life story feels like oxygen to Kate. Her deep desire to articulate all the details and fill our interviews with as much detail as possible fills our interviews with an air of breathlessness. The stories and their themes loop in and out of each other, sometimes with no clear separation or delineation. Kate's trauma laces our interviews:

## 6.4 Family life

Kate, I am interested in your family life. Do you have siblings? What was your experience of childhood?

*Mum was married to a man and had two daughters by him. Apparently, he was diagnosed as a schizophrenic or a psychopath, sorry, yeah, and then my dad, in the meantime, was married and had four sons, and then they got together, and they had me. So, I was the "laatlammetjie" in the family (Afrikaans for "little lamb", or child born when there is a significant gap between the ages of the older siblings). The brothers were living with me, and my two sisters were living with us.*

So, were you the only child that was a product of your parents' relationship?

Kate immediately launches into her family life, and this sets the tone for the remainder of our interviews. Kate is forthright. There is no preamble, and Kate's narrative is, at times, bracing.

*Yes, yeah, but my dad got custody of the boys right because the boys were also kind of like abused in their teens and even when they were younger than teens. They were used as sexual toys in the family. Their mother was doing things to them and, yeah, and getting her friends over. One day, my dad came home. I don't know if this is the whole story, but it was the story that was told, so I don't know if this is true, but this is the story. He came home one day, and one of his boys was in the bath with another lady naked. You know, it was very inappropriate, and well, I'm just going also by word of mouth, but it could have been when my mom married my dad. The youngest brother was three, Nik and then the oldest brother, I think, was fourteen or thirteen or twelve. So, from three to about 14, they were very sexual. They were actually sexualised, and so that obviously makes sense as to why then it was completely normal for them to start having sexual relations with me and my sisters, although not my older sister.*

*She (my older sister) told me that when they did try that, she told them to know, you know what. She was obviously older, and she knew what the heck was going on, but we were much younger. I have moments where I cannot remember, but I know that it did happen. I've also gone into hypnosis, and I've also gone into moments of remembering the exact bedspread. I even remember somebody climbing on me, and I remember the fear. I can go back there, you know, and go through the stories that my sisters told me about the brothers. I also remember bits and pieces of what happened to me.*

### 6.4.1 Trauma

Kate speaks rapidly, almost without pausing for breath. She smokes with intensity and gesticulates frequently, and in her recall, the trauma is evident. It seems as if it's cathartic for Kate to talk. Sensing this, I allow Kate to talk uninterrupted. She is often upset after our interviews but discloses that it feels good to be allowed to speak. She takes comfort in my disclosing that her story is real, that I am listening intently, and that I am touched, impacted, and deeply moved by her pain. Kate often remarks that telling her story in this way is healing for her. She admits that it has been a lifelong desire of hers to tell her story. Our interviews are also inspiring for her to write her own story.

Kate continues to describe her life story with what seems like feigned nonchalance, but it is clear that she is disturbed and upset by what has transpired.

*So yeah, that's what it was like growing up. It is the kind of thing that, when you think about it, your early sexual experiences then shut you down sexually. It was like you are robbed of the freedom to be your sexual self. Yeah, it definitely did it. I was definitely affected. I was obviously afraid of boys, but when I went to school, even the boys in school knew that something had happened to me because I must have had something in me that attracted the boys to me.*

Kate describes the next part of her narrative with a sense of feigned indifference, which I have come to recognise as false bravado. I steel myself as I sense she is going to reveal further pain, and I am conscious of remaining calm and supportive. I find myself consciously composing myself to adopt a relaxed and responsive stance. I listen intently, acutely aware of not putting Kate off her stride with any conscious or unconscious reactions:

*I would also try things, you know, sexually. Yeah, and I had a bully, a boy bully in my school who used to pull me by my pubic hair. Yeah, I remember that, and then also, once on the bus, a boy also just stuck his hand in, and you just go along with it. You can't do anything about it. Yes, I've had a lot of that experience, and then, obviously, I became a little bit promiscuous. I can't remember exactly, but I did have maybe two encounters before I met my boyfriend at 16. Then, I enjoyed sex with him from about sixteen to eighteen when I was with him. I really enjoyed sex with him, and he was a good guy, but he was just a little bit also mad, like off his rocker. His dad also tried to fiddle with my breasts once when I was on the telephone, so obviously there's something in you, yeah, that they know, that says I can do this, you also.*

#### 6.4.2 Sublimation

Kate has rationalised that because she was subjected to sexual abuse as a child, it seemed to mark her out as visible to others, who would then further perpetuate abuse or who would engage in inappropriate sexual behaviour with her. She holds an inherent belief that these abusers can sense that she is sexually primed because of her childhood abuse. Kate is acutely aware that her sexuality has been prematurely awakened and that she is sexualised and describes herself as promiscuous. It's difficult to hear Kate's stories. I allow my mind to wander, and I reflect that she must have felt so alone. Physically, she was primed to respond sexually, psychologically, and emotionally. She felt powerless in the face of her sexual compulsions and frozen in her inability to fend off these abusers. I feel very sad and empty after these reflections, and in my mind's eye, I see a confused and lost teenager harbouring a lot of secrets. Kate is keen to continue talking, but we are both fatigued, and I feel emotionally blunted by Kate's stories. We agree to continue in our next interview.

In our next interview, Kate continues to fill me in on her family life. I am curious about her relationship with her parents.

*What type of relationship did you have with your parents? I recall you having a good relationship with your mother but that you did not feel the same way about your father? In fact, I recall you saying you despised your father?*

*Yes, he was mean, he would dilute the flipping tomato sauce. I actually imagined myself stabbing him in his neck with a pair of scissors when he sat in his chair watching TV. When I was eleven, my mom had breast cancer, so I was like, I felt very alone. My family, my brothers and sisters, had already moved out of the house. They got married and already had children.*

### 6.4.3 Isolation

*So, I was alone. I kind of grew up alone as the kids started leaving the house, so I went through a little bit of an abandonment, and when my mom got breast cancer, she was very sick, and I can't remember anybody ever explaining to me that she's not going to die, but she smelled terrible.*

*She was getting chemo, she was losing her hair, she looked terrible. I didn't know if I was gonna [sic] come home from school and if she was going to be there. You know there was no one that you could ask. I don't even know if there was anybody that even told me what was going on.*

Kate seethes when she describes her father. The rage that she has towards him is barely contained, and I get a real sense of how she experienced him growing up. The sense that I had of Kate's loneliness in our previous interview was accurate. She identifies with her childhood abandonment and the visceral sense of acute loneliness in her confusion and distress at her mother's cancer diagnosis and how shut out and scared she felt. I feel a compulsion to explain to Kate that her acts of rebellion were a cry for help, but again, I am conscious of allowing Kate to hold the space. Kate, I am learning, has been nullified, dismissed, minimised and unheard for most of her childhood and adolescence and as her story unfolds, I realise for most of her life. My insights at these junctures would further perpetuate that. I choose to save my insights for later.

*I don't know if I might have forgotten it or the trauma, but I remember my dad was always the guy in the corner in the sitting room with his newspaper. Sometimes, he would just say leave your mom alone. She's sleeping. So, I never went into the room, I never spoke to her, never. I can't even remember if I ever even brought her a glass of water. It sounds so lonely, but now I'm also thinking about was I good to my mother? Was I good? "I was very rebellious and very angry" that's what my mom said to me.*

*She remembers that I was very angry during those times, so I must have maybe been awful to her when she had breast cancer. I'm only thinking about it now, just talking about it.*

Kate becomes deeply emotional at this realisation. She becomes very tearful as she reflects upon her younger self through adult eyes. It's deeply moving to see Kate put together the pieces

of her life. Her insights are further given depth by Kate's inherent emotional intelligence and her many years of self-study in the field of psychology and personal development.

#### 6.4.4 Sexual Abuse

*Think about it, if you look at it now with adult eyes, I mean you were being sexually abused left, right and centre, everywhere you went, you're getting sexual attention, you are sexually abused at home. Of course, you were going to be angry. Also, a little 11-year-old girl is not gonna [sic] understand what her mother's going through. There's no way to explain it. Also, my dad was mean. He was not always mean, but he was just not there.*

I say to Kate that her father sounds remote and cold. It's difficult to interject when Kate speaks, as she speaks rapidly, and her emotions run high:

*I don't know if I might have forgotten it or the trauma, but I remember my dad was always the guy in the corner in the sitting room with his newspaper. Sometimes, he would just say leave your mom alone. She's sleeping. So, I never went into the room, I never spoke to her, never. I can't even remember if I ever even brought her a glass of water. It sounds so lonely, but now I'm also thinking about was I good to my mother? Was I good? "I was very rebellious and very angry" that's what my mom said to me.*

She remembers that I was very angry during those times, so I must have maybe been awful to her when she had breast cancer. I'm only thinking about it now, just talking about it.

#### 6.4.5 Family life

Kate becomes deeply emotional at this realisation. She also becomes very tearful as she reflects upon her younger self through adult eyes. It's deeply moving to see Kate in the moment, put together the pieces of her life. Her insights are further given depth by Kate's inherent emotional intelligence and her many years of self-study in the field of psychology and personal development. I am struck by the profundity of Kate's insights and her self-compassion and understanding.

#### 6.4.6 Alcohol abuse

When I say to Kate that her father sounds remote and cold, she describes what it was like when he would drink to excess:

*Yes, he was remote and cold, and we could never really have a good conversation. I never felt any love, you know. He would get even meaner if he had whiskey at night. He would then get all snappy and stuff like that, and then my mom and him would fight, and she'd throw the whiskey down, down the drain and stuff like that.*

This memory of Kate's father drinking to excess triggers childhood memories of her early school years. Kate's face flushes, and she launches forth into a lengthy recall of her school

years. These rapid-fire recalls explode with tension and alacrity. I have come to learn that I need to allow Kate to “spill”. That in her verbiage, she processes. Her unstoppable flow of recall eventually settles. When the storm has passed, she provides an analysis of her experiences and is able to make sense of her experiences. It’s a fascinating process to witness, and I find myself curious and expectant about her insights. These prolonged recalls resemble free association with Kate threading through and defining the narrative. I do find myself inadvertently steeling myself as Kate’s trauma is severe, and often, there are no lead-up or warning cues as to what Kate will reveal next. It’s painful to hear Kate’s stories, and again, I find myself upset at her isolation and loneliness.

## 6.5 Traumatic school years

*So, I failed standard four, and when I think about it, that's when I was just a little baby. I failed because I was just out of it all the time. They saw my school reports...I must have just disconnected. Nobody noticed that I checked out except the teacher. Yeah, no, the teachers were also horrible, though. They hated me, but there was hatred because I was also rebellious. So, I used that energy for anger and rebellion. I even once spat on the teacher's shoes, you know, so I was hated by the teachers. That was my high school.*

*I used to go and spend a lot of time with the boys. That's when that boy used to pull me by my pubic hair, and the older boys would give me money and say call me when you're older. At that point, I also looked like the lady from Dirty Dancing, you know the movie? I was very attractive, so I am this new girl, and the boys found me very attractive with my bob cut to here (Kate indicates that her hair was cut at her neckline). So now, I am this new girl, and you know the boys loved me. I don't know if I was aware of my sexual power or what I looked like, but there was this once where the principal called me into his office, and he said to me why do the boys like you so much?*

*At that point, I was still a virgin, you see, well, uhm, I still don't know. I don't think my brothers raped me. I think it was just fiddling and doing weird stuff that I don't think was right. What I mean is, it was penetration but not penis penetration. So, yes, I got a lot of attention from the boys.*

*Then, my first boyfriend Justin was perfect. We went out for a long time. He was my first love, and then he dropped me. That was incredibly painful, he just never spoke to me again after three years of dating him. We even had sex on a mountain, and he just never spoke to me again after I had sex with him.*

I can see that Kate is reaching a crescendo, and the breakup with her boyfriend and his subsequent rejection of her after sex with him seems as tangible now as it did then. I realise that I am trying to soothe Kate when I say that experience must have been devastating for her and a very cruel and confusing experience. Again, Kate is able to review her childhood experiences and see her distress as a child, that was overlooked by her family, her teachers, with a near fatal outcome.



*Yes, it was devastating for me. Devastating. So, I failed at school because I was never in class. I would bunk school, and then I refused to write my exams, I refused to write any tests. It was like a call for help, yeah, but nobody saw. My parents didn't even notice. They didn't even look.*

*I did try to commit suicide once. I drank a lot of pills, and I had my stomach pumped out, but what they did was shame me to the church counsellor, and this person didn't even ask anything about my life, he just shamed me. That suicide was a cry for help because I took the pills, and when I started feeling woozy, I went immediately to the sitting room. My parents were watching TV, and I lay down on the couch. So, it's not like I wanted to die. It was to show much, you know, I was dying inside, yeah.*

*Then, many times, I wondered why I didn't ever tell my parents what was going on with me. I don't know, maybe, I just dealt with it.*

### 6.5.1 Religion

The loneliness and isolation that Kate had to contend with in her adolescence is stark. This theme of isolation remains a pertinent theme in Kate's life. Kate remains deeply affected by her mother's religious views, and these religious views become part of Kate's fabric as she remains affected by feelings of shame, which she has been taught can only be redeemed by God.

She proceeds to go into more detail about her mother and the dynamics that were to shape her life in unforeseen ways. Kate's school years were very fraught. She was unable to cope academically as she was trying to manage the impact of sexual abuse, her mother's cancer, her father's remoteness, and the barrage of sexual attention she was receiving at school. Kate was not coping, but she was unable to have a perspective on this. She reacted by showing her inability to function at school. Kate's mother, despite her illness, was able to intervene and talk to the principal to initiate change for Kate. This timely intervention changes Kate's life. She is liberated from the confines of school, and she embarks on her transition into adult life and the working world. Many of Kate's experiences are interwoven with religion. Kate's mother is upset at Kate leaving school, and she attributes it to Kate losing her connection to God.

*My mom was super Christian, so I think she felt a lot of shame about stuff, so whatever I would tell her, even until today, she would say I've gotta [sic] be careful what I say. She would turn it around like she would shame you in the sense that unless you're turned to God, that's why your life is like this. So basically, because I haven't loved God, then the devils got a hold of my life. She doesn't say it like that. She just says the devil is busy if you don't turn to God. I tried to explain to her, I do have a relationship with God, just it's not like I used to have. She still saw it as me having left the church and that if I had gone back to church, it would have all been different.*

*So, what happened was I left school, this was after my mother went to the principal when she was sick and weak and with her black sunken eyes and a big body from the cortisone. She said to him, just give Kate her certificate, and she can go study beauty. That was one of the best things that could ever happen to me. Going into beauty, because I was always doing*

*stuff on other people, and I was always getting into trouble for doing this stuff. So, the principal put me through, and I got my certificate for standard seven, and I could go and study beauty. I loved it, then I had a little bit of freedom, and I was 16, and I moved out of the house. My friend Bella and I were friends at college, and we are still friends. She was studying art when I went to study beauty. She was studying art, and we rented a sitting room in another girlfriend's house. She had one bedroom, and I would sleep on a mattress. My mum was OK with it because I was working, I was studying beauty. I was really happy, we smoked a lot of weed, we partied hard. It was an amazing time. I remember waking up with a hangover and then having a joint and going to work. You work beautifully, and you feel fantastic, and then at lunchtime, you have another joint.*

### 6.5.2 New relationships

Kate revels in the memories of those liberated years. Her freedom, independence, and carefree life. Kate's description of her life during these times is in direct contrast to the unhappy, repressed and shame-filled childhood she had. Kate launches herself into this newfound freedom and makes choices that will shape her life. She describes an encounter with Fred, the man who will have a significant impact on her life.

*Bella and I were 17, that's when I met Fred, I was dating a guy at the time. Bella and I liked grunge music so we would go and drink and scream and dance. It was that angry, angry music. It was so good. So we were at this club, this guy that Bella likes, walked in with Fred. I was with my boyfriend, and they joined our table. I was kind of breaking up with my boyfriend, and Fred just pursued me, but I didn't like him because I liked the long-haired tortured boys, you know.*

Kate describes how her relationship unfolds with Fred. That they would drink a lot and be hungover and go to work, that the cycle would continue until one day, Fred changed the pattern. This change of pattern shocked Kate:

*One day, he arrived really literally with a bush of red roses, this big arm full of roses, and he was dressed in a suit and tie. At that time, he called himself Rambo. My mum opened the door, and he asked if I was home. I said to my mother, no, tell him I'm busy. I wasn't interested in him, but he pursued me and pursued me. After that, we would go for walks, and then he would hold my hand. The moment he held my hand, I felt the excitement in my heart.*

### 6.5.3 Family life

Their relationship progressed, and Fred worked some distance away, so he and Kate had a long-distance relationship for a year. Kate continues to party and smoke weed until her life changes dramatically:

*We fell pregnant. Yeah, this is a whole other story. So, I was about five or six months pregnant. We went for a sonar, and the guy said to me the baby's dead. So, I had to go to the hospital and be induced for the baby to come down. Then, every time they gave me something for pain, the cramps would stop. So, for three days, I was kind of like in labour, out of labour. Then my mother just lost it, and she said to the doctor, this baby must come out, my daughter can't suffer like this. Then they gave me gas because they realised the*

*injection that they were giving me for the pain was stopping the contractions. They gave me the gas, and, in that moment, I linked with Jesus.*

This experience becomes a turning point for Kate. All that she had espoused and reviled about religion was now anachronistic. Kate had encountered her religious euphoria, and it was to be the start of a new chapter in her life. Religion would play an important role in Kate's life and her encounters with various forms of religion were to shape Kate's life inexorably. It is startling to hear Kate's religious encounter as it is inverse to Kate's previous intense disdain for religion.

*Jesus held my head. Obviously, at that time, I wasn't a Christian. I hated religion. My mom was so religious, and I hated everything that she stood for, you know, so I was just a rebel. I loved angry music, and I was swearing and using God's name in vain all the time, but in that moment, I mean, it could have been the gas, of course, but it was such a moment that that just like healed me. Jesus was holding me and just rubbing my head, and I remember everything. That baby came out so painfully. It was terrible pain, and I asked the nurse do you think I can see the baby. She says I think you shouldn't see the baby, but she told me it was a boy.*

#### 6.5.4 Loss

The poignancy of this recollection is very sad, as Kate recalls in acute detail what it was like to return home to a home that had been prepared for her deceased child. Added to the deep pain of losing her child, compounded by the excruciating and traumatic way in which she lost her child, Kate is confronted with the loss of her friendship with Bella. This is a painful time for Kate, as she has just experienced an exhilarating and profound religious encounter, which contrasts with the reality of losing her baby, the mundanity of returning to work and, sadly, the loss of her friendship with Bella.

*The worst thing was I had to go home, and the room was full of baby clothes. The room was all sorted out for the baby. We were already married. I was three months pregnant when we got married. I can't even remember what happened to the clothes, if I gave them away or if I gave them to my mom. I don't know what happened, but I had to sort through all the baby stuff. During that time, Bella never came to visit me in the hospital. She never spoke to me. Six months later, I had to go to her work, I had to go to work, and she just totally disconnected from me during that time. She was my best friend, you know.*

#### 6.5.5 Religion

Kate's life changes dramatically after her religious encounter and a new world opens for her. She forms a deeper connection with her mother and encounters a religious euphoria that nurtures and fills her unlike anything she has ever experienced. It is deeply moving to hear Kate describe these moments of joy and ecstasy, and I find myself relieved that Kate is able to experience happiness and joy after her tormented childhood, adolescence, and the excruciating loss of her baby.

*My mum invited me to a revival, a church revival. After that, I went to see Stella. This was after six months that I went to see Stella, and then we reconnected our friendship. I took Stella to this revival with Fred, and there I had my born-again experience. They asked who wanted to give their lives to Jesus, so I went to the front. The guy came to me to put his hand on me, he didn't even touch me, and I felt like energy went through me. I just lay there with so much peace, right there on the floor, just so much peace washing over me. It was beautiful. I was being baptised that night as well, so I put on the robe, and then they baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost and John.*

I am caught up in Kate's description of her religious baptism and awakening. She tells her story in her inimitable way, full of vigour and euphoria. It's difficult not to be awed by her experience, and again, I default to relief at her being rescued from her pain and difficulty. My professional pragma intercedes, though, and I am conscious of checking whether this much euphoria is possible. I question myself: am I a cynic? Why can't I be fully immersed in her experience? Is this real? Will Kate be safe? Will there be balance, and what will happen to her when she comes down to earth? I feel churlish questioning this euphoria and apparent magic. It makes me doubt my ability to feel and see magic. I have experienced my spiritual euphoria and had many unexplained spiritual connections, but Kate's religious extremes leave me feeling unsettled. I feel guilty about my caution. Yet, even in confronting my doubt regarding Kate's wellbeing, it does not assuage my caution and prescience that Kate's exuberance will entail further problems.

Kate further elaborates on her religious awakening:

*I was just so light, there was so much ecstasy and such beauty. My mother came running to me. She just had a back operation, but as she was running towards me and she came close to me, we both just held the power of whatever was happening with me. Fred came to fetch me. He had Metallica playing in the car, I just couldn't listen to it. I couldn't smoke, I couldn't drink. I was a totally different person. It was incredible, yeah. I was alive, and I was so filled with the Holy Spirit, and that is the truth. It's also what people in the Bible experienced.*

Kate's life is now firmly rooted in religion, yet her religiosity does not shield her from experiencing the vicissitudes of life. She is beset by guilt and sadness, especially with regard to her experience of motherhood and her pregnancies:

*I was a totally changed person. Religion takes over, you know. I just lived now as a Christian. I even went into the ministry. I studied for a year to be a pastor. I fell pregnant and had a girl, Annabella. She was the best, best, best thing. She was the most amazing baby, full of love and so funny. I have hours of video footage of just her chewing things. Then I fell pregnant with Lily, and I was devastated. I rejected my second child. I didn't want Lily because I just didn't want another baby. I think I might have also lost a baby through a miscarriage between Annabella and Lily. I had an ectopic pregnancy that had to be surgically taken out. So, I've had three pregnancies, and while I was a Christian and just before Joe, my son, I went for a chemical abortion, which was so against my religion. So, even though it's against my religion, I decided to rather ask for forgiveness than have another baby. It had nothing to do with Lily. I just didn't want another baby.*

*I just wasn't a good mom to Lily. I wasn't good enough to her. I didn't play with her enough. Sometimes, I would leave her, but I think I was also depressed. I would leave her in the room to cry. I've forgiven myself for it, and I've also asked her forgiveness. She doesn't know anything about my childhood, that I was unhappy.*

#### 6.5.6 Shame and outsider status

I ask Kate if she thinks she could have had postpartum depression. She agrees vehemently. This traumatic period of her life elicits memories of her time spent with Fred's parents. Again, Kate slides into another deeply unhappy period, where she feels alienated and adrift:

*Then, what made it worse, Fred couldn't afford to keep us together as a family, so he sent us to the farm where his parents were living. His parents tried to control me. They took over the parenting of my kids. They did whatever they wanted with the girls. The girls could do anything, and they didn't listen to me. I felt out of control, and I had terrible stomach ulcers. I was so sick and so weak. My periods were so heavy. And because I was so weak, I couldn't go to the toilet, so I would take off my sanitary pad, roll it in toilet paper and put it under my bed. I would put on a new pad. You know, that's all I could do because I was so weak and there was no one looking after me. Fred's mother called me dirty to leave my pads under the bed. She shamed me. I felt terrible, such terrible shame. There was also public shaming.*

Kate describes the unhappy times she spent living with her in-laws, how controlling they were and the ultimatums they subjected her to. It's distressing to hear how Kate seems to find solace in friends, and yet she is unable to maintain these friendships. Kate often seems misunderstood. She does not appear to have control over her life and circumstances:

*They hated me because I was English and because I didn't fit the mould that they wanted me to fit for Fred. I was too opinionated. I had my own beliefs and my own life. They tried to break me down. They made my life unbearable. One day Lily was being so difficult, she knew she could just manipulate me. One day, I hit her hard with a wooden spoon, and it left a welt. Fred's parents took photos, and they threatened me with the police. At the time, I was working at a beauty salon fifty kilometres from the farm. I would go there every day. I would drop the kids off at school, and then, from school, they would go to my boss's wife's house. Steven was my boss. I loved working there. They were also Christians, but the kind of Christians who wore studs in their ears and in their eyebrows. They were grungy Christians. I loved them so much.*

*Sean and I would actually go and minister to schools, to teenagers. He would come with his guitar, and then I would do some preaching, and we'd sing and dance, and then we had such fun. After school Mary, Sean's wife, would go and fetch her kids and my kids. Then, the kids would be together in the afternoon, and then I would come back from work. We would have bible studies or play games, and then we would only come home at about 7:00 o'clock to the farm. That's when it was time to sleep. Often, the kids would have bare feet and run free. They loved these times, because it was like one family. Then, going back to the farm was hell. Also, the problem with these Christians, Sean and Marina, they were very for corporal punishment. They smacked their children, and Sean and Marina kind of instilled in me that you must take control of your children. So that's what happened with the welt. Fred's parents took a photo, and then they threatened they'll take me to the police for child abuse if I don't come home at lunchtime when the kids finish school.*

The situation worsened with Fred's parents and became so intolerable that finally, Fred intervened and came to fetch Kate and the children.

*I can't even remember, but I think he stuck up for me, and I think really it was literally within a month he got us a small little flat, a one-bedroom. Me and the kids slept in the one bedroom, you know, and most of our furniture was in the in the one bedroom. Yeah, that's how we lived for about a year.*

Kate's married life comes into focus now, and it's apparent that she and Fred had spent a large part of their early marriage living apart. Kate had been living with her in-laws, with Fred visiting on weekends or Kate going to see Fred. Kate describes this period as awful until she moved with Fred into the one-bedroomed flat. It was during this time that Fred told Kate he had seen four houses and took her to view them. They settled on one house that he had predicted she would love:

*We went to go and look at a few, and then there's, and this is there's this one that I think you're gonna [sic] also love it, and it was exactly the same house he said I was gonna [sic] love and we bought that house. We loved that house, and we worked on it and converted it into a five-bedroom house.*

Kate and Fred's financial position started to change for the better during this time:

*Fred started making a lot of money. He was just starting to prosper. I was still very much in the church, and it was very much a prosperity church. You know what you sow, you shall reap, so we gave a lot of money to the church. I helped a lot of the ladies that were down and out, especially single moms. One of the single moms became one of my best friends. I met her when she came to church one day.*

*We just locked eyes and we just knew there was something special about our friendship. Yeah, she was fabulous. She was actually an Internet prostitute, so she would, you know, dress and dance and get money. She didn't sleep with men, but she did later on. Yeah, then she did confess that she was a prostitute before that.*

Her new friend enchants Kate and is even more struck by the similarities in their religious experiences:

*She also had an amazing experience with Jesus in hospital because her husband was actually poisoning. Yes, he was giving her poison, but she came through it.*

I am very curious about this story, but as I have learned from Kate's narrative, it needs to flow, as her narratives flows, the threads becoming apparent later:

*Life was really good, I was happy and loved the church, there was dancing, there was singing. Church was really important to me. It was just my marriage to Fred...*

## **6.6 Midlife crisis**

### **6.6.1 Unhappy Marriage**

Kate becomes distressed as she describes her marriage and, specifically, their sex life:

*It was sexually cold. I did try. I worked hard at it. There were times that I did it, but you kind of grit through it, and you try. It was just such a weird thing. I mean, just how can you even imagine trying to have sex with somebody you don't really wanna [sic] have sex with? I just did my wife duty, so I did it, but not every day and sometimes it was like this for months you know. It was tough for him, but he was good and kind, and maybe he was doing things on the side, I don't know. I used to pray to God and plead to please help me. So, every time there was a roll call at church, I went. Meaning if you wanna [sic] come forward for prayer or you need help for something you know, come so you knew, there was something that wasn't right.*

*I was trying at church. I wanted to be healed. I wished I wanted my husband. I didn't want to be in resistance. My body would clam up every time he comes close to me, you know. He was the kind of person that would grab you know, those type of men. I didn't think that there was anything wrong. I thought that it was marriage because I saw it with my dad. I saw my dad also do things like that with my mom, so I thought that's married life.*

It's upsetting to hear Kate describe her married life and the status quo thereof. Kate appears to shoulder the responsibility for her lack of sexual attraction to her husband. I am curious about the contrast between the staleness of Kate's sexual relationship in her marriage to the orgasmic religious experience she had. It seems like Kate's sexuality is externalised - others define her sexual identity. I ask Kate about the amazing religious and spiritual orgasmic experience that liberated her. I posit that it was as if her prayers were answered:

*You describe having this amazing religious, spiritual orgasmic experience that opened a gateway for you sexually. It is as if your prayers were answered.*

I leave Kate to talk. Her words come out in a flurry, and sometimes, it's hard to follow her train of thought as she enmeshes her memories:

*It was after I kind of left the church and left religion that I was fully able to enjoy this experience. I left the church because there were a lot of little, small things over the years that bothered me. It was over a period of two years. We started hating the pastor because he would just preach about money all the time. We would do give out money, in front of the pastor, we all throw our money in front of him. The pastor then grabs the coins, and he threw the coins and says stop giving God your queries, and then you kind of have this moment, you know, when you started questioning. Yeah, and then I also was in my nice Volvo and this one lady that was so faithful to the church for many years, she was just so poor, so, so poor and she had to walk to and from church. Everything she had was old and decrepit, and she walked past me. I was sitting in my car, and she said to me, "Oh, you know God is so good to you guys", and at that moment, I just thought but why is God good to me and not good to you?*

*You know, and this is maybe because you start getting high, you start thinking I'm a super spiritual person that has God's blessing, you know. It is probably true, you know, maybe I am a little bit of God's favourite, you know, but it felt too good to be true. I started questioning things because remember my dad was a miser and my husband was a generous man, so I didn't meet marry my husband because of my dad. I totally married the opposite. My husband is generous, and God is generous.*

*I'm just living in this lovely bubble, yeah, and then obviously, I started to read and listen to other doctrines and other churches. So, for fundamentalists, there's a certain doctrine, and then you go to preterist, which is when Christ has already come here. You know Christ's consciousness has already happened in us. That was the best revelation for me. Then the*

*next revelation of being a universalist is there is no heaven and hell because Hell's being defeated, so there is no devil, and then all of the scriptures also make sense, so if you've been indoctrinated to believe this, then it's just amazing, and then that made me happy again.*

*Then I moved out of the church, all of this hopping from doctrine to doctrine, yeah, and then eventually I just let go of it totally, and then I started, you know, I started becoming more like my husband, drinking, partying. You know, just after a while, what can you believe in anymore? Yeah, so that happened, but I was still going to church or trying to find other churches. Then I went on a ladies' camp, but I had really kind of left my church, and I think for a while I didn't go to church, but then I missed the church, but I knew I couldn't believe that church anymore. You know, it's just such a weird place to be, and I went to the lady's camp, and there we were giving birth. It was really the spirit of God that was moving in us. It's also that energy, and you are screaming, and you're giving birth to the primal. It was incredible, you know, but we were used to stuff like that in the church because the fundamentalists, we shake, and you are talking in tongues, praying, you know. You build yourself up. I mean, you feel fantastic when you're praying sometimes, you know, yeah, so that I came back from that weekend, and I was exhausted.*

I am fascinated by Kate's experiences at the ladies' camp, I am struck by how primal her experiences at this camp are. Kate disassociates herself from formal dogma and allows herself to be enraptured in a deep connection to her body, a temporary abandonment of a Western obsession with intellect and analysis. Kate's self-expression and freedom enchant me during this experience. It is this pivotal climactic experience that shapes Kate's midlife transition:

*So, I was really there just for the fun. It's always a fun time when you're laughing and giving birth, and then you're with your old, you know, church girlfriends. Also, sometimes it's hard to lie and just pretend like you believe all this shit, but Sunday afternoon, I just went for a nap. I'm not talking to God, I'm not exhausted and again like something comes over me. I think I was like in a sleep state. I wasn't even praying, no meditation like nothingness. Then this experience was longer than I've ever had because I have experienced things in my Christian years, but this one was totally different because it was definitely sexual, more sexual, more full body. It was a totally spiritual experience.*

### 6.6.2 Spiritual/sexual epiphany

Kate is incandescent with rage and outrage when she relates how her life unfolded post her religious, sexual and spiritual experience. She accretes a profound and life-changing event into a few sentences, events that changed her life forever:

*I could feel it deeply within; it wasn't sexual harassment. I just went with it, and it just went, and I just went, and there was flow and flow and flow, and then finally, it died down. I remember telling one of my friends, and she said, "No, the devil came upon you, he came on to you". You know, as if to say the devil raped me, yeah, you know, and that's when the last straw broke. During this time now, leaving my religion, my husband. It's like I must have proof. They told me I was bipolar, then telling me this experience only happened because now, ooh, I wanna [sic] have sex.*

*Then everything changed, I want to have sex, I am trying different things, it shook my husband up because one day this, the next day that. Yeah, it was just incredible. So that was tough for him, I think, because I'm drinking and partying and everything, and obviously now I'm totally like sexually free. Now, I'm also getting a lot of attention. I must have physically changed as well because even before his friends that hated me, they hated me. After all, I'm*



*this prude Christian, you know, that preaches at them and gives them shift if they drinking and smoking and swearing they can't do that in my house you know. You know, now yeah, that was a threat to him and the more sexualised I became, the more frightened he became of me. Yeah, but it wasn't gonna [sic] stop me, no it wasn't gonna [sic] stop because he was enjoying it, but he didn't. He didn't show signs of fearfulness until he started controlling me.*

### 6.6.3 Taking control

Kate's demeanour changes. She becomes defiant and proud, and it is in this interview that I can see how her religious and sexual experiences have changed her profoundly. Kate is never going back to who she was. She's found a lost part of herself, and she's claiming it. I suggest that she won't be controlled:

*Yes, I was not going to be controlled, no I wasn't, and then the war started.*

It sounds to me like this was the first time Kate has taken control of her life. Kate claims the religious experience for herself was a unique sexual experience, and most importantly, it wasn't a rape. Kate describes the experience as a spiritual experience, which she elaborates as culminating in the sum of all her learnings. It is also an unshackling of her past, an experience where she managed to reclaim her sexuality for herself. Kate is proud when she declares that not even the confines of her marriage are going to confine her from connecting with her true inner self. There is a long pause whilst Kate gathers herself. She seems both proud, victorious and vulnerable. Kate rapidly dissolves into tears when she tells me the following:

*I walked out of my marriage. I left it all behind you so that I could align, yeah, and I am tearful when I say this, but I think it's beautiful. I don't know why that experience drove me to not let it go because I knew that something marvellous was happening. I knew it was right, and yeah, there's no other way to do it, and I wanted to understand more about what was happening.*

I am struck by Kate's deep sense of connection to a hitherto unseen and unrequited part of herself. I share my reflections with Kate:

I think that this has been the most magical awakening and connection with yourself. It seems to me as if you took control of your past as well you took control of doctrine and dogma. You were able to clearly see and then confront the cruelty that religion represented for you. You have been able to objectively face the abandonment and the punitive aspects of your upbringing. You also confront how awful school was for you. You do not shy away from any of these parts of your life. Instead, you face them head-on, embrace them and appear to move through them instead of allowing them to shape you. The sum of this has led you to where you are now.

*Well, it's weird because now that I'm sexually awakened now, I'm single. You know which is a choice. I have tried relationships, but I cannot stay in a relationship because if I have to stay with this man for longer than a year or even three months, I will die again, because what happens is I get bored. I get sexually bored.*

#### 6.6.4 Extrication from marriage

*So, he had this idea that I was cheating because of my sexual openness, but actually, later, I found out that he was actually cheating on me. He was projecting onto me. He was shaming me for stuff he had done, and I didn't even know it. I didn't do that, but the worst is to be accused of doing something that you haven't.*

*Yeah, so, this last seven years out of my marriage, it was tough. Money-wise, I struggle sometimes, so I do have anxiety, but I'm not on any chronic medication. I don't take any anti-anxieties. I do take pain pills for some body aches, but I do believe that it's inflammation, which I think is part of my emotional processes to get rid of some trapped emotions.*

*I am still on a journey. There's many times that I think I'm going to take Fred away from his girlfriends, you know, because Fred said to me if you ask me, Kate, to marry you, I will marry you. You know, so I know. I just have to talk to Fred and say: "Will you marry me?" but I don't want to.*

*He was an amazing husband, and he was an amazing flirt when we were younger. So, then I still dream about us getting back together and even allowing him to have girlfriends in this dream.*

I asked Kate if she would have wanted Fred to understand her better. She says yes, that's what she wanted the most. Then, in Kate's inimitable style, without any pre-empting, she reveals that Fred was cheating on her and launches forth into a heated flurry of what transpired.

Shame is a familiar theme for Kate. She has been shamed by her parents and by religion, and she has lived with her own internalised feelings of shame. However, it appears that in this instance, Kate is not going to accept being shamed, as she knows that she doesn't deserve to carry this shame.

#### 6.6.5 Regret

It is sad to see Kate reflect on what her relationship could have been with Fred. She regrets that he couldn't meet her at this level or the stage of life that she is at now. She has gained self-mastery and is experiencing sexual liberation, all these things that she deeply wanted with Fred and that were missing during their dry and inhibited sex life. I suggested to her that she has a fantasy about reuniting with him:

*Yeah, so you fantasise about what if. Yeah, I have a lot of regret about that. I do wish we could be together. I wrote him so many letters during those times that he was so awful. I was really trying to get through to him. I was begging him to see what's happening, you know.*

Kate remains fixated on whether she can reunite with Fred somehow. Yet, the fantasy is convoluted and complex because Fred behaves very badly towards Kate when he suspects she is having affairs. Kate relays what it was like for her during these difficult and confusing times.

## 6.6.6 Betrayal

*Well, I told him, it's your stuff, you're not even gonna [sic] tell me about that, yeah, because that's your stuff. It was amazing. My mom has saved me many times in my life, and she was there for me, and the one surprising time was when I moved out of the room, and I had a lot of migraines and, you know, how I would sometimes deal with my migraines, is that I would masturbate and then it would kind of, yeah, release the pain. Then Fred was recording me in my room, he recorded everything, he put spyware on my phone.*

I am trying to put together this phase of Kate's life sequentially. I ask her if it was after she became sexually liberated. It seems as if her sexual liberation also happened at the same time as Kate wanting to become more independent.

*Yes, he did this after I did all my sexual work. I wanted the kids to go to school in another place where I could also get work. I wanted to get a job. I wanted to go out into the world and do something, because, at that time, I'm a homeschool mom, stay-at-home mom, but I was now awakened. I wanna [sic] go, I wanna [sic] go to this new city. I want to work. The kids must go to school, you know. I want to live life, yeah, and that scared him as well because he couldn't leave. So, I went to stay in this new city for six months with the kids, and then I had to go back. Then he compromised, and we bought a place which was halfway from where he was working and where I wanted to stay, and that's when the worst happened.*

*When I went back to live with him, he did terrible things. He was recording me. He was putting spyware on my phone. He was trying to find reasons. To find something on me, which he could never, but he kept on trying. Do you know that he even made fake Facebook accounts and befriended me using my new language and my new things that I was learning?*

*I remember this one woman, her name was "something moon" and she wrote me this message, we started becoming friends. I don't know how it happened, but anyway, he used his knowledge of me, you know that he knew me really well, he used that to make up this person on Facebook and so I became friends with this person, and this person started writing to me this long story about her husband. I was really suspicious, and I just knew that this is my husband. What a betrayal. Then, once I was with Michelle, one of my other friends, a weekend away to do with her business, it was her work function. So, we were talking, and I remember saying to Michelle in that hotel room, if I leave, he will die, but if I stay, I will die.*

*Yeah, and he verbally quoted me when I got back, so he had put something in my bag or on my phone. He was spiralling. He just couldn't find anything because I wasn't doing anything. Except he was in on my conversations of how I wanted to leave him and how I was feeling about him. Then, one day, my mom came to help me pack because now it's final. There was also so much that happened when I got divorced. He swindled me. Firstly, this happened while we were still actually busy divorcing. He told me that he was going to be liquidated. So, when we lived in that other city before we moved to where I wanted to work, he said he was being liquidated.*

*Then, if he gets liquidated, they're coming to fetch everything. He's got three houses and the house we lived in, so we must get a divorce, and I keep the one house. Then when he gets liquidated, at least then we've got this house, you know. Then, in the divorce, I get nothing, nothing, no maintenance because, obviously, we're not really divorcing, so he doesn't have to pay me maintenance.*

It dawned on me that Fred had set Kate up. He appeared to use getting divorced as a means of divesting assets from Kate under the subterfuge of liquidation. Kate has sacrificed a lot to gain her freedom. She was compelled and driven by her desire to be sexually liberated, and in doing

so, she gave up her husband, lost assets, was subject to emotional manipulation. Nevertheless, she soldiered on, unwavering in her desire and seemingly innate knowledge that there was more to life for her.

#### 6.6.7 New love and sexual liberation

Kate describes the on/off relationship she has with her current boyfriend. He provides her with a haven to express herself sexually. She is struck by how different he is from other men she's been with. He doesn't grope or paw at her. He reveres her, and she feels deeply respected. For the first time in her sexual history, she feels a spiritual connection akin to the spiritual experience she had during her religious encounter. Kate speaks of this part of her life with great happiness. She seems to be incredulous at the sexual connection with this man:

*So, with all the other relationships before, they also have that vibe of groping and stuff, and then all I want is to be seduced. So, I want absolute spiritual lovemaking, and I'm having it now with my current boyfriend. I am doing things with him because he respects me so much. There's such reverence, you know, and he knows everything about me, and he speaks my language. This guy has been part of my sexual journey, also learning about myself, and what I love and how I want to be touched. Yeah, how I need it, yeah. That you can relate to this type of sex without shame, for so many years, I have been groped by men, yeah, and now I can go on this journey with him and feel sexually liberated, yeah, without judgment.*

*I desire him so much, and actually, it's messed me up because now I don't desire anybody else. I've tried having other boyfriends, yeah, and I've tried to have a boyfriend. Then I am always thinking about this time with my boyfriend, it is a beautiful connection.*

I am not entirely sure why if Kate is so physically attracted to this man and he seems to understand her so well, that she would want to consider other boyfriends. I wonder whether Kate has a sexual rapaciousness to her that drives her to have sexual experiences with other men, as she has been denied this for so long.

Overall, I am struck by Kate's fortitude, that no matter how difficult it got, Kate had an inner drive, an inner driving force, she needed to self-actualise, whatever the cost of that was. Her freedom and sexual liberation were her drivers, and these were non-negotiable in her life transition.

## CHAPTER 7: THE LIFE STORY OF RITA

### 7.1 Personal data

Participant	:	Rita
Age	:	60
Field of Occupation	:	Photographer, model
Research Setting	:	The interviews were conducted online. Rita lives in a large American city. Our interviews were punctuated by urban noises such as ambulances, fire engines, police sirens and cars. The splices of Rita's life that I could see in her apartment were her love of books and photography and her affinity to her spiritual beliefs, notably Buddhism. There was a simplicity and order to what I could see of Rita's home. Her books and artefacts were ordered and uncluttered, yet the hallmarks of who Rita was were evident in the originality of her space.

### 7.2 Identified themes

The following themes are identified:

- Breakup of a marriage
- Pain and grief associated with the breakup of marriage
- Betrayal
- Family dynamics
- Gaining strength
- Revenge
- Loss
- Reconnection
- Forgiveness
- Supportive friendships
- Healing
- Insights
- Self-awareness
- Recovery
- Loneliness

- Spiritual beliefs
  - Financial betrayal
  - Legal support
  - Resilience
  - Epiphanies
  - Self-mastery
- 

### 7.3 Introduction

Rita was both relaxed and open. Rita was a very easy research participant to interview. Rita has been in therapy for approximately five years, has high EQ and was very forthcoming in relaying her midlife narrative. I did not feel the need to coax, elicit, or try to extract Rita's story. There was an enchanting fluidity to her, and I found myself riveted by her narrative and deeply touched by both her narrative and her soulfulness. Rita's life story was deeply sad, and it was evident that she had been profoundly affected by her life events. Yet Rita presents as compassionate, warm, sensitive, and accessible. This, I believe, is what has allowed Rita to transcend her profoundly tragic narrative.

