

# Secret Paths

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WOMEN IN THE NEW MIDLIFE

Terri Apter

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"AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT BOOK....  
[APTER'S] DESCRIPTIONS OF WOMEN ARE MEMORABLE  
AND HER WRITING OFFERS PERCEPTIONS RARE IN PSYCHOLOGY."  
—CAROL GILLIGAN

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# Secret Paths

**Women in the New Midlife**

**Terri Apter**



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**To the continuing memories of Gillian Mirrlees**

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# *Acknowledgment*

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**O**n my fortieth birthday, two women with whom I had been close friends in high school announced that they had several hours' stopover in London before traveling on to Frankfurt. To maximize our time together, we agreed that I should drive to Heathrow, meet them as they came off the plane, find somewhere to eat, and then take them back to the airport. Then they would not have to travel to Cambridge—a journey which would have eaten away half their time in England. This arrangement, however sensible from one vantage point, was not fully appreciated by my family.

“Don't mind us. It's only your birthday,” my older daughter assured me with barbed magnanimity.

Her younger sister fought her own disappointment to protect me: “She can do what she wants. It's her birthday.”

“Yes, like I said. And she doesn't want to spend it with us.” Her saucy grin broadened as she savored her little sister's heated response.

“You always try to make her feel *bad*,” she protested, close to tears because that big girl would always have the last word.

But it would have taken more than this to make me feel bad. The prospect of meeting these friends, whom I had managed to see only five or six times during the last twenty-five years, drew me back to those years upon which I was inclined to reflect anyway. This birthday, in particular, was a marker which demanded a question and answer period. But I had avoided this aspect of it, and was merely pleased that it promised to be without trauma, pleased that forty, now, was much younger than I had ever supposed it would be. The arrival of my girlhood friends, however, highlighted those peripheral reflections I had been putting to one side. I felt an eerie distance from the last-minute negotiations involved in clearing my schedule both at home and at work. There was a more important agenda to attend to.

As I made the tedious journey along the congested, and increasingly icy, roads to the airport I felt the warmth of memories so vivid that I wondered where all the intervening years had gone.

At fifteen, life had been hell. What had centered this hell was a sense of inadequacy too shameful to be voiced. Instead, it was patched over with flippancy and bravado. Knowing I would eventually disappoint anyone in that other world—that world in which people with real knowledge and real skills moved effortlessly—the friendships I managed to form felt like temporary planks on the brink of collapse. My daily life consisted of the pretence that I did not know I would soon crash into the pit below. My connection with these women, as girls, had been different. They had witnessed my inadequacy and knew my fear, but found them causes for amused concern rather than revulsion.

Always, one or the other had stood on the far side, smiling with confidence, or urging me on, impatient with my doubt. Whether it was enduring the humiliation of poor exam results or tending wounds from another girl's snub, they were there to make my sojourn in that isolated, competitive boarding school bearable. My final years at that school—since they were older than I—had been marked by their absence, a definition so palpable that it emptied the faces and hearts of all who sat next to me in the cafeteria or the classrooms. No one could touch me, once my real friends had left.

Now we were all women in, or approaching, midlife. Those adolescent terrors were left behind. The chasm of self-doubt had, after all, been bridged, one plank at a time. Yet its echoes remained. It was no longer dragging me down; but it was still part of me. I heard it now, more clearly than usual, because I was recalling the past, because I was now forty, really grown up, and should no longer hear it. Yet it formed a running commentary—on my driving, my inadequate timing, my trouble in finding my way from the car park to the terminal. I found myself listening with a new curiosity. I felt I was eyeing up a returning enemy, which I would lure into the open in order to attack.

Moments before such reunions are often dreadful. As I waited outside the customs area I could see that the freezing rain had congealed to thick snow. I despaired of their plane ever landing. I rang my home to check in, announce my safe arrival, and explain the uncertainty. My older daughter sounds younger on the phone. Her voice is thinner, less expressive, and loses its capacity to tease. "We're making the most beautiful cake in the world," she told me, and in the background I could hear her sister's squeals as she discussed the icing decoration with her father. They seemed days, not hours away, so that even when the plane I awaited was announced as "landed," I felt lost in the dull terminal and worried about the difficult drive home.

My excitement turned to doubt as I scanned the figures emerging through the exit. Would I see in their middle-aged faces the young girls who had meant so much to me? And would they see, in my face, the girl who had been sustained by their affection? Might we not, in the ten years since I had last seen them, have become strangers? Had I made a worthwhile journey? Did I really want to see them?

I need not have worried. Faces of friends change even less than do our own in the mirror. It was only gradually, after our celebratory embraces and exclamations, when we were settled in a restaurant that I could recognize the mature women they had now become. As the snow thickened, we delighted in our marooned state. The news that their flight was delayed a further four hours seemed like a gift, for we now had more time together; but they were too drained, after our lively meal, to keep up the pace of conversation. We decided to see a film, after which they might be refreshed. Our choices were constrained by film times and cinema locations, but the choice was apt, as such things which signal turning points often are. We decided on *When Harry Met Sally*, with Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal, scripted by Nora Ephron.

The scene that struck me like a whip in its timeliness was Sally's despair when she learns her former boyfriend is getting married. She feels time speeding by, and protests, "And I'm going to be forty." Harry pauses as the comic surprise sets in: "When?" he demands.

Sally gestures impatiently. "Some day ... What does it matter? It's there, staring at me. A big dead end."

As the film ended, I put my dissatisfaction to my companions. Judy sighed, burdened by the need to explain something so simple. "It's funny." Her voice had a feigned patience. I was, as always, slow on the uptake. But the pleasure I took in noting my unchanged role as ingenue among these larger and wiser women did not distract me.

"I know it's funny, and it's cute, but it's disturbing." Yet, as I watched a range of thoughts play on Judy's face, and heard Pam's low chuckle, it was difficult to feel disturbed. These women, now in



their mid-forties, had, since I last saw them, undergone an exquisite change. The strength they had always carried was fine-tuned to a new tension, and they looked down upon that image projected by Sally's despair with a majestic indifference.

"You see," she continued, wearied by my need for further explanation, "Sally says it as though it's tomorrow, as though she really has to worry, but of course she doesn't. It's a formula in romantic movies: The distressed heroine, just when she's on the brink of her best future, feels the greatest despair. She feels 'old' or 'unloved' and then turns out to be neither." Her mouth straightened in irritation and her eyes filled with affection, as she watched me brood over this explanation.

"But 'dead end' is such an awful term. Think about it. 'Dead' and 'end.' Like you're racing towards something and then there's no where to go, and you just die."

