

James Hollis & Through the Dark Wood

Finding meaning in the second half of life

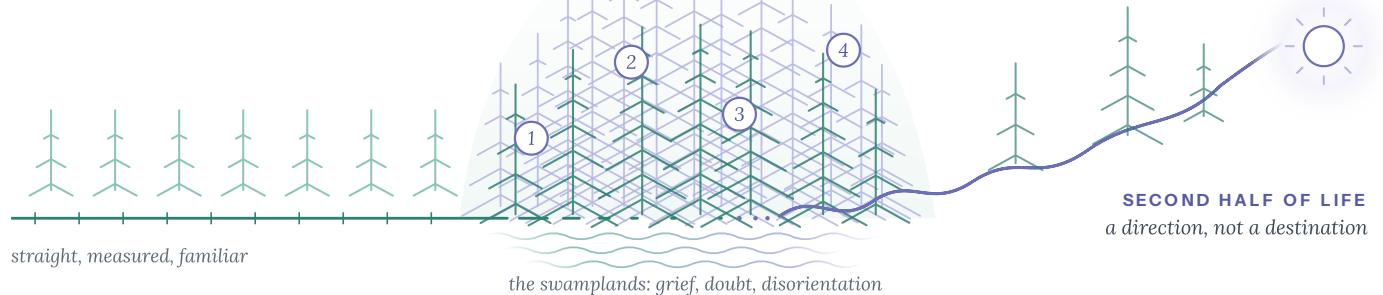
Jungian analyst James Hollis describes midlife not as a crisis to be fixed but as a **summons from within**: a call to move from the “provisional life”, built to secure love and approval, towards one that is more authentically your own.

FIRST HALF OF LIFE

a path laid out by others:
the provisional personality

THE DARK WOOD

“Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.”
DANTE, INFERNO I · LONGFELLOW TRANS.



Who is James Hollis?

A former humanities professor who taught for 26 years before training as an analyst at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich (1977–82). He later led Jung societies in Houston and Washington, D.C.

A larger body of work

Through the Dark Wood is a recorded course that builds on *The Middle Passage* (1993) and *Swamplands of the Soul* (1996), Hollis's long exploration of suffering, meaning and maturity.

In his words

“When the illusions of our youth begin to crumble, we reach a turning point that the poet Dante called the ‘dark wood.’”
From the *Through the Dark Wood* programme description

01 Two selves in collision

one built for approval, one waiting underneath

The false self

the provisional personality

Formed in childhood to secure love, approval and safety. It adapts to the expectations of parents, culture and circumstance. It was a necessary strategy, and becomes limiting only when mistaken for the whole of who we are.

The true self

an instinctive, authentic core

Hollis suggests it tends to make itself felt at midlife, often through dissatisfaction, restlessness or a sense that one's life no longer fits. Not a fixed identity to find, but a direction to keep moving in.

02 Signs you've entered the dark wood

numbered in the wood above

- | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| <p>① Dissatisfaction</p> <p>A persistent sense that something is missing, even when life looks fine from the outside.</p> | <p>② A call from within</p> <p>A pull towards a more purposeful, self-directed way of living that is hard to ignore.</p> | <p>③ Crumbling illusions</p> <p>Beliefs and roles that once felt solid begin to lose their hold.</p> | <p>④ Losing the old map</p> <p>The familiar path of career, relationship or identity no longer seems to lead anywhere true.</p> |
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03 Not a problem to be solved

Hollis's central reframe

— Meaning over easy answers

For Hollis, the second half of life is less about quick fixes or certainty and more about honest engagement with life's real questions, tolerating ambiguity rather than resolving it too soon.

— The swamplands are the way through

Echoing his earlier work, Hollis treats guilt, grief, doubt and disorientation not simply as symptoms to eliminate, but as terrain in which deeper meaning and maturity may be found.

04 A quiet check-in

for reflection, or to bring to session

What parts of my life were built to please others, not chosen?

What old belief or “map” might I be ready to set down?

A note on this lens. Hollis offers a Jungian, meaning-centred view of midlife, not a diagnosis or a stage everyone passes through. If dissatisfaction becomes persistent low mood, hopelessness or thoughts of self-harm, talk with your psychologist or GP. In a crisis, contact emergency services or a crisis line _____

SOURCES

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