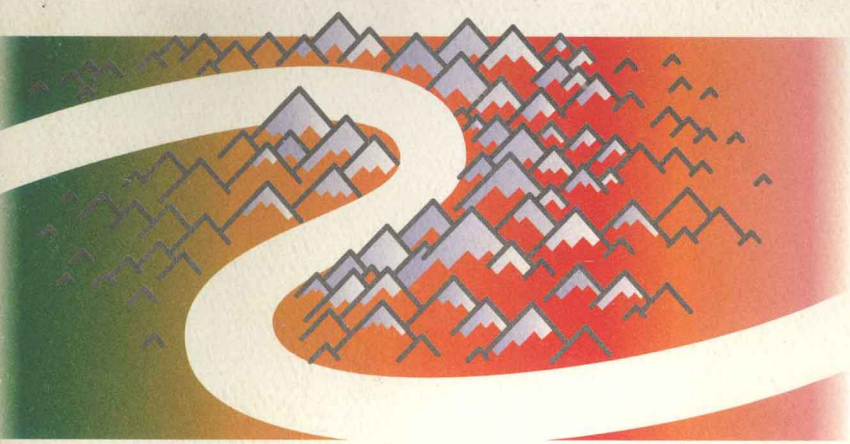
GAIL SHEEHY

new passages



mapping your life across time

NEW PASSAGES

MAPPING YOUR LIFE ACROSS TIME

GAIL SHEEHY

RANDOM HOUSE NEW YORK

Published in the United States by Random House, Inc., New York, and
simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sheehy, Gail.
New Passages : mapping your life across time / Gail Sheehy.
p. cm.
Sequel to: Passages.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-394-58913-0
1. Adulthood. 2. Maturation (Psychology) 3. Socialization.
4. Middle aged persons—Psychology. 5. United States—Social conditions—1980– I. Sheehy, Gail. Passages. II. Title.
III. Title: New Passages.
HQ1064.U5S52 1995
305.24—dc20 94-43998

Manufactured in the United States of America on acid-free paper
2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3
First Edition
Book design by Lilly Langotsky

ALSO BY GAIL SHEEHY

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THE SILENT PASSAGE

NEW PASSAGES

FOR CLAY, MAURA, AND MOHM

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I first began research on the new passages of middle life about seven years ago. By *middle life* I refer to the mid-forties to mid-sixties, the most unrevealed portion of adult life. The idea was to map out the predictable crises of this territory—an extension of my long fascination with the adult life cycle—but after interviewing the first seventy-five women, I had to pull up short. I had come upon a black hole of ignorance and denial, the silence called menopause. Before I could hope to understand the larger issues of middle life for contemporary women and men, I had to try to confront the cultural taboo surrounding the Change of Life. So what was meant to be a chapter in this book took on a life of its own.[1]

No time to make a passage myself—or so I thought. People were ready to have the conversation about menopause, and *The Silent Passage* became a conversation piece. Suddenly I was in constant demand to make speeches to help spotlight the many new women's health centers sprouting up across the country. It was a thrill to feel that one was in the right place at the right time, engaging with one's culture. But my own life was overtaken by the full-time job of publicity and public speaking.

At the peak of this razzle-dazzle of pleasant activism, my publisher threw a book party to celebrate *The Silent Passage*'s reaching number one on *The New York Times* best-seller list. I felt almost like an impostor. This book wasn't even meant to be! (In fact, when my husband, Clay Felker, first suggested that I expand on the magazine article I had written about menopause

for *Vanity Fair,* I scoffed, "Oh, really, who would want to read a whole *book* about menopause?")

On the night of the party we were swept up in a gala outdoor garden dinner at an Italian trattoria. It was a mild summer evening. New York's literati gabbed with health professionals at checkered tables beneath trees giddily strung with lights. The trees gave way in places to pale lavender sky and faint stars and the suspended evening of endless possibilities that is June. I was a hundred feet off the ground. A wise friend of mine caught me in midair and whispered a warning. She could see the breathless half-finished hellos and airborne kisses, the jittery dance of narcissism.