"Remember, she's forty today," Pam interjected, and Judy's eyes widened; she nodded in appreciation, and kissed me. "Congratulations!"

"So it's not a dead end, is it? And why is it that Nora Ephron, who's past forty and gaining strength with everything she does, can write that it is?"

"Because it's good copy," Judy repeated.

"But doesn't it offend you that it is good copy? And that people who know better make use of it?"

"It's our secret," Pam explained. "We undergo a metamorphosis at forty—or so, but don't tell anyone about it."

"Really—." I was undeterred by their conspiratorial amusement at my expense. "But why? Why is it so secret?"

Judy shrugged. "It's too hard to explain. To start from scratch. It must be a long story, and it's not easy to tell. Of course some people try ..."

"Do they get it right?" I asked.

"No," Pam announced, but as she turned to check the flight information board she guffawed: "Oh no, she's going to write about it!"

Their amusement was suddenly overlaid with interest. A silence fell among us as we acknowledged that some decision had been made. "Okay," Judy consented, eyeing me steadily, "you can change the copy. Reveal how we tunnel out, around the dead end."

It was time to say good-bye. The string that tugged inside me as they proceeded towards the security check unraveled a pattern I could not yet discern. What I knew was that the story of that secret development had to be told by many women, by the many different kinds of women now merging into midlife. A new kind of listening would have to be achieved, as we wiped the copy clean.

I watched them dump their bags onto the conveyor belt and walk through the metal detector. Their gestures, their facial expressions had, for me, that mythic quality which stemmed from the discrepancy between my knowing them so well, so deeply—and yet being unable to account for that knowledge. Watching them, I could see how that center within them had shifted, gaining weight and power. I could hear the silence of their new strength, but I refused to respect that silence. Partly, I could not resist exploring the developmental path that lay ahead for me; but I was also impatient with that secrecy, and convinced that every woman's journey would be easier if it were shared.

THIS EPISODE OCCURRED two years before I was even to begin the studies which form this book. Now, five years later, I look back on the work's conception, and realize that I had only a dim idea of how taxing it would be to disclose that silence. Development in infants, children, and adolescents is much easier to see: It is more rapid, more hectic, more physical. In those developmental stories dramas are enacted on a broad stage, observed by an enraptured audience. At midlife, women's development

appears muted. It is far more private, and there are fewer players. Its silent but sure pace has led many people to believe that midlife change is hormonal—another byproduct of women's reproductive system. But psychology is a listening science, and in listening to women I could trace a deliberate acquisition of self-determination and self-definition—a matter of psyche, not biology. Instead of seeing themselves through others' eyes, or through the maze of social images, they took steps to forge their own vision and gain greater control over the precious second half of life. For they saw midlife as a midpoint, a turning point, wherein they could strike out in new ways. The "dead end" was a tangled knot of unresolved fears, lingering constraints, and distorted images. During their forties it became disentangled, then transformed into a myriad of paths towards new challenges, new pressures, and new anxieties. In confronting these, a new certainty was born. This book charts the story of women's journey through that occluded passage—wrongly conceived by some as a "dead end." It tells the story of a developmental leap which has hitherto been achieved in silence.

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# *Introduction*

## *Crisis of a New Breed*

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**I**n a society of unprecedented stability, women have experienced upheaval. Women who are in their forties and fifties today have participated in a social revolution which has changed their ways of living and their ways of thinking. While many markers of women's lives remain in place, their meanings have been transformed. Marriage, motherhood, fertility, and sexuality are concepts jam-packed with questions and a decreasing store of answers. As women either welcome or resist change, they engage in a struggle to define who they are and what matters to them. Every conclusion a woman reaches is hedged with doubt, challenged by a bombardment of ideologies and expectations alongside the urgent requirements of daily life. The cataclysmic changes experienced by this generation of women have oriented them to new psychological developments which, in midlife, elicit a new crisis. This crisis often feels like a catastrophic breakdown,<sup>1</sup> yet is in fact a turning point wherein women capitalize on what they have gained through new challenges and struggles. A new midlife awaits women at the far side of this journey.

The women who are in midlife today faced, as children, a divided social history. For many of them the games and teachings and examples set in childhood prepared them for what was then the traditional female world: They would grow up to be wives and mothers; their place of work would be the home; and their goals would be to produce and maintain a family. Their aims were to be loved and to be chosen, and then to care for others through their love. "Feminine," during their childhood, had a special meaning, and evoked a powerful control over their behavior, their wishes, and their needs. It was not something they had thrust upon them simply by virtue of being born female. It was something they had to work at, and something their behavior could endanger. Ambition, competition, independence, strongmindedness could threaten femininity. With femininity threatened, they faced the unacceptable alternatives of exclusion, loneliness, and ostracism.

Yet this generation of women entered adulthood with very different ideas about what a woman should be, what she could be, and what she wanted to be. However little the world around them changed, however rigid were career structures, family practices, or personal habits, these women had different ideas about themselves, and faced new challenges to their self-esteem and their sense of identity. The dissolution of old norms seemed to offer freedom; but with this freedom came anxiety. As in any social revolution, no one knew which hopes were realistic, or what the consequences of change would be. And, as in most revolutions, certain things changed more quickly than others, so that women's new hopes were hitched up with old habits. Thus, opportunities at work expanded while

practices within the home were static. More women were welcomed into male professions, but discovered a maze of male prejudice therein. Couples praised equality, but practiced old forms of dominance and submission.

Twenty years ago, the move towards equality seemed inevitable. It seemed then that with a mere modicum of good will on each side, sexual division would travel a smooth path to a just meeting point. Few women who are now in midlife had any idea how hard their lives would be and how difficult it would be to be at peace with their life choices. Few of the women planning to be working mothers understood just how time-consuming child care and domestic work were. And as they vastly underestimated the amount of traditional maternal or wifely tasks to be done, they vastly overestimated the amount of help with those tasks they would get from their partners. Women with more traditional goals failed to appreciate the costs of fulfilling roles that once appeared an easy option. If being a career woman was difficult, being the wife-at-home could be equally so. As men's income fell between 1970 and 1990, as men's job security decreased, their "homemaker" wives had to sustain family income by finding paid work. At the same time, many women who believed they had some kind of security as homemakers found that divorce had disenfranchised them of financial support or health care for either themselves or their children. Women who had deferred their careers while they raised children found that they were attempting to enter a workplace whose rigidity had increased since they had left it in very early adulthood. Now, with fewer jobs and prolonged working hours and increased demands of employers, the new opportunities that in some sense women did have were lost on them. As women's expectations soared, as certain kinds of achievement became necessary to self-esteem, as the concept of happiness shifted from the more modest version of *satisfaction* to the demanding notion of *fulfillment*, they found life progress confusing. Inherited ideas were not so much replaced but extended. While their mothers before them were haunted by ideals of youth, beauty, and maternity, the adult woman of today has not escaped her mother's ghosts, but added to them. Beauty, charm, grace, and youth are no less important today than they were in the 1950s; but, in addition, women in the 1990s are expected to be smart, successful, and powerful.

