

# Love at Mid-Life

by Dolah Saleh

*"Each of us stumbles upon the major issue of mid-life somewhere in the decade between 35 and 45. Though this can also be an ordinary passage with no outer event to mark it, eventually we all confront the reality of our own death. And somehow, we must learn to live with it." Gail Sheehy (Passages, Predictable Crisis of Adult Life, 1976)*

Ask anyone the first thing that comes to mind upon hearing the expression mid-life crisis, and you will get some interesting responses. "Men," one 41-year-old mother said. "Money," responded a 50-year-old single woman with two almost independent sons. In a word, "unnecessary," says a 50-year-old man, married for over twenty years to someone who is very likely his best friend. I heard things like "second adolescence," "getting fat" and stereotypical responses such as "an attempt to recapture youth." It began to sound circumstance-dependent, demonstrating the conventional wisdom that an individual's perception is the individual's reality.

But then I realized. Perhaps I had predisposed my respondents when I used a judgmental term like "crisis."

What if I had simply said, "mid-life?" Would that alter the type of responses I received?

Well, sort of. I heard "age 40 something," "transition," "baby boomer" and "life change... crisis." Okay, so we think of mid-life as quite literally the middle of our life span\_ here and a time for some change, or at least to consider the status of our lives thus far. Have we done well?

Do we like where we are, and if not, what are we going to do about it? Reassessing the meaning of our lives is almost an inevitability at some point, is it not? But is a crisis inevitable?

There is undoubtedly a negative connotation associated with the word crisis, but the truth is that when we consider the Oxford definition of a decisive moment, a turning point,

a "crisis" could be a very good thing. Yes, it is also a time of danger or great difficulty but this could translate to a challenge and that is not necessarily bad either.

Some experts concur. The middle years are a relief, actually, they tell us, a time when we are willing and able to let go of external concerns and live the life we were always meant to live with our internal focus. And if you can include yourself among those individuals who have reached the age of 35 to 45 only to feel that they have failed to live their life in the truest reflection of who they really are, then you know exactly what the experts mean.

Relationships at mid-life So how do relationships fare in these middle ages? Does it depend on the length of time you have been together (i.e., fifteen-twenty years versus just starting) or is there some other factor to determine whether or not to expect `changes'? I did have two rather stereotypical stories relayed to me during the course of my inquiry into the subject of midlife crisis. Both women believed their husbands to have undergone a crisis beginning somewhere around the period of late 30s, early 40s. One couple had no children and had experienced the death of the husband's parent. Both men felt a strong urge to end or at least leave the marriage as it had been for over twenty years. In the end, my guess is that neither of these men had the enduring feelings that make marriage

work in the first place, and-when enough time passed and perhaps as they faced their own mortality made a conscious decision to make a change while there was still time. I think that both women would have remained in the marriage for all time, but they have both made peace with what happened. Neither woman holds either man solely responsible-even as both men went on to have relationships with younger women, one marrying someone twenty years his junior and is today a 50-something-year-old dad of three very young children.

Again, was the dissatisfaction obviously felt by these two men a function of their unique circumstances? Had they married with a better self-knowledge, would that have altered the outcome? Whatever the answers might be, we can deduce that they have chosen to be true to themselves now, and hope that they have made a change that is meaningful for them.

One might speculate about the women involved in these two situations. Is it possible that part of their ability to make peace is a function of some sort of tacit acknowledgment? Can a marriage that is not good for one of the partners be good for the other? Perhaps these men really saved these women the trouble (and/or guilt), and actually made it easier for them. Today, both appear pleased with the outcome and would never return to the way it was in their marriage. Does this tell us that the one to make the move is the more courageous of the two?

It does take courage to conquer the fear associated with change, particularly in ending a long-term relationship. In her timeless bestseller, *Passages, Predictable Crisis Of Adult Life* (1976), author Gail Sheehy

wrote about the inevitability of some discomfort, even "pain" in transitioning from one "adult stage to another and says that it is all about our willingness to live abundantly. We were born to learn and experience and grow, she says, and this sometimes means taking risks. being temporarily uncomfortable. Self-discovery is a dynamic process. we know, so change is unavoidable. (Sheehy now has an update, *New Passages, Mapping Your Life Across Time* (1996), in which she defines mid-life as the middle 30s, early 40s, when we are confronted with the terrifying "arithmetic of life.") Sheehy's presentations of classic themes bring us important sociological thought.

"When I had journeyed half of our life's way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray." -Dante

In my own work as a career transition counselor, I came across hundreds of individuals between the ages of 35 and 55 who clearly were face to face with a life change event. Most looked upon it as an opportunity to decide if the type of work they had been doing accorded with who they were as individuals-their unique needs and interests. The majority gave more serious thought to the idea of meaningful work than they had when originally embarking on a career path, back in their late teens and early 20s. What I found, interestingly enough, was that the obvious positive correlation between those who had selected work that was particularly suited to them and thus had a higher level of fulfillment

was most often augmented by success in their personal lives. This led me to question the criteria with which one selected their careers. Was it similar to that used to select a mate, i.e., were they listening to their hearts instead of their heads? Did these folks know something early on that most of us did not or was it pure serendipity?

Fulfilling careers-successful relationships?

I also came across a book during this time by Marsha Sinetar entitled, *Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow* (1987), in which the author wrote about the difference between living unconsciously and living consciously, something she called "Right Livelihood." Sinetar urges her reader to choose work that is meaningful to them. She discusses the high price we pay when we fail to listen to our inner selves, that our entire life needs to be an outward expression of our inner selves in order for us to be happy and "right."

She writes, "each of us must eventually submit to the meaning and purpose of life as we are destined to live it from within ourselves, even

when such submission calls for a sacrifice of unfulfilled potential which may seem to us a personal loss or defeat."(p. 36)

We might well feel "defeated" as we take a stand in favor of who we are and what we need, as we make our conscious choices that may involve major changes in lifestyle and breakups of families. But we also can not go on living a life that someone else has designed for us and feel happy and fulfilled. It is no wonder that so many relationships do come into close focus at this juncture as both people feel the physical changes of time. And while women are confronted with the loss of reproductive capacity, men are feeling a loss of their own virility. Family responsibilities may be at their peak, including the care of older parents, exacerbating already stressful lives opening up to feelings of dread, disappointment and restlessness in this middle age time frame. Peggy Lee's question "Is that all there is?" may be a whimper that slowly creeps into our consciousness, but if the foundation of our primary relationship is weak or cracked, the whimper turns into an unrelenting cry until it gets our attention.

Building on success.

And what if our foundation is solid? Then, I believe that whatever issues a couple confronts along the way can and will be resolvable. They will take strength and support from one another and find a way to attend as a unit. The transition or passage into the next adult stage, as Sheehy calls it, could be smooth and even fun.

Perhaps if we lived our lives the way they ought to be lived instead of back<sup>w</sup>ard<sup>d</sup> we wouldn't get to middle age and panic because we would own the contentment of having lived this "right livelihood" as Sinetar calls it. We are so often caught up in our early years with getting and having more "stuff" because we think that will allow us to do the things that should ultimately make us happy. Instead, when we know who we are to begin with and we embrace that, we are sure to do the things in accordance with our authentic selves that will ultimately bring happiness. The challenge always is, however, how do we get that information early enough and elude all the turmoil and disruption?

"What is life? ...It is about loving and being loved ...it is about enjoying the ride."-Harold Kushner

This is what I have learned. A mid-life crisis is not only not inevitable, it probably is completely escapable. Making conscious choices is the only way to avoid regrets. Living authentically does not need to be reserved for the religious few or the lucky; it is entirely within your reach, only a decision away.

Disruption in the middle years could be a good thing. We could change for the better, become stronger, truer to ourselves, and thus happier. The sense of urgency could catapult us into doing great things. We are definitely wiser, so we can share our wisdom with the world in whatever way that makes sense for us.

If your work is dissatisfactory to you, strongly consider a personal (re)assessment and transition into meaningful work. Know that you

have a "soul companion," as James Hillman wrote in *The Soul's Code* (1996), who knows what you were meant to do. Heed your calling because, whether you believe it or not, you have one and it is not going away. If you are not married in accordance with who you are, either engage in therapy to discover why you came together in the first place and if there is good to be salvaged, then rediscover that connection and begin with the foundation of friendship. If it was not good to begin with, and you can neither make it good nor want to do so, then part lovingly. It may be useful to think of your partner's behavior as not consistent with the way you choose to live your life.

Finally, give your authentic self permission to act in your own best interest and remember that while you may not have control over what happens, you will always be able to choose how to respond. I also know that we are not afraid to die, we are afraid of having not lived-and that is an individual definition.

"In the final analysis, we count for something only because of the essential we embody, and if we do not embody that, life is wasted:' -C. G. Jung

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