# Hinge Moments: Initiation, Identity, and the Spiral of Becoming

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## Part I. Exploring a Life Situation via Developmental Themes

*The Situation*

During the Perimenopause decade of my adult life, I experienced a multi-year descent, a few years in the dark valley floor, and an ascent toward authenticity. This is a time in my life that I have not written about in much detail, the decade of 40 to 50, the adrenal crash years from about 2004 to 2013.

I now come to see a descent, dark depths, and ascent cycle. Not only was it the developmental cycle of a female experiencing a long perimenopause period, but I can title these multiple years as:

Descending into the Fog of Overwhelm

Lost in the Valley of Judgment and Performance

Ascension into Voice and Early Authenticity

I recall not only a model of jumping off into a deep V to climb out but a spiral of continuing comparison, performative masks, natal family and village judgement, and attempting to hear my own voice in the chaos and noise.

I see now that the key character or player in all of this was Me, Myself, and I. My interior world was filled with tension that put me in the depths of darkness that left me feeling alone and isolated just as I did through the difficult decade of infertility and recurrent miscarriages. I had to go there to experience the death of a self that was filled with insecurity and soul crushing judgement from not just others but myself.

> "According to attachment theory, adults also need attachment figures to provide a source of comfort and security during times of physical or emotional stress in the same way that infants and children do" (Berry 90).

Not only had I put myself under a microscope of failing to be the perfect wife and mother, I was also playing/performing for acceptance in the village and my natal family. I felt incredibly judged by both arenas. My own question of "Was I a good enough parent?" Bridging the two worlds together. As I reflect, outsiders more than likely thought I was living the dream life with a big house behind the gate and financial security. I have come to discover that this tower moment would require rebuilding myself physically as well as growing into a new version of myself.

> "Our suffering is caused by holding to how things might have been, should have been, could have been" (Levine and Levine 3).

The strongest messages I received overtly or quietly during the hellscape years were: Your kids are a handful, no fun to be around, and you are not controlling them to a level we judge to be appropriate for Hillman standards.

The ascent would begin through choosing to sell the big custom home, finding a hormone balancing health team, entering a partnership with my sister to bring a healthy living magazine to the Las Vegas area, and then when she moved across the country finding my voice to tell her the partnership cannot continue (that was a tough one, but empowering). As my strength grew I found a parenting support program and began blogging the experience, deepening my voice further and finding a new foundation for my children's teenage years.

*Initiation*

Attempting to hear myself in the chaos and noise has become a red flag signal for me in later life. I have climbed out enough times, and reflected upon the process, that I can see I have developed a playbook. Progoff calls it a prototype. The pattern I am beginning to see: my body knows first, then I gain clarity, and then I engage with a transformative learning experience that changes me and pushes me to grow.

Although age sixteen to twenty may have been a time of adulthood initiation in earlier centuries, Progoff notes it is most likely delayed until later in modern times (169, 179). Although I had many experiences in my late teens and early twenties that felt like many little deaths. Partying with alcohol and avoiding growing up, I delayed myself. I ended up being isolated and lonely. Overweight and binging videos. My friends were moving into marriages and home buying and I was lost and bobbing along.

> "To Erikson, genuine intimacy was not possible until issues of identity were reasonably well resolved" (Ferrer-Wreder, Sugimura, and Kroger 27).

Near my 25th birthday I made the conscious choice to kill off childhood and take a step into adulthood. The moment came when I announced to my cousin, "it is time to get our shit together". There was no traditional ceremony, no ritual, I did it alone. I had some of the pieces practiced like attempting going on the wagon, trying the latest new fad diet, learning a new craft or diving into some literature but I had never strung it all together into a set of steps that would become my transformational prototype. This time I joined Weight Watchers, began a rigorous walking routine, and basically stopped drinking and eating sugar (too many WW points). As my

body strengthened, the detox cleared my mind. I pulled away from social scenes and friendships that did not serve me. I found new hobbies. I began to imagine myself into adulthood.

From that moment in August to nine months later in May, an actual gestation period, I would retreat into a liminal chrysalid space, emerge as a butterfly and inform my roommate from college that I was ready to meet a normal guy. Weeks later she plans a blind date barbecue with a friend from her work, and my husband walks in the door. Soon after, I leave behind my undergrad degree of business and walk toward what I was born to be: an educator. At the age of 27, I am married. At 28, we have relocated and have put a downpayment on a home, and I meet my first class of 3rd graders at the bubble on the first day of school as a licensed teacher.

