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## The INVISIBLE Decade

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Could it be we are so used to assigning men and women in their forties to “mid-life” and then those in their sixties and seventies to “senior citizens” we miss the lessons we can learn from those in their fifties? So, what is it like for those in their fifties? Have you been there, done that? You may be thinking, “Oh, to be fifty again!” Are you dreading your own fiftieth birthday? Are you so far from being fifty you are wondering why you are reading this?

The authors of *In Our Fifties: Voices of Men and Women Reinventing Their Lives*<sup>1</sup> suggest this decade is obscure because our society has changed so dramatically during the past 20–25 years. There are no neat descriptive labels, or even public myths, to describe our fifties. Less optimistic people may see the glass as half empty and call the fifties the “do-or-die” or the “last-chance” decade. Those more optimistic want to call it the generative decade or the decade of maturity.

Some see the fifties as a time to prepare for a life of physical decline and diminished social recognition and leadership. Sacrifice and stability are among the descriptors used. It has been generally viewed as immature for men and women of this age group to make decisions that impact their economic status, their choice of friends, their roles in the communities, and decisions which impact their family.

However, without expansion and change, those in their fifties become stagnant and ill-prepared for the later decades of their lives. Many in their fifties are at a time when their words can truly be trusted. They do exactly what they say they are going to do. They realize there is no longer time left in their lives to be less than honest and frank with themselves and with those they care about. This is a

time when unrealistic expectations are given up, providing comfort as well as an opportunity to be more productive in focusing on realistic and achievable challenges.

It is a time when adult children can begin to return the kind of caring support their parents gave to them. Adult children often become best friends to their parents during their fifties. A new level of friendship and camaraderie emerges as both face the realities of adult life. The fifties is not an easy decade to be alone. Finding support in family, friends, church, and the broader community is invaluable.

Being ready for challenges and high levels of activity, ready to make difficult choices among competing priorities, remaining open to change, and new roles and responsibilities is perhaps the hallmark of those living their fifties to the fullest. How comforting it can be to know that God is the blessed controller of all things and that the decade of the fifties is a potentially expansive and exciting time of life.

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Susan Murray is an assistant professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

<sup>1</sup> Bergquist, W.H., Greenberg, E. M., and Klaum, G. A., *In Our Fifties: Voices of Men and Women Reinventing Their Lives*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.