Rita looks like a ballerina. She is fine-featured, tall, elegant, and graceful. Not only is she graceful, but she seems full of grace. There is a benevolence and a kindness to her. She speaks in cadences that are soft but not whimsical. Rita bridges both gentleness and assertiveness and listening to Rita, I am struck by her wisdom, her intelligence, and her breadth of knowledge. Rita has a long, elegant neck and fine, long fingers that flutter frequently to her neck when she is agitated. She is often dressed in delicate, patterned fabrics that drape her delicate frame. She is never without a scarf adorning her head, obscuring her hair but accentuating her fine features. Rita has large, expressive eyes and a smile that seems underutilised. I learned that Rita's smile will be my biggest cue to understanding Rita's unsaid narrative. Rita never seems to wear makeup, and her skin is soft and unlined. Her lack of adornment is true to form. I learn, as I spend more time with Rita, that she always presents herself as unmasked and real. Rita's lack of adornment and her unconscious ability to be metaphorically naked is what makes Rita endearing.

I am struck, though, by the sadness that is inexorably etched on Rita's face. I try to see where the sadness lies. Is it in her eyes, the shape of her mouth, her expressions? It's difficult to tell, as Rita's sadness seems to be elusive. It moves from her eyes to her mouth, to the set of her

jaw, and then to her movements, which are embodied in the fluttering of those delicate fingers against her throat.

Rita is a beautiful and delicate woman. It's difficult not to be enchanted by her. Her life story is riveting, and I find myself profoundly affected by the tragedy she has experienced and how it has inexorably changed her life.

In this chapter, Rita's story is related in transcribed excerpts, and the researcher's input and observations are included to allow for a fuller context of the data. Emergent themes pertinent to a midlife journey are identified. It may be seen that some of these themes extrapolated are not mutually exclusive and that the themes are shaped and coloured by the researcher's lens and responses during the interview. Therefore, these themes are not deemed to represent a finite truth about the participant's reality but rather an in-situ narrative that is influenced and enhanced by both researcher and participant. Every story of midlife has its own countenance and will, therefore, be different. This story is not meant to represent a finite nor absolute truth about all midlife stories and remains an experiential narrative.

Rita launches straight into her story:

#### **7.4 The breakup of a marriage**

*It's a decade, and it's still, I mean, it still sits here, but it's not, it's not as painful as it was, but I mean, I think about my ex every day because I never stopped, you know.*

That must be difficult.

*It's hard. But it is what it is, and you can't just from one day to the next say, okay, I'm not gonna [sic] love you anymore. I know that he was meant to be a major force in my life, you know, but you always think that person is always going to be there. Although oddly enough, I have to say that throughout our marriage, I mean we were together, it was twenty-eight years that we were married, and I always had. There was always a fear that one day, he wouldn't be there anymore. I didn't know if it was whether he would die or he would leave me, although he always said to me he could never, could never, you know, leave, he would never leave me, but that fear was always deep down. Whenever I would think about it or even mention it, I would just tear up, you know. So, somehow, I knew.*

##### **7.4.1 The pain and grief associated with the breakup of a marriage**

It's a sense of prescience, isn't it? Is that knowing?

At this point, Rita's soulful brown eyes fill with tears. I acknowledge her pain and the unsaid that is about to be revealed in the early stages of our interview:

I can see it even invokes a lot of emotion for you right now, talking about it, knowing that you knew.

*I mean, at that point, there was, we were very, very close, we really were. There was probably a co-dependency that was maybe not so healthy. I mean, he was very, very dependent upon me, and we did everything together. I think we never spent more than three or four days apart. So, once I had to come to New York because my mom was having surgery, he didn't come. Normally, he would have come with me. He didn't come, but that was the only time in twenty-eight years that we had been away from one another for more than two days.*

You were together twenty-eight years?

*When I met him, I had a very successful modelling career, and when we got married, he said he wanted me to stop because he wanted me to be with him. He was a recording artist and is still a recording artist in Europe, and he just wanted me to be there all the time. When he went to the studio, I had to be there. When we did videos, I had to be there for everything, and when we worked together, I did a lot of styling for him in the band. I helped to do the artwork for album covers and, you know, was very much involved, and we did all the videos together. I did it because I have a very creative eye. I'm a former illustrator, and I am a photographer now, so he still asks and always seeks my advice on all those creative things that fall outside of the music itself.*

You gave up a lot of yourself. It seems like there was this need to be needed as well, that was created.

Yes.

Rita looks crestfallen, the enormity of what she has given up, reflects in that now familiar fluttery dance across her delicate features.

His career seemed to take precedence. You became inveigled in his career, started to fulfil lots of roles and you became enmeshed?

*Yes, I mean to the point where people thought that I was his manager. I would say, no, I am not his manager, but yeah, he would always push me to the forefront when a major decision had to be made. He'd say, oh, I, I needed to speak to my wife about this or I have to see what Rita thinks about this. You know, it was always, it was known that I was very much involved with everything that he did and all the decisions that he made.*

Well, I think that's what must have made it even more heart-wrenching if the man couldn't live, eat, breathe, or decide without you. Then suddenly, you don't occupy that role. Not only do you lose a sense of yourself, but you lose your sense of place.

#### 7.4.2 Betrayal

*Yes, absolutely, absolutely. I want to tell you about our breakup. In 2006, we were looking to buy a house, and a friend of ours who had a bed and breakfast in Africa, said "Oh, you should come to Africa. I'm sure you would love it." We were looking to have a place somewhere where it's warm always we could go in the winter in the northern hemisphere winter. We ended up in this African city, fell in love with it, and we bought a property and actually built a house, blasted this huge rock and built a beautiful, beautiful house. While in this African city, we met this young woman. We were introduced to this young woman who was an aspiring singer. She wanted to be a solo artist. She was 30 years younger than my ex. She basically had a plan to capture him. Later, I realised she was a narcissist. Someone called her a vampire narcissist. She worked on this plan for about three years until she finally got him. She would come to our home in Europe to visit us and stay with us, and she*



*was sleeping with my husband. This went on for a good seven months. The actual physical relationship, I think went on for about seven or eight months. Until he told me, I mean, I noticed that he was acting strange, but I never, ever imagined that he would do that because he always said, you know, being a, he's a celebrity in Europe, people would always say, yeah, you and your wife have been together as long as he was a rock star. People would always say how do you keep, you know, your marriage going?*

*He always said, "I could never cheat on my wife. It would kill me to hurt her". I believed him, you know. So, he was acting strange and rather distant. It didn't click for me. I just thought, you know, when I say to him what's going on, what's right on. I would say, I'm just going through a strange time, he always had an excuse until one day, he came home and said to me you know, I'm in love with this woman, and I'm not in love with you anymore, and I want to be with her, I felt like I had been hit by ten trucks.*

Rita's face crumples, and the grief and shock appear as strong now as it must have been. Her fragility amplifies and she takes a few moments to gather herself before speaking again:

*I was just, I was speechless. So, I confided in a friend of ours, a therapist, and she said to me, Rita, you need to get out of the house. You need to get away from him. This was because he was sleeping with her and then coming back to our house. Sorry, I forgot this. When he told me this, he had just gotten off the plane from New York. We were, we were living in Austria. He had been in New York for two weeks, recording like he usually does. I would have been with him. At the last minute, about a week before it was time to leave, I had organised the flights and the hotel and everything he said, "You know what, I think. I want to go to New York by myself. I need to learn to do things on my own. I need to learn how to pay for a taxi on my own. I need to learn to grow up a bit.*

*This was his plan; he was going to New York with her. You know, stay in the room that I had booked for, a room for a husband and wife. Yeah, that was quite a shock, and it just threw me over the edge. Two weeks later, my friend, the therapist, said, "You need to get away. Don't tell him where you're going". She said, "Just go. You can leave him a note that he shouldn't contact you, but you need separation". What he would do was come to the house and the woman he was with, her name is Lisa, was staying in a hotel, and he would go to the hotel every night to stay there with them and come home to shower or change clothes or you know, pack fresh clothes. I'm seeing him coming and going like this and it was just like I was in shock. I can't even remember how it all was. I was just in shock. The worst thing was that he would say things to me about her, you know, what they're doing because he was helping her to rerecord her album and how good she is, and it was just weird. Then he said, "You know what, I wish I could live with both of you". I said, "Well, that's not going to happen". Yeah, it was. It was weird. Then we went through a very difficult divorce because it became quite ugly, which I was also shocked at because Mark was always a very giving and generous person.*

Rita is methodical in the telling of her story. Her words are measured but nuanced with shock and disbelief. Even a decade later, the retelling of her story and the upsetting elements of it seem to catch her by surprise. It seems cathartic for Rita to talk, and it's sad for me to see the pain still so evident for her.

*We were well known, so that was the other thing he didn't want anyone to know. No one could know of our separation because he was terrified of it coming out in the press. Of course, the press loves things like this. We were like seeing, we were seen like Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt of the rock and roll world, it was like we were the prince and princess of rock and roll in Europe, Okay, and the ideal couple. So, for this to happen, of course, that's major fodder for the press. So being the obedient wife that I am, I didn't say anything,*

*I didn't say anything to anyone except maybe one person who knew because he was sort of liaising between me and Mark.*

*So, this happened at the beginning of July 2013. Two weeks later, I packed my bags, and I came to New York and stayed with my mother, which was also difficult because I don't have a great relationship with my mother. Mark called constantly, and I never answered the phone. Then he got his right-hand assistant to call me. I spoke to him, and he wanted to know where I was, I just said to him that I was in New York. But, I didn't say exactly where it was. Mark was constantly calling him to see how I was. He was very concerned, oddly enough.*

### 7.4.3 Family dynamics

*Then, on top of it, I had to confront the relationship with my mom. My mom was always very domineering and very controlling. Her hearing was beginning to fail, and what I didn't realise is that she was experiencing the early stages of dementia. Which made her, at times, very aggressive angry, and she would say terrible things to me, and I was in a deep depression, and I had lost a lot of weight. I think I weighed just under fifty kilos, and I mean, I'm like 1.76m. I remember one day she said to me, your leggings, your legs, your skin, your leggings shouldn't be bagging around your legs. You don't say that like that to someone who's clinically depressed, you know. I had a great therapist who was recommended to me through a friend, and I started going to him. Yeah, I started going to him that July, twice a week and I stayed in New York all that time. Then fall was coming. I only had summer clothes. I had to get better clothes, my clothes. I eventually went back to Europe to our apartment in November. I went because he was planning to go with her to spend the winter in Cape Town in our house.*

### 7.4.4 Gaining strength

*Meanwhile, when I was in New York, he was living in our apartment with her openly. It was just, it was, yeah, oh, a total invasion, a total invasion. So, when they went to Cape Town, I went back to the apartment in Europe, and it was like the atmosphere had totally shifted. It was just cold, and it was a great apartment. I loved it, and we had fixed it up really nicely. When I was there, I stayed there. I got a lawyer who was amazing.*

*This lawyer and her boss worked on my case together. They told me not to leave that apartment before we had some sort of agreement worked out. I had to survive somehow financially until the divorce settlement came through. It was a constant back and forth because he was planning to go on tour in April, but he had to be back in March to start rehearsal because his boys were coming to the band, the band members were all coming from America, and of course, he wanted to be in his home. So, they were going to be rehearsing for like four weeks, and my lawyers said, you do not leave that apartment until we have that part of the finance settled.*

### 7.4.5 Betrayal

*He was so angry and was sending me messages. "What are you doing in Berlin? You don't need to be in Berlin, you already have a place in New York". I was shocked that he even knew that. Then I found out eventually that a common friend of ours was giving him information.*

*The housekeeper said they knew I was coming. I was shocked, and she said, "... if I let you in the house, they'll fire me". I was stunned, but I didn't care. I went. I stayed with friends who had a B and B, and they went with me and they even got a lawyer for me when I was there. Then we all went into the house. He had put up cameras everywhere, which we didn't have when I was there. There were cameras in every room, and when we walked in, I just kind of waved at the cameras. When I was in Cape Town, I knew he was on stage at that*

*time because he was on tour. No, sorry. Wait a second, no, he was. He was already on stage because it was nighttime, but apparently, his secretary could see what was going on in the house on her computer. That just shows how mistrusting he was, but I know that that all came from her, from the girlfriend who was now his wife. So, I got the rest of my stuff out that I wanted. The next morning, my housekeeper, Vera, said, yeah, I got fired.*

My word, what a betrayal.

*Vera, my housekeeper, said the secretary called and said that she was fired, but she was very happy about it. Vera was happy to be fired because they were treating her terribly. When Mark went down in November with Lisa to the house, they were horrible to her and us. We always treated Vera like family, you know, it wasn't about, you're the servant, you're less than, when we had lunch, she sat down to lunch with us. If she was there at dinner, she sat down to dinner with us. That was one thing that I found terribly important. This was important for me. When we first started going to Cape Town, and we had a housekeeper, when it was lunchtime, she would go outside and sit on the ground and eat her lunch. I'm thinking this is not possible, I'm sorry. So, Vera was like family, and we're still in touch. She calls me mom, you know, we have a great relationship still, in any case, she was happy that she'd been fired. Yeah, so that was that trip to Cape Town. Then I came back to Europe, and then I went to London for a week. Whilst I was in London, I came back, and I realised that he had been in the house because he had gone through some of the clothes that he needed. I could tell that he'd been there. So, this so-called common friend of ours was telling him when I was away.*

Rita is still so shocked at the betrayal of people who are supposedly close to her. Her loyalty and belief in others are evident in her close bonds with people. This is tangible in her relationship with her housekeeper in Cape Town. Rita connects with others on a deep level. She is inclusive, and the openness I perceive in Rita is echoed in the relationship she describes with others.

The housekeeper is relieved to be fired. She seems to be more affiliated with Rita than with Mark. I notice that a brief smile of triumph temporarily erases the sadness on Rita's face. I want to describe it as a smirk, but that won't accurately represent Rita. Smirks are sardonic, and Rita appears triumphant when she describes how she entered her Cape Town house despite cameras and legal threats, despite the threat of her finances being withheld, despite the threat of her beloved housekeeper being fired. I point this out to Rita. Her courage. She looks surprised, then triumphant. I tell Rita that she exhibits great courage, which seems to be her mettle. Rita continues with her narrative - she appears emboldened, and her story further reflects this.

#### 7.4.6 Revenge

*So, whilst I was in London, a friend of mine messaged Mark and said there's a story on the front page of a major European tabloid that you two are not together anymore, and he has a new girlfriend. There's an interview with him, an interview with the new girlfriend, which, of course, she loved because she loves attention. I saw it, and I saw in the interview he said that we had already been separated for nine months before he got together with her, which was an absolute lie, and that just that killed me. So, I did something which I probably*

*shouldn't have done, but you know what? I don't regret it because I'm not a vindictive person. I'm not about payback. I know when it's time for you to pay your dues, it will come, you know. I practice Buddhism, and I truly believe in that, but this was something that I felt I was going to do.*

*So, a friend of ours was the chief editor of one of, I call it one of the housewife magazines, you know, the gossip magazines, but one of the really popular ones. My friend's daughter, who had known since she was like 14, called me and she said, Rita, Peter, my husband, would like to talk to you. Would you be willing to give an interview? I said I don't really want to give an interview. I said, I'll talk to you. I can tell you what happened, but you must confirm to me that it will never be said that it came from me. She said no, no, I will say it was an acquaintance of the family, and I told them exactly what happened.*

*So, the following week after his article came out, mine was on the newsstand. Front page picture of both of us with a part of the page looks like it was ripped, you know, like, we were apart, the two of us. This was the real story behind the breakup, and it gave all the details, even the details about how she had been sleeping with one of the band members while she was flirting with my husband, how she was living in our house in Cape Town and had all her clothes that were now in my closet. Everything happened, even though she had a fling with my son before she started with Mark.*

#### 7.4.7 Loss

At this point, Rita seems to deflate, and I can't help but want to comfort her. I see that this woman has had everything sacred taken from her. Her home had been invaded, her family had been violated, and she was fighting to survive. Her identity had become null and void. She had given up her career and life to look after this man-child, who then decided he wanted to grow up and discarded her. Cutting her off financially and severing her from her livelihood, her relationship, and the identity she had formed with him. Not only that, but Lisa, his lover, had also infiltrated her inner sanctity by sleeping with her son.

*This woman, she's dark, dark energy. If you were to see a photo of my ex that I took of him in 2011 and you were to see a photo of him now, you would be shocked. He has aged terribly. I know that he's not happy. I know from friends. You can see that he's not happy, but the last thing he wants to do is admit that he made a mistake. Now, here's the kicker, Louisa. My mom, my parents passed in 2021, my dad in February, my mom in September. In all the years that we've been apart, every so often Mark would call a very dear friend of mine here in New York to check on how I am, how is she, is she dating anyone?*

*At one point, my friend said to him, Rita eventually wants to, you know, go back to Europe when her parents aren't here anymore. He said, "Oh, where does she want to move to?" So, every six or eight months, you would call her to see what I'm up to and if I'm dating anyone. The week before, no, the day that my dad passed, my girlfriend messaged them. I've never told her to send him messages or anything. She never called him. She would sometimes send him a message of her own. She sent a message that my dad passed, and he sent me a very sweet text message, and I responded thank you, you know, the usual response.*

*That we had when my mom was on her way out, about a week before, again she said she sent a message that my mother was dying, and he called her immediately and said he wanted to know how I am, wanted to know what illnesses my mom had and all the details. She said just call Rita, she's not angry anymore, she wouldn't have a problem talking to you, just call her. The next day, he called. I'm sure he was scared to call because he didn't know how I*

would react toward him, but I was okay because, at that point, I was in the process of forgiving him.

## 7.5 Reconnection

*So, he called, we talked for quite a while about my parents, and you know what I'm going to do next. I did mention that I'd like to come back to Europe and back to the city we lived in. I love it there. It's a wonderful city, and we talked about mutual friends and just all kinds of things. That was September 2021. Now, every month since then, he calls me once a month just for a chat like that, you know, just sometimes and tells me all sorts of things, like he shows me how he has a tennis elbow. He loves it. He's very much into medicine. He's a bit of a hypochondriac. He's always telling me about his medical things and what's happening, but once a month, I know he's going to call.*

*My girlfriend had been in touch with him because her husband is a scriptwriter and had written a script about a German U Boat captain who had been captured here during World War Two. He wanted Mark to read it. Mark used to be an actor, and my friend's husband just wanted a second opinion about the script. So, that was the only time I sent him a message. I told my girlfriend what I had done, and the next day, I was on the bus, and my stop was coming up very soon, so I quickly copied the message to send to her so she could see exactly what I wrote. Instead, what I did was, I accidentally sent it to him a second time, which is not what I wanted to do, but that happens. I got off the bus 3 minutes later I got home, and I saw a missed call from out of area, and I knew he tried to call me. At that time, I still had a landline, and he tried that. Then, about a half hour later, I got a text message, saying don't call me, please.*

*Do not answer this message. I don't want any more discussions with you. In German, the word discussions mean arguments, but he'd written this in English, so instead of saying arguments, he said I don't want any more discussions here. It made me suspicious.*

*She happened to be standing right next to him. He told me when we spoke a few days later. She happened to be standing by his phone when my message came, and she saw it. She's a very jealous person. I am at the top of her jealousy list, of course. Apparently, she went ballistic, totally ballistic, and when she gets angry, she's like a wild lion. For months after that, I didn't hear from him. I was a little concerned, but I thought that said something to me. I'm highly intuitive,*

*I don't realise that I even know that I know. I knew that she had deleted my number from his phone because he's not a tech person. He's not aware, you know. We always spoke on Facetime, but he never turned on the camera. He could have searched through his phone for my messages or something, but we lost contact for a while.*

### 7.5.1 Forgiveness

*So, I decided to go back to Europe. I had this thought. I thought, okay, I'm at the point where I've already forgiven this man. I love him unconditionally, and that's a fact. That's just the way it is. I went to Europe because I was considering moving back. I thought I'd like to speak to him because every time he would call me, it always came up in the conversation. I hope one day you will forgive me. I never meant to hurt you. I'm so sorry. One time, we were talking about depression, and I was saying how I went through such trauma during our breakup and was in a deep depression for five years. I had PTSD, and EMDR helped me a lot, and he would always apologise and say I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry.*

*Okay, so when I went to Germany, I hadn't heard from him for like three or four months, and I felt I needed to tell him how I feel. He needs to know this. I also need to tell him that I've forgiven him. So, I thought, how do I get in, touch him? I can't call him, and then it finally hit me. The day before I was leaving, I called a girlfriend of mine who had been in*

*touch with him, she is a girlfriend of mine in Germany. She and her husband were good friends. Her husband was a former politician.*

*The wife knew about everything that had happened. She was such a great friend, even when I was going through this with Mark when I was still in Europe. She was there for me, just like full-time, and I called her. I said, you know, would you mind calling Mark, telling him I'm here and that I'm leaving tomorrow. I'd like to speak to him, and I knew that he would like to speak to me. Mark never answers the phone. If it's a number he doesn't recognise, he won't answer it.*

*He had that number, though. He knew it. She told me that a year before, he was looking for a new place to live, and he called her and said if you hear of anything in your neighbourhood, please let me know.*

I am struck by how much chronological detail Rita remembers. The retelling of her story is ordered, structural and methodological. She remembers dates and details. It's like Rita's story is indelibly printed in the fabric of her. I never have to ask Rita for details or further explanations.

### 7.5.2 Supportive friendships

*Mark said to my friend, you know, it's such a shame that we don't see each other anymore. She said she hadn't seen him since we broke up. My girlfriend said yeah, it's, it would be great if we could all get together for dinner, but Mark, what Rita went through when you two broke up was something she had never witnessed before. She told him that she had never, ever seen so much pain. She said that was the pain that was unbearable to see. So, no, they don't really want to get together with him for dinner. So, I knew that when she called them, he would pick up the phone immediately because he wanted that friendship.*

*Then she told him, "Rita is here in Europe, she'd like to speak to you". His reaction was, "Oh, how, how can I reach her? Can I reach her?" He was like totally like a kid at Christmas, you know, he happened to be at the airport in Spain, waiting for the flight. He said, can you send the number, he said, you can send it to my phone. The next day, while I was going from one flight to the next, he called me. I said, "I'm transferring to another flight. Please, you can call me back in 15 min when I'm in the lounge, and I can talk."*

### 7.5.3 Healing

*He called several times before I could talk because it took longer, but he finally got me, and I sat in the lounge in an empty room. I said, there's something that you ask me every time we speak. You say I hope you can forgive me. I would always say, I'm working on it, I'm working on it, I need time. I said I'd like to have a do-over. I need you to ask me again for my forgiveness. He said, "Yeah, really, would love to have your forgiveness." I said, "Mark, I've already forgiven you."*

This feels like such a pivotal part of Rita's healing. Again, I am struck by Rita's clarity and recollection of the most acute details. A part of me wonders whether Rita still remembers so much in such detail because the trauma remains so raw, the wound is still open, and she still has unrequited feelings for Mark. I also cannot overlook the sadness and pain that is so deeply etched onto Rita's face. Rita is a soulful person. She is a deep thinker, and her words are concise and deliberate. Nothing Rita seems to do or say is without consideration.

Therefore, I feel the profundity of her forgiveness of Mark with acuity. Rita has an indelible way of inviting one into her world. She is not a woman who treads lightly emotionally or spiritually. She has a quiet but tangible presence that presents deep gravitas and dignity. Rita reveals the following, which confirms the tragedy of the love between her and Mark:

*I said, "I could forgive him", but I was not able to admit it to myself. I said to him I've already forgiven you. I have never stopped loving you. I love you unconditionally, and I never stopped being in love with you. That never ended. Before I told him all that, I said, I am about to tell you something that will put me in a very vulnerable position. I need you to know this. So, after I told me, he said, "Well, you're being really open". I said, "Yes, I am". Then, he changed the subject to something else.*

There is a pregnant pause here in our interview. I feel the enormity of Rita's disclosure and her vulnerability. It must have taken courage to find Mark, through mutual friends, to summon up the courage to tell him she still loves him and will always and to have him stymie this revelation. Rita, however, manages to make sense of this. Her emotional intelligence, resilience and acuity help Rita transcend her hurt and her burgeoning sense of Mark's lack of emotional maturity.

#### 7.5.4 Insights

*I know that it blew him. It really challenged him. I consulted with friends who were deeply intuitive, spiritual, and psychic. He regrets what he did. He's made his bed, he sees he's made it his bed, and he has to lie in it now, you know, but he's not willing to admit that to anyone, and it's hard to admit, to admit it to himself. I even know that he has often contemplated divorce. That would be a shit show because she would make his life hell. You know, she would probably go to the press. God knows what else she has over him.*

From what I have heard of your story, it feels like this woman has appropriated parts of your life. She seemed to want to become you and deliberately set about modelling herself on you.

*You know she has appropriated of me. This woman appropriated parts of me, and she moved into my home whilst I was still there. Absolutely Louisa. What makes it even insane is that I was like, okay, he was helping her with her music, coaching her voice and helping her re-record this album that she did. I was teaching her style. She had no taste as far as how to dress. So, I was trying to teach her what works for her and what doesn't work for her, and I was teaching her how to cook. She didn't know how to cook. She came from a dysfunctional family. Her mother was a career woman, famous in the media but never at home. Lisa was her oldest daughter, so she grew up in the shadow of this very famous mother. She grew up quite spoiled. You know, when her mother was in South Africa and was having great success with her media career, she was living with her dad and her sister. They would come and visit, but for 14 years, her mother was not there.*

*My son also had this thing with her. She slept with him. My son told me one night they were smoking weed and drinking beer. My son looked at her, and he said, "Where do you want to be in five years?" She says I want to find an older man, an older rich man. Who can give me the lifestyle I'm used to, and I want to have a baby. So, when he told me that, I was like, oh my God, I think she admired me a lot. She would always say, I love you so much. I want to be you when I grow up. Then, once I was out of the picture, everyone told me that she always tried to dress like me and that sometimes people mistook her for me, even though I'm much fairer than she is. I'm much taller than she is. We don't look anything alike, but she*

*would try to dress like me, down to, you know, the sunglasses I wear and the kind of hats I wear, and it's quite sick. It's a bit like, what is that, that film with Bette Davis? All about you?*

I'm sure you've explored this in therapy, but I want to ask you something. There is something for me here about your ex-husband being so childlike that he can't make up his mind about things. You speak about how you gave up your career to be there for him, that he could not book flights, pay for taxis, book hotel rooms and then he swapped you out for Lisa. Who then became a clone of you?

*Yes.*

It seems like there are parts of him that were like they were a child, and you were summarily abandoned when something shinier came along.

*You're right. He is. There are parts of him that have not grown up. He's still very much a boy in some ways. I mean, he says to me that he's changed, he's now in therapy. I mean, there were often when I had to play the mother role, which I know now was not good. You know, of course, what every man wants, they want the mother, they want the Madonna, and they want the whore. That's okay. We must be everything to a point. But to a point, I was probably too much of a mother. Can you do this? Can you do that? Oh, I don't know how to do it, can you do it for me, you know that kind of thing, but what was it? Basically, Lisa wanted to step into my shoes, and that was her goal.*

She emulated you, but it appeared so calculated that it caught you off guard. You welcomed the girl/woman into your home and mentored her, teaching her style and how to cook. She received voice coaching, assistance with recording and becoming a musician. Then, she slept with your son, followed by achieving her aim of meeting an older, affluent man, your husband. So avaricious and calculating. We cannot ignore your husband's complicity in this, and we have touched on it. However, I can see the distress, shock, and horror of being betrayed and duped by someone you let into your inner sanctum.

*Oh yeah, I mean, I think when I spoke to my therapist about her, he said, oh, she's a sociopath. He named that she's a sociopath, a narcissist anyway, but also a sociopath. I remember one day I came home, and Mark had been really horrible to me. We had been out to pick up something at the coffee shop, and I came home. I left him where we were, and I walked home, and I was in tears. She walked in, she said, "Oh my god, what happened, what happened?". She knew he had been so horrible to me. I told her he's not nice to me. He doesn't touch me. He's so distant. And I was crying, and she took me in her arms, Louisa, with tears in her eyes. She said, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry". Meanwhile, this is going on. You have to be a sociopath to do that.*

That's cruel, and also, that is a huge deception. I wonder if there are times when you must have berated yourself. What couldn't I see? What didn't I know? Especially if you're an intuitive, especially a spiritual being. You must have asked yourself, why couldn't I have seen it?

### 7.5.5 Self-awareness

*I think what I learned is that this had to happen. I understand now why it had to happen because I needed to get back to me, I needed to get back to my thing, I needed to get back to doing the things that I want to do and not just being there for this other person, not just being there for this famous rock star. Even though it was painful, I don't regret it because I learned so much about myself. I learned so much about what I'm capable of. To be honest, if you asked me if he were to call me tomorrow and say, Rita, I want us to get back together, I honestly cannot say what I would do. I couldn't say, oh, no, that's not going to happen. I couldn't say to you, no, that's not going to happen.*



Rita looks wistful when she says this. There is a faraway look that clouds her expression. The connection between Rita and Mark was intense. Even though Rita admits to the split being necessary for her to individuate, it does not take away the pain and the longing for parts of what she had with Mark. I express my thoughts to Rita:

The two of you seemed to have a deep love, a sacred bond. Yet Mark's behaviour and actions were contrary to that. You cannot explain it to your heart, I guess. From what you have described, it's as if your heart doesn't quite understand what's happened, and your love for Mark seems pure and unconditional, yet his actions don't justify what happened to you. I am curious as to what got you through and what your turning point was.

### 7.5.6 Healing

*Well, I was in therapy for five years. As I said, he had an amazing therapist, and he used EMDR on me, which helped. I mean, for example, there's an Aretha Franklin song, the name of it is Natural Woman. That was our song, and in those first few years, Louisa, I heard it everywhere, and I would start crying. It was just like I had no control over it. I went to Australia to see friends, and we went to the daughter's end-of-year school concert. The senior class had a band get up on stage, and what did that girl start singing? "Natural Woman", I'm sitting there in tears. Then a friend of mine, who lives in Switzerland, wants to go and see musicals every time she comes to New York. She wanted to see the Carol King musical, and I didn't think twice about it. I said, "Oh yeah, let's go. I love Carol King." We are going to see it. The last song they play, "Natural Woman". I'm... and at that point, it was toward the end, the entire audience is standing, so we're all standing, and I am sobbing. My girlfriend was holding me, and the guy next to me was like, he kept looking at me. It was terrible.*

*With EMDR, I can hear that song and not even notice it's on, it doesn't affect me anymore. There are many things I would think about when we sat on the couch, and he said, "I'm not in love with you anymore. I want to be with her". I would start crying. I think of it now, and I'm okay. So that was a breakthrough. Plus, I also worked on other things in my childhood with my mother, all those things that pushed me to the limits, and it was incredible. Therapy also helped me deal with my mom because if I hadn't had that therapy, I would not have dealt with her aggression. My mom was very jealous of me and very competitive. I only realised that in the last two years, I helped along with my spiritual healer and two other friends, they are my rocks. They are my rocks. I could talk to them anytime I wanted to about the situation, and they were never tired of hearing it. They just gave me such full support. It was amazing.*

### 7.5.7 Betrayal

I'm also struck by something that I'm not sure if it's an insight that you might resonate with or not. This girl also felt like a representation of your mother, that she was jealous of you. She was competitive, aggressive, and jealous of you.

*True.*

It must have been triggering.

*Yeah, you're right. I never thought of that because I only learned about my mother's jealousy in the past few years before she passed, so I didn't make that connection. But you're right.*

### 7.5.8 Loneliness

Rita's body language denotes great sadness, as if her lithe and graceful frame bends and becomes stooped. The enormity of her mother's betrayal makes me think Rita must have experienced great loneliness:

I feel that you've also had to go through quite a solitary journey, and loneliness has also been part of your journey.

*I remember something someone told me, and they said this was, this was meant to be. I needed this time these nine years to find myself, to regrow and come back to myself. Before I was married, I was working and travelling all over the world. I was very independent. I mean, I had a previous marriage before this one, I had a son, and I was very independent. When I got into this relationship, my independence was cut off. If I wanted to visit a friend somewhere, he would have to come, or he wouldn't want me to go. I remember when I had to come to New York for my mom's surgery, and I was in Europe for about a week before I left. He would say things like, "Oh, I know you can't wait to get to New York and be on your own. You probably go out every night with your friends, and you'll be happy to be away from me". He made those comments when he was angry that he was going to be on his own. He was very jealous, very insecure, and now he's with somebody who's just like him on that level.*

It seems like he's holding up a mirror.

*Yes, I want to say that it's almost like he's made his match. If you don't do the work, you'll meet someone reflecting everything you're currently holding, and that's exactly what she's doing to him.*

Where are you now, Rita?

*Emotional or physical?*

At any point, you feel it is relevant now.

## 7.6 Starting a new life

*Okay, right now, I'm in New York. I'm planning to move back to Europe hopefully within the next couple of months, but I've been thinking a lot, like I have a lot of friends in Europe. I have quite a few, and I know I will make more. I have friends in Italy, England, and Switzerland, but I think I'm a little bit nervous about it because now I'll be going back, and I'll be on my own. I won't have that cocoon of having a partner who can take care of things. If something bureaucratic needs to be done, he knows who to call, what to do, you know, I won't have that.*

*So that's making me a little bit hesitant. Although I'm sure I'll overcome that because I have friends who are always willing to help, I don't like calling people up and asking for help. But I am looking forward to getting back to Europe because I much prefer the quality of life in Europe. I have lived in Europe since I was twenty-one. I miss it, and I like to be able to travel, get on a plane in an hour and a half to be in London or go to Asia to photograph or, you know, just some travel and just see the world and do things that I enjoy doing.*

*Also, not have, on the other hand, not to have a partner that says, "Oh no, you can't go to India for two weeks. Who is going to make my breakfast, lunch, and dinner, you know?"*

### 7.6.1 Insights

It sounds as if you are describing someone who kept you ransom. Mark sounded quite controlling and needy. That's also quite something to disengage yourself from when you've had that many years of it. It sounds like you gave up so much of yourself, possibly without realising it.

*I remember when I, when I first came to New York, after he told me what was going on, I was staying in my mom's, and I would. I wasn't sleeping, never, in all my years, I never had problems sleeping. I would get up in the morning and just kind of wander around the apartment thinking, "Yeah, so what am I going to do with myself?" I have nothing to do. Just the idea of having nothing to do was very frightening.*

I am sure that it was completely destabilising because not only did you lose the love of your life, but you lost your sense of purpose.

Rita becomes very animated, and she seems to be relieved to identify how profound her loss was on these different levels.

### 7.6.2 Epiphanies

*Exactly, exactly! What's interesting is that whenever we have our conversations, even now, at the end of the conversation, I always say love you, and he always says I love you too, but you know you say that to your best friend as well.*

There is an emptiness to it, isn't there? When you tell me how he says "I love you" back, there is a brief look that flashes across your face. You look dejected and sad.

*Yes, it's true, and then our mutual friends would be so shocked, and they would say to me, "Is he mad?" "Is he going crazy?" Well, yeah.*

I can still see the sadness etched on your face and the absolute disbelief, shock, and horror. What I can also see is that perhaps for a great deal of this time, you didn't realise how much you may have subjugated yourself in your support for him because I think you did it very willingly. I don't know enough about your family history to know what the dynamics were there, but there is something about this role that seems quite familiar. Something familiar about sacrificing yourself for others because you are a selfless being, you I love a lot, and you care.

*Yeah, I think there, I think there were a lot of things in him that reflected my mother. He was very controlling. My mother was very controlling. Yeah, there are things. I used to think that he was a narcissist, but now I think he just had narcissistic behaviour at times, as opposed to being just a full-blown narcissist. My mom was a narcissist. It was always about her. There were things that I felt comfortable with. I didn't even realise any of this, but it's so obvious.*

Yes, it can be an eye-opener to see the pattern. I am sure you are familiar with narcissistic behaviour, the patterns, and the dynamics because you've done so much therapeutic work. With narcissists, there is no beginning and no end, you become an extension of them. Also, if you've grown up in a narcissistic family, you will seek out a narcissist because they are familiar to you.

*That's fascinating.*

Rita is open and transparent, and her demeanour is receptive and resilient. I find myself more willing to share my observations with Rita than with other research participants thus far. I tell Rita candidly what I perceive about the subtext of her narrative:

I'm curious about this new start for you in Europe. A great deal of healing has happened in your life, as well as an enormous amount of mourning. I think you are still terribly sad, and there is a strong presence of absolute disbelief and shock. If I had to describe your experiences, I would say that you never believed it was supposed to be this traumatic. It was never supposed to look like this. This was never supposed to happen, and you are still trying to make sense of it all.

*That is so true, but at the same time, I think that I know why it had to happen. I understand why I had to go through that. This has been a rebirth for me.*

That was my sense too that you're going to Europe as part of your new chapter. That you are ready, as well.

*I feel that's why I went to Europe in September, just to feel it out. To feel if I do still feel comfortable there because between 2016 and 2019, I was working on a photo project in Europe, and I would fly over a few times a year to do the photos, and then the exhibit was held in 2019. Every time I would go, it felt okay for me because I knew he wasn't there. I knew he was in Cape Town. I knew he wasn't in town, that I wouldn't run into him at a restaurant or something. So, when I went in September, I assumed that he was in town.*

*With that in the back of my mind, I was okay. I wasn't feeling that uncomfortable, and it felt like home again. You know, that's when I thought, okay, I can do this, I can live here, and if not, I mean, I'm just going to go somewhere else. My son lives in France. I even considered Florence, but Florence is so small but no, the city I have chosen is really a cosmopolitan city. It has a lot of what New York has.*

### 7.6.3 Spiritual beliefs

Did your spiritual beliefs play a role in your transition to healing?

*Yes, when it came to the forgiveness part. I came to realise that holding this anger doesn't serve me. It's like, you know, I'm sure you've heard, it's like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. I even said that once to Mark, and he was very impressed by it. He was always really impressed by my thinking, especially because I was trying to get him to forgive a friend of his who had done something. The friend hadn't even realised that they'd hurt him, but he wouldn't. He couldn't let go. That's when I told him about drinking poison, expecting the other person to die. What was your question again?*

About your spiritual belief systems and what role did they play? You said forgiveness played a role in it.

*Like I said, it doesn't serve me. What's the point of holding onto that which only hurts me? When I did tell him I forgave him, he was so relieved, he was like, "Oh my God, thank you so much". So, he was just over the moon but at the same time, I know that I cannot remove his guilt feelings. That's not my problem. That's not my task. So, I'm sure the guilt is still there, but my forgiveness has made him more comfortable. He definitely finds it easier to call me and speak to me, I'm sure.*

It sounds like he still relies on you quite a lot, that you're an anchor for him.

*I find it odd that he feels the need to call me. He always just says, "I just called to check, see if you're okay", but I know there's more to it than that. I would love to say to him, "Why*

*are you calling me? Why are you calling me every morning when she's not home?" I won't say that somehow. I just, I don't know, that he wouldn't tell me the truth anymore. It's hard because I believe you have a spiritual connection that you're soulmates. You know, we have many soul mates, and there's that connection. Mark even said to me, "I know that we're connected on a spiritual level, very much so, yeah".*

#### 7.6.4 Financial betrayal

*So, even with this spiritual connection, some stuff happened that blew me away. I never really got it until a while later. I was so emotionally caught up in my pain. It was sometime between November and February, and I was on Facetime with a friend and another common friend of ours, John. I was telling them how Mark had offered to give me one of his apartments. He owned several properties throughout Europe, including apartment buildings. He offered to give me one of the apartment buildings. He had said, "Yeah, you can have one".*

*Then we must sign a piece of paper, and we'll be divorced. That's what he said, and then we'll be divorced. Was thinking, well, maybe this is just a fling, and he'll get over it, and he'll come back, you know, and I mentioned this to them about the apartment building he wants to give me. And John said, "Rita, how much is that building worth?" I said, "Well, maybe about 2 million". He said, "Rita, think about how many more years you'll probably live and how much money you'll need".*

*My friends woke me up through those years. Thank God, I had incredible lawyers. I mean, even my ex said, "My God, you were tough". I was also very lucky because we lived in this European country, we had, we had a prenup. When Mark and I got together, he was known, but he was not known. He became when we were together. So, on a scale of one to ten, he was maybe at four and a half, and we got together through those years. It shot up to ten or even ten plus, so he made the bulk of his finances while we were together. So, when I signed a prenup, he owned maybe the equivalent of a million euros and an apartment that was it.*

#### 7.6.5 Legal support

*No, he has multi-millions. So, in this country, when you have a prenup, you go to court because they wanted to settle out of court and give you practically nothing. They never wanted me to go to court. Usually, you would get alimony for maybe seven or eight years after that, you still get alimony, but it would be less because your lifestyle is not the same, and then it would end. I was very lucky. We had a judge, and she didn't give us as much as I wanted, but it was 50 per cent more than what he wanted to give me.*

*She made it lifelong. If he dies tomorrow, I will still get alimony from his estate, and that's not normal in that country. He was like, "That means I have to work forever". She says now you are a multi-millionaire. "Yeah," he said, "But then my wife should work." "Why should she work?", the judge said, "She didn't work when she was with you. You know, she's 60 years old. She can't start a photography business, and suddenly, she has no social security because she was living here in Germany with you".*

*She was great. I know he was incredibly angry about it, and during one of our conversations before, before I said that I forgive him, I said to him I felt I needed to say this to him. I said I'd like to thank you for the support I get from you every month, and it's very helpful. And he says, "Oh, you're so welcome, you deserve it, you really deserve it". I was shocked.*

#### 7.6.6 Resilience

There is a hitherto unseen radiance that crosses Rita's face. She looks triumphant, and an air of pride and dignity emanates. I tell Rita that she looks quietly triumphant. There is a broad

smile across her face. I see an inner strength in Rita, her mettle, the mettle that got her through her difficulties:

*Yeah, you're right. I was like, don't mess with me, and he didn't. He did not expect me to fight like that. I know he also had a very tough lawyer. Someone told me after the divorce went through. If you still need a lawyer, I know someone, and it was his lawyer, and we still won! Yeah, we fought against him, and we won.*

I get the sense that this triumph and your reconnection with your inner strength will have the impetus you will propel into your new life and infuse the new changes you're about to make. Interestingly, we're having this interview on the eve of you making these changes because you've had to go through this period of mourning.

*It was July of 2013 when he walked out the door, but the divorce didn't go through till August of 2015, so there was like a decade. Yeah.*

You are now beginning to make changes for yourself, and the interesting thing I've noticed in my research is that there's a turning point. It happens when there's something that we glean or learn about ourselves. During these crisis points, and one of the things that I've seen in my interviews with you, is that there is an inner strength to you that you've never really had to draw on. You may have been at your mother's behest, then in service to your ex-husband and now you are doing things for yourself.

Your mother was quite cruel. She was envious of you. There was a great deal of competitiveness. Then you meet this girl, you mentor her, and it transpires that she is a woman similar to your mother. There was an untapped source of strength that you didn't know you had. It said, "I've had enough, I will not do this, and I can fight, and I will win. You didn't act in a histrionic manner. You were quiet, and you were dignified, but you were firm.

*It's true. Yeah, and I never saw her again. She was too afraid to confront me. She is afraid of conflict.*

I see that shy, triumphant smile spread across Rita's face again.

*Yes, the day when he came home and told me what was going on, I was in shock, and he went and slept in the guest room that night. I didn't sleep, and I didn't go to bed that night. I knew that she was in a hotel. I knew that she liked chic hotels, and there weren't many of them where we lived, so I went online, I looked up all the little chic hotels. I made a list, and I looked at it, and my intuition told me that one, and I called and asked if she was a guest there, and they said yes, she was.*

*I got up and pulled out everything that she had ever given me, birthday presents, thank you cards, anything she'd ever given me, put them in a box, got in the car, drove it over and left it at reception for her. I didn't want anything of that woman in my house. Where my husband was sleeping, she had stuff in there, but I couldn't get in there already. Just to get that out was an accomplishment.*

Rita describes what she did and becomes visibly lighter in energy and disposition. Rita's strength is her magic elixir. She transcends her sadness and pain:

*I remember the next day, a message from her popped up on his phone, and he was in the shower, and I saw it was from her, and she wrote, "She said she sent my shit over to the hotel". So, after he saw it, he came into the kitchen, leaned over the counter, and said, "How did you know where she was staying?" "Did you follow me?"*

Again, I see the triumph on Rita's face. It's as if she now has some of the power and mastery back that she lost, that she gave up, that was usurped.

