

White Paper: Boomer Women and their Search for Meaning

Summary

THE WISDOM YEARS:

Women of the Baby Boomer Generation and their Search for Meaning

By Carol Orsborn, Ph.D. and Jimmy Laura Smull, Ph.D.

Charting the largely unmapped terrain of adult development of post-menopausal women, the co-researchers studied 100 college-educated leading-edge women of the baby boom generation identifying the issues that are foremost on the participants' minds. Utilizing the primary tools of motivational research – observation, focus groups and depth interviews—the research found that regardless of the presenting issues that were cited by the participants, be it care giving, parenting grown children, ambition or any of the top ten concerns that emerged during the course of research, the conversation often turned quickly to an underlying motivator: the participant's search for meaning. Aspiring to live in what one of the participants tagged as “the wisdom years,” this thirst for spiritual understanding and fulfillment emerged as a primary motivator, influencing the needs, interests and behaviors of the study group. Research points to the need for further work not only on models of adult development, but of spiritual development particularly geared to the unprecedented life spans and heightened spiritual aspirations of this stereotype-defying generation of women.

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By Carol Orsborn, Ph.D. and Jimmy Laura Smull, Ph.D.

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“Given everything that’s been happening in my life lately, I have the suspicion that spiritual proficiency can no longer be considered a luxury.”

--Molly, 58, educator, widow, mother of two grown children

In the 1950’s, anthropologist Margaret Mead delivered a memorable lecture about the role of the postmenopausal red-tailed deer. Margaret explained that in their advanced years, when all the old bucks had been killed off in skirmishes, the females became the oldest survivors.

“In time of drought, these old does could remember where once long ago, under similar circumstances, water sources had been found. When spring came late, they recalled sunny slopes where the snows melted early. They knew how to find shelter, places where blizzards could be waited out. Under such circumstances, they took over the leadership of the herd.”

Seated in the audience of Margaret’s lecture was the young Joan Erikson, wife of the champion of developmental psychology, Erik Erikson, and an intellectual and artist, in her own right. Years later, Joan, well into her 80’s, revisited Margaret’s story about the red-tailed deer. Recalling the story as an elder forced to deal with societal pressures that marginalized or dismissed older women outright, Joan found personal meaning in the story. What she appreciated most was the notion of lifelong development, recognizing

the contribution of extended time and experience to the achievement of psychological and spiritual growth.¹

This notion, that the experience of aging provides both the opportunity and context for the search for and discovery of meaning in an aging woman's life, is a theme that emerged from our research. In 2002, we set out to begin to chart the largely unmapped terrain of adult development of post-menopausal women just as the earliest wave of the baby boomers began navigating the first decade of the new millennium. Specifically, we selected 100 college-educated leading-edge women of the baby boom generation, women born between the years of 1945 and 1956, identifying attitudes about issues related to aging that were foremost on the participants' minds.² Recognizing the size of the baby boom demographic, and its potential for economic, social and political impact over the coming decades, we sought out female "cultural creatives", a term borrowed from marketing to define people who have historically tended to be on the cutting edge of societal trends for their generation, often serving as a harbinger of attitudinal trends, styles and behaviors to come for the generation as a whole. The women, located primarily in southern California, were identified through their self-selected participation in a series of workshops led by Dr. Orsborn and Drs. Orsborn and Smull at various venues—from a corporate leadership institute to community non-denominational church settings—on subjects relating to leadership, resilience and intuitive decision-making, as well as through personal networking. In addition, several

¹ Erikson, Joan. *Wisdom and the Senses*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988.

² The baby boom generation consists of people whose ages are 41-59 in 2005, at almost 80 million, the largest generational demographic segment of the population. Women born between 1945 and 1964 according to the U.S. Census account for 27.7 of the American population. According to Metropolitan Life Insurance Company's Mature Market Institute, the generation has a combined estimated spending power of \$2.2 trillion.

women in their early to mid sixties were included as participants who, with the exception of birth date, fit the demographic description.³

Utilizing the primary tools of motivational research – observation, focus groups and depth interviews⁴—we quickly discovered that while certain topics, issues and concerns came up repeatedly, the participants were not generally drawn to discussing “the problems of aging.” Rather, regardless of the presenting issues that were cited by the participants, be it caregiving, parenting grown children, ambition or any of the top ten concerns that emerged during the course of research, the conversation often turned quickly from “the problems” of aging, and towards broader philosophical/spiritual concerns.⁵ While the search for meaning emerged as a top-of-mind issue of concern, issues related to the search for meaning also lay just beneath the surface of each of the ten top areas of concern. Take, for example, the comment made by Rose, a woman in her late 40’s, undergoing treatment for breast cancer. “The part of this that is really important is to analyze what this means and what are the issues that got you here...not from a physical point of view, but from a spiritual and mental, emotional point of view.

