

aging to love, loving to age

EVERY day I talk to women about love and aging. It's an over-forty thing to do. The exciting news is this: Everyone agrees that aging is more fun than it has ever been before. It has its joys and delights. It also has its problems. What's new for many women is that the problems don't always get us down. And if they do, we don't stay down—we pick ourselves up and start over. This is part of the magic, the power and pleasure of midlife. Even though trashing feminism has become as commonplace as chatting about the weather, we all owe feminism, the women's liberation movement, women's lib—whatever you call it. It helped change how women see aging. Many of us feel better about aging because the old scripts that told us life ends at thirty or forty, that we turn into sexless zombies

who bitch bitch bitch all the time and make everyone around us miserable were thrown away. So it does not matter that feminist movement has its faults—it helped everyone let these scripts go. And I do mean everyone.

We have changed our ways of thinking about aging and we have changed our ways of thinking about love. When the world started changing for women because of feminist movement and a lot became more equal than it ever had been, for a time it was only women who had been allowed a taste of power—class privilege or education or extra-special-hard-to-ignore-gifts—who most “got it” and “got with it.” These women were among the feminist avant-garde. Often they had exceptional advantages or were over-achievers. While feminism helped these women soar, it often failed to change in any way the lives of masses of ordinary women. Many advantages gained by women’s lib did not trickle down, but the stuff around aging did. By challenging sexist ways of thinking about the body, feminism offered new standards of beauty, telling us plump bodies were luscious and big bellies sublime, that hair hanging under our arms and covering our legs was alluring. It created new possibilities of self-actualization in both our work lives and our intimate lives.

As women have changed our minds about aging, no longer seeing it as negative, we have begun to think differently about the meaning of love in midlife. Beth Benatovich’s collection of interviews *What We Know So Far:*

Wisdom Among Women, offers powerful testimony affirming this fact. With prophetic insight, writer Erica Jong declares, “I believe that this is a moment of history in which we are engaged in a kind of spiritual revolution—the kind of revolution that creates pathfinders. . . . Older women are again being accorded their ancient role as prophetesses and advisors. . . . That’s the great transformation that’s happening again in our time. In looking to things other than the body beautiful for inspiration, we’re being forced to redefine the second half of our lives, to become pathfinders.” Difficulties still abound for aging women. What’s most changed is the constructive way women of all ages, classes, and ethnicities cope with these difficulties. Open, honest conversations about the myriad ways empty-nest syndrome, the death of parents or a spouse, and/or the deeply tragic death of a child all create psychological havoc in our lives have helped. Our talk of this suffering would be stale and commonplace, were it not for all the creative ways women are attending to the issue of aging both in midlife and in the postsixty years. The courage to choose adventure is the ingredient that exists in women’s lives today that was there for most women before the contemporary feminist movement. Contrast the women who suffered breast cancer silently with the women today who speak out, who proudly and lovingly claim their bodies intact, whole, and beautiful after surgical removals. Poet Deena Metzger boldly proclaims

the beauty of the one-breasted woman on a poster. Theorist Zillah Eisenstein tells all about breast cancer, her personal story, in *Man-made Breast Cancers*. In these ways women in midlife are changing the world.

In the exciting world of women I was raised in—an extended family with lots of great-grandmothers, grandmothers, great-aunts, aunts, daughters, and their children—I learned early that aging would be full of delight. Women around us talked about the prime of their life as though it was indeed the promised land. Like beautiful snakes, they were going to reach their prime, boldly shed their skin, and acquire another—this one more powerful and beautiful than all the rest. Something in them was going to be resurrected. They were going to be born again and have another chance. These were poor women born into a world without adequate birth control, a world where having an abortion could end one's life, psychologically or physically. They were women who saw menopause as a rite of passage in which they would move from slavery to freedom. Until then they often felt trapped. This feeling of being trapped was one they shared with women across class. Even women who were solitary, celibate, and quite able to manage economically lived with the ever-present fearful possibility that all that could be changed by sexual coercion. In their world, once a woman was no longer able to bear children, she was just freer—midlife, the magic time.