Rita consulted with psychics and tarot card readers, and without fail, the message was always the same for her. Mark is leading a miserable life. Rita calls it living a coffin life - that he's lying in this coffin that he's built for himself and doesn't know how to get out of it:

*He's just saying, "Well, yeah, I just, I'm here, I guess I'm stuck here," that kind of thing. One of the psychics told me, "I see him, he's kneeling in front of you". She said, "He reveres you". I'm sure she's right. He used to say to me, I'm not good enough for you I'm not good enough for you. He is so insecure, although he says that now that he's in therapy, he is much more self-secure. I don't know. He's in therapy, which is good.*

### 7.6.7 Self-mastery

Rita admits that she is conflicted by the possibility of Mark changing and what it could mean for her:

*What if he changes? What if he is unhappy? What if he sees what he's done, and he wants to change and be with me?*

It's clear that Rita still has deep feelings for Mark, and there is a fantasy that he will redeem himself and come back to her, reformed, a different man and that he will have come to his senses. It's a difficult question to answer. I could ignore this question as a rhetorical question. Still, Rita is emotionally resilient and has invested much into her healing process and transforming a midlife crisis into a transition. I want to give Rita my honest opinion:

Rita, you have worked so hard on self-development. Mark would need to show up as the person who would be there for you as your equal.

*No, you're right, and I know that, ultimately. It's only you who must do the work ultimately.*

Yes, because you've done the work, and you have changed dramatically.

## CHAPTER 8: THE LIFE STORY OF GEORGE

### 8.1 Personal data

Participant	:	George
Age	:	48
Field of Occupation	:	Art dealer and collector
Research Setting	:	The interviews were conducted at George's gallery. A light and bright, vibrant space filled with George's art collection. George's area of speciality lies in mid-century artefacts, of which he has amassed a significant collection. He is particularly interested in ceramics and religious iconography, and his studio is resplendent with his collection. Sometimes, George plays music during our interviews, the doors to his gallery are left wide open, and we sit at a small table together. George rarely eats or drinks in his gallery. He smokes copiously and stubs out the cigarettes in a small silver ashtray, the kind that requires one to depress a lever to open the ashtray.

### 8.2 Identified themes

The following themes were identified during my interview with George:

- Appearance
- Sublimation
- Tattoos
- Childhood
- The peacekeeper
- Refuge in academia/ religion
- Working life
- Death
- Midlife crisis
- Stroke
- Emotional distancing
- Emotional distancing as a means of survival
- Self-actualisation



- Survival
- Coping mechanisms
- Music as a means of self-expression
- Sexuality
- Adaptation
- Relationships
- Manipulation
- Self-awareness
- Escapism
- Abuse
- Self-preservation
- Relationships with mother
- Healthy relationship
- Epiphanies
- Religion
- Emancipation
- Defensiveness
- Transcendence through creative outlets
- Transcendence through healthy relationship
- Self-effacement
- Symbolism of tattoos
- Self-expression
- Self-worth
- Abandonment
- Positivity
- Fulfilment

### **8.3 Introduction**

In this chapter, George's story is related in transcribed excerpts, and the researcher's input and observations are included to allow for a fuller context of the data. Emergent themes pertinent to a midlife journey are identified. It may be seen that some of these themes extrapolated are not mutually exclusive and that the themes are shaped and coloured by the researcher's lens and responses during the interview. Therefore, these themes are not deemed to represent a finite truth about the participant's reality, but rather an in-situ narrative that is influenced and enhanced by both researcher and participant. Every story of midlife has its own countenance and will, therefore, be different. This story is not meant to represent a finite nor absolute truth about all midlife stories and remains an experiential narrative.

## 8.4 Appearance

George is a man who does not go unnoticed. He has long flowing locks that he keeps pinned up and, on rare occasions, wears down. He is always adorned in a variety of interesting amulets, which consist of rosaries, evil eyes, beads and heavy silver jewellery. He also wears a number of heavy silver bangles interspersed with beaded bracelets.

His style of dressing is colourful, eclectic and irreverent. He favours clothes with cartoon characters, he loves bright colours and vibrant patterns, and he wears all manner of patterns together that form a bold statement. At other times, he wears all white. I have never seen George wear black. He also wears clothing with slogans that are meant to provoke. During one of our interviews, George wore a T-shirt with “Pray the Gay Away” printed on it.

He often wears plastic shoes with swear words printed on them. Some of his plastic shoes are thick-soled, and they elevate George to be taller than he is. These shoes are almost always paired with outlandishly coloured socks. George presents as a kaleidoscope of colour.

He wears a variety of different, oversized reading glasses that tend to magnify his warm, brown eyes. When he takes his glasses off, George’s eyes appear surprisingly smaller and gentler, fringed by long, dark eyelashes. The starkest element of George is his tattoos. There is a lot to take in visually of George, but his tattoos invite scrutiny. They are deeply etched, bold tattoos in a gothic-type font. They are etched over his forearms, biceps, calves and ankles. All of his tattoos are prose. There are glimpses of other tattoos, and although I am initially curious about his tattoos and find myself trying to piece together the snatched glimpses of prose, I bide my time before asking George about his tattoos. I intuitively get the sense that they are a visual clue to George’s life.

George is highly articulate and erudite. He speaks with fluidity and ease most of the time. His voice tone does not change, except for when he is speaking of painful memories. Then his voice becomes hushed, and his words take on a faint, light and breathy quality. George’s vocabulary is frequently punctuated with colourful expletives and in my interviews with George, I reflect his language back.

#### 8.4.1 Sublimation

I learn that George is a deeply sensitive man. Over time, during our interviews, it becomes clear that George has learned to mask his emotions by sublimation. He has learned not to take up too much emotional space. He has learned how to be a peacemaker, how to avoid attention, and the type of attention that could result in confrontation. This is at odds with George's appearance, which one cannot miss. It appears that George "speaks" in other ways, and it is during our interviews that I learn how to listen carefully to George's narrative, as there are many other ways that George communicates. These are not necessarily via the spoken word.

#### 8.4.2 Tattoos

When I ask George about his tattoos, I ask him to tell me their provenance and which tattoos are the most poignant. His reply provides me with even further insights that give context to George. George has a number of tattoos that require close attention to see the details. One cannot see George without noticing his tattoos. I am curious about his tattoos as all his tattoos seemed to be prose. George confirms that his tattoos are all prose, sourced from the Bible and *The Book of Counted Sorrows* by Dean Koontz.

I asked him to choose his most poignant tattoos. These pieces of prose set the tone for our interviews:

- "Jesus wept"
- The Lord's Prayer in Aramaic interspersed with the seven deadly sins.
- The act of contrition.
- The symbol for Yahweh as called by Moses to set forth each plague.
- "The nuclear spirit erased"

When I ask George the meaning of his tattoos, this is his response:

*Having escaped into music and literature, I became fascinated with horror. D R Koontz and Steven King being the firm favourite of any teenager. Koontz used many quotes from The Book of Counted Sorrows, and that addressed my interests. I then further investigated monks' writings and books on philosophy and life forms. Strong in my belief are the writings on the Benedictine monks, and that was the start of my love of both the horror in the Bible and biblical teachings that then led me to the path of the seminary.*

*What destroyed that dream were the actions of man (the priests) and how what was said was not practised. I suppose my initial break from the Catholic faith was when I was informed that for your own spiritual wellbeing you were expected to bear arms to protect material goods of the church. It was then when I went to a private school and was opened to a cavalcade of religions that I source truth and lies in all religions and also learnt to have respect for them all as I believe that all religion comes from the same seed of human necessity to be belong.*

*I got my first tattoo when I was 14, and that was " Jesus wept" and I loved it as it is the shortest verse in the Bible. All my tattoos are pieces of my life at the time recorded only on my body, so I never forget where and what I was and what I knew I had to become. I love the belief that the same being that made you will not kill you allow you to suffer but also send mercy and joy.*

I ask George to expand upon his tattoos and their relevance to him. George is quick to answer:

*Jesus wept - and I found it in a Chappie wrapper that it is the shortest verse in the Bible. I found that the universe was talking to me. (A Chappie is a brand of chewing gum found in South Africa. Each gum can be individually purchased, and the inside of each wrapper had general knowledge trivia.) My favourite tattoo is the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic with the seven deadly sins. I chose this when I knew I could never turn to religion, and that became my seal and the list of sinners that will burn in the fires of hell from revelations as it is everyone.*

## **8.5 Childhood**

George describes his early years, starting with his earliest memory:

*My earliest memory is of being a roommate in an orphanage, and I was given a chair. I don't know what to do with the chair itself as I didn't speak the language, which was English at the time. In my memory, I was in a funny green room, which was that hospital green. There was this chair, and then a rush of people came in. That's as far back as I get. The other early memories I have are of sitting at fences. We did a lot of that. We had a lot of fences when I was younger and in Zimbabwe because we had just finished the war, so there were fences put up everywhere to deter people. I remember the bombs and the gunfights, and I remember getting packed in cars.*

George is understated in his recall. I try to piece together his narrative. If his earliest memory was of being given a chair in the orphanage, followed by a rush of people, then this was an early memory of visits by prospective adoptive parents. George elaborates on the confusion, stemming from his early years, as during his childhood, he did not speak English:

*All of the time, I was trying to understand exactly what was happening because it was all being done in English, and the only people that spoke Italian were my parents at the time, so they did the translating. Then we moved to Johannesburg, and from Johannesburg, it was Durban, and I went straight into South African government schools. That's where the turning point started. I could see that I wasn't like everybody else. There were surfers and young guys jumping and skateboarding. In general, lots of outdoor activities. I was living a very unsheltered life.*

### 8.5.1 The peacekeeper

Without much preface, George segues into a significant chapter of his life—that of growing up with an alcoholic father and a physically and emotionally abused mother:

*It was a very turbulent lifestyle, having an alcoholic father and an abused mother. Then having my other siblings thrown into this space made me want to be the peacekeeper, so I think I've always been the one that tries to defuse the situation. I will subdue myself to handle a situation, and it's still like that today. It's who I am.*

### 8.5.2 Refuge in academia and religion

*Then, I pushed myself hard academically, and I pushed so hard that I was able to go to a private school where I could focus on things that I did enjoy doing. I loved drama and, history, and theology. I took all this in, and I think it built up my character. It gave me a sense of worth, and I think at that school, there was no discrimination. It was the first multiracial-covered school in South Africa. So that also did a lot of building up.*

## 8.6 Working life

*Then, it was straight into work. I had to go work in family business, which was 24 years of boredom. But that did give me the opportunity to travel overseas and study overseas and a lot of international travel, which was a very good thing because that was very rewarding.*

### 8.6.1 Death

*Then, I dealt with the death of my parents. They died one year apart from each other. This created a lot of issues in the family. I was always trying to be the appeaser of situations.*

## 8.7 Midlife crisis

### 8.7.1 Stroke

*I subsequently had a stroke. Which you only do to yourself, and you cannot take care of yourself, which I wasn't. I decided after that that I wasn't gonna [sic] give a fuck what anyone thought, and I would carry on the way I wanted to. Obviously not hurting anyone in turn but being honest and true to myself as I could be. Although that only happened in my late 40s, I think rather now than never.*

I point out to George that that was a huge turning point and that he relates his story dispassionately, the lack of emotion startling. It appears as if George wants to distance himself from his stories, to keep them at arm's length. I ask George if he is trying to put distance between himself and his story:

### 8.7.2 Emotional distancing

*Yes, because if you take it all too seriously, you are going to make yourself a victim of life. Everyone is different. Everyone has stories.*

As an observer of your story, I wonder if you have conditioned yourself to keep your story at arm's length?

*Your history defines you and I am the way I am because I am, because I don't want to be a bunch of excuses.*

It seems to me that you don't want to be defined as a victim.

*Well, a lot of people have things that have happened to them that are worse than what happened to me. If you look at people I don't know, her name was by heart, but that woman from Syria, the one that was severely burned and tortured by her family. The only thing that's important to me is about being honest to yourself at all times.*

### 8.7.3 Emotional distancing as a means of survival

Are you saying that you are not going to allow what happened in your childhood to affect your adult life? Is this a transition point?

*Absolutely. It's a knowing. You need to know your self-worth.*

This seems like one of the most pivotal things that you learned and possibly a turning point in your story. Perhaps you allowed a level of invasiveness in previously. You have described growing up in a very Mediterranean family...

*Yes, you've always got the peacekeeper, and that was always me. Um, and I think I took that on too. It affected me in my relationships and, in my daily life and in my own thoughts on who I was. I mean, everything falls away, and you realise that you don't want to put up with that. You don't have to. That's why I don't care anymore about what others think, and what you see is honestly what you get. There is nothing else there.*

So, was it painful to make that change?

*No, no, it wasn't painful at all. It was actually quite liberating. At the age of 45, the events that led to it were comprised of a series of things. It was a long series of things once my parents had passed as I saw all the fighting within the family. In many respects, the man cracks, and that ultimately led to a masterpiece. My main concern was always my younger brother. I had to make sure that myself, my husband, my brother, is taken care of even when we're not here.*

*My family didn't care after my parents died. My brother would have honestly been left destitute, and they couldn't care. So, taking that responsibility on at that time was really a very heavy task. I realised that it wasn't just any kind of task. I took over the responsibility of my brother.*

*He's autistic. I had to learn so much about the positives, the negatives. Learning about outcomes and also teaching myself a more positive way forward. I had to learn to define myself, not by what's in my past.*

### 8.7.4 Self-Actualisation

George looks proud of himself, and I point my observation out to him:

*Yes, I am proud of myself. I'm not used to being like this, but this way is far better for me. I'm learning to take ownership of myself.*

*I'm proud of myself that I'm not what I used to be, which is far better. I don't know. I've learned that I used to put everybody else before me. I've learned that maybe, at times, I was a doormat, and it breaks you down completely. Stripping away all of that was a very good thing to do, and all of this happened in my late 40s. I think I kept up a very good facade. I learned to mask very well. I could be the most arrogant fuck in the world. I'm not saying don't be true to yourself, but just be aware of yourself. That actually opens up a lot more doors to self-happiness and self-worth. I don't even know if there is another path that I could have followed. There were so many hidden agendas in my childhood.*

### 8.7.5 Survival

*There were so many people with hidden facets to them. You need to get a full 360-degree picture of it all, and it's amazing. Then, when you do that, you can find where the hidden facets are. I've learned that society operates Kind of down there. And you can spot that once you've sussed out the first one. Then the rest of them are really easy to suss out. I just needed another path to follow.*

What I'm hearing you say is that you had to learn new ways to survive. You had to learn how other people behave. You had to start to watch. To monitor, I can't help myself from wondering what it must have been like for you as an adopted child to have to find your way in the world. You didn't even speak English as a first language, let alone figure out how your family worked. Your father was abusive. He was an alcoholic. You and your mother were victims of his alcoholic abuse.

### 8.7.6 Coping mechanisms

*Music was so important for me, so was reading. These two things were my biggest escape for me. I was lucky to grow up in a time when there wasn't much music being made, as in manufactured music. It was real music. The extremes of 9-inch nails and then Tori Amos. It led to questioning music at the time. It was the music that made you. You become aware of yourself and your surroundings. That was a big thing, that was a very, very big thing. That's where I found a lot of release, and that led to my having my private time. At the time, I kept a journal that I could write in.*

*I wrote and wrote, and it was a relief. Whatever I wrote were my private thoughts, and that was a big help. I was never alone as a child, and I didn't often have private time. I've always had many friends and I had a very good connection with my mom. She was always just my mom. She was very sure that she wasn't my best friend. She made it very, very clear, which I respect her for, but by the same token, you could go to her for anything, and she would offer you some advice, first as an adult speaking to a child and then as your mother, which I think is a big thing for any parent to do. She wouldn't hide anything at all. She would never sweep under the carpet what you had done wrong. She would tell you what you had done. Then, she would tell you how to remedy it or how to look at it in another way. Which was a very, very big factor in my life. My mother was very grounding for me, and it was really hard for me to accept what she was going through. That was the abuse with my father.*

You speak about how difficult your childhood was and how difficult it was to watch your mother being abused by your alcoholic father and that it led you to take on the role of a peacemaker, mediator, the jester. It also led you to be nonconfrontational, as you had learned to make yourself as small as possible.

*I've seen that put into practice. You shut up and take it, which now I don't. You also don't have to do it in a horrible way. You don't have to be aggressive. You don't have to be volatile. You can speak very calmly to someone. And let them know how you feel. You actually get a*

*lot more comfort from people, and you see that it works. This is where a lot of self-teaching and learning came in.*

### 8.7.7 Music as a means of self-expression

I asked George about what he's learned through music and how it's taught him to handle life:

*So, in music there were circumstances which informed me. I kind of put myself into their shoes. In music, you can see how you can approach situations. Music doesn't mock you if you get it wrong. Music speaks to me; I got so much out of music. I learned so much.*

It seems like you found solace in music and literature. With these two mediums, it also seems as if you found highly creative ways to cope with your life.

*Yes, that leads to a totally different conversation. So, I've seen that I've learned to identify with music, and also, it was a way of expressing myself.*

### 8.7.8 Sexuality

*I mean, I really hate referring to my sexuality here, but growing up, in the time that I did, it wasn't easy to express myself as a gay man. There wasn't anywhere that you could go. And you couldn't really speak about it, so you had to find a way to express yourself. I also refused from a young age to be defined. I think that being gay doesn't define a person, and I still don't believe it does. So that was a big, that was a big thing that I taught myself from young. So, I never flapped my wrists and acted like a typical gay man. I would walk properly. I would conduct myself as a man. And not as a typical gay man. I really didn't want to engage at all the stereotypical ranting that goes with being gay.*

*That was a big thing for me, a really big thing. In my family, they all knew it was just something that wasn't discussed. So, when I told my parents, well, actually, I didn't tell my parents. I told my mother first and then when I got married, my father came to the wedding, and he was OK with it. So, he had accepted me being gay by that point, and I think what helped there is that he didn't have a son. That was a raving fairy. To be honest, I think that would have been a lot harder, and I wouldn't have wanted that for myself. So, I really chose to negate all the more stereotypical elements of being gay. I don't identify with that part of being gay. I mean, I can appreciate it. I can appreciate the wit. I can appreciate the very, very fast comebacks. I can appreciate their unique sense of humour. Gay men can be really, really cutting. But they can also be very resilient, and they can also have a great sense of the aesthetic. I've been on the receiving end of the cutting part, and I don't want to do that to somebody else, and I don't think it's right. You're not going to have a happy life.*

### 8.7.9 Adaptation

*You see, I've never been apologetic for who I am, and maybe that's one of my faults. Everyone knows who I am now, and if I don't fit into a space, then I don't fit into your space.*

I'm hearing you say that you had to learn to adapt, that you had to learn how to fit into society as a gay man, and that you were very, very conscious of not being a gay man that was too obviously gay or too stereotypically gay.

*Yes, that's true. I learned how to assess situations and make sure I'm comfortable because it was important for me to have a peaceful environment. When I was younger, I learned how to fit into situations, and I did what was expected of me. But the most important thing that I've learned? Not to fit into their environment but to change their environment to suit me.*



It seems to me that one of the most important things that you've taught yourself is to be comfortable with yourself. To not have to adapt to learn the value of who you are. And to be comfortable and proud of that.

*Yes, I guess so, but. Everyone makes mistakes, and I continue to make mistakes, so I'm not always going to get it right.*

## 8.8 Relationships

Tell me about some of the formative relationships in your life that you think may have contributed to who you are now.

*Sure. I think from coming from an abusive background, the relationships that I went into were never volatile, but they were very toxic, very, very toxic. My first real relationship with the supposed love of your life was with my best friend's boyfriend. We would have our time together, and she would never know about it. Never knew about for three years. Eventually, I had to tell her. I had to name this thing because he seemed like the most fabulous guy, and he would never, ever admit to being gay. That was really, really hurtful, and that was something that I did to someone that caused a lot of hurt.*

In our next interview, George describes what his relationships have been like in general and what has shaped his relationships. I asked George if he had taken on a leading role in his relationships. He describes himself as always assuming a subservient role, as doing a lot of things traditionally ascribed to women:

### 8.8.1 Manipulation

*So, whatever was going to be done would be done. Whatever would be sorted, would be sorted. I would never object. I would never argue. I would never even think about arguing. But by the same token, I think it also teaches you things, and I had to teach myself to be very manipulative. I do think that can happen in relationships. You trade in that. I learnt to be manipulative in my first relationship. I mean, it was a horrific thing to be so manipulative. Yet this was my first entry into true love. I think it was hers as well, her true love. So, I know that that's something she can never forget, and she can never take that back, so I guess I'll always have tainted it for her, and I've tainted it for me.*

George pauses here and reflects. It seems as if he's struggling to find the right words. He's normally very erudite and eloquent. Yet he seemed flustered. This event has affected George profoundly. Still, all these years later, he grapples to make sense of what has happened:

*I'm not saying I was the only one guilty of it. I mean, I was guilty of it, but I wasn't the only one. I didn't have to do that. Then I did, but I shouldn't have. I guess I made a statement, but right now, when you look at the relationship that I've got, it's transparent. We've all got things that we are ashamed of in our past. I am respectful to my husband, and I honour our relationship as well. I think I know that I can be manipulative, and you can manipulate people, but maybe you can also learn to manipulate people to do the right thing, manipulate them to be very communicative.*

### 8.8.2 Self-awareness

*I respect his wishes as much as he respects mine. It's all about compromise, and it's all about respect for the compromise. He doesn't impose any boundaries on me, and I respect his wishes as much as he respects mine. I always say I trust him. I don't trust other people because I used to be those other people, so I know.*

This is a deeply revealing comment. George is aware of his misdemeanours, his past, his manipulation. He knows that he doesn't want to meet himself in a relationship and goes to great lengths not to be that person.

*I knew what I was getting myself into at a very young age. I was going to nightclubs at 11 or 12 years of age. I knew how to work the system. I looked a lot older than my age. I knew what buses to take to get to clubs. I knew how to dress the part.*

It is clear that George, as a child, had learned to navigate his way into an adult world. He describes his younger self as streetwise, savvy, sassy, and confident. I ask George if he was sexually promiscuous. This leads to George revealing the next pivotal and defining relationship:

*No, no, no, no, no, no. I was never promiscuous. Never. I think AIDS took care of that for me at a young age.*

Were you aware of AIDS at a young age?

*Yeah, when I was very, very, very young. It was through the media. So, you were very well educated, even when you were little. I've never been promiscuous. I can honestly say I've slept with three people in my entire life, my husband being one of them. But there's a hell of a lot more you can do without actually sleeping with someone.*

### 8.8.3 Escapism

George is very candid about his sexual adventures, very matter of fact and from what I have come to know about George's communication style, he is blunt, yet there is an element of vulnerability to him. I have learned that George does not like his vulnerabilities to be highlighted. He becomes insouciant about his life experiences and deflects by saying other people go through worse:

*So, I was sexually active, yes, but it wasn't penetrative sex. There are risk-takers, absolutely. I was very aware of them, but I had to find my own way. I didn't have any teachers around me. I had no one to mentor me. I didn't have a game plan. No, not until I got to high school. There, I met a very, very well-educated young gay man, and he had the same outlook on life as me, or so I thought. I thought that he was very respectful. He wasn't. It was amazing to be with him. He loved art. He was incredibly talented. He was a musician, dancer, artist, and I had many conversations with him that helped structure my way forward. Because until then, I also took a hell of a lot of drugs. If you name the drug, I probably tried that. I tried everything except the one that you had to inject. I didn't want to try that one at all.*

#### 8.8.4 Abuse

I ask George why he took so many drugs:

*I guess part of it was about experimentation. I mean, I really wanted it to be dangerous. It was also escapism. Probably a lot of it was escapism. What was I escaping from? Well, I don't know, but I guess I was really, really nervous a lot of the time. You kind of never knew what was going to happen. I mean, my father broke my mother's shoulders, He broke her hip, he broke her arms, he broke her femur. Those are really big bones to break. I was lucky. He only broke my jaw.*

You must have been terrified.

*He was horrific. You never knew what you were coming home to. So, I was lucky enough to be wise to it. I escaped him by requesting to go to boarding school. Because I knew I was going to get a scholarship. So, because I was manipulative, I knew that I could get a boarding school scholarship. So, I told my parents that it was part of the package.*

It sounds to me that your so-called manipulation was actually just a form of escape. It was probably the only way that you managed to survive. Also, by using your EQ and your IQ, you were able to negotiate self-preservation. It seems to me like you used your wits and your street smart to keep yourself safe. I explain to George that children growing up in households where alcohol abuse is prolific creates an environment of shame and secrecy.

*Yes, absolutely, I did. Well, the actions of my dad defined the family. My mom, although she was Portuguese, she was much more English in her nature and mannerisms. On my dad's side of the family, I don't know. It just seemed like everyone was really, really attractive. Well, those ones that I knew about.*

*Well, you kind of didn't really speak about them. You knew. You knew that there was stuff going on. You knew that that uncle was sleeping around, or you knew that that aunt is doing whatever, that that one drank. But you didn't really discuss it. I guess it was just always swept underneath the carpet. Maybe that's really what defines a Latin family?*

#### 8.8.5 Self-preservation

You have learnt to live with a lot of secrecy and it's not surprising that you had a relationship in secret with your best friend's boyfriend. I am really curious. How did you manage to turn this around? How did you change this long-held narrative of secrecy? How did you decide you were going to do things differently? You describe experiencing a very serious health and debilitating illness that led to a turning point for you. You made significant behavioural changes, which were quite pivotal. It seemed as if there was an epiphany, a point at which you said this is no longer going to serve me.

*Yeah, I definitely think I learned from it. I think one of the main things was having to deal with all the stuff going on in private. You think that people are close to you. You think that people who have lived through the same things as you it's going to form a bond with you, but it doesn't.*

When you left for boarding school, how did you feel about leaving your siblings behind?

*The only sibling I was worried about, and that I knew could not take care of himself, was my younger brother, who's mentally handicapped. My sister was inconsequential because she was just self-obsessed. My other two brothers were already elsewhere, so they were out of the picture. It was just the young one. But I was lucky that my father had a soft spot for that child, so he never did anything to him.*

So, who did your father do things to?

*Oh yeah, me. I used to get thrashed. Really good. Yeah, weekly. But that was just normal. It was because of things like you didn't close the gate, right? You didn't clean the pool right - you just never knew what the trigger was. There was always a trigger, but whatever it was changed all the time. I think that's where reading and music came in because you'd rather spend time by yourself in a room, as opposed to being outside in an environment where you can be attacked. You see, it's like I said in the beginning, I don't need to find me. I'd rather take those things that I've learned, and I've looked through them in detail and I have looked at the positive.*

### 8.8.6 Relationship with mother

*I always said to my mom when she always used to apologise for childhood. I always said you don't have to apologise for anything because it's made me a stronger person. Maybe now, I appreciate things that I have now and all the goodness that I have. I can appreciate all the happy memories I have from childhood. I can look at the commitment and strength from my mum. I now know how much she gave, which teaches me how much a person can actually give. She gave it to him, my dad. It was an unbearable situation; she didn't have support. She could have thrown in the towel. She didn't. She went above and beyond for her kids. She didn't overdo it. We weren't spoiled. Well, I wasn't. It did filter down into the others. They did get spoilt. I wasn't. But there was a great deal of love. I learned from her how to love honestly and truly.*

*She was paradoxically, a great role model, but then she was also a very poor role model. She was a role model because she taught me what not to do. So, she taught me many things, what I should be doing and what I should not do. When I started my early relationships, I realised now that I was unknowingly doing those adult things that you've learned from other people.*

### 8.8.7 Healthy relationship

*So, I started learning about myself. I learned to say maybe it's better to hold on to have a look first. Does this work because of XY and Z? Then, of course, you don't want history to repeat itself. You don't want to end up hurting people around you. You know, if it didn't work before, then why are you doing it now to yourself? It's about finding someone to have a good relationship with. I'm lucky enough to have that with my husband. When we started our relationship, I laid my cards down on the table. It's always been like that with him.*

## 8.9 Epiphanies

*There are certain things that I know that he doesn't like. He knows things that I don't like. So, then, you don't have to dwell on these. You can actually just focus on them. I'm not saying you have to ignore them, but you have to learn to live with them. If someone is giving you their absolute all, then why go and agitate something that needs to be agitated? Focus on the positive and focus on the good. Focus on the truth that you have around you because it's very seldom these days. If you've got that, treasure it, and you must work on keeping it. I don't think that it's a form of manipulation. I think it's a form of communication. I think it's a form of communication that you have to learn. I had tried to communicate and to learn how to communicate with my husband honestly and openly. But by the same token, you don't have to be offensive or limited in what you say.*

*My husband is a very quiet person, but he's very confrontational, but not in an ugly way. He's not aggressive, which is what I've grown up with.*

That must be an antidote for you.

*Yeah, it was.*

*With all the crap going on with my family and then my subsequent stroke and, as you said, the epiphany and always, always, always, my husband would never he'd never judge us.*

It must be incredibly reassuring for you that there's no volatility or mercurial ups and downs because that's what was so destabilising for you growing up.

*It's a big, big thing, to be able to have that now. My husband has really helped me come to terms with a lot of things. Remember I was having serious relationships from a very young age. I was lucky to find my husband at a young age. We have both guided each other in the right way through our relationship.*

In one of our previous interviews, you mentioned that when you first met your future husband, you knew that you were going to marry him. You identified him very early on, and I think you have a great sense of prescience regarding what is good for you and what works for you.

*I first saw him when I was 14, and I'd spoken to him. It was a business, straightforward business transaction, and I first got to know him from that business transaction. I knew this was definitely a man I'm going to marry. He had that way about him, a presence, and he gave off all the feelings that I knew I should have. But, at that time, I was not right, and I knew I was not right, and I was not at the level I should be at for a relationship with him. I subsequently went off to study. So, before I went to study, I weighed 115 kilos, and I did my best to lose all that weight. I looked good, and then I came back, got my head right. Then I went to go see him. That was it. I made an appointment and chatted, and then we went for dinner. I told him how I felt, we took it from there, and we've been together ever since.*

You've spoken in detail about your brother and that you took custody of your brother.

*Yes, I had to. There were five kids, and I would say to my parents when they died that I was going to look after my brother. I spoke to my husband about that right in the beginning. He said no Negotiations. I just never questioned it, he said. He's never, ever going to let my siblings look after my brother.*

I'm really struck by how centred and calm you appear when talking about this phase of your life.

*Well, after coming out and the extreme aggravation and abuse that I went through in my family life and all that uncertainty. I guess I learned to appreciate things. You take value of what you have around you a lot more.*

*I spent a lot of my youth accumulating things, material things, material things to fill up this void. And I'm trying to understand my own sense of self-worth. Stuff doesn't make you happy. It's just material to fill up this void that you've got. Now I really have a sense of what I will and will not accept, and the fact that I've got a loving, peaceful relationship Has given me a real sense of solidity. We have our problems like every couple. But it's not as if it's on a scale that I can't handle. It's not exactly as if there's going to be a broken bone or I'm going to have to go to hospital after an argument. We can disagree, yes, even have a screaming match. That's fine.*

*It's still a decent form of communication. Whereas previously, there was no form of decent communication because everything was meant to denigrate you or break you down.*

It seems as if you've come a long way in terms of your personal growth. It seems like you have actualised. What would you attribute your growth to?

*I think a lot of it's been my stable relationship, my husband.*

It also seems to me as if you've had to teach yourself to learn about emotions.

*What I've seen is that people shut down. They become closed. Bitter, they choose not to share. I'm really, really private. I don't really like people that easily. I have a group of People. A small group of people that I'm really, really close to. And I don't really open up to a lot of people. Even if people seem to have good intentions, I often feel that people have agendas. It is about self-preservation. I'm not even doing it in a hostile way.*

### 8.9.1 Religion

*I don't even know what the turning point has been in my life. Maybe it was the fact that I had a stroke. Um, I think I just did a 360. I just realised that I had to focus on the most important things in my life. It reminds me of another big turning point in my life when I was supposed to go into the seminary. My family were devout Catholics, and I went for my confirmation then I wanted to go into the seminary. I realised that I would have to take up arms for the Catholic Church. There was no way I was going to do that, and that was one of the few times that I really stood up in my life for what I believed in.*

*I knew religion was rubbish when I went for my first Holy Communion classes, and the priest was speaking to us about the Bible, and I said to him, but weren't they part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and how do we know that that wasn't a fairy tale that was found? How do we know that's real? And he hit me with the Bible. So, if a book is a sacred object, you don't hit with it, and that's when I knew it was bullshit.*

*I must have been about seven or eight, and that's when I knew it was shit. That was the beginning of, it's not even a stance, it's a quiet stance actually, a quiet revolution against it. I'm not out to bring down any church or religion or whatever. Let them believe what they want to believe, but I do firmly believe that as much as people say they are fanatics like ISIS and whoever else is publicised, churches are more damaging than fanatics. They do it in a very sly way.*

Given the punitive and violent family life that George has had, challenging his father and the Catholic Church must have been daunting. I put this to George, and in his now familiar self-effacing and nonplussed way, he explains further what his family life was like within the context of religion:

*I started with all my confirmation classes, and it seemed as if my path was clear-cut. It was like, after that, I'm going into the Seminary. When I didn't go that was my first epic stand against what was the prescribed protocol of a typical young man in a Latin family. I came from a very typical Latin family. One of the turning points was when my mum, who was super Catholic, converted, and she became a Baptist. Then, from Baptist, she became non-denominational, but she wouldn't push it down your throat. She knew not to do that. I've never liked anything that's pushed onto you.*

George becomes very agitated when he speaks about dogma. He is fiercely protective of freedom of speech, personal liberty in belief systems and an ability for self-expression. George becomes enraged when he describes his mother's insights into religion prior to dying. It seems as if George is expressing fury at what he was made to believe as a child and how futile it all seems now after his mother's death. His mother had no spiritual epiphanies during her near-death experience in a coma and renounced religion before her death. George's entire existence had been shaped by religion. His realisation that religion is a man-made dogma is deeply

wounding for George, and he is viciously angry in his retelling of this discovery that became evident before his mother's death:

*I don't care what the cause or your rights are or what the issue is. I don't impose myself on people. Just before my mother died, she was in a coma for ten days, and she woke up, and I said to her, "Do you remember me singing Amazing Grace?"*

*"Do you do you remember me reading the Bible to you?"*

*She said no. I said, "What did you see?"*

*She said that she saw nothing. Absolutely nothing. That was from a woman who was highly religious. She said to me when she dies, that's it, it will just be a death. No priest, no ceremonies. Then she died. It was about a day after we had this conversation. I think that was my breaking point with religion. I realised that I have not been doing what I want, how I want to do it and when I want. That was my fury about religion. It's a man-made construct, and I think that was a very big domineering factor in my younger life as well. It was actually a very, very big part of my life. It dominated me.*

*This was the really, really, really big domineering aspect to my life, and after my mother died, and I faced this, this man-made construct in its fullest enormity. It set me free. I was free of that. Yeah, then that let everything slip into place. I was lucky enough, really fortunate enough, to have my husband at that time of my life. There was no way I could have these conversations with someone who wasn't 100% neutral. My husband is not a fanatic. Yes, he believes in God, but he's not full of religion. He doesn't live in the constructs of religion, doesn't live in the construction of a traditional family unit. He doesn't.*

*He's got a much more open view of living. Having him there by my side at that time was deeply comforting. I was able to have these conversations and make my way in the world without this dogma. He never imposed anything on me. He never said you're wrong or you shouldn't do it like this. It was a really big thing for me because he helped me to question things and to look at things differently. He would say, what if you looked at it is this way or that way, which is a big thing.*

It becomes evident that George had been deeply affected by the insidious and ever-present role of religion in his life. Both religion and his father's cruel, chaotic and violent patriarchy became intertwined and inexorably transposed onto George's experience of religion. George was held ransom to religion out of duty, fear and forced respect. Those same set of dynamics that George was forced to endure with his father. Religion was cruel, punitive, and violent (to join the seminary, he had to take an oath of taking up arms for the Catholic church). Religion took on paternal aspects, and George's father embodied these cruel and dogmatic religious aspects. When George's mother died, she confirmed prior to her death that religion was of no consequence to her and that it did not provide her comfort in her near death. George felt able to throw off the shackles of religion and, subsequently, the same heteronomous influences that religion and patriarchy represented to him. George felt he was now free to express his full fury at what he had had to endure at the hands of his father and in piety to religion, and he renounced religion with unbridled rage. George's tattoos, etched in a deep Gothic font, seem like they are

the equivalent of a Catholic hair shirt. His tattoos are stark, bold, imprinted on him like flagellations. George's husband plays a role in liberating George from dogma.

### 8.9.2 Emancipation

*I learned that you always need to question things. That whatever decision you make isn't necessarily because you've made the right one. That was quite a pivotal turning point for me.*

Your mother's death seems to have released you from some very entrenched belief systems? After she emerged from her coma, she said to you, I can't see anything there. I can't feel the presence of God, so why am I holding you to this doctrine? It seemed like you felt compelled to follow a certain route or life path, possibly out of a sense of subservience or duty? Or out of respect? Your mother's admission of no religious attachments or affinities when she faced death freed you. It had the most amazing and transformative effect on your life.

*Yeah, absolutely, completely. At the time, it didn't look like it was it was a shedding, but it actually was. It was something that had been building up for a long time, and then that was the point that I said, OK, listen to yourself now. I've had my stroke after that. That voice, the inner voice that's so important.*

George elaborates further on his newfound path into self-introspection and meeting his true self. The hitherto unseen self, as it was shrouded and opaque because of his violent, dogmatic and punitive childhood, was further layered with the perceived harshness and the futility of the role religion occupied in his life. George is vehement in his disdain for dogma, for enforced beliefs. He feels like he breathes deeper when he describes his emancipation from the strictures of religion:

*I think you're always evolving. Like I said, you can never be too old to learn, the more self-aware you are and your surroundings and people around you, the attitudes of the world and the attitudes of even the media, which plays a big role in these days. You can either choose to adopt what's been said to you, or you can choose to put it aside and make your own assumptions. That's exactly what I chose to do. You take it for granted that self-awareness is at the forefront of everything. I always thought that self-awareness was something that people can be taught, but then, who is teaching you? Then, people aren't taught properly. You have to take it back to source. Otherwise, it becomes hard. But I learned. Yeah, but I learned through reading, and I learned through because of who I am.*

*In this day and age, kids are learning sound bites from YouTube to gain self-awareness. People grab excerpts of that, but. It's totally different. Yeah, that's a whole different ball game. What I'm saying is, like in school, from an early age, we need guidance. It's confused, confusing as it is to navigate your way in the world. When we go to school, we're taught colours, we talk, later, we're taught to read. We're taught to write. When you start your little subjects of history, geography, and whatever the other subjects are now, they should be something that also then teaches you from a young age, a class that sows seeds into which direction you want to grow.*

### 8.9.3 Defensiveness

George inadvertently reveals the absence of parental involvement in his life. I am acutely sensitive to pointing this out to George, as he tends to become self-effacing and deflects by



telling me that everyone experiences difficulties. His childhood is not more difficult than anyone else's. This remains a consistent theme in our interviews. I am sensitive not to interpret George's experiences, nor reflect them back to him, as he tends to deflect and to minimise his pain. I learn to listen and to extrapolate my reflections. George does not respond well to empathy and understanding. I realise that George has experienced deep trauma. He found solace in music and literature and found it difficult to experience understanding and empathy. These are novel concepts for him, and he deflects with humour, sarcasm, nonchalance, and self-deprecation. Without interruption, I let George continue:

#### 8.9.4 Transcendence through a healthy relationship

*I was lucky enough to find that seed within me, because I had to. But I think everyone's actually got it in there. And there's many spiritual and theological scriptures that talk to them. But in an ideal world, parents should start that process, and I didn't have that. Therefore, there was some kind of thrive mechanism in me that taught me that there's something more. My husband played a big part, I knew existentially that there's so much more. So, I know I looked for it in music and literature, possibly in the arts.*

It is at this point in our interviews that I take a risk. I reveal to George what I have observed about him. I tell him that I see him as a highly creative person and that his creativity has been an outlet for him. That his creativity and resonance with music, poetry and the arts has been what has helped him to survive his abusive childhood. That he's channelled his creativity as a means of transforming his pain. I further risk telling him that he tends to be self-deprecating and dismissive of his journey and growth. George tends to invite tenacious discourse. I realise that this might be a legacy of his being punished, that he provokes one to elicit punitiveness.

I take care in relaying my observations to him. George is a dichotomy - he professes to like truth in all its starkness, yet one gets the sense that he steels himself from the starkness of truth that he likes to elicit. I couch my observations in the following way:

I think what I am trying to say to you is that maybe you're not used to being seen or noticed. You are unused to having attention focused on you. You tend to be a little defensive.

Perhaps it's because you're unused to this. I find that you speak a lot in the third person, that you create distance from yourself and further distance from your experiences. Your experiences are relevant, your life story is compelling, and I find myself deeply compassionate at what you have lived through and equally fascinated by your resilience and your affinity to art, music, and literature. How you have transformed your pain through these mediums into your life and transmuted these elements into your life and they have become your mainstay, that is, these lifesavers are now your passions, your career.

### 8.9.5 Self-effacement

*I never grew up knowing this. So, whatever I have done, I have done for me. I have transcended yes, yes. But yeah, some things you are powerless in the face of. There are people who have got it a hell of a lot worse than me, and they're transcended even more. I'm talking generally, and yeah, I'll take the compliment for having done it. But whatever, there is always someone who's got it 100 times worse, and there are people who are 100 times better than me. They're far more evolved than I am. I appreciate it, but it doesn't need to be congratulated. It's a form of survival. From being acknowledged could be but. It's just that because I honestly, and I'm not trying to be defensive on this account, I see the point of being congratulated on something, but it doesn't make sense to me.*

*I can't be proud of myself for having done what I've done. Like I said, I've got no regrets. Maybe, the one that I slept with my best friend's boyfriend. By the same token, that also taught me a hell of a lot. Sleeping with my best friend's boyfriend, that was really a shit thing to do. It was revolting, but I've learned from it. I've taken the positive out of it, and that was a step as well. That taught me what I won't accept in my relationships. So that's why I'm saying it's not something that needs to be rewarded because. Sure, I need to acknowledge it, absolutely. Everyone struggles.*

*I'm very grateful for my experiences, and there have been a couple of my close friends and family that noticed the changes in me that said you're completely different to when you were a teenager to when you were away, young guy. I have had people tell me that I am far more of a real person as opposed to a facade, but I think it was quite obvious.*

Again, it's hard to sit with George in the dismissiveness of his transition from pain to healing and self-actualisation. I check myself, this is George's narrative. Yet, for me, it's clear that George has survived his difficulties and made a positive transition because he drew on resources that gave him solace and comfort. George is resilient, yet he appears unable to acknowledge that he has endured difficulties. George's way of coping is to deflect and insist that everyone has endured difficulties.

He steadfastly refuses to acknowledge that he has experienced hardships and come through them and, in turn, alchemised these difficulties and transformed his love of music, literature, and art into creative pursuits. He is an art collector, a published poet, and an aesthete. I choose instead to ask George to expand on the theme of religion and the significance of his tattoos.

### 8.9.6 Symbolism of tattoos

When we started these interviews, George, one of the first things that I was struck by was your tattoos. There is something sacred and biblical about them. I realised when you elaborated on why you didn't want to go into the seminary that that was your first stance against your family. The stance that delineated you from being an archetypal, well-behaved Catholic son also led you to question religion and religious dogma after your mother died. When you saw her emerge from a ten-day coma, she didn't have any spiritual epiphanies. It was like there was a fury that erupted in you after your religion, yet there was nothing to it. You described religion as a complete man-made dogma.

I began to wonder if there was some kind of correlation between you and religion and how maybe you had spent a large portion of your life believing that religion was important but

then being absolutely shocked to see that it meant nothing. Yet you have so many mementoes of religion that are inscribed on your body. It felt like a dichotomy for me. I don't know if I'm on the right track or not, but for me, the theme of religion played quite an important role in your becoming, your transition at midlife. Religion plays a vital role in your questioning of what's important for you. It seems as if you have a complicated relationship with religion?