³ The workshops were not specifically identified in advance to participants as being part of a research study and the discussion and content format were open-ended, allowing for topics and issues on the women’s minds to emerge as unselfconsciously as possible. Permission to utilize information gathered during the workshop was asked for by the presenter and granted by all participants at the end of the workshop. It should also be noted that the utilization of research that came out of workshops in church-related settings was tested against research that came out of workshops and focus groups in non-church-related settings, so as to ensure as much objectivity as possible as spiritual attitudes and issues of meaning began emerging as important themes. The focus groups, specifically identified in advance as a research study, were held in comfortable, private home settings and the depth interviews took place either in the interviewee’s home or in their choice of a restaurant or coffee shop. The internet surveys were distributed to women across the country,

⁴ The 100 women in the study included 50 in observation groups, 15 women in two focus groups, 5 in depth interviews and 30 internet surveys.

⁵ The top ten concerns cited could be grouped into the following ten categories: Preparing for the future; ambition; love and relationships; parenting grown children; beauty; health; inevitabilities—caretaking others, loss and mortality; creating a legacy; taking care of unfinished business –things left undone or done but regretted; and the search for meaning.

What are the questions you need to answer in your life...Ultimately, what you have learned from this process is what is important: is what will take you forward.” Aspiring to live in what one of the participants tagged as “the wisdom years,” this thirst for meaning, which often came hand-in-hand with the implied or stated assumption of on-going personal psychological and spiritual growth, emerged as a primary motivator, influencing the needs, interests and behaviors of the study group.

Anna, one of the focus group participants, illustrated this developmental movement towards meaning. Anna, 54, is a well-known artist, famous for her bucolic water colors of domestic and garden scenes. She arrived at the private home designated for the focus group fifteen minutes after the scheduled starting time, out of breath and looking anything but bucolic. “I’m so sorry I’m late,” she started in immediately, interrupting the conversation. “I just had to confront my daughter, telling her she’s got to move out so that I can get a roommate.”

“Why are you getting a roommate?” one of the other focus group participants asked.

“Yeah, well, years ago when I was published I thought it would go on forever, and then the recession hit. I’m 54, and I’m supposed to feel confident, and I just say I achieved more success at business than personal life. My personal life is that I’m twice divorced. My daughter got pregnant at 17 and moved back in with me at 18; she had my granddaughter. I’ve felt like that significant other parent in my granddaughter’s life, which has been a blessing to me, and hard because they are still living with me at this point. The goal is for them to go away. Right now, I want to date; I want someone in my life; I feel so defective because everyone sees the artistic person, but it suffers in my

own being when I don't have a balance in other things. The one area I've got together is "meaning." Yes, I have self-understanding. Even if it doesn't feel good. Self-understanding can be one of the ways of healing. Spirituality is about my work and about who I am. It is the most interesting thing to me right now."

Joan, 52, a management consultant, also spoke in terms of meaning. A former actress on a daily televised soap opera, she left the business and went back to school to become trained in her new field. "It wasn't just the superficiality. I was bored with it...It was a waste of my time so I really wanted to get back to something that was less egocentric and something that was more meaningful to me."

By "meaning" and "spirituality", we took the participants' implied and/or stated definitions as striving for or achieving a more satisfying experience of their lives, containing at least some non-physical aspect, expressing itself as the search and discovery of a sense of being connected to something larger than themselves. This was most frequently expressed as a diffuse or "cafeteria-style" spirituality, although there were frequent references to religious or philosophical beliefs. Given the scope and purpose of this study, we have made no attempt to "stage" the participant's level of spiritual development (as per Fowler or Maslow.) Rather, we noted their generally optimistic view that even when facing the challenges related to aging, their expectations in regards to what they often reported as being most important to them—a sense of meaning—was increasing with age. Commented Samantha, 62-year-old radio producer. "I had to come to terms with the fact that my life wasn't as meaningful as it could have been. Some of me was coming apart turning 60 and not finding a soul mate and maybe I still will; but at 60, I hadn't found anything to attach myself to. Suddenly, I saw myself

unattached, (but in the sense of being) a mystic. I remembered that my life mattered on a higher level and that I was connected to something “great.” Clearly, that is part of me that has been developed. (Perhaps) I am never going to love one person more than (I) love the world. When I wake up in the morning, I connect with divine first. Now, I swim and I see it as meditative time. I’m always walking in it.”

