

CHAPTER 1

Is It Time for a Change?

If you're reading this book, it's likely that you're considering a change. At mid-life there's still plenty of time to start, grow and even retire from a job (or two or three!). The experience that you've gained before, whether in paid or unpaid work (or both), can be directly translated into marketable talents. The secret is finding an environment that appreciates and values what an older woman has to offer.

You may have been "downsized" or taken unexpected early retirement. You may be restless in your current work or even feel burned out. Perhaps you want to or need to work more - or less. You might even be entering the work world for the first time. There are many reasons for career change at any age. This book will help guide you as you explore the career opportunities for this next phase of your life.

Paramount to finding the right job is understanding what **is** the right job. The right job (or career path) is one which meets psychological, emotional and financial needs as much as one which uses your skills. Finding that kind of job may be more difficult but ultimately more satisfying. If you're unfamiliar with your own desires and needs, perhaps having spent most of your life caring for the needs of others (your boss, spouse, children, parents) you'll first face the task of recognizing the validity of your desires and then reconnecting with the feelings that accompany them. Not all women, of course, are out of touch with their inner selves, but as a culture we're led to believe that "others come first." Even if this is true, at mid-life you may finally have the chance to focus on yourself.

If you're at mid-life and healthy, you can probably expect to work for another twenty years. The changes in Social Security over the next decade are uncertain, but it's likely that the benefits payout will be delayed and "normal retirement" will move from age 65 to 70. Women are at a disadvantage with Social Security because payments are based on earnings, which tend to be lower for women. (The politics of Social Security are very important for women, but are beyond the scope of this book.) Nevertheless, it's possible to plan, even starting now, for a comfortable retirement and old age. An entire career can be started, grow and end in a fifteen to twenty year period, enough time to accumulate Social Security benefits and create your own retirement funds. Retirement aside, these are the years of new opportunities – and the chance to take advantage of them. This book will help you determine what you want and then suggest ways to get it.

Maybe you've lost your job. The realities of adjustment to a new life without the foundation of a steady job can indeed be stressful. With mortgages, car loans, perhaps a college tuition or two, a job search at mid-life can seem like the end of the world.

But does your reaction change if you take a different view of what's happened? Did you truly feel energized every morning and look forward to going to the office to get right to work on the unfinished project waiting there? Or were there more and more times when the alarm went off and you found yourself wishing you could be gardening, stocking the shelves of your own boutique, or just rolling over and sleeping for another hour. Maybe the traveling that seemed such fun ten years ago (after all, you had not been to Seattle, then) has recently become tiresome and routine. If you've been "reengineered" and don't like your new job (or don't have one!), this may be the time to take stock and see what else you want to "be when you grow up." Maybe you can finally risk a foray into the theater or open the ice cream parlor you wish your neighborhood had.

Another kind of job loss is the insidious loss of interest or enthusiasm for a career. At its most extreme form it's called burnout, often seen in the helping professions. People suffering from burnout often don't realize it; instead, they simply feel tired, depressed, discouraged, hopeless, frustrated, even angry. They may become cynical or sarcastic and may develop stress-related physical symptoms but may not connect these feelings with their work. Only in retrospect do they realize how depleted they'd become.

Sarah had been a social worker in private practice for many years. She had married young and had two children right away. She managed to raise her children and go to school, graduating with a degree in social work. She developed a flourishing psychotherapy practice and was busy and intellectually challenged by her work for many years. However, she became increasingly tired and aware of constant pressure on her time. She never felt relaxed or free to take any time for herself despite the fact that her children were grown-up and living independent lives and her husband worked long hours. At 51 she became increasingly aware of a need for what she decided to call a "sabbatical." She decided to take three months off from her work, expecting to return feeling recharged. Instead, she was astonished to discover how much she didn't want to return, ever! After discussions with her husband, she decided to close her practice and develop her growing interest in ceramics into a profession. She reports that she feels better than she has in years and had not realized how exhausting her work as a therapist had been.

Some women at mid-life enter the job market for the first time or after a long absence from it. If you haven't worked outside the home before but now must, due to divorce, widowhood or just needing a second income to help with the unpaid bills, you may feel overwhelmed by the prospect. It's tempting to look through the Help Wanted pages of your paper and "find a job." While this is possible, you're more likely to find a position and setting in which you'll be happy if you take time to think about your goals for work and reflect on your desires.

Career planning is life planning. "What kind of life do I want?" and "What's important to me?" are the central questions for true career planning. Matching talents and experience to job availability is secondary.

Although people often feel an understandable urgency about finding their next job, career change is most successful when experienced as an exploratory process. It's much more than matching your talents and skills to the current job market. Career planning can help you set a goal and begin to identify what you need to achieve it. More importantly, it's the process of learning about yourself: what kind of a person you are and what kind of a life you'd like to live.