"Be careful, you're becoming stress-addicted," said Pat Allen.

She was right. I had been performing for the previous year as a Little Ms. Menopause. As satisfying as that time was, I had become caught up in the world of externals and increasingly disconnected from what was real and important. The more public the expectations, the more compulsive I tend to become about trying to do it all perfectly, and the easier it is to be thrown by the slightest criticism. All the effort goes into keeping the show going, twenty-four hours a day. Stress builds up; body and mind almost never completely rest. It's a swell antidepressant. But losing myself in hyperactivity is also a classical way to avoid engaging a necessary passage.

And there were now issues I very much wanted to avoid. For one, the news that the husband of a dear friend of mine was battling cancer. When we are on the threshold of a new stage, we are particularly vulnerable to twinges about aging, and 50 is certainly a threshold. When a friend around our own age stares back at the beast, it gives death a human face. The marker event that makes our mortality suddenly feel so real and frightening does not have to concern death or happen to us directly. It can be the abrupt independence of a last child, the enfeeblement of a vigorous parent, a friend who slips from what seemed an unassailable position of success into has-been status and despair.

Since ultimately death cannot be avoided, the real question then becomes: How shall we live the rest of our lives? A hundred years ago that question seldom came up for people beyond their mid-forties. Their proper expectation upon approaching age 50 was to be dead.[2] Today, even though we know intellectually that we can expect to live much longer, our view of life beyond the mid-forties is still colored by mental snapshots of our mothers or fathers at that age: "My mother looked tired and, yes, *old,* at fifty," or "My father had his first heart attack at fifty; he was never the same man."

The first glimpses of a midlife perspective usually begin to startle us in the middle of our thirties. Time starts to pinch. I was in my mid-thirties when I began the research for *Passages,* a book about the adult life cycle that was published nearly twenty years ago (in 1976).[3] It proposed that we continue to develop by stages and to confront predictable crises, or passages, between each stage of adulthood. At that stage in my own life I saw the mid-thirties as the halfway mark, the prime of life. The years between 35 and 45 I called the Deadline Decade, as if we had only until our mid-forties to resolve the crisis of midlife.

I stopped before 50 in *Passages.* Frankly I found it impossible to imagine myself at that age. Like so many others of my generation, I couldn't imagine life beyond 50, and I certainly couldn't bring myself to consider it as a time of special possibility or potential. It had always conjured up moms who slipped into depression or some slope-shouldered fellow sitting in a fishing boat while the world goes by. It was supposed to be a time of winding down. The midlife crisis had long since blown over, and if one hadn't confronted it by then, there wasn't much family or societal support for taking the risk at 50. Careers were settled; one was either coasting toward retirement, resigned to failure, or somewhat patronized as a has-been success. Children were launched. Idealism had faded. Learning was completed. Love was about cuddling or rocking grandchildren, certainly not associated with computer dating or uninhibited sex. Since there were no instructions for what a woman should be after she has finished making babies and getting by on her physical charms, it might just be a sudden Dorian Gray transformation. My own dark fantasy was I would go to sleep and wake up one morning to the *Today* show and there would be Willard Scott, saluting my picture: "What a beyootiful little lady, a hundred and one years young!"

Given Western societies' revulsion against middle age, the map of the youth culture leads us to the edge of the known world, whereupon it simply drops off. We have been as ignorant about what lies on the other side as were Columbus and the early explorers of the New World. It requires a leap of faith, we are told. But when we do take the leap, trusting in the possibility of a new beginning, we find ourselves hurtling along the edge. On the other side we will be something else, but we have no idea what. It may be too frightening to look over the edge. Just as the early explorers assumed the world was flat, we have assumed the other side of youth is a sheer drop or, even worse, a slow, wasting decline.

That's the way I thought it was; that's the way most of us thought it was. We would get old in much the same way our parents did. The conventional

maps in our minds and the timetables that go with them can keep us imprisoned in old ways of thinking about life beyond youth.