This sense of time being an ally in this regard is particularly significant for the baby boom generation, considering that in 1900, the average American woman lived to be only 47.3 years of age. Today, many of the study participants expect to have five decades of quality life ahead of them, anticipating (with good cause) not only living longer, but healthier and more vitally than did previous generations. Taking advantage of medical and technological breakthroughs, it is as if they’ve been instinctively pacing themselves for the longer life spans that are now the norm rather than the exception.⁶

The majority of the women in the study reported feeling much younger at their age than they perceived their parents to have been at the same age.⁷ Nevertheless, many reported having gone through a period sometime in the past one-three years in which they feared aging as a depressing decline, still expressing anger at news reports, advertisements and “advice” that they perceived as exaggerating issues related to aging “in order to scare us into buying their products and services,” in the words of one participant. Often, the period of anger and fear was initiated in conjunction with a specific incident, such as a milestone birthday, the loss of a job, a child leaving home, an

⁶ The same can be said of the “twixter” generation, individuals in their twenties and early thirties who have been delaying marriage, the initiation of career paths and parenting.

⁷ Historians teach us that our parents’ concept of old age finds its roots in the years immediately following World War II. Women and older people who had been playing a vital role in keeping the country running while the men were away were prevailed upon to patriotically step aside at war’s end to make room for the returning heroes. Those who failed to cooperate were labeled as cranky, eccentric or even senile.

illness or a death. However, all but a handful in the study group report having emerged from what the national media nicknamed “female midlife crisis”,⁸ feeling renewed optimism. In Anna’s words: “I like to be optimistic, and the positive part of me tells me that when things get bad you will focus on it and make it better. I think people are basically good. The friends and people I’m involved with are spiritually focused and involved. One thing I know about the world, the glass is either half empty or half full. That’s my choice.”

The notion of lifelong development stands in contrast to the classical developmental theorists. These include scholars such as Jean Piaget, (1954) who was the first to correlate the stages of intellectual growth with the stages of physical development. Piaget privileged the importance of childhood, arguing that one’s full intellectual potential will have been basically determined by the time one reaches adolescence. Piaget’s invariant, sequenced stages influenced the classical models of psychological and spiritual development. Lawrence Kohlberg (1963) focused on moral development in male children and adolescents,⁹ asserting that people reach their peak level of moral development at around the age of 16. Kohlberg later revised his theory, based on his study of 51 additional boys over a twenty-year period. He found that the higher stages of

⁸ “Newsweek Magazine”, cover story, May, 2005

⁹ Critiqued for its male-bias by Carol Gilligan (1982). The focus on males contributes to the inadequacy of classical theory in terms of application to adult and spiritual development of women of the baby boom generation, but is not the central issue engaged by this research study. The core issue, as will be addressed later in this paper, is the historic lack of consideration of the possibility of significant psychological and spiritual development in individuals at midlife and especially beyond. This gap can at least be better theoretically bridged by constructive-developmental models, such as that proposed by Robert Kegan (*Evolving Self*, 1982.) The *constructive-developmental* model views people as being in on-going growth processes. “Persons evolving” may experience even pain as movement toward growth. Viewing people as primarily “meaning-making creatures”, Kegan’s model departs from hierarchical stage theory and offers the notion of a continuum, with movement back and forth through periods of stability and change, as a corrective. His theory is consistent with our research.

moral development did not become dominant until the boys reached their 20s and 30s, the highest Stage 5, with spiritual overtones, first appearing in the mid 20's and remaining a rare occurrence. James Fowler (1981), whose six stages of faith correlate to Kohlberg's moral development stages, also privileged young male study subjects as well as role models.¹⁰

