

‘Shedding light on the wonderful possibilities of midlife, a transition that is so often labelled as an illness. I highly recommend this book!’—Dr Ruth Gawler, MD

‘With energy, strength and passion Robyn offers a wealth of insights into the continuously changing nature of womanhood. As a woman and a professional I found this a valuable resource.’
—Dinah Berlin, Individual, Couple and Family Therapist

‘I read your book this week and found it wonderful. I think my blood pressure went down as I read, because you helped me feel “normal” in the midst of midlife.’—Amy Lynch, US publisher of *OurSelves*

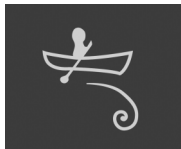
‘This book assesses the feminine aspects of midlife with uncommon wisdom...it’s a gem!’—Robert A. Johnson, best-selling author of *He, She, We, Inner Work, Transformation, Owning Your Own Shadow* and *Balancing Heaven and Earth*

‘I encountered your book on midlife women while doing an exhaustive literature review in my university library. I want to acknowledge you for writing a better book than one that has received widespread attention here in the US. Please accept my thanks and best wishes for your important work!’—Julie Mitchell, Kent State University

Dedicated to my mother, Patricia
And to my daughter, Patricia

Navigating Midlife:
women becoming themselves

Robyn Vickers-Willis



Wayfinder Publishing

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Wayfinder Publishing
Cottles Bridge
Victoria 3099
Australia
www.navigatingmidlife.com

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First published by Allen & Unwin in 2002
Reprinted 2002
This edition published by Wayfinder Publishing 2008

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National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Vickers-Willis, Robyn, 1952– .
Navigating midlife: women becoming themselves / Robyn Vickers-Willis.

3rd reprint.

Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 9780975704240 (pbk.)

1. Middle aged women.
2. Middle aged women – Life skills guides.
3. Midlife crisis.

305.244

Set in 10.5/16 pt Stempel Schneidler by Midland Typesetters, Maryborough, Victoria
Printed by BPA Print Group

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
1 Midway this way of life	1
Part 1 What is midlife transition?	
2 A woman at midlife transition	11
3 A metaphor for understanding transition	21
4 The psychology of midlife transition	32
Part 2 Finding your true Self	
5 Noticing your Self	47
6 Making your values conscious	56
7 Telling your story	66
8 The wisdom in your dreams	77
9 Buried selves, buried energy	87
10 Gathering up your projections	95
11 Finding your joyful, passionate and creative self	102
12 Creating personal mandalas for healing and wholeness	111
13 Using Jung's psychological types to explain uncharacteristic behaviour at midlife	118

Part 3 Creating your new personal world

14	Are you a ‘human being’ or a ‘human doing’?	135
15	Remaining distracted from your Self through your addictions	144
16	Meaningful simplicity	149
17	Asserting your Self to create your world	159
18	Your thoughts create your world	168
19	Changing Self—changing relationships	175
20	Synchronicity is a guide to a new direction	187

Part 4 The journey never ends

21	Balancing your inner and outer journey	201
22	Nurturing your self	210
23	A vision for your future	219

<i>Bibliography</i>	227
---------------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	231
--------------	-----

Preface

Over the past thirteen years I have been through significant changes in how I perceive myself and in the way I choose to live my life. These changes started when I was 35 years old. Despite many years of training and practice as a psychologist, I had little knowledge of the normalcy and value of these changes, nor about how to start navigating myself through what I now believe to be the most personally significant stage in a woman's life, midlife transition. I have since come to the conclusion that most people, including health professionals, are similarly uninformed.

If you are a woman experiencing the feelings of depression, anger, bewilderment and loss that are inevitable when in midlife transition, this book is written for you. It is also useful for women experiencing other significant life changes.

Navigating Midlife: Women Becoming Themselves is a self-help book offering the information and assistance that I wish had been available to me when I started midlife transition. It provides a psychological framework to help explain why this can be a time of dramatic change in women's lives. This framework is based on sound psychological concepts that have been distilled to make them easily accessible. Through personal examples and case studies, I also demonstrate some self-empowering strategies that you can select to help you through

transition—a bit like having a map where you choose the route. In understanding these strategies and applying them to your personal journey, you can navigate towards a feeling of balance, a positive centredness on self, and an increasing clarity and confidence about who you are and what you want for the second half of your life. You will then move towards achieving the two main developmental tasks of midlife transition. First, to find your authentic Self and second, to create a personal world where you can be that Self.

From my professional and personal observation, women at midlife rarely receive advice or information based on their specific psychological development needs. When they experience the turbulent feelings that are signalling the need for change, women at midlife are often categorised in a limiting way and are perhaps even given faulty advice and direction by doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors. There is typically a focus on such areas as menopause, diet, the ‘empty nest’ syndrome and/or relationships in general. In contrast, *Navigating Midlife: Women Becoming Themselves* focuses on the inner, psychological journey we need to make if we are to create a second half of life that is both personally meaningful and satisfying. It is my hope that after reading this book, more health professionals will view the turbulence of midlife as a normal phase of development, and encourage women to use their energy for increased personal awareness and wise midlife choices.

