

Women, Midlife, and Leadership

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Books Discussed

Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide, by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever (Princeton University Press, 2003)

Midlife Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes, by Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan Nicholas Hays, rev. ed. 1999)

Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives, by Anna Fels (Pantheon, 2004)

Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America, by Marc Freedman (Public Affairs, 1999)

Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership, by Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Oxford University Press, 1995)

The Postmodern Life Cycle: Challenges for Church and Theology, by Friedrich L. Schweitzer (Chalice Press, 2004).

The huge baby-boom generation is now poised on the brink of midlife, an infamously tumultuous period in the adult life cycle. I have been wondering whether our questions and our searching will do as much to the cultural status quo as our adolescent sexual explorations and challenges to authority once did; my research toward an answer has turned up a particularly interesting array of books and challenging insights.

The normal processes of midlife are apt to challenge both the mindless consumerism and the continuing subordination of women in our culture as midlifers critically review many of the blind assumptions and get-ahead priorities that have shaped ordinary adulthood in the 1980's and 1990's. We may not resume the heady idealism of the 1960's and 1970's, when we honestly thought we could change the world. But central to the midlife experience is Pogo's famous line: "I have seen the enemy, and he is us."

From what I have read, midlifers are at least as determined to change themselves as to change the world. We know that changing the world is unlikely, but we also know that changing ourselves is both possible and sometimes necessary.

This stage in life is apt to be particularly important for women, who have suffered so much of the opportunity costs involved in child-rearing, and who have lived through such momentous changes in the role of women in our culture. What will happen when this generation of women get their second wind, this time without the ambivalences and ambiguities we felt thirty years ago? Because the huge baby boom generation enjoys both unprecedented health and an unprecedented percentage of well-educated, ambitious women, these changes are apt to reverberate generally in ways no less potent than the "sexual revolution" of the 1960's.

Theories of Midlife Adult Development

A useful starting point is Friedrich Schweitzer's elegant little book, *The Postmodern Life Cycle: Challenges for Church and Theology*. From introduction to epilogue, it's a mere 139 pages--and it offers more cultural and theological insight than many books twice its size. Furthermore, it's quite readable. The book originated as the Stone Lectures 2000 at Princeton, an influence visible in its very immediate address to the audience, in its remarkably clear organization, and above all in how wonderfully it invites conversation with its readers.

This would be an excellent first book in a first course in missiology, because it will help seminarians to begin to think systematically about the practical challenges facing the church after the demise of Christendom. I also recommend it highly for vestries and for parish staff, because it offers a tough and honest look at how religion ought to matter for the things that matter in our own daily lives. This is theology with its feet on the ground--and its heart in the right place.

Schweitzer identifies himself as a practical theologian determined to work up theologically from actual daily experience rather than down from systematic theology based upon systematic philosophy. I like that angle, particularly from someone who

transparently commands the systematic and philosophic issues that he so diligently keeps out of the way. But the influence upon him of Erik Erikson remains remarkably clear.

Although practical and pastoral theology have been, on the whole, massively influenced by the life cycle theories of Erik Erikson, Erikson in turn had a generally modernist and furthermore individualist view of the life cycle. That is, he assumed that in growing up we face a single, coherent set of cultural pressures to become certain sorts of people playing certain sorts of roles, among which we choose in our late teens: tinker, tailor, fisherman, spy, and so forth. (Except for women, of course: women are mothers and that's about it.) The challenge is to make this choice wisely, and then to adapt to the demands of the choice with appropriate integrity and personal autonomy. As Freud insisted upon love and work, Erikson insists upon generativity--being productive somehow both within the intimate relationships of one's personal life and the public roles of one's professional life. In old age one sums it all up somehow, emerging with whatever wisdom and acceptance one can muster, and so the story ends.

As Schweitzer observes, such a story depends upon a cultural stability and homogeneity that no longer exist. As he explains, "the challenge is how to come to terms with a life cycle that presents itself like a permanent construction site, with an overabundance of completing construction plans and with no clear criteria for choosing among them" (p. 17). And so, he argues, pastoral and practical theology must adapt to the lives people really do lead, continually asking and re-asking what it means to live a life of faith in such culturally fluid circumstances, and how congregations might help.

