Paths to Fulfillment
Women’s Search for Meaning and Identity
Ruthellen Josselson
Paths to Fulfillment
Paths to Fulfillment

WOMEN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING AND IDENTITY

Ruthellen Josselson

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
To my women friends of forty or more years, with whom I have shared the challenges of finding, revising and fulfilling ourselves: Amia, Barbara, Bev, Connie, Dori, Ellen, Judy, Judy, June, Megan, Pam, Roberta, Sally, Sherry, Sue, and Susie.
You have won rooms of your own in the home hitherto exclusively owned by men.... The room is your own, but it is still bare.... How are you going to furnish it? How are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it? And upon what terms? These, I think, are questions of the utmost importance and interest. For the first time in history, you are able to ask them; for the first time, you are able to decide for yourselves what the answers should be.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, “PROFESSIONS FOR WOMEN,” PUBLISHED POSTHUMOUSLY IN THE DEATH OF THE MOTH AND OTHER ESSAYS

“. . . we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having lived only one.”

CLIFFORD GEERTZ, THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURES
## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments xi
Preface xiii

1. Women and Identity 1
2. The Pathmakers 31
3. A Pathmaker and Her Daughter—And a Pathmaker Who Lost Her Way 81
4. The Guardians 115
5. The Searchers 157
6. The Drifters 205
7. A Drifter Who Created a Path 247
8. Paths to Fulfillment: Reflections on Adult Growth and Development in Women 261

Afterword 291
Appendix 293
Discussion Questions 297
References 299
Index 305
I have been working on this project, in one way or another, throughout my entire adult life so it seems like everyone I have known has contributed in some way to my thinking and understanding about women’s development. I am grateful to so many people for their support, encouragement, and interest over the many years of this study. Here, I will acknowledge only those who have assisted me in this last round of interviewing and analysis. Most heartily, I wish to thank my colleagues and friends, Jane Kroger, Jim Marcia, and Ravenna Helson whose own work on identity has inspired me throughout my career. They, as well as June Price and Amia Lieblich, read all the chapters, talked with me at length about my perspective on these women, and contributed their own ideas. Many of my students at the Fielding Graduate University have helped me by transcribing and commenting on interviews, working with me on analysis, or commenting on chapters. In particular, I am grateful to Devon Jersild, Heidi Mattila, Janita van der Walt, Shari Goldstein, and Marti Spriggs. Others read and commented on interviews or chapters, and I thank Tova Hartman, Monisha Pasupathi, Paivi Fadjukoff, and my daughter, Jaimie Baron, as well as my colleagues in the Society for Personology who allowed me to present this work and offered me their insight: Jim Anderson, Jack Bauer, Sunil Bhatia, Mark Freeman, Gary Gregg, Jeannette Haviland Jones, Jen Lilgendhal, Dan McAdams, Dan Ogilvie, Mac Runyan, Brian Schiff, Todd Schultz, Jefferson Singer, Ed de St. Aubin, Paul Wink, and Barbara Woike. I also thank Jonathan Slavin for having lent me his apartment for a snowy winter week so I could do interviews there. I am appreciative of having had a research grant from the Fielding Graduate University to fund my travel to interview these women. And I thank my editor, Abby Gross, for her counsel and support. As always, I thank my husband, Hanoch Flum, for his wisdom and knowledge about identity development and just for being in my life.

Most deeply, I give my thanks to the women of this study who have, over the course of 35 years, opened their lives and hearts to me. They must, of course, remain anonymous. I hope I do them no injustice by how I have written about them. Immersing myself in their lives, I have come to love each of them as fellow travelers trying to grow and to make sense out of our lives.
To observe a woman’s life unfold is like looking into a kaleidoscope. Women’s identities integrate multiple elements in an arrangement that changes over time as new pieces are added and old ones given more or less prominence or discarded. Each change makes the overall pattern shift but still resemble the previous one. The elements grow out of the childhood they had and the experiences and people they encountered later along the way as they go through life making choices. There is both continuity and change over time. I have been following the unfolding of 26 women’s lives for 35 years, trying to understand how and why the college seniors they were became the women they are today. My inspiration has been Michael Apted’s “Up” series, but I use words rather than film to document lives, and I think psychologically rather than sociologically. Nothing intrigues me more than to witness change over time. I am interested in providing fleshed-out descriptions of these lives in progress rather than vignettes to illustrate a point. Rather than focusing on social class, as Apted did, I concern myself with differences among four distinct psychological pathways that I identified when these women were seniors in college. There are many ways for a woman to live a life, and some, in late midlife, feel more satisfied with what they have created than others.

In psychology, adolescence and old age are well-conceptualized, but we understand less about what occurs developmentally in the many decades of adulthood that constitute the middle years. This period reflects continuity as well as growth and change and has its own challenges and possibilities. The women I studied have forged lives very different from one another, yet there are commonalities among them.