It is a year since I started writing this book. It has been the most rewarding and satisfying time of my life. In retrospect, I now realise my passion for writing *Navigating Midlife* has been twofold. First, to empower women and better inform health professionals about midlife transition; and second, although I

had not realised this when I started, to assist my own transition by telling my story at midlife.

Working your way through many of the strategies suggested in *Navigating Midlife* will be challenging, exciting and often painful, but I know from personal experience that the rewards are enormous. I suggest you first read the book right through and then go back to the chapters that particularly drew your attention. Re-read these chapters, incorporate some of the suggestions and exercises into your everyday life and notice the difference they make in how you feel about yourself and your world. Some of you will enjoy discussing the book in a small gathering of women, such as a book group. Many of the exercises, such as drawing a personal mandala, lend themselves perfectly to a group setting, although remember, you are your own best navigator; honour whatever feels right for you.

There are several people I particularly want to thank. Friend Rita Kryshkovski, whom I met as my first writing teacher at the Council of Adult Education a couple of years ago, has been my writing mentor. I often phoned her, especially in the early days of the book, needing to share some concern or revelation. Her patience as I 'rambled on' helped me to remain motivated and focused on my writing. Friends Miranda McLeish and Dr Manfred Krautschneider and my daughter, Patricia Hay, have read through chapters and given me much appreciated critical feedback and encouragement. William Hay, my youngest son, has patiently assisted me as I did battle with my limited computer skills. He has also been tolerant of erratic meal times as they fitted in around my writing. Tom Hay, my older son, Amy Hewitt, my niece, and friends Chantal Babin, Fiona Blanch and Heather Nankervis have shown ongoing interest and enthusiasm. My sister, Judy Vickers-Willis, has always

encouraged me in my endeavours, often by acting as a 'guinea pig' or as an 'audience' on which to try out my new ideas. Early on in my writing Dr Colin Stewart, George Wilson and John Marsden gave me timely feedback which reinforced my belief that I was on the right track. Peter Hay, my ex-husband, has shown support and unconditional acceptance throughout my writing of *Navigating Midlife*. Many of the stories that clients and friends have shared with me have been 'creatively' developed to make up the case studies in this book. Names and details have been deliberately altered in the text for the sake of anonymity. Thank you to Rita Kryshkovski, Glenda Lehmann, John Bolton, Carol Nelson and Wendy Grace for allowing me to draw on material and experiences from their workshops.

A special thank you to the wonderful team from Allen & Unwin. Annette Barlow, the Senior Commissioning Editor, was the one to phone me to say that she wanted to publish my book. As soon as she described what she wanted my book to look like I knew 'my baby' would be in safe hands. Colette Vella, the senior editor, Karen Ward, the copy-editor, Ellie Exarchos, the cover designer, and Rosanna Vecchio, the cover illustrator, all worked with a sensitivity and professionalism that has made my introduction to the publishing world a very easy one.

And finally, thank you to all the other people in my life who have given me support along the way and helped me to believe that *Navigating Midlife* was possible.

Robyn Vickers-Willis
Melbourne, 2001

Being self-centred is not being selfish

When I explain my ideas to some women they say, 'Oh, but I couldn't be so selfish!' I used to go out of my way to do things for other people. I did this for a variety of reasons. It made me feel good. I thought it would make them like me. I thought it would be selfish to do otherwise. In certain situations it made me feel as though I belonged. It made me feel worthwhile. I had all sorts of 'shoulds', 'oughts' and 'musts' controlling my behaviour and making me feel it was my duty to always put others first.

From when I was young until my late thirties this was a fairly constant part of my life. However, once I started connecting more with my true centre I started to feel differently about all this 'doing for others'. I started to feel resentful. I felt that often I was giving and when I wanted support it wasn't coming back. I became more conscious of my giving nature and gradually, over a long period of time cut back on a lot of it. This could be seen as selfish and perhaps at times it was. However, I now believe I had to go through this stage to counteract the imbalance that I had been living with. As I started focusing more on my own needs, I focused on others less. This increasingly gave me the space to really see myself and to work out what was important to me.

Eventually I found that I started to do things for others again. And this giving was coming from a different place. Now, when I give, it is because I want to give. I do not

expect anything in return. It doesn't matter if the person doesn't say thank you, although I find people nearly always do. They don't even need to notice my giving. When I give now, it comes from a place deep inside me, and in the giving I am connecting with myself. The giving is connected to my heart and there are no strings attached. I believe this is unconditional giving. To me, it feels a bit like unconditional love.

Midway this way of life

*Midway this way of life we're bound upon
I woke to find myself in a dark wood
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.*

Dante

I walk down the passage and into the dining room where the well-wishers are. I am numb with despair. I am dumb with terror. Do they notice? I attempt a smile. I move through the room. I am a skin with nothing inside. I must keep going through the motions. I must not let anybody know. Can they see my emptiness? Can they feel my emptiness? Can I keep it up? How long to go?

In the days leading up to my fortieth birthday I knew there was something very strange happening to me. I had no energy. When I spoke my voice was hollow. Looking back on this time I can now see that many of the structures my life had been built around were collapsing. Having created a life based on what I had grown up believing, consciously and unconsciously, would make me happy, I could no longer find the energy to maintain it.