In the view of these early life theorists, people at midlife and beyond are perceived as primarily passive recipients of their early childhood influences and/or predispositions -- but after adolescence, at most harvesters and no longer creators of their destinies. Midlife made its debut as a serious subject for research in the field of developmental psychology in the 1950's, with Jay Levinson's *Seasons of a Man's Life* and later, Gail Sheehy's *Passages*. In these seminal works and even in Sheehy's 1995 update of the material in *New Passages*, the vital core of developmental action is reserved for the earlier stages of mature adulthood, paying special attention to midlife crisis and in the cases of Sheehy's work, menopause. While attempting to correct her previous failure to address the possibility of further development in women post-menopause, Sheehy only begins dealing with the stage of life she refers to as "The Serene Sixties" on page 345 of a four hundred or so page book, with "The Sage Seventies and Beyond" getting less than 13 pages immediately after.¹¹

You will recall that we began this paper by sharing Joan Erikson's memory of the story of the red-tailed deer, finding meaning in the notion of lifelong spiritual and

¹⁰ Abraham Maslow, for instance, estimated that only about two per cent of the population would consistently have the kind of peak psycho-spiritual experiences he correlated with the tip of his developmental pyramid. In Fowler, the highest levels are achieved by so few as to be statistically irrelevant.

¹¹ "Serene" is not a descriptor used by any of our participants, including the sixty-year-olds, who tended to view the search for meaning as a dynamic and often uncomfortable period of personal growth, rather than the peaceful, passive state suggested by the word "serene."

psychological development. To put this seminal story into broader context, we need to point out that Erik Erikson, Joan's husband, was also, not coincidentally, among the first to propose stretching the boundaries of developmental theory to cover the entire lifespan of the individual. However, even Erik Erikson's notion of eight lifecycle stages casts the mature individual in a largely passive role. For Erikson, the fulfillment of one's potential culminates with stepping out of the way shortly after midlife to allow the next generation to come into its own. Ironically, as Erik and Joan aged, he was quickly revising his stages as he went. In his last book, collaborating with Joan, he added a ninth stage to acknowledge that their own creative powers and continuing personal growth paid witness to the novel notion that psychological and spiritual development could grow in strength and vitality throughout one's life. In her follow-up book, *Wisdom and the Senses*, written well into her eighties, Joan summarized their revolutionary late-in-life realization: "The whole earth, the planet, the cosmos, is in a state of constant change. We are all and with everything, involved in a process." Joan's words anticipated what our research found to be true for the women in our study: namely, that personal growth and spiritual development were anticipated by many to have the potential of continuing all of their lives. In the words of one participant, "in many ways, the best has been saved for last."

For many of the women in our study, far from buying into the belief that their power was destined to diminish as they aged, they experienced time as the means of actualizing their true potential, tapping into their ever-growing reservoir of self-knowledge, external resources and communal wisdom. Says Irma, 52, "when my child was young and I wasn't working, I didn't feel like I was doing something meaningful.

Other people complain about empty nests, but it freed me up to get back on track with my work.” Along the way, they found themselves increasingly able to identify and cast off aspects of their lives that they had outgrown: namely other people’s expectations, unmerited shame, knee-jerk reactivity, family dynamics, and a wide variety of toxic beliefs, roles and limitations. Moreover, they were making these advances issue by issue, as they arose.

Following are excerpts of several of the in-depth interviews, expressing this dynamic quality of psycho-spiritual growth later in life.

“When I was young, I faced sexual harassment in my workplace but kept my mouth shut because I was afraid of getting fired,” says Lucille, one of our research participants, now 62. “Then, when I advanced to a new position and was no longer in personal jeopardy, I got caught up in advancing my career. Even though I knew that the problem had not gone away for others, I told myself I’d get back around to it ‘when I had more clout.’”

“In my forties, when I did have enough clout, I was too exhausted to take anything else on. In my fifties, I began reaping the rewards of all my years of hard work, and the last thing I wanted to do was to rock the boat. ‘It’s the next generation’s turn to fight the good fight,’ I told myself.’ Then in my sixties, I retired. Somebody asked me to mentor her niece, Linda, a young woman of great promise. As fate would have it, Linda reluctantly admitted to me that she was being sexually harassed at work but made me promise not to tell. Then and there, I realized that it is possible to let one’s whole life pass, never once finding the perfect opportunity to say ‘It’s me. It’s now.’ Well guess what! It is me and it is now!” Lucille became active, addressing sexual harassment in

her industry, and giving voice to the issue that had lurked in the shadows all her life. “I used to have problems with meaning in the past, but right now, I don’t.”