He offers specific suggestions for each of his six stages: childhood, adolescence, postadolescence (one's 20's), adulthood, midlife (roughly 50 to 75), and old age. His accounts of what congregations should do to support those in postadolescence and midlife seemed to me quite thin, but perhaps that's because his Eriksonian model of adult development gave him little to go on. That doesn't worry me: congregations are rightly charged with figuring out what to do for themselves, because regional and local differences have been substantial during the cultural upheavals to which these lifecycle

changes attest. I am impressed, however, by Schweitzer's thoughtful accounts of all the many ways in which identity-stabilizing structures have disappeared.

I propose that Schweitzer's account of postmodern identity-formation problems needs to be intersected with two reasonably familiar facts. First, the huge generational cohort of Baby Boomers is now well into midlife. Midlife is famously the most tumultuous life stage other than adolescence because, like adolescence itself, midlife involves once again asking major questions about one's identity. But if we never fully or solidly answered the question "who am I?" during the tumult of the 1960's or 1970's followed by the stunning rise of an electronics revolution and a global economy, this revisiting is apt to be quite lively.

Secondly, the Boomers--or at least many of us--have benefited dramatically from the medical and epidemiological advances of the twentieth century, especially cautions about exercise, smoking, and dietary fat. According to the *National Vital Statistics Reports* of the Center for Disease Control, the average life expectancy of someone who was born in 1950 is 80 years. That's an average. It does not exclude people who currently smoke, or have uncontrolled blood pressure, or colon cancer, or whose blood lipid levels are sky-high. Which is to say: life expectancy is even longer for someone born in 1950 who is currently healthy, doesn't smoke, eats and drinks reasonably, gets the appropriate regular medical tests, and lives a reasonably stable life. For women born in 1950, who are significantly healthier and longer-lived than men, these decades of vital, active adulthood constitute what some social scientists are now calling a second 30 to 40 year life-span, an entire second run at adulthood--but this time without small children and with much greater reserves of skill, confidence, and moxie.

Such longevity dawned on me as I sat at my son's college graduation a year ago: I'm thirty years older than he, but thirty years younger than my mother, who still attends aerobics class three times a week. I have a long way to go yet. A very long way to go. My son and I were both "graduating" in some sense, because he was leaving home: what were my plans for the future?

I started reading. And I've decided that there are greater psychological and theological resources in Jung's psychology of midlife than there are in Erikson's.

Jung contends that at midlife we reconsider the sacrifices we made to cope with the demands of early adulthood (such as three children under the age of 2½). Coping with the demands of ordinary adulthood forces anyone to set aside an array of talents, needs, interests, and aspects of our personalities--what Martin Smith nicely describes as our "marginalized selves" in *The Word Is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying with Scripture* (Cowley, 1989). These submerged needs, interests, and identities resurface at midlife because only at that point is the mature personality sufficiently strong and sufficiently well-developed to cope with the re-emergence. The mature personality does so by enlarging its own scope and by attaining more flexible, more nuanced boundaries that, by Jung's account, more easily include or engage the symbolic, the paradoxical, and the transcendent. This process no doubt underlies the many midlife calls to ordination.

The best guide that I have found to Jungian theories of midlife is Janice Brewi and Anne Brennan, *Midlife Spirituality and Jungian Archetypes* (rev. ed. Nicholas-Hays, 1999). They do an extraordinary job of bridging between Jungian psychology and the teachings of Jesus. Their theological position is not developed very far, but perfectly far enough for the theologically sophisticated to see where they are going in their account of Jesus' call to wholeness, to integrity, and to healing.

Brewi and Brennan also offer the finest, most persuasive account of Jung I have ever read. Given Jung's infamous opacity and apparent inconsistency, the clarity of their account has its origins--or so I suspect--in a prior and richly developed dialogue between their Jungian sources and their Christian vision of what it means to be a person made in the image of God and called to friendship with God. I should also note that their earlier book, *Mid-Life Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives* (1982) has just been issued in a revised edition from Nicholas-Hays.