I had consulted several professionals in the preceding years because of a range of bewildering thoughts and emotions.

At the same time I had physical, mainly gynaecological, problems. Some of the suggestions made to me were to take hormone replacement therapy (HRT), antidepressants, or to look in to my childhood to explain my feelings. I refused HRT, tried antidepressants which helped me manage everyday life, but the concurrent counselling avoided the real issues. In my gut I sensed at the time that these well-regarded professionals were not right for me. However, I was feeling so unsure of myself, so desperate, I didn't trust my judgment.

The day after my fortieth birthday I was referred to a professional who at last listened to me. He accepted my feelings. I gradually came to realise that they were understandable given my stage in life, the type of person I was and the personal world I was in. I started to acknowledge the 'me' under that skin and to create a new personal world. I began the proper work of navigating midlife. Within two years I was divorced after being married eighteen years. This is not to suggest that navigating midlife always leads to such an outcome.

I am a mother of three children aged seventeen, nineteen and 21. I have been a practising psychologist since my mid-twenties. When I studied psychology I learnt very little about midlife and I believe most women (and men) are uninformed and unprepared, as I was, for this time of life. With all that I have experienced personally and professionally I have become fascinated by this important psychological stage.

So often, when people see the word 'midlife' they associate it with the word 'crisis'. This thought was affirmed for me recently. I developed a flyer to advertise a talk I was going to give. When the young manager at my local women's gym saw the title of my talk 'Navigating Midlife' her response was,

‘I don’t think our members would like to come to a talk on the midlife crisis.’ I pointed out that the flyer didn’t mention the word crisis. One of the points I wanted to make in my talk is that we need to stop viewing midlife this way. If we only view midlife as a crisis it will be a time we fear—fear will encourage us to resist this important stage of life rather than embrace it.

Like any developmental stage in life, midlife brings on inner conflict. This ‘crisis’, or conflict within us, produces an internal energy. It is the wish for resolution of this internal conflict that will help us move on to the next developmental stage. In this sense, it is important to not view such conflict as something negative, but as a positive opportunity. Imagine if we were always talking about adolescence as the adolescent crisis. It would colour our thoughts immediately about this stage.

Carl Jung, the respected Swiss psychiatrist, said our lives could be divided into two halves. The primary task in the first half of life is to develop so we adapt to our outer world and thus fit into society. We do such things as study, make a living and form relationships. The challenge for all of us in the second half of life is to adapt to our inner world. That is, to discover who we really are, and then create an environment to suit this unique Self.

While I was working through the earlier stages of my midlife transition I did not have the understanding of Jung’s work on midlife that I have now. In the last few years as I have read more extensively, I have realised that my pattern of development at midlife has fitted in with much of what Jung said. I was often led by my inner voice to the many processes I recount in this book. These were not sought out consciously. Many of these processes I now realise are ones that Jung used himself.

How do we find our way through this bewildering time? Our own answers are within each of us. Our inner voice speaks

to us from our unconscious through images, metaphors and symbols. If we show an accepting and friendly manner to them, they will guide us on our way. When we go 'within'—through meditation, dreams, writing, creative pursuits or just by simply being still—we do find answers that help us find our true Self. Most women at midlife do sense an inner Self. The proliferation of and interest by women in spiritual books, talks and workshops supports this belief.

Finding our true Self, however, only leads to frustration if we can't create a personal world where we can be this Self. This is the midlife task women find most difficult. We struggle with creating a personal world where we can honour our Self.

In our middle to late thirties we are typically at a stage where our lives are busy. We have multiple roles. Children, partners, career, parents, in-laws, siblings and other relatives, friends, children's schools and the community may be drawing on our energy and time. At midlife many of us look at all these responsibilities and feel overwhelmed and caged in by them. The demanding life we were so willing to put hours of time into no longer has the same attraction.

As our inner voice gets more insistent, we look out at this world and wonder, 'Where is there space for me?' Or perhaps, even when there is space we find there is something within that stops us from taking time for ourselves. Many of us have self-denying thoughts that sabotage us when we are trying to make changes. Thoughts such as 'I must not be selfish', 'I must not be demanding', 'I am only worthwhile when I am doing things for others', 'I don't deserve', can be part of us, perhaps at an unconscious level. These thoughts only discourage us from making changes and creating a life where we can be ourself.

Some of us ignore the inner prompting for change. Others notice and remain in a state of inner dis-ease as we continue in our old personal world. Yet, anything other than honouring our Self, our inner voice, will lead to a second half of life full of regrets and inner dissatisfaction. A life that is only half lived. This results in lack of vitality, depression and illness.

We all need support in creating a new personal world and from my experience this support can come from many different directions. I have learnt so much from the people in my life: while talking to old and new friends who are also on the midlife journey; my family; and the many people I have met while attending workshops, retreats and festivals. Knowledge and skills which I have acquired through reading, personal counselling, work as a professional counsellor and developing Personal Development courses while consulting to organisations, have also been invaluable to me in creating my new personal world. I draw extensively on all these resources in this book. I also use personal reflections and case studies to demonstrate and support many of the suggestions made.