Oh, how I was filled with delight when I heard Mama and her friends carry on about the joys of “the change of life.” They never used the word “menopause.” How intuitively sensible! Had they taken to heart medical ways of defining shifts in midlife, they might have been forced to take on board the negative implications this word would bring—the heavy weight of loss it evokes. Instead they had their own special language. A subtle, seductive, mysterious, celebratory way of talking about changes in midlife emanated from them. Like a perfumed mist whose scent has followed and haunted me, it touches me now. I have arrived. I am receiving the signs. I am in the midst of change.

To Mama, her friends, and lots of other women she would never know, the approach of midlife was exciting because it meant that they were no longer compelled to spend all their time taking care of others. They were finally to have time for themselves. The absence of free time—time spent doing nothing—had plagued them all their lives. And they looked forward to days when time would hang heavy on their hands. Days when they could think about play and rest and forget about work. Listening to Mama and her friends, I never thought about what I wanted my life to be like in midlife; I just accepted on blind faith, with absolute trust, the conviction that it would be sweeter than it had been before. Even if the before was sweet, midlife would be sweeter still. I did not know then

that midlife would also be a time to rethink everything I had learned about the nature of women and love.

Most writing by women on midlife talks about menopause as though that's the only "happening" event. Not true. There are so many happening events it's hard to keep track of them all. From day one, when woman hit Earth, she has been the heartbeat of all happening events, except that most of those events were not arranged by her or for her pleasure. Much of what makes midlife magical for women now is that we are the ones making the arrangements—inventing our time and our way. For most of our lives women have followed the path of love set for us by patriarchal pathfinders. Despite our disappointments and heartaches, we have gone along with the program and accepted without challenge and critique the notion that love can exist in a context of domination. A feminist movement and many heartaches later, more women than ever before now know that love and domination do not go together—that if one is present, the other will be absent. For some of us this has caused more heartache. Since domination is still the primary order of the day, women, especially women who desire to be in partnerships with men, want to know how to love and be loved. That's one of the big questions this book answers.

When I first talked with women about writing this book, the most frequently asked question was whether or not love was as important to women in midlife as it was

when we were younger. There are so many women I talked with who, like me, never thought about midlife, so many of us who thought we would be dead before the age of thirty. Our reasons for thinking this were rooted in tremendous fears about growing up, about becoming grown women. We wanted to be girls forever. As girls we felt we had power. We were strong and fierce and sure of ourselves. Somehow, as we made our entrance into the realm of young womanhood, we began to lose power. Fascinating research on girlhood is happening these days. It confirms that young girls often feel strong, courageous, highly creative, and powerful until they begin to receive undermining sexist messages that encourage them to conform to conventional notions of femininity. To conform they have to give up power.

Giving up power has been what aging has traditionally felt like for most women. And with the loss of those feelings of power came the fear that we would be forever abandoned, unloved. Now midlife and thereafter has become not only a time to reclaim power but also a time to know real love at last. More than ever before, women talk about the difficulties of being powerful in a world that has changed a lot but that still remains patriarchal. Hence we have enormous freedom in a world that is not yet fully accepting of our freedom. This fact creates new issues, ones that most women in the past did not face. Think, for example, about how many of our parents remained or

remain in marriages of more than fifty years where the woman is miserable and unhappy. Yet the world they were raised in told them this was a woman's destiny. Today masses of women—women who would never call themselves feminists, who may not even feel that their lives have been in any way affected by a feminist movement—are empowered to leave relationships when they are terrorized, or miserable, or maybe not treated poorly in any way but are merely unloved. Leaving these bonds opens up the possibility that they may know love in their lifetime. The older stay-married-forever generation were and often are cynical about love.

