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THE PASSION WITHIN: CHALLENGING THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE BY
EDUCATING MIDLIFE WOMEN TO FULFILL THEIR CAREER DREAMS

A Dissertation Presented

by

Kelly Ann DePaolo

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education
Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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Abstract

This study is a very personal reflection. The purpose of the study is to illuminate how following the calling of my heart led to a deeper passion in my own work whereupon I realized my natural and limitless creative potential. It is a blending of my narrative with research conducted over a ten year time period on midlife women, work, and the search for passion within. The capacity and fostering of creativity became a focus in my writing because that is exactly where my spirit has led me. It has been my personal joy to put something in this world that was not there before.

My personal story is my unique Scholarly Personal Narrative, but the story itself and the constructs embedded within on midlife women moving beyond the feminine mystique to fulfill their career dreams by embracing their passion and seeking creativity is universal to many women. I believe that my experiences are both generalizable and transferable and will serve as a beacon of light in guiding other midlife women in their own journey to follow their dreams and nurture their true self. Scholarly Personal Narrative was used to blend my experiences with research on women's identity, midlife, reinventing careers, opting-out, on-ramps for women returning to work and expressing creativity. My narrative speaks to how specific events in my life, as in many women's lives, have contributed to finding my own authentic voice, navigating a course of rediscovery, and ultimately realizing the personal power of knowing you are empowered.

Throughout my writing I highlight that midlife is a unique period of time. I believe it can be claustrophobic and it can be ripe with opportunity and adventure. If you allow it, this time of life affords an opportunity for self-discovery and unanticipated growth. Midlife is a time to dig deep in examining our life experiences to extrapolate meaning. My meanings derived combined with my dreams within has led me in finding my true creative calling through my work. But, I believe that we each are the only ones who can find the meaning in and through our life experiences because they both form and inform our own truth. Universal themes that emerge include recognizing one's creativity has worth, viewing future work life as an opportunity to incorporate that with which we are passionate, and embracing midlife as a time for positive personal growth and change. It is a complex narrative, but in finding the truth, I became open to building on the successes, experiences, and lessons of my past to pursue work that excites, enriches, and motivates me.

Findings suggest that midlife is a crucial time of personal and professional growth. Findings also suggest many highly educated women have non-linear career paths which in turn deepen our self-understanding moving us toward authenticity and allowing ourselves to engage in work that matters to us. Embracing creativity in midlife, through our work, can fill us with both passion and purpose and ultimately lead us on a magical journey in discovering our own truth.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my four boys:

Nicolas

*For showing me the importance of
taking chances in life and embracing the moment
with a sense of adventure*

Zachary

*For demonstrating to me to
humbly employ your talents and always go
with gusto for what you really want*

Spencer

*For teaching me to always look at
situations with fresh eyes, a sense of humor
and that a really big hug solves many problems*

Rocco

*For showing me that
kindness, generosity and moral courage
in the way you treat others, is a true foundation for life*

I give you each the gift of living my truth and of honest courage. Through this, I send each of you into the world with the fortitude to honor your lives with compassion and to always consider women your equals. My love and respect for each of you is endless.

Acknowledgements

My ten-year study of midlife women finding passion in their work and embracing their creativity brought me full circle back to my own personal journey. The writing of my dissertation was a profound confirmation that I had, in fact, found my authentic voice. My writing was both cathartic and enlightening as it spoke to my head and to my heart.

I am blessed to have wonderful women in life that I call friends and I thank each of them for continually sharing their stories with me, listening to mine, and challenging me to honor my true talents. Four friends in particular have been instrumental in supporting me throughout my writing; checking in with me daily, encouraging me to write, think, explore, and write more. These ladies who text me late at night, early in the morning and throughout the day with inspirational and often funny words. Zoe Perez, Jennifer VanVleet, Patricia Nesto, and Fifi Schmidt – your presence in my life makes my world a better place. Thank you to each of you – your stories are intertwined with my own. Diane Benoit, Jennifer Zubarik, and Colleen Parker, dear and cherished friends in my local community have lent support to give me the time to write and have eagerly listened to my thinking. As they say, it takes a village and you have been my village.

My parents, Joe and MaryEllen DePaolo, you have believed in me even when I doubted myself. You have provided me with a strong foundation, encouragement along the path of my life, and wisdom to boldly navigate all life's twists and turns. Dad, you are a shining example of respecting and valuing the women in your life. Mom, your

inner strength and commitment to your beliefs and ethics has always been an inspiration and a beacon of light as an example of a life well lived.

My committee gave me permission and guidance in honoring my true self. They supported me in writing a doctoral dissertation that put my voice, my story at the front and center, and for that I am eternally grateful. Robert Nash, a mentor and a confidant for well over a decade, was a catalyst in my decision to let my voice shine through in my doctoral work. His very presence fills a room with compassion and with wisdom. Along my writing journey, Robert constantly supported me, gently challenging me when needed and was always there to catch me and thrust me forward when I hesitated even briefly. His greatest gift was his unending belief in me and in the importance of my story. He has been my true and utter champion. Tony Magistrale has been a friend who openly shared many incredible insights about writing and taught me one of my most valuable tools - to always engage with the words I read. Deb Hunter's confirmation that my work was important remains paramount in keeping me on the right track. Suzy Comerford brought an ability to see an overall picture while encouraging me to dig deep below the surface in a search for more meaning. Jill Tarule remains a hallmark of inspiration in my work. Jill has continually offered me professional insights and support, and has shared many stories about life's journey as a woman. I will always appreciate her encouragement and her elegance.

To the females I live with on a daily basis, Daisy and Davina – you bring me solace. Daisy, the cutest dog in the world, has sat by side or on my lap each and every

time I wrote. That is commitment. Davina, my bold and beautiful horse, has been and continues to offer me a liberating outlet that floods me with joy.

Lastly, I thank my husband, Michael for always recognizing, appreciating, and supporting the value of my creative side.

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Chapter 1

“In every great manifesto there are riveting moments of self-awareness.” (Anna Quindlen in the introduction to Betty Friedman’s *The Feminine Mystique*)

I had opened all my presents. I sat among my husband and four boys feeling happy and content. It was then that Nic, my oldest and eight years old at the time, handed me a card and said, “you have one more thing to open.” I smiled. Inside, on the left side of the card, he had jotted one simple sentence. As I read it, first to myself, I suddenly felt frozen. My eyes quickly darted from Nic’s to my husbands. I knew my husband had absolutely no idea what words that card held. No one knew the implications that this one sentence would come to have. How could they? How could I?

I cry easily. My boys could tell you this. I cry when I’m happy. I cry when I’m sad. I cry in front of my boys. I sometimes cry hiding in my closet. I cried that moment on my fortieth birthday, although, I’m not entirely sure why. Maybe it was because I was caught off guard. Maybe it was because I suddenly was a bit apprehensive and a bit unsure. Maybe it was because I was suddenly filled with anticipation and with hope.

I would have never guessed that a birthday present from my son on my fortieth birthday would cause such an internal stir. I would never have guessed that in the years to come, what would follow was an examination of my dreams. Dreams that have been left behind have a funny way of finding their way back into your life. I guess it happens when you least expect it. For me, it was the day I turned forty.

“I got you a riding lesson,” those were the words carefully inscribed in my child’s handwriting on the inside of my birthday card. My eyes met Nic’s. My eyes

surely spoke of questioning, of trying to comprehend exactly what he meant, of wanting to know more. His eyes were sparkling, full of pride and excitement. He was beaming, with a smile literally from one rosy round cheek to another. His face held all the exhilaration that makes giving a gift so truly wonderful. His face held all the anticipation of waiting to see how the recipient will respond.

“How,’ I asked. “Where?”

Nic proceeded to excitedly tell me that he asked a friend his age where she took lessons and he looked up the phone number and then just called the barn. He continued to tell me that the lady who answered the phone said she was happy to give his mom a riding lesson. My eyes again met my husbands, who was listening to Nic tell his tale, and clearly I knew this was the sole doing of a precocious little boy.

“What gave you this idea?” I asked my son, who was still grinning.

“Well Mom, every time you’re at Fifi’s (my childhood best friend since I was 6, and now professional equestrian), you never want to leave her barn. I figured you might want to ride again.”

It was at this moment that the tears began to fall down my cheeks and I engulfed Nic in my arms. My husband chuckled loudly as he told Nicolas, “You totally showed me up dude...look, Mom’s even crying.”

Barns are nostalgic for me. It starts with the smell – the aroma has always filled me to my innermost core. I took that riding lesson (but with Fifi and at her barn in Massachusetts) and that day I was catapulted into a sea self-exploration. As I swung my leg over the saddle and gently settled onto the horses back, I realized I was home.

Suddenly transported back to a time and place where I had been more carefree and more creative, without the constraints and demands of adulthood.

I believe many women experience some sort of Aha moment, much like I did. It may not be drastic. It may not come overnight. But for many, including me, it has resulted in self-questioning such as, “is this is what I’m meant to be doing?” It’s the “am I doing, or being done to” question that burned deep inside me. It takes courage to react to these feelings. But I would come to realize, that I had the power to choose, to listen to, and to react to the voice inside myself. And, I held the power to make changes.

Introduction:

The Layers

BY STANLEY KUNITZ

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled

to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.
Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”
Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

I believe that life is not linear: my own certainly has not been. There is no roadmap, but rather we encounter many paths and which one we elect to travel at any given time is a function of a multitude of factors. Our greatest challenge is to keep forging ahead. It is okay to redirect. It is okay to stray. It is okay to abandon and start down an entirely different route.

For the past decade I have closely followed the literature on Midlife women and work issues. I have read and reread and pondered and absorbed so many stories of women grappling with the topic and found myself uttering, “me too.” While these stories of women with diverse life experiences gave me reassurance that I was not alone, they also left me feeling frustrated because it did not give me an answer to the question that

constantly loomed within my thoughts, “what am I going to do with the rest of my life?” The stories only made me question more deeply if I was really “who I was.” I know this sounds odd; of course I am who I am, physically that is. But to the outside world, the woman they saw in me, mother, wife, volunteer, was not necessarily the woman I knew I am or more accurately, the woman I knew I am meant to be.

The words of Stanly Kunitz have rung true for me over the last ten years as I have both researched midlife women finding passion and using their creativity in their work and while I have been on my own personal journey. And like the words in his prolific poem, in my own darkest moments – those where I felt trapped and worthless, I clung to the promise of what could be – to “live in the layers, not on the litter” as Kunitz exhaled.

The themes and threads in my story are not unique. My personal story, however, is my unique narrative, but the story itself, and the structures within, are ones in which numerous women have encountered. The purpose of sharing my story is to illuminate how following the calling of my heart led to a deeper passion in my own work that whereupon I realized my creative potential. I sincerely believe that my narrative will help other midlife women in understanding and framing their own midlife choices regarding embracing passion and creativity in the work they do and serve as a beacon of light in guiding them in their own journey to follow their dreams and nurture their true self. My narrative is universal in that it speaks to how specific events in my life, as in many women’s lives, have contributed to finding my own authentic voice, navigating a course of rediscovery, and ultimately realizing the personal power of knowing you are empowered.

Merging passions with my life events, I began to seek avenues to fulfill my creative spirit and pursue work that excites, enriches, and motivates me. It became about harmonizing creative development, my identity, and work to fuel major changes.

Universal themes that emerged include recognizing one's creativity has worth, viewing future work life as an opportunity to incorporate that with which we are passionate, and embracing midlife as a time for positive personal growth and change.

History:

Midlife. It's a word that often conjures up negative associations. Crisis. A word I often hear linked with midlife. While I understand that midlife has frequently been recognized as a time of personal assessment, I do not believe that it is defined by a time of personal crisis.

Many theorists have proposed that a midlife crisis is a common western cultural experience (Bee, 2000; Santrock, 2002). Much of the literature on women and midlife has focused on the negativity of this stage in a women's life. I, however, prefer to think that midlife offers a plethora of opportunities to look within and explore passions while embracing our creative side. It can be a time of review, but also one of confidence.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines middle age as "the period in a person's life from about age 40 to about age 60." This may be one of the most slippery dictionary definitions I have tried to understand. What exactly is meant by "about?" The "about" tells me – give or take 20 years, as in there is no true manner in which to define the confines of this period. Technically, I suppose, I am in my midlife. I am not, however, in crisis. I prefer to say that I am seeking new avenues to nourish my soul and to flaunt

my true identity. I am on a journey of personal and professional growth. I am one of the lucky ones.

When I first began researching Women and Work, in 2004, I was 36. At the time, I would not have considered myself in midlife; I was a full-time doctoral student, with a full course load and a teaching fellowship. A full decade later, I am smack dab in midlife. I have become overtly aware firsthand of what Betty Friedan (1963) wrote eloquently about in *The Feminine Mystique* – essentially stifling my own career passions for the sake of motherhood and wifehood.

Unlike the housewife of the 1960's, today's women have been faced with the image that they could do and be it all. Many tried and many are finding the image a far cry from reality. I am one of these women. And, therefore, the struggle ensues over finding meaning and passion in my work. The topic of study is central to me, and to many women, because I have yearned to harmonize my creative development with my identity and merge it with my work. I believe that middle age marks an exciting transitional opportunity for women in relation to their careers. Further, I believe that our professional aspirations are continually shaped and redefined by our personal experiences.