During the research for this book a voice kept nagging at the back of my conscious mind: *There is something deeper, richer, and much riskier that you must try to grasp.* It went way beyond menopause. There was a new and tantalizing dynamic out there, and it was happening just where we step to the edge of the known adult world. What I was discovering was a whole unexplored territory in the middle that does not fit at all within the confines of the old map of youth and age. Surprise! The second half of adult life is *not* the stagnant, depressing downward slide we have always assumed it to be.

Wonderfully zesty women in their forties, fifties, and sixties came up to talk to me after my lectures. I kept asking them how it felt to be here, now, on the cusp of radical changes in the life cycle. Whether they talked about the degrees they were studying for, or the daringness of launching new businesses or digging up fossils in China, or the alcoholism or anger or anxiety they had shed, or the live-out lovers they were enjoying instead of remarriage, they all seemed to be exhilarated about starting over.

The more I lectured on female menopause, the more I kept getting the same question: Is there a *male menopause*? So I turned it around to ask the women themselves, "What do *you* think?" Most thought there was. It was worth investigating. When men at this stage slip into chronic depression, or start desperately chasing after girls their daughters' ages, or throw over careers they have spent lifetimes building to start from scratch in businesses they know nothing about, wives and friends mutter, "He's just acting crazy." That is only because we haven't tracked what is really going on under the surface.

The only way to find out how men felt about being in their forties, fifties, and sixties was to get them to talk about it. Not easy, since most men over 40 were conditioned early by their fathers to cauterize their feelings. At first, when I tried to interview some of the same men who had eagerly contributed woeful tales of their wives' Change of Life, they swallowed their tongues. "You are now entering the *inner sanctum,*" I was warned.

And so, whenever I was scheduled to make a speech in another city, I began asking the sponsoring institution to help me set up a group interview with eight to ten men of varied backgrounds. None of the men who agreed to join my focus group in Detroit, for example, would be caught dead on a weekend in the woods looking for his Wild Man. They were shaped by a tough industrial city and heavy ethnic conditioning to be "real" men—i.e., stubborn, cocky, hard to read, convinced that they must remain forever

strong, perpetually virile, providers and protectors of their families, and without doubts or needs or fears that require expressing their feelings. To join any sort of men's group still held a stigma.

"There's no way I'm going to be able to get eight to ten men for this type of project," said Suzanne Schut, director of public relations for St. Joseph's Mercy Hospital in Macomb County, Michigan. Gamely she reached out for a varied group of men and sent each of them a Life History Survey I had developed along with a copy of the *Vanity Fair* article I had written titled "Is There a Male Menopause?" Overnight the men called back. "I was shocked," said Suzanne. "They really *want* to come." These were questions they had been asking themselves. Ray Kudzia, a high school music teacher, said candidly, "The lady author, I don't know her, but I'm looking forward to talking to the other *men.* They may be feeling the same way I'm feeling, but we don't talk about it."

I found the same hunger wherever I called together men's groups. From Orlando to Rochester to Seattle, regular guys were ready to strip away most of their pretenses to search together for ways to change the model of masculinity—to move beyond the stud or jock prototype of youth—in preparation for the new stages ahead. I read it as an unstated phenomenon, a consequence of all the focus on women. Men have become sensitized to *what they're missing* in middle life. And many I interviewed are excited about reinventing themselves.

As I read over the transcripts of the hundreds of life history interviews I had done with women and men in middle life, a new theme, one of surprise and rebirths, was recapitulated loud and clear. More and more people were beginning to see there was the possibility of a new life to live, one in which we could concentrate on becoming better, stronger, deeper, wiser, funnier, freer, sexier, and more attentive to living the privileged moments, even as we were also getting older, lumpier, bumpier, slower, and closer to the end.

Of course, for some of us time will run out before we can really engage or enjoy the second half. No one can predict catastrophic illness, accidents, financial crashes. Whatever the future holds, however, the present still vastly enlarges the boundaries of vital living for those moving into the second half of life.

