We Contain Multitudes: Our Many Roles, Many Selves

Manager, professional, mentor, mother, wife, volunteer, artist, friend, athlete. Never before have there been so many demands on women to excel in so many domains of life, so many opportunities for self-expression and success, for disappointment and frustration. Our sense of self is nuanced, intricate, and rich. We derive our feelings of satisfaction from multiple roles.

Freud famously said: “Love and work are the cornerstone of our humanness.” If we augment “love” to include our friends and our passions and “work” to include paid and unpaid activity, this is all that matters. These are the issues we are particularly likely to reflect on at midlife, a time of significant opportunities and challenges when we take stock and ask, “What next?” and “How can I feel better about my life?” and reevaluate our priorities.
We have so many needs and desires. In my career/life-planning workshops with managers and professionals, I am always aware of the different ways in which men and women identify and rank their values. The most striking difference is not in the values themselves or how they are ranked, although there are differences, but in how the lists are completed. The men finish the exercise in a few minutes and move on to the next question. The women write the list. Then they erase it. Then they do it again. Disaster! Children aren't at the top of the list! Guilt! Erase! Erase!

We want it all. We need it all to have a sense of a fulfilling life. We all have unique needs, but we also have a lot in common. Each of our roles provides opportunities for a deep sense of satisfaction that supports important values and desires. Each also opens us up to disappointment and sadness. What mother is not deeply, viscerally wounded when her child tells her she hates her? What professional is not furious when her male boss tells her she is not a good team player or that she needs to toughen up? What woman is not exasperated that she has to choose between the great career and the great family life?

We wear our hearts on our sleeves. We are tender but can be tough. We lead interior lives, always on a quest, always asking, Is this all there is, is this how life should be, am I doing this right, should I make a change, is everyone in my care happy, how do I compare with others in my situation?

We use subtle vocabulary to describe our emotions. We are explorers of an emotional terrain quite foreign to the land of doing, acting, and achieving. The one thing we can't do is segment our lives. If we are deliciously happy in one area, we are full of lightness. If we are hurt in one area, it spills over and colors everything else. A sharp word from a friend. A child's rejection or failure. A boss's criticism. A partner's ennui. Don't take it personally, we are told. But we do. We may get angry at our environment momentarily, but finally we ruminate: What did I do wrong? What could I have done
differently? And we blame ourselves. “If I was smarter or tougher or a better partner or parent or professional, this wouldn’t have happened, or I would be better able to cope,” we tell ourselves.

Who are we? We are midlife women who have been doing what we’re doing long enough to know a few things about life and work. We are experienced enough to have perspective on ourselves, our work, and our relationships. We can be bitchy. We are sick of engaging in male-pleasing behaviors. We are sick of pretending we are good girls. We are sick of putting others’ needs first.

We are also nosy. Very nosy. Am I thinking and feeling similar things to other women? Are they doing something I can do? This curiosity gives us insight into our own experiences and what we can do differently. It is how women learn.

We compare ourselves to others in all life arenas. We used to ask: “How did you do on the test?” Now we ask: “How are you doing at work?” “How are you doing as a mother?” “How are you doing as a partner?” “How do you feel about X, Y, Z?” In this way we can answer the critical questions: “Am I doing OK?” “Are my feelings—whether positive or negative—normal?” Social psychologists call this phenomenon social comparison.

Women Confidential will give you the inside scoop and allow you to check your experiences and feelings against the lives of women who have grappled with the same questions, insecurities, thoughts, and challenges, and overcome them. It provides no-holds-barred career and life intelligence on what women need to know and do in order to feel good about themselves. It provides a psychological framework for women to understand and reshape their lives, make good decisions, and move forward with grace.

We are all in different places. Some of us have a degree of financial independence. Most of us do not. Some of us have a household full of kids, some are empty nesters, some are childless. While some of us are happy, many of us are struggling. We are tired, lonely, unhappy at work, irritated with our partners, worried about our
kids, or disappointed with how our lives have turned out so far. As
the pampered baby-boom generation, we thought we could have it
all. Some of us feel that all we got were the dregs; most of us feel
that what we got was something in between.

What We Want Now

The second half of our lives presents us with unique challenges and
opportunities. We have been busy. By now we have fallen in and out
of love, been married, had babies, been divorced, made friends, lost
friends, worked for bad bosses, made career changes, suffered heart-
break, and experienced loneliness and bereavement. All of our life
experiences have left their mark and shaped us. They have given us
strength and perspective. They have left us asking questions. They
have left some of us reeling from good fortune, others reeling from
twists and turns less kind.

This is a time for asking ourselves what we really want. The
answer depends on our situation, talents, and needs. Some of us
want to feel contentment. Others want to ignite passion. Some of
us want to test ourselves in new and inventive ways. Others want
to reconnect with earlier career themes and return to the path not
taken. The stories and voices in Women Confidential will show how
others have coped with their own twists and turns.

We are each different in terms of what we need from our work,
whether we are looking to contribute to something important,
seeking collegiality or to hone professional skills, or simply wanting
to make enough money to have a rich life outside of work. But
although we are all different, at our core we are all finally looking
for the same thing, and that is to be able to express ourselves in our
work— paid or unpaid— and in our personal lives. Our work should
make us feel good about ourselves because it is in tune with deeply
held values and speaks to us at an emotional or intellectual level. And it should still allow time for a life.

In our personal lives we want to be able to express ourselves in our totality, whether by giving back to the community or by applying our creative side. We are also reevaluating our relationships, becoming more selective about our friends, and more accepting—or demanding—of our partner, if we have one.

Many of us have unfinished business. We worry that we are becoming our mothers, mothers whom in some cases we are ambivalent toward, or worse, angry at. Or we regret never having developed a closer relationship with deceased parents. Or we are trying to finally accept our parents.