How Boomers Are Expected to Redefine Midlife

While social scientists have been off in the library tinkering with how the new longevity messes with their tidy modernist heritage of life-cycle theories, journalists and activists of various sorts have been criss-crossing the country with tape recorders and

notebooks, talking to midlifers and to retired folks, trying to make sense of what's going on before the full demographic deluge of the boomer generation reaches this turbulent stage. It's quite a tale.

In *Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America* (Public Affairs, 1999), Marc Freedman contends that Boomers will reject wholesale the vision of retirement made famous in the 1950s by Sun City and similar retirement developments. We are not interested in thirty years of shuffleboard, golf, and bridge, he argues. We are not interested in leisurely irrelevance. As our midlife re-evaluations draw to their natural conclusion, we will storm into our retirement years determined to do something "worthwhile" with our new resources of time, desire, and psychic energy, something that "makes a difference."

What impact will that have upon the expression or the perception of life-priorities within popular culture generally? Furthermore, will the churches rise successfully to the challenge of helping this huge generational cohort to define what "worthwhile" means? As Robert Bellah and his colleagues so famously argued in *Habits of the Heart*, radical individualism fails to offer any solid definition of "worthwhile" beyond the transient assertion of immediate preference or arbitrary taste. Yet books in "religion" and "spirituality" continue to dominate trade-book sales to an extraordinary degree: I think there is every reason to expect that many people will turn to religion--in some guise or other--for answers to ultimate questions grown suddenly urgent as old age appears on their personal horizon. Opportunities for serious, sophisticated ministry may prove abundant.

Much of *Prime Time* describes small, ingenious programs that pair this midlife drive for worthwhile activity with pressing social needs. Between the demands of careers and the needs of children, many people now suffer a terrible time famine--but for the midlife boomers all those demands are about to diminish, a life change that comes decades before the incapacities of old age. At that point, our notorious energy and our once-discarded commitment to social change may intersect in potent ways.

Freedman's study of changing themes in insurance advertisements offers intriguing evidence for his claims: insurance companies are known to do extensive, quite

intelligent marketing research. They know that Boomers are making big plans to do something more than play shuffleboard. Freedman tells a good story about these innovative programs and about changing images of retirement in the last century, a good story that parish staff need to know if they are to play a role in helping midlifers turn their restless transitions into new opportunities and commitments to live into baptismal promises honestly.

Abigail Trafford takes a more personal, more individualist approach to these issues in her lively new book, *My Time: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life* (Basic, 2004). At times there is something naively individualistic about her analysis: once too often she quotes someone saying that for decades they have done what others want but now they are going to do what they themselves truly want--a decision that too often means little more than tossing off all prior commitments and responsibilities in favor of the latest adventure in "self-realization." Furthermore, tossing off former roles to the extent she describes is a process available only to people with considerable economic resources: most 50-something folks cannot possibly afford to quit their jobs. Seen through such lenses, the Boomer generation is approaching midlife as we have approached every other stage: we have always been accused of a "me first" attitude, a frivolity about commitments, and an endlessly sybaritic search for self-actualizing.

Furthermore, there's something centrally dishonest about claiming that one's major choices for thirty years have all been inauthentic. In fact, Brewi and Brennan would contend that such claims are evidence of psychological pathology--evidence that the mature personality has been overwhelmed by the demands of needs and priorities that were once set aside for the sake of mature integration and solid, functional adult identity. Such inner chaos is the classic "mid-life crisis" in which a solid-citizen sort has an affair with a 19 year old, quits his job, cashes in his pension to buy a sailboat, and then runs away from home--for a few months, at which point he reappears broke, alone, and pathologically depressed.

But Trafford is not one to worry about naively celebrating the radical individualism endemic in our culture. She doesn't appear to recognize, much less to question, the

great American assumption that we can always pick up stakes and move on, reinventing ourselves whole cloth in the process.

And yet, as a good journalist, Trafford is also an astute listener and an excellent observer: despite its occasional shallowness, *My Time* is an engaging book, a genuinely fun read full of lively portraits and telling accounts of what midlife feels like for those of us amidst this stage. Furthermore, she can turn a phrase with the best of them, a talent I always enjoy.