Throughout adolescence and young adulthood, women of this generation have grappled with contradictory aims, needs, and expectations. They were under pressure to embody that image projected by one of Naomi Wolf's publicity photos: ambitious yet caring, physically attractive yet unconcerned with time-consuming grooming, intellectually sharp yet yielding to men's desires. The efforts involved in realizing these aims within stubborn social and family structures have been repeatedly recorded in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Women's defense of their life choices and the inevitable pros and cons of any choice, have also been explored.<sup>3</sup> What has not yet been explored is the developmental effect on midlife women of this history of personal conflict.

AS I WORKED ON a book about mothers with young children who were also professional women, most of whom were between the ages of 28 and 37,<sup>4</sup> I noticed that their management efforts led to relentless, excessive attempts to control their lives. They often sustained themselves with the belief that things could be better, even perfect, if only they were more organized, or had more energy. Though they observed, and resented, and resisted external constraints, their commands were directed within: They would make themselves strong enough to overcome constraints. So, while they were courageous and often ingenious in finding ways of managing their busy and conflict-ridden lives, they were also under the spell of the belief that somehow they would establish a way of life in which there were no compromises foisted upon them as women. This is daunting—this belief that their long journey must be justified by ending in some perfect order that accommodates their entire array of needs, aims, and

obligations. Under the sway of this ideal, they regularly disguised from themselves the costs of their efforts. On one level, of course, they felt them; but at the same time denied them:<sup>5</sup> they were “temporary”; they were not “really all that bad”; they were “worthwhile.” While often suffering great stress, they used whatever mental energy was left over to control their awareness of just how deep their conflicts were. Such awareness would give rise to regret, anger, anxiety, and more stress—which mentally, they could not afford.

As I returned to the midlife women to whom I had already begun to listen,<sup>6</sup> I found—even among those who, like my younger sample, had young children and careers which were important to them—different styles of reflection. Among women in their forties, this control was disintegrating. They no longer sounded so certain or so determined. Questions crept in at every turn: about what an effort was worth, what compromise could be accepted, where she had gone wrong, what she had done right, what she wanted to be, how she had to change either herself or her circumstances. Midlife women were no longer sustained by the fantasy that a perfect balance was to be found. There was a growing resistance to the control they had once worked so hard to sustain. The interviews were framed by competence and control, but as they spoke the surface calm cracked. Anxieties, anger, regret, fear, despair dwelt in lively concert beneath their composure. Voices broke with tears, old memories protruded oddly, old pains inspired bitter laughter, points of impasse became magnified as they swung from self reproach to anger or despair. There was a *sense* of catastrophe; but as these conflicts were confronted, women passed into a new stage of development, wherein they found a new voice for expressing a suppressed powerful individuality.

At about forty, most women allow themselves to feel those points of dissatisfaction that were once born in heroic silence. Making use of what Joyce Carol Oates calls “looking back time,”<sup>7</sup> they see how past decisions have cut them off from the potential they had wished to achieve, or how past expectations blinded them to the costs their goals incurred. As they took note of their new—really grown up—phase, they felt the panic of self-responsibility, and sought means of gaining greater control over their compromises. But to gain this, they had to see what they had compromised, and what it had cost them or those they cared for most. Regret and doubt are violent feelings, and this was often a violent time. But as I tracked them over the course of four years, and as I included women in their fifties in my sample, I saw that this hectic phase was temporary. However, it did not simply pass like a bout of nerves. Instead, it gave way to new skills in making assessments and choices. These women had passed through a crisis, and come to a turning point where they could now perceive their own strength and assert their own desire. From this point on they were aware of what they had accomplished and where they were headed. I wanted to retrieve their stories for the women currently experiencing midlife growth, and for the women of the future who may be able to achieve this developmental task with less suffering, as the current strong, loud-mouthed generation of women extend the range of possibilities for women.

THE GENERATION OF WOMEN now in midlife has, like any other, its own special history, experiencing similar events and conditions at certain stages of its life.<sup>8</sup> Each new generation differs from earlier ones “because of intervening social changes of many sorts: in education, in nutrition, in the occupational and income level at which people begin their careers. There is no pure process of ageing ...”<sup>9</sup> Our parents’ generational identity was formed by the two World Wars and the Great Depression. Now, they are the generation of unprecedented wealth and health in old age, creating new forms and features of longevity. But the generation of women in their forties and fifties belongs not only to the generation of the new woman, but also to a new life phase. “Middle age is the latest life stage to be

discovered,” writes sociologist Arlene Skolnick:<sup>10</sup> As people expect to live longer, and as their expectations of productivity increase, they do more and demand more of their middle years.

The concept of aging itself has been a special problem for this generation: first, because fewer women in midlife today feel they have attained their goals—because their adult goals have been formulated in a social context that does not foster them; second because youth and its potential are so peculiarly and highly valued by contemporary culture. It is more difficult to experience the end of youth when its promise is not fulfilled. It is also more difficult to accept one’s maturity when being young has such enormous value, and being mature has none.