Midlife has been by far the most challenging and exciting time of my life. It has been full of so many strong emotions because it has been a journey of change, and as we know, any change—even good change—involves loss. As I have left behind ‘old’ parts of myself, grieved for those parts that I know now will never be, rediscovered parts of myself buried long ago, and discovered hitherto unknown parts of myself, I have gone on an emotional roller-coaster ride. I have felt deep sorrow, anger, despair, boredom and joy and often at a level I have never felt before. I realise we are all so different that for some the profound questions such as ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What do I want in my life?’ may be asked and answered with less

turmoil. For most of us it is not such an easy journey. This is why many choose not to take it. However, if we are willing to take the plunge the rewards are enormous.

Most books about midlife transition have focused on men's lives. Initial research and findings on psychological development at midlife were based on studies using male subjects. When women and midlife have been discussed it has been usually in relation to the 'empty nest' syndrome or menopause which are very limiting ways of looking at a woman's midlife issues. Both ignore her important psychological developmental needs and the difficulties she can face in meeting them.

These days fewer women have children, yet they still experience midlife transition. Midlife transition starts around 35 years of age and can continue until the late forties. Children often now stay on in the family home beyond their mother's middle years. And once again while focusing on the 'empty nest' syndrome, women are being looked at purely in relationship, rather than focusing on their individual psychology.

When I mention to others that I am writing a book for women at midlife, many assume it is about menopause. I point out that midlife transition starts long before most women experience menopause. I also point out that menopause is mainly about physiological change and its effects, whereas I am writing about women's individual psychological development. And difficult as menopause is for some women, seeing it as our main midlife issue ignores the importance of our psychological growth at this stage.

We all experience depression while going through midlife transition. Jung says this sense of loss is a normal psychological response as we experience symbolically the end or death of the first half of life. The feelings and thoughts experienced because

of this grief have to be worked through before the second half of life can be ushered in. With the use of tranquillisers and HRT by women in their middle years, could it be that a normal psychological process is often being diverted into a medical one? Medical interventions may mask the psychological work that needs to be done.

If you are a woman at or approaching midlife, this book is written for you. It is also invaluable for anybody who wants to understand more about the psychology of women, and assist them at this stage of life, such as psychologists, doctors, psychiatrists and counsellors.

The aim of *Navigating Midlife* is to inform you about the psychological importance of the middle years, and to validate the range of thoughts and emotions you will experience around this time. It also includes information and practical, verified strategies that will empower you to find your authentic Self, and to create a new personal world. You can then make the most of the second half of your life.

Part I

What is midlife transition?

During midlife it is natural for psychic energy to be redirected to our inner world to do reflective, inner work.

Lethargy comes upon us for no apparent reason. Things that once interested us no longer hold our attention.

These are inner taps on the shoulder for us to go within, to find our Self, and to search out new meaning to our life.

A woman at midlife transition

We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning, for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.

C. G. Jung

Julie, a woman in her mid-forties, sits opposite me. A mutual friend has recommended me to her. When I reassure her that whatever we discuss will remain confidential, her words come tumbling out.

Julie: I feel trapped, I feel powerless. I liked being looked after. I liked being at home with my children when they were young. And when they went to school I enjoyed studying part-time and finally getting a degree. I felt fine. But now it's different.

Robyn: What do you mean different?

Julie: I've felt down now for a long time. Especially ever since I got a full-time job when I turned 40. I hate the routine of working nine to five and the business ethics of many of the companies I have to deal with. My work doesn't have enough meaning for me.

Money is not enough to keep me going. In the past ten years I've had several bouts of depression and they're coming more often since I started work.

Robyn: Have you talked to anybody before about the depression?

Julie: Yes. When my father died suddenly a couple of years ago I felt so depressed I went and saw my doctor. He referred me to a psychiatrist, and I saw him a couple of times. He gave me some anti-depressants. Dave was really angry with me for going to counselling and then when I told him about the anti-depressants he hit the roof.

One Saturday afternoon as I lay in bed he said to me, 'Get up and stop feeling sorry for yourself.' And so I did. However now the feelings are returning. I feel awful, but I don't want to put anybody out. I don't want to let people down.

Robyn: What do you mean by letting people down?

Julie: I hate criticism and disharmony. When I was a young girl I vowed to myself to never be selfish. I don't want to be selfish and demanding. And I'm scared of the thought of making changes. And I wonder if I make changes will I be happy or more miserable. *(There's a brief pause and then she speaks suddenly.)* I have the most lovely life.

Robyn: What do you mean?

Julie: It looks lovely. I have a hard-working husband, two healthy grown-up children and a nice home. Who am I to kick up a fuss? I feel pathetic compared to my husband and boss. They just keep on going and whenever I seem a bit flat they just tell me to get

on with life. My husband never expresses any feelings.

Robyn: How is your husband's health?

Julie: His health seems fine, however all the men in his family have died of heart attacks in their early 60s. He is so much part of my life I can't imagine life without him. I crave intimacy in my life and yet find it impossible to have it with him.

Robyn: Have you ever thought of leaving him?

Julie: No. After years of trying to change him I've decided he is enough. I can't imagine life without him. I would stay with him even if I knew it would kill me.

Robyn: What do you get from the marriage?

Julie: I love being with him. I feel safe and secure with him and loved by him.