*My tattoos are purposely being chosen because they are the direct opposite of what we are told religion is. That it's not an all-encompassing loving God, an eternal being that looks out for your best interests. It's not this hug of love that's from the book that spreads the word of God. The love of God in all of my tattoos come from religious books and comes from religious writings. I knew religion was shit from an early age, and that was my only way of expressing it. I mean, I had my first tattoo when I was 13.*

But if they were shit, why would you tattoo them on your body?

*Because it was my response, my way of showing how stupid these things were and hoped by people reading them when they could get to see them, it would bring up a conversation. In that conversation, you could then say well, because this is the crap you believe.*

But why would you have something inscribed on you that you thought was crap?

*Because I think it's a good thing to have. It's like holding up a mirror in society's face, and I think I chose to be that mirror.*

I sense that I am stepping into sensitive territory with my questions. I don't understand George's relationship with religion. It is complicated, both loathing and reverential at the same time. My innate sense is that religion is tied up in George's relationship with his father. George feels God abandoned him during his father's violent rages and abusive behaviour towards George and his mother. I start probing deeper into George's tattoos, which symbolise his religious affinity:

That's quite a strong stance, to wear inscriptions as a mirror on your body that is a testament to something that you are quite disparaging of?

*Well, it's not disparaging. It's more to show how farcical the thing actually is. That's the whole thing, in the same token that you see these people that have tattoos that are just big black blocks. I've got as much respect for that because that also signifies something, even if that's just a black square or black circle. If you have to ask them about it, they'll tell you it's to cover up a picture, or it signifies XY and Z. That's what I think my tattoos were, and also, it was my way of rebelling against what I was indoctrinated into.*

Yes, it seems to me as if you wanted to expel a doctrine that you had been inculcated in.

*This was something that I could control. It was my body, I can control what goes in it, and I can control what goes on it, and by doing that, I can outwardly show the points of my control and the extent of my control as well. That's why I have so many tattoos.*

So, are all your tattoos mostly religious?

*All religious.*

But I'm still at a loss to understand, and I am sorry if I continue to ask the same question in different ways, but why do something so contra-indicative to what you believe religion represents? Why tattoo your body with religious verses and words to show the world how farcical religion is?

*Because it's such a beautiful ideology. So, it's a wonderful thing, it's the most wonderful, wonderful thing to have. It's like socialism, but in reality, it doesn't work, and religion falls into that category.*

### 8.9.7 Self-expression

It's at this point that I wonder whether George is describing the relationship with his father. Whether religion is a metaphor for his father. That parenthood could be wonderful and that the relationship with patriarchy is an idealistic concept. I have learned that George can be sensitive to discussing his relationship with his father so I continue asking George for more details about his tattoos, in the hope that they provide further insights:

What is the font your tattoos are written in? Is it a Gothic font?

*It's called a typewriter. It's meant to be a statement, and it is my statement. It's a fuck you statement.*

So, who are you telling to fuck off?

*Anyone that believes the bullshit they are told.*

So, anything anyone who believes in the bullshit of religion?

*Not necessarily religion but anything that you are told. Question everything. Don't believe blindly. It doesn't get you anywhere.*

Did you believe blindly?

*We all did when we were kids.*

Is this a reaction to the indoctrination and the dogma that you were made to believe as a kid?

*No, I think it was more of an unfurling of my own wings. I was doing what I wanted to do to myself. And these tattoos, they are lovely sayings. As harsh some of them are. I think they're beautiful things if you believe in it then it's really lovely. Some of them might seem a bit severe, but there's a lot of thought that's gone into the placement of them so that the right person will pick it up without having to explain a single thing, and many people do pick up on what I want to say through my tattoos. I didn't do them for anyone else. I did it for me. So, if I was having a shower or a bath or swimming or whatever, I would see them. No one saw my tattoos until I was about 22/23, not even my family.*

There's an element of purgatory around having something so deeply etched into one. I know you've spoken about coming from a deeply Catholic family. I wonder whether this is a type of symbolic Catholic hair shirt that you are wearing?

*No, it's not. It's something I enjoyed, and there are still other ones I want to have done, but I didn't just think about them and just have them done instinctively. I put a lot of research and time into them. My inspiration comes from looking at things or if something triggers my attention. I also get my inspiration from writing, reading, tattoos are recordings of certain mindsets and times and places in my life for that are good things for me to remember.*

I think tattoos can be a placemark in one's life.

*Absolutely, it's a total place marker. You'll know where, what, and when the circumstances were, where a person was in their life. I can honestly say every one of my tattoos has been*

*a good experience. I've never done it when I'm feeling down or depressed or angry or upset. I've always done it when I'm feeling elation always, and it's my form of happiness.*

Another aspect of you that I find so striking is the number of crucifixes that you wear and the number of religious amulets, artefacts, and jewellery that I see you wear. There's a big part of you that's rooted in religion. The objects that you wear are quite beautiful.

There is a shy expression of pride that softens George's face.

*They are lovely objects to wear. That's why I like wearing them, and again, it's a quiet fuck you. There's no deep meaning to it.*

Hmm, that's so interesting. So, you want to wear them against religion to say, "fuck you". So, what makes you want to say, "fuck you"?

*Well, I'm not the epitome of what you would expect to see wearing 7,000 crucifixes and rosaries. I'm not the absolute epitome of masculinity that, I guess, earns the right to be uber-religious.*

George, you're very interesting to me because you are challenging my perceptions here, I think this is why I have had some difficulty in interpreting our interviews because there are mixed messages. You say fuck you to religion, fuck you, you are going to wear all this stuff, that you will overtly show your affinity for religious symbolism. Yet you do not form part of what you deem an archetypal version of someone who should be religious because you do not describe yourself as hyper-masculine.

*Absolutely right. Yeah. It's not something I wake up and do every day. It's just what I do. I think I've always been like that.*

So, it's a form of rebelliousness?

*Maybe. Could be.*

The deeper I explore George's narrative, the more fragile I experience George to be. He wears his tattoos and religious artefacts as armour. A beautiful carapace that embodies his pain, his love for the purity of piety and a stark visual testament to the mixed messages he believes religion represents. I summarise my perceptions of George's life story thus far:

George, in my interviews with you, I have experienced you to be self-deprecating. I wonder whether it has been because you have endured suffering. You have described your father as very violent and punitive. That your childhood and adolescence was chaotic and turbulent, ruled by dogma and fear.

I perceived there to be a correlation between your upbringing and some of the more punitive elements of the religion of Catholicism. I wondered whether Catholicism represented a patriarchal element in your life?

When your mother died, you seemed to renounce religion. You appeared both furious and disappointed in religion. In fact, after your mother's death, you said that you never had another religious tattoo etched on your body. Could your mother's death and your subsequent renunciation of religion have been some kind of breakthrough for you? That in the renunciation, you were also freed from the patriarchal, punitive elements of your father?

That you could be free to renounce and rebel against religion and, in so doing, divest yourself or remove yourself of your father's cruelty and his toxic patriarchy?

There is a stunned silence. George looks aghast. I wonder whether the interview may be terminated at this point. We sit looking at one another for a few minutes.

*I don't know how to answer that. What you have said is a statement. Okay, but let's just stay with the uncomfortableness of it. I don't know what you want me to answer because... there's no answer you can give to that. Yes, okay, okay. I agree with your statement. You've summed up the elements that you're talking about, obviously, as it is your job.*

George, I am aware that these interviews may be challenging for you as we are exploring difficult parts of your life.

*Yeah, it is what it is, and it happened. You carry on, and you move on. You address it. You acknowledge it, and you move on, which I think I've done. That's what you do. I'm glad that I've done what I've done. I'm glad I am where I am. I wouldn't have gotten to this point of my understanding, realising, whatever the hell you want to call it if it wasn't for all those factors. Maybe I'd be more sheepish, but maybe those things made me stronger, which I'm happy for. That's why I don't dwell on it because it doesn't get you anywhere. I've sorted it out. I don't compartmentalise it, not deal with it. I deal with it, sort it out, and then push the boat out to sea. It's gone.*

### 8.9.8 Transcendence

I understand that your way of transcending crises has been to distance yourself from crises. Once you've dealt with it, then you distance. So, how did you deal with it?

*Well, in many ways. With people, you address the people right on, which I did with those people being my mother, my father and whoever else was involved in the situation. So, everyone was dealt with openly and honestly. Uh, before the end of their life, so I never had to live with regrets of what I should have said, I could have said, I never had any of that. Then, with situations, I'll deal with the people and the situation directly one on one, and once it's finished, it's finished.*

In one of our interviews, you said to me that one of the things you love about your husband is the fact that he's very stable and non-confrontational. That must be very reassuring for you.

*There can be a fragility to me. I know my... I know what my fragile points are, but I think just as well as you know your strengths, you should know your weaknesses, the same way you should know your limitations, the same way you should be able to ask for help. This is just the person I have become through what I have lived through.*

This is what I'm curious about, because there are things that happened to you, through the sum of your experiences that led you to find a loving husband, to find a partner in life that represents the antithesis of your previous life experiences. All of which speaks of profound change, deep inner change. You have described your ability to get on with things, keep people and events at arm's length, when it's done, it's over etc. However, during our interviews I get the sense, that despite your willingness and openness to participating in this study, that some topics are off limits. I shouldn't probe too deep or go too far. I respect your boundaries, and it's clear you don't want to open up some parts of your life. I am curious about various transition points. You were an orphan. A family adopted you with a father whom you had no choice in accepting, who turned out to be deeply violent and cruel. You saw the most awful atrocities perpetuated on your mother and your family. Then, in turn, you were betrayed by your siblings. You have alluded to this betrayal. What got you through? What made you different?

### 8.9.9 Self-worth

*I think knowing what your own self-worth is, knowing what you will and won't stand for.*

Where did you glean that from? Who was your role model? You said it was music. You said you found a lot of solace in literature?

*Music, art, literature. They're very enlightening. It teaches you a lot about yourself. That's where I learned elements of myself but not my full, true self. I think every one of us is an individual, but in literature, you're reliving stories that have been told, whether autobiographical, fictional, non-fictional, autobiographical, or biographical. It's all normal. You can see how someone handled the situation and the outcomes. You know the opposite way to handle it. Also, you must read your surroundings and the people involved. That's what gets you through. You've got to learn to be self-sufficient from a young age. You've got to learn to be socially aware of things around you, things that you're taught. That's why I've said question everything. Don't take anything for granted. The only thing you can ever believe is when you're taught to read and write.*

When you say your body language reads differently, it seems as if you instinctively tap into a muscle memory of how you behaved or coped in the past with situations?

*So, my body might be remembering that's how I felt then, but my brain trying to deal with those things doesn't deal with it anymore because it's dealt with. It's more matter of fact as opposed to the suffering and the pain, and because you've read the literature, why would you want to live through it again when you've dealt with it, and you've grown from it, and it's actually fed you to become a better person?*

What was your transition point that got you to the point of being this better person? You have referenced your stroke as being the apex point at which change happened? The stroke was the pivot point of fuck everything.

*Well, that was the stress of all the outside influences at once and family influences and emotional and every possible thing that you can imagine in your daily life no matter what type of life you lead. Everything around me started attacking me, and I had a stroke. That's when you turn around, and you make sure that nothing else attacks you again. So, you actually learn not to care. That's where I worry about certain factors in my life, those are my factors I worry about, and unless those things are affected, I don't give a fuck. I don't care. Children dying in Somalia, I know that sounds like... I don't care. It doesn't influence me directly. Maybe that's why it's good I don't have kids.*

Finally, I begin to put together the more elusive missing piece of the puzzle that is George's life story. George had a deeply troubled childhood. He was adopted, and his earliest memories were of gates and fences in Zimbabwe. Metaphorically, George has developed his gates and fences in his life to protect and shield himself from pain, hardship, and suffering. Once a gate is shut, it remains shut, hence George's defensiveness against delving too deeply into areas of his life that he has transcended and mastered.

George may have felt unconsciously abandoned by his birth parents and then subsequently by his adopted mother, who couldn't protect George from the brutality of his violent, alcoholic father. George was then further abandoned when his idealised and patriarchal embrace of religion was shattered when his religious mother became irreligious after emerging from a

coma. Then George was further abandoned by his siblings, who didn't protect him after his parents died.

George and I sit quietly for a few minutes after I reveal my observations. The moment feels sacred. I feel as if I have been allowed access to an inner sanctum, that I have opened a gate.

#### 8.9.10 Abandonment

*Yes, I did feel abandoned. Absolutely.*

So, you learned to develop a carapace around yourself to protect yourself. Then you had your stroke at midlife, and that was one of those launching points. I think that you find it difficult to acknowledge that you have experienced suffering because suffering for you was never acknowledged in your life. You had to just get on with it. You had to develop a carapace. I think it's quite hard for you to accept nurture, to accept care because you're unused to it and you're unfamiliar with it.

*So, you learn to adapt. You learn to fuck off and get on with it. What affected me got me nowhere, eh? Here I am now. I'm still growing, still learning. You can never stop growing. You can never stop learning. You can only hope to better yourself the older you get. That's fine. I think that should be my journey. The important things to me are my husband, and my brother that lives with us, and people around me. A small circle of friends. That's it. I don't have great expectations.*

In one of our early interviews, you said you'd taken every drug under the sun. You had very few relationships when you were young, but the relationships you did have were deeply scarring yet very formative because you learnt a lot. It seems to me as if you're now at a place of peace and contentment. Who have you transcended into?

#### 8.9.11 Positivity

*I suppose the better version of myself. It can only ever get better. What does that look like? It's someone who's positive. It's someone who has a good outlook on life. It's someone who loves what's around and appreciates what's around them and doesn't want or need anything because everything is actually there already.*

#### 8.9.12 Fulfilment

*I think we all have a sense of what we know we deserve. Yes, it's very seldom that you find it. You make sure that you are enabled, that you are supposed to be at your best because people don't wanna [sic] deal with shit. There's enough in the world. I'm very lucky that I'm in a spot where I'm doing what I love to do. I've got a very loving relationship. I've got a very good life. I know there will always be troubles, but I've got a far more relaxed way of living. That comes from only worrying about my immediate environment, my husband and my brother, and everything else takes a second step to that.*



## CHAPTER 9: THE LIFE STORY OF VIC

### 9.1 Personal data

Participant	:	Vic
Age	:	43
Field of Occupation	:	Ex-professional sportsman/ Property Development
Research Setting	:	Online. Vic and I conduct our interviews online at Vic's home. Vic's environment is calm and still, yet his space is ordered and minimalist. The only clue to Vic's home is a painting of an African sunset scene evenly positioned on the wall behind him. Our interviews are conducted mostly at the same time, mid-morning and Vic's room is bathed in a soft yellow light that reflects the sunset in the scene behind him.

### 9.2 Identified themes

The following themes were identified:

- School years
- Sport
- Structure
- Self-esteem
- Successful career
- Traumatic change
- Midlife crisis
- Resilience
- Transcendence
- Resourcefulness
- Stoicism
- Structure as a coping mechanism
- Suffering
- Purpose
- Survival
- Betrayal
- Resurgence
- Epiphany
- The role of survival as an impetus to live

- Irrevocable change
  - Residual effects
  - Trauma
  - Repressed emotions
  - Confronting fear
  - Freedom
  - Healing
- 

### 9.3 Introduction

Vic is a very tall, robust-looking man. He is well-built and appears physically fit. Vic's posture is open and direct, and at all times, his posture remains straight. Mostly Vic's gaze is direct, bold, and confident. Yet, there is a shyness to Vic and when he speaks, his eyes frequently widen and then narrow. Sometimes, Vic appears as if he is startled. The most striking facet of Vic is his eyes. They express a variety of emotions and flit between the "deer in the headlights" look, awkwardness, and vulnerability. His expressions are consistent with the emotional content of his narrative.

Vic does not fidget or move during our interviews. He remains still and focused. Vic is well-groomed, his appearance always neat, his posture straight, and his body language exudes solidity. Vic is very forthcoming in his narrative. He does not obfuscate or shy away from difficult topics despite the enormity of Vic's midlife story. I experience Vic as open to scrutiny. He is characterised by self-discipline and stoicism, yet at other times, Vic appears bewildered and blindsided by the enormity of his midlife crisis and the fallout thereof.

Vic's midlife narrative is stark in its fracture. Vic was poised as a professional sportsman, when an unexpected event destroyed his professional career and changed Vic irrevocably. The role of sport in Vic's life, its discipline and structure remain consistent themes in Vic's life. Yet, Vic's midlife crisis forced Vic into an uncomfortable transcendence. This transcendence robbed Vic of a prestigious professional sporting career. Although Vic gained epiphanies, it appears as if they pale in comparison to his life prior to his midlife crisis.

In this chapter, Vic's story is related in transcribed excerpts, and the researcher's input and observations are included to allow for a fuller context of the data. Emergent themes pertinent to a midlife journey are identified. It may be seen that some of these themes extrapolated are

not mutually exclusive and that the themes are shaped and coloured by the researcher's lens and responses during the interview. Therefore, these themes are not deemed to represent a finite truth about the participant's reality but rather an in-situ narrative that is influenced and enhanced by both researcher and participant. Every story of midlife has its countenance and will, therefore, be different. This story is not meant to represent a finite nor absolute truth about all midlife stories and remains an experiential narrative.

## 9.4 School years

Maybe you can start by giving me some family background, where you went to school, a bit of history, where you come from so that I can fill in the details:

*Okay, so, um, I grew up in a small town in a farming community. I went to school there until standard five. Then I moved to, well, I, I didn't move, I went to a different school in the Eastern Cape, an agricultural High School. I basically just moved because of, you know, better opportunities, better school. You know, playing sport that kind of stuff, although I didn't really at that stage excel in sport anyway. So yeah, I was going for the agricultural part of it. Yeah, I'm, I'm a middle child. I have got two sisters, one older sister and one younger sister, and my parents still live in the same area I grew up in. So yeah, that's it. I went to university in another area about 500 kilometres away. From there, I moved to the town where I spent three years playing sport and then after that, I came to the city where I now live basically.*

It sounds like you were initially looking to get into agriculture, which was going to be your main focus?

### 9.4.1 Sport

*Yeah, then sport happened.*

Tell me about that.

*I went to a school that's basically more sports-oriented. I think I developed a little bit later than guys at my age, you know, I don't know. In my previous school, it was ok, the discipline, but at my new school, it was stricter. What do you call it? Teachers, they've actually, yeah, they've actually force you to do better at what you are doing. Or not better, but just, you know, start, training the way you should train and start, you know, doing what you are capable of.*

### 9.4.2 Structure

At what age was this? Was this in high school?

*Yeah, it was basically at age fourteen, thirteen, well, when I went to high school. I was living with my parents and then I went to boarding school. When I went to high school, everybody lived in the hostels, and actually, my grades went up, my sport went up when I was put in. As I said, a more strict situation, more disciplined.*

That's really interesting, so it seems like being in that environment had a really positive effect on you overall?

*No, definitely, no, definitely, I think I didn't only grow, you know, in my grades, in my sports. I think I actually grew as a person. You had to be self-sufficient in this situation like, you know, going to school about four hundred, I think it was about four hundred and fifty kilometres from home, so I only saw my parents, you know, maybe once a month. I think the first time I was away from home for about six or seven weeks that, I didn't see them, and it was just, it just became normal.*

You must have been thirteen or fourteen when you went there, and of course, you're four hundred fifty kilometres from your parents. You've grown up in a small community, and all of a sudden, you're outside of the home. It sounds like the strictness and the structure of the school gave you a lot of comfort and support.

### 9.4.3 Self-esteem

*No, definitely comfort and confidence. So, um. Yeah, I think when I was at my first school in my hometown, I don't think I had, you know, a lot of confidence because I don't know, I think I was just coasting. When I went to my high school, obviously, if you work hard, you can achieve and no, and that was that sort of, I don't know, I just, I think there's a lot of stuff that contributed to that, but I think it was the structure, the discipline, the teachers that actually believed in you, you know that made me excel in that environment.*

Well, it definitely sounds like it's had a major influence on you, that those formative views had a major impact on your life. I can hear that structure and confidence and the formality of sports training and being singled out as somebody who has special talents as well must have been very, very encouraging for you.

*Yeah, well, in that first year, basically, I was not struggling. I didn't excel in sport. I just actually started training again. It was in my 2nd year at my new high school that I actually started, you know, playing provincial sport again. I didn't know that I was good. I didn't think of myself as being able to, you know, to play at provincial level. It was just, you know, I just did what I did, and I think that it was the first year, in 1997, that I started playing sport more seriously at school level. I played provincial level until I left South Africa in 2017. I think, yeah that, that was the first year that I missed one year, and that was just course of injury and stuff, but I played every year. Basically, I played provincial-level sport.*

## 9.5 Professional sport

We've jumped straight ahead to the fact that you became a professional sportsman after school. What happened? You left school and then?

*So, um, I was on my way to uh university because of my sport, so I was on my way there. I got accepted because I played professional sport at school. So, they accepted me, but without a bursary, but then this professional scout came to the school for prize giving or something and usually, our holidays were a little bit before the holidays of the other schools in the area. So, I came back to the school, and one of the teachers said, we've got a student that's going to join the rugby squad at the university. The scout said, well, he wants to meet me. So, I went. I went to meet Gary, and I told him the story and yeah, and he basically said they will call me the next day. They called me the next day and said to me, well, I got a bursary to go to the university.*

*Then everything started to fall into place. I started training again. I didn't really worry much about the studying part. Although I finished everything that I started, I finished so well, and from there on, I started basically a coaching course. I studied a three-year coaching course in professional sport with a little bit of sports science, obviously human movement sciences and a little bit of, a little bit of everything to put it together as a sports course. Basically, it was a sports management course that the university offered.*

An expression of pride briefly flits across Vic's face. His face is sometimes inscrutable as he tells his story, but as I become more familiar with Vic, I notice that he allows himself flashes of emotion that filter through his balanced composure.

It sounds like even then, you were very disciplined, you got through everything - you finished your studies. And then what happened?

*Yeah, well, I wouldn't say I had a lot of discipline. So, we had a lot of structure because you needed to go to training, you needed that stuff, that stuff was the main, what do you call it? The main driving force. The rest of the stuff was just based around that. So obviously, I was a typical student, you know.*

*So obviously, after the games, we used to go out and stuff. We were, uh, normal students. We would go out every night, we just went out of the game. So, it would only be Saturday nights and that kind of stuff. But yeah, you know, we would skip classes, and there was more skipping classes to go to training and playing matches, and that stuff. So yeah, so, I got picked for the university's 1st team in my 2nd year. Which actually was a big achievement in itself.*

### 9.5.1 Successful career

*I played sport there for, I think, about four years. I played for the top team at the university. I got picked for the provincial side. Then I got a contract. In that time, I got a major career-ending injury. I had a prolapsed disc in my c-six vertebrae in my neck. I needed to have major surgery and stuff, so, um, yeah, I was out of professional sport for six months, but this team that gave me my contract still decided to sign me on, and after six months, I started playing again. I went from there straight into a... basically, a final and then obviously played the rest of the season.*

*At the end of the year, I was taking part in a big event and as I got off the field into the changing room, my phone rang, it was my agent. He said, "Do you want to go overseas?" I said, "Well, I still have a contract for next year." My agent said it's only gonna [sic] be for about three, four months. It was basically in our off-season. I said if we come back again next year, then... then, I can start playing at the beginning of the season again in South Africa. So, I said yes.*

*I think that was on a Saturday, the next Wednesday, I flew overseas. The following Saturday, I was basically playing for a new team in Europe. During that time, I was still studying property management through an online university, so I missed a lot of exams in that time because I couldn't move quickly enough. So yeah, I played that season, I played, I think it was about four months in Europe. Two weeks before I came back, I broke my nose. I came back a week earlier and started training again with another team back home.*

*I basically came back, I landed in Johannesburg, flew down to the town where my I was going to train. I started training again for a week. Then I got back on a plane, went back to play in another match and then flew to play in a different foreign country.*

That's quite a feat that you played in so many foreign countries.

*Well, that was part of the clubs I was involved in. So, we played New Zealand, Australia. I've basically been all over the world, basically because of my sporting career. New Zealand, Australia, obviously the whole of Europe, Italy, France, I even went to Prague to play a game there, two games there against the national team of Prague, with an invitational team, so yeah, basically travelled the whole world on the back of my professional career.*

*I came back home, and I started playing at my local club. Then, I had a major knee injury at the beginning of the season. There was a major club competition happening. I couldn't*

*play, but at this time, I was approached by another team, and they signed me anyway, even though I had a knee injury. I started training with them, and then we won some major cups, and that's how I ended up in the town that I am in now.*

Vic paints a picture of a successful sportsman, the structure shapes him, discipline and focus during his school years. He is singled out for his potential when he leaves school and goes to university on a scholarship to play sports. Vic lives a full life, travelling the world for his sporting career. He is on the precipice of further success in his sporting career. He is feted in his career, and his life is poised for further positive changes. Vic's entire world is his sporting career. It defines him and gives him status; his career forms an indelible part of his life. He is a public persona and is required to stay fit, strong, and healthy as part of his sporting career, meaning that his career and his personal life are intrinsically intertwined. Vic does not have the type of career that he can switch off from after working hours. Therefore, the impact of Vic's midlife crisis is far-reaching, as the effect on his career has catastrophic ramifications for his status, his health, and his identity.

### 9.5.2 Traumatic change

Tell me about living in this town.

*Yeah, so everything was going good until obviously that night that everything went to shit, basically.*

*Well, everyone knew about it. So, uh, I wasn't picked to play for the weekend. It happened over a weekend. Me and a few friends went out, we had a few drinks. On my way back, I got pulled over by the cops. Obviously, I was intoxicated. I admitted that to them. Then they took my wallet and tried to extort the pin from me. I pushed the guy, and he fell to the ground and struck his head. At that stage, I didn't know this town at all, but I took a chance that I could jump out of the car and get away from them. Then I tried to escape, and they arrested me. I spent the weekend in jail, and that Monday, I got bail. Yeah*

The starkness of Vic's life-changing episode explodes like shrapnel in the soft morning sunlight of Vic's room. There is no real preamble to Vic's midlife crisis, and he relates his narrative with the same stoicism that characterises his sport:

What happened after that?

*So, I had a bail hearing on the Monday. I got bail. On the Wednesday, um, I went back to training again, so of course, you know, we were playing the weekend. So, I went back to training as normal, you know, I didn't, you know. I felt, well, I still feel like I, I was in the right in a way.*

Vic looks at me directly as he says the last sentence above. He does not flinch or move. His body language is open, and his stance is firm. That sentence defines Vic's experience of his midlife crisis. The firm belief that he was justified in his actions. No matter what the fallout

from his actions was, he firmly believed that he was doing the right thing and would maintain this stance at all costs.

### 9.5.3 Resilience

*Then, the team manager told me that I was not allowed to train with them on the field. So, I can train with them, but I'm not allowed to be seen with them basically. So, at that stage, me and another player, I think they suspected him of using steroids or something. Him and me and a third player were training together on a different field. So, we would train, do gym work with the team, except if there were photographers and that kind of stuff. So, for close to a year, this was how I lived. I would train and then go home.*

The contrast between his very public, high-flying sporting career, where he was highly visible, to being forced to train apart from his teammates, avoiding photographers and living in isolation. My insights into Vic are found in the subtleties. His posture rarely changes. It is his eyes that give away his emotions. There is a resignation to Vic as he relives this year. His stoicism surfaces, yet the strain that he lived under is evident as his eyes narrow, and he reflects on this period in life wherein he was effectively banished and in limbo:

*No, it was more than a year and a half that I did that.*

What was your life like in that year and a half?

## 9.6 Transcendence

### 9.6.1 Resourcefulness

Vic looks downcast, shadows cross his face, and his expression is a curious mix of stoicism and turbulence. Throughout our interviews, Vic appears to grapple with his emotions. His ingrained self-discipline and the structure that has served him so well in his sporting career are also now part of his emotional repertoire. Vic relates his experiences in a detached way, devoid of emotion, as a matter of fact. Yet there are flashes of unguarded emotion that flood his expressions. I have come to learn that Vic's eyes often widen, almost in shock, when he relates difficult parts of his narrative. Vic describes the year and a half as he waits for fate to be decided. In this year and a half, Vic draws on his inner discipline to reinvent himself:

*I can't really remember. It was most of it was basically a blur. I went in to train, went back to my house, the place that I stayed at that time actually, yeah, it was just a blur. I was, yeah, I was still studying, I finished my last subject in property evaluation. At that stage, you know, to keep me busy. I actually started studying. Well, I went to the guys at a flight school, and I got the books to study for a private helicopter license. I wanted to be a private pilot. I went to see the guy and said, this is my situation. I can't come to class.*

*I want to write the exams. They said to me, you can't do it like that. I would say, well, I don't have an option, and that's how we going to do it. So, I got the books. Three weeks later, I started writing the exams. I think it took about five or six weeks, then I finished my exams for the private pilot's license, for a helicopter private pilot, and then because funds were becoming a little bit of a problem.*

*They told me if I did my commercial license first, then I could basically get a hundred hours of my private pilot's license, that would have would have saved me about three hundred to four hundred thousand at that stage. So, I went back, got the books, and started, you know, my private pilot's license and then, yeah, I couldn't actually complete it because I went overseas after that.*

*I was in Europe and the European country I was in didn't want to help me to study my, to do my private pilot's license because obviously there was a language barrier, and they didn't accept the curriculum from South Africa.*

*So that's what I kept myself busy with. I was just basically training, sleeping, studying, yeah, just getting along, getting, getting by working from one day to the next day.*

You've described yourself as being busy to distract yourself. What was your support network like at that time? Who was there for you? How did you cope?

### 9.6.2 Stoicism

*Um, my parents were, obviously, still at home. I had a girlfriend at that stage that actually supported me quite a lot. So, um, I must say that did help. Most people that I knew never said anything negative to me directly. The Sunday after my bail hearing, I went back to being me. I just keep on going. I didn't allow myself to stop.*

Something that you said has really struck me, and I can hear it coming through as we speak, which is this absolute conviction and belief in yourself. It's really very striking.

### 9.6.3 Structure as a coping mechanism

*Yeah, that's well, I think it's just because there was such structure, I would just, you know, keep on going, keep on going. I wouldn't say that I wouldn't say that I believe in myself, but I just know what to do, well, what I have to do. And I just went out and did it.*

There's a resilience to you, which is like, I'm just going to get on with it. So, during this tumultuous time, you go and study to get a private helicopter license in the midst of the storm that's happening to you. You convince the examiner at the flight school to give you the books so you can study at home to distract yourself. So, you've developed some really strong coping techniques around trauma and crisis that you there's a strength to you, and I know that your sport requires strength. You spoke about structure. That was very good for you, and I see that you brought it in during this very traumatic stage of your life.

*No, definitely, but I think it was not one thing. It was a combination of, you know, all my training, basically. Studying was part of that, if you can call it that. Yeah, as I was doing my private pilot exams, I was still finishing my evaluation exams. I was still busy with that as well.*

I don't think it could have been easy. You were given outsider status in your club; they made you train separately. Those kinds of things can break a person, but you just carry on.

During our interviews, I realise that this is the first time that Vic has spoken openly about what happened to him. I tread gently, allowing Vic to describe the suffering and distress that he



experienced during this time. Vic speaks openly about his pain and suffering. Sometimes, it appears that he is surprised by his own insights and disclosures. I do not interrupt Vic as I want him to emote. It feels as if Vic has suppressed his emotions, and our interviews are allowing him to vent:

#### 9.6.4 Suffering

*Yeah, I never thought of it like that. Explaining it to somebody, it sounds easy and stuff, but it really wasn't, it was, you know... Some days, it was a struggle to, you know, obviously to get up, get going and everything. I got ulcers in my stomach, you know. I would go to training, and I had to stop next to the road. I couldn't drive anymore because of the pain, and I had to, you know, turn around and basically go straight to the doctor to get some medicine for that.*

#### 9.6.5 Purpose

*Obviously, they, you know, took me off for a few days of training and stuff, but you know, as soon as that was finished again, I was back on the field training again and, you know, just kept going. I think, I think that helped a lot during that time to, you know, to have to have something to do. I think that helped a lot during that time, and obviously, you know, the end goal was me to get back on the field again to play again. So that was the main goal of the whole, you know, exercise, you can say.*

I certainly don't underestimate the agony that you must have been going through personally in terms of anxiety and depression and maybe even the shock and trauma of it all and that it was prolonged for you.

#### 9.6.6 Survival

*Basically, I had a judge on my case that we didn't know, and the judge came to us with a plea agreement, you know. At that stage I'm running out of money, I'm running out of time. We went through every scenario that we that we could go through. So, then obviously I decided, you know, I'm gonna [sic] cut my losses. I don't have the time anymore. I don't have the money anymore. I just needed to get this thing over.*

*They accepted the agreement. I could basically go back to training again and, you know, go forward with my life. This team wanted me to play for them, so I got the opportunity to go to this prestigious team. I also got a chance to promote myself again. I took up the offer, and I went to them. It was a complicated time, because I was still with this other team that made me train on the sidelines. But the best part is still to come. So, I went to train with this other prestigious team, after I got permission from the team, I was with to train with them.*

#### 9.6.7 Betrayal

*I went, I trained with them, I think about for two days, they were actually gonna [sic] pick me for the weekend and then then my old club called me in. They said, no, they're gonna [sic] cancel my contract, they're gonna [sic] suspend my contract, because I went to train with another team. At a different union, basically. Then they suspended my contract, and I got a hearing, but obviously, nobody actually wanted to hear what, what was going on. So, they didn't believe me and yeah,*

*I basically got fired from my old team after I specifically got permission to train with another team.*

*Before, even before that, the team paid our, what you call it, our medical insurance. I think about a, a month before that, they already stopped my medical insurance. But I still had about three, four months left on my contract. So yeah, they fired me, basically, from the club for training at a different club after I got permission from them to do it.*

What a betrayal on top of everything that you've been through. That must have been a really low point in your life. You have just been through the court case; you are trying to piece your life together.

*Yes, it was. It was really, really, really difficult. I just felt like nobody, nobody is listening to you, nobody wants to listen to you and yeah...*

It must have been very lonely and isolated. How did you cope during that period? What did you do?

*Well, I kept on, I kept on training and um, I was actually after that, obviously I was down in the dumps and everything, then I got an opportunity to go to Europe again to play for a club.*

### 9.6.8 Transcendence

*It was a bit complicated because as soon as basically, they knew that I was going, that I got an opportunity to play there. They said, obviously, with my reputation and my record, that I would never be allowed to play in that country. The club there was in difficult straits, so they actually got the mayor to give permission for me to come and play for the club, and he basically said that they would love to have me there, and I just went over, and I played with them again. That sort of changed everything.*

So, then, the mayor welcomed you to that country?

*So, I went to that country, and um, you must remember this. This whole situation was, uh, very loaded. They had painted me as racist South African - the government, everybody. The police tried to make it out as a racial incident. Yet, I was so well-liked in my club. I had so many friends across the spectrum. I was living in accommodation with friends and teammates of colour. This was when I was in Europe as well. I lived with other South Africans, guys from Cape Town, from all over.*

### 9.6.9 Resurgence

*So, there was a little bit of irony there. So yeah, and then I went in because I was training the whole time. I went to this foreign country after not playing for more than a year and a half, and then I think I was there for two weeks, and then they picked me again, and I started playing again. So, I just basically went. I still had two subjects left on my property valuation studies. I was actually writing my last two exams in Europe.*

*Well, I didn't even have a proper apartment there. I was actually sitting in this space where there was supposed to be a stove and studying for my last two subjects. Yeah, to finish my exams.*

What was it like for you to be in Europe? This sounds like a fairy tale because you are at the depth of your lowest ebbs, and you get this golden opportunity to play for this club that's in the midst of dire straits. Even the mayor gets involved and pulls strings to get you over there.

*Well, it felt good to be on the field again. It felt good to be out of South Africa, to be a little bit of what you call it, you know, nobody knows you. You can actually relax. It wasn't a good time, but you know, I was obviously training a lot again, you know, getting my mind right, and when I got home, there were times that you are on your own that, you know, you're so tired, you that you don't really have time to think. So, you just go and basically sleep and get going again.*

It sounds like it was quite a healing time for you to be there. As you say, you could distance yourself from what was happening in South Africa and your reputation and the fallout from this whole thing.

## 9.7 Epiphany

### 9.7.1 The role of survival as an impetus to live

*So yeah, again, like it was at that stage, just surviving, just, you know, again trying to get back on my feet. So, there was a different devil that was chasing me. So, I had a lot of debt that I needed to pay back in South Africa to be able to, you know, get in the clear again. So, I couldn't really enjoy what I was earning there. Everything that I had, that I made overseas, was just going back to repay all my legal costs and all that kind of stuff. So again, I was in a situation where I needed to survive.*

*If I didn't survive, you know, there just wasn't any other outcome. I didn't have fallback finances or anything like that. I just needed to, to do this. I think it would have been much, much easier to have come through this if I had a major, you know, let's say, a major backup or that kind of stuff. I think that would have been that, sort of. It would have been an excuse to not survive, not to fight through anything.*

This is a pivotal moment in our interview. Both Vic and I pause for a few seconds at the gravity of what he has disclosed. The enormity of finding what motivated Vic to stay alive during his midlife crisis is a clear example of Vic's epiphany and how he was able to transcend his crisis. Vic and I remain looking at one another, until I break the silence. Vic appears stunned at his own revelation:

That's a very profound insight. I'm curious about this. You're telling me that one of the things that got you through this was your need to survive. That, if you didn't have responsibilities, you don't think you might have gotten through this?

### 9.7.2 Irrevocable change

*I don't think I would have survived. I would have fallen apart. I don't know who said it, one of the conquerors of the Roman Empire. How do you conquer an island? As soon as you drop your anchor, there is no turning back. There is no surrender. You can't, it's done. It doesn't sound like it, but it was basically a lot of tears and lot of blood and lot of sweat that I needed to go through. Still, you know, I came through that, but I think it's still an everyday struggle. You know you said that I came through it. I think I'm still going through it.*

*It's difficult to say when get through something? At what stage, when, in how many days, how many hours, or how many weeks? Or is it a financial thing? Or is it, you know, an emotional thing? How do you put a measurement on that?*

It's hard because it sounds like it was hell, and it sometimes is still hell because it's had the most detrimental effect on your life in every aspect. It's changed everything, and I think that's what you're also saying.

*No, definitely.*

It must be so difficult to extricate yourself from what has happened to you. It is now part of the fabric of your life, like it or not.

*Everybody but everybody knows me and yeah, everybody that meets me knows about it, although they don't say it, but obviously everybody knows. Most people know who I am.*

You've been a high-profile figure. Has that also compounded the distress?

### 9.7.3 Transcendence

Vic's fortitude and his self-belief are spontaneously present. There is a tangible inner strength to Vic. He admits to the vicissitudes of his feelings during and in the aftermath of his midlife crisis.

He remains steadfast in his conviction that he has done nothing wrong, yet he grapples with the fallout from that fateful night and the far-reaching ramifications that it has had on his career, his mental health, and his physical health. Yet throughout this, Vic retains his dignity and self-pride. Whatever was taken from him that night that precipitated his midlife crisis, Vic's self-belief remains inviolable:

*Well, I've got nothing to hide. I know who I am as a person and you know, somebody else's opinion of me doesn't really bother me that much. Again, as I said, I've never had a negative comment Well, not, not to my face anyway.*

I think you make a really interesting point when you say does it ever really end? I think what we've uncovered in our interviews is that it doesn't really end. It's become part of you. You've managed to work with it. I don't think the pain of that rupture will ever go away because of what happened to you and how it changed your life. I think maybe it's more about how you have integrated it. What are the things that got you through? I'm hearing that the discipline of your sport and your internal self-discipline have got you through this. Your sense of duty forced you to stay alive and made you survive because you had to pay back debts. The fact that you had responsibilities, whether that was to yourself or the dedication to your sport.

*No, definitely. As I said, there were a lot of people, you know, who believed in me. That belief also got me through. I got through this, you know, and obviously, I can't say it doesn't bother me. Obviously, it's always in the back of your mind if I want to apply for a different job or something. That will always come up somewhere. So that's something that's going to follow me for the rest of my life. You can sit in the corner. You can sit there in the corner and cry about that. It's not gonna [sic] change it. Medicine, medication, won't take that away. I think it will help you cope with it, but it will never take it away. So then again, what's the use of it? And listen, I'm not saying I, you know, there's some days that I drank too much and, I think that was just a way to cope in that situation. Maybe this is also something underlying that just keeps creeping back and stuff.*

### 9.7.4 Residual effects

That's understandable that the trauma creeps back unsolicited and that you have looked for ways to self-soothe. That's a normal reaction. When stress and trauma become too overwhelming, one looks for ways to dilute it or assuage it.

*I do struggle with anxiety, and sometimes, things got so bad that I would have to stop the car on the way to training because the pain in my stomach was too hard to manage.*

### 9.7.5 Trauma

It feels like you've been left with this residue of fear that something could happen to take everything away again.

*Well, I never thought about it like that, but yeah, basically, I feel I am just waiting for the next obstacle, basically to come. My life has changed so much. This thing happened, and nothing was ever the same again. I've had to change my life. There was a before, and now there is an after.*

Vic looks a bit lost and bewildered as he confronts the enormity of his midlife change. Discussing it so openly during our interviews seems like it has given Vic the liberty to delve into hitherto unspoken feelings and symptoms:

It sounds to me as if you've been left with quite a lot of residual anxiety, and there might be some post-traumatic stress that's also happening for you. When one lives in a state of hypervigilance and waiting for when the next thing is going to happen, it becomes very difficult to relax. It's a symptom that's commonly found in people who've experienced significant trauma. So, it's a normal response, but it doesn't make it easy to live with.

*Well, I don't know what you call it, but yeah, I feel this.*

It sounds like you find it quite difficult to switch off. Do you have to be distracted to switch off?

*That's it. Yeah, that's more like it. As soon as I stop doing something I like, then I start getting not anxious, but I feel guilty basically.*

### 9.7.6 Epiphanies

Vic's epiphanies post his midlife crisis stem from his realisations that he has not ever fully processed his emotions. That he has been hardwired to be stoic, unwavering, and unflinchingly strong. The structure and discipline that held him through his crisis, which stemmed from his school years and then was subsequently rooted in his sport, now hold him captive. Vic has been unable to emote; he has remained stoic, steadfast, and resilient. Yet, he has a well of unresolved trauma and unexpressed emotion. He also comes to realise that he has never been able to process or confront his emotions.

It sounds like you're now dealing with the residual fallout from what happened. Now that you're getting your life back together, you are processing the emotions that you've had to be so stoic and strong about.

### 9.7.7 Repressed emotions

*Well, I've never been good at that, so you know it's easier to hide behind the small stuff than to, you know, than to sit and complain. I don't know, I have never really learned how to deal with it, you know, just one of those things.*

I have heard how tough it's been for you. I realise that maybe during our interviews, we've agitated some emotions. We've muddied the waters that you've kept quite controlled because I think that your way of coping is to have an element of control and to have been very disciplined and strong about just getting through. I would say to you, you've done really well up to a point, but you're human too, and there is going to be a point where some of these emotions break through.

### 9.7.8 Confronting fear

Vic takes his time to consider his answer. There is something sacred to being in the presence of Vic as he confronts the enormity of his repressed emotions. Vic feels as if he has been held ransom, that he has been trapped by this midlife crisis and its subsequent trauma. Vic's inability and his reluctance to face his emotions have meant that he has, at times, remained trapped by his emotions. Vic's resilience and discipline, as well as his conviction and self-belief, allowed him to transcend parts of his crisis. Confronting his emotions during our interviews is a further transcendence as he allows himself to confront his emotions, he encounters further epiphanies:

*Yeah, it's almost like it's the fear of what is coming. What if I can't cope? What if it floods me?*

*Yeah, well, you know, sometimes, we are all alone, and you know, then that stuff really does come up, and you, you know, you start to worry about that. You think about that. Yeah, and then it, yeah, it gets a little bit overwhelming.*

*I've never really sat down and spoken to somebody about this, so you know, I've had some small, what do you call it, "sessions"? But, you know, they were small, you know, conversations about this. Also, only with not even a handful of people. I have never talked about the exact scope of everything that happened and what I have actually gone through.*

Maybe what we've done here is we've opened up a part of you that can start to heal. We have identified that you have a lot of resilience and strength, which has been a vital part of you getting through your crisis. Yet, now you are also encountering suppressed emotions and the vulnerability that comes with feeling those emotions. It feels as if that incident and the subsequent crisis that disrupted your life in some way still sometimes hold you ransom in your darkest moments without you realising it.