It is now that we deal with unresolved issues in our work and personal lives, reclaim disowned parts of ourselves—ambitions left unfulfilled, dreams unsatisfied—and give expression to entrepreneurial or creative impulses we have too long denied. As one client, a forty-one-year-old magazine publisher, said, “I’m feverish with all the possibilities.” This is also the time when we start to think about what kind of legacy we want to leave behind.

But there is also our inner bitch that yearns to be heard, silenced for many until midlife. As a forty-eight-year-old friend of mine said, or rather, ranted, “Is it too much to ask for it to be my time now? For my husband to think about what needs to be done around the house without my telling him? For my son to not act like I’m a piece of crap? For my boss to recognize I’m not his personal productivity machine? For my friends to stop being so needy?”

Another friend, a home-based consultant who describes herself as “Mary Poppins nice,” complained about her husband’s plans for self-employment after he lost his job at a large corporation. “I know. I know. I’m supposed to be supportive. But OK, I’m territorial, and I don’t want him hanging around the house. And I’m pissed
because now I have to make even more money and work even harder. Why can't he just be a normal guy and just find another job? Why should he be happy? He should just eat it like I did. I sound like a bitch. But I'm fifty and tired of being nice.”

By midlife, whether we began adulthood as good or bad girls, we have become almost good girls. We have a polite, agreeable exterior. But we tell our friends the awful bitchy truths.

Almost Good Girls

When you were in high school and university, were you a “good” girl or a “bad” girl?

Now let's try again. Were you a “good” girl, “bad” girl, or an “almost good” girl?

My guess is that you answered “almost good” girl.

Why do I know that? Because you are restless and seeking more in some aspect of your life. You are prepared to deal with the big questions; you may even be pissed off about some things.

Let's parse it.

Good girl: In high school, she wore the kind of clothes that led your mother to ask you all the time why you didn’t dress more like Susan. She consistently did the “right” thing, as defined by authority or society. She engaged in appropriate adult- and society-pleasing behaviors so that she got a good education, which enabled her to get a good job, and gave her lots of resume-enhancing experiences. Now, she lives around the corner from her parents and has them over for Sunday dinner at her perfect house. She cooks an elegant five-course meal. She also has perfect kids— or so she says. They volunteer, clean their rooms, get great marks, and are always polite. She works out, eats sensibly, doesn’t drink, loves her job, and spends buckets of quality time with her family. If she’s married, she describes her husband as “supportive.” If she’s divorced, she hung in there
well beyond when she should have. There is also a good chance that
she is depressed, is taking prescription drugs, and is barely holding
it all together.

She may now be rebelling and becoming an almost good girl.

**Bad girl**: When she was younger, she made bad choices, the
kind of choices that did not give her the underpinnings at midlife to
see her life as full of possibility. She came to class with hickeys
(when she wasn’t skipping school), had a boyfriend with a motor-
cycle, and was notoriously “easy.” Opportunities were either never
available or were rejected. Authority and status quo were anathema—
she would do anything to shake things up. She rebelled against
everything and trusted no one.

She may have returned to school or in some way pulled her life
together so she now has choices and is, in fact, an almost good girl.

**Almost good girl**: In high school, she got good or even great
marks, was involved in extracurricular activities, was respectful (sort
of) of adults, had sex (hopefully wild) in her parents’ house, and
generally walked close enough to the dark side to know it was dan-
gerous. She avoided the bad boys or at least got out of bad situations
fast enough to keep her self-esteem intact. She took risks, asked
some penetrating questions, was irreverent, did some dumb things
(though not without a safety net). She knew how to project outward
conformity but never held back from telling her friends the tough
truths. She still does.

She didn’t fit in totally with the good girls or the bad girls but
was never rejected by either. Now, she has the ability to fit in almost
everywhere, if never completely. She refuses to accept received
wisdom and increasingly challenges herself: Am I happy? Is there
more? Can I be more? What about me?

It doesn’t matter how you get to this place in your life—as a
good girl rebelling, a bad girl reformed, or an almost good girl
grown up. What matters is that we are reaching this point and
moving on together.
Moving Forward with Grace

The challenge of the first half of our lives is to make our way in the world: to demonstrate our competence, to test ourselves against others, to get feedback from the world about what we are and are not good at. This externally driven phase often involves dealing with petty bosses, putting up with less than fully satisfying work, kowtowing to the needs of high-maintenance friends, repressing important parts of our personality, or putting our partner's needs before our own.

In the second half of life, the midlife years, we are internally driven. We should have a sense of who we are, both our strengths and our weaknesses. And yes, I'll call them weaknesses—they are a part of us; we should accept them, and refuse to think of them in silly corporate euphemisms such as “areas for development.” How do we know this about ourselves? Well, for one thing, we've been through enough performance appraisals, whether literally from bosses and clients, or metaphorically from friends and family, to know what they are.

Accepting our limitations and disappointments means we don't beat ourselves up for being less than perfect. It means we can move ahead rather than endlessly revisiting the past, decrying slights and instances of injustice in an endless, negative feedback loop. We see expressing all our complex needs and desires as a right, not a privilege, or as my friend said, an “irresistible” pull. If we fail to focus on what we really want and care about now independently of the “shoulds” of the past, then we continue to play out old scripts, scripts about what we should do, how we should behave, what we should be happy with. Or as Carl Jung said, we walk “in shoes too small.”

It is time to celebrate our achievements, which are many. We have fought the wars at work, we have raised children, and hopefully done a few interesting things in our lives. Remember, we have been very, very busy.
We Still Have a Lot to Worry About

To a large extent women have always dealt with the challenges of balancing work and family. What is new, though, is the complexity of these challenges. Parents have always become ill and needed help. But now women are caring for them while working for demanding employers, scrambling to get more business in the door, and continuing to look after the kids. And many of us are doing it alone.

As for the kids . . . either they can’t wait to leave home or they’ve set themselves up under our roofs for what looks to be a very long stay. We worry about them working at McJobs, not being able to decide on a career, and the lifelong repercussions of making bad choices. Mothers with younger children worry about predators in the classroom, perverts in the schoolyard, and their kids getting a leg up in what they perceive as a scary and competitive world.