Robyn: How does he make you feel loved?

Julie: Because of what he does for me. But I'd like to make some changes. I've never been involved with our finances. Money scares me. However, in the last few years I have realised that I am 'grown up'. I want some control. I want to plan things. I want to explore options, to see if we could downgrade our housing, get rid of the mortgage and live differently. The children have left home. It's a good time to make a move.

Robyn: Have you talked to Dave about this?

Julie: He gets annoyed when I ask to have the finances explained to me. I would love to be on my own. I need to find me.

Robyn: Do you do anything for yourself away from home and work, something just for your own pleasure?

Julie: No. I've planned to go to yoga and writing classes,

but something stops me. I feel guilty whenever I go to do anything for myself. So I tend to stay around home when I'm not working, yet I would like to do things. Nobody is stopping me.

Robyn: Then what is stopping you?

Julie: If I take time for me I feel as though I am letting others down.

THE POINT OF CHOICE

Julie is typical of a woman at the point of midlife transition in that her world is full of contradictions and bewildering thoughts and feelings. For several years now she has been clinging on to her old world while aware that there is another world that is increasingly enticing. She feels scared. She wonders—could it be better? She says she loves her husband and would never leave him, and in the next breath goes on to say that she would love to be alone. In the past she has wanted to feel secure. Now she wants to explore another way of living. She is beginning to question the vow she made as a young girl never to be selfish. After telling me how miserable she has been for several years, she says she has a most lovely life. She wants intimacy in her life, believes she can't get that from her husband, yet says she would never leave him. She has found money scary and so happily left this up to her husband. She now wants to understand their finances and have some control over directing her life. When expressing her thoughts and feelings she has perceived herself as demanding. She is now realising that she has a right to express herself. She wants to do things for herself, such as go to yoga and writing classes; however, when she attempts to do these she says a wall comes up. Until now she has not wanted to think about what she wanted in life, it has been so

easy to just let others decide. She now wants to make some decisions for herself.

Julie is now at the point of choice. She can decide to stay as she is and remain in the life she has been in, or she can decide to move on, to make changes and take control. And this is the midlife crisis—the actual point of choice. As Anne Brennan and Janice Brewi point out in *Midlife: Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives*:

The real crisis is not the turbulence, the depression, the midlife crazies, as important as these outer signs of it may be. The crisis is: Will I move on? Will I leave behind the first half of my life, which then demands a whole new myth and story for me to live out of, a whole new meaning and way of being.

At this critical stage of midlife we are asking ourselves such questions as:

What is the meaning of my life?

Do I feel fulfilled in my relationships with my partner, my children, my friends, my work and my community?

What is it that I truly want for myself?

What do I truly want for others?

What are my core values? Are they reflected in my life?

What are my talents? Am I using them? Do I know them?

Have I fulfilled my earlier dreams? Do they still have meaning for me?

Can I create a way to live that fulfils my current desires, values and talents?

How suitable is my present life structure?

How might I need to change my present lifestyle to fulfil myself?

During midlife it is natural for psychic energy to be re-directed to our inner world to do this reflective, inner work.

Lethargy comes upon us for no apparent reason. Things that once interested us no longer hold our attention. These are signs for us to go within, to search out new meaning to our life. Women experiencing this lethargy can feel stressed as they try to fulfil their roles in life. They think there is something physically wrong with them. If they consult a doctor they may be prescribed a tonic, antidepressants or perhaps even HRT. In some cases these may be of assistance. However, often the lethargy is there because the woman's body is telling her to take this time out to attend to her psychological needs of personal reflection. Not everyone will be able to make, or choose to make, these necessary changes.

WHEN WOMEN RESIST MIDLIFE TRANSITION

Some women ignore the signs. They hold on to their old life in fear, and as the inner promptings get stronger they become increasingly rigid in their outlook on life. In their forties they will be caricatures of themselves at 30. They will be women struggling endlessly to fix their outer world—their faces, their bodies, their careers and their homes. Or they will be still involved in a never-ending round of activities that on questioning they admit have little meaning for them anymore. In the short term keeping busy may alleviate some of the pain, but in the long term this is to no avail. For the pain these women are trying to alleviate requires them to go within. As they refuse to do this they miss the opportunity to create a life that fosters the development of a strong inner sense of Self. Their lives become increasingly void of joy and meaning.

Some women heed the signs, give up on their old life, yet find it impossible to create a new life. They remain depressed and not engaged in the world for the rest of their lives.

Other women refuse the long, slow process of integration. Instead they have a radical conversion. They discard the identity of the first half of life and all its values, only to quickly convert their life using the opposite set of values. They repress their former life completely and produce just as unbalanced a state as existed before, but in the opposite direction. For example, a woman who has in the past been extremely repressed will radically convert to a promiscuous lifestyle.

WHEN WOMEN EMBRACE MIDLIFE TRANSITION

Some women are open to the challenge of midlife transition and embrace it from when they feel the very first inner promptings. Others resist at first but finally start making changes further into the midlife cycle. These are the women who may experience the transition as more of a crisis. Once a woman embraces midlife transition, she begins to achieve more depth, flexibility and integration. She increasingly has clarity about herself and her approach to life and an acceptance of and flexibility about differences in herself and others. She is busy creating a world that honours her inner yearnings, and is engaged in activities and commitments that foster the development of a strong inner sense of Self.