But how to write about it? How to *believe* it? I had my own private doubts and fears to overcome.

On my mind more or less constantly was the "sentence" passed on the friend I mentioned earlier. Up to the day her husband went into the hospi-

tal for "routine" exploratory surgery, Peggy Downes, a professor and avid mountain climber, had been enthusiastically planning a trip to Provence with her partner of eighteen years, Chuck, to celebrate the freedom of an empty nest. Instead, overnight, they became locked in a battle with prostate cancer. Their ordeal haunted me.

One night after a phone call to Peggy I had a horrible nightmare. I began to suspect that my intimate involvement with Peggy's ordeal wasn't just about empathy for a friend. Most of us face some crisis in our forties or fifties that will force us to rethink and reflect on how we are going to live the second half. The longer we put off that task of reflection, the more everything, even the mundane, begins to remind us of death. The private feelings I was having were spilling over into the intellectual questions I was trying to confront in my research. My fear was a shadowy thing, while up ahead I could faintly glimpse a lighter, brighter place, if only I could reach it. But I had to step to the precipice and deal with the reality of my own age, my own place in life, my own mortality.

I prayed that Peggy and Chuck would come out of their dark combat with the spiritual energy for a renewal of growth. But there was a signal here for me too—I recognized it now—that a new passage had to be made, a *conscious* shift to another stage of life.

Call Peggy, I commanded myself.

But I didn't want to know. My construct for incorporating her experience was still too fragile. Like most people in middle life, I was in the process of shifting from searching for answers in the concrete to searching in the transcendent. My subjective definition of success was changing as well. The arrogance of possibility and the fiery excitement that fueled my twenties through my early forties were best expressed in several bracing lines of poetry by Goethe that I used to keep pinned up over my typewriter in those years:

> What you can do, or dream you can, begin it,
> Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.

It spoke to the coltish will that had always worked for me before. But now my goals were changing. I was coming to a plateau in the long dance of achievement that had begun in school and continued throughout my career. I was no longer so eager to please or so willing to allow my sense of well-being to be determined by the world's evaluation of my performance. There was a yearning in me for a different sort of tempo, almost as if my personal

journey and my professional curiosity were coming together in something of a magical unity. Writing *The Silent Passage* had been only the beginning of that journey of integration.

Concentrated work on the sequel to *Passages* would demand discipline and solitude and a commitment to turning inward for a couple of years. I would have to walk away from my public platform. Another priority would be to get away with my husband every six weeks, if only for a weekend of walks through nature conservancies. The work would still get done, but the energy had to come from a different place, so we both would be free to proceed with joy into the playfulness of the next stage.

Eventually a plan took shape: to tie up all the outstanding obligations and then drop out for the month of February. I felt pulled toward a wholly unfamiliar environment. Another friend, Ellen McGrath, generously invited me to share her office in a half-empty resort town in Southern California where I could watch the waves roll in. She provided a touchstone of affectionate support while I dropped the masks and rituals of my predictable and recently very public life. It was necessary to let go of external demands and deadlines, relax the old habits of defense, even dispense with most of the rituals of grooming. The time had come to pare down to essentials and try to get back in touch with my inner voice.

All the journals I had kept over the past few years and notes I had made during a weekend seminar on "The New Older Woman" were in a little zippered suitcase, stuffed under the bed. In this unhurried place on the Pacific, where no one would know to call me, I could unzip it and open up the journals and notes—along with the fears stirred in my unconscious from sharing Peggy's experience—to see what Furies would fly out. What unfinished business did I need to digest, put to rest, draw from? I was expecting to brace myself to accept the inevitable decline at this time of life. It would be frightening and sad. I would probably cry a lot and come out the other side with the crisp, dispassionate composure of the Older Woman.

I ran on the beach every morning, as I have walked or run on winter beaches all my life, hoping to work up to a plunge in the Pacific. Why not? I have been comfortable in the water since I was a tadpole no more than two and a half, when my mother and father tossed me back and forth in the shallows of Long Island Sound until I learned to swim. But I felt a little tentative about these waves. At high tide they reached up to slap at the rock cliffs behind the strip of beach. I went back to reading over my journals.