Those who came to adulthood on the crest of the cult of youth have now learned that aging is no optional—it is a reality. This can be seen in the recent focus of the media and society on menopause. The long-overdue attention this physical change is now receiving has put the spotlight on midlife, but has left its real psychological story lost in the shadows. Germaine Greer, in her book *The Change*, sees women’s release from reproductive cycles as leading to a golden, luminous phase that frees them from all previous constraints. Gail Sheehy, too, in *The Silent Passage*, sees menopause as the last taboo, something that is feared and yet which mysteriously releases women’s energies. While the issues surrounding menopause remain of enormous importance, to put this at the center of midlife development is as unsatisfactory as placing the onset of menstruation at the center of adolescent development. Such physical markers often have a psychological impact. They may jolt a woman into reflection and reassessment. But they remain only one reference point in her individual and social history, which was begun long ago and which she daily creates anew. The still-neglected story of this generation’s female midlife development rests on the clash between ideals accumulated in adolescence and early adulthood, on the one hand, and the edging out by society of a woman’s significance in midlife, on the other. For as women’s lives changed rapidly, and as the contradictory demands on them increased, they were driven forward by the ideal of perfect integration: Everything they wanted to be both personally and professionally, both psychologically and physically, could be achieved if only they were tuned to some perfect pitch. The inherent contradictions in the expectation that they could remain the women they wanted to be and make it in a man’s world were suppressed by this ideal. As the women living through this social upheaval matured, they saw that the contradiction could not be so easily mastered. As this gradually accumulated knowledge intersects with the threat of being marginalized as a middle-aged woman in a culture in which only young, attractive women are visible, women at about 40, in self-defense, rise to the challenge. There must, they reason, be a way through this threatened dead end. The hope of new development sustains them through doubt and despair. For in midlife, when women are freed of the supposition that someone else has the answer, when they are no longer shadowed by a need to please a parent, when they are less anxious about standing in opposition to a partner, when the fantasy of the ideal of who they should be is shattered by the mature reflection in the mirror, they grow strong enough to listen to their own answers to the questions they pose. Thus, women gain strength to engage in this crisis and conflict because they have gained the confidence that they could come up with answers. While crisis at midlife is now thought by many psychologists to characterize only a minority of adult men,<sup>11</sup> women engage in it as a normal developmental stage. For men today, midlife is less threatening than it was twenty years ago. The male midlife crisis tends to focus on fears of diminishing potency and adventurousness. As health and physical activity tend to be sustained well into their sixties, as men are encouraged to broaden their notions of success and achievement, as a wider range of roles is opened to them, men now enjoy the changing pace of midlife. At forty or fifty a man can become a “new man,” discovering emotional expression and the pleasures of connection and freedom from the pressure always to be strong, to be

certain, to surpass others. The “new woman” cannot be so easily realized; both family and career time have to be created by her over a much longer span. The costs of both connection and independence tend to be higher for her, and hence the midlife counting of these costs is more drastic.

Women’s construction of a new midlife can be seen as a counterpart to the invigoration experienced by countries such as Japan and Germany in the 1950s, after defeat marginalized them in others’ eyes. So, too, do women unglue the labels they know all too well. Highly sensitive to others’ views of them, they both register and resist the blankness of others’ gaze: They see others dismissing them, categorizing them as middle aged. A secret resistance then occurs. They establish their own knowledge and their own vision. Ripe for significant change, many different things may act to instigate a crisis. It may be the pressures of work; it may be release from domestic burdens; it may be a daughter’s impasse, a son’s disappointment, a partner’s departure; or, sometimes, deep within her, as she confronts her surprise discovery that her potential must be realized now or never, she retrieves neglected needs and wishes, and finally wages battle against the dragons that have stood in her way. Hence, women, proud of their battle, emerge with a stronger sense of themselves and their own powers.

These clashes and the developmental crisis which ensues usually occur during a woman’s 40s, and are resolved in her early 50s—though, as in all developmental stories, individual variation is vast. Recently, however, there has been a large-scale slighting of women in their forties by stronger, more sharply focused women in their fifties. Gloria Steinem<sup>12</sup> looks askance at the jumble of her younger adult self, seeing much of her past self as shallow or misguided or off-center, without appreciating how this shifting perspective was a developmental process. Germaine Greer<sup>13</sup> claims to have “sailed through” her forties. She believes she foundered on the rock of aging suddenly, at menopause, quite forgetting the previous psychological descent and reconstruction during her forties as she traced the steps of her father’s life and the images and feelings which, hitherto, had been fragmented and ignored.<sup>14</sup> Gail Sheehy,<sup>15</sup> in admiring the force of women’s “second adulthood,” notes, but only in passing, the turmoil women in their forties suffer. She uses this turmoil as a point of comparison, to show how much better off women are once they pass fifty; she fails to see that it is an essential step toward that special phase of women’s maturity she so eloquently embraces. This book attempts to fill the gap in accounts of development, and to trace the pivotal stage where women come into their own. Surprisingly, this phase, so commonly experienced, is difficult to capture. Having gone through it, women tend to forget the process. Just as a four-year-old has particular intolerance toward a younger child caught in the developmental stages she has recently passed through, so too, apparently, do some older women slight the developmental steps that were so exhausting, so exacting, and so necessary to their new-found self-confidence and self-certainty.

THERE IS A WELL-GUARDED secret about women in midlife that has just begun to come out. Both women and men, both psychologists and novelists, have noted an increase in energy and self-assertion among midlife women.<sup>16</sup> Once this surge of energy was thought to arise from the decrease of domestic burdens: At midlife women were often released from the demands of young children and, hence, had more time and energy for themselves. Yet today’s women share no common timed events, except biological ones, which may be why menopause, in the absence of any other common marker, has such a high profile. The current generation is marked and challenged by the variety of its members, as those who, at 45, attend their children’s college graduations or weddings, send invitations to friends of the same age who are nursing their infants. Even women whose children are grown face new extended parenting: Their children, through economic necessity, stay at home longer, or return home when job

fail to be offered, or when income from jobs obtained cannot support an independent lifestyle. Moreover, family demands come from all angles: Children's independence sometimes makes way for demands of other relatives—either of aging, lonely parents, or partners in need of renewed attention and support. These demands often increase in midlife, as does a woman's wish to remain connected to an ever-widening network of friends and family. Today's midlife woman is *less* likely to be freed of family demands than was her mother, whose children left home at a specific time and found jobs and the financial wherewithal to be independent and whose own parents had shorter lives.

Women's lives, once thought to be routine, constrained, and predictable, are now understood to be so much more packed with variety than are men's lives that none of the models sociologists or psychologists have constructed to explain or describe men's life patterns work for women's. Whereas men often concentrate on one special role at a given phase of life, in a society which is structured to sustain the separate parts they play—as lover, as worker, as responsible father, women's roles—as mother, as wife, as daughter, as participants in economic and domestic and community production—fragment their attention. As Mary Catherine Bateson says, they “compose a life” from different themes; they must be opportunistic in developing these themes within varying contexts of time and place. Women's self-confidence, their aspirations, their personalities, and their work lives show far more change over the life course than do men's.<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt that women undergo developments in adulthood that men, on the whole, do not. Why? What triggers this development? How does it proceed? How does it succeed? What happens when it fails? These are questions answered by the women whose voices fill this book.