The midlife search, she says, is "not for a job but for a purpose" (p. 84). The goal of life has changed "from getting ahead to getting whole" (p. xxiii). "What you lack in speed" in this quest, she explains, "you make up for in clarity of purpose" (p. 132). These are not needs one can meet by buying a Hummer or a pricey condo in Vail. But if a goodly percentage of the Boomer generation intentionally slows its consuming during its prime years as consumers, that will jolt both the economy and the culture in no small way. The changes that social scientists and cultural critics have been calling for all these years may begin to happen: think of what we did with nothing more than long hair, sex, and rock-n-roll.

Nor is that the only potential change to ponder. "This is all about resurrection," one of Trafford's sources explains, "but first something has to die" (p. 42). What has to die, she goes on to explain, is the way we hang on to our old losses and familiar illusions. As we accept, grieve, and finally get past the suffering life has brought us, we are ready to focus our new restless energy upon the three tasks of midlife: reaching out to others, providing knowledge and memory, and achieving integrity (p. 91). That's a somewhat blurred Eriksonian account, blending the generativity he attributes to early adulthood with the perspectival tasks he attributes to the last years of old age; but her stories and profiles nicely portray the odd mix of introspection and activism that characterize midlife and, soon afterwards, an active retirement. It could be great fun to invite those amidst this process to do some serious theological reflection together about both Freedman's *Prime Time* and Trafford's *My Time*.

As I suggested earlier, I think midlife is a particularly rich time for many women, because we have lived through and struggled with historically remarkable changes in the public roles and status of women.

This progress has come at considerable personal cost for most of us, because we rebelled against the 1950's model of housewifery only to discover that employers and colleagues alike were somewhere between blind and hostile to our difficulties in combining motherhood with professional achievement. As Claudia Goldin demonstrates from excellent demographic databases in *Career and Family: College Women Look to the Past*, fewer than 20 percent of women who graduated from college between 1966 and 1979 managed to have both a family and a career (Working Paper No. 5188, National Bureau of Economic Research, 1995). Goldin defined "family" as at least one child, and "career" as fulltime employment and, for two years running, earnings equal to the lowest 25 percent of comparably educated men.

These are hardly rigorous standards, especially for "having a career." I found these numbers stunning. But if once and for all my generation of women can let go of the losses and frustrations to which such statistics testify, and then reclaim the renewed upwelling of all the dreams and drives we compromised in order to survive as mature and responsible parents, then who knows what will happen next in our lives. What I have seen so far--and repeatedly--is a depth of exuberant energy and confidence that is quite remarkable.

I have found several books--by midlife academic women--that delineate at least a few dimensions of what may lie ahead for many of us and for the culture generally. All of these books simultaneously document the cultural obstacles to women's professional advancement while insisting that with a little old-fashioned consciousness-raising women can effectively refuse to be trapped.

This is feminism with a new face, aggressively accepting responsibility for our own complicity with oppressive norms, even when that complicity is unconscious. We are not helpless, innocent victims: at least some of what has happened to us is plainly our own fault, *and we can do something about this*. That recognition has for a me a distinctly midlife color. These books can help anyone with the midlife task of reclaiming sidelined

or marginalized drives, this time with far less ambivalence, far less brittle single-mindedness, and far more strategic moxie.

Because clergy generally also face many of the classic pressures women face to be "nice," to be deferential to authority, and to be self-sacrificing, I suspect these books will be doubly useful for ordained women--and not a few ordained men as well. For women in seminary, these books should be required reading:.

The first title I want to discuss is an older but terrific book: Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (Oxford, 1995). Jamieson explains that she wrote the book to refute Susan Faludi's 1991 book *Backlash*--a polemical and now widely discredited account of a massive, often violent retaliation against women who challenge male supremacy. As befits the Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, Jamieson offers an astute rhetorical analysis of the double-binds women face, a well-documented account of how certain prominent women confronted and triumphed over such traps, and, finally, an array of strategies anyone might deploy to avoid these double binds.

Her list goes like this (p. 16):

- Women can exercise their wombs or their brains, but not both.
- Women who speak out are immodest and will be shamed, while women who are silent will be ignored or dismissed.
- Women are subordinate whether they claim to be different from men or the same.
- Women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent will be judged unfeminine.
- As men age, they gain wisdom and power; as women age, they wrinkle and become superfluous.

