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WOMEN  
*of a*  
CERTAIN AGE

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THE MIDLIFE  
SEARCH FOR SELF

LILLIAN B. RUBIN

AUTHOR OF EROTIC WARS

# *Women of a Certain Age*



The Midlife Search for Self

by Lillian B. Rubin



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*WOMEN OF A CERTAIN*

Also by Lillian B. Rubin

*Busing & Backlash: White Against White in an Urban School District*

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## *Acknowledgments*



Appearances notwithstanding, no one person and no one research project is ever responsible for a book. Writing, it is true, is a private task, a lonely process. But the creation of a book begins long before the writing of it and is, ultimately, the sum of the author's life and experience. In some fundamental way, then, a book is a social product in the same way as is an individual—both infant and idea born into a culture that shapes growth and development. The infant experiences life through the filter of family and society. The idea for a book and its execution is the product of some combination of those experiences and their integration inside the individual who conceives and writes it. That means that others have a hand in it as surely as if they had held the pen or punched the typewriter keys. So it is with this book.

Many of those others, I don't know. They're just there—in my present as well as my past—part of the background of the world I live in, helping to shape and mold me and my work in a thousand small and large ways. The women's movement—the most recent wave in the long feminist struggle—is one such influence, a movement that has helped me to understand myself and my life in sometimes startlingly new ways. The debt I owe to that movement and to the brave women who first raised their voices is incalculable. It is easy to see that this would have been a different book if it had been written a dozen years ago, before the voices of the women's movement

were heard. More difficult, however, is to understand that it probably never would have been born. For even if I had been able to think clearly about these issues and to write about them all those years ago, who would have published it? Who, at that time, was interested in the problems of women, let alone women at midlife?

There are also others to whom this work owes important debts—family, friends, colleagues who have participated in the ongoing process of thinking, writing, and revising.

The women who worked with me on the project are, of course, an indispensable and integral part of it and of the final product. Barbara Artson and Loni Hancock did a superb job in helping with the interviews. Elaine Draper handled difficult library assignments with exceptional intelligence and creativity. And Kristin Meuser oversaw it all with dispatch, while she also typed everything from the transcripts of the interviews to the final manuscript. We all worked closely, talked together often. In such a situation, ideas fly back and forth so quickly, are accepted and discarded so often that, in the end, claiming or attributing ownership makes no sense. In any case, ideas are, or ought to be, public property—part of the riches of the community. It is in this spirit that our work went on, and in this spirit that I thank them for their contribution, not only to this book, but to my intellectual growth and development.

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and I owe him much. Barbara Grossman turned the often difficult relationship between author and editor into a warm friendship as she edited the final version of the manuscript with tact and sensitivity. And Margery Tippie copyedited it all so deftly that hardly a hackle was raised in the process.

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Then there is my family for whom no words of thanks will ever be enough. My daughter, Marci Rubin, gave me her ear and her heart whenever I needed it, while also reading every word of every draft and responding with unfailing intelligence, sensitivity, and honesty. Her support, both emotional and intellectual, is a mainstay of my life. My husband, Hank Rubin, did all those things for which I have thanked others, and so much more that there is no way to recount his contribution, no words to give adequate expression to either my love or my gratitude. He, above all others, nourishes my life in all of its facets.

Finally, there are the women who opened their hearts and their homes to us, giving more generously of themselves than anyone had a right to expect. This is their story. And it is also their book, for without them it would not exist. They are a wonderful lot—intelligent, competent, sensitive, thoughtful observers of their own lives and of those around them; the finest teachers I could have had. It is to them that I dedicate this book.

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# 1

## *Of Beginnings and Endings*

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I am a midlife woman. Like most women of my generation, I gave over much of my adult life to marriage and motherhood. Like so many others, I awoke one day from the childhood dream that I would be forever cared for—that being some man's wife and some child's mother would occupy my mind and my hands for the rest of my life. And I lay on my couch, listened to music, and wept with despair.

I was thirty-eight years old, already divorced and remarried to a man with whom I expected to spend the rest of my life, the mother of a beautiful fourteen-year-old daughter whom I loved dearly. But it wasn't enough. My daughter was busy with her teenage activities, my husband with his career. And I? I awoke each day wondering how to fill the time, wondering how I'd ever gotten into this fix, wondering how I'd ever get out.

But it was only 1962. The women's movement hadn't yet arrived to reassure me that others suffered a similar anguish. Betty Friedan had not yet given my feelings a voice, had not yet given my problem a name. So I suffered silently and, I thought, alone.