I make no argument in this book; I have no axe to grind. My aim is to map the developmental paths of adulthood. I lay claim to charting the seasons of a woman’s life and demonstrating how different inner arrangements at the end of college give way to different life courses. Because of these different launching patterns, generalizations about women, even college-educated women, become impossible to sustain. Women become themselves in intricate ways. Yet some women experience their lives in their mid-50s as more fulfilling than others do—and how they create that fulfillment has much to do with the form of identity they shape along the way.
Note

1. Although I have followed 26 women for 35 years, I report on 25 of them in this book. One of the women was in a marital crisis when I saw her at age 55, and she was in a rather traumatized state of mind.
I sit in my rented car somewhere in the middle of nowhere. I have come to this rural area of West Virginia to meet Alice, one of the women I have been tracking, once every decade, for 35 years in my effort of learn about the development of identity in women. Alice is a woman who had seemed to me to embody promise and stability from the time I first met her when she was a college senior, and I am eager to know how her life has evolved. The winding rural road that I drove to reach this spot was paved but barely wide enough for two cars. I am early for my interview with Alice, and I had thought to stop for a cup of coffee. I drove past several lakes and looked at blush-of-spring green wooded hills but I saw no coffee places the past 30 miles in this remote area. Simple clapboard houses dotted large lots, never more than three houses in a half-mile span. Alice gave me detailed directions, but I am nervous about there being no cell phone service and I’m not absolutely sure I’m sitting in the driveway of the right house. I hear no sounds but the wind and the birds, and I wonder what it would be like to live here, to make a life here. It is spring now, but I suppose the winters are harsh. The women I have been following have crafted such different lives in such varying places. I wonder how life is shaped by the presence of this natural beauty and the absence of any real town life—or, at least, any coffee shop. What sort of person will I encounter here? I am relieved when a small four-wheel drive van pulls up next to me and gives forth a stocky middle-aged woman dressed in jeans who appears to be expecting someone. Alice. She acknowledges me with a smile, invites me in, and, mercifully, offers me a cup of coffee.

Imagine four groups of young women graduating from college in 1972. They exit through different gates. One group, which I have called the Pathmakers, has used their college years to transform the high school students they were by exploring other ways of being and believing, charting some path on their own terms for their future. Another group of women, the Guardians, are not much changed by their college experience. These women have held fast to the values and goals they derived from their
families, and they plan to stay on the same course they have always followed. A third group, the Searchers, are uncertain, still unsure of how they want their lives to progress or the people they wish to be, but they are actively questioning and questing. And another group is, either merrily or despondently, moving toward the gate with little idea of where they might be headed but not troubling themselves about it. This group, the Drifters, are leaving their future to fate and circumstance.

What becomes of these women in adulthood? This is the question I have spent 35 years pursuing, tracing the evolution of their lives by interviewing them in depth every 10 years or so. I found, of course, that the women change courses and move into other groups. Nearly all the Pathmakers continue to make their own way, carrying forth the psychological strength they garnered in their college years and earlier. Some of the Searchers and Guardians and one of the Drifters eventually join the Pathmakers, facing forward in directions of their own choosing. Some of the Searchers gave up their exploration and went home again to the ways of living they came from, becoming more like the original Guardians. To my sad surprise, nearly all the Drifters continue to drift, unable to organize themselves into a purposeful and ultimately meaningful life.

My purpose, though, is not just to note these changes in path, but to track the processes of change in order to better understand how adult life unfolds for American, college-educated women. And this is a particularly fascinating group to follow because these women who graduated from college in the early 1970s are the ones who actually created the revolution in women’s place in American society. Although few of these women declared themselves to be feminists at the time, they seized the new possibilities and definitions for women created by the feminist movement. Turning their backs on the traditional roles their mothers had occupied, they were determined to create something different for themselves. By shunning cooking, dusting, and ironing as their central tasks in life, they lived out the (at the time) new vision for women by taking up work in the wider world. The choices they made over the course of their lives were personal but, taken together, had political implications. They made contributions to the social good outside the home and, at the same time, raised a generation of daughters and sons who took for granted the right to equality for women. Although often only dimly aware of the larger social forces that made opportunities for them to create lives different from their mothers, they became part of the snowballing social processes that enhanced opportunity for women. Many of them became “the first woman” within their social contexts to do things—get a judicial appointment, be on a professional credentialing board, receive a particular award. They were the generation in line when professional worlds were looking for women to take positions formerly restricted to men. They did not set out to shatter glass ceilings, yet they were the ones to do so.
Although all of these women were college seniors when I first interviewed them, and all received college degrees, what they did with them varied widely. Some eventually made headlines (and Google searches unearth lots of photos and articles); most others have led lives unknown to search engines. Because I chose them at random from women who were graduating from four different universities in 1972 and 1973, they represent a diverse range of college-educated women from disparate backgrounds. Some grew up in large cities, others in small cities, towns, and in rural areas—and there remains diversity in where they live now. Some were from well-to-do families; others put themselves through college by working while studying. Some had immigrant parents and are embedded in ethnicities that feel to them separate from the American mainstream. There is religious diversity—people who were raised as Catholics, Protestants, or Jews—although their religious affiliation and commitment has declined enough over the years that many now do not hold religious identity very important. Many were the first in their families to go to college, getting themselves there either by forming their own dream or fulfilling their parents' hopes for them. In midlife, most of them feel comfortable materially, part of the middle or upper-middle class, and most of them have a higher standard of living than their families of origin.

When I first met them when they were 21, about to take their college degrees, all envisioned the same outlines for the future. They would marry, have children, and work. But the particularities of the work they would do, the husbands they would marry, and the children they might mother remained obscure, as the future always is. I have been interested over the years in how they created these particularities and how they coped with the decisions and challenges along the way. By the time they were in their early 30s, the shape of the identities they would live out was firmer than it had been at the end of college, some of the details filled in. By their early 40s, they were actively revising what was in place—in their work, their marriages, and themselves. And now, in their mid-50s, they are reaping the fruits of the dreams they have been striving to realize in their lives. All but one of them have spent most of their lives in the work world, either in professional careers or having a series of jobs. All but one married at least once, and most, in their mid-50s, are still married to their first husband; just over half had children. They have fulfilled themselves in different ways as they have expressed their varied identities in the worlds they found and created for themselves to live in.