Vic becomes deeply reflective. He sits back, and his firm posture softens a little, as does his expression. Vic has not allowed himself the liberty of engaging with his emotions.

*Definitely*

I am wondering whether you could allow yourself to start to enjoy life again. To work through some of that fear. Men in our society are told you've got to be strong. You got to get through it. Especially given the nature of your career, you're a really big guy physically. You're expected to be so superhuman, and it's not realistic. We live in a society where people talk about mental health, but then, when it really comes to it, you're not allowed to express yourself.

*I have felt this. That it's been so mixed up, I know it's there, but I just sort of get on with it, shut things out.*

### 9.7.9 Freedom

Maybe it's time to give you your freedom. It feels like you've been in a cage.

*When you put it like that. Definitely.*

### 9.7.10 Healing

Maybe what we have done is open a little bit of space to allow you to experience your feelings safely. In fact, I'm amazed that you've kept together this long, and you've remained high functioning. I mean, if the worst of it is that you drink too from time to time and you have to take a sleeping tablet now and then, I understand it. It's because you've been trying to make yourself better, to self-soothe.

*Well, I must say that I don't drink that often. It's maybe once a month or something, not every weekend. But I can't sleep without a sleeping tablet.*

I think that inadvertently, we may have entered into a therapeutic realm with you, as you have unexpectedly encountered your repressed feelings. I would encourage you to be gentle with yourself and to consider therapy to explore your feelings further. In closure, I would like to tell you that I have experienced you as a very dignified person, who has endured, perhaps without even knowing that you were enduring. That your foundation of discipline and structure was what helped you to survive, but perhaps it also split you from your feelings.

*Yes, it's true. I have carried myself with dignity. I didn't do anything wrong. No one ever said anything to my face. I live here in this city, and it doesn't matter where I go. I can still hold my head up high. I know it doesn't look great on a CV or whatever, but I believe in myself, I'm really proud of that. So that's the good stuff you through. At least there's some good stuff.*

## CHAPTER 10: THE LIFE STORY OF BELLA

### 10.1 Personal data

Participant	:	Bella
Age	:	54
Field of Occupation	:	Entrepreneur
Research Setting	:	Online. Bella and I meet online in what appears to be her bedroom. Her bedroom looks plush and luxurious. I see a soft velvet headboard studded with crystals. The lighting is soft, and the room looks light and airy, with a faint glimpse of foliage in the background. Our interviews are always quiet and calm, and Bella's expressions and reactions are transparent.

Upon reflection, meeting in Bella's intimate space is a testament to Bella's transparency. During our interviews, it becomes apparent that meeting in Bella's bedroom is a metaphor for her transparency. Bella allows me into her most intimate emotional spaces without qualms, and this openness characterises our interviews.

### 10.2 Identified themes

The following themes were identified:

- Childhood
- Abuse
- Working life
- Illustrious career
- Trauma
- Dramatic change in career
- Survival
- Resilience
- Regret
- Resourcefulness
- Marriage
- Intuition



- Disillusionment
- Persistence
- Second marriage
- Fundamental change
- Family life
- New career
- Second career
- Success
- Happiness
- Midlife crisis
- Confrontation
- Self-awareness
- Spiritual emergence
- Transcendence
- Epiphany
- Truth
- Spiritual epiphanies
- Spiritual growth through illness and adversity
- Family crises
- Insights
- Survival
- Self-care
- Boundaries
- Positivity
- Intrinsic change
- Self-actualisation

### **10.3 Introduction**

Bella's energy and dynamism are immediately apparent. She bounds into space with her exuberant personality. Bella is enthusiastic about our interviews. She is erudite, confident, and well therapised. She is able to present her insights and details of her inner journey coherently, yet Bella is not distanced from her narrative. She is a passionate, forthright woman who has lived a full and adventurous life. It is immediately apparent that Bella has high EQ, and it is clear that Bella has the confidence and the character of a leader. During our interviews, it becomes obvious that Bella has always taken leading roles, both in her career and in her decisiveness in her personal life. Nevertheless, Bella has the ability to listen and to be receptive to observations. Bella's narrative is dynamic, courageous and also deeply touching. She is a survivor, and her narrative has served to propel her to survive her storms.

In this chapter, Bella's story is related in transcribed excerpts, and the researcher's input and observations are included to allow for a fuller context of the data. Emergent themes pertinent to a midlife journey are identified. It may be seen that some of these themes extrapolated are not mutually exclusive and that the themes are shaped and coloured by the researcher's lens and responses during the interview. Therefore, these themes are not deemed to represent a finite truth about the participant's reality but rather an in-situ narrative that is influenced and enhanced by both researcher and participant. Every story of midlife has its own countenance and will, therefore, be different. This story is not meant to represent a finite nor absolute truth about all midlife stories and remains an experiential narrative.

Bella is enthusiastic about our interviews and launches straight into her narrative with aplomb. She is immediately generous and altruistic in her approach to our interviews. Bella is able to recall dates and events with startling precision:

*I think it's important to tell my story so I can help you and others in any way I can. Of course, I'll help in any way I possibly can.*

I want to start by asking you a few questions from the beginning just to get a little bit of background on you and where you grew up and the early parts of your life.

I did not realise that from the outset, I was to hone in on the very subject that precipitated Bella's midlife crisis and her subsequent confrontation with her crises. This acuity and clarity were to be a hallmark of our interviews. I would ask a question, and Bella would respond with alacrity and incisiveness. It potentiated our interviews with depth and perspicacity.

## 10.4 Childhood

What are the memories that stand out to you the most about your childhood and where you grew up? In essence, what was life like in your family?

*Okay, so let me, perhaps, start with my mother. She had me when she was 16, and my biological father and grandparents raised me for the first ten years of my life. My mother wasn't very present. She was off working, understandably, as one is, when she left school to support me. My grandparents were my mother and father. For all purposes, they had actually lost a child called Bella at age one, so when my mother had me, they named me Bella after their daughter, the daughter that they lost. They were the nurturing factor, and I lived with him for the first ten years. And I think, if I hadn't had that, possibly I would have had less resilience to handle what came thereafter.*

### 10.4.1 Abuse

*My mother got remarried at an age when I was ten, and I moved in with her and my stepfather. They subsequently had a daughter. My mother's child is nine years younger than me. My stepfather, as soon as she was in the marriage, was very emotionally and physically*

*abusive. Between age ten and age 18, when I left home, I was subjected to so emotional abuse in the sense that he didn't want me to be there, so I would have to be in my bedroom when he came home. I was never allowed to watch TV.*

*To this day, I battle watching TV. I was, um, I had to have my school shoes outside my room, and they had to be polished so that he, my stepfather, could see his face in them, and if they weren't, he would walk into my room and hit me over the head with a shoe. So, I had that to manage. And I'll come back to how I've dealt with that, with my mother, my grandparents were there once. I recall he hit me with a belt, and I had welts on my back, and my grandparents came to the rescue and said, you know, we're taking her away from you.*

*My grandparents were able to do that for periods of time, but I ended up having to go back to, to my mother's home. So that was until about the age of 18. During that time, I was also sexually abused by my uncle. I can get to have dealt with that with my mother as well and the questions that I've posed her, particularly now in midlife, which for me is, you know, I'm fifty-four. Um, so I threw myself into my schoolwork. I loved being at school; it was an escape for me. And I loved horse riding, which was an escape for me on weekends.*

*They were very happy to get me out of the house on weekends. So that was sort of ten to 18. I then wanted to, from age 18, in fact, even younger, from age 16, I threw myself into one relationship after another with different men. And if I look back now, all of them had very stable family lives. So, I almost went from one to another where there was mother and father, and they took me in as their own, and I would spend my weekends from about age 16. With whichever boyfriend I was with, and usually it lasted about two years and then I would leave.*

*That was very, that was very much the cycle. I was never alone, per se. I always had a boyfriend. When I matriculated, I matriculated with a B aggregate, and I really wanted to study. My father at the time, in the interim, my mother had had to sue him for maintenance, so he had let me go. That's relevant. But my mother's husband wasn't prepared to pay for me to study. My grandparents couldn't pay for me to study. So, I went and got a bursary. I couldn't go to university. It was too late.*

*So, I went to a college. I wanted to study business marketing, and I got a bursary because my results were so good, so they were only happy to have me. So, the bursary was for the first year. There was no maintenance. I worked two jobs. I worked during the day, in the afternoons, I studied in between, and I worked a night job in a restaurant. And stayed with a boyfriend. So, so that was how those three years played out. And I did really well.*

*And I loved it, and I just, I made the most of it and, and, and I was happy. Just to go back to my biological father, I met him at the age of ten for the first time. You know, my mother says he wasn't interested, although he paid maintenance up to a certain point. He says he wasn't allowed to meet with me. My question to him has always been well, why didn't you push that? You know, legally, you were paying you had a right to. In the meantime, he'd got married, and he had three sons.*

*Meeting him was one of the most amazing moments of my life because I had no father, and suddenly, I had this young father. He was hugely successful in business, and that was my cue to study business.*

*I wanted to be like him, and we had a good number of years between, you know, from age ten, he would see me regularly. I would travel to Johannesburg to see him because I lived at the seaside. He sort of spoils me, and it was wonderful. He took me overseas on my first trip for my twenty-first. He gave me a second-hand car when I turned 18. So, there was that influence which was really positive for me at the time.*

Bella segues straight into her working life from a very succinct and chronological narrative. Bella's narratives are precise. If she remembers a detail that is not in chronological order, she refers to it and ensures she returns to that event at the appropriate time:

## 10.5 Working life

*I then started working, I then got a job. First of all, it was a very junior repping job, sales job. Then, I got a repping job with confectionary company, which was my entry into a huge conglomerate of companies that the confectionary company were a division of. They said I was overqualified for the position. Within a year, I had been promoted into the marketing department as a brand manager. So, then I stayed with the company for sixteen-odd years. I went from brand manager to marketing manager. I moved to Johannesburg when I was twenty-six with a transfer because they moved head office, and when I moved, I was offered a new position. I moved with them, um, my dad lived in Johannesburg, so I stayed in a cottage in his garden, um, and I had an amazing career with them.*

### Illustrious career

*I worked in various divisions, I travelled internationally a lot with them, launched prestigious brands in this country, you know, worked in with all their different brands, and I eventually became a marketing director with them. I was approached for a position after fourteen years of being with them in the marketing department. I was approached by the head of the company at the time. He asked me if I would be interested, and he pushed quite a lot for me to go into a position as a managing director.*

*I reported to a man who now heads up the company still today, so I reluctantly accepted that position. And I think in every position that I was offered, I often felt, will I be good enough for this? So, there was that sort of theme that ran through, but then I'd over excel and go, wow, okay, I'm actually okay, I'm actually good at this.*

Bella is ambitious and hardworking, and these traits are recognised and validated by her superiors. She softens and seems contemplative when she reveals that she is insecure about her abilities, yet she can reflect and acknowledge that she is very good at what she does. Bella does this in a matter-of-fact way, without a preamble. Bella can be very direct and honest about herself, whether it's to reveal her perceived flaws or her positives. Our interviews flow very smoothly as Bella is so open and there is very little prompting from me.

### 10.5.1 Trauma

*What was interesting about that position is that it didn't last long for me. It lasted around a year, 18 months. And I must just mention the armed robberies to you. But let's wait. Let me just, um, tell you this. I was being forced to fire certain people when I took over that business because they wanted an influx of new blood, and some of those people, for example, the factory manager I remember, was particularly good at what he did. He was... he was sort of middle-aged. They wanted a younger person to come in, and I was being put under pressure to do what is not in my nature, and that is to dismiss people that don't, in my opinion, deserve to be dismissed. So, I came up against, um, I came up against my manager and, um, and I just realised that I'd got to the top of the tree, but it was no longer the tree that I wanted to be at the top of. I did a package agreement with them for the time that I had worked, and I left. But before I left, I was working in the offices where the factory was.*

*I used to fly to Cape Town on a Monday and back on a Thursday, and I was in our offices in Johannesburg one day, and I was sitting on the phone. This person walked into my office, and I sort of was taken a bit aback because nobody sort of walked into my office without knocking, especially if I was on the phone and I turned, and it was a man who put a gun to my head. We had basically had an armed robbery. My office was right at the end of the passage, so I was the last one to be taken through. And when I went through to the reception*

area, everybody was lying on the floor, so fortunately nobody was harmed. That was part of that experience as well.

### 10.5.2 Dramatic change in career

*I then left, and I decided to go and work for a princess in Egypt. There was this job, this position. To cut a long story short, when I arrived there, things weren't quite as we thought they were. My passport was taken from me, I was sent to in the middle of Cairo, they took me to this building, and there was this room, and they said, okay, that's where you're gonna [sic] stay.*

*And then, you know, you needed to walk two blocks, and you know this is where the princess lives, and you needed to come and see her. She sleeps during the day. When I got into the apartment, it had black plastic bags hanging from the windows. It had cockroaches in the kettle. It hadn't been cleaned. It smelt disgusting. I couldn't even sit on the mattress. There was no phone, you know, I wasn't able to sort of dial on my phone at the time. So, I just knew I had to get the heck out of there.*

### 10.5.3 Survival

*The one contact that I had before I left was a woman who worked in an ad agency, my brother's girlfriend at the time, and she'd given me the name of an Egyptian woman who lived there and said, look, connect with her at some stage whilst you living there. So, I thought, okay, I went into survival mode, and I thought, I've got to get out of here, but I've got to play carefully because I'm not quite sure what these people are about. Something wasn't right. From the time they met me at the airport, something wasn't right.*

*When they met me at the airport, they came and took me through without taking me through passport control. So, I eventually found the Princess's house, and I went in there, and there were various servants, etc. People said you just need to wait for her to wake up. And I sat and I sat, and I sat, and I sat, I can't remember how many hours went by. She was sleeping, and I had to wait, and I thought, it's getting darker, you know, I'm concerned about being in that apartment. So, I said to them I needed to make a phone call, just a local phone call, and I had the number, fortunately, of this girl from the Ad agency who was the managing director of the agency, and I called her up, and I said, "We haven't met. My name's Bella." "Yes", she said, "you've arrived". I said, "I'm in big trouble. I need you to help me." Briefly, this is what's happened. I can't really talk now, but I'm going to go back to this apartment. And she said, okay, that's fine, I'm gonna [sic] call you. For some reason, I couldn't call out on my phone, but I remember she was able to call in. So, I said, okay, that's fine. And I said to the person, look, I just need to go back to the apartment. I'm gonna [sic] do a few things, and I'll be back in about an hour.*

*And I went back to the apartment. And then I stood on this little balcony. Cairo is just so busy. I was in probably one of the worst places. I mean, I am sure there are better places, but I was in the most horrific place in Cairo. She started calling me, and she said, "Okay, where are you?" I said, "I have no idea". She said, "Okay, give me landmarks." I said, "Okay, I'm here. There's a big billboard on the right-hand side, and there's, and there's a freeway." Now, Cairo is massively compact. Anyway, to cut a long story short, it took I don't know how many hours because it was starting to get dark, but eventually one of her people who was driving around trying to find me, and I was saying, look, there's this on this corner, and I've just heard this noise.*

*And eventually, he found me. And I took the stuff that I had, and I left the apartment with him, and he took me to the Ad agency, and I met the most wonderful woman who just took over everything, you know. I still have contact with her. She was, she was literally a lifesaver. Because I'm not quite sure how things would have played out. She said, "You know, you can stay with me." I said, "You know, all I need is an international hotel, just an*

*international hotel. I've got the money", etc. So, she took me to one of the international hotels, but of course, they wouldn't accept me because I didn't have my passport.*

#### 10.5.4 Resilience

Bella has a great capacity for detail. She remembers dates, details, and chronology with precision. She also has the ability to make the best of her circumstances. Her ordeal in Cairo was frightening. She was alone, cut off from a network. She reached out to a stranger and, through sheer perseverance, managed to get help and extricate herself from her perilous situation. Bella's resilience and the sheer dynamism of her personality opens doors and creates opportunities for her. She finds herself in difficult situations and becomes resourceful. Bella does not give up, and her resilience is palpable. Bella also makes the best of situations that she finds herself in, as she does when she is liberated from her disastrous work experience:

*I was supposed to go back to the princess's house, and now they couldn't find me. And eventually, I gave my Egyptian friend gave them an update, and she started liaising with them saying, look, you know, she needs her passport. They were saying, yeah, but we've got an agreement, and she needs to come and work, and we're not giving the passport back. Anyway, she handled all of that. There I was, and I thought, well, I might as well enjoy it, you know, I mean, I'm here. I've always wanted to ride an Arab horse in the desert, so let me go and ride horses. I had also always wanted to go on a camel, always wanted to see the Pyramids. So, I arranged a tour through the hotel, and I did things on two of the days that I was there. I went to the Papyrus Museum, and I rode an Arabian horse in the desert, and I did the camel thing, and I went into a, you know, a tomb in the pyramids.*

*I am cutting a long, long story short because it was a week before she got my, um, passport back, and we were able to organise an international flight. We stood at the hotel, and she said they're bringing your passport, and I said, "I have to leave. I have to go."*

*She said, "I know we have to go, but they're bringing the passport and literally at the last minute they arrived with the passport and handed it to her, and she took me to the airport, and I caught a plane back. There was a very interesting experience.*

That's an incredible story. You go from a senior corporate position to what seems like an exciting adventure to work for a princess in Cairo.

#### 10.5.5 Regret

*Yeah, it was completely bizarre. It was through friends of a friend. And there was this opportunity, and I would earn dollars, and I would be in a in a palace, you know. And I thought, oh, what a great experience. Let me go, you know, let me go and do that. I've got nothing to lose. I left my corporate job and I was sorry.*

Even though Bella expresses regret about leaving her corporate job, there is an element of feistiness and an air of self-pride that illuminates her face. I tell Bella that I experience her as both resourceful and resilient:

## 10.5.6 Resourcefulness

*Well, I've tended to do that throughout my life. It's become a bit of a theme, and I'm not sure where that comes from, but I like to think it's just a fighting spirit, you know, that screw it. I'm here trusting I'm going to get out, and it is what it is. You know, I can't change it, it is what it is, but I can choose how I navigate my way out of this and try and enjoy it whilst I'm here. So, when I got back, I couldn't find a job that paid what I was earning, so I was offered an advertising position, but they didn't pay well.*

*So, my maiden name was Smith. I decided to open my own strategic consulting agency, and I went, you know, looking for work, and I called it Smith Consulting. I was doing marketing strategies, business strategies, and communication plans. I got a job with an agency called Blue and White, and I was basically consulting with them, but on a full-time basis. So that was a great salary, a good income for the time that I was there, which was probably over a year.*

## 10.6 Marriage

*And I then met Steve, who I'm now married to, and it was love at first sight. I mean, I saw his blue eyes, and I decided he was going to be the father of my children.*

*By that stage, I was thirty-two-ish, um, yeah, I was about thirty-two, um, but he had gotten divorced a year before. Sorry, he got divorced, um, after a year's marriage in November, and we met in July. I had also been married, which is also an interesting story, that I had come out of at the same time. Steve had come out of the marriage, and he wanted to sow his seeds. He was, he was not interested in a relationship. From the day I met him, he never missed a phone call. So, he missed one actually when he slept with someone else, but besides that, he never missed a phone call.*

*Eventually so, to go back to my marriage. So, when I met my first husband, I was about 30, all my friends were having children and getting married, and I wasn't sure that I really wanted that, but I thought maybe I do. One day, I was driving my car to a service to go and have a service, and I saw this man in my rear-view mirror, and no, sorry, I saw this man in the front, he saw me in the rear-view mirror, and he sort of looked at me, and I noticed him. Anyway, he was going to take his car to be serviced, and I was taking my car.*

*So, I ended up following him all the way there. I got to the front desk, and I remember the service provider said to me, you go first. I said thank you to the service provider. His name was Irvin, and we had a little bit of an interaction, and the service manager said something like, "Invite me to the wedding", which just always stuck in my mind. Anyway, I ended up marrying him, and I had this beautiful white wedding. I walked down the aisle thinking about somebody else. I loved the white wedding, and I made it special, and it was fantastic.*

### 10.6.1 Intuition

Bella has an innate knowing from the start that her first marriage is doomed. She admits to thinking about someone else, as she walks down the aisle. This characteristic of Bella's is omnipresent in everything that she does. Bella is acutely intuitive and has heightened levels of self-awareness. This intuitiveness and self-awareness serve Bella well. She is often right. She listens to her inner voice, even if it means taking action retrospectively.

## 10.6.2 Disillusionment

*But he failed to deliver a ring, and then he moved into my house, which I had built, and one day, six months into the marriage, I came home from work at about ten at night, and he was sitting with his feet up on my furniture, and said to me, "Hi love, what's for dinner?" That was in about June. July was my birthday, you know you can't forget my birthday, especially if you are married to me. Long story short, he forgot my birthday, and my mother said to him, this is not going to go down well, anyway, no birthday gift.*

*He walked down the stairs, said I've arranged some horse-riding lessons for you. He ended up never paying for them. And I walked down the stairs one morning, and he said hi. He was in the kitchen. He was already up, and I said I want a divorce. He said what do you mean? I said I want to divorce. I'm not enjoying being married to you. You know, this is not working for me anyway. By December, I got a divorce. So that was that marriage.*

## 10.6.3 Persistence

*Then I met Steve, and he was not interested, and I was not letting go. So, for two years, he was always in his integrity, said to me, "Look, there are other girls. You are number one on the list, but there are other girls." And like he says slowly, I, I got rid of them, one by one, but I was very patient, and I played the game and went out with other guys, didn't. He eventually decided that he wanted to be with me, so we got together. That was after about two years or so we got together. I moved into his home. It was a big, beautiful home, and I was very happy.*

*And then one day, we were in Sydney, and I said to him, let's have a baby. He said, "But, I thought you didn't want babies." I said, "Well, I want a baby with you," and he said, "Yeah, I wouldn't mind having a baby." I said, "Okay, let's have a baby." So, we started trying to have a baby—two years of IVF. I was battling to conceive. He was fine. Then we had the second round of IVF, we conceived Alex, that's Steve's second name. I named him after Steve, and I said to him before, before I conceived him, I said, we're going to have a boy, and I'm telling you, I'm calling him Alex anyway.*

*I was huge. I had put on thirty kilos, and I was not a pretty sight. About three weeks before Alex was due to be born, I was sitting in the TV room with him the one evening, and I said, you know, I think maybe it would be really nice if you married me. And he said, but we've both been married before. We wanted to have a child. We agreed we weren't gonna [sic] get married, and what's the point? We are happy, you know, do we really want to do that? And I said to him, "Okay." The following night, I said to him, "Alex Smith, it's got such a lovely ring to it."*

*He said, "What do you mean Alex Smith? He's gonna [sic] be Alex Black." I said, "No, he's not. I've gone to the hospital, I've registered him. He's got my surname, so he's registered at the hospital. Everything's in order, and he is Alex Smith." Two days later, I said, "But if you still want to marry me, then I would like an eternity band ring with nice big diamonds in it." He said, "Well, we agreed we're not getting married." Not long after that, we sat down in the TV lounge again, and he took a box out of his pocket and he, put it down in front of me, and he said, "Have a look."*

## 10.6.4 Second marriage

*See if it fits. So, I opened the box, and it was the eternity band. Very excitedly, I said to him, "Which finger do I put it on?" And he said to me, "Any finger." So, I put it onto my engagement finger, and it fitted. He's always been very good like that. It's his love language, gifts, so that was the start of many beautiful gifts, and as you can see (Bella shows me her hands), I don't really do that stuff, but that was his love language.*



*He said, be there at this time. He arrived there, I arrived. I had a brown dress made, which came to my knees which went up in the front because by then I was so massive, and so we got married. But before that, he said, "Okay, I'm going to have this friend", and this friend who are going to be witnesses. I said, "Okay, I'd really like my best friend" who was my boss at the corporate I worked at. I need to be there. He said, "Well, she can't be. She's not Jewish."*

### 10.6.5 Fundamental change

*Oh, I have to tell you about converting. I converted after I'd met Steve, but not with him. So, I did a year's conversion on my own. I love the Jewish faith. I love the sense of togetherness. So, I did that on my own. I said, "Well, Annie has to be there. I need one person there", and he said, "Well, she can be the photographer." And I said, "Okay, perfect." So, she was the photographer. After we got married, it was beautiful, just the two of us, you know, in this it was absolutely beautiful. It's not about the white wedding. It's about the connection.*

This was a very different experience to Bella's first wedding, which was a fairytale white wedding, and a marriage that was empty. This time, her wedding is understated; there is a simplicity that characterises her wedding to Steve. The dress is unimportant, there is no lavish reception, no guests, and the union between Bella and Steve is the main focus. Bella describes her wonder at the beauty of the occasion. She speaks with a great love of how precious it was that it was just the two of them. It feels like Bella comes home in this union with Steve. That teenage girl, who found refuge in two-year stints with boyfriends who had stable families, now had her own stable family, and it is in this environment that Bella thrives:

*And it was beautiful, and afterwards. Annie took me to a coffee shop, and that was my after-party. We never went on honeymoon because Alex was born a week later. I have still got the card which has got Smith crossed out and Black written in, you know.*

### 10.6.6 Family life

*And then, when Alex was about a year old, I said to Steve, "I think we should have another baby". You know, we are older parents. I mean, I'm fifty-four, he's sixty-five. I think that we should have another child, and he said to me, "Well, only if it's a girl". In the meantime, I'd gotten involved in the medical industry, in the fertility business which I'm now currently in. Um, and so I knew all the fertility clinics sex selection was illegal still in the country, but there was only one clinic that did it. I went to that clinic, and I said, look, we'd like to have another baby, and my husband wants a girl. "Can you do sex selection?"*

*And they said, "Yes, we can". So, we went through an IVF round, and we had about eight embryos, and they said, "Look, you know, we can test these embryos. We'll see how many we get to on day five". So, I said, "Fine" they phoned me to say, "We've got one viable embryo, a very strong embryo, but you've only produced one viable embryo. Do you want to do the testing on it or don't you, given your history?" And I said, "Absolutely without hesitation, go ahead and test it."*

*It was a girl. When we did his sperm analysis, we checked basically all of the sperm that he had were boys, and this was an absolute miracle because there was one, there was a girl, so we put her in, and that's Stella. So, she's now, um, 13, and our son is 15. So that was the sort of infertility battle. During the time when Alex had been born already, I hadn't conceived Ellie yet. I had a friend who I met through my husband because she was going through fertility treatment.*

## 10.7 New career

*She said, you know, there's this opportunity to start a business where we help to find surrogates, and we help to find sperm donors, and we help to find egg donors. I want to start this business, but I need somebody that can, you know, be the face of this, because she was more of a behind-the-scenes person. I said, "That sounds amazing", so we formed the company which is which is still going.*

*I left them four years ago, and I'll explain that, but we started another agency. I started working with patients, I started working with the clinics, and I've always loved the medical profession, and it was just a wonderful new meaningful start for me. We built a fairly big business. I left the first agency because things didn't go so well when we had more face-to-face interaction when we were in the same city, and we split away.*

### 10.7.1 Second career success

*I had a two-year restraint of trade, but while I was under that restraint of trade, I was approached by another clinic, who had been one of the clinics I worked with, and they asked me if I would do what I did before and start an in-house agency as part of their business.*

*Business was very, very lucrative for me. So, that's what I did four years ago. I went to work for this amazing group of doctors. You know, I'm part of the family, but I'm also able to work from home. I zoom a lot with international patients. Probably about 70 % of the patients I work with are international.*

### 10.7.2 Happiness

*I just love what I do. I love the fact that I can just help these people that are so desperate. So that is what I still do, and I love it.*

*I go into the clinic to see the doctors and the coordinators. I have an amazing relationship with all of them and, and I absolutely love that.*

Bella's narrative of her adult life thus far seems enchanting. Bella is innately hardwired for success. She pursues what she wants, whether it be her husband, getting married, having children, or rebuilding a career that gives her meaning. At this stage in our interviews, I find myself captivated by Bella's narrative, her ability to alchemise difficulties and adversity into positives. Bella jars me back into reality with her sudden leap into her midlife crisis.

## 10.8 Midlife crisis

Bella chooses to confront her mother and stepfather about her distressing childhood in midlife. It's as if the safety of her married life and her life experiences have encouraged her to confront the trauma she experienced growing up. It's clear in Bella's narrative that her pain and distress were acute, and the need to address this is paramount:

### 10.8.1 Confrontation

*Just to go back in terms of my mother, because that's, that's been a big, a big part of having to build resilience was what happened to me as a child. My stepfather ended up alone when my mother left him. He was a very cruel man. He never had any friends. At one point in time, I phoned him up, and I said to him, "You know I want to just say this..." He was an older man. He's twenty-five years older than my mother. I said, "I want to just say this to you: you had every opportunity to have a daughter in me who would still be here, would still be here for you." Because his own daughter had left the country.*

*I said, but you were incredibly cruel to me, and I was a child, and I want to know why you were so cruel to me, and he just broke down. You know, he just broke down, and he just said, I'm so sorry. I just, I chose that moment to forgive him because I realised he was such a broken soul, and I just said to him, Dave, I forgive you. I don't approve of what you did, and I will never approve of what you did. What you did was cruel, and I and I have suffered as a result of it, but I forgive you. He died a short while after that.*

*Then it was about my mother. My mother doesn't live here, in this city where we have been living for the last ten years. I brought my mother into my business, so she works as my right-hand person. Because financially, she needed that, and she got involved with my second business, so she still works for me. But I started seeing a psychologist to try and unravel the betrayal that I felt with my mother. This fact that she wasn't there, where was she?*

*You know, when I was being abused, where was she? Why did she allow another man to do that? Because I've now become a mother and I have a daughter, and I couldn't understand how a mother allows that to happen. Now I understand. She did the best that she could at the time with what was in her head. She couldn't have done better, or she would have. I had her fly here, and I had an intervention with her, with a psychologist, which I requested, and with her psychologist as mediator.*

*She never knew that I was sexually assaulted, sexually abused up until that point. I had never told her. And in that, in that meeting, I just said to her, you know, I was sexually abused by this person. You allowed your husband to physically abuse me and emotionally abuse me. You made him be the one to take me to school every morning, knowing that I had an angst and that he abused me all the way to school. You allowed me to be locked in my room from seven o'clock whilst my sister watched TV. You know you did all of these things, and I need to understand how you could have allowed that. Did you not love me? Was I a pain to have around? What was the reason? The first thing she said was Well, I don't know about the sexual abuse, but you know, maybe it was, it was double, two-sided, you know, maybe it was actually consensual, and then I lost it.*

*I said to her. How dare you? I was ten years old and when that was happening in my room, where were you? Where were you? You left me with an 18-year-old boy. I was ten years old in my home. Eventually, I said to her, why didn't you just leave me with my grandparents? I was happy. Why did you actually force me to go into that environment, knowing how I was being treated? She eventually broke down. She was just apologetic. Anyway, we left that meeting, and we went to a coffee shop outside. I just said to her, you know, I'll never understand.*

### 10.8.2 Self-awareness

*"I know you did the best that you could. It's not actually good enough for me, even though you did the best that you could. Because I have a daughter, and I would kill somebody who did that to her, you know, I would never allow that to happen. But I'm going to choose to forgive you because I need to be free of this. I'm gonna [sic] do the best I had in my heart to just let it go because, in fact, the way that I was treated during that time has shaped the person that I am.*

*I have compassion, I have love, I have forgiveness, and honestly, I don't know where all that came from, you know, I don't know where it came from”.*

### 10.8.3 Spiritual emergence

What was the catalyst for you to confront your mother? What was happening to you at that point in your life? That this was the time, you then chose to confront your mother? Listening to your life story thus far, there's so much to it. Your energy and your presence strike me. You're a dynamic woman. Yet there's this feeling that with the things that happened to you, there was a need to mend your soul, to tend to that wound and why, you said you confronted her at midlife. It seems as if you arrived at a midlife point, where things cracked open, where you couldn't stomach the stuff that happened in your childhood anymore?

*Yeah, absolutely. Firstly, had a daughter, and so my perception of my own mother-daughter relationship that I thought might be slightly normal that I had with my mother was reconfirmed as abnormal and unacceptable. I had to face it. I'm on a journey of self-healing. I believe I reincarnated into this lifetime. My soul did. I chose these experiences, I made these soul contracts, and it's all for the benefit of my soul, becoming more of me, becoming more and more enlightened. So, I needed to understand this.*

*I wanted to heal, and I wanted to forgive because I realised that only by forgiving will I be free. My mother still carries a huge guilt. You know, I'm actually the mother in the relationship. I help her financially, emotionally. She'll turn to me. But, I realise that if I didn't confront it head-on and I wanted her to hurt... make no mistake, I wanted her to really, really hear me in that meeting as to what she had actually put me through, because I was never brave enough to confront that with her, for fear of rejection.*

### 10.8.4 Transcendence

*And at that point, I was happy to take whatever came out of it. You know, if it was rejection, that so be it. It was definitely that I had my daughter, and it was definitely that I'd become enlightened enough to know that holding it on earth in this human way in this body was not serving my soul.*

That, for me, speaks to your transcendence, this epiphany that you had that this relationship with your mother could not continue the way it was. You couldn't continue not speaking your truth. You couldn't stay the frightened child anymore, afraid of rejection. You realised the bond that you had with your daughter was so different to the relationship that you had with your mother, and you decided to crack all of that wide open.

*Absolutely.*

Are there any epiphanies that have emerged for you post these midlife confrontations?

*That's an interesting one to answer, and I think that part of me is still working through that because I still have daily contact. I am a rescuer of my mother. Which is interesting and which I know is not good for my soul. It's not good for her journey either, because I'm stopping her from her own evolution. So, I'm not sure what the epiphany was, except that, um, I can transcend anything, I can. There's nothing that I can't deal with.*

## 10.9 Epiphanies

### 10.9.1 Truth

I have observed one of your epiphanies in our interviews, it's that you are now free to speak your truth.

*Yes, absolutely, and thank you for sharing that. Because I've just learned that from you, I am allowed to speak my truth. My voice was so shut down for so long. Finally, I am acknowledging my truth and being able to speak it.*

You seem very focused, logical, pragmatic, and a clear and direct person. There is little scope for ambivalence in your make-up. If I had to see you as a paint palette, certain colours are incredibly vibrant. There is no dilution in your palette. There is little ambivalence to you. Truth and spiritual alignment seem to be an indelible part of your fabric now.

### 10.9.2 Spiritual epiphanies

*Yes, this is what's interesting. We've spoken about my spiritual alignment, and this feels like a confirmation of what you said. I was listening to a podcast this morning about the soul and the personality, and I have these thoughts coming to me all the time. I'm being spoken to all the time. On my way back from where I was this morning, I started listening to *The Seat of the Soul* by Gary Zukav and in the second chapter, I think it is, he talks about karma, and he talks about the personality, which I'd never thought about as the personality. It was kind of like the human body, the human experience. He talks about the personality and the soul coming into alignment in that chapter, which has deep meaning for me.*

### 10.9.3 Spiritual growth through illness and adversity

*I don't know if I mentioned to you, I had an op at the beginning of the year - my gallbladder. My liver was damaged, and then my blood pressure went crazy, and I've had extreme fatigue since. So, it's been a year or not quite a year, but about nine months. About seven weeks ago, I found a doctor who deals with this and with cancer patients, and he put me on a very strong routine of daily drips along with some laser treatments, which is a fascinating treatment. He's very spiritual, so I've had an amazing, just an amazing year of growth.*

Oh, isn't that amazing? But you know, I'm reading through our notes, and I'm actually not surprised because one of the themes that I identified about you is when you put your mind to something, you kind of cast the anchor there, and then you move towards it.

*I do. And I, it's also been, I mean, this is tough. This morning, I was, I mean, I literally passed out having the drip because I was so exhausted. The doctor said to me, "Your eyes are clear. Everything's working". It's like whenever he just looks at you, he seems to know whatever it is that you're holding on to. I said to him, "I feel like I'm still sick. I'm not getting better". But he said, "There's something in your life that you're holding on to, that you need to just let go of, and then you'll feel your energy come up." So, it was quite interesting, and I'll continue with the treatment because it's been six weeks now.*

*But look, here I am, and the treatments good, and it's been an incredible spiritual opportunity. I stopped having alcohol in February because I couldn't anymore, and I would drink champagne every night all my life. I've now become completely addicted to being, not being drugged at all, you know, I am no longer numbed by the alcohol. So that's been incredible, and just, yeah, just a newfound respect for my body. I became vegan since, sort of March, and just, just very much in touch with myself, how I'm feeling. I listen to my body now, you know, when my body needs to rest, I honour it. I am also finding some incredible audiobooks that I've listened to since January. I'm not good at reading. So, the audiobooks*

*have been amazing at just expanding my world of, you know, choosing peace in every moment, which has been profound.*

Bella looks tired but still presents as very focused. It is clear that her treatments do sap her energy, and her voice lacks some of its characteristic strength. Bella's acuity for detail, her preciseness regarding dates and events remains intact and she revels in her newfound spiritual depths.

#### 10.9.4 Family crises

*Okay, so let's talk about the last nine years and, in particular, last year. My husband, who's very healthy in many ways, doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, exercise, etc. Although I understand now, he was diagnosed with cancer nine years ago when we moved here. He is now sixty-five, um, and he had renal cell carcinoma. He had to have a kidney removed. Um, they thought that the histology showed that everything was fine um, but within sort of three months, we received the diagnosis that it had spread and metastasised and that he had tumours in various parts of his body.*

*So, you can't have chemotherapy for this type of cancer, but he had stereo static radiation, which is quite leading stuff, and they managed to sort of nuke all the tumours. Then his PSA count went up, and he had to have his prostate removed. So, he's on treatment now, which is an immunotherapy drug. The last two years, he's been on a drip every three weeks. Now, he is on a drip every six weeks.*

*He's otherwise healthy, but before he went on this trip, he was on another drug, who and the efficacy ran out, and he was very, very ill, and we nearly lost him. So that was about two years ago. So, when it happened, I mean nine years ago, we told the children, and we explained what cancer was, and we explained that we were going to treat it. So, we've been quite open about it with them over time. So, really, what the nine years has been about is me learning to live from scan to scan without allowing it to suppress my life.*

*Then, this last year, my daughter, I found out towards the middle of, towards the beginning of the year, that she had been self-harming for two years, so, cutting herself all over her body. I happened to see it, and I didn't respond in a negative sort of way, I just said, "My darling, you know with what's going on with you, you must be in such pain, talk to me". That was the start of a very, very close relationship with her, as she's 13 now.*

*We went to a mental hospital because I found suicide notes, one addressed to the family and one addressed to each of us, Steve, Alex, and myself, and they were sealed, and they were in a drawer. So, having found those and speaking to the psychiatrist, she had an immediate admission to a psychiatric facility. Because of her age at the time, I had to go in with her, so we spent two weeks together in the same room with her having mostly her having therapy and, and not so much me, me just kind of not really processing it all at the time.*

*In actual fact, I was very much in crisis mode, you know, when I got there, I just sort of broke down because I didn't realise this. She was diagnosed with Aspergers, and that has been quite a journey for her because socially, it's been very hard socially. She's very focused, you know, someone will tell a joke, she doesn't get it. So, it has been big, and she's been suffering from depression, so she's been having this, you know, up and down. Because I've suffered with depression in the past, I understand it very well.*

*So, I, you know, when she says, you know, I'm down, I don't say come on, you know, yet I, I acknowledge that she's down, and we talk through it, and we find out, you know, and I say to her just sit with the feeling because it will pass. You know, just identify the feeling, don't take it on. This is how I'm feeling... okay, why? Then she will say, "Well, because yesterday,*

*it was Halloween, and it was really busy, and I was with some friends, and now I feel empty. So, it's been an incredible learning experience for me.*

### 10.9.5 Insights

Bella grapples with the trials and tribulations of motherhood. She is torn between protecting her children and allowing them to learn through their own experience of the world:

*But also, within this, the lesson of what I needed to let go of is trying to manage and feel responsible for everyone's life around me that I love. So, with Stella, it's, you know, how do I put her in cotton wool? How do I help her navigate this world? Then, with Alex, he broke up with a girlfriend recently. Oh my God, you know, I have to pick up the pieces. No, actually, I have to let him live. I have to give him the wings to let him live. I mustn't start to concern myself with it. I have to say he's got this. This is his path and his journey. The same with Stella, whereas the whole of last year I was so consumed with the possibility of her taking her life and cutting herself, you know, which she kind of had done everywhere on her body, that last year was just about surviving for other people.*

### 10.9.6 Survival

*Then it was Steve, the next scan, what happens if he's not here? How do I manage that financially? How do I manage that emotionally? How do I manage the children? So last year was particularly tough, and I know that's why I got so sick and had, you know, four hospitalisations.*

### 10.9.7 Self-care

*So, I don't have cortisol. So, the doctor has got me on corticosteroids, which has helped, but he's also treating my body to heal it in its own way so that he, you know, he takes me off the corticosteroids, which we did recently, and then he sees how my body responds. My cortisol went down a lot, so he's got me on them again and with that has also been me gaining weight, not being able to exercise for a year. I have gained some weight and have had to say, "You know what, externally, it doesn't matter what anybody thinks because I'm less concerned about that. I know I'll get back to myself when I come off them, and I know that there'll be time for that. But right now, I've just accepted that I'm in a place where my body needs a different kind of care, and it's okay not to be perfect.*

### 10.9.8 Boundaries

*This last year in particular has been difficult, you know in terms of the scans, you know, when there's a scan coming up, I just have to accept that it will actually be whatever it is. Therefore, as tough as it is, and it has been for nine years, I have to just let go of that. You know, it's kind of like let go and let God, is what comes to me all the time. That as much as I love all of these people, I actually cannot hold their space all the time, which I feel is my responsibility, and it's actually not. My responsibility is to love them, and guide them, and be there for them, and that's it.*

It must be especially triggering because you're such a capable person, and it's easy to take it on, of course you're going to want to make it better. Of course, you're going to want to shield everybody, but as you say, these are lessons that you've had to learn, which is hard. I hear you saying that you can love them, but you can't be everything for them. You can't save them from it. I can hear that, at times, this has felt insurmountable, and it's been a significant auto-correction in your head that you have had to make.

*Yeah, and it's, and it's constant, you know...*

Bella allows her strong stance to soften a bit. She looks relieved to admit this. Her face softens, and her large expressive eyes flood with a gentleness that she doesn't often allow. In Bella's inimitable way, she expresses her feelings with rawness and honesty:

*It's living consciously moment to moment, and when the tension comes, I am letting it go. I sort of consciously let it go. I feel everything, whether it is in my stomach. I let it go a notch, my neck, a notch, just like let it go. I have to watch for this, you know, being Jewish, the war in Israel affected me deeply in the last month, and I had all these groups on my phone because, you know, we had family there. I was on all these groups, all the time, all day, checking media to see what was going on, getting updates from family, and I just took myself off the groups.*

*A few days ago, I just took myself off the groups. I don't watch the news because I am not there experiencing it. I feel the empathy for both sides of all the suffering. For me, it should be peace, ceasefire, no fighting, peace. But all of those people, whoever we are, we all have to experience what we have to experience.*

### 10.9.9 Epiphanies

*There have been major shifts that have happened since we moved here - everyone in the family being healthy. Moving here has been a new start. It's just been hard but enlightening because I was so not enlightened. I mean, I have always had that, but I didn't always practice it, and I wasn't, you know, I thought I was living in the now, but now I live in the moment.*

That's a very big differential, isn't it?

*It's my new life. It's a new being. It really is like a reincarnation of sorts into something else.*

Well, it feels like that is an epiphany from your various crises, a transcendence.

