

## ONE

## What's Happening to Me?

“What are those things under my eyes?” I wailed, peering into the bathroom mirror.

“Festoons,” Jim, my doctor-husband, pronounced matter-of-factly. Holding his razor in mid-air like a baton, he continued, “That’s the medical term for those bags under your eyes. They happen to women your age.”

“How sweet of you,” I muttered, stalking out and leaving him in his early morning humor.

Waking up and finding bags under my eyes no longer shocks me. I’ve learned to live with it. I also take seriously a bit of advice from an aging movie star—sleep sitting upright or, failing that, on your back with at least two pillows. When I forget and sleep on my side, in the morning I discover that my face needs ironing.

Of course other clues tell me something is happening to me. But like most emotionally healthy women, I try to ignore them. I’m amazed at how grown up my children look. They’re clearly too old to be mine! Something is wrong with my friends as well—they seem to be aging prematurely. And even though my husband is ten years older than me, it scares me when he utters words like *retirement* and *home all day*.

Help! What’s going on?

Actually, I know what’s happening. I’m in the muddled middle years. I have joined the ranks of millions of forty- and fifty- something women who respond to aging by cunningly disguising gravity – prone figures and slathering on anti-wrinkle creams, enjoying a state of denial for as long as possible.

Recognize yourself here?

If you do, you are likely in what I call the reluctant passage, a season of life few women, if any, enter willingly.

When does this season begin? There’s no particular birthday that, when reached, uniformly plunges a woman into mid-life. We’re as individual as our DNA. Most of us, however, sense changes taking place any time from our late thirties to mid-forties.

Not long after I noticed these beginning signs, I frequently found myself deeply absorbed in thought, staring out of windows, or gazing at blank walls. Often I’d drive without noticing where I was going, brooding about my life. *Had I made wise choices? Had I put God and my family first? Was I someone who could be useful in the years ahead?* The answers depended largely on my mood.

In my mind I peered cautiously at what lay ahead, sensing the beginning of a long journey across a pivotal life-bridge. I couldn’t imagine myself or anyone else my age crossing this bridge with giant, eager

strides. Instead, I imagined myself leaving youth's familiar territory and cautiously moving forward in a step-by-step exploration of the unknown.

The forties and fifties are a major turning point in life, taking us from the old age of youth into the youth of old age. We can't dig in our heels and say, "I'm not crossing over!" Nor can we detour around this part of the journey. We can, however choose what attitude we will have about it.

## **Cringing at the Thought**

Most of us cringe at the thought of entering mid-life. At least I did. We laugh at "over the hill" and "mid-life" jokes, so long as they are aimed at someone else. But we bristle when anyone implies we might be in any sort of crisis.

As we set foot on the *reluctant passage*, we wonder if our marriage will hold together or if our children will stay in touch. Out-dated stereotypes like "menopause makes you crazy," "life is over at forty," and "dress to suit your age" (why don't they just go ahead and say "dowdy?") flash through our minds, causing fear and dread.

Thinking about the future can be fraught with questions: Will I be lonely? What about the dreams I still harbor—are they forever out of reach? Am I going to feel aimless—even useless? In the throes of these dark thoughts, aided by my bent for the dramatic, I began to visualize aging as a prelude to *decay* and *dependence*, ending in death. My overactive imagination left no room for God's promise to never leave us—to never leave *me*.

After a time of wallowing in the midst of the blues, I decided to look at the truth. Although an increasing number of marriages break up on the rocks of mid-life, the majority stay together. Most children love their parents, despite occasional hot words to the contrary. They also keep in touch, though less often than we'd like.

Nor does life have to be lonely or aimless. By shedding outdated stereotypes of what you can and can't do in mid-life and daring to act in your dreams, the years ahead can be the richest you've known. As for decay, dependence and death, the key to fulfilling years ahead lies in exchanging a mentality of doom and gloom for a spirit of hopefulness. Take care of your body, deepen your dependence on God, and don't die before your actual date of decease.

Instead of cringing at the thought of being in the reluctant passage, boldly grasp your identity as a more mature, improved model of your younger self. True, the packaging is slightly wrinkled and maybe a bit lumpy, but what does that matter?

Well, let's be truthful. For some of us, it matters a great deal.

## **Accepting a New Identity**

Because of the age difference between my husband and me, I've lived a long time with the illusion of being prematurely young. When we went to parties or social events with people Jim's age, I always felt like the young wife of the older man. Much as I wanted to hold on to my illusion, I've had to admit the truth. Being a "young wife" had become a figment of my imagination.

Letting go of my youthful identity and coming to grips with one less valued by our culture—"middle-aged wife"—didn't happen quickly or easily. Watching the effect that slim, alluring, eyelash-batting women twenty years my junior had on men, though brought reality home. I realized few women my age could hope to have the same impact. Musing about growing older I began to wonder, *Maybe building a sense of identity based on inner beauty would make aging easier to accept...*

Mid-life transition takes time. Driving across a bridge from the United States into Canada is an instant transition from one county to another. Moving from one perception of self to another is a slow process. For a while our eyes keep straying to life's rearview mirror. We are gripped by a sense of loss and a longing to go back in time.