The ability to control one's destiny is empowering. It is in direct opposition to feeling as if a label has been imposed or, worse, that it has been socially conditioned. Papalia, Feldman and Olds (2008) believe that our identity is a set of attitudes and beliefs about ourselves which lie underneath every interaction we have with other people, and which determine how we plot the course of our lives. Psychologist Carol Gilligan (2003), in the *Birth of Pleasure*, tells us further, that simple awareness is not enough, that

we each need to change or at the very least, question, the circumstances, and what better time than midlife.

Fear, doubt, and guilt have slowed me down. But the burning passion within has fueled my need to harmonize creative development with my identity. Unleashing my creative side has not come easily, but I have found that it is unbelievably exhilarating to merge my passions with the life events I have both accumulated and those I am to live. I have discovered that there is nothing like feeling your spirit soar.

Relevant Literature that Supports and Frames My Narrative:

Introduction

Because my narrative is at the intersection of women's midlife development, work, passion, and creativity, it is important to visit the vast array of psychological literature related to adult identity development as both a perspective and a foundation. More specifically, I delve into the literature of middle-class midlife women to garner an understanding on the effects of aging on women's attitudes towards their own identity and self-efficacy. As I have experienced, and as reinforced by the literature, as women age we develop an increased sense of personal identity and continued growing confidence in our own personal efficacy (Pearlman, 1993). We begin to recognize the importance in nurturing ourselves by finding more personal avenues to express ourselves in our work.

The literature review is divided into four parts. Part one looks at adult development theories and more specifically women's development at midlife. Part two addresses women's development of self-identity. Part three explores career development

of woman. Part four focuses on midlife women in transition: creativity, passion, and self-efficacy.

Part 1: Adult Development

The body of literature pertaining to human development is vast and includes an array of theories. Much of the early literature focuses on adult male development, particularly Erikson (1959) (1968), Levinson (1978), and Jung (1955), but also concludes the midlife period to be a time in life ripe with reassessment of one's life goals. Very little of the early literature focuses on women's identity in midlife, therefore, leaving a wide gap in women's studies as the twenty-first century approached. I believe that it is not merely the traditional perspective that is important, but also that which is specific to women. Many researchers and mainstream authors have also seen value in delving into the unique aspects of female development in comparison to our male counterparts (Gilligan, 1982). I believe this to be critical because women develop identity in a vastly different pattern than men and continue to reshape how they view themselves over the course of their life based upon an array of gender specific factors.

There are two main traditional models of adult development: life stage theories and life event theories. Theorists based in the life stage approach purport that there is a standard series of developmental stages. They would argue that all people, regardless of gender, experience and address the same challenges and issues at roughly the same period of time within their lives. While Sigmund Freud's theory of psychosexual development has been credited as being the first developmental-stage theory, he posited that development was complete by the end of the young adult years, therefore not recognizing

midlife as a stage on the human development ladder. Sigmund Freud's theory of development was based on a masculine perspective that concluded women as envying that which their male counterparts had, known as the Oedipus complex. To achieve mature development, Freud postulated that a woman must accept her feminine nature, which is grounded in passivity. Theorists such as Jung (1955), Buhler (1967), and Erikson (1968) extended Freud's theories to include development into adulthood. They all posited that there is a linear progression of age-related stages, which transition from basic trust and autonomy issues in early childhood to generativity and integrity issues later in life. They viewed midlife as a time of reflection and reassessment pertaining to convictions and goals achieved.

Jung (1955) postulated a three-stage developmental model where he saw midlife as a period of change and growth. Buhler (1967) expanded on Jung's theory, agreeing that midlife was a time of assessing one's goals, both achieved and failed, into four distinct developmental periods. The first two periods, up to age 45, stress a focus on increased interiority while the latter two periods, from ages 45-65, were more centered on reflection.

Erikson (1979) crafted the life stage theory based on the earlier works of both Freud and Jung. This model is linear and includes eight psychosocial stages, each with specified conflicts that must be resolved for healthy development. Unlike his earlier counterparts, Erikson stressed the entire lifespan, including midlife, as fundamental. He highlighted three task oriented adult stages of development: early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood. Early adulthood focuses on the resolution of 'intimacy verses isolation.' This is the life stage of courtship and early family life and professional

progress. Middle adulthood, also known as the stage of resolution of ‘generativity verses stagnation,’ is the stage where adults need to create or nurture those things that will outlast them. The maturity stage is about the resolution of ‘integrity verse despair’ and is characterized by a reflection of life and a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment with life and work.

Daniel Levinson (1996) furthered the work of Erikson’s model, posturing that a person’s life structure is mainly shaped by their social and physical environment primarily involving family and work. Unlike other theories, Levinson speaks of development not in stages, but rather in eras. It is one of the first theories that suggest development and growth occur well into the adult years. He, however, confined his studies to the adult male. Levinson based his developmental theory on a study of 40 men between the ages of 35 and 45 over a two-year period. He identified six stages of development, including midlife transition. During this stage, Levinson states that a man undergoes a reevaluation of their entire life structure, usually by questioning the meaning of his life. This time period is usually associated with a period of crisis whereby the man assesses both his worth and the what he views as the neglected parts of his self, including talents, desires and unachieved aspirations.

While most feminist researchers deem both the life span and life stage models to be inadequate in describing women’s development, Carol Gilligan (1977) proposed a three-stage model that differentiated moral development between men and women. Gilligan (1982) in her book, *In a Different Voice*, identified an even more specific approach to women’s development stating that relationships serve as the context for female development. Gilligan argued that males and females are often socialized

differently, resulting in women being more prone to focus on interpersonal relationships and to take responsibility for the well being of others.

Gilligan was one of the first theorists in the life stage camp to address gender differences. She believed that while men's development focuses on issues of separation, individuation, and autonomy, women's issues were more centered on care and responsibility for others. In the first stage of her moral development theory, she states that the female child only cares for herself. The second stage marks a transition from selfishness to self-sacrifice and caring about the responsibility of others. In this stage, self-care suffers as the needs of the self are largely ignored in favor of others, such as spouse and children. The last stage is delineated by the self-recognition that she herself matters. When women reach this stage they begin to understand that ignoring their own needs can be equally as harmful as ignoring the needs of others. Many women, sadly, never reach this stage.

Gilligan, a colleague of Lawrence Kohlberg at Harvard University, followed in the footsteps of Piaget's theory of moral development. While, Kohlberg (1984) believed that moral decisions are egocentric and concrete. Gilligan believed that women's moral development occurred in three stages, which focused primarily on the concepts of care and responsibility to others. Her ethics of care stages moved the female from a childhood stance of "I love me" to an "I love you" to and "I love you more than me." The ultimate endpoint was reaching the "I love myself and you." Unfortunately, many women never achieve this final stage, which is a major stumbling block in the quest for passion within their own work because they are not able to reconnect with the self.

Life stage theorists have been criticized for portraying growth and development as linear. Identity in this model is moved through one stage at a time with stages occurring in a fixed sequence that are assumed to be universally applicable (Evans, Forney, & Guido, 1998) (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009). Much of the research in current development psychology is not focused on stages, but instead tends to look more carefully at how particular skills develop and change over time in conjunction with the interactions we have with our environment.

The life event approach, also known as life span or timing models, to adult development is dependent upon life events such as marriage, parenthood and career (Neugarten, 1968). Theorists from this perspective claim that life events, in conjunction with the timing of them, are pivotal in our adult development. In contrast, life span theorists place less emphasis on development across chronological age but rather focus on the impact of life events in influencing later life development. Stress occurs when these critical socially accepted events do not occur at the expected time. Bronfenbrenner (1977) ascertained that development theorists were not studying humans in real-life settings and thus limiting the scope of their research. Further, Bronfenbrenner's theory of adult development is grounded in the actual environments in which humans live giving importance to a person's interactions around them. His theory highlights the importance of the complex setting of our lives whereby he believed that a person's development was affected by everything in their surrounding environment and that we, in turn, contribute to the construction of our environment. He believes that roles, norms of expected behavior, and relationships all have a major impact on development. This is important

because Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasizes that change is likely to occur based on face-to-face interactions with our environment putting credibility in situational development.

Bernice Neugarten's (1968) pioneering sociocultural work on personality and aging, debunked many of the common midlife stereotypes such as the midlife crisis. Neugarten proposed "The Social Clock Theory" in which self-esteem is impacted by certain age-related expectations for specific major life events, such as beginning a first job or getting married. She suggested that behavior is controlled by a social, rather than a biological clock, and these accepted timetables influence our reactions to our circumstances. Her theory implies that our self-esteem is strongest when we are on time with the cultural expectations of major life events. Neugarten maintains that it is our response to the progress of our life events that is most paramount in our adult development.

Schlossberg (1981) introduces the transition theory under the assumption that adults continuously experience transitions within their lives. We react to such transitions depending on the type, the context, our perceptions, and its perceived impact on our lives. Transitions are not stand alone events, but rather they are a process over time. According to Schlossberg, there exist three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events, each results in a change in relationships or routines. Schlossberg (1995) identifies four major factors, known as the "4 S's," that influence a person's ability to manage transitions: situation, self, support, and strategies. Transitions provide both opportunities for growth as well as for regression and are most impacted by how a person feels about the particular transition.

I believe that women's adult development is a function of the events in their life. While I see validity in the theory that age is a correlating factor in various developmental phases, I feel that ultimately for women our own life circumstances have a far greater impact. The problem I have with the life stage approach is that it views development in a vacuum, not taking into account critical contextual events and their corresponding effects. I believe we make meaning through the intersection of our own personal contexts within our greater community. Our personal perceptions are critical in our meaning making. Robert Kegan (1982) depicted the process of being a person as "an ever progressive motion engaged in giving itself a new form" (pp. 7-8). Our own unique ability to make meaning for ourselves out of our lived experiences is truly a progressive motion that, when embraced with welcoming arms, encourages us to evolve into a new form. For example, motherhood changed me. My life had been built on a set of feminist beliefs whereby I was a steadfast believer that my career would hold its central position in my life even after I began wearing a mommy hat. With the birth of each subsequent son, four total, the juggling became increasingly more difficult until I reached a point where I evolved into a full-time mother. Although I found it nearly impossible, or really I should say I found it completely impossible to say out loud, my priorities had shifted. My life experiences, that of becoming a mother of four, had gently, or not so gently, necessitated me to, as Kegan (1982) would say, take on a new form. The problem I had was this was directly at odds with the feminist beliefs I was clinging to.

Middle age is a period often referred to as a time of new direction. Whereas in males, the literature refers to a time of crisis and acting out (D. J. Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & Braxton, 1978), midlife in females has been portrayed in relation to

the empty nest and to new opportunities (D. J. 1920-1994 (Daniel J. Levinson, 1996). Karp (1988) focused instead on the inner experience of spirituality, reflection and introspection. The majority of the research on midlife women has focused on the problems encountered and how women cope with them. For most, however, midlife is not a time of crisis (Pudrovska, 2009).

Women's family roles are complex and generally have a higher salience in their lives compared to men. I am in the camp that women's adult development falls squarely in the life event model. While I see validity in the theories that age is a correlating factor in various developmental phases for women, I believe that ultimately our life circumstances have a far greater impact on our development. And while I recognize that men also move through a variety of developmental stages, my focus for this study is on midlife woman. I feel as if many events in a women's life and the context in which they occur are critical in shaping our future. I also believe that the underlining messages inherent in the experiences of many women, although diverse, are more similar than different.

Part 2: Women's Self-Identity:

The study of identity has been an integral component to women's studies and to the age-old question of "who am I?" The on-going development of identity has been vital in my own journey to find passion in my work life. It is encouraging that gender identity literature, specifically related to females, continues to grow.

We define ourselves often in relation to our environment. Our identity is the picture we have of ourselves; it is our self-understanding. As women, however, our

identity is often embedded within the context of the relationships we have with those we nurture. Because identity is socially constructed, both societal changes and our attitudes towards them, influence how we view and reconceive our own identity over time.

Culture and societal norms, which shift over time, create a web of expectations on an individual which then often determine what is viewed as socially acceptable (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Our societal labels, those of wife, mother, daughter, hold a tremendous amount of power in our own self-definition and re-definition.

Much of the literature surrounding women's identity asserts that it is tied to nurturing. Freud's view emphasized a woman's sense of identity as grounded in her support functions within her family. A woman's identity, according to Freud, is therefore tied to relational aspects and their connections to others. Development of the self holds certain generic assumptions related to genders. While identity theorists describe men as generally more concerned with separation, women are characterized as being more focused on attachment to other humans (Gilligan, 1979). The salience of an identity is inherently tied to behavioral choices, which in turn impact our vision of ourselves. Hence, the growing body of literature in women's studies related to the impact of motherhood on careers.

James Marcia (1970), a Canadian developmental psychologist, while primarily focused on adolescent development, expanded upon Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. Though Marcia did not believe that the identity process centered solely within the adolescent years, he felt that those particular years were crucial. Similar to Erikson, he felt that certain events serve as catalysts through his four identity stages. According to Marcia's theory, these crises are what cause adolescents to develop their

particular identity. His theory does not assume that each person moves through all four stages, nor does it state that it is uniform across all domains. He believes development of identity continues throughout the life cycle.