*I mean to the point where, you know, I don't get upset with people on the road, you know, if they want to go fast, I just move over. If they turn in front of me, I just try and make sure I don't hit them, and you know, my husband will turn and say, "Look at that. I mean, what is he doing, you know, what is this person doing?" "...and I say to him, "Lovey, that's only irritating you. It's not affecting that person". That's now how I live in the moment, how I see it.*

*And when I pick up my children from school, look, I've always had this, but when I pick up my children from school, or they come home, even though they are teenagers and they tell me to go away, I try to just check in, you know. Stella says I give too much information out, and Alex says, "I love you, Mommy, but you know, you're overmanaging my life". So, it is constant learning, but it's been, you know, like the greatest nine years and this last year the greatest blessing and opportunity, because without these insights, you are going down. Firstly, you can't appreciate the ups, and secondly, those downs are the only way life can give you an opportunity to autocorrect. Without them, you have no reason to think deeper than that.*

Bella, whenever you're presented with a challenge, you look for the silver thread. When I reflect on your adventures in Egypt, I was so profoundly struck by when you said, "While I'm here now, I might as well go and check into a fabulous hotel, drink wine, and ride an Arabian horse and see the camels". I think that's a metaphor for your life. Even now, talking about the arduousness of the last nine years, that same ethos still holds true. You identify that if you didn't have those experiences, then you wouldn't have the spiritual depth to change your behavioural patterns. To live in the moment and to be so deeply appreciative of things. Because that's the thread that runs through your life, I don't think it's ever changed.



*I have always been, I have always been that survivor, especially after living where we did before, and the background my husband came from was very superficial in many ways. I was blind to that at the time. You know, I have a lot of jewellery, and that was always important, and you know, you know, all of those things. Whereas now, you know, I wear nothing. I don't mind if my nails aren't painted because it's just a vessel. I need to look after that because I'm blessed with the body, et cetera, but it is only about my soul in this vessel, and I want to get as much done in terms of learning as I can in this lifetime, because that's what we here for.*

That is so beautiful. I hear the spiritual profundity of your epiphanies. It feels to me as if you've chosen to pursue deep peace on your spiritual path. To learn from your experiences and that currently, you are in that deep learning that you've asked for.

### 10.9.10 Positivity

*I completely believe in manifestation, and I have manifested so many things. I know I can manifest anything, but I also know that in allowing my soul the opportunity it has presented me with that, there are many, many challenges and many amazing blessings. I live in gratitude for those because they are the ups and downs, the challenges. It's all part of it. You know we are spiritual beings in a physical body.*

*So, for me, if I can use the vessel that I have, you know, I think we come to life, and yes, it's beautiful, and God wants it to be beautiful. You just have to stop to see the beauty in a fly or marvel in those things. But I also believe that there's a contract we make before we come here. I think it's also the choices that we make when we are here. It's about saying, "Well, what I want this journey to be, you know, what do I want it to be about, you know, collecting things? Do I want it to be about fame?"*

*I've constantly checked myself in terms of ego. I don't have a big ego, but we all have ego to some extent, and I have to check that. It's a very tough incarnation. I think, as a soul, choosing to come into a physical body is the hardest. You know, that's, that's really putting yourself in the fire, even though there are all those beautiful positives, because nobody comes out unscathed.*

*It seems as if you have reached a spiritual apex, I'm hearing that you say that it's your spiritual belief system that has emerged as the biggest epiphany for you in your life. That this was something that was always there, but you had never really explored it to this extent or never felt that you had to draw on it to this extent.*

### 10.9.11 Intrinsic change

*I can't engage in small talk. There's no value in it for me, and so I don't do that. My husband is very social, and I allow him to be, and it's a great, it works really well. But, he will go and have coffee in the morning, and he's got his group of girls and guys, and he has a walking club and a swimming club, and, you know, he does all of that. I'm very happy to just be in, you know, in this place and state, to rest or listen to something I want to listen to, but I can't go and sit and have coffee, you know, I'm just not that person, and I've had to uh, accept that this is a lonelier place.*

*I don't miss it because it's a choice. Actually, it's not even a choice. It just happens, you know, so you tend to lose friends in the sense that you no longer actively make plans to meet people or, you know, they'll say, let's get together. I sort of say, you know what, my energy is just not right for it right now, which is the truth. But over time those people and I've seen it, they just disappear. I try to make that not painful for everybody else because it can be, you know, people just want. I've noticed and, and I say it with humility, but when you, when you're able to give spiritual kind of responses to certain things, they just want that energy, they just gravitate, and they want it. I'm there to give it, but I also must draw some boundaries because, otherwise, it just depletes me.*

*So, it has been lonely, but it's a wonderful kind of lonely, you know. It's just like relief, you know, I'm not competing. I'm not sitting talking. I mean, I've got some friends who are spiritual and amazing, and I love meeting with them. I can't wait, and I'm seeing someone on Saturday, and I'm totally engaged and focused on how that time's going to be.*

*I'm excited about it, but if it's somebody or something I'm not excited about, like a 50th that we had two weeks ago. I just didn't go, and Steve went, and that's amazing, and you know, I trust him implicitly. It's, it's, I'm glad he went. I just chose not to go because I wasn't in that space. I was, I was, I was feeling flat, and there's no way I could have given my energy to 30 people.*

Your spiritual epiphanies have changed your life profoundly.

*Profoundly, and what's interesting as well with not drinking alcohol, our daughter has remarked on it. I didn't realise, but they both comment often about the fact that I don't drink anymore, so my daughter, for example, with her addiction to self-harm, has said to me on more than one occasion, "mom do you know you were addicted to alcohol" I said "no I wasn't love I would just have some drinks every night" she says "yes every night and every night means you were addicted" my son also will say it to me.*

*He sees it, but not as acutely as she does, and he will say things to me like, "I used to really give it a go with alcohol, and I say "yes, and look what happened, you know, I ended up with a gall bladder illness, which is a detoxification organ that couldn't work anymore". So, you know, if you're thinking of drinking, you know he does. I'm saying you know you're too young. Your brain's developing, and I go through that whole thing, but they have noticed things that I never thought.*

*They noticed, and it's just brought us all together. I'm also much kinder to my husband. You know, I would often correct him. Then, I suddenly looked back at myself like I was looking at myself at the dinner table. He says, "You're criticising me". The children are hearing this. My daughter is emulating it, you know. I said to myself, "What are you doing?" Let him be him. You don't have to be right. You don't have to do this. You know, have an opinion but express it with kindness. So, it is an ongoing learning and Louisa, I'm so grateful for that because not everybody gets to see that.*

## 10.9.12Self-actualisation

Well, what I'm hearing is self-actualisation and enlightenment. I would go as far as to say, "Self-enlightenment it's not a learned enlightenment". That's the difference: we can read hundreds of books, listen to loads of things, and glean lots of ideas, but it's a very unique fit to find enlightenment within oneself.

*If you are in tune, then it's like garbage. I learned an amazing word recently, "equanimity". It wasn't a word that I was aware of. I learned it from the doctor, who is one of my spiritual teachers. He said to me, you know, just become like an eagle, you know, you steady yourself, you go off in this direction, you go in that direction, you can see what's happening, but you choose where you want to, you know, dip. When he spoke about that, it made me realise there are so many teachers that just appear so many. It's incredible.*

When you use the word "equanimity", and you were telling me about all of these harsh experiences that have led to you being enlightened, I was wondering about you experiencing everything so profoundly. Then you explained that you are very discerning about how you engage socially and where you can and can't go. That you don't engage with superficial people that you choose to engage with people who don't sap your energy. Like your spiritual teacher, the doctor has said, choose to fly like an eagle - you dip in and dip out with equanimity. Otherwise, it may become quite spiritually intense for you.

*That's what's happened to me, you know, and the doctor is aware of that. He just says to me, know it, and then let it go, because when your body is tired, at rest, that's what it needs, and you know, it started with that, with the physical, it's led to a spiritual, amazing spiritual path.*

## **CHAPTER 11: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

This chapter will document a detailed discussion and subsequent findings of six research participants' midlife trajectory from crisis to epiphany. The discussion and subsequent analysis will compare and link themes extrapolated from the life stories. Findings from the literature will further underpin this analysis. This chapter aims to elicit the discoveries made through this study and contribute to the existing body of knowledge pertaining to midlife crises but with the added variable of transcendence from a midlife crisis and its evolution into epiphany. The limitations of this study and the possibilities for further contribution to research on midlife transcendence will be discussed.

### **11.1 The narratives**

Each of the six research participants presented with a unique narrative. Their narratives were reflected in their presentation of their stories. Each narrative represented the personality type of the research participant. This was evidenced by their body language, the setting in which the interviews took place, how they told their story and how they told their story, and the content of their narrative.

Some participants, such as Kate and Bella, were more verbose than others. Others, such as George, were more guarded, and I was deeply aware of the sensitivity of his story and his defensiveness. Vic's story was somewhat lean in its references to emotions. Marc was forthcoming but required some coaxing. Rita was erudite yet concise.

#### **11.1.1 Defining a midlife crisis**

In order to interpret how my research participants have responded to events at midlife, an understanding and definition of a midlife crisis is pertinent.

O'Connor and Wolfe (1987) developed a model of midlife crises based on an analysis of interviews with people in their 40s. Central to this model were strong negative emotions and significant changes that shaped a midlife crisis. When the midlife crisis occurs, it is more than a period of internal crisis but also a period facilitating external transition. As with an early adult

crisis, research on the content of a midlife crisis denotes significant, tangible changes in life structure and subsequent challenges and changes to identity and affect are unavoidable.

Robinson and Wright (2013) reinforce this period's tumultuousness by defining crisis episodes as filled with stressful and challenging life events. These events are tethered to a retrospective recognition of that time as a crisis, as they may embody a symbolic turning point in life. Readjustment is required after the event and may be reviewed as a central locus of change during the crisis (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987; Robinson, Wright, & Smith, 2013).

Robinson and Stell (2015) define crisis episodes in adulthood as a period in an adult's life that typically lasts a year or more. Significant transitions and stressors challenge and sometimes surpass their capacity to cope effectively during this time. This leads to an atypical level of emotional instability and negativity (Caplan, 1964; Erikson, 1968; Slaikeu, 1990). After such a crisis, the resultant instabilities and challenges lead to the individual questioning or reviewing their lifestyle, values, goals, and sense of identity. This has the effect of soliciting action to understand the causes of the crisis and potential resolutions to it (King, 2001). According to the literature on the epidemiology of stressful life events, young adults are more prone to regard recent life events as stressful or traumatic, and they are more likely to have problems adjusting to stressful life events than persons in midlife or old age (Masuda & Holmes, 1978; Norris, 1992; Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007; Turner, Wheaton, & Lloyd, 1995). My findings have shown that research participants displayed a willingness and a strong impetus to change and adapt to stressful life events that presented at midlife.

#### 11.1.2 Misconceptions about midlife

Midlife has become anomalous with a stereotype of striving to maintain youthfulness and sexual vigour, as well as dramatic crises with adverse outcomes. Traditionally, midlife has been seen as a period defined by stagnation, rebellion, the climacteric, an obsession with youth and generativity. My research chronicles crises generated from personal circumstances unrelated to generativity, the climacteric or an obsession with youth or generativity.

Infurna, Gerstorf, and Lachman (2020) reinforce that development at midlife remains cumulative and is a lifelong process, yet very little is known about development in midlife. It is further noted that there are several misconceptions about what midlife is and scant knowledge of developmental milestones and difficulties faced by those in midlife. Midlife is a vital period encompassing gains and losses, and there is a link to earlier and later life periods.

Infurna et al. (2020) also posit that the midlife period holds opportunities for reversibility and resilience with interventions. This reversibility and resilience are equated in this study in the variables transcendence and epiphany.

Infurna et al. (2020) have identified midlife as the most significant portion of adulthood and the launch point for critical life transitions, yet we are only at the beginning of understanding this life phase and how it differs from other periods of adulthood (Lachman, 2004). It is proposed that the narrative surrounding midlife needs to move beyond misconceptions and stereotypes yoked to midlife crises and allow for the possibility of midlife as a vibrant period with untapped opportunities and the navigation and mastery of challenges within this life period. In this study, the narratives of research participants at midlife encompass the grittiness, challenges, crises, resilience, vibrancy, and opportunities these research participants have navigated. Furthermore, mastering their personal challenges has solicited transcendence into an epiphany.

#### 11.1.3 The impact of childhood adversity and parenting on midlife narratives

The elicitation of this narrative was not formulaic; other than that, I tried to give form to the interviews by starting with a chronological history that began with childhood or adolescence. Unbeknownst to me, this line of questioning would form a fundamental tenet to my findings. The narrative stemming from this time elicited unresolved historical threads that were presented at midlife, and these historical threads were then reviewed within the context of a midlife crisis. Unresolved childhood or adolescent narratives found their way into the crisis at midlife. Part of the transcendence into epiphany was the research participants confronting these narratives and alchemising these into epiphanies in adulthood.

Jung noted that puberty is the life stage where the ability to navigate psychological problems begins (Hargrave, 2006). This time is akin to a psychic birth wherein adolescents can consciously distinguish the self from the parents. In this stage, the potential for unresolved identity crises from adolescence is sometimes revisited in midlife.

Moreover, it sometimes happens that when children reach adolescence, it is a trigger for the parent's own midlife crisis due to unresolved issues (Palk, 2015). Childhood adversity predicts adolescent suicidal ideation, but there are scant studies examining whether the risk of childhood adversity correlates to suicidal ideation in midlife (Stansfeld, Clark, Smuk, Power, Davidson, and Rodgers, 2017).

Adversity in childhood, presenting as parental divorce and sexual abuse, has the effect of predicting an increased risk of affective disorders such as suicidal ideation and completed suicide in adolescence and early adulthood (Fergusson et al., 2000; Agerbo et al., 2002). Kate, Marc, and Bella were exposed to emotional abuse, in addition to physical and sexual abuse. George was exposed to physical and emotional abuse, and Rita was exposed to emotional abuse from a narcissistic mother. Exposure to these types of childhood adversity has been shown to interact with genetic factors, resulting in altered hormonal responses to subsequent stressful life events. This has the potential for long-term consequences in the life trajectory. (Bradley *et al.*, 2008; McGowan et al., 2009; Hornung & Heim, 2014).

It remains unknown whether the association between childhood adversity and suicidal ideation extends into midlife, although cross-sectional studies show that there are associations between retrospectively recalled childhood adversity and suicide in adulthood (Dube *et al.*, 2001; Bifulco *et al.*, 2002; Fanous *et al.*, 2004; Corcoran *et al.*, 2006; Enns *et al.*, 2006; Fairweather *et al.*, 2007; Heider *et al.*, 2007; Afifi *et al.*, 2008) in addition, compounded by sexual and/or physical abuse in childhood (Fanous *et al.*, 2004; Ystgaard *et al.*, 2004). It has been seen that the association of childhood adversity with adult suicidal ideation may be mediated through increased exposure to life events in adulthood (Fergusson *et al.*, 2000), exposure to adversity in early childhood predicts adulthood adversity either through trajectories of social disadvantage (Graham & Power, 2004) or through a series of adverse environments (Kendler & Eaves, 1986). This correlates with my findings with Marc, George, Kate, and Bella. A series of adverse environments characterised their adulthood.

The participants in this study described their childhood experiences, which resurfaced in midlife. Midlife narratives with all participants began with a description of their early years. In this narrative, research participants who had experienced childhood adversity created a canvas that formed a catalyst for unresolved behaviours revisited during the midlife crisis.

#### 11.1.4 Marc

For Marc, his childhood was a recurring cycle of punishment, abuse, and violence. It left an indelible print on Marc; he lives constantly with an underlying expectation of what he will be called out for next or what he has done wrong. It also led him to experience criticism as deeply wounding and that he is not “good”.

This was due to Marc being raised by his father, whom Marc describes as loving and, at other times, violent, unpredictable, volatile and a heavy drinker. Marc's childhood was one characterised by fear, violence, a lack of security and a series of different women in and out of his father's life that further contributed to the cruelty and punishment that Marc was subject to. These women were often much younger than Marc's father and resentful of caring for Marc. Marc says he did not want to ask his father why he left his mother. There was always an undercurrent of not wanting to anger his father as a child, and, in later years, this changed to great forgiveness on Marc's part and not wanting to bring up the past with his father.

#### 11.1.4.1 Abuse

Marc was sexually abused at boarding school at the age of 11. He kept this secret until adulthood, never disclosing what had happened to him to his father or anyone else. Marc also describes being sent away at such a young age as difficult. Marc has learned to deflect with positivity, and this is a residue of his childhood. He describes himself as having to overcome everything. Marc's sexuality was prematurely violated. Marc's adult life is characterised by a desire to conquer his sexuality. His sexuality seems to have been a rampant part of him that appeared to have its impetus. A great deal of Marc's life was vested in trying to understand and control his sexuality. Marc had a very lonely, frightening, and violent childhood, starkly ruptured by sexual abuse at a young age.

#### 11.1.5 Kate

Kate immediately launches into her family life, setting the tone for the remainder of our interviews. Kate is forthright. There is no preamble, and Kate's narrative is sometimes bracing:

*Mum was married to a man and had two daughters by him. Apparently, he was diagnosed as a schizophrenic or a psychopath. Sorry, yeah, and then my dad, in the meantime, was married and had four sons, and then they got together, and they had me. So, I was the "laatlammetjie" in the family (Afrikaans for "little lamb", or child born when there is a significant gap between the ages of the older siblings). The brothers were living with me, and my two sisters were living with us.*

So, were you the only child that was a product of your parents' relationship?

*Yes, yeah, but my dad got custody of the boys right because the boys were also kind of like abused in their teens and even when they were younger than teens. They were used as sexual toys in the family. Their mother was doing things to them and, yeah, and getting her friends over. One day, my dad came home. I don't know if this is the whole story, but it was the story that was told, so I don't know if this is true, but this is the story. He came home one day, and one of his boys was in the bath with another lady naked. You know, it was very inappropriate, and well, I'm just going also by word of mouth, but it could have been when my mom married my dad. The youngest brother was three, Nik and then the oldest brother, I think, was*



*fourteen or thirteen or twelve. So, from three to about 14, they were very sexual. They were actually sexualised, and so that obviously makes sense as to why then it was completely normal for them to start having sexual relations with me and my sisters, although not my older sister.*

#### 11.1.5.1 Traumatic school years

*So, I failed standard four, and when I think about it, that's when I was just a little baby. I failed because I was just out of it all the time. They saw my school reports...I must have just disconnected. Nobody noticed that I checked out except the teacher. Yeah, no, the teachers were also horrible, though. They hated me, but there was hatred because I was also rebellious. So, I used that energy for anger and rebellion, I even once spat on the teacher's shoes you know, so I was hated by the teachers. That was my high school.*

#### 11.1.6 George

##### 11.1.6.1 Childhood

**George describes his early years, starting with his earliest memory:**

*My earliest memory is of being a roommate in an orphanage and I was given a chair. I don't know what to do with the chair itself as I didn't speak the language which was English at the time. In my memory, I was in a funny green room which was that hospital green. There was this chair and then a rush of people came in. That's as far back as I get. The other early memories I have are of sitting at fences, we did a lot of that. We had a lot of fences when I was younger and in Zimbabwe, because we had just finished the war, so there were fences put up everywhere to deter people. I remember the bombs and the gunfights, and I remember getting packed in cars.*

George is understated in his recall. I try to piece together his narrative. If his earliest memory was of being given a chair in the orphanage, followed by a rush of people, then this was an early memory of visits by prospective adoptive parents. George elaborates on the confusion he experienced in his early years as he did not speak English as a child:

*All of the time I was trying to understand exactly what was happening, because it's all being done in English and the only people that spoke Italian were my parents at the time, so they did the translating. Then we moved to Johannesburg and from Johannesburg, it was Durban, and I went straight into South African government schools. That's where the turning point started, I could see that I wasn't like everybody else. There were surfers and young guys jumping and skateboarding. In general, lots of outdoor activities. I was living a very unsheltered life.*

#### 11.1.7 Rita

##### 11.1.7.1 Family Dynamics

*Then on top of it, I had to confront the relationship with my mom, my mom was always very domineering, and very controlling. Her hearing was beginning to fail and what I didn't realize is that she was experiencing the early stages of dementia. Which made her at times very aggressive, angry, and she would say terrible things to me, and I was in a deep depression, and I had lost a lot of weight. I think I weighed just under fifty kilos, and I mean I'm like 1.76m, I remember one day she said to me, your leggings, your legs, your skin, your leggings shouldn't be bagging around your legs. You don't say that like that to someone*

*who's clinically depressed, you know. I had a great therapist who was recommended to me through a friend, and I started going to him.*

### 11.1.8 Bella

What memories stand out to you the most about your childhood and upbringing? In essence, what was life like growing up in your family?

*Okay, so let me, perhaps start with my mother. She had me when she was 16, and my biological father and grandparents raised me for the first ten years of my life. My mother wasn't very present, she was off working, understandably as one is when she left school to support me. My grandparents were my mother and father. For all purposes, they had actually lost a child called Bella at age one, so when my mother had me, they named me Bella after their daughter, the daughter that they lost. They were the nurturing factor and I lived with him for the first ten years and I think if I hadn't have had that, possibly I would have had less resilience to handle what came thereafter.*

#### 11.1.8.1 Abuse

*My mother got remarried at an age when I was ten, and I moved in with her and my stepfather. They subsequently had a daughter. My mother's child is nine years younger than me. My stepfather, as soon as she was in the marriage, was very emotionally and physically abusive. Between age ten and age 18, when I left home, I was subjected to so emotional abuse in the sense that he didn't want me to be there, so I would have to be in my bedroom when he came home. I was never allowed to watch TV.*

*To this day, I battle watching TV. I was, um, I had to have my school shoes outside my room, and they had to be polished so that he, my stepfather, could see his face in them, and if they weren't, he would walk into my room and hit me over the head with a shoe. So, I had that to manage. And I'll come back to how I've dealt with that, with my mother, my grandparents were there once. I recall he hit me with a belt, and I had welts on my back, and my grandparents came to the rescue and said, you know, we're taking her away from you.*

Significant contributors to childhood adversity and midlife suicidal ideation have been defined by (Kendler *et al.*, 2002). Kendler's developmental model for major depression in women (Kendler *et al.*, 2002) and men (Kendler *et al.*, 2006) describes three pathways: the development of internalising disorders, externalising disorders, and adult interpersonal difficulties, also known as adult adversity. This developmental model was tested on twin samples and has been shown to be innovative. It has integrated a multifactorial aetiology of adult depression that considers genetic and environmental influences.

Kendler *et al.* (2006) extracted eighteen predictor variables spanning five tiers. During childhood there is risk in the form of genetic risk, a dysfunctional family environment, sexual abuse, and parental loss. Early adolescence presented risks for neuroticism, self-esteem, anxiety, and conduct disorder. Late adolescence placed the adolescent at risk for educational disruption, trauma with potential longevity, variables in social support, and substance abuse. Finally, adulthood presents the risks for divorce, major depression, or marital difficulties due to independent/dependent life events (Kendler *et al.*, 2002).

Kendler (2002) noted that neuroticism and early-onset anxiety disorders were the most dominant influences in the internalising pathway, with conduct disorder and substance abuse presenting as the most powerful in the externalising pathway. However, extrapolating the pathway to adult interpersonal difficulties proved more complex. Kendler found that childhood adversity played a significant role in adult interpersonal difficulties. He found a correlation between lifetime trauma and several latent depressogenic consequences linked to earlier adversities. This is presented as troubled adult interpersonal relationships (Kendler *et al.*, 2002).

## 11.2 Childhood stressors

My findings correlate with childhood stressors identified by Kendal *et al.* (2002)

These stressors are defined as:

- Maternal or paternal absence, for example, when a child is not living with their natural mother or father, whether through death, divorce, separation, illegitimacy or being in institutional care.
- Physical abuse by a parent - punched, kicked, hit, or beaten with an object or requiring medical treatment. Physical abuse and sexual abuse were ascertained by Kendal *et al.* (2002) from retrospective reports at 45 years (Rosenman & Rodgers, 2004). These types of adversity are challenging to assess prospectively because children experience shame and adult coercion and mostly do not report abuse at the time.

Marc, George, and Bella all experienced traumatic physical abuse by a parent. Kate was subject to sexual abuse by her stepbrothers and further sexual abuse at school.

A consequence of childhood adversity demarcated as an indicator of adult externalising behaviours by Kendal *et al.* (2002) is problem drinking. Kendal describes this as the adult feeling they should cut down on or other people annoying them by criticising their drinking. It is further described as feeling bad or guilty about their drinking. Marc, Vic, and Bella all described negative interactions with alcohol in their adulthood. In addition, Marc, Kate, and George all had an alcoholic father that contributed to their childhood adversities. All three were

subject to verbal, emotional and physical abuse. Marc abused alcohol in adulthood, as did Bella. Vic turned to periodic alcoholic binges to escape the fallout from his crisis, and George admitted to abusing as many drugs as possible.

Stansfeld, Clark, Smuk, Power, Davidson, and Rodgers (2017) reinforce that exposure to childhood adversity is related to increased exposure to midlife events. A study conducted by Stansfeld *et al.* (2017) evidenced that self-reported alcohol dependence, as an example of externalising behaviour, partially mediates the effects of sexual and physical abuse (Dube *et al.*, 2001).

That childhood adversity in the form of sexual (Fergusson *et al.*, 2000; Fanous *et al.*, 2004; Ystgaard *et al.*, 2004; Afifi *et al.*, 2008) and/or physical abuse (Ystgaard *et al.*, 2004; Enns *et al.*, 2006; Bruwer *et al.*, 2014; Harford *et al.*, 2014) has been correlated with suicidal ideation, both in the form of attempts and completed suicide (Séguin *et al.*, 2007). This combination of life events in childhood (Fergusson *et al.*, 2000) and adulthood, which includes divorce in adulthood (Dennis *et al.*, 2007), is further linked to an increased risk of suicidal ideation. This was evidenced by Marc's attempts to commit suicide in adulthood, as well as Kate's and Bella's attempts at suicide in adolescence.

### 11.2.1 Effects of childhood adversity

The experience of adversity, in turn, impacts feelings of self-worth, mastery and the ability or potential to develop positive and trusting relationships, as per Marc, Kate, Bella and George.

These feelings of poor self-worth, lack of self-mastery and the inability to develop positive or trusting relationships may further influence coping abilities and the ability to ask for help in a crisis (Gunnell *et al.*, 2004). Mastery has been linked to lower levels of suicidal ideation (Fairweather *et al.*, 2007). Self-mastery has been a factor in transcendence for Marc, George, Bella, Rita, and Vic.

The combination of childhood adversity and abuse has been linked to adverse coping methods for stressors in adulthood. These lead to disengagement, defined as problem avoidance, social withdrawal, and self-criticism (Leitenberg *et al.*, 2004). This behaviour, inherent in childhood adversity, may result from stress sensitisation and could stunt the emotional processing of adverse events in adulthood. Difficulties in coping with adult adversities have the potential to accrete in terms of perceived burden and severe interpersonal difficulties that place the adult at

risk of perpetuating and increasing suicidal ideation (Heikkinen *et al.*, 1993). Marc, Kate, and George all struggled to navigate adult life due to their childhood adversities.

### **11.3 Midlife crisis and how it presented by each participant**

#### **11.3.1 Marc**

Marc's midlife crisis was characterised by his unresolved sexual and physical abuse during childhood. This resulted in the themes of unfulfilled sexual desires, fracture, and upheaval in his midlife, which led to the disintegration of Marc's marriage, the loss of his career, his marriage, and the breakdown of his family, culminating in a midlife crisis.

Sexuality remains a dominant theme in Marc's life. It intruded in the form of infidelity and led to the demise of his marriage. In midlife, Marc questions his ever-present theme of sexuality. Marc often refers to his sexuality, either from the perspective of being deeply ashamed or from the perspective of yearning for love and purity in a sexual union.

Marc admits his earlier years were characterised by frequent sexual encounters, and realises he was trying to find himself by seeking love through sex. Marc was craving intimacy. A quest for intimacy dominated his later sexual encounters. He describes a contributing factor to the demise of his marriage as a lack of intimacy – how his ex-wife would turn her back on him. Marc's sexuality becomes a metaphor for his life – if he can master his body, he achieves self-mastery:

*I think that's the thing for me about midlife crisis. You only know when you are in it and when it's done. I lived my life in compartments, so work was really going well, but I mean, the alarm bells should have gone off like when I used cocaine, for instance.*

*Alarm bells should have gone off when had a car accident while driving drunk after spending 12 hours on the road drinking. It should have been when I had an overdose of pills and I had to pump out my stomach. So, the thing that I managed to do really well was I managed to keep my, my private life and my work life separate. So, at work, I kept on excelling, I kept on doing well from the outside in, there was nothing wrong.*

*Yes, I was a bit wild. Yes, I like to party, but so did a lot of other guys. Nobody would have looked at me and said, okay, you know, that's a mess about to happen, and I think, on its own, should have been an indication to me that something's not right because there was no equilibrium in my life. I was moving from compartment to compartment and managing my chaos, and I managed it really, really well. You see, running on that sort of treadmill, it goes all faster and faster and at some point, you lose the ability to balance it all because my life wasn't built on proper principles around that time, you know, it was a mess.*

Cracks started to show in Marc's when he began his career ascent. Marc was wildly successful as he climbed his career path. He was repeatedly promoted and rose the ranks into more senior roles with greater responsibilities. The increased responsibilities meant that Marc needed to focus more on work. He spent more and more time away from home, on business trips, and working long hours. He earned well and built up a vast collection of cars, lived in an expensive home, and, as he describes it, hedonistically enjoyed his financial success.

#### 11.3.1.1 Tumult

Marc describes this period of his life, preceding the demise of his marriage, as intense: he seemed untouchable and omnipotent. At the height of his career, he was wildly successful, a corporate maverick with the ability to motivate and drive his staff. The more invincible he felt, the more Marc pushed the boundaries, and he acted outrageously at corporate events and in meetings. He accrued a large group of friends whom he would pay to fly abroad with him for sporting events. No one could restrain Marc – he seemed invincible.

Marc started to split his personal life from his home life. He began having numerous affairs with women. He describes his home life as unfulfilled and how Tracy would turn his back on him in bed. Marc craved intimacy and sought it out in multiple encounters with women. When these women would fall in love with him, he would summarily end the relationship, maintaining that it wasn't part of the agreement. Ultimately, Marc resorted to paying for encounters with prostitutes, sometimes not having sex with them, merely sleeping with them for comfort. Marc ultimately became very ill after a series of these paid-for encounters. This period of his life would prove to be his undoing.

Marc was burning the candles at both ends, and the splitting that he had been able to maintain his entire life was becoming impossible to maintain.

#### 11.3.1.2 Transcendence into epiphany

All my research participants experienced a transcendence into epiphany due to confronting and navigating their respective midlife crises. As per O'Connor and Wolfe (2007), who determined that a positive perspective on midlife is a transition phase with great possibilities for growth and development, transcendence can be elicited through a paradigm shift. That growth and development can only occur when such a paradigm shift occurs, as midlife is a time when the adaptive capacity of the old paradigm becomes strained (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

This finding held true with my research participants - growth and development were impossible unless they chose to adapt or change. O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) defined a paradigm as a set of assumptions, perceptions, expectations, emotions, belief systems, and intrinsic values uniquely organised to navigate a broad range of situations and events (p. 7). Individuals need to confront the challenges inherent in a midlife transition and transition through them to achieve a paradigm shift. Variables such as ego development, a capacity for inner directness, and a commitment to learning facilitate growth during midlife (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007). This ego development, the capacity for inner directness, and the potential for learning at midlife were visible during all participants' crises at midlife.

Marc's transcendence into epiphany was evident in his embrace of positivity as a coping structure, religion's role and its subsequent evolution into spirituality. His insights profoundly strike Marc. His insights and inner explorations lead Marc to a place of vulnerability and strength. He describes his feelings of acute vulnerability at revealing aspects of his life. Nevertheless, he sees the benefits of opening up these hitherto locked areas.

It seems that Marc has been on an eternal search for safety. Subconsciously, the search is for the safety of being himself, free from the hypervigilance of reading others, free to be accepted for himself. He describes the journey of how he comes to acquaint himself with himself and his value system. These insights are mirrored in many areas of his life. Marc discovers who he is in relation to his new partner. He finds a sense of purpose in a different career. He moves away from religion to a spiritual awakening. He experiences a change in relationship with his children and ex-wife. He confronts the complex of his guilty father syndrome and finds release from indebtedness and guilt with his ex-wife. Marc's finances start improving, and he experiences a reinstatement of status. He still admits to grappling with regret at his loss of career status and his previous earning capacity.

#### 11.3.1.3 Positivity

*I make a decision every day of my life to be positive. I make myself believe that everything will be ok. I do suffer from depression, and I have had some really tough times in my life. Well, I think it's most probably a product of toxic masculinity. If I have to reflect back now as a mature male, there was the sense that, you know, you can either make a choice that the things around you bring you down or you make a difference. For me, it was always that, you know, for some of my life, I believe that none of those things that happened around me would have an effect on me. I have a choice as to how I go, how I affect situations. I didn't allow really myself to be pulled back or brought down by things that happened to me because I realised on some level, maybe a subconscious level, I realised that if I'm going to get caught into that situation, it will destroy me. Or it would have a very negative effect on me. So, for me, it was always about making a difference, stepping up, and yeah, I have to remember my*

*dates here. My Mom and dad got divorced when I was seven months. I can remember, back in my memory, there's been this duality in my life. I had to learn to adapt. You learned that. That's the way it is. You learn maybe to control it and to manage it and to be always sensitive around it and to see how people react, and I guess I had to learn to survive.*

#### 11.3.1.4 Religion

Marc became deeply religious, which segued into a spiritual awakening. He described himself as having to redeem himself in God's eyes. Marc feels as if there is a lot that he needs to make up for. Marc enters a period of great self-introspection and begins to do a lot of reading, research, and self-exploration. Marc weans himself off all medication. He questions his diagnosis as bipolar and begins to pray and meditate devoutly.

Eventually, Marc finds himself at odds with some of the teachings of his religion and begins to question both the religious aspects of the group he is a part of and the group's principles. This does not go down well with the group, and Marc feels isolated. Despite the resistance from the group, Marc continues with his self-exploration and discovers a newfound spiritual awakening that seems to have far more resonance with him than the rigidity of the religious beliefs to which he has been exposed. Marc finds himself growing away from the group, and it reaches the point where he begins to separate from them.

#### 11.3.1.5 Insights

Marc begins to question the narrative around him being the guilty perpetrator in his marriage, and this becomes a turning point in Marc's narrative as he begins to grasp that there are external loci of control. Marc appears ego-centric, not from a self-absorption perspective but from the perspective of believing that the fate of everyone close to him and around him is affected by his perceived wrongdoings and mistakes. Marc seems to persecute himself as he remains wracked with guilt:

*There was no equilibrium in my life. I was moving from compartment to compartment and managing my chaos, and I managed it really, really well. You see, running on that sort of treadmill, it goes all faster and faster and at some point, you lose the ability to balance it all. Then, because my life wasn't built on proper principles around that time, you know, it was a mess.*

#### 11.3.1.6 Epiphanies

Marc reflects on the fundamental internal changes he has made:

*Oh, it's respect for myself and respect for who I am to focus on the why. Not the how and the what and to basically learn from the inside out. Like I said before, you don't cheat on*



*somebody because you have a girlfriend. You don't cheat because that's not what you do. It's not because of another person. You do it because of you. I also started gaining more self-respect for what I have to offer and to question who I am and what makes me special.*

One of the most profound changes he makes is that of a spiritual awakening:

*I kept on saying. Who am I? Who am I really? Then it started for me this way that I'm a child of God, that grew to understanding that the power lies in me. I'm part of the great, the whole.*

*I'm really most probably the best place that I've ever been if I look at myself, and I make sense. So, I mean, I still have anxiety around things. I still feel fearful around certain things. Physically, I have been sick. I'm not one hundred percent, well, yet, I can still feel the pressures like I've always done. But it's possible for me to take a step back and look at it and understand it better, maybe, than I ever done before my life. I don't have the, the need any more to just act on it, and it's really difficult for me because I'm, because I know I've never done it and I've never allowed myself to talk about it or about it.*

*It's almost like it's poised. It's beautifully poised and it's okay, it's okay to feel, the fear. Sometimes it's okay to feel that anxiety and to have someone that you can share it with is quite, it's quite frightening sometimes because you're always expecting there's that sort of program that's, that's installed in you over a period of time that you're expecting a person to react to, to some of the things, but It's, it doesn't happen. It's actually really a beautiful place, and it's a good place to be.*

### 11.3.2 Kate

Kate's midlife crisis had its genesis in childhood sexual abuse and presented at midlife in the guise of deep shame, not feeling worthy enough, periods of isolation and sexual repression. Kate's marriage broke up during her midlife crisis as she grappled with her sexuality as well as her relationship with religion:

*So yeah, that's what it was like growing up. It is the kind of thing that, when you think about it, your early sexual experiences then shut you down sexually. It was like you are robbed of the freedom to be your sexual self. Yeah, it definitely did it. I was definitely affected. I was obviously afraid of boys, but when I went to school, even the boys in school knew that something had happened to me because I must have had something in me that attracted the boys to me.*

Kate has rationalised that because she was subjected to sexual abuse as a child, it seemed to mark her out as visible to others, who would then further perpetuate abuse or who would engage in inappropriate sexual behaviour with her. She holds an inherent belief that these abusers can sense that she is sexually primed because of her childhood abuse. Kate is acutely aware that her sexuality has been prematurely awakened and that she is sexualised and describes herself as promiscuous. Physiologically, Kate appeared primed to respond sexually, psychologically, and emotionally. She felt powerless in the face of her sexual compulsions and frozen in her inability to fend off these abusers.

### 11.3.2.1 Isolation

*So, I was alone. I kind of grew up alone as the kids started leaving the house, so I went through a little bit of an abandonment, and when my mom got breast cancer, she was very sick, and I can't remember anybody ever explaining to me that she's not going to die, but she smelled terrible.*

*She was getting chemo, she was losing her hair, she looked terrible. I didn't know if I was gonna [sic] come home from school and if she was going to be there. You know there was no one that you could ask. I don't even know if there was anybody that even told me what was going on.*

### 11.3.2.2 Sexual abuse

*Think about it, if you look at it now with adult eyes, I mean you were being sexually abused left right and centre, everywhere you went you're getting sexual attention, you are sexually abused at home. Of course, you were going to be angry. Also, a little 11-year-old girl is not gonna [sic] understand what her mother's going through. There's no way to explain it. Also, my dad was mean, he was not always mean, but he was just not there.*

### 11.3.2.3 Religion

The loneliness and isolation that Kate had to contend with in her adolescence is stark. This theme of isolation remains a pertinent theme in Kate's life. Kate remains deeply affected by her mother's religious views, and these religious views become part of Kate's fabric as she remains affected by feelings of shame, which she has been taught can only be redeemed by God.

### 11.3.2.4 Shame and outsider status

I asked Kate if she thought she could have had postpartum depression. She agrees vehemently. This traumatic period of her life elicits memories of her time spent with Fred's parents. Again, Kate slides into another deeply unhappy period, where she feels alienated and adrift:

*Then, what made it worse, Fred couldn't afford to keep us together as a family, so he sent us to the farm where his parents were living. His parents tried to control me. They took over the parenting of my kids, they did whatever they wanted with the girls, the girls could do anything, and they didn't listen to me. I felt out of control, and I had terrible stomach ulcers.*

### 11.3.2.5 Unhappy Marriage

Kate's marriage starts to unravel as she becomes sexually liberated through her newfound religious exaltation. She starts to confront the reality of her marriage and, specifically, their sex life.

### 11.3.2.6 Spiritual/sexual epiphany

Kate is incandescent with rage and outrage when she relates how her life unfolded after her religious, sexual, and spiritual experiences. She accretes a profound and life-changing event into a few sentences, events that changed her life forever:

*I could feel it deeply within, it wasn't sexual harassment, I just went with it, and it just went, and I just went and there was flow and flow and flow and then finally it died down. I remember telling one of my friends, and she said, "No, the devil came upon you, he came on to you". You know, as if to say the devil raped me, yeah, you know, and that's when the last straw broke. During this time now, leaving my religion, my husband. It's like I must have proof. They told me I was bipolar, then telling me this experience only happened because now, ooh, I wanna [sic] have sex.*

Kate's midlife crisis unravels as she becomes angry and chooses to take back control. In so doing, she creates a rupture in her life as she makes significant changes.

### 11.3.2.7 Taking control

Kate's demeanour changes. She becomes defiant and proud, and it is in this interview that I can see how her religious and sexual experiences have changed her profoundly. Kate vows never to return to who she was. She has found a lost part of herself and is claiming it. I suggest that she won't be controlled:

*Yes, I was not going to be controlled, no I wasn't, and then the war started.*

This is the first time Kate has taken control of her life. Kate claims the religious experience for herself, it was a unique sexual experience, and most importantly, it wasn't a rape. Kate describes the experience as a spiritual experience, which she elaborates as culminating in the sum of all her learnings. It is also an unshackling of her past, an experience where she managed to reclaim her sexuality for herself. Kate is proud when she declares that not even the confines of her marriage will confine her from connecting with her true inner self. There is a long pause whilst Kate gathers herself. She seems both proud, victorious, and vulnerable. Kate rapidly dissolves into tears when she tells me the following:

*I walked out of my marriage. I left it all behind you so that I could align, yeah, and I am tearful when I say this, but I think it's beautiful. I don't know why that experience drove me to not let it go because I knew that something marvellous was happening. I knew it was right was right and yeah, there's no other way to do it.*

### 11.3.2.8 Extrication from marriage

*So, he had this idea that I was cheating because of my sexual openness but actually later I found out that he was actually cheating on me, he was projecting onto me. He was shaming*

*me for stuff he had done, and I didn't even know it. I didn't do that, but the worst is to be accused of doing something that you haven't.*

### 11.3.3 George

George's midlife crisis presented in the form of a stroke after both his alcoholic, abusive father and his beloved mother died. His midlife crisis was generated by his experience of childhood and the adversity he encountered in childhood. This adversity, in the form of physical abuse, resurfaced in midlife, and George was forced to re-evaluate his way of being and his interactions with others. George had to confront the toxicity of his family dynamics and his relationship with his siblings. He re-evaluated his relationship with religion, became mercenary about boundary settings, and sought to cut out relationships and interactions with others that did not serve him. George became resolute about ring fencing, which serves to protect and nurture him. George has always been a peacekeeper, and his midlife crisis forced him to practice self-care versus caring for others. George emotionally distances himself from his abusive and painful narrative, and his self-care and self-protection are evidenced in his defensiveness:

#### 11.3.3.1 The peacekeeper

*It was a very turbulent lifestyle, having an alcoholic father and an abused mother. Then, having my other siblings thrown into this space made me want to be the peacekeeper, so I think I've always been the one that tries to defuse the situation. I will subdue myself to handle a situation and it's still like that today, it is who I am.*

#### 11.3.3.2 Death

*Then I dealt with the death of my parents, they died one year apart from each other. This created a lot of issues in the family. I was always trying to be the appeaser of situations.*

George's midlife crisis presented in the form of a stroke:

*I subsequently had a stroke. Which you only do to yourself, and you cannot take care of yourself, which I wasn't. I decided after that that I wasn't gonna [sic] give a fuck what anyone thought, and I would carry on the way I wanted to. Obviously not hurting anyone in turn but being honest and true to myself as I could be. Although that only happened in my late 40s, I think rather now than never.*

I note that George relates his story dispassionately; the lack of emotion is startling. It appears as if George wants to distance himself from his stories, to keep them at arm's length. I check with George to see if he is trying to put distance between himself and his story.

### 11.3.3.3 Emotional distancing

*Yes, because if you take it all too seriously, you are going to make yourself a victim of life. Everyone is different. Everyone has stories.*

As an observer of your story, I wonder if you have conditioned yourself to keep your story at arm's length?

*Your history defines you, and I am the way I am because I am, because I don't want to be a bunch of excuses.*

It seems to me that you don't want to be defined as a victim.

*Well, a lot of people have things that have happened to them that are worse than what happened to me. If you look at people I don't know, her name was by heart, but that woman from Syria, the one that was severely burned and tortured by her family. The only thing that's important to me is about being honest to yourself at all times.*

### 11.3.3.4 Abuse

I ask George why he took so many drugs:

*I guess part of it was about experimentation. I mean, I really wanted it to be dangerous. It was also escapism. Probably a lot of it was escapism. What was I escaping from? Well, I don't know, but I guess I was really, really nervous a lot of the time. You kind of never knew what was going to happen. I mean, my father broke my mother's shoulders, He broke her hip, he broke her arms, he broke her femur. Those are really big bones to break. I was lucky. He only broke my jaw.*

You must have been terrified.