IT WAS TO ADDRESS THESE questions that, in the winter of 1990, I began a research project on midlife women. Having recently completed a study of mothers and adolescent daughters, I remained puzzled by the ways in which mothers were often knocking over the psychological blocks that their daughters were putting in place. As adolescent girls were becoming more controlled, more circumspect, their mothers were often growing more impulsive, wickedly relishing a new spontaneity. Many mothers, too, I noted, were fired by anxiety about their own lives, and were taking apart the assumptions on which they were built. At the time I thought that this had something to do with the mother/adolescent relationship. Perhaps a mother, aware of a child's new capacity for independence, was exulting in freedom from the vigilance younger children required. I quickly saw that this account was inadequate, as I learned how watchful and caring parents remain of their adolescent children, whose independence often brings terror rather than relief. I wondered whether the mother might be trying, through example, to preserve aspects of her daughter's personality that she saw on the way out. Was she reverting to a childlike directness and literalness because she missed having it around? Was her anxious questioning of her own life a mimic-response to her adolescent daughter's challenges?

I shelved these questions at the time, but brought them back when I turned to the new project on the development of midlife women. What I saw was that women in their 40s, whether or not they had adolescent children, were exhibiting the more impulsive, willful behavior that I had thought was a response to adolescents; women in their 50s had, on the whole, cast aside that anxious challenging. Whereas the speech of younger midlife women is often hedged with queries and qualifications, that of women over 50 is like a direct flow, sometimes with the to-the-point humour that children display. They were more likely to speak their minds, to know their minds. I became more and more curious to see how this new directness was achieved, and to see more clearly what was happening.

As I “studied” midlife women, or worked out ways in which I might be drawn into their world, a participant and observer, as both anthropologist and native, I found two distinct and apparently



contradictory things. I found the increased strength that other writers and psychologists had led me to expect. Their energy, and the eagerness with which their interests were engaged, revealed a thrilling, consoling self-confidence. Alongside this I heard something else, which nearly, but not quite, contradicted it. I heard hectic self-assessments, full of doubt and anxiety. I witnessed self-recrimination and self-correction. I heard resentment at the cruel costs exacted in both private and public features of their lives. I heard of defeat and confusion, of change and uncertainty. I heard about the frustration of compromise, of being constrained both from within and from without. I heard, in effect, the language of crisis and the language of conflict and, often, the language of anger. While men in midlife seem to “mellow,” and welcome a new flexibility and new expressiveness, enjoying the fruits of their labors or finding compensations for past disappointments,<sup>18</sup> women have a much rougher passage into midlife. Like adolescents emerging into a new self, these midlife women were foraging among their pasts and presents to forge their futures. The pivot of development from anxiety and anger to liberation and energy was defined as women confronted the question: “Why did it take so long to trust myself?” The question could leave a woman bewildered: The people, the images, the models, the advice, the ideals she once trusted might, for a time, seem thoroughly untrustworthy. Posing this question could, for a time, leave her more bewildered, more angry, more anxious as she confronted wasted energy and wasted time. How, indeed, women asked themselves, could they have been constrained as they were, knowing what they did know, but what they somehow ignored? How could they have been guided by ideals that they must have known (they decided on reflection) were false constructions? How could they have foregone either a career or a family and pretended that the compromise did not hurt? How could they have been shadowed by their concern about what others thought, or how others judged them, knowing as they must have known (they decided upon reflection) that the approval they sought would never be gained—or, if gained, never fulfill the function they had imagined.

This query, “Why did it take so long to trust myself?”, arises in the wake of a woman’s special experience of conflict and compromise. She asks it not in a self-punishing or rhetorical manner, but as a genuine question about the course of her development. It takes time for patterns to emerge. The frustration so many parents feel as they discover they cannot “make their children listen” or “give lessons from their own experience,” is a result of the simple human need to learn, some important things at least, from one’s own experience. The lesson that one’s own experience matters, that it provides the best line to truth, is knowledge we are born with, and then taught to forget, and then learn anew. Girls and women seem under particular pressure to abandon this more direct line to knowledge. The archetypal coming-of-age book by women, about girls growing into women, tells the story of a break between a girl’s “innocent” relation to her knowledge and the pressure to “not know,” as Carol Gilligan says, “what she knows.”<sup>19</sup>

The most striking coming-of-age books—books about a girl’s passage into womanhood—have been written not by women in early adulthood, newly freed of parental control, newly honed in literary skill, newly proud of their passage; nor have they been written by women in the strength of secured maturity. Instead, they have been written by women at the brink of midlife, women who experienced a girl’s development into woman and who have also experienced the adult consequences of those steps taken. They have had time to reflect on the links between girl’s suffering and women’s psychology. Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, which charts the fissure between girlhood wholeness and adolescent fragmentation, was written—despite its youthful, angry immediacy—when the author was 35—still too young, perhaps, to imagine a resolution. *Annie John*, though outwardly “healed” at the close of the novel, remains at internal impasse. She cannot, yet, envision an adulthood outside the constraints of

social and maternal expectations.<sup>20</sup> Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, which marks the split between the clumsy and illiterate descriptions of her psyche by professionals and her own passionate experience of mental illness, was written when she was 44. It is only at midlife that she can catch the image of a "young and distracted" girl, who was "looking out, looking for someone who would see her."<sup>21</sup> Only now can she see through others' descriptions of her to an abiding, valid reality. Michèle Roberts was 43 when *Daughters of the House* was published. Here, the tortuous course of a young girl's development deletes memories of a language "Deeper than English or French; not foreign; her own," which came as "the underground stream that forced through her like a river, that rose and danced inside her like the pulling jet of a fountain. ..." As a teenager and young woman she colludes with adults' denial of her own knowledge, until in midlife, she must make the journey again, stepping forward "into the darkness, to find words."<sup>22</sup> *Martha Quest*, written when Doris Lessing was 44, brilliantly traces the link between a girl's loss of her own knowledge and idealization of a feminine future. Martha chatters in a voice she knows is "false" and becomes powerless as she loses touch with her own emotion. As "her childhood ... said good-bye to her" she idealizes her "new" self and her "extraordinary" future, over which she has lost power.<sup>23</sup> In her nonfiction book *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang at 40 describes with startling simplicity the process that began when she was 12: "I was learning to live with contradictory thoughts and realities, and getting used to compartmentalizing them." As these contradictions are compartmentalized, she comes to embrace the ideals promulgated by her society: In the fast flow of doubt and emotion, she pledges herself to be the ideal woman in the society she pretends is itself ideal. For the more fragmented her knowledge is, the more attracted she is by an ideal of perfect integration. She experiences social control and cruelty, yet cannot trust her experience. Thus, she denies its reality and listens to voices outside her. These voices promise solutions. Believing those promises, she buries her own doubts. She does not unearth them until midlife, when "looking-back time" and a new tolerance for conflicting emotion allows her to judge anew, with her own eyes.<sup>24</sup>

The notable exception<sup>25</sup> to such coming-of-age plots is Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Lacking the defenses of those women who waited until they were stronger before they embarked on their devastating exploration, Plath cannot envision a resolution between her individuality and the social experience of womanhood. As Plath's character Esther Greenwood scatters the pretty fashion clothes out the hotel window, resisting the "prize girl" persona, she finds herself empty—for what can replace the superficial lady others want to see? Buoyed by determination and intelligence, Esther forestalled psychic conflict to late adolescence. At this crossroads, however, her knowledge and her social experience cancel one another out, until she is left inside that vacuum of "the bell jar" in which she could not breathe. To prove herself sane, she must succumb to the control of the Other-Eye—or the view others have of her: "The eyes and the faces all turned themselves towards me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magic thread, I stepped into the room."<sup>26</sup> Recognizing those eyes as the ones that had looked at her "over white masks" during her terrifying electric shock "treatment," she accepts them as the authorities that must be placated if she is to pass into "normal" womanhood. Had Plath lived, she may have made a happier, more integrated passage through the crossroads of midlife.