And then there are the secret anxieties we are too embarrassed to discuss with anyone but our closest friends. Your kid is going to become a sanitation worker. You think you’re going to be fired because of your age. You think your friends are all doing better than you and what’s worse (and you hate yourself for this), you privately resent them for it. You are lonely. You are bored with your life.

Finally, there are the secrets that we tell no one, because revealing them would be deeply painful to others or because they are hurts so unbearable or scary or shameful we can scarcely contemplate them. A child addicted to drugs. A violent sibling. A husband having an affair. Most of us have at least one thing in our life we don’t talk to anyone about. All women have secrets.

Thinking about What Really Matters

A t the same time, a significant majority of us are asking ourselves: What do I really want to do with my life? Why am I working so hard
for so little emotional, intellectual, or financial gain? Is this all there is? Those working for organizations despair of the soullessness, the endless demands and personal sacrifices, the assaults on ego, the lack of harmony between their personal values and those of their employer, the inability to practice their craft in the way they want. Many of those who are self-employed are at once bored and overworked, and are looking for more meaningful challenges. On the home front, we are asking penetrating questions about the nature of all of our relationships, coming to terms with our parents, redefining friendships, looking for more from our partners. In other words, we are deciding what really matters.

What are we optimistic about? What are our sources of sadness or regret? What kind of unfinished business do we have to address in order to move forward with grace? What can be learned, and what lessons can be passed on to our daughters? What are our challenges, and how are successful women meeting them?

This book will help the questioning, seeking woman, whether she suffers from career malaise or life malaise, or seeks confirmation of her choices. It will illuminate what we wish we had known earlier, good advice in the voice of a very smart friend whispering secrets in our ear. It will help younger women by sharing life lessons from savvy women about what they did well and what they would have done differently. And it will satisfy the prurient need we all have to snoop into each other's lives.

I hope you will consider me and the other voices in Women Confidential as a collective life mentor for approaching the midlife challenges of seeking to redefine work, relationships, and the rest of life. Can we have it all? How can we be authentic in male work environments? How can we parent in the way we want to and still have satisfying work?
The Voices You Will Meet

I recently read a review of a book that admonished women who want to get ahead to follow several rules. If you are a woman of a certain age, you know the drill—all those rules about what women should and shouldn’t do. Don't be nice. Don't express emotion. Toughen up. I was so disgusted by the soul-crushing advice based on traditional male success models that I wrote a column for the Globe and Mail on why the advice was retrograde. My advice? Women should refuse to become “mini-men,” wear a corporate mask, or pretend they are someone they are not. I received a record number of responses from readers agreeing with me.

Shortly after that, I wrote a column for the Wall Street CareerJournal on why women should fight to express their authentic selves at work. I sent the column out in a mass e-mail to my clients along with a few questions:

“Can you be authentic in a corporate environment? Are the rhythms of corporations antithetical to female rhythms? Where are women happiest? Are you going though a transition...If so, what? What is most important to you at this life stage? If you had one piece of advice to give to a younger woman, what would it be? Please share all the juicy details. This is confidential. All your identifying attributes will be changed.”

I was deluged with replies. Women even asked if it would be okay to respond to my questions if they were not on my list (the column was forwarded extensively), and I'm still receiving comments today.

The responses were remarkable—candid, intimate, and yes, often bitchy, angry, and full of all the juicy details. Obviously this is an important subject, and women want to share their experiences. These women asked me, “Can I help you some more?” About half of them said something like, “Sorry for the rant, but I had to sound off. This was great therapy.”
This book is populated by many voices. I have spent my career fascinated with the psychology of women, especially professional women. I have taught courses in this area, conducted research as part of my PhD, done internal corporate studies on why women aren't moving ahead and the issues they grapple with, and delivered many, many speeches and workshops.

I have also been collecting data for more than twenty years on what motivates women, most recently through my online career/life-planning resource, Career Advisor, which provides me with information on values, needs, challenges, and desires broken down by age and gender. To date about ten thousand people have completed assessments on Career Advisor.

I have spent my life counseling women, listening to women, advising women. I know what excites and inspires them. I know what derails them. So I am a key voice, an “expert” voice if you will, giving my perspective by distilling, interpreting, and providing ideas and advice based on my research and observations as a practitioner, writer, thinker, and social psychologist.

Over the past few years, I have also received close to a thousand stories from women, including those from this recent e-mail survey. I have married these thousand voices to those of thirty women, in their late-thirties to midfifties, whom I call life mentors, insightful, thoughtful, interesting women whom I have personally selected to be part of this group. (All names have been changed.)

In spite of the temptation to describe these women as successful, I call them interesting because they have defined success on their own terms. Like many women, I struggle with the word successful. I always think of those eighties women in their power suits pursuing the holy grail of their career. I don't like speakers' series in which women politicians or CEOs hold themselves up as role models or talk about their lives with the “if I can do it, so can you” or “surely you want to be like me” attitude.
Some of these women are successful in the traditional sense of the word—lawyers, owners of thriving businesses, vice presidents of major corporations. But of equal interest are those women who left prestigious jobs to do something they cared about deeply, whether to live in a cottage in the country, to volunteer, to paint, or to coach others. My group is fairly representative of the occupations of university-educated women. It includes writers and editors, human-resource professionals, a TV producer, an accountant, independent consultants, an artist, a teacher, career and life coaches. Most of the women live in major urban centers in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. As in the general population, about two-thirds have children; in terms of partners and family configurations, they represent all the tangled possibilities.

Regardless of their path, the women understand the choices they have made and can reflect on what was and wasn’t wise. They accept who they are instead of endlessly second-guessing decisions they have made (and if they have had bitterness in the past, they have moved on). They are excited about their futures. As the French say, they are bien dans sa peau, they feel good in their skin.

They are savvy about the work world, have important things to say about their personal lives, and understand the complexities we all deal with. They are generous and want to share with other women what they have observed and learned.