Moving through this passage, strange and wild ideas came to me like getting pregnant again. I thought a lot about the joys of having a chubby little baby cooing away in its crib. This image had powerful appeal until I thought of my adult children gasping, "Your're WHAT?"

It's alright to look back and allow ourselves to experience feelings of loss, but eventually we have to look ahead or else miss the adventure God has waiting for us.

For some women, awareness and acceptance of the mid-life transition is like traversing gently rolling hills that gradually take us into an exciting new land. Some find the journey uncomfortable but manageable. Others feel like travelers trying to scale formidable mountains. As they face changes in status, roles, health, or finances, each step brings a new crisis.

## **Growing Through Crisis**

My friend Becky saw her shaky twenty-eight year marriage collapse when her oldest son married. He had been her emotional prop. After her husband divorced her, Becky careened from one catastrophe to another. She became a single mother with no money. Her deep hurts were made more painful by divided loyalties among her children and the loss of former friends. Her pastor told her to stop teaching Sunday school and to stop singing in the choir. Becky survived these disastrous years by turning to God for help in her battle with hurt and resentment. Today she is discovering His fresh path for her life.

With God's help, crisis and change act like fertilizer—like growth granules. Sprinkled on the ground of our mid-life years, they spur us to grow and blossom into the person God knows we can become.

Whatever the impact of our daily struggles, we confront numerous changes in this season of life. We also plunge into a wide-ranging assessment of our lives. We emerge, eventually, on the threshold of new horizons.

## **Face to Face with Change**

### **Your Body . . . What's next?**

After age forty, my body seemed to take fiendish delight in presenting me with new problems on a regular basis. A line from an old hymn, "Change and decay in all around I see . . ." became not a theological statement but daily reality.

Most obviously, mid-life brings physical changes. In the middle years, we not only go through menopause but our susceptibility to illness such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer climbs. Seeing early signs of what could lie ahead. I've stopped lying in bed idly looking at my cross-country ski machine standing two steps away. For years I had asked myself if I felt like exercising. My answer was always no. Now, whether I feel like it or not, I haul myself out of bed and daily (well, almost daily) huff and puff my way to better health. (My slimmer hips are a great incentive too.)

### **Your Memory**

Some days you're sure your mind has lost a few computer chips. Don't worry. This is normal. Not only is your body changing, but, it seems, so is your mind.

Not long ago, I was late for a meeting and hurriedly backed the car out the driveway. Suddenly I thought, *Did I brush my teeth?* I couldn't remember! I quickly set the brake, dashed into the house, and brushed my teeth—just in case. And then I wondered, *What is happening to me?*

Walking into a room and wondering why I'm there or staring into the refrigerator and trying to remember what I'm looking for is all part of the package. All my best friends do it. So is swallowing a pill and five minutes later asking myself, *Did I or didn't I?*

### **Your Emotions**

Your emotions are also apt to misbehave. Instead of sensibly taking orders from your brain, they decide to run wild and be uncooperative, like some petulant child.

Battling “the blues” is common. So is wondering *What is the matter with me?* because you cry at the least provocation. Your family is probably as baffled as you are by your emotional ups and downs. Be patient with yourself. Emotional swings are part of the muddled middle years.

## **Your Children**

As if the changes you are experiencing aren't enough, your family is also changing. Your delightful little boy is now a strapping six-footer, hand extended for cash and stomach growling for food like a bear of hibernation. When you weren't looking, the little girl you tearfully waved off to college may have boomeranged back and be cozily curled up in her old room.

Now, instead of confidently issuing time-honored “Mom” commands, you have to swallow what's on the tip of your tongue. Yes you are their parent, but time has marched on. Whether their behavior affirms it or not, they are now adults.

## **Your Parents**

With our parents living longer than ever before, long-distance conferences between siblings about what to do for Mom and Dad is a reality for many. So is criss-crossing the country racking up frequent flyer miles to give support, get the old homestead ready for sale, figure out finances, and persuade them to move into a safe environment.

Watching their decline and sensing the inevitable loss can be a wrenching part of the middle years. But by choosing to lovingly parent our parents, we have a special opportunity to return their devotion.

## **Your Marriage**

If you are married, your perception of your spouse can also undergo a radical change. Some enchanted evening, you will look across your living room and see a stranger. Actually, it's the man you married. Out of nowhere the question will pop into your mind, *What happened to that amorous man I married? Who is this aging male snoring in the recliner?*

At the same time your husband probably looks at you when he's in more of a pensive mood and wonders, *What happened to her? Where is that cute little thing I married?* This, too, is normal.

## **Your View of Yourself**

The most far-reaching changes are taking place in the unseen chambers of our minds. There, a slow yet unstoppable transformation occurs in our self-perception, erupting in questions that tumble out on top of one another in a demanding frenzy:

- Who am I now that I've grown up?
- What do I want to do with the rest of my life?
- Is it all downhill from here?
- How do I find meaning and purpose in the years ahead?

As both outer and inner changes carry us along, we plunge into the turbulent waters of assessing all we previously took for granted.