GIRLS AND WOMEN FACE three significant danger points in their development. The first "meeting at the crossroads"<sup>27</sup> is at puberty. Under the influence of their sexual maturity, as they become aware of who holds power, as adults' unquestioning delight in their child's ways turns to new forms of control, the child's eye is blinkered by confusion and disappointment. The need to please, the terror of rejection, which all children feel from time to time, may harden in adolescence to images of perfection. Hence,

adolescent girls are cramped by the desire to achieve the ideal form—both within and without. That tense perusal of face and figure teenage girls engage in, searching out one mirror after another for a better look or a more favorable pose, is not superficial: Through attention to their appearance girls are dealing with profound questions of what they must be to become a person others like and a person who feels “right” from within.

Adolescent resistance or rebellion is usually a girl’s attempt to maintain contact with her own responses. Even as her thoughts and feelings and perceptions confuse her, she seeks recognition for them. Rather than change and deny her self, she tries to change others so that they will accommodate and appreciate, rather than deny or punish who she really is, who she is becoming.

These resisters may survive adolescence only to succumb at the next danger point: the passage into adulthood. While parents, teachers, and friends may have allowed the adolescent girl her own rough-edged self, the proximity to adulthood may unnerve her. At this second crossroads, pressures to be what she may not want to be again crowd her: She sees the need to make decisions and carve out paths in this adult world, yet she finds there is no pattern ready-made, and that her own inclinations may threaten relationships with both parents and lovers. The successful new woman portrayed by Bridget Fonda in the 1992 film *Single White Female* runs her own business, but is caught out by a dread of loneliness, which makes her the dupe of male deceit and female malice. At this second crossroads, goals and plans and ambitions often lose their once pristine outline. During this phase, as a woman steps out into the world outside the structure of school, college, and family, she often makes far more compromises on behalf of lovers, friends, siblings, or parents than she ever imagined she would.

Experiences of marriage or motherhood, and of the institutions that surround these relationships form the third crossroads of a young woman’s development. During the years between 25 and 40 the pressure of working out those ideals is felt in all its immediacy, as questions crowd in about marriage, maternity, work. Clashes between affiliative needs—to be closely, carefully involved in the emotional well-being of others—and expansive needs—to achieve, to meet challenges, to gain social recognition for skill and competence—create deep fissures in her life. She tries to heal them with a monumental determination, but often the wounds are left to gape beneath the thin skin of her control. Her own hopes and desires may now seem null and void. Her doubts and confusions may slip into a parallel universe. Dissociated from them, she may be “certain” that she can manage her woman’s life, or change it, or “certain” that the compromises she makes are right. Hence, her “certainties” and her ideals can create pools that drown her doubts. These ideals may guide her until they are shattered by the crossroads at midlife, when she breathes new life into self-knowledge.

Dilemmas between independence and connection, work and family, cooperation and ambition, are not new. Each generation of women in this century has believed that it stood on the verge of breakthrough—a break away from constraining female images, and a liberation of a broader female humanity. This expectation was described in Mary McCarthy’s 1963 novel *The Group*, which opens one week after Vassar Commencement, with a wedding, but a wedding that is special, different, as the couple forego a honeymoon and think about work. The different characters who form “the group” have very different lives in early adulthood—some of them married to men with good careers who support them, some of them married to men who have to be supported, some of them unmarried. All of the young women who form the group value their intelligence and see their education as a door to opportunity. But what they all discover, in various ways, is that after the dawn of early adulthood, they have become typical women: They are individuals, with individual worries and disappointments and triumphs and frustrations but they are enacting women’s typical lot. They slot into typical feminine

positions—as wife afraid of her husband, as mother terrorized by a child’s needs, as wife demoralized by her husband’s infidelity, as woman trapped within a confused sexuality. Education gave these women high self-esteem, high ideals, and high goals. As they set out to fulfill their potential, however, they found themselves repeating old patterns. The novel ends with a funeral of the woman who, in the opening scene, was married. There is nothing special about this funeral: It is a “regular burial in the ground.” A decade on, these once eager women are now ready to bury the expectation that they can, in their society, be the individuals they had set out to be.<sup>28</sup>

Mary McCarthy’s grim narrative, however, leaves her characters when they are in their thirties. The story stops short of women’s midlife, the precise point at which past impasses are most likely to be resolved through a crisis. With more experience, more knowledge, and fewer attempts to control their voice and vision, more women can amass the resources to forge their own lives, and to live through their own experience. As Carolyn Heilbrun points out in *Writing a Woman’s Life*, authors as varied as Dorothy Sayers and Virginia Woolf created new and distinctive styles in their forties and fifties; with their midlife vision, they wrote about women in new ways, knowing that as midlife women they had to construct new stories as they followed those secret paths to their own strength.

The women who are now in midlife were not in their youth mere dupes of others’ whims and wishes; they were far more self-aware and self-determined than previous generations of women, who were more cruelly hedged in by constraints of law, education, and economy. The women who are now in midlife have been more active in fashioning their goals and their identity than any other generation. This splendidly noisy generation of women, ruthlessly critical and deliberate, nevertheless described themselves as having suffered the influence of false ideals. Even those who, from without, appeared fully self-determined, admit in midlife that they had been shadowed by false voices and images. Gloria Steinem describes how, even as a mature woman, even after nearly two decades of feminist activity, she disguised her real self in order to inspire the love of man. Germaine Greer admits that she was highly conscious of and concerned about her appearance, even as an outspoken feminist. Angela Davis has recently reflected that even radical young women in the 1970s sought power through men rather than obtaining it directly themselves; they turned to men, Angela Davis now realizes, for approval and strength. Midlife development is the process whereby borrowed voices are returned and idealizations shattered.<sup>29</sup>

Ideals have power because they are not simply, not thoroughly false. During certain developmental phases they are necessary: we use them as crutches in infancy and craft knives in adolescence. They support us when we have not yet established an internal world, and they draw vivid pictures of futures we may not be ready to envision.