A couple of seven-year cycles later, I am a stay-at-home mom in the underworld fires of hormone imbalance. I am in a dark valley, and a slight ray hits my psyche and reminds me: The Body Knows.

I knew something was not right. This time, diet and exercise were not enough. The prototype from initiation needed assistance and add-ons. I would seek the wisdom of "elders", give up alcohol completely for over a year, and go into partnership with my sister to buy a franchise to publish a healthy living | healthy planet theme magazine. My experience follows Progoff's description of a prototype that follows the same form and pattern with new content (183). I see now that my successive initiations are hinge experiences.

> "As we *un*fold into speaking, standing, walking, discriminating, and mastering, so we may *in*fold… Initiations into another way of life" (Hillman 59–60).

As my life progresses, I will use the model as I open new doors and pass into new phases of my life. With each new growth cycle, I keep more and more of the strategies as everyday rituals and habits.

*Imaginal Structures and Death*

In this reproductive body, I managed to maintain an optimistic outlook anchored in the phrase: "Always Keep Hope in Your Heart." As an Infertility Survivor, Multiple Miscarriage Warrior, and Perimenopause Veteran, I have earned my stripes as a Reproductive Elder.

The imaginal structures that carried me through have themes of light and shadow. I was the young girl who was told I was too much and to put my shine on the shelf to belong. I disguised myself with an imaginal red hat as a lampshade to dim my brightness. The subjectivity of Party Girl was a crack in the facade where shine could slip through, but it came with a cost of haze and humiliation.

> "Such a sense of identity is never gained nor maintained once and for all. Like a good conscience, it is constantly lost and regained" (Erikson, quoted in Ferrer-Wreder, Sugimura, and Kroger 22).

The dark years of struggling in my body, especially the fog and gloom of perimenopause, were a time of very little light, like being in the basement with the flickering lightbulb hanging from an unfinished ceiling with a broken string out of reach.

The light returned in my fifties when I chose words of the year like bloom, luminosity, radiance, and glow. Year after year my psyche was naming its hunger. And now that I have identified my Leo ascendant in conjunction with my natal asteroid Sappho, I have a structure where shine can last. Shalit shared that Jung says midlife fear is the sun drawing in its rays (14).

For me my rays had been shrinking in my earlier stages of life, and midlife was when they finally began to return.

How did my awareness of the phenomenon of death weave into the struggling times? I feel that I knew death intimately after eight miscarriages. Those birth, death, rebirth cycles gave me wisdom. When the perimenopause sent me toward the doctor who knew my history, he gaslit me and told me I was basically "hysterical." I believed him until I got to the elevator where I basically killed him off from my advisory team. My womb was speaking truth.

> "When the body begins to sag, it is abandoning sham and hypocrisy. The body leads the way down, deepening your character. It doesn't know how to lie" (Hillman 71).

As I look back in the writings this quarter, I killed off childhood, I killed off my first OB who gave me six rounds of unmonitored Clomid, I killed off the Perimenopause Denier, and this summer I have had to grieve again. A friendship died when I finally used my voice to push back on her projection. As it unraveled, it went into a death watch. I realized I was not allowed to be authentic and instead of pretending, I used my voice again to simply state it lost its ease and that is okay.

> "We think we have something to hide. Yet, this self-protection is our imprisonment" (Levine and Levine 11).

But I also have written of my ease with death. I buried a goldfish when I was six, I basically buried eight babies and numerous negative pregnancy tests, and I held my Dad's hand when he took his last breath. I recognize the cycles of life…and death.

*How It Lives in Me Now*

I have a protocol for hinge moments. My body knows first. Then I turn to "Nourishment." I turn away from toxins and toward foods that are anti-inflammatory. With detox comes clarity and when my body and mind are clear, my spirit can see pathways and choices.

My parenting chapter is changing. I am no longer on the field coaching my kids. I have moved to the stands as a spectator. I am an enthusiastic fan. I am always available for pre-game and post-game discussions, but I am watching rather than directing.

These themes now shape the work I am called to do. As the Depth Docent, I guide others through the thresholds I once had to cross alone. I trust that the body knows first, and I help others listen to theirs. I sit with the deaths that come before rebirth, because I have known them intimately. And I return again and again to the Power of Story. When I tell my story, it opens the door for you to tell your story, and together we can learn and heal. The girl who put her shine on the shelf now holds the light for others.