There is perhaps more that distinguishes these women from each other than what unites them. What they have in common is that all graduated from college in the very early 70s and have remained willing to talk to me over the course of 35 years. (Only two chose to drop out of the study between the ages of 33 and 43 and some I could no longer find.) I recognize, though, that with 26 randomly chosen women, I have obtained a wide range of lifestyles and life structures but cannot represent all possible life configurations.
I have had the extraordinary opportunity to follow these women’s lives—most of whom are very different from me and different from the women I get to know in the ordinary course of my life. In earlier books about these women, I have described the ways in which they went about forming their identities from college to their early 30s (Finding Herself) and then how they revised their identities into their early 40s (Revising Herself). In this decade, their mid-40s to mid-50s, I was eager to learn if they continued to revise their identities and, if they are no longer in search of something different for themselves, what constitutes their sense of fulfillment.

Envisioning Women

Carolyn Heilbrun’s comment in her book, Writing a Woman’s Life, made a great impression on me long ago. Commenting on how courtship, with its flaming desire and anxiety, has always been the literary plot depicted as central in a woman’s life, she wrote, “The rest is aging and regret.” It may be true that this is the literary rendition of women’s lives, but it certainly hasn’t been my life story—or the life story of other women I have known. Part of my own quest has been to create a fuller description of women’s lives, one beyond literature and certainly beyond the variables-based lifeless studies of women that my own field of psychology generally promulgates.

I have been interested in creating holistic, rich descriptions of women’s lives—of “ordinary” women’s lives—ordinary in the sense of not being victims of one thing or another, not necessarily heroic or outstandingly successful in the public world, women we neither feel obliged to pity nor to extol. These are the masses of women, and they have a psychology and developmental course as well. How do they go about creating their lives? And what else is there besides aging and regret?

The Social Contexts

Women’s lives are, of course, affected by the social world they live in. These women came of age during a time when fetters were falling. They were to be welcomed into the work world although discrimination still persisted. In that era, the early 1970s, women were actively questioning why all the household drudgery should fall to them just because they were women. They were each raised by a mother who could not escape the tyranny of traditional women’s roles, and they were clear they were not going to follow her footsteps. They noted her dissatisfaction with her life—or their mothers loudly proclaimed it as they counseled their daughters to do something different with their lives. The world they grew up in was changing and not only in terms of women’s
roles. The late ‘60s and early ‘70s were anti-authoritarian times: “Don’t trust anyone over 30” was the mantra. The war-mongering government could not be trusted; rampant racist attitudes were becoming anathema. This was the generation that would remake the world. (I know. I was part of it.) There was freedom everywhere. None of these women dressed the way their mothers thought young ladies should dress. The birth control pill, widely available since 1965, made sexual freedom possible and the insistence on virginity as a moral imperative began to seem antiquated (Roe v. Wade wasn’t until 1973). And then there were the drugs that permeated college campuses. The music—of the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger—that blared on campus spoke of states of psychedelic euphoria and of protest and political discontent. New possibilities were everywhere in the Age of Aquarius if one sought change. It was a heady, if confusing, time to be in college. Few of the women in this study were campus or political leaders, although many took part in political marches. But it was hard not to be touched by the spirit of the times, the collective desire to rectify the injustice and question the rigidities of the past.

At a more personal level, most of these women felt themselves to be bridging two worlds—the world of the families that they grew up in and the world ahead. Just in going to college they all had taken a step away from their mothers’ paths. (Only two had college-educated mothers.) Their colleges were in the East or Midwest; they studied either in large state universities or one private woman’s college. When I interviewed them as college seniors, all imagined that they would find a way to combine some sort of career with having a family—less out of ideology than from a wish to use their abilities and not to be bored. “I don’t want to just sit at home,” many told me. Most thought that they would probably marry shortly after college, work for a time, stop work to have children, and then return to work after their children were of school age. This seemed to be the generic fantasy that their generation fashioned. At age 21, however, most thought of having children as something they would definitely do, but far in the future, too far to really think about. They hadn’t yet given any concrete thought to how they would combine being mothers and career women (and, in general, neither had the larger society). They were thinking about what they would like to “do” (meaning work), being on their own for a time, financially independent and free of the pressures of school. Their dreams were to get their own apartment, a nice car, to travel perhaps. Only five of them had plans to go to graduate school immediately after college, although some thought they might seek further schooling sometime later. Their goals were largely for the short term—what they would do for the years immediately after college—leaving the rest to be decided down the road. Envisioning the “rest of their lives,” they imagined that their future would play out much like their mothers’ except that they would also work, at least for some significant part of their lives.
By 1972, it was no longer radical for women to think of having a career; the media had been saturated with the right of women to participate in the work world. There was some tipping point in the early ’70s when women could seriously think about and tell others that they planned careers without getting surprised stares. I remember being at a party with medical people in the late 1960s—I was at the time married to a medical student—and telling someone I was a PhD student, and the response was, “Well, when are you going to start having babies?” I remember being the only woman there with serious career plans; all the other women defined themselves as about-to-be-doctors’ wives and treated me as rather freakish because I had other visions for myself. Only a few years later, the social climate had completely changed, and, by the later 1970s, women who were stay-at-home-mothers found themselves having to defend their choice.