We are not born with idealized images of others. We learn them, painfully, through belief in our own inadequacy. Babies are thought to develop ideals of the mother or father who cares for them.<sup>30</sup> Powerless themselves, they endow people upon whom they depend with ultimate strength and knowledge. As babies enter the social world of childhood they still borrow from this bank of idealization: A parent belongs to the child, becomes part of the child, who then feels strong through her association with this larger-than-life figure. In middle childhood, however, there seems to be a remarkable window in development, wherein ideals are not needed. A child now registers an inconsistent, imperfect human world. Children accept their own ragged feelings, the mood swings of others, the vast changes in the emotional weather, as part of real life. They observe in order to learn, and they learn from what they observe.<sup>31</sup>

At adolescence, however, idealization regains an important role in development. Parents are loved as deeply as ever, but they come to have more definite boundaries, and more specific “faults.”

Their inconsistencies become extremely annoying. They do not fill the child's psychological world in the way they once did. Instead, the adolescent feels a new self emerging within her. As this self is fluid, unshapen, but enormously precious, its owner seeks new images, new ideal forms. Now, as she observes the imperfections of the human world, she wants to distance the brand-new self from them. She will be different, better, perfect—but how? She seeks a variety of images, promises, hopes on which to model herself. She desires new, very strong ideals to direct her development. But her need for such ideals is double-edged: These new ideals will offer some strength and comfort, as they did in very early childhood; but they also may fill her with doubt and dread as she sees how far she falls from their standard.

In adolescence, too, girls develop a searing self-consciousness through which they are aware of how they “look”—how others see them, how they might be defined and criticized.<sup>32</sup> They long for a perfection that will protect them from rejection. But how can they achieve it? As they struggle with their own confusion, they seek answers in others, burying the acceptance they had as children of a human world that is edgy, uneven, and volatile.

Enmeshed in the contradictory visions of her future, a young adolescent girl posed this question to the psychologists who had been interviewing her: “... is there such a thing as a person who is not necessarily perfect but who has everything together all the time?” Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan describe the eerie silence that settled over the room as the girls and women present pondered the speaker's question. Their imaginations stung with the effort of envisioning some person who from the outside can be likable and attractive, and who matches up this outward beauty with a wonderful inner self, who finds that “magical spot” where everything comes together. Layering this question with a kind of dread, is another query: “if the long journey did not end with perfection, what was all this expended energy about and for whose benefit?”<sup>33</sup> As a midlife woman dismantles the false structure this adolescent girl was trying to maintain—as she frees herself from the ideals that the adolescent girl takes on board to carry her to adulthood—she asks this question in a different guise: How can I continue my journey knowing that the map that I have used for so long is not right? The routes different women take through this impasse are traced in this book. Sustained by their determination, guided by the skills they have acquired through long-term confrontations with old and new concepts of womanhood, they find their way to a new midlife in which they make use of the positive changes in this social revolution of women.

Yet the beginning of the journey is difficult. The impact of this initial question—How can I continue my journey knowing that the map I have used for so long is not right?—may arouse so much anxiety that a woman tries to brush it aside. The “devil she knows” may be preferable to admitting how much needs to change. She may wish to retreat to an earlier phase at which her energy and emotions, though not satisfactory, were comfortable in their familiarity. She might resist the challenge of development, and chug along in the old way. Usually, however, women move forward. A new directness and literalness was apparent in the language of the women I studied. There was less “second guessing,” fewer qualifications and modification and redescriptions of things said. There was a shift from a role personality—in which they spoke of themselves as mothers, daughters, partners, employers, colleagues—to a subjectively centered personality, in which they spoke about how things felt and how things seemed to them. The balance of identity changed from “This is how I would be described objectively in terms of my position, achievements, and connections” to “Here is a gathering of my thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.” When this developmental crisis was successfully negotiated, when they were able to balance their lives so as to fit in with their newly assembled self, there was an enormous gain in power, and a reduction of envy, guilt, and anxiety.

The successful outcome of this developmental phase can be seen as a normal parallel to a cure for multiple personality disorder. In this disorder, whose sufferers are predominantly women, defenses against trauma and pain are constructed by the mind so that certain things that are known and remembered are split off from the “host personality”—or that personality that is closest to being normal and most closely linked with current relationships and activities. The woman who, as a child, suffered some intolerable experience (usually sexual abuse) for which no validation or comfort was provided by the adults around her blocks this pain, humiliation, and terror from consciousness. So intolerable is this part of herself that she cannot acknowledge it. Yet so powerful is this silenced body of youthful torment, that it will not be denied. Hence, a separate “self” is constructed, holding forth in someone else’s voice, with a different posture, different handwriting, a different history, a timeless future. Where two personalities exist, more are likely to emerge, all unknown to the host personality, all knowing well what the host personality denies, all highly critical of that unknowing host. Herein is many women’s psychological drama writ large. Here, in exaggerated, pathological form, can be seen the contradictions and pressures many normal, healthy women experience, as, in meeting demands and expectations that are blatantly inconsistent, a wedge is drawn between their capacity to meet or even acknowledge their own needs, and a coffer of anxieties about what they as women need to be. The fear of not pleasing a mother, of disappointing a father, of harming a child, of losing a partner’s love or approval, of failing to advance professionally, can put a wedge between the real and all those ideals. Guilt and doubt build barriers between layers and aspects of the self. So, even as women make decisions and choices, they often feel shadowed by half-seen ghosts, who hang about them, so their footsteps drag and each step forward drains their energy.

This “dissociated” self, this self with its fissures, is healed not by denying the multiple voices, but by silencing their disruptive, punitive aspects, by ending the wars between different “selves,” by breaking down barriers so that each “self” has access to the others. Hence, the self becomes integrated and empowered rather than anxious and defensive in its layered diversity.

