

Confessions of a Woman on the Brink of 50

I was born a child of the fifties, a Baby Boomer. The generation that was to have it all, Eternal Optimists living in the shadow of the Nuclear Age. The children of Ozzie and Harriet and Ward and June Cleaver, the American Dream—home in the suburbs, white picket fence, station wagon in the driveway, Mother at home keeping the house while Dad went off to work, and two perfect children upstairs in their own rooms.

That was it. That was what we were all supposed to strive for, what we were programmed to want. And so naturally, as is the case with human nature, it was the very thing we rebelled against.

I was no different. I was born into that perfect American family; father, mother, younger brother. No, we didn't have the house in the suburbs because we were a military family; gypsies moving from base to base, town to town, country to country. I rarely attended the same school more than two years in a row, and while I knew a great many people, I can't say I had a lot of friends. And so, through necessity, I learned to depend on myself for company. I found my playmates in books and my own fertile imagination. Friends I could take with me rather than leave behind.

That's not to say I had an unhappy childhood. On the contrary, I got to see the world at a very young age, to experience other cultures. It opened my mind and broadened my horizons, but it also made me realize that I couldn't buy into that pantheon of the American Dream. I couldn't be like my mother, subverting my dreams and ambitions to the those of my husband and children. I had to be my own person, to make my place in the world, to have a career.

To be ... someone.

Little did I know back then that being someone didn't necessarily mean I had to lose what I was. It took me a long time—and a lot of pain—to come to that realization.

I now stand on the brink of fifty and look back at my successes, my mistakes, and my regrets, and marvel at the clarity I would have killed for at twenty, though I know, if given the chance, I wouldn't change a single thing, because the road I have traveled has made me who I am today. Which isn't to say that I'm satisfied with my life or all my choices, only that they are mine, the one thing I truly and completely possess. No one else has walked in my shoes or traveled my road or known my fears and my sorrows and my moments of bliss. And that's as it should be, because they are all busy making their own moments and living their own lives and creating their own successes or failures. That's really what this is all about—living with our choices and loving ourselves despite them.

As women of the Baby-Boomer generation, I think we were unique in that we were the first generation to question the sanctity of the family unit. No, we didn't invent the feminist movement, but we embraced it not as an exception, but as a rule. We fought for and demanded equal rights, equal pay, equal opportunity. We wanted to stand in the man's shoes and walk in his world and fight in his battles, and we did it.

We showed the world that a woman can do anything a man can do, but in the process, I can't help but think that a lot of us sacrificed our greatest power—our femininity. I'm not talking about wearing frilly dresses and having dinner on the table at six for our man. No, I'm talking about the one thing that sets us apart in this world, the one thing we can do that men cannot.

However much we may want to ignore or deny it, we are the caretakers of the species.

From the moment we come into being, we carry within us the ability to create life. We perpetuate the miracle. For many of us, when we were younger, it was a curse. It was the thing that held us back, made us less than equal to men. We had to worry about monthly mood swings and birth control and sacrificing professional goals for our children, and in the process we lost sight of the fact that the very thing we were condemning was the thing that gave us our power.

We were fighting so hard to prove to the world that we could do anything a man could do, when deep down inside, we already knew it. There isn't a woman alive who doesn't know it, who isn't born with an instinctive knowledge that she can do anything it takes to make a place in this world for herself and her family. Society and circumstances may alter her perception, but it never changes her ability.

So who were we trying to convince? Men? We have no control over what a man believes. They have their agenda in life, as we have ours. They may share our lives and support our cause, they may even choose to raise our families while we go off to work, but they can never truly appreciate what it means to be a woman any more than we can appreciate what it means to be a man.

We may have succeeded in making the sexes equal, in creating women who think and act like men and men who are all but castrated of their egos by our success, but in reality, it hasn't changed a single thing because biologically, we are, and always will be, two distinctly different genders. Regardless of sex-change operations and hormone therapy, no man has ever given birth to another human being. That alone is our one true power, our most precious gift.

As I said, it took me years of heartache and denial to accept this one simple fact. Ironic that it should happen at a time in my life when surgery has stripped me of the very organs that grant that privilege, though not before I brought three beautiful children into the world. There were times when I cursed that as well, when I wished they had never entered my life, then immediately felt guilty for my thoughts, but that is what motherhood is. Like all relationships, it's part love and part hate. A curse and a blessing.

I've enjoyed a great many successes in my life. In over thirty years as an adult, I've accomplished the goals that as a girl I thought were so important. I've been a leader, a pioneer, a rebel, and a scapegoat. I've enjoyed a college education, a demanding career, money, cars, houses, clothes.

So why was it, I asked myself, when I finally reached the time in my life when I should have been fulfilled, I felt nothing but emptiness, a loss of purpose? I looked around at my life—my career, my house, my car, my bank account—and realized that it all meant nothing. That through all the years of hard work and sacrifice, of fighting and chasing and yearning for that elusive prize we call Success, the thing I had been seeking had been right under my nose the whole time. The greatest accomplishment of my life, the most rewarding achievement, was my children.

I can remember the exact moment when I had that epiphany. I was sitting in my third-floor executive office on a sunny Monday morning, the day after New Years, and my boss came in and informed me that the company was downsizing and would no longer be needing my services.

At first I was angry—how could they do this to me after all I'd given them? Anger quickly gave way to panic as a thousand things began to spin through my head. What if I couldn't find another job right away? After all, I was a woman pushing fifty. What about the mortgage, the car payment? The lifestyle?

Then the fighter in me woke up. So what? It's not like it hadn't happened before. I'd

been laid off before, been divorced twice, lost houses and cars and all the little niceties that define success. I'd always managed to land on my feet and fight my way back. But something was different this time. I suddenly realized I didn't want to fight back. That I was tired of it all—the rat race, the competitiveness, the back-stabbing, the politics. After thirty years of clawing my way up the ladder, I realized I no longer enjoyed the view. I was tired of the stress, the sixty-hour weeks and ever-escalating taxes and ... well, pantyhose. In short, I was ready to throw in the towel and downsize my life.

I had no idea what I was going to do to earn a living, just that all the things that I had thought were important—the house, the car, the job, the money—suddenly didn't seem to matter any more. They were just window dressing. I was filled with a great calmness, a sense of peace, and I realized it was the first I had known in so many years I'd almost forgotten how it felt.

That was three years ago. In that time I've watched it all go—the car, the money, the house. But I've also watched the graduation of two sons, the birth of twin grand daughters, and the aging of two wonderful parents. I've grown closer to my brother and planted roses and trees and watched hatchlings fly from the nest, and yet, my friends and family accuse me of being a cynic because I have a tendency to argue the negative side of things.

What they don't understand—and what more women should—is that while I'm more at peace with my life, I'm still trying to come to terms with my greatest regret—that I spent more time trying to prove to the world that I was someone special than appreciating the people who already knew the answer. As they say, the hardest person to forgive is yourself.