But don’t think Pollyanna. Most of them are wry, edgy, and sometimes quite rude, in other words, almost good girls. Their comments are often wickedly funny and candid. They are prepared to deal with uncertainty and self-doubt; they know that life does not consist exclusively of sentiment-laden Hallmark moments, and have a sharp, critical take on corporate environments (not to mention husbands, current and former). Their insights provide important information for women seeking to understand their lives and how to move forward.
As you will read, there is good news—there are lots of inventive ways to redefine your life to give you more of what you want.

The women completed an in-depth questionnaire (see Appendix) and a follow-up interview of more questions. You may want to refer to the Discussion Guide at the end of this book when you get together with your friends to talk about each other's lives and benefit from each other's wisdom.

In this book, I show you how strong and interesting women are redefining what really matters in the areas that determine how we feel about our lives—work, partners, children, friends, and the rest. So get comfortable and get the dish.
My father died when I was twenty-three. I was a hippy and had just returned to North America from London, England. Like most of my generation, I didn't have any particular expectations or thoughts about the future. I had just started teaching psychology at a junior college, a cool job, with thirteen hours of lectures, four hours seeing students, and the chance to work with neat people. Even though my husband wasn't working, I earned enough to support both of us. As hippies, material stuff wasn't high on our list of what was important.

My parents lived fairly close by. They didn't have much money, but they lived well enough. Although I knew intellectually that there wasn't a bottomless financial well, I didn't really worry or think about money. There was always someone to take us out to dinner, or in an emergency, to bail us out.
But when my father died, I had a profound sense of having lost a buffer between me and the world. I was IT. I was no longer a child. It was not that my father had the resources to protect me, but the sense of protection was psychological—I had a tacit belief that if I screwed up or something bad happened to me, there was still someone who could make it better. My mother had never filled that role and never would.

I lost my childhood when I lost my father. I developed at my core a niggling sense of “I must be successful, I must achieve.” I had no particular vision of what that success would look like, just a vague concept of being someone important. This had nothing to do with money, and everything to do with being recognized by others as a good person, a smart person, a person to be reckoned with.

As I no longer had the opportunity to elicit my father’s words “I am proud of you,” I internalized an abstract parent who would be proud of me. This meant a drive to succeed that could not possibly be satisfied, as there was, in the literal sense, no one to please. But I think if my father had died later in my life, when I was more fully baked, I would have felt less of a need to prove myself. As it was, I craved approval, as did most parent-pleasing women who flirted with bad behavior while managing to stay on the “good girl” side.

Where did this desire to please everyone come from? Well, most of us as children were almost good girls with the accent on the “good,” socialized to internalize all the dominant messages of society: “Get good marks.” “Be a well-rounded person.” “Be polite to your elders.” “Don’t say anything that is hurtful.” “Be popular.” We grew up seeking approval from everyone—parents, teachers, friends. The list of adult-pleasing behaviors we were expected to demonstrate was endless.

The origins of this need for approval lie, in part, in our families:

“I’m from a large, noisy family. The only way I could get my parents’ attention was by being excellent at everything.”
“As a middle-class girl, by the time I was five I must have heard the words be nice a million times.”

“My brother was killed when I was eleven. I felt I had to make up for my parents’ loss. He had been the one they were most proud of, a great student and athlete. Now it was up to me. They canonized him after his death, and I could never really fill his shoes. But I kept trying.”

The need for approval also comes from our culture, which largely values adolescent females in terms of their attractiveness. Girls must sacrifice parts of themselves to be protected and valued by society, say many developmental psychologists such as professor, author, and scholar Carol Gilligan, who has devoted her life to understanding female development, and has conducted seminal research in this field.

In one of her studies documented in Meeting at the Crossroads (1992), she and her coauthor, Lyn Mikel Brown, conducted intensive interviews with one hundred mostly upper-middle-class girls over a five-year period to answer the question “What, on the way to womanhood, does a girl give up?” They found that girls are initially more self-assured than boys, but that at adolescence, girls lose their sense of self—they stifle their creative urges and natural impulses and are boxed into the standards of “good girl” behavior. In other words, their authentic voice is driven underground. They lose self-esteem—a loss that continues to reverberate even in adulthood.

Susan, for example, recalls that as a child she was a “tomboy” and her parents thought it was “cute.” But as soon as she became a teenager, “My mother was all over me in terms of how I dressed, talked, and walked. It was like I had become a different person and who I had been was no longer OK. And of course it wasn’t only my parents, it was all that awful high-school girl stuff of trying to fit in and be one of the popular girls.”
The impact of this adolescent need for approval continues to be felt later on, in all areas of life: women stay in bad marriages to avoid the wrath of parents, indulge the kids so they won’t be angry, and make work choices that don’t support personal needs because they look good on a resume.

I have known Helen, for example, for twenty years. I have seen her in about ten jobs, each progressively more senior, the past three as a vice president of human resources.

Each time she starts a new job she tells me, “This is it. I’ve done my research. They’re great and are committed to doing the right thing.” Then there is a honeymoon period. “I love it. I’ve finally landed.” Six months later, I start to hear the first rumblings that all is not well. “I’m so tired. I seem to be fighting all the time. But you have to fight if you want to make sure the right thing is done.” And nine months later, she says, “I can’t take this anymore. They’re [referring to the male senior management team] brutal.” Then the process starts again.

Helen’s father was a doctor. Like many doctor fathers of daughters, he was critical and demanding. He wanted her to follow in his footsteps. She was on a lifelong journey to win his approval, to be a success. Even though she wouldn’t be a doctor, she would be a player in the high-stakes game of senior organizational life.

Helen’s story, though extreme, is similar to that of many women. Why did she continue to pursue so many unsuitable jobs? To put it simply, she needed the approval of male senior managers, who were the place holders for her father. When she failed, no matter what swear words she used to describe her employers, what she really felt was unworthy. She needed to prove to them that she was okay and, in the process, prove to herself and her father that she was okay. Making it in a “status” job was a substitute for self-worth. Each time she started a job she was really saying, “I’m going to show these men that I’m worthy,” and “I’m going to show my father that I am lovable and successful even if I’m not a doctor.”
The expectations placed on us as children—by our parents and our culture—helped to shape an entire generation of women. So did the tremendous economic and cultural changes of the sixties.