Ruth Josselson's (1990) theory of identity formation states that women are in a constant state of exploration with their identity. She suggests that identity in women is formed, transformed, and revised over the life course. Josselson (1998), in *Revising herself: The story of women's identity from college to midlife*, wrote, "Identity is what we make of ourselves within a society that is making something of us" (p. 28).

Josselson's model includes both connection and competence as core constructs. Both can apply to success in relationships and in one's career. No single layer in a women's life is solely responsible for her sense of competence and self-esteem, but, rather, it becomes tied to a compilation of factors. My own identity, which is in a continuing state of transformation, is constructed from the multiple roles I play and is certainly a factor of the salience each facet holds within the constructs of my societal groupings.

The women's movement of the 1970's, which drew special attention to women and work, opened the doors for more social acceptance as women pursued work outside the home. What many women found, however, me included, was the ability to balance a dual-role lifestyle between family and work. Giele's (1993) research similarly found that as we moved into the 1990's – the same time I was beginning my professional career path – the role pattern for educated women was a combination of traditional wife-mother and paid employment. We had begun to see a shift away from what the feminist movement of the 1970's endorsed as finding an identity completely separate from that of wife and mother towards finding a balance. In *The Lenses of Gender* (1994), Sandra Bem talks

about how hidden assumptions, which she calls the lenses of gender, oppress women. Bem presents a theory whereby a woman either constructs a more conventional gender identity or resists the norms and therefore constructs a gender-subversive identity. Identity development is both particular and contextual, and takes on multiple dimensions (Jones, Abes, & Magolda, 2013).

The crux of my narrative is exploring my own multiple pathways to identity, which have been and continue to be constructed in multidimensional ways. It's about seeking meaning and making meaning in a quest for purpose in and through my work. It has been a function of my environment and my personal dreams combined with my willingness to forge down new paths. It is a process.

Part 3: Women and Work

Women today are more engaged in paid employment than during any other time in history, with full-time women working an increase of roughly 29% from 1967 to 2009. Alongside this, women still assume the majority of the responsibility on the home front. Therefore, the age old topic of finding the balance between work and family ensues. Because of the demands and stress finding a balance creates, many highly educated women are off-ramping out of the workforce, at least temporarily. The unique experiences of women today can have a silver lining, if you open your eyes to it. It has given many of us the opportunity to question our beliefs and ask ourselves how it is we see our real selves in relation to the work we perform outside the home (Gallos, 1989).

Women's career paths are often, and certainly in my case, an amalgam of personal development over the course of decades. Unlike the majority of men, who lean

towards a linear career, many women traverse through and between careers based on a multitude of factors involving rebalancing, exploration, and finding passion. In the 1996 study by Levinson and Levinson, a husband and wife team, they identified two modes of being for women, that of traditional homemaker and that of career women. Based upon interviews with 45 women, they theorized that many were torn between career and family and consequently were living in a constant state of conflict. In these women's eyes, there was no middle ground between work and family; the two were a mutually exclusive choice. While husbands were busy following the pursuits of their dreams, women have been left at home questioning their vision of themselves in the world. It is an internal and on-going struggle I have dealt with for sixteen years.

Bardwick (1980) proposes that while the perception of careers of men within our society have remained relatively static over time, women, on the other hand, have experienced major changes with regards to career acceptance and expectations. She states while both feminist values and traditional values hold merit, women continue to define themselves not merely through their work, as their male counterparts do, but rather through a variety of virtues.

Many women, myself included, struggle with our sense of identity and consequently with the overarching question of our life's purpose as tied to our work. It becomes about moving towards authenticity and allowing ourselves to engage in work that matters to us. The challenge can be in uncovering and embracing our own truth for the whole world to see.

Part 4: Women in transition: creativity, passion, and self-efficacy

Not all creative people are alike, which makes defining creativity a challenge. Most of us think of creativity as producing or making something. While I have no doubt that creativity plays a role in producing something, such as a piece of art, it is certainly much more than that alone. I see creativity as an expression of who we are in this world. To me, the ability to be creative presents each of us with a wide-open avenue to live courageously. And, of course, creativity takes many forms.

Over time, the term *creative* has been defined in a variety of ways from the most simplistic to the complex. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as *the use of imagination or original ideas, especially in the production of an artistic work*. The U.S. Patent Office, which approves intellectual property rights for products and ideas, include in their criterion, “the creative idea should not be an obvious extension of something that already exists.” On the other hand, Plato claimed that, “The best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift of the god.” Some researchers have viewed creativity from the standpoint of producing a product, much like a novel or a piece of art, while others have looked at it from the perspective of the person in terms of having a ‘creative personality.’ The Latin root of the verb create translates to ‘grow’ or to ‘make something grow.’ In my opinion, creativity usually develops over time. I believe that creativity is a word that means many things to many people, but to me it is a multidimensional process that merges exploration, passion, and end product.

Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs places creativity at the top of the pyramid, a place where we achieve self-actualization. Placing creativity above all other needs distinguishes it from those other basic needs and sets it apart into a realm of striving for

something better. According to Maslow, when we have a desire to create, we are exhibiting a desire to fulfill ourselves by bringing something unique into the world. Reaching the fifth level of self-actualization is about both realizing the endless boundaries of our personal potential and moving forward in seeking personal growth. It is about a person changing and growing, not remaining static. In self-actualization, a person continues to create a meaning to their life that is uniquely important to them.

Howard Gardner's (1993) well known *Frames of Mind* explores the links between creativity and the three intelligences particularly notable in the arts: musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and spatial. For Gardner, a creative person operates in one or two specific domains whereby others see their work as a contribution. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) expands on Gardner in his theory that creativity occurs when three distinct elements come together: individual, domain, and field. Essentially, his theory says that a person with both talent and ambition must operate in a recognized domain whereby other individuals within the field are available to judge the quality of the work produced. But, what about the process? I conjure that creativity is the process of making; it lies both within and through the steps that lead to a product or to a contribution that extends knowledge within a field.

For purposes of the paper, I see creativity in midlife as an attempt to navigate both passion and purpose. I agree with the work of Anthony Storr (1993) who explored creativity from the perspective of seeking harmony, success, and happiness. Midlife is ripe with personal assessment and when open to it, this time can offer an incredible opportunity to look within, identify suppressed desires and talents, and to conjure up the self-efficacy to finally let your wings soar.

Stein (1998), in his book *In Mid-life*, expresses, “at midlife the psyche explodes, and the lava from this eruption forms and reforms the landscapes of our psychological lives.” He observes midlife as a crisis of the spirit in which old selves fade away as new ones begin. I believe that we, as midlife women, often embark on a voyage of the spirit finally allowing our hindered creative juices to flow and form the foundation of our future. I like to think of it as creative self-efficacy – the confidence we each have in our ability to tap into our creative persona and put it to use.

As Ekerdt (1986) points out, it is not merely a commitment to the “busy ethic” that defines our sense of identity, but rather a commitment to develop the untapped gifts and opportunities we each have been given. Both the work of Erikson (1959) on ‘ego integrity’ and Butler (1963) on ‘life review,’ highlight that we are in a state of continuous growth and change throughout our life. They each agree that as we age and mature we continually evaluate and reevaluate the fulfillment of our lives and act accordingly.

The research on creativity is both sparing and lacks a clear and distinct definition, leaving it open for interpretation. Thus, reinforcing my own beliefs that creativity, as a concept, is as unique as the individual engaged in it. Furthermore, as midlife women, allowing our creativity to flourish becomes a magical journey into our own selfhood.

Methodology:

How is it that a book about women, written 40 years earlier from the first time I read it, had such a lasting and powerful impact on me. Because it was personal. Betty Friedman wrote from her heart and from her experiences about being a woman in the postwar era. Her stories, along with those of other women, about being intelligent and

well-educated, but relegated to the role of housewife and mother, and disenfranchised from the mainstream American professional world, spoke to me loud and clear.

Robert Nash (2004), in *Liberating Scholarly Writing*, states "...that all people, including preprofessionals and professionals, construct a series of life sustaining stories that help them make sense of who they are, how they live, and what they do for a living." He says that our written stories not only help us to understand our histories, but they aid in shaping our destinies. Our written stories can serve to inspire our readers and ourselves. Dr. Nash believes, as I do, in Richard Rorty's postmodern perspective that "truth is made." I believe, that through the construction and sharing of our stories, we are able to generalize a larger meaning that not only help us understand who we are and where we are going but also inform others.

Some might call Dr. Nash, the leading academic on using narrative in scholarly writing, a rebel in the academy. I call him a progressive genius. He recognizes that scholarship takes on many forms and without doubt it is important to recognize trends and build upon existing research, but it is also critical to contribute to a body of research in a unique way through our individual lived experiences. In *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (1989), Robert Coles states that our stories aid in constructing a sense of self. Each story has a usefulness to it and I would add, a generalizable construct.

I began my research on the topic of women finding passion through their creativity in their work lives a decade ago. My intention at that time was to contribute to the literature on this topic by and through my interviewing women, reporting on my findings, and ultimately telling their stories. Yes, their stories, which truth be told, ten

years later, were much like my story. So, the question arises, why not have my narrative, my life experiences, contribute to the literature and become a means of guiding others like me on their personal journey?

If I were the one being interviewed as part of someone else's research, then my voice, my lived experiences, would be part of that person's research contributing to the field. So, why shouldn't I be the one to include it? I am researching *me* in a scholarly way. The findings - the story and the messages embedded within, will build upon the existing literature in the field of women, midlife, creativity, passion, and work. This is the methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative.

I will write as Anne Lamott (1995) in *Bird by Bird* prescribes, by putting myself at the center and by addressing those truths about which I am most passionate. I was struck when I read Anne Lamott say that, "the truth doesn't come out in bumper stickers." I will tell my stories by unpacking and unfolding the layers and by contextualizing them with a framework that is universeable and transferable to other women. But, I will do so in my own voice. Because, as Anne Lamott says, "the truth of your own experience can *only* come through in your own voice."

Therefore, I will utilize Scholarly Personal Narrative in the writing of my dissertation. I believe that there is much value in sharing my personal experiences as a midlife woman finding passion and embracing creativity in my work. I plan to blend my experiences with research on women's identity, midlife, reinventing careers, on-ramps for women returning to work and expressing creativity. I believe that my experiences are both universable and transferable to other women. This study, therefore, is a reflection of my personal interests in midlife women's developmental processes and an

effort to help women similar to myself navigate their journey leading to a sense of rich passion in the work they choose to do.

And so I begin...Photography has always been my creative outlet.

Chapter 2: Changing Tides

“You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”

~Maya Angelou~

It looked like a typical corporate boardroom - long solid wooden table, wood paneling on the lower half of the walls, and a bank of windows that looked out over the Portland skyline. About two-thirds of the seats were already filled when I entered the room. My eyes quickly and proficiently scanned the room surveying those seated in an attempt to determine the best place I could sit. There was no obvious spot.

As my heels struck the floor with each step, all the heads in the room turned. It was a seasoned group; they could identify the sound of a women’s heels without mistake, knowing my gender before visualizing my arrival. There was a lot for them to take in, for even I knew I too would have passed judgment if I were in their shoes. But I was no longer in their shoes; I had crossed to the other side and this was the very first moment that it registered with me, loud and clear.

I felt the stare of a rather large, tall man, meticulously dressed in what I knew to be an expensive suit. I looked him directly in the eye, daring him to say aloud what I knew he was thinking. His eyes lowered to the floor and darted away. I could sense he

was annoyed. He was already anticipating the disruption I would likely cause. I selected a seat, placed my briefcase to my left, and the baby carrier to my right. Nic was sleeping and I said a silent prayer to myself. Please Lord; I just need one solid hour.

An hour earlier, at home, I squeezed, yes I literally squeezed my three-week postpartum body into the largest suit I had in my closet. It is an understatement to say it was not my favorite outfit and I knew I would have to reach down deep today to muster the self-assuredness I would need to get through the afternoon. Not feeling confident in my clothes was not the best way to start. But I had little choice. I stood outside my closet wondering why my friends hadn't told me it would be months, if even ever, before I would fit back into my pre-pregnancy clothes. Damn, I thought, this really sucks. Over and over I asked myself why on earth had I agreed to participate on this committee. But I knew why. I was one of those women who both privately, as in I told myself all the time, and publically, as in I told my co-workers all the time, that motherhood would not interfere with my work. I was going to have absolutely no problem "doing it all."

Everyone began to take their seats, and I knew for sure that I would be the only female in the room. I again said my silent prayer of sleep and willed my thoughts to permeate every being of my three week old baby boy. The vice-president of the bank, and the chair of the committee, reviewed the procedure. The candidate would be invited into the room, the committee chair would then give a brief overview of the process, we would each introduce ourselves including our professional roles, and the questioning would begin. It was a rather typical interview format. My turn came and I spoke with my usual professional authority, "Hi, I am Kelly DePaolo (this is my maiden name, and although married with a new legal last name, I continued to use my maiden name because

it was my work identity – something I would come to cling to). I am the Professional Development Coordinator for the Portland Public school system.” As I intently listened to each person make their introduction, I knew I belonged in this group. I had earned a right to sit at this table as part of the group of local professionals with a stake in our city’s new superintendent. It is a school system with over 40,000 students and close to 6,000 teachers and I had been instrumental in forming the partnerships between the educational system and the private sector. Oregon was a pioneer in this realm and my work was being watched closely as my position was funded by the first dollars out of the White House through the Workforce Investment Act. I let this truth run over and over and over again in my head as a self reminder that I had credibility equal to every man in that room, even with a baby in tow.