*He was horrific. You never knew what you were coming home to. So, I was lucky enough to be wise to it. I escaped him by requesting to go to boarding school. Because I knew I was going to get a scholarship. So, because I was manipulative, I knew that I could get a boarding school scholarship. So, I told my parents that it was part of the package.*

It sounds like your so-called manipulation was just a form of escape. It was probably the only way that you managed to survive. Also, using your EQ and IQ, you could negotiate self-preservation. It seems like you used your wits and street-smart to keep yourself safe. I explain to George that children growing up in households where alcohol abuse is prolific creates an environment of shame and secrecy.

*Yes, absolutely, I did. Well, the actions of my dad defined the family. My mom, although she was Portuguese, she was much more English in her nature and mannerisms. On my dad's side of the family. I don't know, it just seemed like everyone was really, really attractive. Well, those ones that I knew about.*

### 11.3.3.5 Emotional distancing as a means of survival

Are you saying that you will not allow what happened in your childhood to affect your adult life? Is this a transitional point?

*Absolutely. It's a knowing. You need to know your self-worth.*

This seems like one of the most pivotal things you learned and possibly a turning point in your story. Perhaps you allowed a level of invasiveness in previously. You have described growing up in a very Mediterranean family...

*Yes, you've always got the peacemaker, and that was always me. Um, and I think I took that on too. It affected me in my relationships and, in my daily life and in my own thoughts on who I was. I mean, everything falls away, and you realise that you don't want to put up with that. You don't have to. That's why I don't care anymore about what others think, and what you see is honestly what you get. This is nothing else there.*

### 11.3.3.6 Midlife Crisis

George's midlife crisis, precipitated by his stroke and the death of his parents, means that George starts to cull relationships and behaviours that do not serve him. Instead, he chooses to focus on the immediacy of his family and what is important to him:

*It was actually quite liberating. At the age of 45, the events that led to it were comprised of a series of things. It was a long series of things. Once my parents had passed as, I saw all the fighting within the family. In many respects, the man cracks, and that ultimately led to a masterpiece. My main concern was always my younger brother, I had to make sure that myself, my husband, my brother is taken care of even when we're not here.*

*My family didn't care after my parents died. My brother would have honestly been left destitute, and they couldn't care. So, taking that responsibility on at that time was really a very heavy task. I realised that it wasn't just any kind of task. I took over the responsibility of my brother.*

*He's autistic. I had to learn so much about the positives, the negatives. Learning about outcomes and also teaching myself a more positive way forward. I had to learn to define myself, not by what's in my past.*

### 11.3.3.7 Religion

*I don't even know what the turning point has been in my life. Maybe it was the fact that I had a stroke. Um, I think I just did a 360. I just realised that I had to focus on the most important things in my life. It reminds me of another big turning point in my life when I was supposed to go into the seminary. My family were devout Catholics, and I went for my confirmation then I wanted to go into the seminary. I realised that I would have to take up arms for the Catholic Church. There was no way I was going to do that, and that was one of the few times that I really stood up in my life for what I believed in.*

*I knew religion was rubbish when I went for my first Holy Communion classes, and the priest was speaking to us about the Bible, and I said to him, but weren't they part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and how do we know that that wasn't a fairy tale that was found? How do we know that's real? And he hit me with the Bible. So, if a book is a sacred object, you don't hit with it, and that's when I knew it was bullshit.*

*I must have been about seven or eight, and that's when I knew it was shit. That was the beginning of, it's not even a stance, it's a quiet stance actually, a quiet revolution against it. I'm not out to bring down any church or religion or whatever. Let them believe what they want to believe, but I do firmly believe that as much as people say they are fanatics, churches are more damaging than fanatics. They do it in a very sly way.*

#### 11.3.4 Vic

A careless night of drinking and an interaction with a corrupt policeman triggered Vic's midlife crisis, ended his professional sporting career and forcing Vic to completely reinvent himself professionally. Vic's midlife crisis forced him to dig deep within to draw on inner resilience and resourcefulness and to maintain his dignity and reputation. Vic's inherent stoicism, fortitude and discipline become more distilled after his crisis:

##### 11.3.4.1 Successful career

*I played sport there for, I think, about four years, I played for the top team at the university. I got picked for the provincial side. Then I got a contract.*

*Well, that was part of the clubs I was involved in. So, we played New Zealand, Australia, I've basically been all over the world, basically because of my sporting career. New Zealand, Australia, obviously the whole of Europe, Italy, France, I even went to Prague to play a game there, two games there against the national team of Prague, with an invitational team, so yeah, basically travelled the whole world on the back of my professional career.*

*I came back home, and I started playing at my local club, then I had a major knee injury at the beginning of the season, there was a major club competition happening. I couldn't play, but at this time, I was approached by another team, and they signed me anyway, even though I had a knee injury. I started training with them, and then we won some major cups, and that's how I ended up in the town that I am in now.*

Vic paints a picture of a successful sportsman. The structure shapes his discipline and focus during his school years. He is singled out for his potential when he leaves school and goes to university on a scholarship to play sports. Vic lives a full life, travelling the world for his sporting career. He is on the precipice of further success in his sporting career. He is feted in his career, and his life is poised for further positive changes. Vic's entire world is his sporting career. It defines him and gives him status. His career forms an indelible part of his life. He is a public persona and is required to stay fit, strong, and healthy as part of his sporting career, meaning that his career and personal life are intrinsically intertwined. Vic does not have the type of career that he can switch off from after working hours. Therefore, the impact of Vic's midlife crisis is far-reaching, as the effect on his career has catastrophic ramifications for his status, his health, and his identity:

##### 11.3.4.2 Traumatic change

*Yeah, so everything was going good until obviously that night that everything went to shit, basically.*

Vic wasn't playing sports that fateful weekend and went out with a few friends. They had drinks, and on his way back home, he was pulled over by the police. Vic admits he was

intoxicated. The policeman then took his wallet and extorted the pin for his bank card. After the police drove around with Vic for an extended period, Vic became frustrated and angry. He pushed the policeman, and he fell to the ground and struck his head. Vic then attempted to escape the scene. He was arrested and spent the weekend in jail:

*So, I had a bail hearing on the Monday, I got bail. On the Wednesday, um, I went back to training again, so of course, you know, we were playing the weekend. So, I went back to training as normal, you know, I didn't, you know. I felt, well, I still feel like I, I was in the right in a way.*

Vic's life began to change in significant ways. He was ostracised by his team and forced to train alone:

*Then, the team manager told me that I'm not allowed to train with them on the field. So, I can train with them, but I'm not allowed to be seen with them basically. So, at that stage, me and another player, I think they suspected him of using steroids or something. Him and me and a third player were training together on a different field. So, we would train and do gym work with the team, except if there were photographers and that kind of stuff. So, for close to a year, this was how I lived. I would train and then go home.*

The contrast between his very public, high-flying sporting career, where he was highly visible, to being forced to train apart from his teammates, avoiding photographers and living in isolation. My insights into Vic are found in the subtleties. His posture rarely changes; his eyes give away his emotions. There is a resignation to Vic as he relives this year. His stoicism surfaces, yet the strain that he lived under is evident as his eyes narrow, and he reflects on this period in life wherein he was effectively banished and in limbo:

*It was more than a year and a half that I did that.*

### 11.3.5 Rita

The breakup of Rita's marriage catapulted her into a midlife crisis. Rita had to re-evaluate her relationship with her narcissistic mother. She was forced to confront the themes of betrayal, both by her mother and her ex-husband, as well as the themes of loss and loneliness.

Rita was confronted with the role she had inadvertently played of being a mother figure to her ex-husband. Rita's midlife crisis compelled her to re-evaluate her place in the world, her individuation, and what she wanted from life versus being in a supportive role to her mother and her ex-husband.



#### 11.3.5.1 The pain and grief associated with the breakup of a marriage

*I mean, at that point, there was, we were very, very close, we really were. There was probably a co-dependency that was maybe not so healthy. I mean, he was very, very dependent upon me, and we did everything together. I think we never spent more than three or four days apart. So, once I had to come to New York because my mom was having surgery, he didn't come. Normally, he would have come with me. He didn't come, but that was the only time in twenty-eight years that we had been away from one another for more than two days.*

#### 11.3.5.2 Betrayal

*Yes, absolutely, absolutely. I want to tell you about our breakup. In 2006, we were looking to buy a house, and a friend of ours who had a bed and breakfast in Africa said, "Oh, you should come to Africa. I'm sure you would love it." We were looking to have a place somewhere where it's warm always we could go in the winter in the northern hemisphere winter. We ended up in this African city, fell in love with it, and we bought a property and actually built a house, blasted this huge rock, and built a beautiful, beautiful house. While in this African city, we met this young woman. We were introduced to this young woman who was an aspiring singer. She wanted to be a solo artist. She was 30 years younger than my ex. She basically had a plan to capture him.*

#### 11.3.5.3 Family Dynamics

*Then on top of it, I had to confront the relationship with my mom, my mom was always very domineering, and very controlling. Her hearing was beginning to fail and what I didn't realize is that she was experiencing the early stages of dementia. Which made her at times very aggressive, angry, and she would say terrible things to me, and I was in a deep depression, and I had lost a lot of weight. I think I weighed just under fifty kilos, and I mean I'm like 1.76m, I remember one day she said to me, your leggings, your legs, your skin, your leggings shouldn't be bagging around your legs. You don't say that like that to someone who's clinically depressed, you know. I had a great therapist who was recommended to me through a friend, and I started going to him.*

#### 11.3.5.4 Loss

Rita has had everything she held sacred taken from her. Her home had been invaded, her family had been violated, and she was fighting to survive. Her identity had become null and void. She had given up her career and life to look after this man-child, who then decided he wanted to grow up and discarded her. Cutting her off financially and severing her from her livelihood, her relationship, and the identity she had formed with him. Not only that, but Lisa, his lover, had also infiltrated her inner sanctity by sleeping with her son.

#### 11.3.5.5 Loneliness

Rita's body language shows her deep sadness; her lithe, graceful frame bends and becomes stooped as she speaks of her intense loneliness. This is compounded by the enormity of her mother's betrayal. Rita appears philosophical as she reflects on her loneliness:

*I remember something someone told me, and they said this was, this was meant to be. I needed this time these nine years to find myself, to regrow and come back to myself. Before I was married, I was working and travelling all over the world. I was very independent. I mean, I had a previous marriage before this one, I had a son, and I was very independent. When I got into this relationship, my independence was cut off. If I wanted to visit a friend somewhere, he would have to come, or he wouldn't want me to go. I remember when I had to come to New York for my mom's surgery, and I was in Europe for about a week before I left. He would say things like, "Oh, I know you can't wait to get to New York and be on your own. You probably go out every night with your friends, and you'll be happy to be away from me". He made those comments when he was angry that he was going to be on his own. He was very jealous, very insecure, and now he's with somebody who's just like him on that level.*

Not only was Rita betrayed emotionally by her ex-husband, but she was also betrayed emotionally. Rita had supported her musician husband in his successful career, giving up her career as a model to become her husband's manager.

#### 11.3.5.6 Financial betrayal

*So, even with this spiritual connection, some stuff happened that blew me away. I never really got it until a while later. I was so emotionally caught up in my pain. It was sometime between November and February, and I was on Facetime with a friend and another common friend of ours, John. I was telling them how Mark had offered to give me one of his apartments. He owned several properties throughout Europe, including apartment buildings. He offered to give me one of the apartment buildings. He had said, "Yeah, you can have one".*

#### 11.3.6 Bella

Bella's midlife crisis is precipitated by her adversity in childhood. Bella was subject to abandonment and traumatic physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. These themes were revisited during Bella's midlife crisis when she confronted her mother about her cruel childhood. Bella spent her early adulthood in response to countering and protecting herself from her deeply wounding childhood themes. She sought refuge in her early relationships by choosing boyfriends with stable families as a safe refuge from her chaotic home life. Bella was driven by her desire to overcome her early childhood. She sought to do better, be better and overcome her circumstances. Bella succeeded in every endeavour she put her mind to. When she was immediately successful, she pursued her goals and objectives with tenacity and resilience until she succeeded.

##### 11.3.6.1 Childhood

*Okay, so let me, perhaps start with my mother. She had me when she was 16, and my biological father and grandparents raised me for the first ten years of my life. My mother wasn't very present, she was off working, understandably as one is when she left school to support me. My grandparents were my mother and father. For all purposes, they had actually lost a child called Bella at age one, so when my mother had me, they named me*

*Bella after their daughter, the daughter that they lost, They were the nurturing factor and I lived with him for the first ten years and I think if I hadn't have had that, possibly I would have had less resilience to handle what came thereafter.*

### 11.3.6.2 Abuse

*My mother got remarried at an age when I was ten, and I moved in with her and my stepfather. They subsequently had a daughter. My mother's child is nine years younger than me. My stepfather, as soon as she was in the marriage, was very emotionally and physically abusive. Between age ten and age 18, when I left home, I was subjected to so emotional abuse in the sense that he didn't want me to be there, so I would have to be in my bedroom when he came home. I was never allowed to watch TV.*

*To this day, I battle watching TV. I was, um, I had to have my school shoes outside my room, and they had to be polished so that he, my stepfather, could see his face in them, and if they weren't, he would walk into my room and hit me over the head with a shoe. So, I had that to manage. And I'll come back to how I've dealt with that, with my mother, my grandparents were there once. I recall he hit me with a belt, and I had welts on my back, and my grandparents came to the rescue and said, you know, we're taking her away from you.*

*My grandparents were able to do that for periods of time, but I ended up having to go back to, to my mother's home. So that was until about the age of 18. During that time, I was also sexually abused by my uncle. I can get to have dealt with that with my mother as well and the questions that I've posed her, particularly now in midlife, which for me is, you know, I'm fifty-four. Um, so I threw myself into my schoolwork. I loved being at school. It was an escape for me, and I loved horse riding on weekends, which was an escape for me.*

*They were very happy to get me out of the house on weekends. So that was sort of ten to 18. I then wanted to from age 18, in fact even younger, from age 16, I threw myself into one relationship after another with different men. And if I look back now, all of them had very stable family lives. So, I almost went from one to another where there was mother and father, and they took me in as their own, and I would spend my weekends from about age 16. With whichever boyfriend I was with, and usually it lasted about two years and then I would leave.*

Bella's resilience and the sheer dynamism of her personality opens doors and creates opportunities for her. She finds herself in difficult situations and becomes resourceful. Bella does not give up, and her resilience is palpable. Bella also makes the best of situations she finds herself in, as she does when liberated from her disastrous work experience. This resilience gets her through her daunting Cairo work experience:

*I was supposed to go back to the princess's house, and now they couldn't find me. Eventually, I gave my Egyptian friend gave them an update, and she started liaising with them, saying, look, you know, she needs her passport. They were saying, yeah, but we've got an agreement, and she needs to come and work, and we're not giving the passport back. Anyway. she handled all of that. There I was, and I thought, well, I might as well enjoy it, you know, I mean, I'm here. I've always wanted to ride an Arab horse in the desert, so let me go and ride horses. I had also always wanted to go on a camel, always wanted to see the Pyramids. So, I arranged a tour through the hotel, and I did things on two of the days that I was there. I went to the Papyrus Museum, and I rode an Arabian horse in the desert, and I did the camel thing, and I went into a, you know, a tomb in the pyramids.*

### 11.3.6.3 Resourcefulness

*Well, I've tended to do that throughout my life. It's become a bit of a theme, and I'm not sure where that comes from, but I like to think it's just a fighting spirit, you know, that screw it. I'm here trusting I'm going to get out, and it is what it is. You know, I can't change it, it is what it is, but I can choose how I navigate my way out of this and try and enjoy it whilst I'm here. So, when I got back, I couldn't find a job that paid what I was earning, so I was offered an advertising position, but they didn't pay well.*

### 11.3.6.4 Persistence

Bella is persistent in her knowledge that Steve is the right life partner for her. She is resolute in her knowledge that she will marry Steve. She never gives up until she gets what she wants since she has an intuitive sense of right and wrong, as well as a sense of self-preservation:

*Then I met Steve, and he was not interested, and I was not letting go. So, for two years and, he was always in his integrity, said to me, look, there are other girls, you are number one on the list, but there are other girls. And like he says slowly, I, I got rid of them, one by one, but I was very patient, and I played the game and went out with other guys, didn't. He eventually decided that he wanted to be with me, so we got together. That was after about two years or so we got together. I moved into his home, it was a big, beautiful home and I was very happy.*

### 11.3.6.5 Midlife crisis

Bella carves out a beautiful life for herself, conceiving two children through IVF, getting married for the second time, converting to Judaism, and again embarking on another successful career that fulfils her deeply. Bella moves through her life methodically. Once she is happy and settled, she feels safe and secure enough to confront the trauma of her childhood, and this comes about in her midlife years.

Bella chooses to confront her mother and stepfather about her distressing childhood in midlife. It's as if the safety of her married life and her life experiences have emboldened her to confront the trauma she experienced growing up. It's evident in Bella's narrative that her pain and distress were acute, and the need to address this is paramount.

### 11.3.6.6 Confrontation

*Just to go back in terms of my mother, because that's, that's been a big, a big part of having to build resilience was what happened to me as a child. My stepfather ended up alone after my mother left him. He was a very cruel man. He never had any friends. At one point in time, I phoned him up, and I said to him you know I want to just say this: he was an older man. He's twenty-five years older than my mother. I said I want to just say this to you, you had every opportunity to have a daughter in me who would still be here, would still be here for you, because his own daughter had left the country.*

*I said, but you were incredibly cruel to me, and I was a child, and I want to know why you were so cruel to me, and he just broke down. You know, he just broke down, and he just said, I'm so sorry. I just, I chose that moment to forgive him because I realised he was such a broken soul, and I just said to him, Dave, I forgive you. I don't approve of what you did, and I will never approve of what you did. What you did was cruel, and I and I have suffered as a result of it, but I forgive you. He died a short while after that.*

*Then it was about my mother. My mother doesn't live here, in this city where we have been living for the last ten years. I brought my mother into my business, so she works as my right-hand person. Because financially she needed that and she got involved with my second business, so she still works for me. But I started seeing a psychologist to try and unravel betrayal that I felt with my mother. This fact that she wasn't there, where was she?*

*You know, when I was being abused, where was she? Why did she allow another man to do that? Because I've now become a mother and I have a daughter, and I couldn't understand how a mother allows that to happen. Now I understand. She did the best that she could at the time with what was in her head. She couldn't have done better, or she would have. I had her fly here and I had an intervention with her, with a psychologist, which I requested, and with her psychologist as mediator.*

*She never knew that I was sexually assaulted, sexually abused up until that point. I had never told her. And in that, in that meeting, I just said to her, you know, I was sexually abused by this person. You allowed your husband to physically abuse me and emotionally abuse me. You made him be the one to take me to school every morning, knowing that I had an angst and that he abused me all the way to school. You allowed me to be locked in my room from seven o'clock whilst my sister watched TV. You know you did all of these things, and I need to understand how you could have allowed that. Did you not love me? Was I a pain to have around? What was the reason? The first thing she said was Well, I don't know about the sexual abuse, but you know, maybe it was, it was double, two-sided, you know, maybe it was actually consensual, and then I lost it.*

*I said to her: "How dare you? I was ten years old and when that was happening in my room, where were you? Where were you? You left me with an 18-year-old boy. I was ten years old in my home." Eventually, I said to her: "Why didn't you just leave me with my grandparents? I was happy. Why did you actually force me to go into that environment, knowing how I was being treated?" She eventually broke down. She was just apologetic. Anyway, we left that meeting, and we went to a coffee shop outside. I just said to her: "You know, I'll never understand."*

### 11.3.7 Kate

Kate transitioned into epiphany through her renewed relationship with religion, liberation, and sexual liberation.

#### 11.3.7.1 Religion

Kate's life changes dramatically after a profound religious encounter, and a new world opens for her. She forms a deeper connection with her mother and encounters a religious and sexual euphoria that nurtures and fills her, unlike anything she has ever experienced. Kate's epiphanies are found in the themes of self-control and self-mastery. These epiphanies are deeply transcendent for Kate, and through these epiphanies, she makes fundamental changes and transforms her life:

*My mum invited me to a revival, a church revival. After that, I went to see Stella. This was after six months, that I went to see Stella and then we reconnected our friendship. I took Stella to this revival with Fred, and here I had my born-again experience. They asked who wanted to give their lives to Jesus, so I went to the front, the guy came to me to put his hand on me, he didn't even touch me, and I felt like energy went through me. I just lay there with so much peace, right there on the floor, just so much peace washing over me. It was beautiful. I was being baptised that night as well, so I put on the robe, and then they baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost and John.*

Kate finds her transcendence in her spiritual and sexual epiphanies

### 11.3.7.2 Spiritual/sexual epiphany

*I could feel it deeply within, it wasn't sexual harassment, I just went with it, and it just went, and I just went and there was flow and flow and flow and then finally it died down.*

*Then everything changed, I want to have sex, I am trying different things, it shook my husband up because one day this, the next day that. Yeah, it was just incredible. So that was tough for him, I think, because I'm drinking and partying and everything, and obviously now I'm totally like sexually free, and now I'm also getting a lot of attention, and I must have physically changed as well because even before his friends that hated me they hated me because I'm this prude Christian you know that preaches at them and gives them shift if they drinking and smoking and swearing they can't do that in my house you know. You know, now yeah, that was a threat to him and the more sexualised I became, the more frightened he became of me. Yeah, but it wasn't gonna [sic] stop me, no it wasn't gonna [sic] stop because he was enjoying it, but he didn't. He didn't show signs of fearfulness until he started controlling me.*

This epiphany allowed Kate to start taking control of her life to pursue what was important.

### 11.3.7.3 Taking control

Kate's religious and sexual experiences have changed her profoundly. Kate is never going back to who she was:

*Yes, I was not going to be controlled, no I wasn't, and then the war started.*

Kate claims the religious experience for herself, and she describes the experience as a spiritual experience, which she elaborates as culminating in the sum of all her learnings. It is also an unshackling of her past, an experience where she managed to reclaim her sexuality for herself. Kate is proud when she declares that not even the confines of her marriage will confine her from connecting with her true inner self.

Kate experiences a magical awakening and connection with herself. She takes control of her past, which includes liberating herself from previously held doctrine and dogma. She was able to objectively see and then confront the cruelty that religion represented for her. Kate faced the abandonment, shame, abuse and punitive aspects of her childhood and adolescence. By taking

control, Kate confronts these aspects head-on and then moves through them instead of allowing them to continue shaping her.

Kate is possessed by a fortitude that no matter how difficult life is, Kate has an inner drive, an inner driving force, that forces her to self-actualise, whatever the cost of that. Her freedom and sexual liberation were her drivers, and these were non-negotiable in her life transition.

### 11.3.8 George

George's transitions into epiphany graduate from his adverse childhood, characterised by violence and cruelty. George expresses this by adorning himself with mostly religious prose in the form of tattoos. It is as if George becomes his own representation of a living body of art. Through emotional distancing, he finds his transcendence in self-expression, gratitude, and boundary-setting. He also experiences transcendence into epiphany through creative outlets such as music and art. George finds his transcendence in liberation from religion and the nurture of his deeply loving relationship with his husband. He transcends into epiphanies by creating his nuclear family as he cares for his younger autistic brother. These transitions into epiphany evolved after George had a stroke in midlife and was forced to re-evaluate his life:

*I got my first tattoo when I was 14, and that was " Jesus wept" and I loved it as it is the shortest verse in the bible. All my tattoos are pieces of my life at the time recorded only on my body, so I never forget where and what I was and what I knew I had to become. I love the belief that the same being that made you will not kill you allow you to suffer but also send mercy and joy. Jesus wept - and I found it in a Chappie wrapper, that it is the shortest verse in the bible. I found that the universe was talking to me. The only thing that's important to me is about being honest to yourself at all times.*

#### 11.3.8.1 Emotional distancing as a means of survival

George refuses to allow what happened in his childhood to affect his adult life and describes this as a point of transcendence:

*Absolutely. It's a knowing. You need to know your self-worth.*

George describes himself as always in the role of a peacekeeper and that in this role, he allowed a level of invasiveness:

*Yes, you've always got the peacekeeper, and that was always me. Um, and I think I took that on too. It affected me in my relationships and, in my daily life and in my own thoughts on who I was. I mean, everything falls away, and you realise that you don't want to put up with that, you don't have to. That's why I don't care anymore about what others think, and what you see is honestly what you get. This is nothing else there.*

*It wasn't painful at all. It was actually quite liberating. At the age of 45, the events that led to it were comprised of a series of things. It was a long series of things. Once my parents had passed as, I saw all the fighting within the family. In many respects, the man cracks, and that ultimately led to masterpiece. My main concern was always my younger brother, I had to make sure that myself, my husband, my brother is taken care of even when we're not here.*

*My family didn't care after my parents died. My brother would have honestly been left destitute, and they couldn't care. So, taking that responsibility on at that time was really a very heavy task. I realised that it wasn't just any kind of task. I took over the responsibility of my brother.*

*He's autistic. I had to learn so much about the positives, the negatives. Learning about outcomes and also teaching myself a more positive way forward. I had to learn to define myself, not by what's in my past.*

*Well, that was the stress of all the outside influences at once and family influences and emotional and every possible thing that you can imagine in your daily life no matter what type of life you lead. Everything around me started attacking me, and I had a stroke. That's when you turn around, and you make sure that nothing else attacks you again. So, you actually learn not to care. That's where I worry about certain factors in my life, those are my factors I worry about, and unless those things are affected, I don't give a fuck. I don't care. Children dying in Somalia, I know that sounds like... I don't care. It doesn't influence me directly. Maybe that's why it's good I don't have kids.*

#### 11.3.8.2 Self-actualisation

George is proud of his self-actualisation:

*Yes, I am proud of myself. I'm not used to being like this, but this way is far better for me. I'm learning to take ownership of myself. I'm proud of myself that I'm not what I used to be, which is far better. I don't know. I've learned that I used to put everybody else before me. I've learned that maybe, at times, I was a doormat, and it breaks you down completely. Stripping away all of that was a very good thing to do, and all of this happened in my late 40s. I think I kept up a very good facade. I learned to mask very well. I could be the most arrogant fuck in the world. I'm not saying don't be true to yourself, but just be aware of yourself. That actually opens up a lot more doors to self-happiness and self-worth. I don't even know if there is another path that I could have followed. There were so many hidden agendas in my childhood.*

#### 11.3.8.3 Music and literature as positive role models

George found new ways to survive. He learned how other people behave and learned to find solace and respite in writing and music:

*There were so many people with hidden facets to them. You need to get a full 360-degree picture of it all, and it's amazing. Then, when you do that, you can find where the hidden facets are. I've learned that society operates kind of down there. And you can spot that once you've sussed out the first one. Then the rest of them are really easy to suss out. I just needed another path to follow. I learned how to assess situations and make sure I'm comfortable because it was important for me to have a peaceful environment. When I was younger, I learned how to fit into situations, and I did what was expected of me. But the most important thing that I've learned? Not to fit into their environment, but to change their environment to suit me.*



*So, in music there were circumstances which informed me. I kind of put myself into their shoes. In music, you can see how you can approach situations. Music doesn't mock you if you get it wrong. Music speaks to me; I got so much out of music. I learned so much.*

#### 11.3.8.4 Solace in a happy marriage

*My husband is a very quiet person, but he's very confrontational, but not in an ugly way. He's not aggressive, which is what I've grown up with.*

This was an antidote for George as he found peace and love in his marriage and reflected on this epiphany at midlife. It is very reassuring for George that there is no volatility or mercurial ups and downs, which he was subject to growing up:

*With all the crap going on with my family and then my subsequent stroke and, as you said, the epiphany and always, always, always, my husband would never he'd never judge us. It's a big, big thing to be able to have that now. My husband has really helped me come to terms with a lot of things. Remember I was having serious relationships from a very young age. Come out with did come out because. I was lucky to find my husband at a young age. We have both guided each other in the right way through our relationship.*

*Well, after coming out and the extreme aggravation and abuse that I went through in my family life and all that uncertainty. I guess I learned to appreciate things. You take value of what you have around you a lot more.*

*I learned that you always need to question things. That whatever decision you make isn't necessarily because you've made the right one. That was quite a pivotal turning point for me.*

#### 11.3.8.5 Finding his inner voice

The death of George's mother seemed to have the effect of releasing him from deeply entrenched belief systems. George was liberated from holding onto dogmatic religious beliefs that he may have been holding onto out of a sense of subservience, duty, or respect for his mother. When his mother revealed that she felt no religious attachments or affinities when she faced death, it freed George. This had a transformative effect on George's life:

*Yeah, absolutely, completely. At the time, it didn't like it was it was a shedding, but it actually was. It was something that had been building up for a long time, and then that was the point that I said, OK, listen to yourself now. I've had my stroke after that. That voice, the inner voice that's so important.*

George elaborates further on his newfound path into self-introspection and meeting his true self. The hitherto unseen self, as it was shrouded and opaque because of his violent, dogmatic, and punitive childhood, was further layered with the perceived harshness and the futility of the role religion occupied in his life. George is vehement in his disdain for dogma, for enforced beliefs. He feels like he breathes deeper when he describes his emancipation from the strictures of religion:

*I think you're always evolving. Like I said, you can never be too old to learn, the more self-aware you are and your surroundings and people around you, the attitudes of the world and the attitudes of even the media, which plays a big role in these days. You can either choose to adopt what's been said to you, or you can choose to put it aside and make your own assumptions. That's exactly what I chose to do. You take it for granted that self-awareness is at the forefront of everything. I always thought that self-awareness was something that people can be taught, but then, who is teaching you? Then, people aren't taught properly. You have to take it back to source otherwise, it becomes hard. But I learned. Yeah, but I learned through reading, and I learned through because of who I am.*

#### 11.3.8.6 Transcendence after his stroke

*I subsequently had a stroke. Which you only do to yourself, and you cannot take care of yourself, which I wasn't. I decided after that that I wasn't gonna [sic] give a fuck what anyone thought, and I would carry on the way I wanted to. Obviously not hurting anyone in turn but being honest and true to myself as I could be. Although that only happened in my late 40s, I think rather now than never. Your history defines you, and I am the way I am because I am, because I don't want to be a bunch of excuses.*

*I was lucky enough to find that seed within me, because I had to. But I think everyone's actually got it in there. And there's many spiritual and theological scriptures that talk to them. But in an ideal world, parents should start that process, and I didn't have that. Therefore, there was some kind of thrive mechanism in me that taught me that there's something more. My husband played a big part, I knew existentially that there's so much more. So, I know I looked for it in music and literature, possibly in the arts.*

*I'm very grateful for my experiences and there have been a couple of my close friends and family that noticed the changes in me that said you're completely different to when you were a teenager to when you were away, young guy. I have had people tell me that I am far more of a real person as opposed to a facade, but I think it was quite obvious.*

#### 11.3.8.7 Setting of Boundaries

George describes what his transcendence and his epiphany means to him:

*I suppose it's the better version of myself. It can only ever get better. What does that look like? It's someone who's positive. It's someone who has a good outlook on life. It's someone who loves what's around and appreciates what's around them and doesn't want or need anything because everything is actually there already. I think we all have a sense of what we know we deserve. Yes, it's very seldom that you find it. You make sure that you are enabled, that you are supposed to be at your best because people don't wanna [sic] deal with shit. There's enough in the world. I'm very lucky that I'm in a spot where I'm doing what I love to do. I've got a very loving relationship. I've got a very good life. I know there will always be troubles, but I've got a far more relaxed way of living. That comes from only worrying about my immediate environment, my husband and my brother, and everything else takes second step to that.*

#### 11.3.9 Vic

Vic's transcendent route to epiphany draws from his early adolescent years at school. It was here that he learned to have fortitude and resilience and where he learned discipline and self-reliance that was to be his salvo during his midlife crisis. Vic discovers that the impetus to

survive is a strong epiphany, as well as encountering irrevocable change, inviolable self-belief, stunted emotions, and his capacity for self-discipline in the face of adversity.

Vic describes his school years as the formative period in which he developed his resilience, fortitude, discipline, and self-reliance:

*I went to a school that's basically more sports-oriented. I think I developed a little bit later than guys at my age, you know, I don't know. In my previous school, it was ok, the discipline, but at my new school, it was stricter. What do you call it? Teachers, they've actually, yeah, they've actually force you to do better at what you are doing. Or not better, but just, you know, start, training the way you should train and start, you know, doing what you are capable of.*

*Yeah, I think when I was at my first school in my hometown, I don't think I had, you know, a lot of confidence because I don't know, I think I was just coasting. When I went to my high school, obviously, if you work hard, you can achieve and no, and that was that sort of, I don't know, I just, I think there's a lot of stuff that contributed to that, but I think it was the structure, the discipline, the teachers that actually believed in you, you know that made me excel in that environment.*

#### 11.3.9.1 The role of survival as an epiphany

These attributes would be magnified at midlife during a crisis where Vic lost both his professional identity and, in turn, a large part of his personal identity. Vic's journey through his midlife crisis is one of stoicism and survival, both personally and professionally. Vic's epiphany is crystallised in his transcendent role of survival as an impetus to live. Vic would not have had the will to live if he wasn't focused on survival. This epiphany feels different to the other epiphanies that my research solicited as Vic was forced to confront the devastation of his midlife crisis, and its resultant transcendence was rooted in survival.

#### 11.3.9.2 Irrevocable change

*I don't think I would have survived. I would have fallen apart. I don't know who said it, one of the conquerors of the Roman Empire. How do you conquer an island? As soon as you drop your anchor, there is no turning back. There is no surrender. You can't, it's done. It's doesn't sound like it, but it was basically a lot of tears and lot of blood and lot of sweat that I needed to go through. Still, you know, I came through that, but I think it's still an everyday struggle. You know you said that I came through it. I think I'm still going through it.*

*It's difficult to say when get through something? At what stage, when, in how many days, how many hours, or how many weeks? Or is it a financial thing or is it, you know, an emotional thing, how do you put a measurement on that?*

Vic describes his transcendence as very difficult because it had the most detrimental effect on his life in every aspect, and it still affects his life as there has been irrevocable change that has been negative. He may have found fortitude, resilience, and the will to live under the worst possible conditions, but Vic suffered a devastating loss in midlife.

Vic's midlife crisis forced Vic into an uncomfortable transcendence. This transcendence robbed Vic of a prestigious professional sporting career. Although Vic gained epiphanies, it appears as if they pale in comparison to his life prior to his midlife crisis.

#### 11.3.9.3 Inviolable self-belief

There is a tangible inner strength to Vic. He admits to the vicissitudes of his feelings during and in the aftermath of his midlife crisis, and he remains steadfast in his conviction that he has done nothing wrong. Yet, he grapples with the fallout from that fateful night and the far-reaching ramifications that it has had on his career, his mental health, and his physical health. Yet throughout this, Vic retains his dignity and self-pride. Whatever was taken from him that night that precipitated his midlife crisis, Vic's self-belief remains inviolable:

*Well, I've got nothing to hide. I know who I am as a person and you know, somebody else's opinion of me doesn't really bother me that much. Again, as I said, I've never had a negative comment Well, not, not to my face anyway.*

#### 11.3.9.4 Stunted emotions

Furthermore, Vic's epiphanies emerge in relation to the dramatic fallout from his midlife crisis. They present in the form of realisations that he has never fully processed his emotions and that he has been hardwired to be stoic, unwavering, and unflinchingly strong. The structure and discipline that held him through his crisis, which stemmed from his school years and was subsequently rooted in his sport, now hold him captive. Vic has been unable to emote; he has remained stoic, steadfast, and resilient, yet he has a well of unresolved trauma and unexpressed emotion. He also realises that he has never been able to process or confront his emotions.

#### 11.3.9.5 Self-discipline in the face of adversity

When Vic describes the fallout from his midlife crisis, he looks downcast. His ingrained self-discipline and the structure that has served him so well in his sporting career are also now part of his emotional repertoire. Vic describes the year and a half as he waits for fate to be decided. In this year and a half, Vic draws on his inner discipline to reinvent himself:

*I can't really remember. It was, most of it was, basically a blur. I went into train, went back to my house, the place that I stayed at that time actually, yeah, it was just a blur. I was, yeah, I was still studying, I finished my last subject in property evaluation. At that stage, you know, to keep me busy. I actually started studying. Well, I went to the guys at a flight school, and I got the books to study for a private helicopter license. I wanted to be a private pilot. I went to see the guy and said this here, this is my situation, I can't come to class.*

*I want to write the exams. They said to me, you can't do it like that. I would say, well, I don't have an option and that's how we going to do it. So, I got the books. Three weeks later, I started writing the exams. I think it took about five or six weeks, then I finished my exams for the private pilot's license, for a helicopter private pilot, and then because funds were becoming a little bit of a problem.*

*They told me if I did my commercial license first, then I could basically get a hundred hours of my private pilot's license, that would have would have saved me about three hundred to four hundred thousand at that stage. So, I went back, got the books, and started, you know, my private pilot's license and then, yeah, I couldn't actually complete it because I went overseas after that.*

*So that's what I kept myself busy with. I was just basically training, sleeping, studying, yeah, just getting along, getting, getting by working from one day to the next day.*

*Um, my parents were, obviously, still at home. I had a girlfriend at that stage that actually supported me quite a lot. So, um, I must say that did help. Most people that I knew never said anything negative to me directly. The Sunday after my bail hearing, I went back to being me I just keep on going. I didn't allow myself to stop.*

*Yeah, that's well, I think it's just because there was such structure, I would just, you know, keep on going, keep on going. I wouldn't say that I wouldn't say that I believe in myself, but I just know what to do, well, what I have to do. And I just went out and did it.*

*No, definitely, but I think it was not one thing. It was a combination of, you know, all my training, basically. Studying was part of that, if you can call it that. Yeah, as I was doing my private pilot exams, I was still finishing my evaluation, exams, I was still busy with that as well.*

## **11.4 Epiphany**

### **11.4.1 The role of survival as an impetus to live**

*So yeah, again, like it was at that stage, just surviving, just, you know, again trying to get back on my feet. So, there was a different devil that was chasing me. So, I had a lot of debt that I needed to pay back in South Africa to be able to, you know, get in the clear again. So, I couldn't really enjoy what I was earning there. Everything that I had, that I made overseas, was just going back to repay all my legal costs and all that kind of stuff. So again, I was in a situation where I needed to survive.*

*If I didn't survive, you know, there just wasn't any other outcome. I didn't have fallback finances or anything like that. I just needed to, to do this. I think it would have been much, much easier to have come through this, if I had a major, you know, let's say, a major backup or that kind of stuff. I think that would have been that sort of, it would have been an excuse to not survive, not to fight through anything.*

### **11.4.2 Rita**

Rita's transcendence into epiphany is tinged with loneliness and some sadness from her midlife crisis. She has made and is making dramatic changes in response to the break-up of her marriage. Rita's epiphanies are found in discovering her inner strength and resilience and the changes she makes in two primary relationships: the relationship with her ex-husband and with her mother. Rita no longer fulfils a subservient role. She is forced into independence, which

she enjoyed before marriage. Rita embraces self-awareness, healing, insights, freedom, a new start to life, and the realisation that she was married to a narcissistic husband and that she has a narcissistic mother. Rita draws deeply on her spiritual beliefs and finds resilience and self-mastery:

*I think what I learned is that this had to happen. I understand now why it had to happen because I needed to get back to me, I needed to get back to my thing, I needed to get back to doing the things that I want to do and not just being there for this other person, not just being there for this famous rock star. Even though it was painful, I don't regret it because I learned so much about myself. I learned so much about what I'm capable of. To be honest, if you asked me if he were to call me tomorrow and say, Rita, I want us to get back together, I honestly cannot say what I would do. I couldn't say, oh, no, that's not going to happen. I couldn't say to you, no, that's not going to happen.*

#### 11.4.2.1 Healing

Rita worked on healing through therapy for five years. She was able to let go of a great deal of her trauma. She was also able to confront the relationship she had with her mother:

*With EMDR, I can hear that song and not even notice it's on; it doesn't affect me anymore. There are many things I would think about when we sat on the couch, and he said, "I'm not in love with you anymore. I want to be with her". I would start crying. I think of it now, and I'm okay. So that was a breakthrough. Plus, I also worked on other things in my childhood with my mother, all those things that pushed me to the limits, and it was incredible. Therapy also helped me deal with my mom because if I hadn't had that therapy, I would not have dealt with her aggression. My mom was very jealous of me and very competitive. I only realised that in the last two years, I helped along with my spiritual healer and two other friends. They are my rocks. They are my rocks. I could talk to them anytime I wanted to about the situation, and they were never tired of hearing it. They just gave me such full support. It was amazing.*

Rita is making plans to move to Europe and exercises her newfound independence. She admits to the newness of these transcendent stages, yet she revels in the freedom within these possibilities:

*Okay, right now, I'm in New York. I'm planning to move back to Europe hopefully within the next couple of months, but I've been thinking a lot, like I have a lot of friends in Europe. I have quite a few, and I know I will make more. I have friends in Italy, England, and Switzerland, but I think I'm a little bit nervous about it because now I'll be going back, and I'll be on my own. I won't have that cocoon of having a partner who can take care of things. If something bureaucratic needs to be done, he knows who to call, what to do, you know, I won't have that.*

*So that's making me a little bit hesitant. Although I'm sure I'll overcome that because I have friends who are always willing to help, I don't like calling people up and asking for help. But I am looking forward to getting back to Europe because I much prefer the quality of life in Europe. I have lived in Europe since I was twenty-one. I miss it, and I like to be able to travel, get on a plane in an hour and a half to be in London or go to Asia to photograph or, you know, just some travel and just see the world and do things that I enjoy doing.*

*Also, not have, on the other hand, not to have a partner that says, "Oh no, you can't go to India for two weeks. Who is going to make my breakfast, lunch, and dinner, you know?"*

*Yeah, I think there, I think there were a lot of things in him that reflected my mother. He was very controlling. My mother was very controlling. Yeah, there are things. I used to think that he was a narcissist, but now I think he just had narcissistic behaviour at times, as opposed to being just a full-blown narcissist. My mom was a narcissist; it was always about her. There were things that I felt comfortable with. I didn't even realise any of this, but it's so obvious.*

Rita firmly believes that she needs to go through her midlife crisis and that her transcendence has led to a rebirth. Rita's spiritual beliefs also played an important role in Rita's transcendence and ultimately led to her healing epiphanies:

*That is so true, but at the same time, I think that I know why it had to happen. I understand why I had to go through that. This has been a rebirth for me.*

*When it came to the forgiveness part, I came to realise that holding this anger doesn't serve me. It's like, you know, I'm sure you've heard, it's like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. I even said that once to Mark, and he was very impressed by it. He was always really impressed by my thinking, especially because I was trying to get him to forgive a friend of his who had done something. The friend hadn't even realised that they'd hurt him, but he wouldn't. He couldn't let go. That's when I told him about drinking poison, expecting the other person to die. What was your question again?*

*Like I said, it doesn't serve me. What's the point of holding onto that which only hurts me? When I did tell him I forgave him, he was so relieved. He was like, "Oh my God, thank you so much". So, he was just over the moon, but at the same time, I know that I cannot remove his guilt feelings. That's not my problem; that's not my task. So, I'm sure the guilt is still there, but my forgiveness has made him more comfortable. He definitely finds it easier to call me and speak to me, I'm sure.*

Rita's triumph and reconnection with inner strength serve as an impetus to propel her into her new life and infuse the changes she's on the cusp of making:

*Yeah, you're right. I was like, don't mess with me, and he didn't. He did not expect me to fight like that. I know he also had a very tough lawyer. Someone told me after the divorce went through. If you still need a lawyer, I know someone, and it was his lawyer, and we still won! Yeah, we fought against him, and we won. It was July of 2013 when he walked out the door, but the divorce didn't go through till August of 2015, so there was like a decade. Yeah.*

#### 11.4.3 Bella

Responses to her childhood adversity shape Bella's midlife transcendence. She is hardwired to survive, and her epiphanies are a testament to Bella's determination, ambition, drive, positivity, and deep connection to spirituality. Bella's father, whom she reconnected with as a teenager, was an important role model in her life who catalysed her ambitions. Bella's transcendent route into epiphany led her to confront her mother and stepfather about childhood adversity. Bella's transcendence into epiphany leads to self-awareness, boundary setting and self-care. Spirituality emerged as a strong theme of transcendence for Bella. She describes a spiritual emergence and further spiritual growth elicited by the illness of her husband, her illness, and

the behavioural difficulties she experiences with her daughter. Within this spiritual growth, Bella finds her spiritual epiphanies. She learns the value of self-care as she is forced into the role of caregiver for her ill husband:

*I wanted to be like him, and we had a good number of years in between, you know, from age ten, he would see me regularly. I would travel to Johannesburg to see him because I lived at the seaside. He sort of spoilt me, and it was wonderful. He took me overseas on my first trip for my twenty-first. He gave me a second-hand car when I turned 18. So, there was that influence which was really positive for me at the time.*

Paradoxically, Bella's security and safety in her second marriage, as well as having children of her own, provides Bella with the bedrock on which to confront her mother and her stepfather in midlife about the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse she experienced. Bella also reframed the relationship with her mother and stepfather and is finally liberated from some of her childhood adversity by being able to speak her truth.