In general, men do not have to do this midlife reconstruction. They seem much better at partitioning different aspects of themselves; they seem less driven by needs for integration of the various parts of the self; they also live in a society that is better adapted to meeting their different needs—for love and work and rest and play—so that men’s different needs, unlike those of women, are less likely to become conflicting needs. Throughout their lives girls and women are likely to feel the pull between pleasing themselves and pleasing others, between working and loving, between private leisure and communal participation. After the construction work of midlife, women devote the energy they once directed towards meeting idealized expectations to managing their own needs and desires. With far less of that second-guessing and those second thoughts, a woman has a more direct line between wish and action, perception and judgment. If this midlife development is not achieved, then a woman in her fifties becomes increasingly rigid in her defenses against change and growth. She may try to deny the reality of her age, or the difference age makes, or leap from one preassigned script to another. Still mimicking the vamp, or the earth mother, or the superwoman, she becomes a caricature of these ideals, using more and more energy to keep her knowledge and emotion at bay. Like the character portrayed by Shirley Maclaine in the film *Postcards from the Edge*, who is trapped within her fear of aging, such women seek out ways of “beating age” and try to become exceptions to the human plot. When psychological growth cannot be accomplished, defenses are marshalled against change. Such women may become more rigid in their ideals—of beauty, of love, of matriarchy, or of feminine perfection in any other of its many guises. And while some of these defenses remain to some extent within most women, they are, in most women, dwarfed by new growth. For women are now

entering a new midlife, determined to engage creatively with new opportunities, and to forge success on their own terms.

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THE RESEARCH FOR THIS BOOK involved interviews and observations of 80 women. The sample of women was, at it clearly had to be, mixed. Roughly sixty-five percent were American and thirty-five percent were from Britain. Sixty-five percent of the women were in their 40s, and thirty-five percent were between 50 and 55. Among the American women, fifteen were from Northern California, fourteen were from Southern California, five were from rural Illinois or Wisconsin, ten were from East Coast cities, and eight were from small cities, mostly in Michigan. Of the Northern California women, five were African-American, two were Hispanic, two were Chinese American, and six were Caucasian. The women in England were based in the Cambridge, London, and Manchester areas; two were Japanese, two were Scandinavian, one was Indian, the rest were British. The economic standing of the participants varied widely. I have used fictional names for all the women in my study, and though I have tried to match these fictional names with the ethnic origins of the actual women, I have changed any details that might identify them. We worked collaboratively to construct their stories; but if the description I give in this book does not fit theirs, then they should be protected from the outrage of my written truth claiming more legitimacy than their felt truth.

I contacted the American women through alumni lists and employment lists of two state universities; from the personnel department of a computer company, which provided names both of midlife women who were currently working for them and midlife women who had recently left them; from a community college, which held evening classes and kept lists not only of people who had enrolled in evening classes but also of people who had made enquiries but not enrolled. In Britain, local job centers referred me to various retraining courses through which I was able to distribute a questionnaire, which was really just a means of finding out who would be willing to talk to me further. Several colleges in England and the United States permitted me to approach their older students in a number of ways. Though they were reluctant to supply me with class lists, I was offered access through informal meetings and the distribution of questionnaires.

Different women were approached for different aspects of my study: I needed in my sample some women who were in the process of divorce, some women who were single, some women who had very young children and some whose children were grown. To a great extent this happened naturally—but sometimes had to take definite steps to redress an imbalance.

I began with a simple interview, which was arranged to last about two hours, but which frequently went on for longer. It was always agreed ahead of time that the interviewee could end the session at any time she wished—but this never happened. There were certain things I wanted to get from each woman—age, age of children (if any), marital status, sexual orientation, brief employment and education history—but from then on the discussion and questions were led by the women's own cues. For some of these women, discussions about the problems of aging were crucial, and for others they were peripheral. There is nothing more boring for a respondent than to be asked a series of questions in which she has no interest, and she may well be disappointed or even insulted when she is cut off or cut short on issues that have an emotive impact for her. The great problem an interviewer has in such circumstances is to obtain from each respondent information that can in some way be compared to other women's responses, yet to avoid a blueprint, a definitive set of questions, because that would prevent exploration of individual leads. In a study like this, which does not begin with a theory to confirm or refute, but whose purpose is to form a theory about development, the interviewee must allow herself to be led by and learn from her respondents. The researcher becomes an interpreter

of voices, rather than a tester of hypotheses.

After the first interview session, I arranged two or three days during which I could shadow a woman through her ordinary routines. Questions and explorations often continued during the observation sessions. However important self-reports are, they do not provide the full story. Not only does different information come up at different times, under different circumstances, and in the context of different moods, but also small, passing responses to current events can be as enlightening and revealing as considered reflection. These shadow days were not always chosen at random. The first interview sometimes indicated where more information would be most useful. For women who were going back to school, I wanted to compare descriptions of their domestic life in the early stages of college, with those a year later. I sometimes sought debriefing sessions, so that after watching a woman at work, or in a business meeting, or caring for an elderly parent, or having lunch with a son and daughter-in-law, or meeting an estranged spouse, I could listen to her interpretation of the events witnessed, and match these to the more generalized accounts she had given in the interview. For women who had suffered some setback or loss, I sought both observation days and interviews at two-month intervals during the course of fifty months. For the other women, I “checked in” at three-month intervals, sometimes in person, sometimes (less satisfactorily) by telephone, again over a period of fifty months. I met at least four times with all the women discussed in this project.

In social psychology there is a term, “saturation,” which is supposed to indicate the point at which the researcher has enough information. It is a friendly term, suggesting that the researcher is replete with data; but it is also slippery term, persuading one to slide a little too readily into simplicity. Saturation is reached when further research offers no more surprises, when everything that the researcher is hearing from one subject has already been heard from another, when everything heard can be quickly slotted into a preestablished category.

I have not reached saturation. I always hear something new. Looking at photographs of mature women in a special exhibition at the Cambridge Dark Room, I was struck by the marked differences in each face. Women of the same age seemed steeped in different time scales. Women’s eyes expressed different knowledge, and each mouth revealed different expectations. Yet these very differences signaled a similar line of development, for each had attained an individuality in conflict with a society that still offers sparse and spare images of midlife women, which still puts constraints on women’s speech, which still slips scripts into their hands, making it particularly difficult to speak their own lines.

What these women had in common was a challenge presented by the social conditions that they experienced as children, and the changed conditions in which they had become adults. Along with increased expectations and increased good health, they experienced new conflict and new crises. The self-responsibility that emerged in midlife as they were liberated from former fears and influences wielded its own terror. With no maps for this new age, each woman had to create a new self and a new future. The hard labor of construction lay on one path, the tedium and stagnation of depression lay on the other. Most women were eager to take the first path.

But is this journey of interest only to women? Soon after this book was under way, I was buttonholed by a male professor at a college meeting about the nature and purpose of my work. How would I collect information on such a wide subject? What was my subject, anyway? What answers did I expect? What indeed were my questions? But before I could answer, he launched into his own narrative about a mother whose remarkable youthful achievements had been cast aside at her marriage, who had been happy in marriage, and who would have described herself as content, but whose frustration burned into his childhood memories; of a sister fiercely at odds with her mother but



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