Another of our participants, Miranda, 58, demonstrates post-menopausal psychological and spiritual development.

“When my husband died, I was left with enough money to cruise away the rest of my days comfortably ensconced on the deck chair of a luxury liner,” Miranda told us. “On my very first cruise, I decided to join in on a group tour of one of the ports. While our attention was being directed towards historical landmarks and museums, I kept catching glimpses of children living in hunger and poverty just steps away. I couldn’t get over the contrast and to tell you the truth, when I thought of all the food that I had personally consumed that day alone, I felt more than a little guilty.” When Miranda returned home, she wanted to do something about what she had seen.

“But who was I to take on such a big undertaking?” she asked herself. “I’m just one person!” Then a friend shared with her a quote by Zora Neal Hurston. “Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at de sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.” The quote inspired Miranda to take action.

When Miranda attended one of our research groups, she was in the midst of considering whether she should get involved in an existing charity that brought humanitarian aid to the children of the region, or in starting a foundation of her own.

“The thing is, to be willing to feel your inadequacy and the fear, and do it anyway,” says Miranda. “That’s what has given my life meaning.”

During the course of our research, we conversed with many women who told stories that demonstrated the capacity to use whatever life brought their way as an opportunity for personal growth. Illustrative of this is a story shared with us by Marilyn, 52, one of our participants. For many nights, Marilyn reports having stood a lonely vigil at her mother's hospital bed in the intensive care unit. Lapsed into a semi-comatose state, her mother could neither see nor hear and her words were unintelligible. There was no one but Marilyn there to witness what happened on the final night when suddenly, her mother's eyes opened wide and she cried out: "I love you Sondra" and then fell silent. "It's not Sondra, Mom. It's me: Marilyn" she cried out, but mother was already gone.

Sondra was Marilyn's sister, always the favorite—and now, with her mother's dying breath, Marilyn now knew, with a terrible finality, that she was, as she put it "doomed to have a mother-shaped hole in her heart forever."

We listened to Marilyn's story, paying rapt attention. Accompanying her poetic if painful words, we noted that just two years after this episode, Marilyn looked fine and seemed optimistic about the future.

"All your life, you yearned for something that was never to be yours," we inquired. "How did you make things right with yourself after that?"

"Before I knew how this chapter in my life story would end, I had kept the space where the love was supposed to be empty, waiting in a state of on-going yearning and hope. I was like a broken pot, the structure weakened by what I now know definitively was an illusion. The sad tale over at last, I realized that if I ever wanted to be whole and strong, I would have to fill that empty place up with something else."

She told the group that of course she mourned her terrible loss, but before long, she realized that by giving up the dream, she had also been spontaneously freed. Her life had blossomed, full of friends, family and the best company of all: her own, healed self. “I found a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. I was whole again.”

This spontaneous attunement is so palpable, a number of participants shared similar stories, many of them weaving in spiritual material to the conversation, from zen to “new thought”, and an occasional Jewish or Christian reference. In fact, the participants called upon an expansive spiritual inventory of non-dogmatic sources and information about life mastery drawn from many times and places.

Having previously discussed the inadequacy of the classical models of psychological and spiritual development to help us understand our participants’ experience, we have identified an alternative upon which to build a more accurate model for specific application to the women of the baby boom generation. We refer here to cultural mythology, a theory about human development, introduced by Drs. David Feinstein and Stanley Krippner.¹² The model posits three stages of development, through which the individual ideally traverses throughout the course of her life, ultimately arriving at higher levels of psychological and spiritual attainment. As opposed to the lofty and rarely attainable notions of psycho-spiritual ascendancy proposed by Fowler, Kohlberg, Maslow and others, the peak of attainment on the Feinstein/Krippner model is consistent with the actual achievements of the many women in our study who expressed

¹² *Personal Mythology* shares a number of theoretical points in common with the work of Robert Kegan, referred to in an earlier footnote. Both theories posit a constructed reality, to which individuals have the ability to respond throughout their lives, capable of seeking input and making judgments enabling changes in behavior and belief. The primary motivator is the urge to make meaning, driving a life long process of differentiation and integration.

satisfaction in their quest and/or attainment of meaning in one or more areas of their lives¹³.