I can still remember the pain my mother expressed at a time in her life when my father was being particularly unkind. He had always been a womanizer, but now his behavior had become just plain crazy and terroristic. They had been married for close to twenty years at that time, and I was about to finish high school. I remember urging Mama with all the hubris and wild courage of late-sixties adolescence to leave Dad. And I have never forgotten the sad and weary look on her face when she turned to me, saying in the smallest voice, "Who would want me?" With pure adolescent wonder, I was astounded by this response; I saw my mother as the most marvelous being. I demanded to know, "What on earth do you mean?" In a sad and tremulous voice she explained that she was already over the hill, that she had lots of children, that men did not

desire women like that. This was one of the most painful lessons about love and heartache I learned as a girl in the bosom of patriarchy.

It warms my heart that women today, even those who may feel trapped in longtime marriages where they are unhappy, at least know that there are ways out, that there is still a world out there that desires their presence, their being. Even if an individual woman may not believe this is true for herself, she sees examples of this truth in the lives of other women in the culture. That's crucial. She has a model for change whether she chooses to make changes or not. The fact that many women now openly choose partners from both sexes means that aging females have a body of individuals with shared experiences who are seeking to share companionship, whether sexual or not, women who are seeking to know love.

A child of the fifties, I was born into a world that believed a woman should marry and stay married forever. In those days everyone I knew believed in the words "until death do us part." I was also born into a world where we went to church every Sunday and took the Scriptures seriously. However, by the time I reached my late teens—toward the end of the sixties—everything had been called into question: the legitimacy of marriage, the significance of the church. It was a time of great rebellion. Suddenly the world was rocked. Nothing was stable anymore. And I was totally "into" defiance. At the same time I was reluc-

tant to give up all the values of my upbringing, so I tried to juggle worlds. I would give up on state-legitimized marriage, but I would hold on to my belief in the importance of commitment and constancy. I would not be seeking a husband, but I did want a lifetime companion. I rejected the notion of falling in love because it implied a lack of choice and reason, embracing the vision of love as an act of choice and will.

Contemporary feminist movement had taught me to question notions of love that encouraged women to be victims or to masochistically subordinate ourselves to terrorizing, patriarchal men. It taught me that I did not necessarily need to place all my longing for companionship in the direction of men—that women were also a romantic option. Now, this was heady stuff for a Southern Baptist girl raised in a strict household, but I was taking it all in and trying to make necessary adjustments. My strategy for a happy life consisted of a plan to keep the good stuff from the old ways and blend it with the best of the new stuff coming in. While this strategy made for good theory, it was hard practice. And lots of stuff failed. The failure hurt most when it came to love.

From the outset, radical feminism encouraged women to question our obsession with love. In extreme cases individual women activists urged us to forget love and get into power. Love was for victims; power was for victors. Shamelessly, I clung to the visions of fulfillment in roman-

tic love that had been imprinted on my girlhood consciousness. As a girl, I was enthralled when Ken was created to go along with Barbie. Now I could really play house. And even when feminism entered every pore of my sixteen-year-old body, I still wanted and believed in the idea of a happily-ever-after union for Barbie and Ken—for me and my chosen love.

Despite more than twenty years as a feminist thinker and activist, my obsession with love is as keen as it was when I first introduced my new Ken doll to Barbie. It was indeed an arranged marriage. With Barbie and Ken in hand, I could create a world of sustained love, a world where romantic union opened the heart and uplifted the spirit. I could create paradise. The fantasies of true love and perfect union I offered to Barbie and Ken laid the groundwork for my own quest for love. I lived in a world where my maternal grandparents were married for almost eighty years, where my parents were clearly planning to be together forever (although it was obvious to me even when I was a young child that they and couples like them were not necessarily fulfilled in love). I was obsessed with the question of fulfillment. I wanted to understand how to make love work.