## Part II. On Aging

*Aging Family Members*

My grandparents have crafted a template for ending a long life well lived. They all had the privilege of living independently at home. My grandmothers were the caregivers of my grandfathers. Only my paternal grandmother needed to spend her final days in an elder care home.

In mid-October 2018, my father began his steep climb to take the last steps of his life. I believe we all live our second half to 120 years, but for some they take the last stairs 5, 10, 20 years at a time. My father reached the summit at the age of 77 on November 8, 2018.

His story included a chapter called "I Don't Want to Be the Sick Guy". He did not want to be bothered with pricking his finger to check his blood sugars, and he asked me when I got my medical degree when I suggested a continuous glucose monitor. My mom's healthy lifestyle and superb cooking probably gave him many more years of hanging out at his club playing golf and cards and telling his many embellished and cherished stories.

When his blood sugars spiked to a critical state, he was admitted to the hospital in very late October and was put on dialysis. Cancer was discovered, but not the primary source, and on Halloween morning my sister and I met with my dad to hear his final wishes should the diagnosis be terminal. He met with his spiritual advisor that night and was at peace that regardless, he would not pursue invasive treatment. Days later the cancer was deemed rapid, and he wanted to be home. My brothers got him there on Tuesday evening. Hospice arrived as I did on Wednesday morning, and I began making calls when I observed his rapid decline. On my parents' outdoor patios, the storyteller was being showered with stories steps from where he lay all afternoon. His grandchildren were calling in and we held the phone to his ear. At about 7pm, in the early dark of his last night he was given last rites that were dramatic, beautiful, and memorable. My youngest brother slept by his side on the couch and before sunrise he summoned my mom and me. He was surrounded by love, and I told him "We got this" moments before he took his last breath.

> "To die at home is to die in the midst of life. In the midst of love" (Levine and Levine 292).

Peter Hillman, an extremely bright light, touched a multitude of people. His celebration of life on the day of the USC Notre Dame game in late November was a fitting day for the man

who defined heaven as a place where every four years you start as a freshman at another great football college.

My mother will be 85 years old this year. She is a vibrant role model for all around her and she is living independently in the home where my Dad took his last breath. Her parents lived into their late 90s, but she notes that her parts are starting to tell stories. She has a plan. For now, that does not include moving from the multiple stairs in her house. We all know she will be forced to move when she is unable to climb them each day to her kitchen living area. She has made clear she wants to see mountains when her story is coming to an end.

*Reflexive Dialogue*

63: I just made another turn, another pass by the largest of the picture windows, in the round pillar that holds the spiral staircase of my life. In this window I see the woman I will become as she ascends higher. I am a QueenAger balancing the crown on my head. It is a new crown for Womb 2.0 and I am adjusting to the fit.

7: If I swing higher and my toes touch the sky and break open a cloud, will I hear my goldfish? I know he is swimming. He taught me to dive, fly, and twirl around on the grass until I fall down dizzy.

88: The stairs are shorter and steeper, time passes quicker as I climb. I am between windows. The last time I passed by the big picture window, I saw that picture of me with the crown firmly on my head, sparkling with gems for every grandchild who calls me Meg, and now a new spot for a great-grandchild to take her place on the crown. I am entering my Third Saturn Return. The 3rd act is coming to an end, and the Fourth Act is getting ready to begin. I do not really like the label Crone. I have a couple years to come up with something better.

GK: (Sitting on the landing, in a lawn chair with a crossword puzzle and an umbrella drink) Hey, stop a minute and help me 5 letters, starts with a C, wise old woman….

88: Flips him the finger as she walks up along the curved stair toward another landing with a window.

GK: I see we are feisty AND spicy today.

7: My library card is my favorite treasure.

FRIEND: (her hand on the rail beside you) Keep climbing, Lifelong Learner. There is no ceiling at the top. Only a wide-open landing and every landscape you have ever travelled. At 120 you will stand there as an Earth Citizen, still asking questions.

*My Attitudes and Imaginal Structures Toward Aging*

At 70, I completed my PhD at Meridian University. I have been the apprentice of my own mythopoetic identity, The Depth Docent. She arrived shortly after I reclaimed my full name Mary Hillman Ruetten. I am a born educator. It is my acorn, my daimon. Does she guide others through the aging process? Does she teach at a university? Does she bring arts-based research to an institution? Does she blend all three? Is she a Death Doula too? These are the stairs she currently climbs, and she sees the world and walks on ancient lands along the way.