WHAT CAN JULIE DO?

When Julie first made her appointment she was coming with the aim of exploring how to find a different job. Once we had the first session together, I assessed that changing jobs was not her most immediate need—it could be addressed in the future. She agreed.

Julie enjoys writing. She used to keep a journal. Since starting work she has written very little. Before she left the first

session I suggested to Julie that she find some regular time daily to do some personal writing. This will help her to continue to listen to her inner voice and gradually she will be guided towards what she needs to do. Her inner turmoil and depression are natural as she listens to her inner voice and the questions that need answering. The turmoil and depression will decrease once she starts creating a personal world to honour her Self. She will need to develop and implement skills to help her do this though.

From what Julie is saying, and from what we personally know, it is not easy to change the way we act, especially when we are consequently perceived by others as demanding. People who know us well, who love us, who are familiar with us, may be upset, bewildered and angry, especially if we are behaving in a way that is asking them to also act differently. They want us to stay as we are. We have to be willing to upset others. This is a difficult step, especially for those who have been brought up to believe that they should make others happy, particularly those they are close to. At the moment Julie has thoughts that are stopping her from moving forward. If she is to move forward she needs to start challenging these thoughts. She is aware of some of them. This is a good start.

Julie also needs to develop her skills of self-assertion. Like many girls growing up in the 1950s and 1960s she has been socially conditioned to fit in with the needs of others. She has already completed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a personality type indicator based on Jungian psychology which is explained further in Chapter 13. Her temperament as determined by the MBTI naturally predisposes her to focus on others' needs. As a result she is always adapting her responses, her behaviours, to accommodate others. If she wants to move

forward and take control of her life she needs to adapt her responses to accommodate her own needs and to develop and use assertive skills. This will enable her to express what is important to her. This is going to be another big step for Julie. She will need support. Although of course at the time of midlife the force within her to move forward is strong and so the biggest support can come from within.

When we think of loss, we think of the loss, through death, of people we love. But loss is a far more encompassing theme in our life. For we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. And our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power, illusions of safety—and the loss of our own younger self . . . These losses are a part of life—universal, unavoidable, inexorable. And these losses are necessary because we grow by losing and leaving and letting go. (Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses*)

A metaphor for understanding transition

When you sail you have to adapt to the waves. You can't predict winds or storms; it's a constant adaptation. And life is like that.

Those waves aren't problems, they are opportunities.

A woman at midlife interviewed by Gail Sheehy in *Pathfinders*

Metaphors are like myths or stories. They provide a meaningful framework and picture to help us understand our own experiences. While working as an organisational consultant I often used the 'American Pioneer Journey' metaphor by Nancy Barger and Linda Kirby while facilitating organisational change programs. I used it to assist others to understand the change process. To understand our experience of change at midlife I have developed an Australian journey metaphor, 'The Migrants' Journey'.

Like many other consultants to organisations, I have also used William Bridges' model, explained in his book *Managing Transitions*, to help others understand and move through change. His model is easy to understand and it resonates for many people in relation to their experiences around transition. In this chapter I will first explain his model for managing transitions. I will then develop my journey

metaphor. As you read you might like to think about where you are on your midlife journey.

BRIDGES' MODEL FOR MANAGING TRANSITIONS

By the time we get to midlife we have already experienced many life transitions. Some of these changes are developmental, such as moving from childhood to adolescence. Others involve changes in relationships, career or one of the many other changes we experience in the first half of life.

Midlife is a significant developmental transition in life for it is the time when we have the opportunity to create a life based around our true Self. The way we approach this significant transition will depend on a variety of factors—past experiences, inner resources, outer support, individual personality, personality development and our attitude towards change. Any unresolved grief from the past may emerge and need to be dealt with as we move through the transition. By midlife we have access to a variety of personal strategies that we have previously found useful when moving through change. It is important to draw on these inner resources.

Bridges suggests that when we move through a transition we pass through three stages. The first stage he calls 'letting go of the old'. The next stage he calls a 'neutral zone', when we have left the old way of being but as yet are not embedded in the new. The final stage is when we start sensing the new way of being. Bridges calls this stage 'new beginnings'.

As I have moved through my own midlife transition it has helped me to understand and then accept that the reason I am suddenly feeling 'shaky' is because I have once again entered a 'neutral zone' as I am in the midst of making another change to my life. It might be an external change or it might be internal.

Perhaps I suddenly realise that in a certain aspect I am not who I thought I was. For me, the internal changes, the changes in self-identity, have been the most profound.

The neutral zone is an inevitable, predictable and painful part of any transition. If you think back to changes in your life—leaving home, ending a significant relationship, getting married, having your first child—you will remember the painful feelings of the neutral zone. Feelings of bewilderment, fear and emptiness can pervade our being as the old reality is no longer there and nothing feels solid as yet. And these feelings can be there even when the change is regarded as a positive life choice. For any change, even a good one, requires us to move through these three stages and experience the feelings associated with them.