Few of the women in my study were actively involved in the women’s movement, although all were aware of it and could not but be bathed in the themes of feminist ideology. Some took up these matters at abstract philosophical or sociopolitical levels, whereas for others discussion of the issues raised by the feminists of the time emerged in questions about who should pay for dates, whether men should hold doors open for women, and whether or not they ought to do “wifely” things for their boyfriends like iron their shirts or cook their meals. Demands for full equality for women were just emerging, but the consciousness of gender-based assumptions was rising everywhere. Many of these women resisted, for example, the idea of seeing a woman doctor for fear they were somehow not “as good” as male doctors, but, at the same time, this thought made them uncomfortable. They were just beginning to question some of the gendered attitudes that were so deeply ingrained in them. The crux of the larger social debate at that time still centered around whether or not women were inferior to men. (One could still in those years say with impunity, for example, that a woman could not do this or that job because “what if she had her period?”) Many of these women still worried about surpassing their boyfriends for fear of “hurting his ego,” but most of them were working their way around to feeling that that was something “he’d have to deal with,” taking their chances on being rejected.

If there was one political idea that united them, it was the idea of choice: that people, especially women, should have the right to choose, that no one should be kept from doing what she or he wished and was able to do because of race, class, or gender. And, personally, they balked at whatever seemed to limit them. Conformity was “out” and individuality was “in.” The Human Potential movement had its effects in a prevailing ideology of self-realization. Students kept on the walls of their rooms the Fritz Perls’ poster that decorated the times, a poster that said, “I am not in this world to live up to your expectations. And you are not here to live up to mine. I am I and you are you and if we find each other it’s beautiful.”
None of these women was a crusader. None had a cause or was out personally to remake the world, although many were highly critical of the world they found themselves in. They struggled to articulate themselves with the people around them. They wanted to have friends who were loyal and compatible, and most of them did. They agonized over their relationships with men, wanting a partner and worrying over the details of real relationships—how they wanted to be treated, how they wished to be loved. As college ended, several were engaged and one was married. And many were eagerly looking for the “right person” to be a partner, hoping to marry as soon as such a person could be found. Others regarded marriage as something they would likely do later in their 20s, after they had more experience.

Overall, these women were optimistic about their future, although few could imagine even the faintest outline of how their lives might look 10 years later. Most had a dim vision of themselves as married and working and perhaps having children, but the image was shrouded in mist. At the threshold of their adulthood, they were building flexibility into their identities by leaving some options at least partially open, preparing themselves for what might come. They varied, one from another, in how they anticipated using their freedom to choose—and the differences in how they chose or didn’t choose is what I will explore in this book.

In Their 30s in the 1980s

Much of the sense of social ferment fell away when these women passed out of the college gates. The university, with its massing of peers, was no longer the social world. Leaving college, they had either to go home or situate themselves elsewhere. Where they went and the people they chose to embed themselves with constituted the first statements of the identities they would try to live out. By the time I saw these women again, in 1983, they had widely dispersed. They were now living in 14 different states and one foreign country. All but one were working in paid jobs at least part-time. While all had thought as college seniors that they would be married in 10 years, only slightly more than half had done so. Most who had married by age 33 did so in the first three years after college. A few had divorced and remarried. Although all had thought they would most likely have children by their early 30s, only 8 of the 34 I followed were mothers at this time. Half had two children already; the others had one and were planning another. If we were to speak of a pattern common to them at age 33, it would be that they were working in some occupation and either thinking about getting married or thinking about having children. But identifying a common pattern is somewhat misleading because these women were already a highly varied group who were creating very different lives. Maria was trying to care for two babies and maintain her nursing career,
Debbie was roaming the country in search of mystical experience, Donna was part of a religious cult. They had been offered choice by their social world, and they were availing themselves of it.

In part because of the times—the Reagan era—and in part because of their own life stage, these women were in an acquisitive phase of their development. In the larger culture, awareness of “hippies” had been replaced by the dominance of “yuppies,” a new word of the early ’80s. The radical voices of the 60s had been stilled in the rush for material success. In 1983, In Search of Excellence was the bestselling book, and the movie “The Big Chill” was already waxing nostalgic for the idealism of these women’s college years. People had turned inward. The women I had known as college seniors were now focused on buying, maintaining, restoring, or upgrading their housing. Concerned about “lifestyle,” a popular word of that age, they desired the material things that would give them a good life. The health consciousness of the times led them to spend more of their energy concerned about diet and more of their time on exercise. Some still smoked, drank, and occasionally got high on pot. All had found some avocation—gardening, tennis, needlepoint. Many had traveled abroad.

By 1983, when I met them for the first time after college, the image of the “superwoman” was emerging in the public mind. These women were aware that newly wrought ideals of success for educated women expected them to “do it all” and “have it all.” No longer a matter of breaking through barriers and proving that women could balance all the roles, “having it all” began to seem the mode. These women, then, had to articulate their personal life designs in this highly altered context.

Those who were not married were in search of partners while at the same time preparing themselves mentally for the possibility of life as a single person. Those who didn’t have children were struggling with the sense that time was beginning to run out and they would soon have to decide to conceive or, if they were having difficulty conceiving, adopt. (At that time, 35 was considered “old” for motherhood. The widespread phenomena of 40+-year-old first-time mothers hadn’t occurred yet.) Most still imagined that children would be somewhere in their future. Although two said that they had decided not to have children, it was with full awareness that this was a highly reversible decision.