. I have taught with story and image and technology, and I imagine that I will guide the transition to blending AI in a way that supports critical thinking and gets society back on track to a shared truth of the world we share. Maybe this will be at an Intergenerational Community Center where 7-year-olds and 88-year-olds will share time together. As James Hillman says about the dry soul, it "brings light, as elder, as mentor" (82).

Womb 2.0. I am invited to become my sovereign self. My new self uses her voice more and does not share as much with those who do not appear to be truly engaged and interested. I am leaving behind relationships that lack ease. I am stepping toward new skin with a patina shine. I am embracing my graying hair, tiger stripe eye crinkles, and crepey arms and legs by reframing them as my "lived silk."

> "Wrinkles and creases are not merely signs of aging flesh and drying skin; they display the lines of character" (Hillman 58).

I thought I was well informed on elder aging and death, but as always, I learn I have much to learn. My heart had already widened and expanded this past winter but I learned this quarter that it is even more elastic and can continue to grow.

> "The old who live in their body are bent under the strain. The old who live in their hearts are aglow" (Levine and Levine 155).

My family of origin handed me a template. Three of my grandparents lived well into their 90s, independent in their own homes, and my great-grandmother, born in 1884, lived to 100. It is not out of bounds for me to imagine 120. What I would like to challenge is my inner daredevil. This summer I jumped off a cliff into the Colorado River of the Grand Canyon. Someday I will need to hear my Gatekeeper slow me down. He will look up from his crossword and say, "You've done that.

*Transmuting Death Anxiety*

Death awareness is not a fear to conquer. It is a scene to write about. I imagined my own death in my Special Interest Group and I was surprised to find a sense of freedom come over me.

I believe the planning of any big chapters in our lives is a form of modern-day rites of passage or rituals.

> "Life becomes immense when we start recognizing that there is no assurance that we live out this day" (Levine and Levine 148).

The end is near. My advocates, caretakers, loved ones still breathing and those who have crossed over join the spirits of my ancestors on the beach facing west. I was born on an August day before sunrise not too long after a New Moon started a new lunar cycle. It is fitting that I will depart on a summer night of a Full Moon in August as the sun sets.

A wooden platform or barge has been built. It is waiting for me at the edge of the water where I have literally and metaphorically swum through experiences of love and laughter, sorrow and joy, finding and losing, learning and teaching. I lived the developmental conflicts of womb time, birth, learning trust and touch, playing, imagining, and separating from my natal family. I lived as a Maiden, Mother, Queen, Crone and now I enter the waters as Earth Citizen after my Fourth Saturn Return.

The drums are playing in harmony with the sound bowls. Wildflowers have been woven in my hair by those who have cared for me in these later years where I accepted that just like a child and infant, I needed nurturing. I am dressed in my Depth Docent gown of shimmering silver. My staff is near my side as they lay me on the boat that will carry me to my next destination. As my companions on this cosmic natal trip walk me through the low waves into the open ocean, they place my docent staff, with its shining crystal, into the corner of my raft. It knows the way home. The spark that kept my life alive explodes and I burn brightly as the sun sets.

NOTES

1. Ruth O'Shaughnessy, Katherine Berry, Rudi Dallos, and Karen Bateson, *Attachment Theory: The Basics* (2023), 90.
2. Stephen Levine and Ondrea Levine, *Who Dies? An Investigation into Conscious Living and Conscious Dying* (1989), 3.
3. Ira Progoff, *Modern Culture and the Psychology of Initiation*, 169, 179.
4. Laura Ferrer-Wreder, Kazumi Sugimura, and Jane Kroger, *Identity in Adolescence: The Balance Between Self and Other*, 5th ed. (2026), 27.
5. Progoff, *Modern Culture and the Psychology of Initiation*, 183.
6. James Hillman, *The Force of Character: And the Lasting Life* (1999), 59–60.
7. Ferrer-Wreder, Sugimura, and Kroger, *Identity in Adolescence*, 22, quoting Erik Erikson.
8. Erel Shalit, [title and publication details to verify], 14.
9. Hillman, *The Force of Character*, 71.
10. Levine and Levine, *Who Dies?*, 11.
11. Levine and Levine, *Who Dies?*, 292.
12. Hillman, *The Force of Character*, 82.
13. Hillman, *The Force of Character*, 58.
14. Levine and Levine, *Who Dies?*, 155.
15. Levine and Levine, *Who Dies?*, 148.