When the questioning opened up to the committee members, I was quick to pose a question for the candidate. I had to jump in the game early in order to prove that I belonged there. I wanted, even needed, every man in that room to respect me. I needed them to see that even with a baby sleeping next to me, I possessed the intellect and the experience to warrant my place there. I knew my question was strong. I celebrated a little internal victory when I noticed the other committee members nod their heads in agreement to my question and in anticipation of how it would be answered. But then it happened, Nic stirred ever so subtly.

I would venture to bet that I was the only human in that room that heard his faint whisper of a sound. But it was enough to send a signal to my body and my breast milk let down. I had prepared for this, or at least I had thought I had. I took the precautions necessary and had stuffed my bra with nursing pads designed to absorb leaking breast

milk. This was no simple leak, however, it was full force “bring on that baby for a milk feeding frenzy.” I knew my nerves were actively spurring on my body. Nic must have sensed it; babies have a funny way of smelling their mother, its primitive. His slow and soft whimpers accelerated into a full-blown cry. The sweat beads were bursting on my forehead and my nursing pads were now fully soaked through. I wanted to hide, to become invisible, to beam myself out of that boardroom as quickly as possible. All male eyes were on me. I swiftly swung myself around, scooped up my loud baby, lifted my breast milk stained silk shirt, and latched my child onto my left breast keeping my right hand, my writing hand, free to take notes. I motioned for the candidate to continue his response to my question. He hesitated, but politely continued. I took notes, not really sure I was writing anything that made sense down. It seemed normal to take notes, and I desperately wanted to be my normal professional self, or at minimum, to seem so. But, my normal was no longer my new normal. I had entered the era of redefining what normal was to me. I had become a working mother.

Becoming a mother has been a key juncture in my adult development. The internal pull to conform to the societal vision of an ideal femininity coupled with the notion of a new set of opportunities set forth by the feminist movement, became a real struggle for me. While I was genuinely excited to be a mother, I saw my career desires being muted.

Nearly five decades after the women’s revolution transformed opportunities for women, our relationship with paid employment still differs vastly from what men experience. Despite my multiple degrees: three higher education degrees and soon to be a fourth, at the highest level of my field, that of doctoral degree, my career path has been

nonlinear. The demands and tugs of family life, coupled with a spouse's demanding career, made me contemplate if the opportunity costs were really worth it. Having considered myself a high-achieving career woman most of my adult life, I was reluctant in accepting anything less.

As it turns out, my ambitions were different. Because financially I had a choice whether to work or not, I spent a tremendous amount of time analyzing the pros and cons. I had always thrived on being high-achieving in my work environment, and truthfully, this occupied the core of my identity for much of my adult life. Then I became a mother. Naturally, my children, all four of them who came along over an eight year time span beginning when I was thirty-one, also formed a part of my identity. The problem was, as each additional child graced my life, my work identity, that with which I associated status, shrunk. It was as if my whole identity was getting swallowed up in motherhood and wifedom. My work life and my personal life had collided head on. It was impossible for me to ignore the legitimate demands that my family life had on me. Eventually, the balancing act became too heavily weighted on one side and I felt forced to leave my career behind. I whispered to myself that it would be temporary. I thought I would be fine, at least, that is what I told myself. In hindsight, deep down, I always knew I was lying to myself.

There exists several dynamics, and I am not alone in experiencing them. The so-called temporary off-ramp slowly moves itself through the years, years of raising children, years of nurturing my spouse's career, and suddenly it begins to seem more permanent. I remember waking up one day with a sudden panic thinking I was obsolete. I feared that the years out of my career had left me stale and antiquated. I wondered how

on earth I would ever compete with those who had not off-ramped. Chance are, I won't. My scenic route, although rich with life experiences, lacked what I would call beefy resume material.

In 2007, the year after my fourth son was born, and the very same year I had “taken a leave” from my career, I read a book that made me realize I wasn't alone. In *Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success*, Sylvia Ann Hewlett tackled head on the disheartening statistics of ambitious women's career paths being sidetracked in their thirties to fulfill caring responsibilities. I devoured the book with interest and with a thread of hope that someday I would emerge victorious – I would again be considered by society a high-achieving career woman. While I found the book fascinating, I also found it discouraging. While Hewlett pointed to the many prominent national companies that were vested in providing real on-ramps for women, it also was clear that many barriers existed for women wishing to do so. It really wasn't as easy as it sounded.

Taking a chunk of time off, to raise children or care for an aging parent, makes you “different.” In my case, it was the time off to raise children that altered my life in ways I never imagined. Different in that my career growth became non-linear, different in that I was not quite as current in my field as I once was, and different in that I had time to reflect and to ponder what my heart was calling me to do. Herein lies the silver lining, but it took me almost a decade to shift my vision.

I was trying hard to ignore the real voice inside me; the one screaming I was a failure. I chanted the word *temporary* over and over and over again in my head, willing it

to be true, desperately needing it to be true. I clung to my old work identity like it was a well-worn stuffed animal. Some days, that memory kept me going.

While on the outside, choosing to be the primary caregiver and off-ramp from my career, from a patriarchal lens may look like dropping out, it was a choice made out of consciousness. It was a choice grounded in acknowledging my limitations and hoping the career sacrifice would not marginalize me to such an extent that I would struggle to on-ramp within my career track.

In the meantime, like many highly educated friends, I thought I would keep up my professional skill set by serving on local philanthropic boards as a volunteer and becoming more involved with my children's school system. It didn't really work in the way I had hoped. While I wholeheartedly enjoyed supporting organizations for which I felt held an important presence within our community, it just didn't feel like real work to me. But, on the other hand, to want to work, left me feeling judged by those mothers who seemed to be highly satisfied with their choice to opt out of the workforce.

Chapter 3: Becoming Invisible

“To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best day and night to make you like everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting.”

E.E. Cummings

Coming to the methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative was a ten-year journey that traversed the more standard and accepted formats and weaved a path through the stories of my life. I first met Robert Nash in 2004, at a time when I was briskly

surging forward on a freight train-like pitch towards achieving my doctoral degree. I was on the academic fast track; a teaching fellow with a full time doctoral course load. I was an ambitious student who planned to complete my entire doctoral work in 4 years time, or so I thought.

I enrolled in Robert's course that fall of 2004 to fill an elective and because I was intrigued with all the hype I heard about him around the university. He was somewhat of a legend, a maverick in the academy, with a staunch reputation for truly loving his students and respecting their work. I was curious and wanted to see for myself what he and his famous, difficult to get into class was all about. I love meeting interesting people and I was eager to discover the qualities firsthand that lay behind this professor's popular reputation. I was hooked the first night of class – completely captivated by Robert's charm, humor, soft but animated voice, vast and diverse wisdom of well, everything, and above all his genuine compassion. It was, without question, the best course I have taken; above every undergraduate class and above all those I took throughout two Master degree programs. I learned about writing, about scholarship, and about myself. And, I learned how to put the three elements together so that I was a voice within my scholarship. I left his class at the end of the semester feeling empowered.

I learned a tremendous amount about the skill of being a writer, and more so, that I am a writer. After decades of academic work as both a student and a professor, it was not until Robert's class that I truly viewed myself as a writer. Weird, I know, but true. Embedding myself within my research gave me a sense of place, a sense of belonging, a sense of academic importance. It was truly liberating. I learned that I had a lot to say and I recognized a plethora of connections to my more traditional academic research in

and through my own narrative. I am not sure now why this surprised me then. It seems so crystal clear to me now that even the so called traditional research topics I choose to tackle all somewhere within them held a hint of personal connection, interest and intrigue. All along I had been really researching, documenting and writing about topics that were relevant and central to my own life.

But in 2004, even after the most memorable course of my life, I continued with my qualitative dissertation, interviewing mid-life women in the midst of reinventing themselves searching for meaningful career on-ramps after a break in their work lives, all the while asking them where the personal connection and passion was in relation to the work they were doing. I took another of Robert's classes, again as an elective, and further explored my ability as a writer but more importantly began to see my own narrative embedded within my dissertation research. The course ended and again I continued on with my qualitative research.

I could never have predicted the changes 2006 would bring to my life. That year, Rocco, my beautiful and energetic fourth son within an eight-year span, was born. He emerged into my world full of brilliant blond hair and piercing blue eyes that spoke of a free spirited child who would rock my world in many new ways. He was born on his actual anticipated due date – which is a rare occurrence.

Rocco was my fourth son, all born without pain medication or an epidural. I was well versed on the process of recovery within both the days immediately following giving childbirth and the weeks thereafter. I was “seasoned,” as the labor and delivery nurses said. However, I knew almost immediately that something wasn't quite right, but I

couldn't actually pinpoint what it was. I kept these feelings to myself, mostly assuming that the fourth delivery just took a bigger toll on my nearly forty-year-old body.

I sat at the top of the bedroom stairs, holding, no actually gripping Rocco with all the might I could muster, unsure what to do. I am not an indecisive person. I am exceptionally level headed in an emergency which I've proved in the face of a house fire, knocked out teeth, a nearly fully severed thumb, stitches, snakes in the Lego bin, and even a scorpion mixed in with the kitchen forks and spoons. I do not panic; I act. But as I sat at the tippity top of those fourteen wooden stairs, looking down, holding my four-week-old baby boy, I simply did not know what to do. What I do know for sure was that I dared not stand; I actually couldn't.

I felt as if there was a leak somewhere in my body and my usual strength was gusting out like the air being released from a balloon when the knot is untied. I sat frozen, telling Rocco it would all be okay, telling him to just hang on and hang on tight. In actuality, I was trying to convince myself.

I slowly slid my feet forward, searching for the solid wood beneath them, avoiding looking down as that only seemed to intensify my growing dizziness. When the soles of my feet found a secure place, I inched my weak body, melded into one with Rocco, forward and let me fanny drop to the next lower step. Only thirteen more to go, I thought. Like an inchworm, I methodically worked my way down. I've got this, I thought.

Nearly an hour later, I sat exhausted, blearily eyes, and struggling to mentally focus, but at the bottom of the stairs. Rocco was hungry, so there I sat cradling him to

my breast giving him the sustenance he needed for life. I carefully worked my way across the cold concrete living room floor towards the kitchen and a lifeline – a phone.

The curtain was pulled on all sides. I would not let them take my baby. I held him with the firm but gentle grip only a mother can master. I did not trust that if they took him from me, I would be able to remember where he was going. I did what any desperate and frightened mother would do; I created a human cocoon around my baby daring the doctors and nurses to pry him loose. I knew well enough that they didn't have a chance in hell of succeeding and I think they knew it too. Through the curtain I could hear hushed whispers and machines beeping and whirling but it all seemed a universe away. I had faded somewhere far off – I felt as if I was looking down at my body, but none of it was real. It was as if I was floating, literally suspended magically in air, my body somewhere beneath me, motionless, limp. I was tired, so very tired. My eyes were locked with Rocco's, I don't remember either of us blinking, we held our gazes, he on me, me on him in a joint effort to stave all else away.

My husband, Michael, a doctor at the very hospital where I lay contained in an emergency room bed, slowly slid through the wall of curtains separating me from the other patients – those I thought were truly ill or injured. I really shouldn't be here is all I kept thinking. – I have too much to do, a family to care for. My precious baby did not need to be exposed to the germs that lingered within the walls here. I needed to go home, but I couldn't seem to get up, to lift my baby or my body, as much as my mind willed my limbs to move.

My eyes left the safety of Rocco's and met Michael's. Tears were silently streaming down his face. At first, he said nothing. He stared intensely at me, at me

holding our baby as if my life depended on it, as if Rocco was fueling my body with life just through our inseparable touch. As my eyes met Michael's I knew what I had been vehemently denying but knew intellectually to be true – Rocco's touch was in fact my very own lifeline.

Ever so softly, Michael asked me, "How long have you known you were sick?" I could not answer; maybe because the effort it took to speak was far more than I could muster or maybe it was partly because the answer now seems absolutely unreal. I had known since shortly after Rocco's birth that something in this recovery was different from the others – really, really different. In fact, I knew I was not really bouncing back but rather seemed to be on a slow, steady progression towards weakness, exhaustion, struggling to maintain the illusion that I was "fine." How could I say all that? As the mother of four children, it seemed almost irresponsible how and why I had missed the cues that my body was slipping into a dangerous place.

Then he muttered it, barely audible, but it stung me, penetrating my intellect and my emotions like an unforgiving force. Michael let the words quietly, sadly slip from his lips, tears falling from his eyes, falling onto my face and rolling across Rocco's, "You might die."

I did not cry. I couldn't. Honestly, I did not have the time to cry. What would happen to my beloved boys if I were not around to be their mother?