I had until then spent my life in and out of the labor force, sometimes doing small jobs, sometimes bigger ones. When restlessness overcame guilt, I went to work. When guilt won out, I quit. In between working for wages, I worked without wages, often putting in longer days and nights in volunteer

labors than I would ever have permitted myself to do at paid work. But no complaints. It was better than staying at home wondering how to keep useful and busy. And more importantly, those volunteer jobs—for me, done mostly in the political arena where I have a lifelong interest—kept me connected to the world and taught me skills that I was able to turn into reasonably well-paid work in the period of my divorce.

But here I was, married again and living in another city—four hundred miles from the political community I knew so well, four hundred miles from old friends. Four hundred or four thousand—in such moments in life, they are effectively the same. I felt isolated, lonely, and furious with myself. I had a man I loved and a child I loved. What was the matter with me? Why wasn't I happy? What did I expect of life anyway?

In 1962, I had no answers. But shout at myself as loud as I could, rage at myself as much as I would, none of it helped; nothing abated the restless yearning inside me—a yearning that called for something more, something different, in this life of mine.

I tried to go back to the world of volunteers. But it didn't work. Once having been paid to do the same kind of work, it felt odd, awkward, almost disrespectful to myself to work without pay.

But returning to the paid work force had its own problems. Without a college degree, the only way I could get a job that would interest me was through personal contacts—through people who knew me, people who were willing to put aside bureaucratic regulations because they believed in me. And I had left all of them behind when I married and moved those four hundred miles away.

As I recall that time, I'm met with an inner sense of shock—shock, not because I gave up the life I had built for marriage, but because it never occurred to me not to. I remind

myself: It was only 1962, five years before most women even thought such thoughts. And I ask myself: Would I do it differently today? And I ask you: Would you?

I had two choices. One, to pack up and go back to the life I had left. The other, to go to school. Both filled me with dread. Although I had always mourned the fact that I had been too poor to go to college in my youth, at thirty-eight I was scared—scared of competing with talented, well-educated eighteen-year-olds, scared that I'd find I wasn't as bright as I wanted to think I was, as I wanted others to believe. Still, on balance, I suppose the other option looked the worse one. A year later, I went to school—a college freshman at thirty-nine. Eight hard but exciting years later, I left the campus with a doctorate in sociology and postdoctoral training in psychology.

Eight years—years when I was literally buried in my books, years when most family responsibilities took second place to my studies. Even as I write that sentence, I experience again the guilt. And I wonder: Do I really want to let it stand bald and naked that way? Can I really be comfortable telling the world that my family took second place to a term paper? I'm not comfortable, but I'll let it stand because I must if I'm to tell the truth about the price a woman with a family pays when she embarks on such a road.

Eight years of guilt and excitement playing counterpoint to each other—years of finding out who I am, what I can do; years of struggle and years of growth. None of it would have been possible without the support and cooperation of my husband and daughter; none of it possible without their protection, not only from their own needs, but from the criticisms and intrusions of friends and family who warned about the dangers to my marriage, the costs to my child. They were warnings well founded in observation and experience, it's

true. When a woman embarks on such a course, her marriage often *is* under threat. But there was something else underlying these expressions of concern from people whose lives touched mine—something related to their own needs and their own resentments because I was no longer able to give them the time and attention they wanted. How often my brother's voice came across the miles of telephone line, anger masking his hurt: "Can I come to visit, or is my forty-year-old sister too busy doing her homework?" How often a friend responded to my inability to make a lunch date with: "Oh come on, surely you don't have to take it all *that* seriously." How often my mother sighed: "Some people are so lucky; their daughters come every Wednesday." And I suffered, even while I understood. On the one hand, she wanted another kind of life for me, a different kind of old age. On the other, her own need, her own emptiness, was intensely felt. And her fantasy still was that I could fill the void in her.

It's true, as Marya Mannes says: "No one believes [a woman's] time to be sacred. A man at his desk in a room with a closed door is a man at work. A woman at a desk in any room is available."<sup>1</sup> It's true, not only in a room in the family home, but on a college campus as well. Ask any woman who has served on a faculty how often a student will pass a male colleague's office to come into hers with a request. If she asks that student why he or she didn't go to the male professor next door—a man who serves on the same committee, can answer the same question, grant the same request—she's very likely to hear something like: "I didn't want to bother him; he always seems so busy." A man, at work or at home, is the symbolic father, not to be disturbed—too busy, too preoccupied with the large tasks of life. A woman is the symbolic mother—always nurturant, always available—even when she is at work.