Nearly a third of these women had gone on for further education, received post-baccalaureate degrees, and were working in law, medicine, business, or education. The rest had found employment with their bachelor’s degrees—as teachers, nurses, physical therapists, or systems analysts. Many were in the business world in various levels of administration or management. Few had plans for further education at this point in their lives, although many had taken specialized courses for certificates or credit related to their jobs. Although all of these women felt relatively settled in their jobs, most felt their
lives still very much in the process of being made. Few had higher career aspirations. Most had set limits on how much they wanted to invest in career success. As a group, these women were struggling with how to get it all in—work, family, partner, friends, exercise, hobbies, reading.

By age 33, most of these women had moved away from the religion of their childhood. They had joined the more secular cast of the larger society. Politically, they were largely uninvolved and uncommitted. Many spoke of feeling that they had grown more conservative. Economics, more than anything else, had linked them to the political world. As working adults, they were aware of what they were paying in taxes and wondered where it was going. Eschewing the idealism of their younger days, they said they had become more opposed to spending for social welfare and had come to generally dislike government. Although most of these women felt themselves to be more allied to the philosophy of the Democrats, if they could define any political conviction at all, they were more in sympathy with Republican individualist values. Some women, through their work, had become concerned about a specific political issue—educational policy, for example. Or they had come to understand where the funding for their organizations came from and recognized that this was an aspect of political decision-making. Asked to name a political issue they felt strongly about, they most commonly mentioned their support for abortion rights, but few had taken an active stand here either. In general, these women were focused on their immediate concerns and were, if anything, even less politically interested than they had been in college.

Having been out in the work world for 12 years, these women were much more attuned to issues regarding women's status than they had been in college. Most were aware of discrimination against women, and many had direct experiences of being paid less than a man doing identical work or being given less responsibility or less acknowledgment for their skills. For them, women's issues felt real rather than theoretical, but they had found no venue or organization for complaint. Many protested on an individual level if they could; many more suffered silently.

For most, college felt emotionally very far away. Few felt that college had any lasting effect on their lives, and only a few retained friends from their college years. Their feeling was that college had been a life stage, an experience, a time in which they had gained some emotional and physical independence from their parents, but, in their developing narratives of their lives, real life had begun after college.

At this point in their lives, these women had, to me, grown more distinct from one another. Whereas 10 years earlier I could discriminate them mainly in terms of their backgrounds and their aspirations, in their 30s, they distinguished themselves more in terms of what they were creating in their lives. Andrea, for example, was a doctor, married, probably not going to have children. Natalie was working as a technical writer for a corporation, hoping
to find a man to marry, intrigued by a parrot she enjoyed caring for. Helen had two children but continued her teaching career. And so on for each one. These were women who had fashioned identities for themselves, but all were still very much in process, with important decisions waiting ahead. All had built a life structure by this age, more or less tentatively. Those with children were the most settled and certain; the others by and large felt that they could revise as they wished. And most had a clearer idea of how their lives might be 10 years later than they had had in college.

In Their 40s in the 1990s

By the mid-1990s, the image of the superwoman was firmly rooted, and these women were having it all—or at least trying. By now, half of them were mothers. They worked out childcare—either by sharing it with their husbands, recruiting their mothers or aunts to help out, hiring babysitters, or finding day care centers. They didn’t sleep much, and they packed their days. They found ways to do what they wanted to do. They were busy, tired, but, at least to me, not complaining about their life structures.

In these next 10 years, Fate played more of a role than it had before. Illnesses of those they loved, infertility, economic vagaries, personnel reorganizations in their workplaces, special needs of children—these were elements that many women had to integrate into their evolving identities. At this point, my group of women was more settled, more recognizably people who knew who they were. They had grown firmer, and they felt less likely to change. The contrast between who they were outwardly at age 21 and age 33 was much greater than the shift between age 33 and 43 even though many, in their late 30s or early 40s, had changed partners or careers. Most had made subtle and internal changes in this decade as they began to understand themselves and their own needs better. Still, they were more likely to emphasize the continuity despite the changes. Interestingly, most of these women remembered our interview at age 33 but had no memory of the interviews held in college. Again, I had the strong sense that, for them, life began in earnest only after graduation as they faced forward with their hard-wrought identities. Once their identity structures had been formed, the circumstances of creating the scaffold of their identities faded from memory. At this time, I began to understand that my possessing transcripts of the earlier interviews gave me a quite different view of their development than they themselves had in retrospect. I was not surprised that they had reconstructed the past because this is what people do as they age.

In 1993, “my” women were now living in 17 states, mostly in suburbs or small towns. (Few had the highly urbanized lives that the media so often depict.) At age 43, all but three were in marriages or committed relationships,
including one who had come out as a lesbian and was living with a long-term partner. Even though many were raised in large families, the majority of the mothers had two children, and no one had more than three. Of the non-mothers married or living with long-term partners, half of these had made clear decisions not to have children. The others remained uncertain or confused over this issue, still thinking “it might happen” or “we might adopt.”

All but three of these women were employed outside their homes in their early 40s, and one of these was in graduate school. Only two, then, at midlife were full-time homemaker/mothers, and these had a variety of volunteer activities. Some women had outstanding professional success; others merely worked. Others were still casting about trying to find a career direction that suited them.