With Michael leaning over me, Rocco encased securely in my arms, with the purring of medical equipment in the background, I must have drifted off; finally fading away to a place of peace where the strength of my body was waiting to be retrieved for it had a critically important purpose and was needed now more than ever before.

I woke to the murmur of machines, tubes extending from my veins, my body hooked to machines that monitored, transfused, infused, and beeped. As I realized my baby was no longer safely in my arms, I screamed - a blood curling, ear piercing primitive call. I discovered that there is something alarming to nurses when a patient in the intensive care unit screams. Within seconds my hospital room was jammed with people.

The nurses and doctors had concurred that I could continue nursing my baby; it was mentally and physically stimulating for each of us. I cherished these minutes, desperately wanting them to last forever and hoping to burn the image eternally in my mind. I was so afraid of forgetting, of letting go, and of never having these moments again.

Four births and each baby always stayed in my hospital room with me. I was the primary caregiver from the get go. I took great pride in this; a sign of strength, as I saw it. Now, my baby, only four short weeks old, was in the hospital nursery while I lay in an ICU bed fighting for my life. As ridiculous as it sounds to me now, at the time I felt I was failing my child. I silently cried, as I did not possess the energy to weep.

A week later I received the clearance to go home. My husband informed me that a nurse would be moving in with us. On that first day home, I refused to leave my bedroom. I did not want to meet the women charged with taking over the care of my, yes *my*, little baby boy and of watching over me. I felt inadequate. I have always been a person who prides myself on being deemed an overachiever, so to be stripped of my responsibilities was a hit to the gut. Intellectually I knew full well that I had to relinquish

control. In my heart, however, I was struggling to accept it; wrestling with the notion that a stranger would govern my house and children while I rested and regained strength.

I grew to truly love Joan, who nursed me back to health while providing genuine loving care to my four boys. In the six months she lived with us, Joan became an integral and loved member of our family. It was during this year that I opted out of the workforce, stepping away from my well loved and intellectually needed career in order to recapture my health. Joan and I spent countless hours talking, in the dark hours of the night when I nursed Rocco, in the early hours of the morning as the sun promised a new day filled with hope, and throughout the day as simple household tasks, like laundry, were tackled. Joan brought a perspective to my life that I cherish to this day.

It was during this year of physical healing that I joined the opt out revolution. Like tectonic plates clashing together, my expectations of maintaining a flourishing career collided with the reality of being a mother to four young boys. Although I knew, particularly as a young woman in my twenties at the onset of my career, that I held endless choices, I was now on the cusp of a fearful understanding that it was becoming increasingly impossible to act on these choices. To continue to pursue my career dreams would now come at a high cost to both my health as I still had much physical healing ahead of me, and at the expense of nurturing my children in the way I wanted. I felt cheated, but I told no one.

Convinced that our dreams and desires are impractical and therefore unattainable, we often tune them out. Women have been conditioned to give: to our husbands, to our children, to everyone except ourselves. So, when our secret desires surface in our thoughts, we repress them, thinking we would be selfish to give them even a moment's

attention. But, as time passes, and we continue to ignore those desires, resentment builds and boy oh boy can it carry some weight behind it.

After my fourth son was born, as I struggled to continue working, somehow, fitting all the pieces together just wasn't so easy. Married to a husband with a demanding and inflexible career, who was the primary breadwinner, my career finally took the full backseat that it had been slowly traveling towards. I thought I would be okay with it. I had wanted four children and with that came an abundance of responsibility. But, truth be told, I never for a minute imagined it would mean the death of my career. I tried to embrace full time motherhood (and wifehood), I really did. But something was always missing; and that something was my own individualization. It was the me, separate from the him or the them, that I craved to have back. In fostering the development of my children and my spouse's career, I strayed from the forward path of my development. This is certainly not to say that my marriage or my children weren't of primary importance to me. I, however, was slowly losing myself in them.

There is little equality of professional opportunity when children are involved. The real truth is, one parent usually has to relinquish, at least temporarily, some amount of their career aspirations in favor of raising children, particularly if you have four. I cannot deny the biology of being female. Without doubt, there is an importance, an urgency even that co-exists with the very nature of being a woman who gives birth to a child. For many women, me included, the physical act alone of giving birth comes with it a call to nurture, often so tremendously strong that even I could not have adequately anticipated. There should be a glorification with the biology and miracle that a woman holds; that of the ability to give life to another human being. It is a powerful thing. But,

all too often it is assumed that the mother will be the parent to opt-out of her career and in the process run the risk of leaving untapped creative potential on the corporate table. I discovered that I have too much ambition, too much curiosity, and too much inner power to remain silent. But, I also had to opt-out.

Chapter 4: It's Time for Me to Own it: Letting Go of Fears

“Every human being must have a point at which he stands against the culture, where he says, this is me and the damned world can go to hell.”

Rollo May

On a clear and warm spring evening, while out for a run along the Charles River, my mind would not let go of the day's events. Earlier that day, I sat in my office gazing out the window at the Boston skyline and was caught off guard by a loud conversation outside my door between a developmentally delayed data entry clerk named Chuck, and his supervisor. I could clearly hear impatience in the supervisor's voice as she told Chuck that the human resource department had called her again, informing her that he had applied for a position for which he was NOT qualified. For the previous five years, Chuck had been in the same position at the company we both worked. He had applied for every position, regardless of the qualifications required, that had become available, and on this day, his supervisor loudly and rudely asked him to stop trying. Chuck walked away from her, his head hung low and his shoulders stooped.

That same afternoon I received a call from my younger brother, a college sophomore diagnosed with severe learning disabilities. The university he attended had

denied his request to substitute sign language for his foreign language requirement. My brother, whose college textbooks were all on audiocassette out of sheer necessity, was angry and mystified at their decision.

As I reflected on these incidents, seemingly unrelated, the pace of my run quickened keeping speed with the thoughts streaming through my head. I was completely perplexed, not with the events themselves, but rather specifically, the rigidity of school and business, both locked into traditional models of learning and conducting business. They were in positions to make huge decisions that had tremendous impact on the lives of others. As I ran, the river flowing to my left, swarming with optimistic college students rowing their boats for Crew practice, it hit me. There was a disconnect between training and work, between educational experiences and education in the classroom, between aspirations and opportunities, between equality and marginalization, between what made sense to me and what was happening to these two individuals. It was at this moment that I experienced a tug; a pull towards a career making a difference in the lives of others in a way that would make me feel good. This was a time that I now, in hindsight recognize, as having significant impact on my future career path and my personal career goals, as well as my life. I had no idea that this would be the first of many steps where my career path would undergo intense transformation.

Within a short period of time, I resigned from my secure job as an auditor and began traveling a less familiar path – that of education. It was a courageous leap for me. Armed with little experience, but bursting with enthusiasm, I received a graduate assistantship in a campus-based program for young adults with diverse learning disabilities and special needs, and was admitted to the School of Education at Lesley

College. During the next three years pursuing a joint Master's degree I hit my stride as a student. It was a different world for me. Excited and encouraged, I graduated with a 4.0 GPA, confirming my belief that an engaged learner is a successful learner. It also was the beginnings of a reawakening for my love of creativity, a persona that had always existed within me, but one in which I never had the courage to cultivate. I was raised in an extremely loving but practical family.

I am a first generation college graduate. Until recently, I never truly realized this fact, probably because it never seemed significant. Certainly graduating from college and graduate school has been meaningful in my life, but the fact that neither of my parents or grandparents earned a college degree has ever felt even slightly noteworthy. Maybe it was because I was raised in a house never to judge a book by its cover, or a person by their title. Maybe its because I was taught, and wholeheartedly believe, that we each have something valuable to offer the world and we each have much to learn form everyone who touches our lives, no matter what their life circumstances.

I was born into an Italian working class family, the only daughter flanked by two brothers. Raised outside Boston, my father and mother were hard working and ambitious, living out the American Dream in a way many immigrant family's (2nd generation in my case) found so inviting about the United States. Armed with a high school diploma, a dynamic personality, and a willingness to work tirelessly, my father became an entrepreneur and founded a rubbish and recycling company. My mother worked alongside him, an equal partner, in their success.

My parents both valued education and worked tirelessly so that I, as well as by brothers, could have opportunities. But, as a high school senior, embarking on the college

search, I had little guidance from them. Although my parents insisted that my brothers and I attend college, it was an unfamiliar path to them leaving us each relatively solo throughout the process. I visited schools on my own, or more so, with a girlfriend in tow. The criteria I used to assess each school was at best, haphazard, and surely more grounded in a mere overall feel for the campus than what I may actually gain from the school. I did little in the way of exploring career options, other than I always had a yearning to be an attorney as I was a “people” person. Choosing which schools to visit was a function of a conversation with a well intentioned, but absolutely misleading school counselor. Because I was deemed extremely bright in math and science, with a near perfect SAT score in math, my school counselor directed me towards business schools. In 1985, as I was at the onset of my college experience, there was still a push lingering around from the Cold War period for women to enter STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). I vividly remember sitting in the office of my high school counselor, a male, telling me that as an “attractive female, strong in math and science,” this was THE obvious career path for me. At the time, naïve and young, I assumed he was correct. It would be decades later before the anger from this stereotyping would manifest itself deep within my conscious.

Although I loved to be creative, pursuing a liberal arts or anything in the arts as a post-secondary degree held little value to my family or my school counselor. At the time, business was seen as the wave of the future and the place to make your mark in the world. All roads pointed me in this direction. All that is, except my heart. Math is neat, precise, and tidy; nothing at all like my personality. But, I took the safe path, and launched myself on the road suggested, that of business.

Looking back, I should have jumped ship my sophomore year as an undergraduate. Having declared myself an accounting major at a university that only offered business degrees, I began combing the course catalog for electives in the humanities. As it turns out, by the time I graduated, I had a minor in Sociology – a minor I handcrafted with the help of a supportive professor. That should have been a big fat, in my face clue, that while academically successful in my chosen major, my genuine interests were pulling me in a different direction. It would not be until much later in life that my authentic creative voice would be unleashed and honored, by myself first and in turn, those around me.

But even in my 40's I still did not know myself very well. My identity was even more deeply wrapped up in my family, that of my husband and children. Although I grew up in an era that attempted to bridge the gap between traditional gender role expectations and that I continually read literature that encouraged me to cast off gender based constraints and strive for both a fulfilling career and family life, I still could not see how this was possible. In fostering the development of my children and my husband's career, I had strayed from the forward path of my own development and slowly over time I had become acutely aware of this. I was encountering a range of emotions and I began seeking validity in my life. The solution I sought was an inner journey towards more refined balance, peace, passion and wholeness.

Chapter 5: Honor Thy Joy

“When we resist change, it’s called suffering. But when we can completely let go and not struggle against it, when we can embrace the groundlessness of our situation and relax into it’s dynamic quality, that’s called enlightenment.”

Pema Chödrön

Finding time to write among the chaos of four boys ranging in age from eight to sixteen has its challenges. According to 2012 US Census data, 2% of families have four or more children. I am a two percenter. Of this 2%, I wonder how many have four boys? And, of this 2%, I am not sure the percentage in which both parents work full-time, like my husband and I, but I would venture to guess that the number is low. My ability to find uninterrupted writing time has taken on a whole new meaning of getting creative. One time during my dissertation writing process, I packed a suitcase, sat my boys down and told them I was driving thirty minutes away to hole up in a hotel to write. I assured them that Dad could and would manage, by hook or by crook. In the first forty-eight hours I received something close to a million text messages from my boys. I tried to cheerily embrace my responses to them, but it quickly dawned on me that with four school-age boys, all who are technologically literate, physical distance would only provide me a fraction of peaceful writing time. I laughed heartedly about it and knew I would not really want it any other way and kept writing.

My first self-guided hotel writing retreat opened my eyes in ways I had not expected. I have always struggled to take a compliment. This in turn, has resulted in me not trying to garner attention for accomplishments. It never seemed like a

huge problem until I launched down the path of pursuing my dream of being a professional photographer. As a burgeoning artist, I needed to not only believe in my own work, but also needed to share it – put it out there and take pride in the reactions.

After an afternoon of writing, I walked to a local restaurant, sat at the bar where a basketball game was playing, and ate dinner. I've always liked eating dinner alone; it provides a wonderful opportunity to absorb the culture of a geographic area and I find people watching just plain fun. The skilled bartender was a trivia guru, at ease asking those gathered around him unusual questions. A camaraderie of sorts grew among those of us at the bar; brainstorming together so that the bartender would keep the trivia questions flying at us. We giggled often, as one of us would sneak our phone under the glistening wood top of the bar to Google an answer to a question that stumped us. We were all laughing, thinking and really having fun. It was a terrific way to end a productive afternoon of writing.

As I finished my dinner, I said my goodbyes and walked the one small block back to my hotel. As I was about to step into the elevator, I heard someone in a slightly out of breath tone exclaim, "Wait!" I turned to see a man in puffy red ski coat who just ten minutes ago had been sitting a few seats away from me at the bar trivia fest. He looked me directly in my eyes saying he didn't want to let the opportunity pass to tell me something important. "I have been mesmerized by your eyes all night and it wasn't until you left that I truly realized it was your eyes that held me. I know you are married. I am telling you this expecting nothing. Your eyes

are absolutely beautiful.” He then leaned in, gave me the quickest peck imaginable of a kiss on my cheek, turned, and walked out the front door of the hotel.

