Linear and Cyclical Models of Life

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The Linear Model

Obviously linear implies a straight line and in our culture, we have a tendency to place numbers on lines to measure behavior or identify developmental milestones to be achieved. In relation to aging, the linear model suggests that adult lives move through predictable stages such as learning, loving, working, and living. Movement in this sequence also implies biological maturation. Linear thinking is results oriented— life is perceived as moving to higher levels of success, incremental improvements in social status, power and economic property. Finally—linear thinking implies we attempt to predict and control our lives. In terms of our culture, the linear model can be used to illustrate improving social conditions, technological progress and the benefits of industrialization. Again—there’s nothing wrong with these advances and it’s part of our consciousness and cultural heritage.

The linear model is based on constancy and stability; it’s vertical in terms of career and if you sustain a disciplined, dedicated work ethic you’ll be rewarded. Also—this view is normative and prescriptive, meaning that this is how life should unfold for males and females. It provides guidelines for us to achieve our dreams and ambitions. This view identifies a sequence of events for us to experience; a sort of social, developmental timeline with relatively predictable outcomes. It includes gender specific roles and expectations to achieve at certain times in our lives; when to marry for women and men, have children and establish careers. The over-arching idea is that one can assume control over change—and when one can’t exercise control over change it suggests he/she is powerless or incompetent. Remember—we can control the choices we make but not necessarily the outcomes of our choices.

The Cyclical Model

The cyclical model implies moving in circles—where we repeat familiar patterns such as night and day, work and rest, breakfast and dinner and birth and death. From the cyclical perspective, the purpose of life is to understand the repetitive nature of our impermanent, changing and unfolding lives. We need to consider thinking in cyclical ways to find meaning in the ongoing movement of daily experience. An assumption we make based on this understanding is that the world undoubtedly contains good and evil, black and white, growth and decay, beginning and endings. The inherent polarities in the world necessitates that we perceive cyclical thinking as a process.

The cyclical view takes into account that life is complex, yet fluid and like a stream; flowing and in harmony with nature and its ongoing cycles. From the cyclical perspective human development is adaptable to change; changing ourselves to adapt to our environment. Adaptive adults know that the possibility for discovering more about themselves occurs when they are challenged. Adults who honor the cyclical view also understand that the world is organic and social realities change; that impermanence is visible everywhere. For these individuals, life develops through cycles of change and continuity rather than in progressive, linear ways. In the cyclical model, the same basic themes in life are repeated—such as love, achievement, loss, work and the search for meaning. We repeat life tasks in different ways at different times in the life cycle—work, play, coupling and care. In the end, relationships and choice of work aren’t dictated by what stage of life we’re in but by our changing commitments to human values that we all share. Remember—attempt to lead a value driven life whereby we honor the enduring sacred values that give meaning and purpose to our lives. The liabilities connected to the linear perspective include feeling incompetent or being a failure when not achieving life cycle milestones. Also—when a crisis emerges it reminds us that life is uncertain and stressors are difficult to overcome. So—if you’re unable to achieve in predictable ways, you become discouraged and unhappy. This distorted thinking results from our reliance on linear thinking. We need to modify how we think about life—and renew faith difficulties.