The Other Messages We Got

Although we each have our own story, there are common themes in all of our experiences beyond just the desire for approval. We didn't know exactly what our dads did other than being told that “money doesn't grow on trees.” Dads went to work and, for the most part, moms stayed home. There was little diversity in our family arrangements and little discussion of how parents made a living. If they were unhappy with their work, we didn't know. Work was not a subject for discussion or debate. It was not supposed to make you happy, and you weren't supposed to evaluate it in those terms.

As indulged boomer children we were the first generation to grow up with widespread abundance and a feeling of security. It was a time of North American political and economic ascendancy, and it formed the bedrock of our beliefs about what we could achieve in the world. Growing up during a time of rapid expansion, we understood, whether explicitly or not, that we would reap the rewards of economic stability and growth and that with our university educations we could be anything we wanted to be. The advent of feminism coupled with a shortage of workers translated into a great broadening of opportunities. We were the first middle-class female generation who thought we would have all the goodies society could provide— the great career, the great family, the freedom to express our glorious, uninhibited selves. We could be a sexy, powerful Katharine Hepburn in terms of independence; we could be mothers if we chose, and goddesses in the bedroom. To the extent we thought about the future at all, one thing was certain: we
would not live lives of domesticated numbness and repressed resentment like our stay-at-home mothers.

There were, of course, individual expectations about university, which in part were formed by social class, in part by parental expectations. Although most of us would go to university, some would go into studies that would lead to a career in a traditionally female occupation, such as teaching or occupational therapy, while others would go into a “where-does-it-lead-to” program in the liberal arts or social sciences; a few would pursue high-level professional degrees. (Between 1970 and 1997 the proportion of degrees awarded to women soared by almost 500 percent in medicine, 800 percent in law, and 1000 percent in business.)

For me, going to university wasn’t a choice. This was simply what middle-class girls did, especially if you were from a Jewish family. My father had left school in Grade 9 to help support his family. He was deeply ashamed of this. For my father, the son of a cutter working in a dress factory, a daughter in university was the ultimate achievement. Indeed, at my graduation ceremony, he said, “We all graduated today,” a comment I callously thought very stupid at the time.

When I was four years old, he took me to the gates of the McGill campus in Montreal, and said, “This is where you will go to university.” (The seeds for achievement motivation were sown at an early age in my family.) Like many others of my generation, I felt that university was a rite of passage, part of being “finished,” not purely an instrument to a career. A university education had value over and above its long-term economic utility. I never thought about how one course of study might better prepare me for future employment than another. Its purpose was to enrich my life, to teach me how to think, to expose me to the world of ideas, and, most important, it was a chance to have fun, sex, and all the rest of it.

Our varying expectations about universities and careers were not much different from those people have today, except that now,
as tuition fees have skyrocketed, and everyone’s career consciousness has grown, parents and their university-aged kids are more anxious about the value of a degree as a professional stepping stone.

Some people, like Karen, always had a sense of their ultimate career destination. From the time she was in Grade 8, she knew that she wanted to be a journalist. She did her undergraduate degree in literature and worked on the student newspaper. Karen, though, was somewhat unusual in having had a clear career concept. Many women didn’t have a specific vision of how they would participate in the workforce and went to university through a circuitous route. Iris, for example, recalls: “Both of my parents were university-educated so of course I was expected to go. But I never really thought about what university would do for me in terms of my long-term career interests. I went into translation because I was good in languages, but quit after a year because I hated it. As a child of the sixties, the idea of thinking about a career was distasteful, and business was boring. The idea of money was distasteful. It connoted greed.”

She took a job as the assistant to the owner of a factory. About a month into the job her boss told her “giving him a blow job was part of the job.” She quit. When her prudish parents asked why she quit, she says, “There was no way I could tell them what had happened. My mother thought the word sex was unladylike. I was embarrassed so I just blurted out that I wanted to go back to school. And that’s why I went back.” Like many women, she had a vague sense that she would work, be independent, but the form it would take was not articulated.

Finally, there were those who were not given a choice about what to study. Steph’s parents, for example, were prepared to help her pay for university but only if she studied to be a teacher. University wasn’t a place to play or to be enriched. For her the cost of education was such that it had to be a ticket to a good job; it was an investment in financial independence. Steph, whose father owned a small, not very profitable store, says, “I was very jealous
of my friends who could pursue a social sciences degree.” It took her twenty years to get over her resentment toward her parents.

Our Concept of Success

We had a sense of entitlement even if we didn’t know how it would express itself. Implicit in going to university was the notion that it would have long-term economic benefit, but we didn’t think about what that would be. Nonetheless, as Hannah, the owner of a speakers’ bureau, said, “It was a ticket to success that knew no boundaries.”

Although our concept of what we would do was diffuse, we had some very clear expectations about what work would be like: it would be fun, provide financial independence, be glamorous, and, most importantly, be a source of personal fulfillment. It never occurred to us that our incomes would be important as half of a dual-career couple or as the head of a single-parent family.

The Early Trajectory

After we graduated, most of us had choices—maybe a trip to Europe to find ourselves, maybe a stay on a commune, maybe a first job.

I went to England to work after completing my undergraduate degree—it seemed as good an idea as any. As we will see later, it is this kind of apparent happenstance that guided so much of what we did as a generation, and led us to ask questions such as: How did I get from there to here?

When someone would ask my mother what I was doing, she would say, “She’s taking a year off,” a comment that deeply annoyed me. Here I was, for the first time in my overprogrammed, high
achieving, parent-pleasing life, doing something not “productive.” From my mother’s point of view, if I was not either achieving in school—doing a master’s degree—or starting a real “career,” then I was taking a year off. From my point of view, I was putting a year on, a year into life.