I stood in place for minutes. He didn’t give me even an instant to either object or to say thank you. At first I thought how bloody unfair of him. I was blatantly denied my chance to offer up some words to dismiss his compliment. How dare he walk out, I thought. But, as fate would have it, he did me a favor. He forced me to just plain accept his compliment. He left me no option. I did not even know his name.

His compliment percolated in my head all night, into the next day, and the days to come. As I reflected on this moment, I began to realize for me it was less about figuring out my dreams and more about being comfortable with them. I realized that it actually felt good, really, really good. I had spent years afraid to commit to these dreams. But, on this night, I became another step closer to embracing my creativity and wanting the world to know that I harbored a great deal of pride in it. It was a reminder to allow myself to live in the moment, to live lit up, and to let the excitement feed my soul.

It brought me back to eighth grade, a very interesting year, in retrospect. I was in junior high, which is no longer the politically correct description for the middle school years. I was enrolled in high honors classes in mathematics, science, English and history. But, the real fun for me were the courses in metal shop and art. The early 1980’s were the days where these electives were both required and appreciated for male and female students alike.

Sadly, these classes are no longer required. The travesty in this is that our schools are no longer exposing growing and intellectually developing children to the wide range that the arts offers. I fear where I would be today if I had not taken these courses so very long ago, at a time when I was impressionable, curious, and less inhibited. They shaped my life in such significant ways, but I did not know it then, at the youthful age of thirteen.

My eighth grade art teacher, a seasoned, relaxed, no-frills educator that clearly came of age in the 60's, with a look and an attitude to match, believed each of his students had innate artistic ability. In all my years of schooling to date, I had never encountered an art teacher who felt this way. On one level it was inspiring, and on another, it was pressure filled. It is a funny thing how I blossomed in that classroom my eighth grade year simply because someone, a teacher, genuinely believed in my ability; an ability I had yet to see myself. He gently critiqued, softly encouraged, skillfully demonstrated different techniques, and freely praised my work. I put every ounce of effort into his class – how could I not? I flourished in his praise and strove to make him proud of my achievements.

That year, the art teacher wanted a mural painted in his room. I jumped at the opportunity. With my teacher's blessing, I cautiously began the project, not really knowing where or how to start. At first I found the process terrifying. It all felt so permanent, putting paint on a wall. I feared making a mistake. My teacher was not fazed by my uncertainties, telling me it could always be painted over so I should just let my creative juices flow. And I did.

I choose to paint a frog – a very green, very jovial frog, sitting atop a luxurious lily pad. It was a simple but happy scene. I got off to a slow start, doubting the design, the color nuances, the placement on the wall. But, before I knew it, I hit a groove, a kind of steady flow that felt both comfortable and inviting. I looked forward to this class, which only met twice weekly. I often found myself stopping by the art room to gaze at my work-in-progress, pinching myself back to reality as my mind wandered adrift with fantasies of fame and recognition. I could hardly wait each week to immerse myself into the free-spirited project I had the gift of undertaking.

I received an A+ in that art class. My frog, well, it was really just okay, at best, and certainly was not going to gain me admission to an art school. My teacher, however, was pleased with the seriousness in which I tackled the project, but more importantly conveyed to me the importance of being engaged in learning and in doing something that I tackled with passion and with enthusiasm.

That same year I was enrolled in metal shop. I took on my course project with excitement and eagerness. As a female, I was determined to shine; the boys in the class all thought they had an edge. I knew they did not. I designed and produced a clever and complicated sign that proudly hung at the entrance to my childhood horse barn until the day the barn was sold, nearly twenty-five years later. Every time I drove by that barn, often meandering out of my way just a bit to pass it, my sign, welcoming visitors new and regular, made me smile.

At the close of my eighth grade year at the junior high awards ceremony, I was recognized for my achievements in both these classes, earning both coveted

year-end achievement awards. Over the course of my school years I received numerous academic accolades in courses such as math, but the two most memorable, by far, were the Art and the Metal Shop award from that very special eighth grade year.

As I look back at the paths I have taken, the experiences I have accumulated, and the triggers present in my life, I began to see my life through a different, more open lens. It was easy to get caught in the current of my current existence and everyday patterns. But, to become the best version of myself meant stepping out of what had become comfortable and into the unknown. I knew it was time for me swim, and stroke hard, against the current.

Chapter 6: Leap of Faith: The Sky's the Limit – Really it is

“A Journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”

Lao- Tzu

Like the woman of the pre-feminist 1960 era, Betty Friedan spoke of my predicament – that maybe in fact the very choices we always thought we had are not really choices for us to freely make. My vision of motherhood had become an unsustainable balancing act with my career, ultimately resulting in my body rebelling – or really more like quitting. Despite my heroic efforts, I was playing a losing game, literally sick with exhaustion. But, in the end, it was a time of coming to an awareness; not penetrated by happy thoughts but rather a sinking disappointment, resentment, and

general cheating of all that I was told as a young girl and all that I embodied as a feminist. Born in the 1960's, my childhood was marked by the uproar of the 70's. I was a product of the 80's philosophy that girls, finally could be and do anything. I embraced it, but somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered when and if the gate would close. The day I came home from the hospital, nurse in tow, I felt like my gate had closed, surrounding me on all four sides.

According to the task force, "The Hidden Brain Drain," out of the Centre for Work-life policy, a New York based organization, women who take time off from their careers to have or raise children pay a big penalty in getting back in. Women who step off their career tracks for even a relatively short period of time, less than two years, lost an average of nearly 20% of their earning power and upwards of 28% for those women in business sectors. Women like myself that found themselves off their career track for three or more years, would return earning almost 40% less than their peers. The interruption took both a financial toll and an emotional one. Although, arguably, the barriers for women entering high power careers are down since the feminist uproar of the 1970's, equality and progress has still stalled. Modern women's struggles with career advancement have been less about obstacles and more about barriers and hurdles faced by being mothers.

A longitudinal study of Harvard Business School female graduates between 1981 and 1991 found that only 38% were working full time, and of those that continue in their career track, upwards of two-thirds work only part-time. The "Hidden Brain Drain" task force carefully looked at the push-pull workforce issue for women. The task force asked the question if women were being pulled out of their careers due to family demands or

being pushed out as a result of workplace demands they could not longer or were unwilling to meet after they joined the motherhood ranks. The bottom line, however, was regardless of push verse pull, I am among the small percentage of the privileged that has the choice to opt out in the first place and further, have the choice to reenter on a different path.

Roughly a decade ago the media erupted with reports that highly qualified women were dropping out of mainstream careers due to the increasing complex demands of motherhood. Articles in prominent publications such as the New York Times, Harvard Business Review, Wall Street Journal, and other popular magazines such as More and Oprah were not only drawing national attention to the topic but were also speculating as to the underlying causes.

The statistics told the outline of the story that I was all too personally familiar with, but really these numbers did little to tell the whole story. The story that highlights the internal angst between nurturing your intellect and nurturing your children. The story that talks of years of accumulated education and experience left behind.

For me, I had too many balls in the air and my illness made it essentially impossible for me to keep up the juggling of it all. My decision to off-ramp from the workforce had much more to do with the demands from my home front than those from work. I was conflicted. Although I live in a community filled with highly educated stay-at-home mothers, many content with their roles, I felt like a cloud full of stigma hung over my head. I had invested heavily in my formal education and had made sacrifices to gain both career experience and a notable reputation. Stepping away from this was difficult; I was letting go of a very precious part of my life.

In so many ways, the central issue was an identity struggle. But through my lived experiences, I knew that I would unearth my authentic identity only through that with which I choose to immerse myself. For years, I had spent time in a sort of forced altruism to my spouse's career and to my children's lives. And while I would not, now, then, or in the future, choose otherwise, a time had come for me to extend my commitment further. Through my search for meaning and purpose my self-expression would emerge. For me it would come in the way of allowing the expression of my creativity, which stemmed from a foundation in childhood to spread its wings in midlife.

I have spent a fair amount of time throughout my life searching for what brings meaning to me in and through my work. Many aspects pointed to a creative repertoire, but I was always held by the internal message that I needed to earn a reliable living and more from the fear of putting my creative work out in public for all to view.

From a moral perspective, and as I have aged into my midlife years, I often find myself at the crossroads of reason and passion; my views on work have gently shifted from a perspective of pragmatism to that of desire. I have become aware of myself as an artist. For the first time, I celebrated that life was as much about finding out what you are meant to do and about trusting it. As the years passed, I began to appreciate and accept that I did not enjoy working in a structured corporate environment. The rigidity of the field of accounting left little room for personal creativity and when I moved onto a career in education, I flourished in an environment that rewarded me for individuality and original thought. However, I could not simply toss care to the wind. I am also analytical by nature and have been trained to be grounded in practicality, and I doubted that my creative interests, that of photography, were career track material. But I would come to

see that my analytical side had benefits too as it helped guide and inform me into organizing my dreams in a way that worked.

But this rediscovery of my creative side would not fully surface until well into my midlife years as I slowly transitioned from a traditional career to a creative one, embracing my passion for photography. But when it happened, I had this overwhelming feeling of things softly settling into place.

Chapter 7: The Passion Within

“There is not passion to be found playing small – settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.”

Nelson Mandela

When you live with something everyday it can be hard to see it. Habits, ways of being, and everyday interactions have a way of settling into patterns that are sometimes easy but not always healthy. I am not sure if I became an expert at not noticing or of suppressing how I felt because I did not readily see a better path. The year I shot over 20,000 photos, mostly of horses and dogs, was the year that I woke up and began to look at my life with fresh eyes.

Everyday life has a way of compiling layer after layer, and for me, the layers – mother, wife, champion of my spouse’s career – began to prevent me from not only seeing but nurturing the true me. I found myself frequently thinking, “I don’t quite belong here,” which was a jolt into a realization that somewhere along the line my identity had been jumbled within the layers of my life. But the good news is that because the layers had been gradually building up over years, beneath was more or less a blank

slate waiting for me to write its story. The interesting thing is that as I began to shake things up, I realized I was uncertain what in my life would go, what may find a new spot – maybe more or less prominent within my life, and what things would emerge from the darkness into the full and brilliant light of center stage.

Middle adulthood is an earned status. I survived my roaring 20's where I had buckled down focusing on the foundations of my career. I joyously worked upwards of eighty hours a week, at times, taking great pride in the burgeoning professional reputation I was building. Then my 30's hit. After a decade of laying a solid career foundation, and at a time when my career should have soared, I began having children; four boys in an eight year time period. I could never have, and certainly did not, predict the impact this would have on my professional growth. As high achieving career women, I did not anticipate the changes that would come as a result of having children and how dramatically it would redraw the landscape of my life. I am glad I didn't see what was to come. And, even if I had, I doubt I would have believed the warning as I remained a direct product of the feminist mentality that we woman could be it all.

Betty Friedan's groundbreaking novel, *The Feminine Mystique*, was first published in 1963, four years before I was born. But, when I first read Friedan's book in 2004, at the age of thirty-seven, two years before I officially opted out of the workforce, I was enthralled with her words, her thoughts, and her ideas. Was she actually writing about me, I thought? How could that be possible, I wondered. Her book was written in the pre-feminist era of the 1960's and I sat reading her prolific words in the early 2000's. Certainly, I pondered, life for women, our career aspirations, our options, the way we as women were viewed, must have changed dramatically in forty-one years. Or had it?

In many ways, we women have gone round and round. The 1960's marked a time for us ladies where motherhood did not mix with work. The 1970's ushered in a push for liberating mothers followed by the 1980's which was a time hell bent on delving into the issues of working mothers and finding solutions. It was a time when women's self-esteem was being elevated, once again honoring woman for being smart and ambitious. I, a formative teenage and college student during these years, was a believer in the "you can do it all" mantra that was being professed to young women. A January 1984 issue of McCall's magazine professed women were finally "guilty of feeling guilt free." I cannot help but think this is a strange way to phrase it. It implies that we, as a gender, should feel some underlying thread of guilt regardless, and if we did not, then we should feel guilty about that. Which, in turn, laid the groundwork going into the 1990's, a time when my career was beginning.

My first professional years were celebrated with the Family Medical Leave Act, an attempt to publically equalize the role both working fathers and mothers played in the first several months after the birth of a child. In reality, this legislation never truly made the intended impact. Women were still viewed and, by and large, felt, as if they bore the brunt of the responsibility for being home with their infants. Most men never took advantage of the legislation either because the stigma was too strong or because they knew that leaving their careers, for even a brief stint, would be devastating in the long run. The old order held strong. Which, returned us back to women being trapped dead center.