**In Their 50s in the 2000s**

When I found them again in their mid-50s, nearly all of these women were living in the same place they were 12 years previously, and few had made major changes in the central investments in their lives. The period from their early 40s to their mid-50s were the Bush years, but one wouldn’t know that by listening to my interviews with these women. If they were engaged with the larger sociopolitical context, it was mainly in terms of how it affected their children. In comparison to the values they had been raised with, everyone had become more sexually liberal in terms of standards they might impart to their children, but the threat of AIDS loomed as something to worry about in their children’s sexual behavior. If people had political passions, it was usually over local issues that engaged them or environmental concerns. They kept up with the news, but neither national nor international issues seemed to them to affect their lives directly. It was now a post-9/11 world, yet life went on. (No one mentioned it.)

Most of them had been having conversations, at least with themselves, about when they might retire, so the end of their occupational lives seemed to loom on the horizon, requiring a decision in the foreseeable future. For some, the pension structure dictated how long they would work, and the pacing of their husband’s career was also something to take into account. Some of these women still had teenagers living at home, but most had seen their children off to college or into adult lives of their own. Most still had living parents. Some of these women had had health challenges in the intervening years, but none that necessitated that she change how she was living her life.

In terms of women’s issues, the struggles seemed to them now to have been over long ago (except for vigilance about abortion rights, which was important to many of them). It seemed, by 2004, taken for granted that women could do what men could do and that men should be taking up a share of the
housework (most of their husbands did). Most had not considered themselves feminists at any time in their lives, although nearly all remain passionately committed to the idea of equality and choice for women and tried to send their own children off into the world with a bedrock assumption about gender equality.

By age 43, most had acquired the things of life they felt they needed, and the majority said that they were financially secure. In their mid-50s, some worried about having saved enough for retirement but were otherwise uninterested in further material gain.

What continues to unite these women as a group is their common belief in choice. They bristle at the idea of coercion of any sort. People, they believe, especially women, ought to be free to choose their own way on their own terms. They eschew categorical statements, remain staunch in their refusal to impose their values on anyone else. These women live lives they chose, having taken advantage of the new freedoms to have a career or not, to marry or not, to have children or not. They made their own decisions about what it means to be a woman in this world. This book examines how they came to the choices they made, how they revised them along the way and what, for them, in late midlife, creates and signifies fulfillment.

The Research Project

How strange it must have seemed to these young women, back in 1972, when they received a phone call from me asking them to come and talk to me about their lives. Back in those days, before all the concerns about privacy in universities, I was allowed to go through student lists and randomly select people for my study. I thumbed through cards (no computers then) and pulled out every 25th or 50th name. Hearing that I was studying women and that women had not been given much attention in psychology intrigued them—and I offered them each $10 for taking part, which was a nice bonus for college students at the time. Women’s issues were gaining momentum on college campuses, and everyone was aware that a sea change was occurring in possibilities for women, so my project made sense to them.

They came to meet me with curiosity and some worry about who I was and what I would ask of them. But when they found me, just a few years older than they were, friendly and interested in them, most settled into the conversation. At the time, I could easily identify with each of them, and we were both highly engaged in the interview. Even then, these young women told me that they had shared things with me that they had never told anyone else. I was a “stranger on a train,” and I seem to have remained so over the years.

I wrote about them, after disguising them fully, in my dissertation and in a published monograph which, some years later when I was a college professor,
my students read. My students were captivated by the detailed cases and demanded that I tell them what became of these women. I had, of course, no idea. It was my students at Towson University, in 1983, who did the detective work to try to find these women again—and we succeeded in finding 34 of them who were willing to participate. (Women still routinely changed their last names when they married at that time, so, for those with very common last names, it was almost impossible to locate their relatives and thereby find them.) The group, now 33 years old, had spread geographically—across the United States and as far away as Italy. I was able to interview many in person. Others filled out lengthy open-ended questionnaires or recorded a tape in response to questions, both of which I could follow up with phone calls. At that time, I was more careful about thinking ahead to how I could find them in the future, and I easily located 30 of these 43-year-olds in the early ’90s. At that point, I was teaching at Harvard and my graduate students did some of the interviewing, although I interviewed many myself. Again I relied on questionnaires, tapes, and phone calls for those I couldn’t get to in person.

For this last round of interviews with women now in their mid-50s, I was determined to meet with each one in person. That took a long time, and I traveled all across the United States. Except for a few interviews I did belatedly through a video call8 and one interview done by one of my Fielding University graduate students who lives in the same town as one of my participants, I managed to sit down with each of these women for at least 3 hours and hear about the development of her life since we were last in contact. It was important for me to see each woman in her own setting, to drive on the roads she travels, to sit in her house. A house, a setting, says a lot about who a woman is and what she has created as her nest. In some cases, we met in her office—or, as a last resort, in my hotel room if her home was not available for private talk.

Over the years, as I have talked about this study, many people have suspected that being in the study has strongly affected these women and that their participation therefore colors the lives I hear about. I don’t believe this is so. When I called each woman to arrange an interview, there would usually be a brief pause when I said my name and then memory of who I am would click into place. “Oh, are you still doing this?” was the usual surprised, but warm, response. After Revising Herself was published in 1996, I had offered to send each woman a copy. This was a bit complicated by the fact that simply receiving this book in the mail could compromise confidentiality (i.e., “Why is someone sending you this book?” asked by a spouse or child), so not everyone asked for it. I didn’t know who had read the book and who had not. So I began the interview by asking women about their experiences of being in the study, how it has affected them (if at all), and particularly if they read Revising Herself and had reactions they wished to share. Most acknowledged somewhat sheepishly that they didn’t
remember the book or even if they had read it or, if they had read it, what it said—as though I were a teacher asking for their homework. Some said, “Oh, I meant to read it before we talked, but I didn’t find time.” Only a few were interested enough in the study (or in what I had to say about them) to have engaged with the meaning I make of their lives. They are occupied with their own meanings. Most did not remember the content of the prior interviews, but they did remember that they had liked talking to me. When I arrived, they all greeted me exceptionally warmly, as though I were a long lost friend, which is rather how I felt toward them. (For them, I appear for 3 hours or so every 10–12 years and then vanish. For me, they are an ongoing occupation as I spend hundreds of hours poring over their lives.) When I mentioned that some people asked me whether being in the study affected their lives, they laughed at the idea that they would make life decisions based on being in my study.