#### 11.4.3.1 Confrontation of childhood adversity

*Just to go back in terms of my mother, because that's, that's been a big, a big part of having to build resilience was what happened to me as a child. My stepfather ended up alone my mother left him. He was a very cruel man. He never had any friends. At one point in time, I phoned him up, and I said to him you know I want to just say this. He was an older man he's twenty-five years older than my mother. I said I want to just say this to you: you had every opportunity to have a daughter in me who would still be here, would still be here for you, because his own daughter had left the country.*

*I said, but you were incredibly cruel to me, and I was a child, and I want to know why you were so cruel to me, and he just broke down. You know, he just broke down, and he just said, I'm so sorry. I just, I chose that moment to forgive him because I realised he was such a broken soul, and I just said to him, Dave, I forgive you. I don't approve of what you did, and I will never approve of what you did. What you did was cruel, and I and I have suffered as a result of it, but I forgive you. He died a short while after that.*

*Then it was about my mother. My mother doesn't live here, in this city where we have been living for the last ten years. I brought my mother into my business, so she works as my right-hand person. Because financially she needed that and she got involved with my second business, so she still works for me. But I started seeing a psychologist to try and unravel betrayal that I felt with my mother. This fact that she wasn't there, where was she?*

*You know, when I was being abused, where was she? Why did she allow another man to do that? Because I've now become a mother and I have a daughter, and I couldn't understand how a mother allows that to happen. Now I understand. She did the best that she could at the time with what was in her head. She couldn't have done better, or she would have. I had her fly here and I had an intervention with her, with a psychologist, which I requested, and with her psychologist as mediator.*

*She never knew that I was sexually assaulted, sexually abused up until that point. I had never told her. And in that, in that meeting, I just said to her, you know, I was sexually abused by this person. You allowed your husband to physically abuse me and emotionally abuse me. You made him be the one to take me to school every morning, knowing that I had an angst and that he abused me all the way to school. You allowed me to be locked in my room from seven o'clock whilst my sister watched TV. You know you did all of these things, and I need to understand how you could have allowed that. Did you not love me? Was it a pain to have*



around? What was the reason? The first thing she said was Well, I don't know about the sexual abuse, but you know, maybe it was, it was double, two-sided, you know, maybe it was actually consensual, and then I lost it.

*"I know you did the best that you could. It's not actually good enough for me, even though you did the best that you could. Because I have a daughter, and I would kill somebody who did that to her, you know, I would never allow that to happen. But I'm going to choose to forgive you because I need to be free of this. I'm gonna [sic] do the best I had in my heart to just let it go because, in fact, the way that I was treated during that time has shaped the person that I am.*

*I have compassion, I have love, I have forgiveness, and honestly, I don't know where all that came from, you know, I don't know where it came from".*

*I said to her. How dare you? I was ten years old and when that was happening in my room, where were you? Where were you? You left me with an 18-year-old boy. I was ten years old in my home. Eventually, I said to her, why didn't you just leave me with my grandparents? I was happy. Why did you actually force me to go into that environment, knowing how I was being treated? She eventually broke down. She was just apologetic. Anyway, we left that meeting, and we went to a coffee shop outside. I just said to her, you know, I'll never understand.*

#### 11.4.3.2 Self-healing

*I'm on a journey of self-healing. I believe I reincarnated into this lifetime. My soul did. I chose these experiences, I made these soul contracts, and it's all for the benefit of my soul, becoming more of me, becoming more and more enlightened. So, I needed to understand this.*

*I wanted to heal, and I wanted to forgive because I realised that only by forgiving will I be free. My mother still carries a huge guilt. You know, I'm actually the mother in the relationship. I help her financially, emotionally, she'll turn to me. But I realise that if I didn't confront it head-on and I wanted her to hurt, make no mistake. I wanted her to really, really hear me in that meeting as to what she had actually put me through because I was never brave enough to confront that with her for fear of rejection.*

*And at that point, I was happy to take whatever came out of it. You know, if it was rejection, that so be it. It was definitely that I had my daughter, and it was definitely that I'd become enlightened enough to know that holding it on earth in this human way in this body was not serving my soul.*

*I think that part of me is still working through that because I still have daily contact. I am a rescuer of my mother. Which is interesting and which I know is not good for my soul. It's not good for her journey either, because I'm stopping her from her own evolution. So, I'm not I'm not sure what the epiphany was, except that um, I can transcend anything, I can. There's nothing that I can't deal with.*

#### 11.4.3.3 Self-mastery

*I am allowed to speak my truth. My voice was so shut down for so long. Finally, I am acknowledging my truth and being able to speak it.*

*This last year in particular has been difficult, you know in terms of the scans, you know, when there's a scan coming up, I just have to accept that it will actually be whatever it is. Therefore, as tough as it is, and it has been for nine years, I have to just let go of that. You know, it's kind of like, let go and let God, is what comes to me all the time.*

#### 11.4.3.4 Boundary setting

*That as much as I love all of these people, I actually cannot hold their space all the time, which I feel is my responsibility and it's actually not. My responsibility is to love them and guide them, and be there for them, and that's it. There have been major shifts that have happened since we moved here, everyone in the family being healthy, moving here has been a new start. It's just been hard but enlightening because I was so not enlightened. I mean, I have always had that, but I didn't always practice it, and I wasn't, you know, I thought I was living in the now, but now I live in the moment.*

### 11.5 Resolution of crises

Without fail, each research participant actively sought to find potential resolutions to their respective crises. Robinson and Stell (2015) define features of later-life crises as different to crises that occur earlier in adulthood, yet there are also some similarities. These similarities include stressful or difficult endings, new beginnings, periods of self-questioning or self-doubt, instability of life structure and emotional upheaval. These events occur in crises in early adulthood as well as in midlife (Levinson, 1986; O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987).

However, there are some notable differences. Crisis events presented earlier in adulthood are defined by the challenges that arise from becoming entrenched in adult roles. These roles are characterised by feeling overwhelmed or eliciting feelings of entrapment (Robinson et al., 2013). In contrast, later-life crisis is differentiated by the challenges and emotional difficulties of separating from these roles and may include feelings of marginalisation and isolation. Vic was isolated and marginalised, and his previously held professional status was lost. Marc was isolated from his family and marginalised because of his financial difficulties. He also was unable to reconcile with the religious beliefs of his church. Kate occupied an outsider status as she no longer fit her marriage as she became sexually liberated, nor did she align with the ideologies of her church. Bella, Rita, and Vic self-isolated in boundaried ways to protect themselves during their midlife crises.

#### 11.5.1 Transcendent changes

Many theorists have suggested that crises can portend positive adult development (Denne & Thomson, 1991; Erikson, 1968; Forer, 1963; Levinson, 1978; Levinson, 1996; King, 2001; Sheehy, 1977). These crisis episodes can provoke change, especially when people conduct their lives in problematic or unhealthy ways. A crisis can also act as motivation to overcome the inertia that seeps into adult life due to commitments or responsibilities (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). This motivation for change was seen in all my research participants in the following ways:

- Marc found change in a healthy, fulfilling relationship
- Kate found liberation from shame, release from a toxic marriage, freedom from a dogmatic version of religion and sexual liberation
- George shut out toxic relationships and found comfort and nurture in his own nuclear family
- Rita found independence and freedom from her narcissistic relationships with her mother and ex-husband
- Vic found that he needed to express his emotions and confront hitherto unexpressed parts of himself
- Bella realised that she needed to practice self-care and boundary-setting.

#### 11.5.2 Factors influencing transcendence

It is worthwhile noting Jung's (1971) views on factors influencing transcendence at midlife, (1971) a transition in the forties or even the fifties. The transitional process can be delayed if the parents remain alive, but, more pertinently, for men, the death of a father has a much more significant impact, one which Jung (1933) described as a "catastrophic ripening" (p. 107). George experienced an impactful ripening when his father died, which could be described as a catastrophic ripening. He was liberated from his cruel, violent, and alcoholic father. Yet, he had a stroke in dealing with the aftermath of managing his father's financial legacy and the bifurcation of dealing with both his family and the financial fallout.

Self-doubt and internal disharmony tend to surface with progression into midlife (Jung, 1933). Navigating the midlife process is smooth if the individual is adequately self-aware. However, difficulties present when individuals hold onto misconceptions steeped in childhood that remain incongruous with the real world (Jung, 1933). Kate, Marc, George, Rita, and Marc were unaware that their childhood adversity was unresolved, and consequently, their midlife trajectories were adversely affected.

Jung (1971) maintained that it was necessary to spend time on oneself in the second half of life, that this period is when the self becomes illuminated. Midlife presents the opportunity for

a transition period as it has the potential to bring gradual changes to the pursuits of individuals, in addition to effecting changes in their characters (Jung, 1933).

As per my findings, individuals in midlife are forced to confront many aspects of their lives, to face the realisation that some endeavours or efforts have not been worthwhile and the disappointment that some aspirations were not attained. People can create a new set of aspirations, take different paths and search for new interests. Jung (1971) maintained that this change hinges on accepting that life does not always turn out the way we want. This held true for Vic - he had a promising professional career ahead of him, and his dreams and aspirations were dashed in one fateful night. Rita still harbours dreams of reuniting with her ex-husband. She never wanted to be divorced.

Death and the fear of death at midlife were not determined as significant at midlife for Jung (1933). He did not deem it a meaningful dilemma during middle age like other theorists such as Dickstein (1972) and Jaques (1965) have. Jung (1933) posited that midlife difficulties present in response to significant psychological changes are far more transformational than physical changes. This has held true for all research participants - the sum of their psychological changes took precedence over any physical changes.

### 11.5.3 The midlife journey to transcendence

My research participant's midlife crises pertain to confronting unresolved aspects of themselves, whether conscious or unconscious. Jaques 1965 (cited in Jackson, 2020) noted that, for those who did not work effectively through the psychological anguish that accompanies midlife, the impulsive strategies intended to stave off the tragedy of death were futile. Jaques (1965) determined defensive fantasies are just as persecutory as the chaotic and hopeless internal situation intended to mitigate.

These aspects remain unresolved until a crisis forces the midlifer to confront these aspects. For Jaques (1965), midlife presents the ultimate paradox – that of entering the prime of life, a stage ripe for fulfilment, yet paradoxically, both prime and fulfilment are dated, and death awaits. He proposed that those who reach midlife without successfully navigating life and establishing themselves in relationships and careers were ill-equipped to meet the stressors of middle age. This portends what has become clichéd features of a midlife crisis. By the late 1960s, Jaques's work had become known for attempting to understand and resolve the “search for meaning” that characterises a midlife identity crisis. For example, the impact of a midlife crisis on

relationships, specifically marriage, became an impetus to confront personal, familial, and social determinants and their consequences as divorce levels increased. (Jackson, 2020)

Levinson (1978) determined that once acknowledgement of a life path is chosen, new perspectives and needs surface, and these need to be addressed, and changes need to be made. These changes lead to transcendence and, in turn, elicit epiphanies. The epiphany or epiphanies remain entirely dependent on the midlifer's decision to transcend.

## **11.6 New midlife generation**

My research participants did not fit previously held narratives of midlife. Infurna et al. (2020) have determined that some of what we know about midlife is based on misconceptions, and some narratives have been debunked by empirical research.

The most cited theories about midlife are those of Carl Jung and Erik Erikson (Lachman & James, 1997). Jung's theory on midlife was poetically known as the afternoon of life and delineated as a distinct period separate from early and later adulthood. Erikson's (1993) stage theory of development pertains to the psychosocial conflict in midlife and is concerned with generativity vs. stagnation and self-absorption. Erikson theorised that middle-aged adults are predominantly invested in time and effort to nurture and promote the younger generation and create legacies that will supersede their lifetime. This generativity is found in parenthood and grandparenthood, work, professional activities, volunteering, and religious/political organisation participation (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). (Erikson, 1963) posits that if a person does not attain generativity, they will be mired in stagnation, impotent in their inability to leave a legacy, with a potential for self-preoccupation and a predilection to focus more on the self than others. Lachman (2001) stated that there might be differences in the strength of generative feelings among adults.

### **11.6.1 Unique thematic narratives at midlife**

The earlier theories of midlife, as posited by Erikson, do not fit this study, as none of the participants were overly concerned with generativity versus stagnation and self-absorption. They were more concerned with navigating and traversing their crises:

### 11.6.1.1 Marc

*I think there are many men who go through similar experiences to me, and they don't talk about things. What I've learned is that I had a wound, and that wound needed healing. I wasn't sure what was going on. What I'm trying to say is I was constantly looking for an answer outside of myself, and the answer was inside. There was a hole in my heart, a hole in my soul that I needed to heal. I think there are lots of other men or people that go through similar things, always looking for the answers or solutions outside of themselves, not realising that it lies within themselves. I have seen how it shows, especially in the way men interact with women in relationships.*

### 11.6.1.2 Kate

*I walked out of my marriage. I left it all behind you so that I could align, yeah, and I am tearful when I say this, but I think it's beautiful. I don't know why that experience drove me to not let it go because I knew that something marvellous was happening. I knew it was right was right and yeah, there's no other way to do it and I wanted to understand more about what was happening.*

### 11.6.1.3 George

*It was a very turbulent lifestyle, having an alcoholic father and an abused mother. Then, having my other siblings thrown into this space made me want to be the peacekeeper, so I think I've always been the one that tries to defuse the situation. I will subdue myself to handle a situation, and it's still like that today; it's who I am. I subsequently had a stroke. Which you only do to yourself, and you cannot take care of yourself, which I wasn't. I decided after that that I wasn't gonna [sic] give a fuck what anyone thought, and I would carry on the way I wanted to. Obviously not hurting anyone in turn but being honest and true to myself as I could be. Although that only happened in my late 40s, I think rather now than never.*

### 11.6.1.4 Rita

*It's a decade, and it's still, I mean, it still sits here, but it's not, it's not as painful as it was, but I mean, I think about my ex every day because I never stopped, you know.*

*It's hard. But it is what it is, and you can't just from one day to the next say, okay, I'm not gonna [sic] love you anymore. I know that he was meant to be a major force in my life, you know, but you always think that person is always going to be there. Although oddly enough, I have to say that throughout our marriage, I mean we were together, it was twenty-eight years that we were married, and I always had. There was always a fear that one day, he wouldn't be there anymore. I didn't know if it was whether he would die or he would leave me, although he always said to me he could never, could never, you know, leave, he would never leave me, but that fear was always deep down. Whenever I would think about it or even mention it, I would just tear up, you know. So, somehow, I knew.*

### 11.6.1.5 Vic

*Yeah, that's well, I think it's just because there was such structure, I would just, you know, keep on going, keep on going. I wouldn't say that I wouldn't say that I believe in myself, but I just know what to do, well, what I have to do. And I just went out and did it. Explaining it to somebody, it sounds easy and stuff, but it really wasn't, it was, you know. Some days, it was a struggle to, you know, obviously to get up, get going and everything.*

#### 11.6.1.6 Bella

*On resourcefulness - I've tended to do that throughout my life. It's become a bit of a theme, and I'm not sure where that comes from, but I like to think it's just a fighting spirit, you know, that screw it. I'm here trusting I'm going to get out, and it is what it is. You know, I can't change it, it is what it is, but I can choose how I navigate my way out of this and try and enjoy it whilst I'm here.*

The epiphanies emerged for my research participants within this period of transcendence. Taylor (2018) writes that those experiences of such sudden, personal, profound, positive, and permanent change can fundamentally alter the lives of those who experience it. Yet, qualitative research presents a conundrum regarding engaging with phenomena experienced as "more than words can say?" Amos (2019) was driven to investigate this magical and miraculous experience further, and the potential contribution of the research study evolved to include the development of technical and experiential knowledge. Braud and Anderson (1998), as quoted by in Amos (2019), stated that "many of the most significant and exciting life events and extraordinary experiences—moments of clarity, illumination and healing—have been systematically excluded from conventional research" (p. 3). Epiphanies are defined as a "sudden discontinuous change" (Jarvis, 1997, p. 5). Epiphanic experiences are seen to transform the individual in an inherently positive and lasting manner. This is achieved by utilising a reconfiguration of their most deeply held beliefs about themselves and the world. An epiphany is a profoundly emotional experience, it is not elicited by force, but is experienced as intensely positive and joyful (Chilton, 2015).

My research participants were able to resource unique and diverse coping mechanisms. They could reclaim parts of their lives, whether to heal, recover their identities, gain a better sense of self, gain self-awareness, and discover epiphanies such as liberation, sexual liberation, spirituality, religion, or self-respect. These epiphanies serve as positive, magical, rooted, and definitive vanguards for the future of the middle-aged adult as they traverse their way through life.

### **11.7 Research participants' epiphanies**

In this study, these peaks or areas of transcendence were visible in the following ways:

#### 11.7.1 Marc

Self-awareness, liberation of self and from others, spiritual awakening, happiness and self-awareness, insights into self and others, resilience, positivity, discovery of authentic self

#### 11.7.2 Kate

Spiritual/sexual epiphany, taking control, extrication from marriage, new love, sexual and religious liberation

#### 11.7.3 Vic

Resilience, transcendence, resourcefulness, stoicism, structure as a coping mechanism, purpose, survival, resurgence, epiphany, survival as an impetus to live, irrevocable change, confronting fear, freedom, healing.

#### 11.7.4 George

Self-actualisation, survival, coping mechanisms, music as a means of self-expression, adaptation, self-awareness, self-preservation, healthy relationship, epiphanies, religion, emancipation, transcendence through creative outlets, transcendence through healthy relationships, self-expression, self-worth, positivity, fulfilment.

#### 11.7.5 Rita

Rita gained strength, reconnection, forgiveness, had supportive friendships, experienced healing, insights, self-awareness, recovery, developed spiritual beliefs, resilience, and self-mastery.

#### 11.7.6 Bella

Illustrious career, survival, resilience, resourcefulness, intuition, persistence, second marriage, fundamental change, family life, new career, second career success, happiness, self-awareness, spiritual emergence, transcendence, truth, spiritual epiphanies, spiritual growth through illness and adversity, insights, self-care, boundaries, positivity, intrinsic change, self-actualisation.



## **11.8 Midlife as a period of transcendence and, ultimately, epiphany**

The autobiographies of Gandhi (1949) and Frankl (1959) illustrate real-life narratives of sudden transformational periods with positive and lasting effects. It has been evidenced that positive transformational experiences present post-trauma in the guise of adversarial or post-traumatic growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004). This post-traumatic growth (PTG) has been the subject of substantial attention in recent decades. PTG is a central tenet of positive psychology (Joseph, 2014). Similar terms have been posited to encompass the breadth of profound and enduring positive change. These are transformative change experiences (White, 2007), unencumbered moments (Murray, 2006), turning points (Berglund, 2014), transformational growth (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2015) and pivotal experiences (Bhattacharya et al., 2018). Individuals have also described experiencing identifying quantum change (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001) wherein they were aware something extraordinary was happening to them and could recall details of their experience vividly. The experience was exhilarating, liberating, and characterised by an innate sense of self-love, security, safety and acceptance. The resultant change was described as permanent: "They knew instantly they had passed through a one-way door through which there was no return" (Miller, 2004, p. 456).

According to Amos (2019), Prendergast (2009) eruditely describes this experience within the context of an empirically evidence-driven research world as a radical ability to draw on openness, intuition, and an emphasis on the "itself-ness" of things (p. 683). Amos (2019) determines that what we understand is intricately woven into how we learn, and how we learn is recursively threaded into what we come to understand.

### **11.8.1 Paradigm shifts as transcendence**

O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) have determined that a positive perspective on midlife is a transition phase with great possibilities for growth and development. However, growth and development can only occur when a paradigm shift occurs, as midlife is a time when the adaptive capacity of the old paradigm becomes strained (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007). This finding held true with my research participants - growth and development were impossible unless they chose to adapt or change. O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) defined a paradigm as a set of assumptions, perceptions, expectations, emotions, belief systems, and intrinsic values uniquely organised to navigate a broad range of situations and events. Individuals need to confront the challenges inherent in a midlife transition and transition through them to achieve

a paradigm shift. Variables such as ego development, a capacity for inner directness, and a commitment to learning facilitate growth during midlife (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

This ego development, capacity for inner directness, and potential for learning at midlife were visible during all participants' crises at midlife.

## **11.9 Summary**

Midlife has traditionally been defined as a negative period of adulthood, stereotyped by a negative crisis, and research has been scarce on this period post-crisis. My research participants all experienced a profoundly negative crisis during their middle years, which was hued by unresolved childhood adversity. This childhood adversity was insidiously woven into the fabric of research participants, who inadvertently continued fielding their lives with outmoded coping mechanisms that were learned behaviour from childhood.

They were unconsciously entering a period of mature adulthood wherein their outmoded responses to the adult world were out of alignment with the experiential sum of their contemporaneous midlife lives. Research participants were forced through a period of crisis to work through varying degrees of shame, loss, betrayal, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse that characterised their formative years and were again triggered by their midlife crisis. However, they were forced through a period of crisis to confront these challenges and opt to transcend this crisis by drawing on resources that were unique to each individual.

Amos (2019) notes that to date, qualitative literature relevant to sudden and profound transformation has mostly been preoccupied with elucidating the antecedent and facilitative variables associated with this type of change (Hayes, Laurenceau, Feldman, Strauss, & Cardaciotto, 2007; McDonald, 2008). It has now been determined that stressful and traumatic events may serve as a trigger to facilitate both personal growth and positive change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006)

Jung (1933) proposed that the ultimate purpose of the individual is to develop consciousness – that by the end of their life, the goal is for the unconscious to become fully conscious. This process is known as individuation. It is characterised by resolving and attaining cognisance of any and all underlying, repressed, traumatic and difficult memories. Jung determined this process to enhance and generate personal growth. This personal growth is not accessible to all,

and not everyone is able to attain individuation (Jung, 1933). Jung's observations were that society typically attributed little value to the exploration nor individuation of the inner self. Only external accomplishments are vaunted, hence the importance of studying the internal explorations of midlife narratives.

As per my findings, individuals in midlife are forced to confront many aspects of their lives, to face the realisation that some endeavours or efforts have not been worthwhile and the disappointment that some aspirations were not attained. People can create new aspirations, take different paths, and search for new interests. All of the research participants in this study sought to create new aspirations. All chose to embark on new paths and found their epiphanies at midlife through this route to transcendence. Jung (1971) maintained that sometimes change hinges on accepting that life does not always turn out how we want. This held true for Vic - he had a promising professional career ahead of him, and his dreams and aspirations were dashed in one fateful night. Rita still harbours dreams of reuniting with her ex-husband; she never wanted to be divorced, and Kate wished she could have found her sexual liberation within her marriage.

Death and the fear of death at midlife were not determined as significant at midlife for Jung (1933). He did not deem it a meaningful dilemma during middle age like other theorists such as Dickstein (1972) and Jaques (1965) have. Jung (1933) posited that midlife difficulties present in response to significant psychological changes are far more transformational than physical changes. This has held true for all research participants - the sum of their psychological changes took precedence over any physical changes.

Robinson and Stell (2015) describe Erikson's stage model of ego development with its particular dialectic as the dominant concern in what has been described as old age: *integrity* versus *despair*. Integrity presents as a personal acceptance of the past, present and perceived future of one's own life (Erikson et al., 1986). My research participants eventually reconciled their past, present, and perceived future. However, it was only through confronting the sum of their experiences that they were precipitated and ignited by a crisis that led them to transcendence, culminating in epiphany. Ultimately, accepting the past entails not dwelling excessively on regrets, painful memories or secrets and resolving conflicts with family or friends (Torges et al., 2008). Accepting the present means finding satisfaction with how life *is* versus how it could be, and thus not mentally struggling against the inevitability of one's current life circumstances (Viney & Tych, 1985).

All research participants (except Vic) wanted to confront and resolve past conflicts. The confrontation of these past conflicts came about insidiously via the path of unresolved childhood trauma that was intrinsically and often unconsciously threaded into the fabric of their adult life and then unexpectedly triggered by a midlife crisis.

### **11.10 Critique**

Although this study was in-depth and the narratives rich, it could be determined as lacking in breadth and not generalisable given the small number of research participants. However, a much larger study of this depth may not be feasible regarding time and practicality.

### **11.11 Future directions for research**

An emergent new midlife generation is possible, which portends scope for new research. The areas of transcendence and their resultant epiphanies carry the possibility of further research into adult development at midlife. They could be a positive beacon in a morass of stereotypical midlife narratives.

The potential for learning at midlife is manifold, whether achieved through self-actualisation and healing or liberation from outmoded dogma and doctrines due to childhood adversity or adult experiences. The wisdom accumulated at midlife needs to be acknowledged, as well as the ability to choose new paradigms more contiguous with the needs and desires of the midlife stage.

The possibilities of reframing midlife through the alchemy of transcendence and epiphany have vast potential for further study.

### **11.12 Implications and contributions of this study**

The accumulated life experiences of all participants were rich and nuanced, with each participant presenting with a crisis that they navigated, drawing deeply on what was uniquely applicable to their transcendence. Through this transcendence, distinctive epiphanies were elicited. These epiphanies were to become integrated as part of the new midlife narrative.

As per Willig (2001), the true value of qualitative research lies in the possibility of studying new meanings and accessing the perspectives and interpretations of participants. This results

in research generating novel insights and new understandings. It also allows the researcher to experience diverse forms of expression. This was apparent in the elicitation of epiphanies as experienced by all participants in this study. The researcher was privy to unique narratives that led participants in the throes of a midlife crisis to find their transcendent points, resulting in epiphanies that would shape their lives forever.

## CHAPTER 12: CONCLUSION

It was Jung (1933) who believed that the ultimate purpose of an individual is to develop consciousness. He maintained that by the end of a person's life, the goal is for the unconscious to emerge fully conscious. This process is known as individuation and is recognisable by the resolution and attainment of cognisance of any or all underlying, repressed, traumatic, and difficult memories. According to Jung (1933), this process enhances and generates personal growth. However, this type of personal growth is not accessible to all, and everyone cannot attain individuation (Jung, 1933).

Jung (1933) observed that society typically attributed little value to exploring or individuating the inner self and that only external accomplishments are vaunted. This dissertation explores the inner self and other cohorts' internal and external accomplishments. Furthermore, these accomplishments are vaunted as personal and unique epiphanies elicited through a transcendence process.

Jung (1933) further posited that puberty was the most pertinent life stage. Puberty is the period wherein the ability to navigate psychological challenges foments (Hargrave, 2006). It is seen as a symbolic rebirth of the psyche, wherein the adolescent can consciously differentiate the self from its parents. However, my findings indicate that the impact of childhood adversity extends beyond just puberty, affecting individuals into midlife and profoundly shaping their adult experiences. Unresolved childhood wounds resurface and must be navigated during midlife. Palk (2015) substantiates that the potential for unresolved identity crises stemming from adolescence is revisited in midlife. Moreover, when midlife parents face the adolescence of their own children, it may serve as a trigger for their own midlife crisis due to unresolved issues (Palk, 2015). The midlife crises experienced by both Bella and Marc were accentuated by the challenges posed by their adolescent children.

Jung (1971) asserted that midlife marks a transitional phase in one's forties or even fifties. This transitional process can be delayed if both parents are still alive. However, the death of a father has a much more significant impact, especially for men. Jung (1933, p. 107) described this impact as a "catastrophic ripening". George underwent a profound transformation when his father passed away, akin to a catastrophic ripening. Liberated from his cruel, violent, and

alcoholic father, George faced challenges, including a stroke while managing his father's financial legacy. This led to a complex situation, dealing with family dynamics, financial affairs, and emotional fallout among siblings caused by his father's demise.

## **12.1 Transcendence**

Comparative to Jung's (1933) theories, all my research participants experienced varying degrees of self-doubt and internal discord that characterised their midlife journey. This navigation into midlife is smoother for those who possess adequate self-awareness. However, challenges arise when individuals hold onto childhood misconceptions that remain incongruous with the real world (Jung, 1933). My findings showed that these misconceptions are rooted in childhood, and an absence of internal congruity with adult values contributes to midlife crises. At this apex, the adult in midlife must confront their unresolved childhood adversity and address the lack of insight into their own hitherto unseen adult value systems. This necessitates reassessing their sense of self and self-awareness, as well as appreciating their own distinctive identity in midlife.

Lachman, Teshale, and Agrigoroaei (2015) emphasise that midlife is a crucial time in an individual's life trajectory, as it holds significance to the success and development of an individual within the context of family, workplace, community, and society at large. Lachman et al. (2015) further reinforce that the central tenet of midlife involves balancing gains and losses relevant to ageing, as it connects earlier and later periods of life. My findings align with this perspective, highlighting midlife's developmental nature, which is impacted by events that have occurred earlier in life.

### **12.1.1 Paradigm shifts as transcendence**

O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) define a paradigm as a set of assumptions, perceptions, expectations, emotions, belief systems, and intrinsic values uniquely organised to navigate various situations and events. Individuals can achieve a paradigm shift by confronting and transcending the challenges inherent in a midlife transition. Variable factors facilitate growth during midlife, such as ego development, a capacity for inner directness, and a commitment to learning (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007). The manifestation of these factors was evident in all participants during their midlife crises.

Paradigm shifts must occur to effect significant change and transcendence into epiphany at midlife. O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) posited that adopting a positive perspective on midlife creates conditions conducive to a transition phase with infinite possibilities for growth and development. This growth and development can only manifest when a paradigm shift occurs, as midlife becomes a time when the adaptive capacities of old paradigms are restrained (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007). This observation resonates with the experiences of my research participants. Unless they choose to adapt or change, growth and development remain elusive. The very act of immersion into their crises, uncovering unique coping mechanisms and value systems, and increased self-awareness through a transcendent journey brought about paradigm shifts. These shifts were ultimately the Holy Grail that led to epiphany.

#### 12.1.2 Positivity within transcendence

The emergence of transcendence, the discovery of the authentic self, and the pursuit of truth stood out as dominant themes during midlife in the cohorts studied. This finding supports the life-span theory that conceptualises human development as multidimensional and multidirectional, thus refuting the idea that midlife is exclusively characterised by decline.

Researchers and psychologists advocating Positive Psychology argue that people aspire to lead meaningful lives. They emphasise an individual's inherent desire to cultivate their best qualities and focus on the positive characteristics and resulting strengths to thrive (Bar-On, 2010). Ryan and Caltabiano (2009) determine that midlife is when stress accumulates, and people inevitably face challenges. However, it can also be an opportunity for positive change depending on how much individuals can access personal resources, such as resilience. Resilience is a pivotal aspect of dealing with life's challenges and stress, and subsequently, the more resilient a person shows, the more likely they are to transition to midlife successfully. Although midlife can be a challenging transitional period, adopting a positive perspective allows individuals to accrue the necessary personal resources and coping skills to prevent a crisis from forming (Parsons, 2016). All my research participants relied on resilience, which enabled them to transcend their respective crises.

Maslow's humanistic theory is relevant within the context of the humanistic approach, which emphasises free will and the privacy of personal growth. The humanistic approach has the potential to transcend periods of unhappiness and foster success in actualising human potential while facilitating personal learning processes. However, this process can be hampered without



sufficient motivation and an environment that is not conducive to supporting these processes (Biruny & Salsabila, 2021).

Humanistic goals were apparent in my study, as they encourage a dynamic that allows individuals to express themselves creatively and, in so doing, achieve self-actualisation. All my research participants sought to express themselves openly and creatively. Liberation from imposed mindsets and ways of interacting with the world were paramount.

For instance, Marc expressed a desire for a fulfilling, meaningful relationship, including a healthy sexual life. Kate sought to liberate herself from the dogma, shame, and confines imposed by her religious upbringing by seeking sexual freedom devoid of shame.

Rita endeavoured to individuate herself from the pain and suffering caused by her narcissistic mother and self-absorbed husband, striving to discover her authentic identity beyond these primary relationships.

George aspired to creatively express his religious beliefs through his tattoos and carve out his unique place in the world.

Vic aimed to find his true north and reinstate his dignity following the traumatic loss of his professional career.

Bella strived to reclaim her lost voice that a neglectful mother and childhood experiences of sexual and physical abuse had silenced.

As per Biruny and Salsabila (2021), the humanistic approach underscores the inherent goodness of humans and encompasses attributes related to potential, creativity, health, hope, a desire for meaning, connection, and purpose. Humanistic theory is a pertinent perspective to understand the capacity for self-actualisation and fosters a drive for individuals to excel.

Maslow's (1954) humanistic theory retains its status as the most prominent actualisation theory. Within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation remains the pinnacle, since it is regarded as the most crucial goal and central purpose of human life. The objective to attain a life purpose aligns with Jung's (1917) concept of self-arsenal, Adler's (1954) self-creative power, and Horney's (1940) self-realisation. Maslow believed that the primary purpose in life is to attain actualisation. As it is a trait inherent from birth, humans are intrinsically equipped with the potential to achieve self-actualisation.

This actualisation manifests uniquely distinctive qualities, including choice, creativity, personal values, and self-realisation. These inherent and distinct human qualities align with the humanistic approach. According to Maslow (1991), meaning and subjectivity precede objectivity. In this study, meaning and subjectivity emerged as the hallmarks of transcendent change for the cohorts, defining the new direction of their lives after their midlife crises.

### 12.1.3 Opportunity for growth

Growth opportunities emerged within this transcendence journey, ultimately leading to epiphanies. Erikson (1980) theorised that crises serve as stimuli for developmental growth. Research shows that approximately half of crises are perceived as leading to growth, while the other half may result in stagnation or decline (Robinson & Wright, 2013). Crises are periods of heightened vulnerability and instability that contain the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. The findings of this study suggest that all research participants utilised their crises as avenues to attain personal growth.

## 12.2 Midlife crisis

### 12.2.1 Crisis events at midlife

All research participants encountered a crisis event during midlife. McGinnis (2018) noted that from a developmental perspective, psychological outcomes are shaped not only by the nature of events, but also by their timing. Baltes proposed a taxonomy of life events in 1987, which lifespan developmental scientists have since adopted. It incorporates influences pertaining to age, historical factors, and non-normative influences (Baltes, 1987; Baltes & Smith, 2004). Age-graded influences occur around the same age for most individuals, while history-graded influences affect everyone during a particular time frame. Non-normative influences are more idiosyncratic, with little or no connection to age or historical timing (Baltes & Smith, 2004). Baltes and Smith (2004) note that adult development is influenced by all these influences, with non-normative factors contributing to variability among individuals.

### 12.2.2 Challenging the stereotypes of midlife crises

The outcomes of this study are concurrent with Lachman et al. (2015), challenging the prevailing notion that midlife is characterised by crisis, rupture, and dysfunction. They emphasise that there is scope for transcendence and, ultimately, epiphany during

midlife. Manifest rewards and positive experiences can also be experienced in midlife, evident in milestones achieved such as career success, earnings, family roles, self-confidence, decision-making abilities, and contributions to society, career, and intimate relationships. Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles (1999) observed positive changes extended to emotional experiences, crystallised abilities (Schaie, 1994), and control beliefs (Lachman, 2006).

Midlife or middle adulthood, typically spanning from 40 to 60 years of age, exhibits ambiguous start and end boundaries, allowing for a ten-year range on either side (Lachman, Bandura & Weaver, 1995; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Lachman (2004) cautions against relying solely on chronological age to classify midlife, due to the less specific and strict age norms during this period. Social, family, career, and other responsibilities can vary significantly among individuals and contexts.

Contemporary research challenges the notion that midlife is an inevitably crisis-ridden period. According to Lachman (2004), while some may perceive midlife as a crisis, others view it positively, representing a peak in their lives. This dichotomy paradoxes our understanding of midlife experiences (Niehaus, 2019). Lachman (2004) advocates understanding midlife as a transitional period along a continuum. In the trajectory of midlife, stress factors and individuals' abilities to cope with these stressors are influential in determining whether midlife is perceived as a crisis or a smooth transition (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001; Clausen, 1998; Lachman & Bertrand, 2001; Whitbourne & Connolly, 1999).

Ryan and Caltabiano (2009) suggest that individuals with essential personal resources, especially resilience, are more likely to cope with and adapt to changes and stresses during midlife. Chandra (2011) advises viewing a midlife crisis as a preventable transitional phase that offers growth opportunities. Individuals can transform a midlife crisis into an experience of growth and self-realisation, when recognising that the initial experience might be confusing and challenging. The author of this study supports O'Connor and Wolfe's (2007) proposition that a paradigm shift is necessary regarding how midlife is understood and researched. Drawing on personal and professional experiences, the author has witnessed the benefits of viewing midlife as a transition rather than a crisis.

Jung played a significant role in delving into the study of midlife. Jung (1933) theorised that changes during midlife become apparent when internal disharmony and self-doubt arise. He noted that these midlife changes are not readily evident. If a person is adequately prepared for

midlife transitions, the experience will likely be smooth. However, Jung (1933) also noted that profound and unusual psychological changes could lead to midlife crises.

### 12.2.3 Changed midlife goals

The results of this study contrasted with Levinson's transitional periods, as the research participants did not express a strong inclination to contribute to society or fit in. Instead, they were more concerned with self-actualisation and the unexpected elicitation of epiphanies that defined their middle age.

Levinson (1978) asserted that midlife remains tempered by social and biological factors, recognising the inherent impact of social and cultural influences that shape adult life. Wolfe, O'Connor, and Crary (1990) argued that adult life can be conceptualised as a series of alternating phases between stability and change. Midlife, as a life structure, connects the self to circumstances which relate to interpersonal relationships, physical settings, activities participated in, and roles adopted. In turn, this life structure enhances adaptability to surroundings and situations (Wolfe et al., 1990).

Levinson (1978) theorised that choosing a life path brings new perspectives and needs, often necessitating unexpected changes in the person's circumstances. Wolfe et al. (1990) noted that a life structure is often deemed a failure if an individual does not fulfil the archetypal demands of society. This is especially true when a person has not significantly contributed to society. However, the research participants focused more on their individual journeys and were less concerned about meeting societal expectations.

## 12.3 Spirituality at midlife

Spirituality is increasingly relevant in contemporary psychotherapy and medicine (DuBois, 2007; Mahoney, 2000; Savolaine & Granello, 2002). Seeman, Dubin, and Seeman (2003) highlighted a growing body of evidence indicating a correlation between spirituality and positive health outcomes.

In the context of this study, Marc, Kate, Rita, George, Vic, and Bella all turned to spirituality as a fundamental tenet in navigating their respective midlife crises.

Frankl (1988) further reinforced the importance of spirituality by proposing that meaningfulness arises when individuals respond to life's opportunities through action, experience, or attitude. This is particularly profound when the chosen response aligns with the individual's personal hierarchy of values, and leads them to associate a deeply relevant meaning to their life experiences.

Central to Frankl's (1988) paradigmatic framework is the notion of people's freedom of will and the responsibility to make their own decisions, which endows them with power and capacity. All research participants demonstrated a commitment to personal responsibility, increasing their capacity, power, and control over their lives. This marked a departure from their previous approach, where they navigated their lives through outmoded frameworks more relevant to childhood adversity.

#### **12.4 Limitations of this study**

While this study was qualitatively rich, its scope was not expansive. Further exploration through quantitative analysis of a larger sample of midlife narratives could provide additional insights. However, the current study's limitations constrained the possibility of incorporating a broader quantitative approach.

#### **12.5 Further possibilities for research**

This study lays the groundwork for potential further research into an emergent arena of midlife - specifically, the transcendence of midlife crises through paradigmatic shifts resulting from unique epiphanies. These epiphanies equip adults in midlife with new tools for navigating this life stage.

Furthermore, it encourages exploration into the healing of adults at midlife from childhood adversity to free themselves from outmoded paradigms. This allows for new narratives and ways of interacting with the world based on historical and contemporaneous knowledge gleaned from collective experiences. When this approach is explicitly applied to the adult at midlife, it is facilitated through the transformative power of epiphanies.

## **PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

Midlife is a deeply personal era for me. I have endured the catastrophe of a midlife crisis of someone close to me. It was spectacular in its fallout and its effects were far reaching, both personally and professionally for this individual. I started to become aware of this phenomenon in my practice and it's negative stereotypes and fatalistic outcomes. I chose to make it an academic study, as I started to see significant changes in my practice, working with adults at midlife. It occurred to me that this was a vastly understudied stage of adult life. That if adults sought help during this stage, they could avert a crisis by being better understood, better equipped and better informed. The study then became deeper and richer as I moved through my Master's study into my Doctorate and developed significant insights into what midlife entails and how to garner the wisdom and richness that this era is filled with and allow for the fully developed adult to make use of these treasures and discard belief systems and paradigms that were no longer useful or appropriate. The journey has been deeply rewarding, as this work continues to liberate and transcend the lives of adults who thought that change at midlife was doomed to be catastrophic, instead of epiphanic.

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## APPENDIX A: Ethics Permission Letter from UNISA



### COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

26 January 2024

Dear Ms Louisa Niehaus

NHREC Registration # :  
Rec-240816-052  
CREC Reference # :  
30770637\_CREC\_CHS\_2024

**Decision:**  
**Ethics Approval from 26 January  
2024 to 26 January 2025**

**Researcher(s): Name: Ms. L. Niehaus**  
**Contact details: [30770637@mylife.unisa.ac.za](mailto:30770637@mylife.unisa.ac.za)**  
**Supervisor(s): Name: Prof. M. Papaikonomou**  
**Contact details: [papaim@unisa.ac.za](mailto:papaim@unisa.ac.za)**

**Title: A Qualitative Study of Midlife Stories: Transcending from Crisis to Epiphany.**  
**Degree Purpose: Masters**

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the Unisa College of Human Science Ethics Committee. Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The *low-risk application* was reviewed by College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee, in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College Ethics Review Committee.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the



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confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data require additional ethics clearance.
7. No fieldwork activities may continue after the expiry date (**26 January 2025**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

*Note:*

*The reference number 30770637\_CREC\_CHS\_2024 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Yours sincerely,

Signature:



Prof. KB Khan  
CHS Research Ethics Committee Chairperson  
Email: khankb@unisa.ac.za  
Tel: (012) 429 8210



Signature: PP

Prof ZZ Nkosi  
Exécutive Dean: CHS  
E-mail: nkosizz@unisa.ac.za  
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## APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

As I have verbally discussed with you, I am in the process of completing my Doctoral degree in Psychology with UNISA. This requires of me to conduct research and to write a thesis. The topic I have chosen is “*An autoethnographic account of developing an approach to midlife counselling*”.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study and this form is to provide information to ensure that you understand what the research entails and what your rights as a research participant and counselling client are.

The data that I intend to collect will take place during the course of our sessions together, which means that the standard counselling notes, voice recordings, and any other verbal or written data will be used. I will also request that once we have completed our sessions together that you answer a few questions related to the counselling approach itself – this data will also be included in my final analysis.

Taking part in my research study means that:

- **The choice to participate is yours.** If you choose not to participate there will not be any repercussions or negative impact on you personally, and your counselling sessions will continue as normal – none of your data will be used for my research.
- You also **have the right to change your mind** about participating. If at any point during the process you decide not to participate, your data will be excluded from the research.
- Your data will always remain **confidential** – no one else except myself and my university supervisor(s) will see your data.
- You will remain **anonymous** throughout the process – pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant so nobody will be able to identify who you are.

Should you have any questions about the research at any point in time please do not hesitate to speak to me about it.

I would like to sincerely thank you for your willingness to participate.

Regards

.....

Louisa Niehaus

**Please read and sign the form below.**

I.....agree to participate in *Louisa Niehaus*'s research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without negative consequences, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured and that my data will always remain confidential.

I acknowledge that it is my choice to participate and I do not feel forced to participate.

Signed.....

Date.....