While there existed a strong contingent of staunch supporters in favor of working mothers, there also began an undercurrent of class wars among mothers, those that

choose to work because they wanted to work and those that choose to stay at home. It is important to note that it was a war between women who had the very privilege to choose. The 1990's saw a surge in stay-at-home mothers who employed nannies for the purpose of providing themselves with time away from nurturing their children. Many proudly advertised that they were recruited to volunteer on local charitable boards, or they were spending tremendous time advocating for their local Parent Teacher associations. Some wanted or needed just a break away from the demands of nurturing. Many highly educated women who had opted out of the workforce were going stir-crazy, their minds idling, while spouses went off daily to intellectually stimulating work environments. They began volunteering in droves as a substitute for the work they once thrived in doing and as a way to utilize their fine tuned professional skills. Friends all around me fell into this category. For many of us, me included, we needed to learn to detach from the part of our life where our identity was established by acquiring professional skills and achieving excellence.

At the turn of the millennium, we began to see a profound shift among those who had the privilege to choose whether to work or to opt-out. Being a stay-at-home mother, even among the highly educated, those women with law degrees, medical licenses, and MBA's, was in vogue and these moms were becoming wrapped up in their children's lives to ensure their success. As the global world was becoming more competitive, kids were being put on the fast track in the hopes of guaranteeing a bright future and many mothers were micromanaging the process. Mothers were constantly on the go, and proud of it. The busier they were, the more highly regarded they felt. They were becoming CEO's of their own homes, their children their charges. But, many of these mothers were

harried in the process. Scores of mother's felt that no matter how much they did, it was never enough.

In so many frightening ways, we as women, women who were starting families during the 1990's and beyond, women who aspired to have meaningful careers, women who were told, and even more so believed, that we held the power and the ability to juggle our professional work, husbands, and children, were discovering it was a full blown crock. It was truly ironic. Women like myself spent decades fighting for equality, fighting to be given the opportunities to fulfill our potential and not to be stopped short by barriers that prevented us from achieving our human potential in ways outside domesticity. But then, empowered with multiple degrees, years of well earned career experience, huge sacrificial efforts at building professional reputations, we realize the reality of combining high powered careers with marriage and child rearing is difficult – very, very difficult indeed. I realized that to be successful in these multiple and vastly different areas of my life, it required me to balance simultaneously cooperation with competition, be a specialist and a generalist, and be able to sacrifice without losing myself. No easy task, but I particularly stumbled on the latter. I have found it hard to maintain a strong identity when constantly nurturing everyone around me and putting his or her success paramount even at the expense of my own. I was beginning to feel both suppressed and constrained by my domestic role.

I am the wife of a neurosurgeon. It is a unique role. Not the wife part, but actually being married to a neurosurgeon. I rarely tell me people my husbands' profession, without receiving a reaction filled with some element of awe. Without doubt, it is a noble career, but also one that offers little in the way of flexibility and lots in the

way of needed support. With my spouse often working eighty or more hours a week, I, by necessity, had to pick up the household slack. For me, as the spouse, this has meant that the bulk of the home and child responsibilities have been in my court since our first child was born. I balanced the added domestic needs with my career through the birth of our first child and again through the birth of our second. It undoubtedly got tougher to balance all the balls in the air after the third child was born, but I managed, some days barely. With the arrival of our fourth son, my plate became over filled, fatigue set in, and my career took a back seat. I felt forced to adjust to the realities of my life and while I strived to intellectually accept the situation, internally fighting the notion of traditional gender roles, deep down, without telling anyone, I felt like the sacrificial mother wondering why my husband's job was never the one up for evaluation.

I was in a quandary. On the surface, it seemed as if I was surrounded by staunch believers in the "Motherhood Religion" (a term coined by Judith Warner in *Perfect Madness*). I was mothering in an era where many stay-at-home moms were wrapped up in their children's accomplishments, putting their kids interests above all else and on a fast track to ensure they had the brightest future possible to compete in an increasing competitive world. My overachieving corporate friends of the 1990's had morphed into competitive supermoms, attaching their self-worth to the academic and athletic achievements of their offspring. Although I knew this was not my preferred parenting style, it butted up against all logic I had, I attempted to throw myself into the cult of motherhood. I tried to convince my friends, and even more so, myself, that I was "choosing" to dedicate myself to full-time domesticity that of motherhood and wifehood.

At first, I was not unhappy. I viewed my changes as a means to take control, to find a better balance.

I feared that age-old cocktail party question, “So, what do you do?” It was like that reoccurring dream that every college kid has: you are sitting for the big final exam – you’ve studied your fanny off – you are utterly prepared – but as you sit staring at the questions, your mind has gone blank, completely blank. You rack your brain, but no reasonable answer comes to mind – panic sets in. In preparation for these cocktail parties, in my mind I crafted responses that said anything other than “I am a stay-at-home mom.” To me, this was the pinnacle of letting years of hard earned education and career experience wilt away. While I love each of my four boys to their core, they are my essence, giving up my career and even more so not remaining true to my unique creative side, was suffocating me. They alone did not and could not define me. While my choice to have a family brought with it specific obligations, that of responsibly raising my children in a hectic world, all of which I wanted to fulfill in the best way possible, and which I took great pride in, sometimes it felt absorbing. I felt like I was on a see saw trying to balance utility verse creativity and responsibility verse self-development. When I would be asked that dreaded, invasive question of “What do you do?” I would stumble through my answer, not even convincing myself of any true validity to my spoken words. It’s hard to convince someone else to believe you when you truly don’t believe yourself.

I have no doubt that in large part my feelings stemmed from the fact that I have always felt it necessary to be high achieving. Why wouldn’t I? Our culture places an abundance of value in what you do professionally. I not only felt judged when asked, “What do you do?” but I was also actually judging myself. And, boy, oh boy, was I a

harsh critic. Approaching a task with only half effort is not something I ever do. I am always striving to do the very best I am capable of. I had traveled a path of having been successful in a male dominated work place to becoming dependent on my husband's career. The shift left me feeling like I had lost an element of control over my life. I felt as if I had compromised my career and consequently my identity had been marginalized. It was only in letting go of my need for and concern with outer career recognition that I truly began to focus on what made me intrinsically happy, satisfied, proud, and inspired. It was a mental ditching of society's expectations of what my life was supposed to look like.

I am certainly privileged. I have choices and it is exactly the ability to choose that has been a huge foundation to my conflict. Unlike the women interviewed in the pre-feminist era of the 1960's by Betty Friedan (1963) in *The Feminine Mystique*, a groundbreaking book on the feminist movement, and a personal favorite, I, in contrast, came of age at a time when I was told "women could have it all." I believed it. I tried to live it. I have struggled with it over and over and over again. I am fully aware that I am not in the majority. Most American women do not have a choice whether they have to do paid work – many are single mothers, or in situations that absolutely require dual incomes, or are even working multiple jobs while a spouse may be out of work.

I was caught between two worlds – one in which I wanted to meet the needs of my family and one in which I wanted to meet the needs of myself. I realized that I could not fully have both and for the time being, the right thing to do was focus on the boys I chose to bring into this world. But "choice" is a misleading word. While I had made a choice to opt out of the workforce, I discovered that in doing so I was not being true to

myself. In my head I was constantly justifying my decision but all the while desperately missing the intrinsic satisfaction of my work, my sense of independence and the intellectual stimulation. Ann Truitt, in *Daybook: The Journal of an Artist* (2013), stresses the critical importance of being responsible to the self by pursuing your aspirations. She cautions the female not to “atrophy or sour.” I had found myself both atrophying and souring. I knew I needed to heal. I was hopeful but in turn expected a messy process.

Dreams of a big, all out change where I could leave the self-doubt behind loomed in my head. My previous career success, which was the path of least resistance, masked my internal pull towards the creative process. The problem with staying stagnant was it would keep my focus in the wrong direction, away from my true career dreams living a life rich in creativity. The push to bring my career life more in line with my inner yearnings and reach towards my artistic urge would in turn bring a sense of satisfaction and meaning to me. My non-linear career path, having gone from accountant to educator, seemed to continue leading me in a direction less and less rigid and more towards self-actualization and authenticity. The process started slowly and the momentum grew over a fifteen-year period.

My creativity and untapped career talents lingered beneath the surface for decades. I am not entirely sure why they stayed at that “oh so close to coming out” place for such a long period of time. Maybe it was fear of failure, or of the unknown, but what I do know now is that burying my intuitive self was not rewarding, despite the range of successes I had achieved elsewhere. It was easy to convince myself that my creative

passions were frivolous. I had spent significant time in my life attempting to find my true calling, when all along it was present.

The uncertainty of not knowing how to make a change, how to move towards my passions was paralyzing. I was afraid to give myself the freedom to explore and the time to do it because it did not feel practical. I did not want to be seen as flighty, deserting years of career experience by pursuing life as an artist. But, I had a nagging sense that I had a different career purpose.

Taking advantage of moving to a new state, I enrolled in a photography course being held walking distance from our home, thinking it was both a great way to meet people and a way to further explore my passion among people I knew for sure I would not know. I instantly felt at home, sitting in a classroom, my camera in hand, surrounded by people who shared a common interest, and all wanting to hone their skills. The energy in the room was powerful. It was mostly people in similar situations to my own, with a few outliers. Most wore the hat of “mom.” Most did not go to college to earn a degree in the arts. Most held intense desires to call themselves a “photographer.” A label. A label that, truth be told, any one of us had the right to embrace. But there can be something oddly frightening about claiming a title associated with being an “artist.” And for me, the notion was terrifying. It would be something I would have to try on slowly, wiggle around it, and readjust several times before I could wear it comfortably.

Labeling oneself an artist implied, at least to me, that I had concrete work; work that I was proud to display, or sell, or let others talk about. It meant that I would have to assign my name to it for the world to see. As Anne Lamont says, perfectionism is the

voice of the oppressor, and I was victim to that. It would be nearly fourteen years before I would embrace her words and set myself free.

I loved that class and I adored the folks I met in it. To this day, when I run into anyone from this course, we talk as if we had hung out just the day before. In that classroom we shared our fears, talked about our dreams of being a photographer, and put our work on display, projected large on a wall, for our classmates to see. Through this class, I was trying to not only learn, but to justify giving myself the title of “photographer.” I did not know it then, but it was the true beginnings of letting my inner artist bubble back up to take a prominent role in my life. But before it would take center stage, I had years ahead of me seeking validity and sorting out my identity as I crawled towards embracing my authenticity and truth on a whirlwind journey into my own selfhood.

As I began to immerse myself more and more in my photography, my life continued. I still worked at a job, not in a career, had primary responsibility for the care of my four boys, and was overall captain of our home mothership. But in the evening, in my free moments, I delved into my pictures finding comfort and solace, hope and inspiration.

As I was ready to ramp back into my career, several events in my life triggered me to seize the courage in order to make the transitional leap towards challenging the feminine mystique and fulfilling my career dreams. One majestic, sunny summer day, camera in hand, I arrived at a prominent east coast horse show. After parking my car I began to walk to the upper jumper ring with my camera carefully slung over my shoulder.

Just a few months prior I had taken the financial leap and purchased a professional grade camera to go with the very high-end lens I had also invested in earlier that year.

As I breathed the air in deeply, letting it sink slowly and fully into my lungs, I felt my body relax. It was warm and I was instantly engulfed with the smell of horses – my absolute favorite scent. I meandered around the tents, peaking in several as I passed by. Horses generally live in stalls set up in temporary tents at most horse shows. For whatever reason, the tops of these tents, which I'm sure are all rented from the same company, are blue and white striped. To me, these tents are a happy site. I have seen them since I was a small child and they hold a sense of familiarity and an element of excitement.

I leisurely walked around the tents, through the vendor area, and up the dirt path towards the jumper ring. All around me, horses with riders aboard, were in movement. Some walking in pairs, while their mounts were casually chatting. Some trotting or cantering, warming up for the competition. Others jumping practice jumps, trainers standing alongside offering words of advice. I appreciatively took it all in.

My oldest son was competing and I planned to photograph him and his barn mates. Upon arriving to the jumper ring, I reviewed the course map, surveyed the ring where the horses and riders would compete, and scoped out the spot where I wanted to shoot from, assessing the light, background, and view towards the jumps that the horses and riders would tackle. I extracted my camera from the bag and began adjusting the settings, waiting for the announcer to alert me to the first horse and rider combination entering the ring.

Standing next to me was the official horse show photographer, the person whose work I admired the absolute most. I have taken every opportunity to observe him shoot over the past year. There is a casual, nonchalant way about him. When he shoots portraits, both rider and horse relax in his presence. His photographs are truly stunning making him highly sought after. Striking up a conversation with him, I quickly learned that his well-honed photography skills came primarily from years and years of practice and hard work, not years of formal training. He learned his skills “on the job,” as they say. And, he has every right to own the label “photographer,” regardless of what constitutes “official” training. He is an artist. As the first horse and rider entered the ring, we both raised our cameras and got to work. While I watched him, noticing every minute detail about what he did – how he held the camera, the angle he shoot, the timing, I also engaged in doing my own thing. He periodically offered me advice. I hung on every word, absorbing it, digesting it, putting it to immediate practice. I cautiously asked a question and was thrilled when he offered a quick, earnest response.

Without knowing his impact, on that day, he ignited a motivation in me to forge ahead, giving me confidence in my work and in my potential. He encouraged me to harness the doubt, silence the fear and channel positive energy into my artistic work. It was an unexpected awakening to my creative side in a way that screamed from the rafters, take a risk, come alive, live your “only ifs.” It was a day that would soon catapult me back to the comfort and passion I first remember experiencing as a child. But channeling this excitement into a real world profession was a big step.