While we are undergoing transition, we experience a range of emotions. These are a normal grief response to loss and occur to varying degrees any time we experience a change. When we are moving through such a strong transition as midlife, we experience a range of strong responses such as denial, anxiety, anger, fear, lethargy, depression, powerlessness, resignation and finally acceptance.

There is great variety in how we each experience the 'neutral zone'. For some the experience may be brief; for others it is protracted and intense. For some, it happens early in the process; others experience it later. We also can move in and out of the neutral zone over an extended period of time as we gradually make adjustments in self-perception and our personal world. Change always uses up a large amount of personal energy and if we do not look after ourselves physically during this time our bodies may take the toll.

If we do decide to move through midlife transition, the amount of change necessary will in part be dependent on how

much we have been in touch with our true nature in the first half of life. Girls brought up in the 1950s and 1960s were mostly brought up in a highly conformist, post-war environment. We were discouraged from speaking openly and honestly and tended to be compliant both at school and at home. We tended to mould ourselves into a package limited by what was acceptable for our gender.

‘Baby boomer’ girls taking on the challenge of midlife transition have often found the changes in self-perception and in their corresponding personal world to be immense. When there is such a big difference between the old and the new way of being, we can spend a long period of time moving in and out of the neutral zone. We go through a series of changes to gradually get the fit right between our emerging authentic Self and the world we want to create around this new identity.

At midlife transition there is often an initial stage of intense feeling followed by a long period of time, extending over several years, moving in and out of the neutral zone. During this time we get used to the ups and downs and eventually regard the pain and turmoil as a gift, because we know it is ushering in a new insight about our Self and our world.

A METAPHOR FOR UNDERSTANDING TRANSITION—THE MIGRANTS’ JOURNEY

In Australia we are all familiar with the migrants’ journey. People have come from all over the world to settle here. I was born in Australia, and except for spending a couple of years overseas in my early twenties, I have only lived elsewhere for short periods of time, while on holiday. When I was a young girl migrants were called ‘New Australians’.

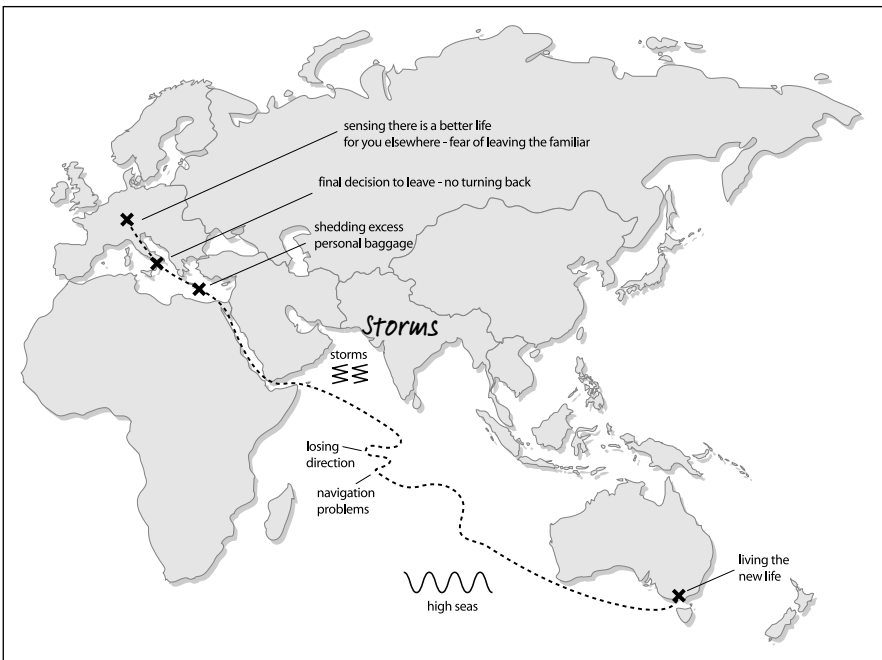
I grew up in a large country town, Geelong, not far from Melbourne. My family lived a postwar middle-class existence. My father was a lawyer. In many ways we led a life of simple pleasures. I had a 'good' education, although looking back now, we had a very narrow outlook on life. Most of the people around me were from an Anglo-Saxon background—we did not mix with migrants from other ethnic backgrounds or appreciate their different customs and perspectives.

At times those around me talked about migrants in a derogatory way. It always mystified me. As a young girl I sensed the magnitude of what it would be like to move your life from one side of the world to the other, especially when you did not have the language. Since I turned 40, many of my new, close friends are women and men who have migrated to Australia. I did not consciously choose them for this reason. Yet now that I have become aware of this fact, I wonder whether it is tied in with the transitional aspect of my life at the time I met them.

Midlife transition is a time of constant change. Midlife development is about change in our perception of Self and then corresponding change in our personal world to respect this new identity. For you, change at midlife might not be as significant as it has been for me. This could be for a variety of reasons. We all respond to change differently. We have different past experiences. Different personalities mean some of us enjoy change, while others fear it. Some of us have strong inner resources; some have encouraging outer support systems. Some of us are living in ways that will require more effort to make significant changes. Some of us have unresolved grief that we must deal with before we can move through such a significant transition. All these differences mean that we can each respond to a

particular developmental stage in very different ways. Yet despite all these differences there is some commonality in the way we experience change. This is why we can all use the same metaphor.