This desire to understand and know love followed me from girlhood into womanhood; it was the ruling passion of my life. As I matured emotionally, the nature of that obsession changed. After feminist conversion, my thinking

about love was no longer heterosexist the way it was before feminism. I begin to realize that the paths to love are many and the way of loving is one. And more than ever I knew it was possible for women to know love's delight throughout our lives. That's why I wanted to write a more personal book about women's quest for love, especially the meaning of that quest in midlife.

My first book, *All About Love: New Visions*, was a more general discussion of the meaning and practice of love in our lives. This book is a more personal discussion of the ways my thinking about love changed in midlife. Exploring my own quest for true love, I look at the ways women's lives have been forever altered by the impact of feminist movement, the way it opened up avenues that had always been closed for social equality with men. Women have greater freedom than ever before, and yet it is not clear whether that freedom has given us greater access to true love. It is not clear how that freedom has changed the nature of romance and partnership. Some of us have been married or remain in lifelong marriages and/or partnerships. Many of us are economically self-sufficient. Many of us are childless. More than ever before, there are many single women approaching midlife alone. Our longing for companions, for love, is rarely talked about in any way that realistically articulates the nature of our lives.

Until recently there has been little discussion of our fate when it comes to romantic love and partnership, other

than the more commonly known notion that any single woman over thirty who is heterosexual is more likely to be alone forever. And God forbid she reaches forty without having found a man. When mass media seized on this notion, using it as propaganda to strike fear in the hearts of women, it was a subtle, indirect form of antifeminist backlash. For those of us who were focusing more on attaining higher education, building careers, and—let's face it—"making some money" so that we could be in charge of our economic lives, being bombarded with messages telling us we were more likely to die in airplane crashes than to find a mate was nothing short of a warning. In the popular movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, everyone in the life of the character played by Meg Ryan encourages her to feel worried and panicked because she is not married. Pondering the statistics that suggest she will not find love, she frets about her otherwise happy life. As a threat, these statistics served to warn women that we'd better get back to focusing on the business of getting and keeping a man—that this above all else should be our primary concern.

Now, when this dire warning struck my life, I was struggling with whether or not I should leave the man in my life. We had been together for more than ten years, but I was simply not satisfied. He was not committed to personal growth or emotional openness. While he supported equality in the workforce, in our intimate lives he saw me as there primarily to serve his sexual needs. Like many

women, I heeded the warning that I might never find another partner. Among other fears, it probably served to keep me in the relationship longer than I should have been. Ultimately, my fears were not as important as my longing for freedom, self-actualization, love. To me, leaving this relationship was not about giving up on love; it was the gesture that would set me free to really search for love—the gesture that would allow me to love again. And so I left. And leaving felt good. I was never going to know love in that relationship. Leaving it opened up the possibility of finding love.

Love should be as important to women in midlife as it was to us when we were girls, when we were wide-eyed teenagers looking for true love and perfect union. We are still looking. Some of us have found the love we longed for. The magic of midlife is that many of us now know more about the meaning of love; we know more about what it means to love and be loved. We are more experienced.

Most of us have suffered heartache. Pain has opened us up—given us the opportunity to learn from our suffering—to make ourselves ready for the love that is promised. We know love is there. Some of us are still waiting. We know we will love again. And when we love, we know love will last. Significantly, we know, having learned through much trial and error, that true love begins with self-love. And that time and time again our search for love brings us back to the place where we started, back to our own heart's mir-

ror, where we can look upon our female selves with love and be renewed.

Feminist critiques of love made it difficult for progressive, powerful women to speak about the place of love in our lives. This silence has undermined the freedom of all females to be fully self-actualized, which women's liberation first championed. While feminist thinkers and activists were right to rip apart and throw away outmoded, patriarchal ways of thinking about love and romance, girls and women still need to fill the gap with new liberatory visions full of hope and promise. Without these new visions to serve as guides and maps, the path to love remains difficult to find and the search for love leaves us unfulfilled and lacking. Women, along with the culture as a whole, need constructive visions of redemptive love. We need to return to love and proclaim its transformative power.