In the third week of my retreat I got up the nerve to call Peggy again. A new tumor had been found. Chuck faced another operation, another phase of radiation, possible chemotherapy. But there was almost a lilt to Peggy's voice. Her husband had decided to forgo aggressive treatment. They would celebrate the life they had left and go to France anyway.

That morning my old nightmare turned into a daymare. I tried my usual technique. I would write the fear out of me. I sat down to start writing Peggy's story—and froze. All the information was there, but I couldn't transform it to give her experience to others. Peggy's story paralleled the very psychic drama that I was living. I too was running along the edge. The structure of my own world—the world of still-youngness where we can take our health for granted and throw ourselves at life, unprepared for inconsolable losses—was disintegrating. Since the thought of our own death is too terrifying to confront head-on, it keeps coming back in various disguises.

When I watched the sea somersault in all its exuberant energy, instead of thinking what I used to when I was younger, which was *I can't wait to dive through the waves,* now I thought of drowning. Realistically I was sure I could still run into the waves and tumble inside those watery barrels; hadn't I often done so as an adult? But now suddenly I wanted to take no chance of losing my footing. Even though there was a comfortable expanse of sand between me and the rocks, I had the sense that if I looked away for even a moment, the beach could be swallowed by a sudden riptide. I would be smashed against the rocks.

My irrational fear of the waves could be explained by the fact that I totally identified with Peggy's travails, but there was something larger, even mythic, about the struggle I was having with those wild and vengeful waves. They represented everything that can overpower us and take away what we love. I thought of myself and my husband as among the lucky ones. *You think you made it,* those waves seemed to be saying, *but we are going to swallow you up too.*

In the face of the randomness of life and death, could I get away with asserting the promise of a rebirth in the second half?

One morning, while I was off guard, a wave caught me and knocked me down. I was startled, stingingly wet, yes, but not frightened: That was the surprise. It had been a gentle shove, like that of a playmate. Soft, soapy foam gurgled around me, and I felt suddenly girlish. I looked back out at the big waves and saw them as white-winged, inviting: *C'mon in and play with us; we won't hurt you. Dive right through us. You'll see. You'll come out the other side.*

All at once I realized, No, this wasn't about decline! Our middle life is a progress story, a series of little victories over little deaths. Surprise! We *can* go ahead. There is resurrection in life, and it is all right to say so.

It was an Aha! moment. Virginia Woolf called such little epiphanies "moments of being," when a shock pulls the gauzy curtain off everyday existence and throws a sudden floodlight on what our lives are really about. There *is* another side to this mountain. One has to consider: *Have I conserved enough strength for the trip? Will it be easier or harder? More fun or a pale replay?* It was time to go into training for the journey. But now I felt an inward trust. I could be creative again.

I dived into the cold waves and came up on the other side, laughing.

As I was dressing to go out to Sunday brunch, the central idea for the book flooded into my mind. Millions of people entering their forties and fifties today are able to make dramatic changes in their lives and habits, to look forward to living decades more in smoothly functioning bodies with agile minds—so long as they remain open to new vistas of learning and imagination and anticipate experiences yet to be conquered and savored.

So there it was. The challenge for me, the anchor in this sea of Second Adulthood, is a rebellious purpose—to redefine middle life and put out the word: This is a gift.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GAIL SHEEHY, the author of eleven books, is best known for her landmark work *Passages* and the book that broke the silence about menopause: *The Silent Passage*.

Ms. Sheehy is also a political journalist and contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*. The mother of two daughters, she divides her time between New York City and Berkeley, California, where she lives with her husband, publisher and editor Clay Felker.

ABOUT THE TYPE

This book was set in Centaur, a typeface designed by the American typographer Bruce Rogers in 1929. Centaur was a typeface that Rogers adapted from the fifteenth-century type of Nicholas Jenson and modified in 1948 for a cutting by the Monotype Corporation.