This is an honest, tough-minded book that is also deeply optimistic. Yes, women face these double-binds. Yes, women themselves, not only men, use these stereotypes against other women. And yes, with a little brains, a little moxie, and a measure of

rhetorical skill anyone can rise above such boxes: this is "consciousness raising" for intellectuals.

In *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives*, Anna Fels picks up on the fourth of these double binds, the supposed incompatibility of competence and womanliness--although she never refers to Jamieson's work. A psychiatrist in private practice and on the medical faculty of Cornell, Fels contends (1) that there is a "powerful and innate pleasure" in developing mastery or competence in some area (p. 7), but (2) public recognition of one's skills or competence is essential to maintaining confidence that one can reach one's goals (p. 254). The pleasure of mastery is not enough to sustain the development of talent if recognition does not follow. Ambition, then, is the complex drive to be recognized for one's skills. Ambition is not--or at least not necessarily--ruthless or brutal or self-centered. Healthy ambition is innate to who we are:

Sociologists, learning theorists, clinical psychologists, research psychologists, and the business community all independently acknowledge that recognition is key to learning, motivation, productivity, and sense of identity. Without it there can be no goals set and no sustained effort at a task. . . . [Recognition] is the motivational engine that allows one to develop the mastery required to pursue an ambition. Ambitions are at first the product and, later, the source of this profoundly animating and defining response (p. 95)

The problem, then, is a disheartening array of empirical studies demonstrating that any work attributed to a woman is evaluated less highly than the very same work attributed to a man. Furthermore, women in competition with men perform less well than they do on identical tasks in which they compete only with women. There is much solid evidence on these points, evidence I have also seen summarized elsewhere.

This cultural complex leaves women deeply conflicted about their own ambitions in ways that men are not conflicted. Competent women are also apt to fear that they are frauds or imposters whose incompetence will be revealed at any moment--again, a syndrome widely described.

Furthermore, women are more likely than men to have an external "locus of control" whereby their successes are attributed to blind luck and their failures to inability--rather than having a more masculine internal locus of control whereby success is attributed to competence and failures are attributed to inadequate effort or trivial, transient problems that are not likely to recur. Above all, women are afraid to admit their own ambitions.

Such issues matter for the church because, at least from what I can tell, the "discernment process" toward ordination commonly serves to enforce an external locus of control and systematically to deconstruct any deep sense of competence that individuals might have brought with them to the process. Any refusal to recognize competence is deeply destructive no matter what, and especially so when paired with an insistence upon repeated, humiliating, often arbitrary scrutiny.

Fels's account is peppered with the sorts of pointed insights into fears, motivations etc. that one would expect from a psychiatrist: this is a good and challenging book at such moments, one that ought to solace and encourage any capable woman who once in a while feels herself inexplicably falling silent or going weak in the knees. But at times Fels goes rhetorically overboard in depicting these fears and inhibitions: "Because of the linkage of subordination and female sexuality," she contends, "positions of authority strike terror into the hearts of even the most dedicated feminists" (p. 155). I beg to differ.

Such hyperbole may be simple carelessness or poor editing; it may stem in part from her reliance upon Faludi's infamous distortions and in part from Fels's intimate therapeutic experience with women who are in fact terrified and incapacitated. This may be a social-class issue: Fels repeatedly acknowledges evidence that working class women and women from ethnic or racial minorities have deeper confidence around men and less-conflicted ambition than middle- or upper-class women of European heritage.

Judging from what my own children reported in the middle to late nineties about leadership in their high school, I think there are also substantial generational differences in how easily competent women find their leadership and their talents widely recognized. I'll leave this matter for readers to adjudicate for themselves.

A more modestly formulated claim still leaves many Baby Boomer women with plenty to think about: beware the tendency to downplay your own competence, to deflect

attention, to obscure ambition, to dodge rather than seek leadership, and above all to tolerate silencing or marginalizing. These are understandable failings among women, but they are failings nonetheless.