Angst: Trying to Find Our Path

Like most of my “almost good” girlfriends, I spent my twenties in a Seinfeld kind of way, doing nothing. Or at least nothing in the sense of a clear vision of what I wanted to do with my life and how my activities would help me get there. (By the way, if you are reading this and you are in your twenties, don’t worry if you are clueless about your career desires. Most twentysomethings don’t have a clear career definition—finding out what you want to do with your life is a process of self-knowledge, trial and error, and reflection. I actually worry more about young people who know exactly what they want to do than about those who don’t.)

That doesn’t mean I was relaxed about not knowing what I wanted to do. The good girls from university all seemed to know their career destination exactly. A few went to law school; others got jobs. They seemed happy. They weren’t constantly second-guessing themselves about whether this was right for them, or navel-gazing about whether they were happy. I was jealous; they seemed to have it together. (It took me many years to realize that it wasn’t so much that they had their lives together, rather they were just less leaky about their insecurities.)

I, on the other hand, was neurotically obsessed and very leaky about my insecurities. While completing my PhD, I worked at an oil company in the human resources department, conducting employee research and psychological assessments. I used to ask the women I worked with, How do you know you are in the right career? How
can you be sure? How do you know there isn’t something better? They looked at me like I was asking “How do you know you are using the right toilet paper?”

There was something out there with my name on it, which was singularly suited to me, or so I believed. How to find it? Should I teach? Should I do a graduate degree? Should I become a clinician? I spent my twenties and, if the truth be known, my early thirties asking myself these questions (although I did manage to acquire two graduate degrees and work in various roles during the process).

Quite simply, as a generation, we had too many choices. And when you have a choice, you want to make the right one, especially if you have great expectations.

So we tried on many roles.

The Corporate Route

“It was a feast, but some of the food was rotten.”
—Corporate counsel

“Working for a major corporation seemed very sexy, very powerful, like the career girls in the movies.”
—Analyst

Our generation, unlike previous generations, had access to the corporate ladder beyond the usual support roles. Of course, women had gone this route before. But their numbers weren’t large, and they were called “career girls.” By the time we entered the workplace in the seventies and early eighties, women were being aggressively courted by organizations. This was a period of prosperity, and it seemed that the prospects were limitless. Organizations were expanding rapidly, there was a dearth of professionals, and there
were more jobs than people to fill them. Feminism and the larger pool of university-educated women meant that women were an abundant source of labor.

The first wave of the feminist battles had been won. Sure there was the feeling of being different, as profiled in Rosabeth Moss Kantor's groundbreaking book *A Tale of “O”: On Being Different in an Organization*, published in 1980, but the promise was there. (Moss Kantor argued that women, the Os, stand out from the male majority Xs, and that due to their scarcity they are treated differently and as tokens.) It was a heady period, and fertile ground for reinforcing expectations that we could have it all. There was a common belief that if you stayed longer than two years in your job without promotion, your career had been derailed.

There were important differences between us and the pre-boomer women, born before 1947, who paved our way into the workplace. We believed good work and opportunities were a right, not a privilege. As a result of the sexual revolution, we were freer and not as caught up with traditional expectations about “being a lady” as our older sisters were. As one trainer recalls, “It was 1985, and I was thirty years old. I was cofacilitating a workshop with a woman twelve years older than me. She noticed a run in my stockings, and wanted to go buy me another pair. She was horrified when I said I was fine with the run. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I had put on the stockings knowing they had a run, because I couldn’t be bothered.” Or as a journalist said, “We were drinking, smoking dope, sleeping around, and holding our own in the male world. Some of us were more men than the men. We were definitely not ladies . . .”

Organizations cared enough about retaining and developing female professionals that the progressive ones appointed affirmative-action officers (though being offered this job was considered the death knell of your career), conducted workshops to ensure that
the most egregious expressions of gender discrimination—being called a chick, being fondled, or being exposed to sexual innuendo—were not acceptable, and encouraged female professionals to start networking groups. (If this sounds familiar, don’t be surprised. As we will see in Chapter 2, while some things have changed, many haven’t.) Bad behavior went on, but it was finally seen as inappropriate. Most boomer women can cite at least one example of being the victim of gender discrimination or inappropriate male advances.

What did professional women think about their careers in corporations? I worked for an oil company. It was the early eighties and management was concerned that the female professionals were not being promoted as quickly as their male counterparts. Internal surveys revealed that the women, relative to their male colleagues, were less happy and less able to see themselves as having a career in the company. (Sounds pretty quaint now, the concept of having a long-term career anywhere.) I was asked, along with organizational development consultant Tamara Weir-Bryan, who would become one of the most important people in my life and my mentor, to help identify the reasons.

Everyone’s hypothesis was that the glass ceiling was to be blamed. And this was indeed part of the problem. But the reasons were more complex. The women looked at the senior managers, who were all male. And they despaired of having to become like them. Mini-men. Some chose to leave. Most were deeply ambivalent. “If that’s what it takes, who needs it?” They thought “Ick. Who wants to be like them?”

“What’s wrong with being feminine, expressing emotion?” they asked. “Doesn’t good leadership require compassion and interpersonal sensitivity?” And most pointedly: “Why am I not valued for what is part of my DNA as a woman?” What followed for most professional women in their twenties and thirties was the struggle to fit in.
Consulting at the oil company was pretty heady stuff for me. I was from a small-business family and had had little exposure to corporate life. All of my friends were in clinical or academic positions. How to behave? How to dress? I wanted this consulting contract to be turned into a job offer. Corporate life seemed very glamorous. Fortunately, I would be a shoo-in—or so I thought. Everyone in the history of the company who had held a similar position had been offered a full-time job.

There were three professional women in the human resources department who were around my age. In my mind I called them the three Christines: Christine A, Christine B, and Christine C, as there was little to distinguish them. They all wore the same regulation Career Woman boxy suit, the same polite pearl stud earrings, the same ribbon tied around their neck that made them look like prize pigs about to be entered in a 4-H contest. I studied them and tried to emulate them. (In hindsight, I realize how harsh my assessment of them was; I’m sure they had their own struggles.)

But I just couldn’t get the hang of it. Or rather, some part of me wouldn’t allow me to get the hang of it. I hated the sexless suits—why spend serious money on something that made you look like a guy? Or worse, fat!

I didn’t get that job offer. They said I was too direct, too expressive, too, well, everything.

As we will see in Chapter 2, some of us were able to fit in better than others. And because so many of us tried desperately to fit in, many women such as the Christines lost their voices.

We had great expectations for ourselves, and the greater the expectations, the more room for feelings of failure. As Janice, a small-business owner, said, “As a boomer, as a woman, I could never reconcile myself to doing an average job at anything. Having
all the balls in the air—kids, career, jerk of a husband (former)—was a given. But then all you could do was not make any of them work. The higher your personal expectations for success, the less successful you will feel. You’re playing where the air is thin and where you always get knocked down.”

The opportunities for assaults on our egos were endless—from parents, our partners, kids, and all of our own preconceived notions of what life should look like. “No matter what you did,” said a career coach, “you were still screwing up in some other area.”

The Schizophrenic Years

“The was a siren in my head. Go to work and force myself not to smile too much or else get beaten up by my boss for being Mary Poppins, not being tough enough. Go home, go into mommy mode, and become warm and nurturing.”

— Freelance journalist

Although many women complained about the struggle and trauma of trying to have it all, many had their children in the eighties, when there was still some wiggle room for work and family life, when a workweek was forty hours long. So although some married women wrestled with whether to have children or not, most felt they were forced to choose between the “brass ring” or spending time with their family.

Flexible work options didn’t exist. There were no models of women who had satisfying careers and were also able to fulfill their roles as mothers. What we knew about mothering came from our own mothers, most of whom were homemakers, often bored, depressed, or anxious and simmering with petty perceived grievances and serious resentments. We knew as a woman if you wanted to be
respected, good enough would not do—you had to be spectacular. What we knew about careers were the silver-screen independent “career girls” portrayed by Lauren Bacall. In any case, there were few women in senior corporate roles, so if you did the math, you realized your chances for success were limited. Why put yourself in the game? According to Catalyst, a research and advisory organization that has been tracking the participation of women in senior roles, in 1995, the first year they collected this data, 8.7 percent of Fortune 500 corporate officer positions were held by women. In 2002, the number had increased to 15.7 percent. No one knows what the percentages were before 1995, but it is safe to assume they were very low. Also according to Catalyst, the first recorded family-friendly support systems were in 1987 for child-care initiatives.

If you wanted to have a chance at a successful career in an organization, one thing was clear: behave like a man, dress like a man. There were tons of books aimed at “ambitious” women that were full of soul-crushing advice about what you should and shouldn’t do. There still are.

Behave like a man: avoid using adjectives, don’t express emotion, don’t say “I feel . . .” And whatever ever ever ever you do, do not cry at the office. Dress for success, in authoritative colors such as navy or black. Men’s clothes sized for women, but please wear a skirt to be polite. And don’t forget the stockings! (I’m embarrassed to confess I actually wrote an article in the 1980s on how to dress for success for a women’s glossy. But I needed the money, so forgive me.)

As an organizational consultant in the early eighties, I gave feedback on psychological tests to young professionals for developmental purposes. Often when I told a woman about a problematic aspect of her personality, such as being overly sensitive to criticism, she would say, “That’s true of me at home, but at work I’m completely different—negative feedback doesn’t really bother me. It’s the
only way I can develop myself." At the time, I thought it was impos-
sible for people to change their behavior when they walked through
the office door, but today I realize they were telling me the truth, or
at least the truth as they saw it.

Herein lay the nut of the dilemma, a dilemma that is still very
much alive in today's workplace. If you are not valued for who you
really are, then you have to engage in what psychologists call impres-
sion management. This means monitoring your environment and
changing your behavior so you will fit in. One set of behaviors at
work and another at home.

But we were in our twenties and thirties, the approval-seeking
years, the time when we are still asking the world: "Am I OK?" "Do
you like me?" "Do you think I am competent?" So we didn't think to
challenge this. We had less confidence about who we were because
we had had less experience and had received less feedback about
what we were good at. And there were so many arenas in which we
could be "not OK." All those insidious internalized media images of
how we should behave as a good daughter, wife, or mother, the
superwomen who always remembered to pick up their husband's dry
cleaning and who baked cookies for the school fair instead of buying
them and pretending they were homemade, women who were always
charming, unflappable, and in a good mood.

Were we angry? We were resentful, certainly, but not angry the
way women are today. Because unlike thirtysomething women now,
who, because of all the media and corporate chatter, know there is
a problem, we were oblivious. The buzz in corporate environments
in the 1980s was about the glass ceiling, not about the demands of
parenting, or balancing work and personal life, or about having to
repress important parts of who you are in order to fit in. This was
girly stuff, and not something to be talked about. The serious stuff
was about ambition and getting ahead.
The Nineties—A Sea Change Still Reverberating Today: Work as Extreme Sport

“If I didn’t do the overnight travel or breakfast meetings, I worried I’d be fired. If I didn’t go to my kid’s soccer game, I wasn’t being a good mother.”
—Director of human resources

There was a profound sea change in the 1990s, foreshadowed in the mideighties, when organizations were restructured to have fewer levels. Here was this great population bulge of baby boomers, accustomed to a feast of endless promotional prospects, competing for fewer opportunities, and having to adjust to career growth slowed to a crawl. But organizations in the eighties were at least still civil.

In the 1990s, all of this changed. The pace of business increased. Workers became disposable units of productivity. The bar for performance went into the stratosphere. Forty-hour workweeks became a quaint memory. This was the beginning of the era of work as extreme sport. It wasn’t fun. Organizations weren’t congenial places where you could actualize yourself.