The mid-50s interview was the most unstructured of all. I asked them to “bring me up to date on the years since I last talked to you.” I thought that listening to them talk about what was most on their minds would give me the best clues as to how their identities evolved, and I was ready to ask about areas of life (work, relationships, health, political and religious views, etc.) that they may have omitted.

The narratives these women produced varied enormously. It was always interesting and important to note where they began their story because this reflected what was most central as they presented themselves to me anew. From there, their narration of the years went in various directions. Some women had many elements that mattered to them that they wanted to tell me about. There were some who got stuck in a particular preoccupation—a current worry about a child, for example—and everything seemed to circle back to that. As in the prior interview, I asked them for an outline of their whole life, organized into chapters, because I wanted to see how this changed over the years. Most of my participants had less interest in talking about this than about the present and more recent past. The distant past was clearly not something that they thought much about; the long story of how they got to where they are now seemed to them to carry less psychological weight than the short story that started more recently.

By and large and with some exceptions, these women are not very prone to self-reflection or pondering their own development. Mostly, they face forward rather than inward. They are not psychologists, and they don’t think the way I do, always wanting to know how and why people are the way they are. Yet I think they enjoy the “stranger on the train” phenomenon, the chance to talk to an empathic, interested, nonjudgmental stranger who feels that their lives are worth chronicling. Some who have been in therapy told me that talking to me feels like talking to their therapist, although we both understand that I will say nothing therapist-like. But I am a therapist, and I listen like one.
Everyone seemed to trust that I can disguise them well enough so that no one can recognize them, but, of course, people can recognize themselves. I warned everyone that if they tell someone close to them that they are in the study, then they might be recognized. If I were to disguise that deeply, I would be distorting—and my topic is identity. Some have evidently shared my portraits of themselves with their husbands, but most keep the whole experience private.\textsuperscript{11}

At the same time, I am well aware that it is impossible to depict another woman fully or to capture all the important aspects of her existence in terms that she would use. One cannot faithfully photograph the inner world. The portraits of these women I present are very much my renditions, based on what they have told me but organized through my own perspectives. I witness these lives through my own sensibilities as an upper middle class, Jewish professor, psychotherapist, wife, mother, (and recently) grandmother. I live an international life because my husband is Israeli, and I travel a great deal, doing work in several countries, but I feel profoundly American. I have always been passionate about my work, and my professional projects are an important part of my identity. My colleagues and friends, as well as my family, nourish me and are central to who I am.

I try not to judge the people I write about, and I am transparent about the observations and reactions that are mine rather than my participant’s. I think I have discovered some truths about each of the women I have followed, but never the whole truth—as Debbie, one of the women you will meet, vociferously pointed out to me. I hope it is “truth” enough to enlighten us about the different life paths that these educated women follow.

\textbf{Identity}

I have been tracking identity formation in women—but identity is not something that one can describe directly. First of all, identity is a conceptual idea that refers to the integration of a felt sense of continuity as a person and aspects of one’s place in the world that one has chosen or been given by others. So how could I have these women tell me about their identities? The lead-off question I chose at the very beginning of the study in 1972 was “If there is someone you wanted to know you, what sorts of things would you tell about yourself?” Their answers to this question were my first important insights into women’s identity—but I didn’t know it at the time. Most of them said something like, “I’d tell them about my friends and the people who are important to me.” This is not the answer I was hoping for. I wanted to hear about what I then thought was real identity—their occupational and ideological commitments. This is what Erikson had theorized identity was about. In 1972, with the Women’s Movement clamoring for
equal opportunity in the world for women, I certainly didn’t want to find out that women’s identity was rooted in the people in their lives. But now, after following these women and studying women’s identity for 44 years, I have come to understand their response differently. Indeed, most women’s identity is grounded in relationship to others, but I have a much broader understanding of what relationship means and how identity is bound to these relationships.

From the very beginning, then, these women have been teaching me about how identity is formed and how it unfolds. I have been understanding these lessons in the context of the work of Erik Erikson. When I began this study back in the late 1960s, I was firmly allied with Erikson as a theorist because his concept of identity seemed to me to be central to psychological life as I experienced and understood it. Identity marks who we are in the world and links our inner self to our outer world. But Erikson never pinned down his concept of identity into some concrete, definable terms; rather, he depicted it through case studies and intensive psychobiographies that demonstrated both what identity might be and how it functions in a life. All of his case studies and biographies, however, concerned men—and that distressed me. Women, I was certain, formed and lived out identities, but differently from men. My project was to investigate how identity was created and revised over time in women.