My process, however, was relatively slow but steady. I perseverated over the details, the how-to’s, the what if’s, and the what then’s. But I knew, as I stood in the

middle of midlife, that I did not have twenty more years to think it through. Luckily, I was financially secure. Giving up my career to be the primary caregiver to our children to support my husband's career did have its benefits. My husband, although in a demanding profession, had been rewarded financially leaving me now, in midlife, with options in relation to my own career. I no longer needed to work, lifting the huge burden of financial pressure. I had the liberty to choose to work and to make that choice something that brought me deep meaning and happiness. I knew I was fortunate in this regard because although I had appeared outwardly successful in my earlier career, I had long ago abandoned my creative interests, namely photography, which left me with an unsettling feeling of dissatisfaction.

As luck would have it, I awoke one morning to an unexpected email. A national, well-known and popular catalog had seen one of my photographs and wanted to include it in an upcoming release. I was both over the moon excited, astonished, and utterly startled. I was not prepared mentally for this. Maybe this is the best way for something of this magnitude to happen. It felt like a message from the greater universe; my work was ready for the public eye and it was my responsibility to get it out there. Within the next several months, they used two of my photos in their catalog.

I had slipped into a pattern where I was defining myself by my deficits, the things I perceived as deficits anyway, and not by what I was capable of doing or aspired to do. Which got me thinking about the saying I had read at some point from an Internet poet, Erin Hanson, "What if I fall? Oh but darling, what if you fly?" I knew the time had truly come where I needed to get to a place where I was able to nurture those

important to me, as I had been doing all along, but also to be responsive to my own career needs, goals and desires.

The hardest part, in hindsight, was making the phone call. It now seems silly and crazy that I waited so long, second-guessing it for over a year. I was bogged down with an inability to be true to myself. I had lots of excuses. Was I a fake? Was I good enough? What would people think? My very real fears were masking my ability to trust my belief in my passion and in myself. I sat at my desk, the phone number scribbled on a pretty round piece of pink and white Lily Pulitzer paper, with the phone at my fingertips, but afraid to dial. I spent many days thinking about making the call, but always ending up with an excuse, which usually played out in my head something like, "I really just don't have enough time today." Honestly, I was not really even kidding myself. I knew I was making excuses and each day that passed where I did not make the call only served to make me feel less like I deserved to take hold of the title Photographer. But I wanted to pursue my art so badly; so I finally promised myself that tomorrow, no matter what, I would call. And, I did.

Within days my website started taking shape. I watched it grow with wonder, amazement and pride. These were my photos – my works of art – my love. Over a decade of training, practice, learning, and fine-tuning was taking shape on my computer screen and I liked what I saw. As my website began to take shape, I knew that the whole was, in fact, greater than the sum of the parts. That in fretting over the details, I had easily lost sight of and was depriving myself of an inner freedom in which I was alone was in control. I had, over the years as I became accustomed to juggling multiple responsibilities and nurturing those around me, compromised the

blossoming of my own creativity. But at some point I realized that I, and I alone, was responsible for the walls built around me blocking me off from pursuing my photography as a career. Some days the anguish overwhelmed me. It was in freeing myself of the self-imposed limits that I allowed to be levied on me that I was able to open my mind and heart to the possibilities of letting my true passion and long suppressed creativity emerge and take shape through a career path. I craved a sense of self that was fully my own and as I moved in this direction I noticed my outward energy shifting and begin being redirected inward. I had finally stepped into my personal power.

Chapter 8: Live Boldly: I am my own Superhero

“Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

As I traversed through the years of my forties, raising four boys, and having stepped away for several years from my well-earned career, I began to take stock and take notice, reexamining my own life. Like many women my age, I discovered that I lacked a sense of self and felt an internal angst that despite all I had, something was missing from my life. What I was discovering in the process was that in fostering the development of my children and my spouses’ career, I had slowly but steadily strayed

from the path of my own development. I had bit-by-bit slid into a life of playing by others rules and in turn had drifted from my love of creativity. I had a sense that I had betrayed myself losing touch with my dreams. I was discontent knowing I had lost a piece of myself along the way and the whole it left in me wept for it to be healed. My true self needed to be reclaimed.

I knew I was not alone. My story constantly sparks other women to talk about their lived experiences. Barely a week passes where I do not have a conversation with another midlife women – a highly educated suburbanite who has also opted out of the workforce because of her domestic responsibilities. She, too, is accomplished, but like me, feels lost. There is a sense of community among those of us that feel if we continued to pursue our career dreams, it would come at the cost of abandoning our children to extended hours in childcare or with a nanny. It is a heroic quest to be a vibrant mother, supportive spouse and have a successful career. In fact, living in the postfeminist generation, the very choices we as women now seem to have, and believing we could challenge the *Feminine Mystique*, in many ways are not viable choices. Betty Friedan, in the 1960's called it the "problem that had no name," in an argument that middle class women had lost their identities because being a housewife and mother had stripped them of their ability to live full and meaningful lives. And despite the advances women achieved in the years to come, as I sit completing my dissertation in the year 2015, I am left pondering what has changed. Her radical and revolutionary book, which sought to uncover the route causes of many women's frustration could have been written today. I feel that although over fifty years have passed, we as a society, and as women living in it, are still wrestling with the same route causes and outcomes. The vision of motherhood

that I, and we as a culture have bought into still precludes us from chasing our career aspirations at the same speed as our male counterparts. Our domestic responsibilities, in an age of extreme busyness, are ripe with the pressure that we have a responsibility to do everything in our power to give our children advantages in all areas including academic, athletics, music, and over the top volunteer experiences. The onerous compulsion to succeed on the domestic front, has in turn, excluded women from nurturing their own career abilities and talents. The ideology of accepting such roles, both at a time when Betty Friedan explored the underlying causes and today, accounts for much of the problem. Sadly, we seem to have come full circle.

Speaking to other women who share the tenets of my experiences, wanting and searching desperately to sort through the clash of expectations that engulfs us, reinforces both my personal drive and the notion that this is important scholarly work. Despite what I was told as an eager seventeen year old, women cannot do it all, or at least do it all perfectly, primarily because we truly can't be it all, to ourselves and to those around us. It is a story of choices. And even in the face of a generation that, on the surface, has a wealth of choices, is more highly educated, and where many women have more financial freedom, we still can easily fall victim to the feminine mystique and the emotional trappings it carries with it. This is not the politically correct thing to state. Women who have made a conscious choice to be stay-at-home mothers, and, yes, I'm referring to those that have a choice in the first place, want validation for the career sacrifices they have made. Women who have deliberately chosen to work full time are walking a tight rope trying to balance the demands on them, from both work and home, in hopes that they will not be crushed by it all or by the guilt and pressures of the sacrifices they are

making. In the end, it seems nearly impossible to escape the overarching feeling that, regardless of our choices, we are making sacrifices. But by the time many women hit midlife, they are looking to rediscover the happiness and intrinsic satisfaction they once had or dreamed of having in and through their work. The process of unearthing our identity or better yet, redefining it, after years of having been caught up in the spiral of nurturing others that sucked our identities away, is complicated but offers the hope of richness.

I believe that midlife is a unique period of time. I believe it can be claustrophobic and it can be ripe with opportunity and adventure. If you remain open and allow it, midlife offers an incredible possibility for self-discovery. It is a time to dig deep in examining our life experiences to extrapolate meaning. My meanings derived combined with my dreams within have led me in finding my calling. But we each are the only ones that can find the meaning in our experiences because they both form and inform our truth. It is a complex narrative but in finding the truth, we open ourselves up to building on the successes and lessons from our past to create the future we crave.

The newsstands are overflowing with pop culture magazines targeting midlife women. As a midlife woman, I am unashamedly drawn to these stories, wanting to uncover another kernel of advice or word of wisdom to help me continuing forward on my own journey. I do not want to stall. These cover stories call out to women just like me. They are stories rich in courage, hope, encouragement, and inspiration with titles such as, “You’re middle-aged, but are you done?,” “Why women still can’t have it all,” “Strut your stuff,” “See life through a news lens,” “Reinvent yourself: find a career that works,” “A second act that feeds your soul,” “The fast track to genuine joy,” “Stop

worrying and start living,” “Be our own hero,” “Taking care of yourself, while taking care of others,” and “How to live an inspired life.” The topic of midlife women is receiving tremendous attention. I know the issues are real because I am living them in my daily life. It is reassuring to see the topics in print as it certainly helps legitimize my feelings that expressing one’s creativity by and through seeking meaningful work is one in which many midlife women are grappling. These articles also reinforce that the middle years for women are a time ripe with opportunity, and not necessarily one defined by crisis, as is often depicted with males of the same age range. Popular magazines are directing attention and persuading women to have the courage to embrace their creative personas and seek happiness and satisfaction in expressive and important work.

I have come to accept that my family role is complex, like many of these other woman I speak too, and generally has a higher salience in my life, and theirs, than our husbands. Furthermore, as the literature points out, much of our identity is tied to nurturing; for me it has been a silent structure inherent of my gender role that slowly crept up on me and squelched my creative career aspirations. In our culture today, we embody a femininity whereby we are forced to be in a world where value is placed and we, as highly educated and ambitious women, consequently strive to release a feeling of masculinity. It’s often becomes a feeble attempt to balance the energies in our body – that of masculine verse feminine, a sacred blending. The challenge for me has been to find the balance of serving the needs of the important people in my life, namely children and spouse, while still paying attention to and giving life to my own needs, desires, and ambitions. I had become proficient at fostering everyone around me – my husband, my boys, my babysitters, and even the community through the committees and other ways I

volunteered. I had simply lost my inward focus. It is a journey that will continue over my life span involving endless wandering and soul searching and constant redefining of the parameters, while I also remain cognizant to my own limitations without falling victim to them.

In desiring to live a more authentic life I have observed many women begin to have the courage to voice their career dreams out loud. It's scary. I know this, because I am one of these women. I, like many others I know, have become introspective and have been cautiously but excitedly navigating the roadmap of self-discovery. I have been able to admit that my passions in regards to my work life have shifted throughout my life, and in midlife I am not only ready, but also ecstatic, to honor the artistic side of me. Hand in hand with this, I have grown to value that my identity is a dynamic beast, ebbing and flowing with the tides of my life.

My life is a colorful tapestry of experiences. While making meaning from all of it is sometimes difficult, I have by and large lived compelled to extrapolate the meaning from my these experiences. Often I find myself battling between autonomy and wholeness, self-preservation and nurturing. But I continue to hang onto the moments, those work accomplishments, that have and continue to “wow” me. I will never forget the moment that I opened my mailbox to find the catalog containing my photograph. Although I was exhilarated, I hesitated in reaching for the mail. I am sure my heart skipped a beat in that second. I retrieved the mail, placing it on the passenger seat of my car, and drove down my long, winding, dirt driveway all the while daydreaming of a glamorous life as a sought after photographer. Was this my first step? I carried the mail into my house, but not yet opening the catalog. Did I dare look at my artistic work,

printed on the pages of a national catalog, for the world to scrutinize? Or even more so, for me to judge. But when I mustered up the nerve to open that thick, colorful catalog, and spotted my photograph in the first few pages, I smiled, a big, broad, proud smile. My passions felt validated and rewarded. I was in the process of fulfilling my very own career dreams.

As I complete my dissertation, eleven years after I began a qualitative research study on midlife women finding passion in their work, I am grateful that I put myself at the center of my study. My initial plan to interview women about their experiences gave me valuable insight and a foundation from which this dissertation grew. But, ten years later I knew in my heart that I was that very woman I was researching. How apropos. In retrospect, I was at the center all along. Of course I was. It is the very reason why I was drawn to the topic. It hit home with me then because I was on the cusp of “midlife” and also had been feeling an internal angst and a pull between my own relationship with the feminine mystique. Without being fully aware, I was in the midst of an inner struggle to unleash my own creativity. A struggle that, although having garnered fruition and momentum in my life, at the same time still requires constant cultivating. At the time, I just did not see it clearly, or more so, did not allow myself to see it unfolding.

Placing myself at the center of research, after a decade of reading and writing on this topic which has been and will always be near and dear to my heart, was the only way to give full and proper credibility to the importance of the material but also to my very own story of transition from a traditional career to a creative one. It also gave credence to the importance that my lived experiences were a critical contribution to the academic literature on the subject. It became equally necessary to investigate my voice, the

professional and the personal triggers that led me, like so many other midlife women, towards honoring my creative career aspirations. My particular experiences legitimately belonged among the scholarly literature as an important contribution.

I am proud to say that I have and will continue to reshape my life, allowing new experiences to seep in, giving myself space to grow and flourish. In the end, I have a sense of self, an identity, that I can call my own. While my life circumstances will continue to require me to wear many hats, I am thrilled to officially add a brilliant jewel atop my head, that is the career title of *photographer*.

Fear Not the Dark

By Kelly DePaolo

Wandering through the rubble
pieces of myself
scattered

Exploring the dark feminine
solitary silence surrounds
transformation

Seeking the parts from which I have split
mindful wholeness
create

Recapturing the passion within
being and doing
courage

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