It was in 1963 that I started back to school—the only person

over twenty-five in any of my undergraduate classes. It was in 1963 that Marya Mannes wrote of the "long burden of guilt" creative women would bear for their desire to do their work. It was in 1963 that she said: "No woman with any heart can compose a paragraph when her child is in trouble or her husband ill; forever they take precedence over the companions of her mind."

Fifteen years have passed since then—fifteen years of political and social turmoil; fifteen years during which, one by one, different segments of the American society have stood and roared their grievances; fifteen years during which women, too, translated their personal injuries into a social movement. At first this new feminism—the last great shout of the 1960s—was treated as a bad joke, or passed off as the cry of a few malcontents. Now, as the 1970s draw to a close, it is taken seriously enough to merit an articulate, highly organized, and well-financed opposition.<sup>2</sup>

By the time the 1970s were well under way, however, the great force of radical social protest that had powered the decade before had turned inward—at least for that historical moment. That didn't mean, as some commentators have suggested, that the grievances went away, that people forgot their anger and their pain. It meant that, exhausted from the struggle with powerful institutions that resist change so ferociously, they turned inward for R & R. Only, instead of *rest and recreation*, for the activists of the sixties R & R meant *respite and reanalysis*—a reanalysis that sought to understand more firmly how individual consciousness and social institutions interact to maintain the existing structure of social arrangements.

Whatever the initial intent, that turning inward has been capitalized on in the popular commercial culture. The decade of the seventies has become the *Me* decade. Gone, or at least muted, not audible under all the noise, is the old ethos of duty

and responsibility to others—exchanged for detailed instructions on how to look out for “number one.” Dozens of books now appear regularly, all aimed at reminding millions of readers that their primary duty is to self.

Enter the midlife woman of the late 1970s. In its early years, the women’s movement was by, for, and about the young. But these are times in which diffusion—whether in ideas or fashion—works both ways. The styles of the student and the peasant are taken up by the rich; the ideas of the young, embraced by the old. Today’s midlife woman had lived by the old rules—rules that promised kudos, congratulations, and fulfillment of self for giving up her own life to meet her responsibilities to others. Now, in the face of a movement that raises serious questions about her life, she wonders: What was it all about? Now, in the face of a culture that exhorts us all to a concern only for self, she asks: Is that really the kind of life I want for me? For my children? Now, in the face of a departing family and a lifetime of empty days, she worries: What am I going to do with the rest of my life?

It’s a strange time, midlife, perhaps especially for women—a time of endings, and also a time of beginnings. As with all endings, there’s pain, and the sadness of loss. But *this* ending brings with it also relief—relief because a task undertaken is finished, one phase of life done; relief because it presages a beginning.

Beginnings, too, carry with them a complex set of feelings. There’s fear of the unknown, and anxiety about the capacity to meet whatever life’s new challenges may be. And there’s excitement—the excitement of a heightened sense of adventure. Life takes on a new charge, an increased energy; there are new possibilities, perhaps to develop potentialities only dreamed of before. Maybe there’s even a second chance.

The feelings, contradictory as they are, war with each other,



buffeting us about, pushing us first to one side, then to the other—the sadness of the ending, and the relief; the joy of the beginning, and the fear.

Until recently, midlife seemed little more than a way station between youth and old age, not worthy of much thought or discussion. Then, suddenly, it became a crisis—a moment of high drama when we supposedly struggle with the recognition of our own impending mortality, when life's unfinished tasks loom large and painfully in our consciousness. In fact, it's neither way station nor crisis, but a stage in the life cycle like any other—a time of life with its own dilemmas, its own tasks, its own pleasures, its own pains.

How is it, then, that we seem to swing so readily from not acknowledging its existence to a loud and insistent concern with midlife as a crisis? How is it that the very *idea* of a midlife transition comes upon us as a sudden discovery? The answer lies in the fact that middlehood as a stage in the family life cycle—a period when the tasks and responsibilities of earlier phases of adulthood are done—is a relatively recent part of human experience, the product of the closely intertwined biological and cultural changes of our century.<sup>3</sup>

Appearances notwithstanding, for women, at least, midlife is not a stage tied to chronological age. Rather, it belongs to that point in the life cycle of the family when the children are grown and gone, or nearly so—when, perhaps for the first time in her adult life, a woman can attend to her own needs, her own desires, her own development as a separate and autonomous being. Thus, the mid-thirties career woman, married two years and about to bear her first child is not concerned with midlife issues. She's worried about diapers and feedings, about hard days and sleepless nights, about how she'll continue her career, about whether she can manage motherhood and wifedom without sacrificing one to the