Identity is both a psychological structure and a set of contents within that structure. As an internal structure, identity is the integration of all the important elements of the person we are in the world, from the most public to the mainly private. As Erikson developed his concept of identity, he stressed its synthetic function—identity putting together in some unique combination the elements of who we are. Identity subsumes identifications, talents, roles, goals, psychological defenses, biological necessities, emotional responsiveness, and accidents of personal history, and it bridges these sometimes contradictory elements into some larger pattern. Identity, once formed, is the ineffable internal structure that directs the actualization of goals and values. It is a sense of who we are.

Another function of the identity structure is to preserve a sense of continuity over the life course. We trust that we will wake up today as the same person we were yesterday. Many people, after a great loss, report waking up feeling that they don’t know who they are—once the reality of the loss comes back to them. Barring such experiences, we generally take for granted that our lives and selves are continuous.

The achievement of the identity stage is a sense of what Erikson calls “fidelity,” that is, faithfulness to certain commitments and the abrogation of other possibilities. Identity choice always involves giving up some potentialities in favor of others. I chose an academic life rather than a career in business, and my fidelity to intellectual values makes me wary of the mercantilism seeping
into the academy. This is an example of my own fidelity to certain values and of how my identity as a professor goes beyond the name of my role.

Change in identity structure reflects change in how one comes to respond to or evaluate input from the world about one's psychosocial identity. This is the experience of “I have changed as a person.” We may recognize that we now have different goals, different values, or different ways of positioning ourselves in the world. An open and flexible structure is receptive to alternative views of the self and might try to integrate them. A rigid, closed structure will screen out discrepant responses with vehement denial, closing off possibilities for an enlarged view of the self. An example: A manager considers herself empathic and caring of her employees. If her identity structure is flexible, she will be able to consider feedback about times when she has been harsh, acknowledge that she might have impatient aspects to herself—and perhaps modify her behavior. If her identity structure is rigid, she will just become angry and blame others for misunderstanding her. If her identity structure is unintegrated, she will merely try to adopt whatever behavior is acceptable in this workplace (“I'll do whatever is required with no implication for who I am as a person”). This is but one small example of how the flexibility of the identity structure has consequences in even the daily experience of the world.

We can also look at identity in psychosocial terms, as a set of contents. In this sense, identity is a location in a personal universe. Identity marks our place in ongoing narratives that are larger than we are, mapping where we fit in the overall scheme of things. Depending on the context, different aspects of our identity are salient. When I am working in China, I am taken in by the people I meet there as a “Westerner.” I had never thought of myself in this way before—as an American, certainly, but not as a “Westerner.” It took me a while to understand that most Chinese don’t differentiate Western people. It isn’t meaningful to them whether I come from the United States or Norway—much as Americans often don’t differentiate Asian nationalities. If I am among psychologists, it becomes mandatory to announce what kind of psychologist I am or what theoretical paradigms I am allied with, if I have a clinical practice or not and, if so, who I see. If I am traveling and meet someone from Baltimore, they want to know which neighborhood I reside in. All of these elements mark something about me; they locate me in the larger scheme of things relevant to the person with whom I am interacting. They place me in a world of meanings. One of the women I interviewed found it disconcerting that I did not immediately know the significance of her living in Huntsville rather than the neighboring town of Monroe because the people she usually associates with simply know how people from Huntsville differ from Monrovians. While the differences were difficult for her to detail for me, whatever they were explained why it was unthinkable for her to take a job she had been offered in Monroe. In her world, her decision made perfect sense, but it was hard to move her knowledge into my context without explaining
to me subtle differences that were important for how she locates herself in her world.

Everyone builds a personal universe in which meanings are apparent and anchor identity, and people depend on that identity being recognizable and articulated with others who have shared meanings. Some aspects of identity are ascribed as people learn over time how others view them, always in the terms salient in that social sphere. Much of adolescence is focused on discovering how one can be seen by others—as smart, pretty, or funny, for example. These attributions can be painful when they seem to be fixedly other than we wish to be. As we will see in some of the cases, being labeled as a “fat child” can persist as part of identity even long after the woman has become thin.

Identity, then, has many moving parts. It melds multiple aspects of the inner sense of self with the ways in which one is viewed and recognized by one’s social world, maintaining some consistency over time. Identity, Erikson said, is the integrator that moves one toward wholeness. In my kaleidoscope metaphor, identity is the overall pattern that results from the arrangement of the elements.

In the modern world, with its many freedoms, coherence of identity is no longer assured by the defining force of collective identities. Integration of one’s identities into an identity therefore becomes the task of the individual. Identity construction involves, among other things, locating oneself, through choice, in an array of communities—nation, class, sex, family, professional guilds, or even imagined communities. Whole identities are not available “off the shelf,” so to speak. Creating an identity, then, is a process continually open to change.

Erikson located the “crisis” in identity in late adolescence, a time when developing internal needs for independence from the family of childhood meshes with the social demands for choosing ways of being in the world. Young people of this age leave the rhythms of familiarity that constitute home, and the college environment offers a panoply of other possibilities. Erikson noted that complex societies make available what he called a “moratorium” period in which young people are given a time-out to try on possibilities without the social world taking their choices too seriously. College environments are ideally suited for such a moratorium period. College students are given license to experiment—with different fields of study, with different groups of friends, with different political stances, with different ways of conducting relationships, and with sometimes extreme behavior. Students are exposed to ways of being and thinking that challenge what had been taken for granted. The social world broadens to include different subgroups of people than had been available before, increasing the possibilities of finding acceptance that may not have been offered earlier. Some people can insulate themselves from being too much in contact with what is new, either by seeking out like-minded others or simply keeping largely to themselves. Others actively explore, reaching