To develop a more accurate model consistent with our findings, we offer a refinement to the implication in many of the stage-oriented models, that advancement from one stage to another takes place simultaneously, across the board, for the individual. Rather, it is our finding that advancement is made by the individual on an issue by issue basis. In fact, it is not only possible but common that a participant be simultaneously at one stage of development in one area of her life, and at a completely different stage in another. For instance, one participant had achieved mentoring status in her profession, but by her own admission, continued to be stuck in childlike expectations in regards to her family dynamics. Another woman reported having learned how to have healthy relationships with her grown children but was obviously in denial about matters related to her health.

A second area corrected by our model is the implication, prominent in developmental stage theory, that we advance from stage to stage at a particular age. For example, while it is true that many of the women in our study reported having had an identity crisis sometime during adolescence, the designated “age-appropriate” stage in most models for such activities as self-questioning and rebellion, many reported having had similar crises as recently as in the past one to three years. A handful identified themselves as being currently in this stage. The Wisdom Years model we propose draws upon elements of Kegan’s constructive developmental work, Peter Berger’s secular

¹³ Few reported having achieved the highest levels in all areas of their lives. Of the few who did report across-the-board attainment, when compared to their actual circumstances and general demeanor, their reporting is suspect.

theory and Victor Turner's ritual theory , in addition to Feinstein/Krippner's cultural mythology,

Our model consists of three permeable stages.¹⁴ The first stage is called The Conventional Boomer Woman (originally referred to by us as "Original Programming.") According to our model, in this first stage, the child is born into an original worldview that functions in such a way as to give that child's life meaning. In healthy development, when new information that differs from the original worldview is introduced into the child's life, the individual either modifies or replaces the old programming. The old beliefs must be acknowledged as being outdated or dysfunctional in order for the person to advance and grow. The fulfillment of this potential is not a free and easy ascent. According to the model, normal stages of development are routinely delayed, halted or skipped entirely as over and over again, the individual is asked to deny her own sense of life and the ability to think for herself in deference to other people's worldviews.

Even as adults, the imposition continues. The women in our study reported being regularly confronted by stereotypes of aging and dire warnings about our futures, having to fight against the tendency to "buy into the fear", as one participant explained.

There are many emotions as well as behaviors that can trigger the awareness that there is inner work to be done. Some of the more common indicators reported by women in our study include the consistent inability to make a decision, the nagging sense that she is being perceived by others differently than how she feels inside, persistent self-neglect of her physical or emotional needs, free-floating anxiety, and so on. The presence of these uncomfortable states often indicate that the woman is entering Stage Two, which

¹⁴ Permeable, in that women reported going back and forth "wavering" between stages and having influences from several stages acting on them simultaneously.

we refer to as “The Transitional Boomer Woman” (previously referred to as “Reactive Response.”)

This is the stage during which one becomes literally dis-illusioned with that which one had previously taken for granted. A woman in this stage often feels herself to be plunged into insecurity, her old status quo crumbling beneath her feet as she frantically clutches at empty air looking for something solid to grab onto. The old beliefs are falling apart—but the new, meaningful worldview has not yet come into view.

In many respects, this vulnerable period bears similarities to an initiatory rite of passage. In the classic ritual, the initiate is separated from the familiarity of the everyday life of the tribe and put through a series of trials. In the end, transformed by the experience, the initiate re-enters the tribe with the new stature of an adult, having gained valuable skills and insights.

Contemporary anthropologists, such as Victor Turner and Ronald Grimes, suggest that individuals undergoing transitions at any stage of their lives go through a similar initiatory sequence, often experienced inwardly as an altered emotional state. For many of the women we interviewed, the advance from Stage One to Stage Two was initiated by some kind of separation from the context within which they had come to know themselves, such as moving to a new city, divorce, career or job transitions, death of a family member, illness or any of the definitive events that take one out of the familiar routines of life. Ironically, happy occasions, too, such as the marriage of a child, can trigger such a response.

At the same time the old conceptions are passing away, signs of new beliefs and behaviors formed in reaction to them begin to emerge. For example, tired of trying to

live up to other people's expectations about beauty, one of our research participants, Samantha, decided to cut her long hair into a crew cut, letting what was left of her mane go a natural gray. Another participant, Elizabeth, frustrated over being asked to once again head up the hospitality committee rather than getting a seat of power on the board, simply stopped going to church.

While disillusionment is not something most of us eagerly seek in our lives, it typically heralds a new period of growth. Sue, 47, one of our research participants, illustrated the value of dis-illusionment. When asked about her areas or issues of concern, Sue shared with us privately that she deeply regretted having stayed in a marriage with a man who didn't want children. Then, to make the issue even more painful, shortly after she ended her childbearing years, he left her for a younger woman. His explanation: *I wasn't ready to father a child before. Now I am.*

Sue told us that she was having a great deal of difficulty coming to terms with the realization that she had been betrayed on so many levels. But even more bothersome was her mother's constant dwelling on a one-note song, that Sue had been a fool. For years, every time Sue was with her mother, she felt the sting of her judgment. Sue went back and forth, ricocheting between the urge to react angrily and feelings of shame, that she would never be worthy of finding someone new to love.

Then somebody gave Sue a self-help book that suggested that the way to break free from anger and shame was to give up trying to win approval from your disapproving parent, and to become a loving parent to yourself. Shortly thereafter, Sue decided to start dating, bracing herself to push through the fear that she was doomed to play the fool. But as she began putting out the word to her friends that she was ready to get into

circulation, she realized that the old script was gone and new words had come to take its place.

“Of course I’ve made mistakes. But that’s not the whole story about me. And what’s more, it’s not even the most important part,” says Sue. “I laugh, I cry—and I can finally look people straight in the eye and say ‘here I am, flaws and all’—the whole package. And while I prefer you love me, as I am, I am willing to take the consequences.”

Out of the chaos of transition emerges the third and final phase of development, the third stage that we call “The Aspirational Boomer Woman” (previously referred to as “Wisdom.”) During this culminating stage, the woman moves beyond the victimization of the first stage and the rebellion and reactivity of the second. The hallmark of the authentic life that arises is integrity: an embrace of opposing tensions – the sum of which constitutes a whole greater than any of the parts. This is the stage that the women referred to when they described their lives as being “meaningful.” Many of the women used images of integration to describe their lives in regards to meaning: weaving and mending, repairing and healing. “I think of it as the retrieval of lost and broken pieces, patching it together like a broken pot on an archeological dig, making it into something at once authentic and new,” said Cynthia, 54, a woman who had recently lost her mother after an extended, painful period in which she had served as primary caregiver.

A week before our first research circle, one of our participants called to tell us that her mother had just received word that she was to undergo life-threatening surgery. Asking us to keep her upsetting news confidential, Celia called in her regrets. We were disappointed and concerned for Celia and her mother, but of course, we understood.

But the morning of the gathering Celia called, asking if she could come after all.

“Had the surgery gone well?”

“It’s not scheduled until next week. We still don’t know.”

We assured Celia that we could reschedule her for a future time, but she was insistent.

“The thing is, I realized that the main reason I felt I couldn’t come was that I knew you were talking to people about their lives. I wanted you to think of me as the together businesswoman who lets nothing faze her. And yet here I was, canceling a session I’d been looking forward to, asking you to keep secrets and throwing myself into work so as to not have to deal with my feelings.”

Celia paused, taking a deep breath. “Then I suddenly realized that I was, indeed, letting something faze me. Ironically, it was none other than my concern that I would appear to be untogether. So bottom line: if you still want me, and let me come as I am, I’ll be there.”

Even as society’s imagery about aging continues to tend to marginalize women, painting fearful portraits of the future and a litany of concerns, the women of the baby boom generation who participated in our study display a psychological and spiritual resilience that defies the stereotypes. The stereotypes are due, in part, to the lack of useful models of adult development for women—as well as men—at midlife and beyond. As a result, the 80 million members of the baby boom generation are on largely unmapped terrain, often wondering if their experiences are unique (and isolating) or common (and holding the promise of building community.) Running a close second to the quest for meaning was the urge for community. In fact, in both the focus groups and

in several of the workshops, the women expressed the desire to continue meeting on a regular basis, feeling relief at having had the opportunity to share pent-up thoughts and feelings.

Our research is just a beginning, pointing to the need for further work not only on models of adult development generally, but of spiritual development models particularly geared to understanding the potentialities of the unprecedented life spans and heightened spiritual aspirations of this generation of women. The fact is that given the size of their demographic, baby boom women have the potential to make a bigger impact on our society today and in the coming decades than any other gender or age group in the population, economically, politically, socially and spiritually.

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