Forty years ago, the nuns who ran my high school understood as much: in the front hall, outside the main office, there was a floor to ceiling mosaic paraphrasing Emerson in letters a foot high: "Every girl has the obligation to become what she has the ability to become." We are indeed morally obligated to be all that God has made us to be--and all around us women function competently in a variety of skillful tasks and leadership roles. The role models we lacked thirty years ago are now abundant.

Much may follow from such a psychological regrouping among competent, well-educated women with long healthy active decades ahead of them--especially when there is such solid demographic evidence that most of our careers have been to some extent re-routed by the demands of motherhood. At 24, having been told repeatedly by English professors that with rare exceptions women had never written anything worth reading, I did have my doubts about my ambitions to write. At 54, with the kids gone, four books to my credit, and thirty years of the new women's histories lining the shelves behind me, I have no such doubts. And I'm a ridiculously typical Baby Boomer--I always have been. Millions of other women are also feeling this newly ferocious, newly exuberant confidence: we may be a force to contend with culturally.

More potent yet, because far more skillfully argued, is *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever. Babcock holds an endowed chair in economics in the school of public policy at Carnegie Mellon; Laschever is a professional writer. Between the two of them, they have produced a highly polished, beautifully paced examination of why women have been at a stunning disadvantage in negotiations of any sort--and how and why that is changing, and how it can be helped to change even further, even faster. Once again, this is a book that male clergy ought to read as well, because there is such good empirical evidence that clergy are deeply conflict-averse.

Their argument addresses Jamieson's contention that women who are silent are ignored, but women who speak up are shamed or attacked. More specifically: there is excellent empirical evidence for each of the following claims:

- Women seriously underestimate the value their own work in comparison to the values assigned by men to their objectively inferior performance in identical situations.
- Women underestimate the scope of resources available to them for the asking.
- Women are much more likely to assume--mistakenly--that resources are both fixed and fairly allocated already, such that asking for more is either pointless or inappropriate.
- Women tend to feel that asking for recognition diminishes the value of the recognition if it is offered; men don't feel that way, and so men are much more likely to seek--and to receive--recognition.

Fortunately, women cued to these disabling assumptions quickly amend their ways, especially if they also have access to good information about pay scales (the authors include a list of salary-range websites, p. 60). Women clergy, take heed.

Babcock and Laschever also discuss persuasive evidence that aggressive behavior of the sort which is admired in men is sharply disparaged or attacked in women. Shrewd women, then, are well advised to take to heart the relatively new work in non-domineering leadership styles and especially the newer, more nonconfrontational negotiation skills taught by Roger Fischer and William Ury, in the famous *Getting To Yes* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1981). Women are eminently suited to exercise authority in the new, less centralized, less hierarchical or less "modernist" organizations of the 21st century, because we are better at consulting, more perceptive emotionally, and less likely to think we can fall back upon bullying successfully.

All through *Women Don't Ask* I kept insisting to myself, "but not me!" or "surely this is exaggerated"--objections repeatedly thwarted truly disconcerting, ingeniously designed empirical research. We don't ask as often as we should because we have an array of

unconscious false assumptions. We do undervalue ourselves even as the world undervalues us. We do err, and err seriously, in trying simple-mindedly to imitate domineering male behavior rather than asserting ourselves with the specifically womanly style of authority that every mother invokes at times to control her children. But we can change, as these authors also demonstrate--in fact, we can change without all that much effort if we will only awaken and accept responsibility both for our own mistakes and for failing to speak out when we have been underpaid, ignored, or overlooked.

I'm awake now. And the simple accumulation of decades of experience goes a long way toward bolstering anyone's confidence, despite the undeniable obstacles to recognizing and rewarding women's talents. Midlife classically involves exactly this kind of re-evaluation and re-consideration, although various psychological theories account for that fact using different conceptual tools.

Christians call it conversion, which in Latin means "turning around," and by that account midlife is a time of remarkable grace. But grace is notoriously dangerous stuff. In less than ten years, the whole Baby Boom generation will be in this stage--and also richer, healthier, and more rambunctious than our Depression-era parents were. It will be both a challenge and an opportunity for the churches.

And it may be a lot of fun.