

The Prodigal Son and a Midlife Crisis

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*2002-2003 was a difficult year for me, including the cancellation by the university of my course in Haiti, a subsequent failed job search, and the war in Iraq. A friend suggested a book on midlife crises. In trying to work through my feelings, keeping a journal worked best. Reflecting in my journal on Henri Nouwen's book, **The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming**, led to this essay. Nouwen focussed on Rembrandt's painting, shown at <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/rembrandt/1660/return-prodigal-son.jpg>. The original parable is included at the end of this essay.*

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, I am not the only one to think that the older son got a raw deal. You may remember that he was the one who stayed home on the farm and worked while his younger brother went off to have a good time. After burning through his inheritance, the younger son came running home to dad who not only forgave him but threw a big party. Did dad really expect the older brother to share in the joy?

Henri Nouwen and my own aging have helped me see this parable as a story of the life many of us lead. In our teens and early twenties we rebel and go off to see the world. Authority figures have little authority. Our options are open, and we no doubt abuse many of them. Somewhere in our late twenties or early thirties we end up getting married (perhaps for the second or third time), taking on a decent job and mortgage, and bringing up a family. Somewhere into our forties, we begin to see that life hasn't turned out quite like we envisioned when we were younger. The belly is growing, as is the list of responsibilities. And we're up against the fact that our hard work and commitment hasn't led us anywhere particularly special. It's not so much that the grass is greener elsewhere as that it is a jaundiced yellow everywhere. And that is where the elder brother's resentment can become our own.

I've spent a fair bit of time reading about addiction and alcoholism. A common part of the problem is resentment, a sense that things shouldn't be the way they are. Those addictions can take the form of workaholicism, alcoholism, eating disorders, drug use, and religious fanaticism. For men, working so much that they don't have time for family and friends is the most socially acceptable. In fact, we often take pride in it. Yet it can be as destructive to our friendships and family as the other forms of addiction. And when we slow down for a minute, we still have to face our resentment of the demands on our time, the judgements of others, and that life hasn't been as good to us as we believe our hard work deserves.

The parable of the Prodigal Son provides a clue as to where we have to go to get through this crisis of resentment. We have to give up being the older son, and become the father. That is, we have to offer love and forgiveness to others. I believe this is the crucial step in moving through our

midlife crises. As long as we cling to our resentments, we're stuck. While the party is going on, we're off by ourselves nursing our hurt feelings.

The parable of the Prodigal Son has continued to impact people for centuries since its telling. I think two things explain its impact: All of us experience resentment and the need for forgiveness. And the healing power of letting go of resentment and forgiving is a psychological truth. At different points of our lives we experience being each of the characters of the parable. Moving into the role of the forgiving father is the necessary step for passing through a midlife crisis.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. '

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "