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Midlife: Crisis or Opportunity?

Finding purpose as you navigate the transitions and challenges of midlife



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Introduction

Am I Really *That* Old?!

By Kelli B. Trujillo

In my daughter's collection of picture books is an old "Little Critter" book I'd purchased as a gift for my own mother when I was in second grade. *Happy 35th Birthday, Mom!* I'd scrawled in my awful handwriting. Then, what surely made her feel great (ha!), I wrote: *Don't worry, Mom. If you think you're old, Mrs. Hulahan [my teacher] is 40!!!!!!!*

I remember thinking, in my eight year-old way, that my birthday message was quite encouraging. Now, in my mid-thirties myself, I can only roll my eyes and imagine my mother's feelings as she read those words. I'm sure she chuckled good-naturedly . . . but it's likely my note struck a nerve as well.



Midlife: Crisis or Opportunity?

Am I Really *That* Old?!

Though there are many joys that come with aging, there are many sorrows, fears, and pressures too. Somewhere after 30, most of us stop really celebrating our birthdays. Year after year, we groan and wonder, *am I really that old?*

Along with the increasing digits of age come increasing challenges: keeping romance alive in a marriage that's now spanning decades; facing off with the physical realities of midlife like perimenopause or menopause, graying hair, increasing wrinkles, and an uncooperative metabolism; parenting teenagers and then facing the stark reality of an empty nest; dealing with boomerang children who've re-entered the briefly-empty nest; and caring for aging or ailing parents.

With all of these pressures, it's no wonder that many women feel an ongoing sense of crisis during midlife: *What has my life become?* They wonder. *Who have I become?*

But along with these difficulties, midlife can also bring many exciting opportunities: the chance to "reinvent" ourselves—to reevaluate who we want to be in life and how we want to use our talents and abilities to make a difference in the world. Even the hardships of midlife can become meaningful avenues of growth as women transform empty nests into ministry hubs or grab hold of the opportunity to view caretaking as a way to serve God.

In this TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN download, we'll first unpack some of the difficulties surrounding midlife with articles that deal frankly with issues like menopause and marriage. Then we'll consider together the stories of women who've seized midlife as a stage to identify their passions and minister to others.



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What will the midlife years be for you? A crisis? Or a time of transition into meaningful ministry, spiritual growth, and a confident self-worth? As you read these articles and explore God's Word, my hope is that he'll speak directly to you about his plans for this critically important stage of your life.

Grace,

Kelli B. Trujillo

Managing Editor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN downloads,
Christianity Today International



Leader's Guide

How to use “Midlife: Crisis or Opportunity?” for a group study

“Midlife: Crisis or Opportunity?” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**



Will Your Romance Last

With God's help, it's possible to rebuild trust—even after a painful betrayal.

by Louis McBurney

Recently, my wife, Melissa, and I were going through our wedding album. As we sat in front of the fireplace and looked at the photos of ourselves as 23-year-olds, we caught our breath.

Who are those kids? we wondered. *And what on earth were they doing?*

We spent the next hour going through the wedding photos with lots of laughs and pleasant memories. When we were done, we felt glad that after 41 years we're still together to share such a moment. We're keenly aware of how unusual that's getting to be.



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Melissa and I work with couples, many of whom have trouble remembering what brought them together and what happened to their joy. How did the magic go out of the romance?

Life phases

If you stop to think about it (which most couples don't), it's not surprising that newlyweds begin to drift apart. Throughout life, we move through phases. These phases call for continual reassessment and renegotiating to the marriage "contract" we made when we first got married.

One of the most common issues that slowly erodes our marital foundation is the inevitable change that accompanies aging. I'd say "maturing," but that's optional. Aging isn't. When most couples exchange their vows, that commitment to being married with all the rights and privileges are foremost in their minds. They've had some form of courtship, are seeing what they want to see in each other, and truly expect to live happily ever after.

But after the honeymoon bliss, a marriage begins to move through the following phases:

The establishment phase. This is when couples focus on what will make them competent members of the culture, such as proving themselves in a chosen career, setting up a house, or beginning the lifelong job of parenting. While these are worthwhile pursuits, they can be barriers to intimacy, causing couples to disengage from each other.



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The midlife phase. Once couples have worked their way through establishment, they hit that dreaded midlife crisis. It isn't always a "crisis," but it does hold some emotional and physical transitions, such as recognizing time is moving swiftly and our bodies are changing. Wrinkles appear and hair disappears—except in places where you never wanted it. Uninvited pounds and inches crash the party, and you find yourself getting tired more easily. And you might even start thinking about the possibility of death. Next thing you know, you're dealing with an empty nest and caring for aging parents. All those things can force couples to relate to each other more intensely, only to discover they hardly know this stranger at their dinner table.

During this midlife phase a strange thing happens to men. They begin to realize they need something other than financial success to complete their deepest longings. Unfortunately, these men have been so busy with their careers that their wives have often completely emotionally disconnected from them. So it's not uncommon for them to look for closeness with some other woman. Then it's a midlife crisis!

The retirement phase. Poet Robert Browning penned these romantic sentiments to his wife, Elizabeth: "Come grow old with me, the best is yet to be." This era often brings out the deepest expressions of love or unspeakable loneliness.

The drift

As couples move through those phases, many of them begin to drift away from what a marriage is meant to be. What are some causes of this drift? Here are a few:



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Dependency changes. During the dating days, one person is often attracted to the strengths of the other person, motivated by the longing for a protector or surrogate "parent" who'll provide loving care forever. The marriage contract becomes a "you be the strong one and I'll be the weak one" agreement.

But it usually doesn't stay that way. Things change. And often, that dynamic begins to feel burdensome to everyone. The "strong" partner gets tired of carrying the load, and the dependent mate begins to feel controlled or squelched.

When Melissa and I married, I saw myself as a rescuer; I was saving her from the "throes" of singleness. She seemed to need and appreciate my strength and wisdom. But after several years of seeing my vulnerability—and me seeing her competence more clearly—we arrived at a potential crisis point. And we both had to reassess the dynamics of our dependency.

Hurts accumulate. Another reason spouses drift is that we allow our hurts to build. As Christians we know—and probably had read at our wedding ceremony—the 1 Corinthians 13 passage that says, "love keeps no record of wrongs" (v. 5).

Reading that in a candlelight service is a lot easier than applying it to the wounds we've received from each other. Gashes of disappointment cut into our romantic expectations. Melissa really thought I'd never fail to call if I would be late for dinner and that I'd take the lead in our family's spiritual life. I really thought her sexual passion would be undaunted



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by motherhood. These are superficial abrasions that can be forgiven quietly. Yet the deeper hurts are harder to keep off the mental scorecard. If a couple isn't careful, they begin to compare scorecards at every new opportunity.

Circumstances stink. This drift is probably the most obvious. In our work with couples in crisis, Melissa and I are reminded frequently that "life ain't fair." When the "for better or for worse" vows are exchanged, nobody really considers the "for worse" part. We just think it's all going to be the "for better" part. Then most marriages are hit with some totally unfair event that smacks of "for worse."

How do you cope with the loss of a child? There aren't many redeeming features or satisfying explanations. How do you deal with economic catastrophe? That wasn't part of the dreams of courtship. What about a chronic illness? It can be more difficult to handle than death. We have a friend who's lived seven years with his wife's deteriorating mental function caused by a car accident. She offers no companionship, nor meets any of his needs. These scenarios form the expected stuff of marriage. Is it any wonder so few couples laugh together at their wedding photos after 41 years? Hardly.

A different dance

So where do we go from here? In our work, Melissa and I usually see couples who are very aware of their miserably ineffective relationship. Each can describe in accurate detail the "dance" they do. She says, "Why are you late this time?" (not really a question). He replies, "What does



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it matter to you?" (also not a question). Their defensive attacks and counterattacks continue until one leaves. The script is well rehearsed and the outcome sadly predictable: detachment and loneliness.

Yet the old dance doesn't have to continue. Either person can change it by learning a new step. Here are seven steps to help you begin again, to renegotiate your marital contract if it needs some revisions.

1. Commit to change. This may be the hardest part when you're both discouraged and about ready to throw in the towel. Take some time to look at the consequences. While separation and divorce might provide initial relief, reality will eventually settle in and the complications will overcome the relief. Stop to count those costs: financial, emotional, relational, even parental—the scar it leaves on your children is probably the highest cost of all. Leaving the relationship is really just an exchange of problems—many times, bigger ones. But choosing to stay and committing to change because of the good you've experienced together and what you've invested in each other's lives will likely bring rewards to your marriage.

2. Identify hurts, but don't blame. Individually, list events or patterns that have created hurt for you and how you interpreted them. For instance, we knew one husband who remembered vividly his bride's tears about leaving her mother as they drove away from the church on their wedding day. He believed she was enmeshed with her mother and that he'd made a fatal error. On the other hand, she remembered being totally fatigued and emotionally exhausted for a couple



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of days after the wedding circus, but had no recollection of wanting to go back home to Mom. Yet that event created resentment in the young man that set a negative tone from the beginning. Our marital histories are laced with similar experiences. We're all guilty of feeling hurt because we've interpreted an event in the worst possible way, such as, *I'm not loved* or *I married a monster*. When you can share these not to establish blame but to find understanding, they take on a different tone. Forgiveness can follow.

3. Trace the roots. Sometimes those painful patterns become more understandable when you discover their childhood roots. Look at your families of origin objectively. When you quit being defensive, you'll probably laugh at the unique, peculiar styles you've always accepted as *the* way life should be lived, just because you grew up that way. These myths die hard and set you up for confusion and discomfort. Gender roles, decision making, conflict management, parenting styles, religious beliefs, celebration rituals, and dealing with illness are just a few that may create disappointment. Melissa and I began to discover these myths early in our marriage. Just to name a few: I rearranged her kitchen the first week in our first apartment because she didn't have things in the "right" places. (Boy, did I learn quickly!) Then Christmas came and she expected to open presents on Christmas morning. (Can you believe that?) The thing about these "myths" is that they make such a powerful emotional impact, but don't actually matter one iota. Let go of them—have a good laugh as you see how foolish it's been for you to let those differences rob you of enjoyment.



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4. Define your current needs and expectations. Where are you today as individuals? Yes, you've both changed since the wedding, but take a fresh look at what you'd like to experience together starting *now*. Chances are you've tried to tell each other these things off and on for some time. It's amazing how resistant we can be to really hearing each other. Frequently, Melissa and I hear couples talk about their needs for being accepted, feeling loved in a certain language, having a comfortable space, being listened to rather than ignored or put down, achieving mutual sexual satisfaction, and allowing each other's differences about life's little never-minds such as toilet seats and clutter. The bottom line is often the desire to feel safe, cherished, and respected.

5. Design new behavior. Changing old scripts is a challenge, but once you understand the "whys" of the old dances, it's easier to find different, more effective steps. Talk together about some behaviors you'd like to see in your relationship, then pick out one or two to work on first. They might be as simple as putting the milk back in the refrigerator or dirty dishes in the sink. Start small; you don't have to solve all the world's problems—much less your own—in the first week. Some victories in the small things will encourage you in the bigger ones. Remember to give each other grace. Old patterns don't disappear instantly. You've had a lifetime of honing those to perfection. Don't be surprised or too disappointed when they persist.

6. Decide to be accountable. You can help each other change primarily by praising each other. Reinforcing the new, preferred behaviors by frequent "at-a-boys" or "way-to-go's" is far more effective than pointing out the failures!



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If you're really brave, you may risk asking your mate to remind you if you slip. That can be dangerous, however, particularly if you've been firing darts of criticism as part of your old warfare. An occasional truce table discussion of how you're feeling about the process can help to reaffirm the commitment. So can calling in some outside help with a friend or a professional counselor.

7. Celebrate your new relationship. As you begin to see success in your renegotiated, all-new-and-improved marriage, have some high fives. Set some attainable goals and go out for dinner to rejoice in the change. You've done a great thing. Don't minimize the smallest victory. By taking these steps, you're investing in a future of intimacy and enjoyment that will affect your family for generations—and bring you laughter and smiles when you're looking at your wedding book on some far distant night in front of the fire.

Louis McBurney, M.D., is a marriage therapist and co-founder of Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado, where he and his wife counsel clergy couples. This article was first published in the Summer 2003 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.



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Reflect

- *On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being "awful" and 10 being "fantastic"), how would you describe your experience of the midlife stage of marriage? You don't need to share this with others.*
- *If you're married, what changes have caused some relational "drift" in your marriage? Which of the three causes of drift did you most identify with: dependency changes, accumulated hurts, or stinky circumstances?*
- *Which of the seven steps Louis McBurney outlines for reinvigorating a flagging marriage do you think is most needed in your own marriage relationship?*
- *Read **1 Corinthians 13:4–7**; invite God to speak through his Word and help you cast a fresh vision for your marriage. In light of this passage, how can you better show true love to your husband?*
- *Louis highlights the retirement stage as a time during which people can experience the "deepest expressions of love." What are some specific steps you can take now to get your marriage to that point when you reach retirement age?*



Managing Menopause

Here's what you need to know to take "The Change" in stride.

By Ronna Snyder

Five thousand American women enter it every day. No, it's not a day spa. Nor is it an outpatient clinic for plastic surgery. And it's certainly *not* optional—although many options exist for dealing with it. It's menopause—often referred to as The Big M. Over the generations it's been called The Change of Life—for more reasons than one.

For many women, menopause comes abruptly, far sooner than 51, the average age of the body's natural cessation of menses—due to the 6,000 hysterectomies performed in the U.S. each year. For the rest of us, this unavoidable rite of passage often sneaks up after a six-month to ten-year hormonal time warp called perimenopause.



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I know. I was blindsided by this roller coaster of baffling physical symptoms and emotions when I was in my 40s. If I'd been paying attention, I'd have realized some of my girlfriends already had entered perimenopause in their late 30s. A few even reached menopause—that point of no return where periods stop forever—before they were 40.

Since no physician had yet mentioned The M Word to me, I convinced myself what was going on in my mind and body was "all in my head"—a diagnosis often given to the younger woman who sees her family doctor for the first time with symptoms such as mine: teariness, tingling muscles, aching shoulders, racing heart, insomnia, anxiety, and forgetfulness.

Despite that hallmark forgetfulness, I clearly remember where I was when I finally realized what was happening to me. I'd just made a hasty exit from a Christian bookstore where I'd gone to find a book that might help me self-diagnose. I perused one on depression and promptly burst into tears. Too embarrassed to buy the book, I hurried out of the store before the clerk could see my puffy-red eyes.

"What on earth is wrong with me, Lord?" I wailed as I got in my car and desperately tuned into my favorite Christian radio station, hoping its upbeat music would sooth my jangled nerves.

Instead, a woman's soft, authoritative voice came into my car, systematically describing nearly all the symptoms I'd been asking doctor after doctor about with no results. I heard the one word no physician had yet diagnosed—one that would rock my world and set me free at the same time: *menopause*.



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"What??!!" I wanted to scream back at the radio in denial. "Isn't that for old women? I'm just a kid in my 40s!"

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists assures me I'm not alone. They report fewer than half of the women entering meno-years knows much about them.

As a result, many initially view the onset of perimenopause with that proverbial "deer in the headlights" look. Then, like me, they dig into ways to manage this time so aptly dubbed The Change. As I did, I discovered six steps crucial to adjusting to—and even embracing—The Big M.

Get meno-info.

Start with your physician if you're experiencing symptoms such as hot flashes or night sweats (see sidebar for more). She can explain the myriad medical treatments that often help with physical symptoms. But if you feel dismissed by your physician, don't be afraid to find a more sympathetic doctor.

I went to three different gynecologists before I found a care provider who was unflustered by my many questions. While she was more than willing to provide me with prescriptions, she encouraged me to embrace menopause for what it is: a time of change, not an illness.

ARE YOU "CHANGING"?

If you experience one or more of these symptoms, consult your physician or a gynecologist who specializes in menopause and its treatment: mood swings; insomnia; depression; night sweats; painful sex or loss of sexual desire; thinning hair; heart palpitations; frequent urinary tract infections; sore heels; panic attacks; migraine headaches; changes in regularity or nature of periods (flooding, spotting, or complete cessation).



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Get a meno-mentor.

Scripture is clear that older women are to teach younger women (Titus 2:3–5); there's no age cap on this commandment. So find an older woman who's further down the hormonal road to inspire you through this time.

I literally prayed God would lead me to these gems—women full of life despite, or perhaps *because of*, menopause. One such friend, Cleo, bought herself a Harley-Davidson motorcycle for her 75th birthday as a reward for "living this long"! Another meno-mentor repeatedly encouraged me to override pride and condemnation and take a much-needed sleep aid that saved my sleep and my sanity.

Get meno-counsel.

Now's the time to stare down middle age and face your fears about aging. I chose to do that by getting Christian counseling. I used this venue to explore midlife issues such as: Had I been a good wife/mother? Had my life been worthwhile? Could my marriage reconfigure itself with just the two of us in our emptying nest? Was I still desirable?

My widowed, never-married, childless, or divorced perimenopausal girlfriends shared some of these issues, but also found themselves struggling with another heart-wrenching one—the very real fear of loneliness or of never having children.

Ironically, these questions—often more troubling than menopause's actual physical symptoms—are a key part of The Change. The answers this season of life eventually provides can be the pot of gold at the end of the hormonal rainbow.



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God directed me to a skilled counselor as well as to numerous books by Christian psychologist Dr. Larry Crabb (my favorites during this grueling time were **The Pressure's Off** and **Shattered Dreams**) to help me cut through hormonal mumbo-jumbo and discern biblically based truths from falsehoods.

Get a meno-makeover.

Since I saw a number of my peers wilting at this stage of life, I decided to head full-tilt into it—literally. I followed an older meno-mentor's example and bought a Harley-Davidson. I got a treadmill and began actually using it. I revamped my wardrobe, makeup, and hairstyle, peeling off a few extra years and infusing myself with confidence. And I wasn't shy about telling my husband and family what I was going through—which helped them become more supportive. I purposely deleted energy-robbing responsibilities from my calendar (including some church and Bible study). I added naps to my to-do list, and bulked up on complex carbs and low-fat proteins, dropping ten pounds in the process. But most importantly, I sought out friends—both old and new—who had youthful, positive attitudes, yet wise spiritual values that helped me remember I still could make an eternal impact for God's Kingdom—whether or not I was perimenopausal!

Get the meno-mind-set.

Although many women find clues to their hormonal status through blood tests, there's still no definitive test to determine if you're in perimenopause. Since the only proof you're menopausal is the cessation of periods for one year (with no other medical reason for you to stop), you'll need to learn to listen even more to your body. Part of the glory of The



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Change is that it may force you to avoid stresses you used to enthusiastically wrestle and give you permission to reprioritize your relationships with an awareness you don't have forever to do it. And that can be a very good thing!

Get a meno-life!

Like death and taxes, you can't avoid menopause, so you might as well embrace it. It helped me to accept that the same Creator who gave me the ability to have children and enjoy sex with my husband also ordained this time in a woman's life. I have meno-friends who wrote their first bestseller, finally dragged apathetic husbands off to marriage counseling, went back to college, switched careers or passions—all amazing transformations that may never have taken place had it not been for the biggest and most glorious change of all—The Big M. Now those are hot flashes that can re-ignite any woman's life!

Ronna Snyder is the author Hot Flashes from Heaven, a collection of hormonally related inspirational stories. This article was first published in the March/April 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.



Reflect

- *Whether you're dealing with menopause or perimenopause or it's still on the horizon, what are your feelings about "the big M"? Explain.*
- *Where do your ideas and feelings about menopause come from? What examples, positive or negative, have influenced your views?*
- *Describe an older female "hero" you know—a woman (who's gone through menopause) about whom you say, "I want to be like her when I 'grow up'!" What do you admire about her?*
- *Read **Titus 2:3–5** and consider what this verse has to say about what you can learn from those who are older than you, as well as what you can share with women who are younger than you. Have you been taking full advantage of the female friendships you have in your life? Why or why not? How might God want to use your friendships more powerfully in your life?*
- *Which of Ronna Snyder's tips for facing off with menopause most resonated with you? Why?*



Parenting (Again)

I thought my mothering days were over . . . until my son came home with his preschool children.

By Maxine Hancock

Five years ago, my grandchildren, Kristen (now eight) and Marissa (six), moved into our farm home with their dad (our eldest son, Geoff) in the wake of a marriage that didn't make it past its fourth anniversary. While I dearly love my son and granddaughters, this living arrangement wasn't how I envisioned spending my "autumn" years with my husband, Campbell.

To be honest, when our four kids left the nest to get married, I looked forward to my life as an empty-nester. I redecorated our house, exchanging all those durable, kid-friendly earth tones for serene shades of pale blue, peach, and off-white. Since I'd postponed pursuing a career until my family was raised, I enrolled in graduate school to complete a doctorate in 17th-century prose.



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But a month after I graduated, I found I had to put professional notions on hold to cope with a grieving three-year-old and a baby still in diapers. That summer—and every summer since—Campbell and I have been surrogate parents for our granddaughters, since our son's summer job as a pilot has him flying water bombers in northern Canada's fire-prone forests. Geoff restores aircraft the rest of the year, so he's able to assume more responsibility—but it's been hard to make up the deficit left by a mother's departure. And it's been hard for us to adjust to parenting the *second* time around.

Calling all grandparents

More and more children are being raised by grandparents—a growing trend for which neither the children nor their grandparents volunteer. I've identified three main reasons why many of us are being summoned to an unplanned "round two" of mothering: Unmarried mothers (with the support of their parents) often choose to keep their babies rather than put them up for adoption; unemployed or underemployed young adults move back into parents' homes or rely on their moms for unpaid childcare; and, as in my son's case, divorces often create the need for grandparents' assistance.

Of course it's not all diapers and drudgery. There's great joy in life with little children; they quickly find room in our hearts and lives. And there's a richness in intergenerational families that's largely been lost in America today.



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But I'm not dewy-eyed about the situation. It's not easy to play the Waltons. Caring for children is time-consuming: Meals are more demanding; there's more laundry and housework; and everything must be done with inquisitive little ones at your side. Furthermore, I don't have the energy I had 20 years ago; sometimes, the clutter and chatter seem more than I can bear. By the time the two little girls are storied, sung to, prayed with, hugged, and snugly tucked in bed, most evenings I'm too tired even to read. My friendships suffer. My freelance writing must be done in grab-and-s snatch sessions in the midst of constant interruptions. And the few quiet moments Campbell and I find to be alone make me yearn for more.

Conflicting emotions

Women in my situation usually don't feel free to express their frustration at having to re-engage in a stage of life they thought they'd completed. Instead, pent-up feelings are apt to lead to depression.

"Midlife women whose families make new demands on them are conflicted by guilt and anger," says Diane Marshall, family therapist and clinical director of the Institute of Family Living in Toronto. "They often feel responsible for their children's failure in relationships or employment. They feel guilty for feeling angry when their lifestyle is truncated by a new, unexpected set of family needs. And if they have careers outside the home, they feel guilty because they can't offer more support."

Indeed, the women I've talked to deal with a whole slew of complicated emotions:



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Anger. When another person's irresponsibility ricochets into our life, hurting vulnerable children and people we love, and consuming our days, we have a right to feel angry. My friend Dorothy was angry at first when her desire to do ministry work was thwarted by a granddaughter who came to live with her. "Feelings aren't wrong," she says. "But the mature woman learns to process or vent her feelings without projecting them at others."

Anxiety. As Geoff waited for final court proceedings on his divorce, we feared he might lose custody of his girls. And for the first couple summers, I was often frantic some accident might befall the toddlers at our farm. Even now, my heart nearly fails at the thought of what might still be ahead as the girls grow toward maturity.

My friend Sandra, who helps her son care for two preschool-age grandsons, says, "When the kids go to spend weekends with their mother, I've had to learn to say, 'Lord, you look after them, wherever they are, whatever's going on.' "

Grief. Only those who've experienced the loss of a beloved daughter- or son-in-law know how deep the pain of that bereavement is. Our own grief is multiplied as we share the emotional wounds inflicted on our son and his children. We know our grandchildren will face the lingering effects of the loss of their mother. For our part, Campbell and I have chosen to give them honest, age-appropriate information when we're asked, and afterward we try to affirm how beloved and precious they are.



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When a friend's granddaughter asked, "How could Mommy have had a baby without having a husband?", she breathed a silent prayer and answered quietly, "Your mommy had a boyfriend and they started a baby, but they weren't ready to start a home. So you came to live in our home, and we're so glad you did."

Women who revisit mothering are also likely to one day experience another kind of loss: the loss of grandchildren when an adult child remarries or moves back out. After caring for her son's daughter for four-and-a-half years, my friend Irene's son remarried and took the child with him. I asked her how she was coping. "Well, I cry a lot," she said.

Isolation. We may feel isolated emotionally. Our peers are taking golf lessons or starting new careers while we read *Little Red Riding Hood* for the umpteenth time. For Campbell, having the children around has been a source of renewal and delight. So even he—my dearest friend and confidant—hasn't found it easy to understand that for me, it's not a complete joy.

Finding help

After Sandra's son and two small grandsons squeezed into a two-bedroom, one-bathroom house with her and her minister husband, Sandra reached a point where she couldn't cope. "I call it my Black Hole, and I didn't think I could get out of it," she says. "When I found myself thinking it would be easier just to be dead and rid of all the stress, I went to get counseling."

For me, I find therapy in a few deeply trusted friends to whom I can pour out my heart. I also make time to write in



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my journal. Often what I write are prayers, pouring out my perplexity and confusion. The Psalms, with their honest expressions of bewilderment and anger, confusion and desperation, comfort me. Psalm 39 describes the psalmist's need to speak out his pain and find relief in prayer; Psalm 116 chronicles the movement from grief to praise and invites me, "Be at rest once more, O my soul."

Making choices

Although I didn't choose the situation in which I find myself, I do have choices. I'm not powerless. I can either let the children at my feet make me old and bitter, or keep me young and on the cutting edge. There's a new incentive to dress well and look good—not just for business or church, but for when I visit the first-grade classroom to take my turn helping children read. I can let myself become mired in self-pity and resentment, or I can say with my Lord, "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11).

As I've learned to place the little ones' needs above other plans and desires, I've grown more patient. And I've chosen to refuse to let resentment rob me of the many joys of having children around again.

Consider it joy.

Taking up mothering tasks again is certainly not all stress and pain. In fact, I've discovered sustaining joy. I sometimes have to seek it out: to focus on a pretty little face instead of the background disorder, to enjoy the moment of a child's discovery. I struggle to keep my own rest and work in reasonable balance so I don't get overwhelmed by weariness (which all too easily translates into snippiness and general



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crabbiness). But day by day, I experience joy. I've had a chance to enjoy again all the magical moments in our grandchildren's lives. And we've had lots of just plain fun. I'm learning to take each day as it comes and fill it as full of love and glad memories as I can.

My pale blue carpet is graying. My other redecorating plans—and many other plans—are on hold. But the other day, when several of our adult kids were hugging me goodbye after a holiday weekend at the farm and heading back to their jobs in various cities, my eight-year-old granddaughter, Kristen, looked at me with her big brown eyes and said, "Aren't you glad you've got us, Gram?" And it wasn't a tiny bit hard to reply, "Oh darling, so glad. So glad."

Maxine Hancock is an author and professor. She now lives in Nova Scotia; you can follow her journey at <http://maxinehancock.ca>. This article was published in the September/October 1996 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.



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Reflect

- *If you have "boomerang children"—adult children who've returned to live with you—describe your feelings about the situation. Or, if you haven't yet reached the empty nest years, what do you most look forward to during that time? How do you imagine you'd feel if your children suddenly came back to your nest?*
- *Maxine identified several difficult emotions that she, and many other parents of boomerang children, has experienced: anger, anxiety, grief, and isolation. Brainstorm together the different ways women can be affected by these emotions and how they can be dealt with. Try to come up with both positive and negative examples.*
- *Maxine highlights the honest expression of negative emotions to God in the Psalms. Read **Psalm 39** and **Psalm 116**; what ideas and phrases in these psalms can you most relate to in your own life? Why?*
- *How can you more consciously turn to God and rely on him as you deal with the challenges of boomerang parenting (or grandparenting)?*



Sandwich Generation

How to be a parental caregiver without letting your own life fall apart

By Martha Evans Sparks

A good friend "Serena" (not her real name), called me in tears.

"Sam just doesn't understand," she said, "and it's so difficult on our marriage."

Serena, a stay-at-home mother, and Sam, an attorney, live in Milwaukee, a two-hour drive from her parents' farm. When it became evident that her mother's breast cancer was terminal, Serena began to spend several days a week at her parents' home.

She put nine thousand miles on her van in seven weeks in the middle of that icy Wisconsin winter. Sam demanded to know how long the arrangement would last.



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"As long as she lives," had to be the answer.

If you think you're hearing more about caregiving than you used to, it isn't your imagination. Almost one in four American households, about 22.3 million, provides emotional or physical care for aging parents, spouses, or siblings. That's three times the number from ten years ago. Seventy-five percent of caregivers are women; many are employed full-time outside the home.

As the population ages and caregiving needs multiply, how can we fulfill the biblical mandate to "leave and cleave" while accomplishing the equally biblical command to honor and care for our parents?

In sickness and un-support

One of her mom's hospice nurses had called Serena in the middle of dinner earlier that evening.

"Three doctors agree Mom is within three or four days of death," Serena told Sam and the girls as she hung up. "They say I should come tonight."

"Those doctors can't know that," he said.

"I don't want to risk it," Serena said. "I want to be there when she goes."

"Why?" Sam said. "You should be here with us, instead of *neglecting* us."

"Sam, she's my mother and she's dying! Don't you understand that?"



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"I understand you're choosing between me and your mother," he said angrily. "Has it come to your attention that my mother has cancer also? I don't run home every time she sneezes." And with those words, he left the room.

"Did you and Sam ever discuss what you'd do when the end came for either of your mothers?" I asked when Serena called to tell me her story.

"No," Serena said. "Sam doesn't want to be there when his mom dies. He won't talk about it."

Even though Sam appears unsympathetic and hard, what happened to Serena and Sam is not uncommon. Caught in a caregiving circumstance beyond their control, communication broke down. Silence, hurt feelings, and to a certain extent, selfishness, reigned until it was too late to have a calm exchange of viewpoints.

Although your experience may not be as extreme as Sam and Serena's, many of the same issues can be avoided. While caregiving can be challenging, it can also be one of the most deeply rewarding experiences of your life. Here are six ways you can ward off family discord when faced with caregiving.

1. If possible, avoid long-distance caregiving.

Eric and Pam had lived in Erie, Pennsylvania, their entire lives. Their only child, Janet, lives with her husband and two children in Charlotte, North Carolina. When retirement came, Eric and Pam decided to move to a retirement community in Charlotte, so that if they had problems, Janet would be close by.



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Their wisdom became clear a dozen years later when Eric died. Janet and her family were close. The couple's new friends had become old friends, a marvelous support group for Pam. Janet says she's relieved that her mother is in a sheltered place with help as close as a call button. "What would I do," she says, "if she were still nine hours away, alone in that big old house?"

If your parents live far from you, ask if they'd consider moving closer to you or to one of your siblings. Keep in mind that changes of this magnitude should be made in your parents' best interest and never simply for your own convenience. But having them closer makes caregiving easier on your parents and your marriage.

2. Get and share answers.

In the middle of a hectic Monday morning, Ken Rogers took a phone call in his New York City office. It was his widowed mother's neighbor from Poughkeepsie, almost two hours away.

"You'd better come right away," the caller said. "It looks as if your mom has had a stroke. The hospital staff want to know who her primary care physician is, what medicines she takes regularly, and what insurance she has."

Long before the need arises, find out who your parents' primary care physician is. What other doctors do they see? What hospital do they prefer? What medications do they take regularly? Who is their pharmacist, banker, broker, accountant? Who does the taxes? What insurance policies are in force? Who do they want notified in an emergency?



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Find out if they have wills. Are they in debt? Do they have a durable power of attorney? Living wills? Do they want a Do Not Resuscitate order?

Make it clear that you aren't attempting to get control of their money or property. You just need answers for an emergency situation. Share that information with your spouse so you both are on the same page.

3. Lay ground rules.

When a parent must move into your home, have a frank, realistic discussion with your spouse. Cover everything from who will pay the extra cost and shoulder the financial burden to ways to guard your couple time. Then make ground rules for the entire family.

That's what Teresa and Ron did two years ago when it became apparent that, because of financial problems and early signs of Alzheimer's disease, her widowed mother, Judy, was going to have to move in with them.

"Ron and I had a long discussion," says Teresa. "Then we had one with Mom before she moved in, to set ground rules." They decided sleeping arrangements and who would pay which bills. They let Teresa's mom know she wasn't responsible for disciplining their kids. If there was a problem, she was to tell Ron and Teresa about it. On the first of each month, when Judy's social security check comes, Judy and Ron go over the bills together and he writes the checks for them. If there's money left over, it is Judy's to spend as she wishes. Teresa and Ron pay all the household expenses—mortgage, utilities, food.



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Their biggest adjustment? "Privacy!" Teresa says. "Mom is from a big family, and everybody knows everything. Ron came home from work one day and said the boss had given him a raise. When Mom asked how much it was, Ron smiled and said pleasantly, 'Judy, that's none of your business.' She's quit asking things like that. But all this openness was difficult on Ron for a while."

The other bump they had to get over was that Judy would enter their bedroom without knocking. Teresa and Ron handled that by putting a lock on their bedroom door. Make sure you and your spouse agree on the rules and keep them impersonal. Don't allow emotions to get involved. Remember that you and your spouse need to be working on the same side with the same goals.

4. Take respite time.

Caregiving is isolating as well as emotionally and physically draining. Both Karen and David are upwardly mobile professionals. Karen quit her job to care for two young children and her father, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

David worked hard. When he got home, Karen regaled him nonstop about her woes with the kids and her dad. She never asked about his day. She had no time for clothes, makeup, or hair. She aged rapidly, worn down and struggling. David came home less and less often.

When caregiving becomes a 24/7 job, especially if the care-receiver has dementia, spouses need to agree on how to get respite time and who will pay for it. Otherwise, one spouse



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may turn into a workaholic, while the other becomes an aggrieved, resentful caregiver. It's better to find the money to pay a sitter than to have your spouse say, "It used to be our date night. Now you work late and I'm stuck at home with *your* mother."

A walk outside, a trip to the mall, or enjoying a cup of coffee and a good novel can do wonders for you and everyone involved.

5. Sometimes it's better just to listen.

Sometimes it's good to call a family meeting to divide up the caregiving. Who can take over the care receivers' financial affairs? Whose schedule is flexible? Who won't help?

Carol lives in central Kentucky, four hours from her parents' home in Ohio. Her two brothers and their spouses live in the same town as the parents. "Sometimes they'll call me and ask, 'What are Mom and Dad doing today? They don't answer their phone,'" Carol says. "I want so badly to tell them to get in the car, drive the ten minutes, and find out. But I don't."

Instead she makes the four-hour drive about once a month, staying for a long weekend to be sure bills are paid, prescription drugs are up to date, the checkbook is balanced, and the freezer is stocked with food her folks can easily heat and eat.

"When I realized my brothers weren't going to help, I was so angry," Carol admits. Realizing that her anger was too deep to manage alone, she got professional Christian counseling. "I know I'm being imposed on," Carol says. "But it will end."



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Carol's husband, Alex, supports Carol, providing a listening ear and advice if Carol asks. But he's careful not to overstep. "Other family members see what's going on," says Alex. "I keep out of it and let their blood kin do the fussing."

Sometimes it's better to offer your spouse support, prayer, and a listening ear, than to contribute to the stress, tension, and pain with complaints.

6. Remind your spouse often of your love.

Serena's mother died four days after Serena's angry parting with Sam. Sam's mother lived another six months.

"Those six months were awful," Serena says. "I cried a lot in my grief, while Sam held in all his anxiety. As a lawyer he deals with harsh reality every day, but he copped out on his mom's death. He was determined not to be there when she died." Serena realized a lot of Sam's reactions to her were more about his struggle with his parent's aging and death than with Serena or his marriage.

She realized that Sam needed her compassion, love, and understanding. "That can be difficult to give when you're so focused on your parent," she says. "But it's a necessity. Mom will be gone; my marriage is forever. There are times in marriage when you have to say to yourself, *I made a vow to have and hold till death do us part*. It becomes nothing but that raw, hard, hurting duty, that commitment holding you together."

Try to remember that your spouse may feel neglected in the midst of caregiving. Small gestures go a long way to help feed the flames of marriage—an arm squeeze or pat, holding hands, a kiss, a walk together.



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"I knew we'd come out on the other side," Serena says. "And we did. Our love for each other began to percolate again. But if Sam and I had not known the Lord and been committed to each other, we might not have made it."

Martha Evans Sparks, a freelance author, was married 42 years until her husband's death. She is the author of two books on caregiving; you can find her at www.martha-evans-sparks.com. All names in this article have been changed. This article was first published in the Spring 2007 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Reflect

- *Read **Exodus 20:12** and **Ephesians 6:1–3**. What do you think it means to honor your parents as an adult? What do you feel are your obligations toward your parents?*
- *Have you discussed with your spouse or siblings what you'd do if an aging parent needed additional care? If so, what are your plans? If not, why not?*
- *What sacrifices would be involved in increased caregiving for a parent? What would be hardest for you to give up?*
- *If you are currently serving as a caregiver for an aging parent, what have been the toughest parts of your new role? What have been some surprising rewards?*
- *Mother Teresa repeatedly taught that she found inspiration to care for the poor, sick, and dying by imagining she was caring for Christ himself. How might this mind-set help you as a caregiver? Be specific.*



Plucking the Stray Grays

How can we age beautifully?

By Holly Vicente Robaina

I'm a low-maintenance gal. Most days, my makeup consists of a smear of ChapStick. I get a \$12 haircut two or three times a year. My minimalist style is partly rebelliousness, having heard my mom, a retired beautician, nag, "Comb your hair! And why don't you put on some lipstick?" throughout my teen years. But not until my stint as a fashion reporter did I go totally anti-beauty. I saw firsthand how fashion magazines shape the societal beauty standards that make girls feel inadequate. From then on, I pledged my appearance would be *au naturel*.



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That is, until I spotted my first real gray hairs.

In high school, I had a few stray grays that never troubled me. Back then, finding a random, wiry white hair sticking up from my chestnut mane was kind of cool. Contrary to my mother's warnings, when I pulled it out, five didn't grow back in its place. But in my late 20s, I noticed those single strands had mutated into little gray clusters. My solution: brush the dark hair over the gray areas so I couldn't see them. I kept brushing in denial until a few years ago. I went for my semiannual haircut on my 31st birthday, and the stylist offered, "I can touch up those bad spots for you." I passed on the dye job, but went home feeling defeated.

My youth—as I knew it—ended that day. I began questioning my commitment to natural hair color. *I don't want to go gray! I don't want to look old!* I whined internally. At the same time, my pledge to buck conventional beauty pressed in on me. I wondered: *How might my choice to dye or not to dye affect future generations?*

Thinking my hair color would impact other women and girls seemed a bit egotistical. But then I picked up an issue of *Time* magazine that dubbed women's hair-color choice "**The Gray Wars**," calling it "the latest feminist debate over aging and authenticity." This issue has polarized baby boomers, some of whom defend their dyed tresses while others **promote** natural gray hair.

The debate includes a superficial element, to be sure. Some women insist gray hair's superior because it's real and naturally beautiful. Others argue dyed hair looks better and reflects a youthful spirit.



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But the issue goes deeper than vanity. Some women worry about gray discrimination in the workplace—that they'll get less respect or even lose their job if they go gray. (And, they contend, the same doesn't hold true for graying men, whose hair connotes responsibility and intelligence to employers.) These women fear society will deem them irrelevant if they go gray—too old to make an impact anymore.

On the pro-gray side, women want to own up to the reality of aging and seize the opportunity to redefine beauty. These ideas reflect my biggest concern: If I dye my hair, will girls think they have to look young forever? We live in an age where 60-year-old celebrities have skin with less flaws than a 16-year-old's—and few publicly admit to having had cosmetic surgery. Will girls employ extreme measures to keep up? Will women feel they aren't truly beautiful unless they appear perpetually 20 years old?

On the other hand, suggesting women become dumpy and dowdy as a show of "real" beauty seems extreme. At 58, my mom never has a hair out of place. Mom once took a comb and a mini-bottle of hairspray on a 10-hour, 16-mile hike. She came back ever-so-pleased that her hair looked as perfect as it did when she'd left our campsite. Looking good makes her feel good. I'd never suggest Mom stop coloring her hair or change her beauty routine, because I now realize it's part of who she is. What's truly beautiful is that my mom and I have learned to appreciate each other's distinct beauty. I admire her talent to create perfect hair and makeup, and she admires my ability to pull off a carefree style.



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Ironically, I've spent more time obsessing over what to do with my hair than I've ever spent styling it. The Bible tells me beauty emanates from something much deeper than physical appearance: "Don't be concerned about the outward beauty of fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. You should clothe yourself instead with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God" (1 Peter 3:3–4, NLT).

Beauty that's built to last, even as I age—that's the kind I want. I pray it will keep me from making value judgments on other women's hair, regardless of what I do with my own.

Holly Vicente Robaina is a professional writer.

This article was published in September, 2007, on

TodaysChristianWoman.com.



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Reflect

- *How have you struggled with the physical changes that come with aging? Share your biggest frustration.*
- *The article points out how rare it is to see a celebrity in midlife or beyond who actually looks her age. How have you been affected by our culture's obsession with youthful (rather than true-to-age) beauty? Explain.*
- *If you can, read **1 Peter 3:3–4** in several different Bible translations as well as The Message paraphrase. How would you sum up Scripture's countercultural message in your own words?*
- *So does God want us to neglect our outward appearance entirely? What do you think is a proper degree of concern for our outer beauty? Explain.*
- *Who's been a role-model in your life of a woman who has aged well—who, especially in her demeanor and character, has reflected true beauty? Describe her.*
- *Read **Psalm 139**; as you do, invite the Holy Spirit to help you really understand what this passage reveals about God's love for you. How can security in God's love help us navigate the difficult aspects of aging?*



Discovering a New Purpose

Katie Brazelton helps you understand your place in this world.

Interview by Jane Johnson Struck

Katie Brazelton faced a crisis: she found herself divorced and suddenly devoid of the roles she'd used to define her life. This agonizing transition—and the purposelessness that ensued—left her in an emotional free fall, wondering if "the only logical life purpose [she] had left was shopping" for clothes to compensate for a depression-triggered weight loss.'

*Slowly and painfully, Katie began to recover a sense of purposeful living after a life-changing encounter with Mother Teresa during a trip to Calcutta. As a result of her long journey of spiritual growth and discovery, outlined in **Pathway to Purpose** (Zondervan), Katie realized her call to mentor other searching women. She served as a licensed minister at Rick Warren's Saddleback Church for several years and now runs Life Purpose Coaching Centers International.*



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Why are you so passionate about women living lives of purpose?

Because for years after my divorce, I didn't. The angst of purposelessness almost tore me apart. But one of the most important components of my healing was learning that "finding purpose" is a universal heart cry. I wasn't alone in yearning for a life that had significance!

If God has a purpose for us, why do we often feel as though we're simply going through the motions of living?

That's because when we're in "robot mode," we let busyness, noise, fear, or impure motives drive out that purpose. We guilt ourselves into doing the hard work of becoming holy in the day-to-day grind instead of experiencing the reward of fulfilling the reason God put us on earth!

I know I used to be more concerned with religious to-do lists and endless faith-driven obligations than with unearthing the buried passion God instilled in me. There was a time when I'd routinely ask myself, *Am I happy?* I was so unhappy, I couldn't even get the question out before I started sobbing.

We women need to discover our purpose in life for two reasons. First, fulfilling our purpose gives glory to God. Second, it releases us from the captivity of hopelessness and despair.

How do you define "purpose"?

For Christians, purpose is *being* and *doing* what God intends us to be and do: doing today what God asks us to do in



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our family, church, and community; being more like Christ; and then doing the distinct, bold work God designed us to do before we die!

Scripture reveals the "pathway" to follow. It's spelled out in the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36–39) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20). In *The Purpose-Driven Life*, my friend Rick Warren says these verses tell us we're ultimately made for fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship.

But to discover our more unique life mission, we should pray specifically for God to reveal it; we should meditate on pertinent Scriptures, such as Psalm 37:4, Amos 4:13, Matthew 14:27, and John 17:1; and we should clear away some of the mental and emotional clouds that block us from his revelation.

What do you mean?

The Bible says, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13–14).

After my divorce, I lived in manic mode; I'm amazed now I actually thought I could find God's purpose in the midst of my frantic life. I numbed my pain with overspending, travel, and work. It didn't occur to me numbing my pain *became* my purpose.



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I had no idea how much my past influenced my everyday life. I needed to put my anger, regret, bitterness, and pain behind me before I could focus on the race God set before me. It took me years to hear God's voice over the noise and confusion in which I lived. As an immature Christian and an introvert, I didn't realize I needed more mature Christians who could help shed light on what God was saying to me about his will for my life.

So you're saying we can't be a lone ranger in this discovery process?

That's right. A woman trying to find her life purpose is like a novice trying to run a marathon. Both need a partner who can prepare them for the challenges and risks that lie ahead. Many women fail to fulfill their significant life purposes because they have no Christian mentor or adviser to help them reach the next mile marker. Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 says, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!"

God designed our purpose in life to happen in community—whether it's in person, online, through a telephone relationship, letter writing, or as an intercessory prayer warrior. Giving and receiving love is part of God's design, and nothing substitutes for interpersonal communication.



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But community takes time—and we're all so busy!

Yes, but God's creative in bringing spiritual friendships into our lives. Christian community can happen anywhere: at a church Bible-study group, babysitting co-op, corporate lunch-time prayer group, gym, ministry setting, sports event, or hobby show.

One fun way I've developed community is to belong to a "Dreamer's Lunch Bunch"; we meet once a month at a salad bar for the sole purpose of holding each other accountable to God's call on our lives.

Being in community means I'm authentic in a group I trust. Because of the dangers of a "lone ranger" lifestyle, I rely on others to walk alongside me.

Is there a difference between having a purpose and having a passion?

Our *purpose* is being a woman of God and doing what he asks. Our passions are meant to be godly purpose-indicators. They are the things that make our heart sing; they help us identify and complete our purpose. For example, my passions include jigsaw puzzles, travel, and Sherlock Holmes mysteries. God's purpose for me is to help women figure out his call on their lives.

How can we become content with God's purpose for us, especially if it seems less visible or exciting than we'd envisioned or hoped?

The Bible warns us not to despise the day of the small things (from Zechariah 4:10). It says we need to look forward to when our Master says to us, "Well done, good and faithful



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servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21).

The best shortcut I've found to guard against jealousy over someone else's ministry is to invite God to reveal his vision for *your* life and to believe with all your heart he'll do so. If you find yourself envying others, confess it to them or at least to God; pray for them; and support them in their endeavors.

What's the bottom line on living purposefully?

In Acts 20:24, the apostle Paul says, "I don't care about my own life. The most important thing is that I complete my mission, the work that the Lord Jesus gave me—to tell people the Good News about God's grace" (NCV). And 1 John 2:17 says, "The world and its desires pass away, but the [wo]man who does the will of God lives forever." God wants us to heed the apostle Paul's counsel: "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). God wants us to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

I love the way God takes any willing Christian—no matter how broken or scarred her past—and weaves every thread of her life into his kingdom-building plan! He doesn't shy away from our hurts and failures but specializes in hope, second chances, and resurrections.

I never imagined my tough experiences would give me the substance I now need to minister to others. I had no idea God was preparing me to offer the same hope to other women he provided me every day. Our ordinary routines and daily roles—no matter what they are—can provide incredible opportunities to help others become more like Christ.



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In the end, purposeful living is about hope. If you can hang onto the hope that God does have a plan for your life, as the Bible promises in Jeremiah 29:11, you'll make it through the tough days of the unknown and later, the tough days of fulfilling the bold purposes God assigns you.

Katie Brazelton, Ph.D., is founder of Life Purpose Coaching Centers (<http://www.lifepurposecoachingcenters.com/>).

Jane Johnson Struck is a freelance writer and former editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. This article, originally titled "Becoming a Purpose-Driven Woman," was first published in the January/February 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *God used a failed marriage and a frantic lifestyle to lead Katie Brazelton through an identity crisis that eventually helped her discover her purpose. When have you gone through a difficulty that caused you to question your own identity and purpose?*
- *In the interview, Katie said, "when we're in 'robot mode,' we let busyness, noise, fear, or impure motives drive out that purpose. We guilt ourselves into doing the hard work of becoming holy in the day-to-day grind instead of experiencing the reward of fulfilling the reason God put us on earth!" Can you relate to this? What aspects of your life drive out your true passions and purpose?*



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- *Take a moment to look forward: envision the next two or three decades of your life. How might God want to use you? In what new ways might he be calling you to serve? What interests and passions have laid dormant in your life that God now may be calling you to use in a new way?*
- *Read some of the passages Katie points to regarding finding our purpose: **Psalm 37:4** and **Amos 4:13**. What desires in your heart may be from God? In what ways may God be revealing his thoughts to you through Scripture, the words of others, the nudging of the Holy Spirit, or your own longings?*



Soccer Mom to Activist

At midlife, God pulled Kay Warren's heart toward a brand new calling.

Interview by Jane Johnson Struck

*It took a magazine article in 2002 to completely change the trajectory of Kay Warren's comfortable suburban life. Then 48 and the wife of Rick Warren, author of the bestselling book **The Purpose-Driven Life** and pastor of Southern California's megachurch, Saddleback, Kay was a busy "soccer mom" of three who dreamed, once their nest was empty, of sharing a platform with Rick and ministering to pastors' wives.*

Then one day Kay picked up a news magazine and was arrested by an article on AIDS. When she read that 12 million children were orphaned in Africa due to AIDS, "I realized I didn't know even one orphan. I couldn't imagine millions of them anywhere," she admits. "That number haunted me. My life's never been the same."

Since that "divine appointment," Kay has become a woman on a mission. Kay makes regular trips to AIDS-ravaged countries and is leading the charge in her church family to combat the international AIDS pandemic. Kay's mission isn't only global; she's equally passionate about ministering to HIV-positive people in her community. We caught up with Kay to discover why she changed from soccer mom to social activist—and what we can learn from her transformation.



Midlife: Crisis or Opportunity?

Soccer Mom to Activist

Did you ever wonder if you could even make a dent in an issue as big as AIDS?

Of course. But the day I read that article on Africa, I had my own Damascus Road experience. I was blinded by a reality outside my own. After that, I went to sleep thinking about those 12 million children; I woke up thinking about them. The Lord and I began this internal dialogue. I said, *This just can't be true. Because if it were, then I'd have to do something about it. But there's nothing I can do!*

After a month, I realized I had to decide either to go on with my plans or to let my heart become engaged. I sensed I couldn't face God when he asked me, "What did you do about those 12 million children I told you about?" How could I possibly respond, "Oh, that was so sad. But I had so many other good things on my agenda. I'm really sorry I wasn't able to get around to that. I hope that's OK"? The truth is, it wasn't OK—not for me, not for anybody. I decided to get involved. That's when God shattered my heart into a million pieces, and I became what I call a "seriously disturbed" woman.

What did you start doing?

Reading, watching videos, talking to anybody who knew anything about HIV. After eight months of that, I needed more. God captured my heart through Africa, so I wanted to go to Africa. I first went to Mozambique at the invitation of a Christian relief organization.

How did that first visit impact you?

Nothing in American life prepared me for rural Africa. Nothing. Even the poorest of the poor here have it much better than most of those living in the rest of the world.



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One of the first women I met was Joana. She was stick thin, plagued by unrelenting diarrhea, left homeless under a tree, dying of AIDS. Joana was so weak, she couldn't even crawl over to greet me. So her aunt scooped her up and placed her on a piece of plastic in front of me. I'll never forget Joana mustering every ounce of strength and dignity she could to pull herself up, fold her hands, and greet me.

I couldn't tell Joana she would be healed or that I could give her a roof over her head. But I *could* offer my presence, and by my presence, the presence of Jesus. And I could offer her the hope of heaven. I will never, ever forget Joana. That's why her picture hangs in my office. For me, AIDS wears a face. It's Joana's.

What happened after you returned?

If I started out seriously disturbed, I came back gloriously ruined. I couldn't live the way I used to live. I didn't have the same values. But I'm embarrassed to say that as I flew home, I stewed over the fact I didn't think pastors and churches in Africa were doing enough. Then God clearly asked me, *When was the last time you cared about anybody with HIV in your community?* The answer was "never."

God quickly showed me my hypocrisy; I cared about people far away, but not for the HIV-positive people in my own church. I'm ashamed to admit I was full of fear and prejudice. I had to overcome several myths, including the one that AIDS in America was a gay man's disease.

But what if it *were* only a "gay disease"? That's where Christians start labeling people. There are "innocent



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victims"—a baby born to an HIV-positive mother, a woman infected by her spouse—and the perpetrators—a gay man, an unfaithful husband. Why does one set seem more deserving of love and compassion?

How dare we pretend our sin is worthy of God's grace, but somebody else's isn't? When I see lists of sins in Scripture, they're lumped together. Sin is brokenness. It's going against God. God's Word says if we break the law in the slightest part, we're guilty.

Did you have an inkling God would lead you in this direction?

I think he planted the seeds, but somehow, through the years, they'd gotten buried. I'd spent most of my twenties feeling very inadequate. I didn't think I had many gifts, and I'd married Rick, a man with extraordinary gifts. When I compared myself to him and others, my gifts seemed so small.

In my thirties, I got caught up in raising our three children. But when I neared 40, life came crashing down.

How so?

When I was a little girl, I was molested by someone from my church. As an adult, I'd done a good job of pretending it hadn't affected me. I'd memorized Scripture, prayed for healing, done all the things I knew to do, but I'd built my life on a shaky foundation.

That shaky foundation couldn't bear the weight of all my life's growing pressures—the needs of my children, the demands of a huge church, the notoriety of my husband's ministry. I waved the white flag of surrender.



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What happened?

I underwent intensive counseling for a couple years. That season of extreme brokenness was one of the best things that ever happened to me; through it, God rebuilt my life. I relearned things, unlearned others, and began to see myself in a new light. God was preparing me for what I do today. I couldn't even begin to minister to sexually broken children and adults if I hadn't let God mend my broken places.

What are you most passionate about?

Believers leading the way in loving. How will people know Jesus loves them unless we show up in love? And the truth is, whoever loves them first, wins them.

How can women start “showing up”?

Start with repentance. I had to repent of my enormous apathy. Even though I'd read God's Word from the time I was a little girl, somehow I'd skipped over all those verses about the poor and the sick.

A third of Jesus' ministry was spent healing people. Jesus was full of compassion. He touched the lepers, the prostitutes, the people his society wanted nothing to do with.

Ask him to show you ways to live out his heart in your everyday life. I can't prescribe that for somebody else. If you don't feel called to reach out to HIV-positive people in your community, beg God to open your eyes to others who are poor, sick, or homeless. Once you do, then it becomes personal. And when it becomes personal, you start caring.



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James 1:27 says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress." What if more women adopted the unwanted children in our own country, or opened their homes to foster children? What if Christians *really* lived out James 1:27? I think we've severely underestimated what God wants to do through the church.

Everybody can do *something*. From your sink as you're washing your dishes, from the diaper-changing table as you're changing a diaper, you can be praying for people. The bigger issue is letting your heart be broken by what breaks God's heart. I long for Christians to live out a muscular faith that actually changes our world. It starts with prayer, then moves into action. I long for women not just to be caught up in who's got the best price of chicken this week. God's asked us to do and be so much more than that.

Do you feel a sense of urgency?

Yes, borne out of my bout with breast cancer. But I don't live looking over my shoulder, waiting for cancer to catch up with me. I'm not willing to waste a single moment. Every day I say, "God, use me as you like. I'll live out your call for however many days you give me."

What kind of legacy do you hope to build?

I hope my children and grandchildren see a life of surrender and reckless abandonment to God. And in so doing, they'll be willing, as Isaiah 58 and 61 say, to expend



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themselves for the needy, the poor, the immigrant, the sick. To pour yourself out on behalf of others, to accurately reflect our God's heart in this world—what an honor. What a privilege.

Kay Warren is the author of Say Yes to God (Zondervan). This article, originally titled "Purpose-Driven Wife," was first published in the May/June 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *What most inspires you about Kay Warren's journey? Why?*
- *What's one specific need in your local community or in the world that really tugs at your heart? Explain.*
- *Consider Jesus' response to those in need in **Matthew 9:36**. How might God want you to be involved in addressing a specific local or global need?*
- *How can others best pray for you as you consider God's calling for the second half of your life? Be specific.*



Measuring Up

How I learned to be content with God's plan for me

By Verla Gillmor

I'm sure the warning signs were there. But I was moving at such a fast pace, I missed them all until the day I woke up totally burned out, with no idea how I got there. Difficult questions ran through my head: *Was this what life was supposed to look like? How had things gone so awry?* It wasn't exactly a midlife crisis, but something was terribly wrong.

My life wasn't that different from a million other women. College, marriage, a child, a career. Somewhere along the way, though, I started feeling as though I were living someone else's life.



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I needed time to think—to tally what I knew for sure, what I needed to hang onto, and needed to discard. As I sorted things out, I realized there were truths about living an abundant life I'd totally misunderstood. Here is what I learned:

You have to run your own race.

Our culture constantly evaluates whether we're "successful" by measuring everything from our bank account to our IQ to how many miles we can run without full cardiac arrest. The benchmark isn't how well we do, but how well we do *compared to everyone else*.

So whenever I used to read Hebrews 12:1, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us," I'd picture myself running alongside my sisters in Christ, constantly trying to gauge how I was doing. *Was I spiritual enough? Was my home sufficiently organized? How did my appearance stack up?* I especially worried about how I was doing as a mom and wife. I wanted to know if I was "holding my own."

One day I had to drop off something at the home of a woman I didn't know. While chatting, she showed me around her house. She'd covered her children's beds with quilts she'd made from scraps of their old clothes, filled with embroidered squares that depicted events in each child's life. Her refrigerator displayed a star-filled chart that indicated how many Bible verses her kids had memorized. In the backyard, each child had his own vegetable garden.

I felt like throwing up.



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When I got back in my car, I started to cry. *God, this race business is a drag. If this is what it takes to be a good mom, I concede defeat. I can't measure up! I hope you have a Plan B!*

The next morning, I revisited Hebrews 12:1, and the Holy Spirit illuminated something I'd been missing: We're to run the race marked out *for us*.

It was as though a 500-pound weight fell off my shoulders. I didn't have to measure up to other women. I didn't have to take on an assignment someone else thought I should—especially when it didn't fit my skills and talents.

Years ago I was asked to help plan a women's conference. Because I had a job in the business world, they assigned me the task of managing the event's budget. I'm sure the conference planners thought the match was brilliant. But I was miserable. It wasn't that I didn't know how to do the assigned tasks—paying bills and producing voluminous reports of mind-numbing information. The problem was the assignment didn't use my strengths or involve anything I loved to do. I'm a people person. My heart soars when I can lead, inspire, teach, and influence others. My assignment was painful because I wasn't running *my* race.

Of course, life always includes a certain number of things we don't enjoy (in my case, God didn't give me the "loves housecleaning" gene!). But if we're running *our* race most of the time, we'll feel a level of satisfaction and purpose that makes the hard parts easier to bear.



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You can't do it all.

I'd rather eat chalk than admit I can't do something. It isn't because I'm brimming with self-confidence. It's our culture. Everywhere we turn we're told there are no limits to what we can do.

The truth is, we *can't* do it all.

My girlfriend Beth figured this out before I did. She loves kids. When Mr. Right never came along, she decided to become a single mom and eventually adopted four kids.

"I had this grandiose idea of how I was going to parent," Beth says. "With my first child, Robby, I held onto my lofty goals. When Preston came along, I thought, *Uh, oh. Let's rethink this.* By the time Kent joined the family, I was making changes on the fly. I'm still adjusting."

Beth says she's abandoned any hope her house will look "picked up" for more than 10 minutes. She no longer folds underwear—if it makes it into the correct drawer, she's happy. And instead of hauling a laundry basket from room to room, she's placed a basket in each child's room for them to transport. Every little bit helps.

Acknowledging our limitations means letting go of an unrealistic ideal, setting boundaries, saying "no" more often, and prioritizing what's left.

In Luke 10:41, Martha—upset about too much to do—asked Jesus to instruct her sister, Mary, to help with food



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preparation. Jesus replies, "Martha . . . you are worried and upset about so many things, but only one thing is necessary and Mary has chosen the better thing" (CEV)—time with *him*.

God doesn't expect us to do it all. Only a few things are necessary. Do you know *your* few things? Make a list of your strengths and weaknesses, your spiritual gifts, your natural talents and skills. What makes your heart dance? What do you do that other people repeatedly affirm in you? How would your spouse or best friend describe the way God "wired" you?

You can't make life behave.

I used to think I'd be happy if I could get my weight down to a certain magic number. Or if my husband could get promoted so we could afford a bigger house. I defined happiness as manipulating circumstances into perfect alignment, then yelling, "Okay, nobody move!" Then we would live happily ever after in a freeze-framed perfect world.

Several years ago, I found out I couldn't make life behave. Within a few months' time, several unexpected events threatened to unglue me. My husband—the love of my life—decided he didn't want to be married anymore. I had to undergo several surgeries due to a rash of serious health problems. I was self-employed, and two of my major clients unexpectedly cancelled their contracts, leaving me in financial jeopardy. Every area of my life was falling apart.

That's when I found control doesn't deliver what it promises. Disappointment and exhaustion were the only fruits of micromanaging my world. Disappointment—because control



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couldn't restore what had been lost, insulate me from heartache, or guarantee my safety and security. Exhaustion—because I learned it's tough doing God's job when I'm not God!

Although I was stripped of everything I leaned on for security and success—relationships, health, financial stability—God taught me I still had *him*, and I could be secure in that.

Let's face it—safety, stability, and peace of mind don't come from trying to control life's unpredictable circumstances. They come from being anchored to Someone who doesn't change. As Scripture tells us, "I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6) and "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

Security comes from putting ourselves into the hands of the One who really knows how to be in charge. God says, "Give control a rest. Your life is safer in my hands than anywhere else."

These three lessons aren't the only ones I've learned. But putting them into practice has altered how I live. I've accepted my pear-shaped body (and the futility of finding a suit where the skirt and jacket both fit). I serve in two ministries at my church that are a good match to my gifts, and often say "no" to other opportunities. I block out chunks of time for solitude. These changes—which take constant vigilance to maintain—have increased my peace and contentment significantly.

Of course, the most important lesson I've learned is that God loves me—*really* loves me. He doesn't love me because he's



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forced to; he chooses to love me. I matter more to him than anything else in all creation. It was as if he's saying to me, *When you made a commitment to me, I made a commitment to you, and I love the chance to prove it.*

Second Corinthians 4:7–9 explains what that relationship is supposed to look like. "We are like clay jars in which the treasure is stored. The real power comes from God and not from us. We often suffer. But we are never crushed . . . God is with us" (CEV).

It's that knowledge of God's great love that gives me the confidence I need to make tough choices. And it's freed me from worry about whether I measure up to anyone else's standards—except *his*.

Verla Gillmor, a business consultant, speaker, and author of Reality Check: A Survival Manual for Christians in the Workplace (Horizon Books), is also president of LifeChasers, Ltd. (www.lifechasers.org), a ministry resource for Christians who work. This article was first published in the July/August 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.



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Reflect

- *Katie Brazelton and Kay Warren's midlife course corrections are inspiring—but it's important to remember that you aren't called to be them. As Verla Gillmor points out, God has a race marked out just for you (see **Hebrews 12:1**). What's the difference between finding healthy inspiration from the examples of others and life-sapping, dangerous comparison-itis? Explain.*
- *What comfort do you find in the truth that God's plan for you is different from his plans for other women?*
- *This download has covered the pressures of midlife (like caregiving and marriage-maintenance) as well as the opportunities to make a difference in the world. But this can quickly feel like a lot on one person's plate! Consider Verla's reminder that you can't do it all. How can this realization be freeing? If applicable, share how you've found freedom from saying "no" and paring back on your commitments.*
- *Verla had a point of crisis in her life when her marriage, physical health, and financial security all began to fall apart. Through these painful experiences, she learned to find her security in God alone. As you look ahead to both the joys and potential heartaches in the next few decades of your life, what will it look like for you to truly trust in God? Explain.*
- *In light of all you've read and discussed in this download, what message do you believe God has for you about the midlife phase of your life?*



Additional Resources

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further

Online Articles and Downloads

“Living Life as a Mentor”—It's easier and more natural than you think.

By JoHannah Reardon, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Managing Menopause”—Help and hope for facing “the change.”

By Verla Gillmor, available from TodaysChristianWoman.com

“Prepare Now for the Second Half”—*The empty nest years are often a time of crisis for marriages; here's a game plan for making yours the best.*

By David and Claudia Arp, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

“The Sandwich Generation”—A TodaysChristianWoman.com download exploring life in the crunch between caring for aging parents and parenting children.



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Additional Resources

Available at Today's Christian Woman's online store

"Sandwiched In"—*I never expected to be a parent to both my children and my mother.*

By Marian V. Liautaud, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

Books

Barbara & Susan's Guide to the Empty Nest by Barbara Rainey and Susan Yates (FamilyLife, 2008; 244 pages). If your kids have flown the coop and you're wondering "what next?," Barbara Rainey and Susan Yates have the answers you're seeking. Let them be your mentors and friends as you navigate through new territory. Sharing their own personal stories as well as those of many other women, they address questions such as: *What do we do with our loneliness?*, *How do we adjust our marriage relationship?*, and *How do we relate to our now adult children?*

Cherish the Days by Martha Evans Sparks (Wesleyan, 2004; 176 pages). In our highly mobile society, many people are separated from aging loved ones. Caring for older parents is a difficult and emotionally draining challenge. In this book, Martha Evans Sparks offers practical help to find balance and peace in caregiving.

Pathway to Purpose for Women by Katie Brazelton (Zondervan, 2008; 256 pages). Discover God's agenda for your life! He wants to use everything about you to achieve his purposes through you. This book will help you see how your life roles, longings, and experiences point you toward your life mission. Find your pathway to purpose, and become the woman God created you to be.



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Additional Resources

Say Yes to God by Kay Warren (Zondervan, 2010; 272 pages). Kay Warren had a plan—but it wasn't what God had in mind for her. This book takes readers alongside Kay as she travels the globe and takes a closer look at her own community, coming face to face with the bruised, broken, and hurting. Just as Kay is compelled to shrug off her complacency about the suffering in this world, she compels readers to recognize and answer God's call to serve.

Second Calling by Dale Hanson Bourke (Thomas Nelson, 2006; 192 pages). If you are wondering if the best of life has already passed you by, this book will prepare you for the adventure of your lifetime. In it author Dale Hanson Bourke contends that midlife is a time for spiritual rebirth and urges women to find new passion and purpose by developing their spiritual life. She urges women to live in the present, leave the past behind, develop a prayer life, spend time with friends, and pass on their wisdom to younger women.

The Second Half of Marriage by David and Claudia Arp (Zondervan, 1998; 256 pages). You've spent years focused on the kids, and now they're gone. Are you looking at each other and wondering what to do now? Practical help is on its way for "second-half" couples. David and Claudia Arp reveal the eight marital challenges every long-term marriage faces and offer solid solutions that will not only allow you to create a vision, but will also show you how you can make the upcoming years the happiest times of your life.



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Additional Resources

Bible Studies

“Encouragement for Caregivers”—A three-session Bible study guide that explores how we can honor God and discover joy in the challenging task of caregiving for elderly parents, available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

“Thriving in the Empty Nest”—A three-session Bible study guide to help you explore what Scripture says about this season of life, available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

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