As you read 'The Migrants' Journey' I would like you to imagine where you might be on your midlife journey. Are you still in 'the old country'? Are you on board the boat? If so, how are you responding to all the difficulties along the way? If you have arrived in Australia, what are you doing to acknowledge and use your inner resources for the continuation of your life journey? Once you have read this chapter you can refer to the migration map below and estimate where you are at the moment on your midlife journey.



Migration map

The Migrants' Journey

My story, or metaphor, begins with several families from a town in Europe who in the 1950s decide to investigate immigration to Australia. They are considering buying tickets for an assisted passage. This means the Australian government assists them by paying for most of the voyage. They will come by boat. I want you to imagine you are a member of one of the families. Which way are you likely to respond to the different challenges along the way? As you will read in the next chapter, the internal psychological changes of midlife are thrust upon you. They are unlikely to be something you consciously choose.

There is a meeting in your village. One of the members has collected as much information as possible about Australia. There is not much to go on. There is even less about the assisted passage. Some decide to stay behind, saying they might come later. Although not happy, they are influenced by others who fear change and convince them not to go. Despite the lack of information others decide to go.

Some are drawn to Australia. They believe there will be opportunities to learn and to create a lifestyle that will bring them greater fulfilment. Others are going in desperation. In the past it has been a good life. Now it has no meaning for them. They sort out and pack what they can take. It is a time of mixed emotions. Some feel exhilaration, others deep sadness. Often individuals experience both feelings in a short space of time. As their moods vacillate, tempers get short. Many feel they haven't enough

time. Others are keen to get going. In the back of their minds they hope to recreate much of the good things of their current lives in their new one. They make decisions about what to take. They pack family heirlooms, kitchen pots and pans, clothes and so on. All the things that seem necessary if they are to create on the other side of the world a new life that is familiar. They want to bring the past into their new lives. They have strong feelings as they leave. Many of these are not expressed.

They quickly farewell those who have decided to stay. Those left behind know deep down it is not a satisfying life anymore, but they are scared of change. They would rather stay where they are. There is not enough information about the new country to be sure that it will be better. They envy the excitement on some of their friends' faces as they leave. They can also see the fear. After they have said farewell to their friends, they go back into their homes and sit back feeling secure in their unfulfilling but familiar surroundings.

The others arrive at the docks. They discover they have too much baggage. Hasty decisions have to be made. They quickly prioritise and shed some of their hand luggage.

They are surprised at how cramped their quarters are. As well as sleeping there, they have to store most of their luggage around their bunks. At midday on the first day of the voyage they have a meeting and decide that more 'personal baggage' will have to be shed. There isn't enough room to store it all and still have room for relaxing in the cabin. If they do not get enough rest they will get tired.

They know that people often get ill during the journey. If they are to remain healthy they need to look after themselves. They have to re-evaluate what's important to take to their new life. Once again, priorities have to be reassessed. They have to ask themselves some tough questions:

What is most important to me?

Of what value is this in my new life?

The journey takes a long time. In the beginning listlessness comes over them and they spend much time lying on their bunks. They feel heaviness in their hearts. They feel like doing nothing. They rest as much as they can. They also know they have to deal with day-to-day practicalities and so they attend to personal hygiene, cook some food and generally look after themselves and each other. They walk on the deck when they can, to get some exercise and fresh air. Some also tell stories of the old life. They support each other as they share their sadness. Many had no idea the journey would be so difficult. Some start to wonder if the old life wasn't so bad. Perhaps they have made a mistake. Perhaps they have been too hasty.

After a while they settle into a routine. In their own individual way each is still grieving what they have left behind. Some are angry. They find it difficult to express their feelings and others steer clear of them because of their moodiness. Some have vented their feelings early on and are surprised at how for brief moments they are actually starting to look forward to their new future. Some put on a sunny face. Some are silent. Some have found creative

hobbies. Some lie in their bunks meditating on their future and what it might hold.

During the journey there are many rough patches. Storms and high seas fill them with fear. At other times it appears the boat has lost its direction. During these times they are scared, even the usually brave, optimistic ones. For when the journey is long and you have no idea what it will be like where you are heading, it's hard to remain optimistic about the future. Fear spreads. They do not know what is happening. They feel out of control. They are thinking:

'It's too much for me! Will I ever feel secure again?'

'I wish I had stayed in my old life!'

'I've lost too much!'

'I know nothing about where I'm going. I can't imagine what it will be like. I think I've made a mistake!'

'I wonder if I can find out more information to help me feel more confident about where I'm heading? I'll ask around.'

Finally they arrive. There are still many unknowns. They stay in a migrant hostel for six months while they find somewhere to live. This gives them some opportunity to orientate themselves in their new life. They also need some rest after the tiring journey. They decide to live in Geelong. There is work there. There is housing they can afford.

What the 'New Australians' gradually realise is that the essentials for establishing a new life are the inner resources they had within them before they started the journey, and

those they discovered and developed on their journey out to Australia. They also find strength from others who are, or who have been, on a journey similar to their own. All of these resources continue to be needed in creating their new life.

THE JOURNEY NEVER ENDS

Navigating Midlife: Women Becoming Themselves

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