Where were we? Some of us were starting families; some of us had young kids at home; some of us were beginning to feel something important was missing. We started to ask ourselves new questions: “Why am I working so hard for so little?” “What is the emotional cost to me of working?” “What is the impact on my kids?” Pandora’s box had been opened—people started to think about work choices. If your work is relatively pleasant—a decent paycheck, interesting colleagues, challenging work that can be put to bed at the end of the day—you don’t need to second-guess whether your work is meeting your needs. Of course there were sacrifices, but you could still be at home at 6 p.m. and turn into
Mommy or go for a run. But now the effort-reward equation was seriously out of whack.

The nineties heralded a new era of heightened work consciousness. With that came a whole new set of interior monologues. And as the decade drew to a close, we didn't keep them to ourselves any longer. We started to share our private concerns about the impact of intense work on our personal lives and about the choices we felt we were being forced to make.

Talking about what you were feeling was new—there was a crack in the corporate armor. When I started work at the oil company in the eighties, I used to watch people approach the fancy head office. As staff walked along the street together they would chat amongst themselves as casual friends do. And then something most bizarre happened, in my imagination at least, when they entered through the big glass doors.

It was as if the lobby of the head office were lined with row upon row of employee lockers, each identified with an employee number, under a gallery of oil portraits of pale male faces. There people would go to their locker and hang up everything that was important to them or that characterized who they were as human beings. Into their locker would go their personalities, their sexuality, their concerns about their kids, their irritations with their partners, their politics. And out they would come—dressed in corporate mask, ready to meet the day head-on.

But as people's work consciousness awakened they started to demand more from work. If they were going to have to make serious sacrifices in their personal lives in order to work, then their work should meet deep personal needs. One should not only be satisfied by one's job, but passionate about it. And if you weren't passionate about your work, there was something wrong with you. This set the foundation for the career angst we see today.
From the Late Nineties Until Today

“To be honest, I was secretly pissed off when my company introduced flextime. It wasn’t bad enough that I was killing myself. Now I had a choice over how I wanted to kill myself.”
— Director of public relations

“I was so sick of hearing about all those choices. What choices did most of us really have? It’s not like I woke up every morning and said, ‘Today I want to go to work and kill myself.’ When you are a single parent on a limited income, where’s the choice?”
— Librarian

Panic in HR. Women were starting to leave organizations. They’d had enough already. They were screaming, “I can’t take this anymore.” It was a media fest. As one career writer recalls, all you read about were “stories about people who chucked it all in, who chucked it all on, or quite simply just chucked it all over the place.”

If you could believe what the media were saying, the choices for women were endless. They could quit and move to the country. They could find work about which they were passionate. They could homeschool their kids. They could work full-throttle, 24/7, or they could calibrate how they wanted to design their lives. Part-time work, telecommuting, portfolio careers—the choices were breathtaking. They were also overwhelming, and made many women feel even worse.

Here’s what it all added up to: more thinking, more guilt. More agonizing over choices we did or didn’t make or never considered. Call it choice fatigue. And if you chose just not to think about the choices, then you were left feeling somehow wanting, that you weren’t in charge of your life.

As one freelance marketing consultant, then a manager of marketing in the financial services sector, said, “I felt inadequate because
now, whatever I did, it was a choice. Like somehow every time I went to work, I had made a decision to go into work and prove myself at the expense of my kids. Like there was someone up there screaming, ‘Hey, get with the program. You’ve got choices now.’

Another assault on the ego, another opportunity to feel one had failed. But were there really any more choices to be made? Although many organizations were offering work-life balance programming, such as flexible hours and telecommuting, in practice many of these policies existed—and exist—more on company’s intranets than in the lives of their staff. And women knew that even if they could take advantage of them, they would do so at the cost of their careers. Another set of choices: Career or family? Passion or contentment? And of course, there was the ever-present “money issue,” since it seemed—and still seems—to many women that deep pockets were required to take advantage of these choices. For most women, the choice to give up their income was about more than giving up a Caribbean vacation or club membership. Their incomes were essential.

Lives Bursting at the Seams

“When my husband was looking after the kids, he described it as babysitting.”
—Interior designer

“My brain used to actually hurt. I would think, ‘It’s going to explode if I have to remember one more thing.’”
—Curriculum designer

Busy, busy, busy. We were so busy keeping our shows on the road—worrying about our kids, looking after our parents, being a partner, seeking a partner, getting divorced, remarrying, facing death and
health scares—we had no time to reflect. We juggled it all, doing, acting, achieving, and looking after others.

And truth be told, we kind of liked it, or at least a lot of women did. We wore our busyness like a badge of honor—"I'm so busy. I must be important." It was the era of the cult of busyness. "I stopped asking people 'How are you?'" one woman explained. "I was so sick of hearing their busyness mantra. They weren't really complaining; they were boasting."

Yes, we had men in our lives, but they could be as demanding as our kids. Worse, according to many women, they had "small" brains when it came to thinking about any problem outside their work and their hobbies.

I have developed an instrument that measures, among other attributes, people's preference for having many things on the go versus working on a few things at once, completing them before going on to a few more things. The dimension is called Pacing. Every time I conduct a career/life-planning workshop, I am asked the same question by the women in the group: "Do men score lower on Pacing than do women?" Because, they say (often in an exasperated chorus), "Men can't multitask." In fact, I have not found any differences in the scores of men and women.

The fissure between men and women is not in their ability to think about and do several things at once, but in their willingness to think about and do several unpleasant or boring things at once.

And the thinking is as important as the doing. As an independent consultant, then a trainer working in IT, said, "It wasn't enough that I had to get my kids to school, prepare their dinners, and book their appointments. I had to think about all this stuff, as well as all the stuff related to my work, as well as all the boring stuff my husband didn't want to think about, such as his parents' birthdays and remembering to pick up his dry cleaning. Like I somehow found this interesting because I was a woman."
And what do the men notice in relation to their kids’ well-being? Not much, I hear over and over. Says Sandra: “My kid had a teacher when he was in Grade 3 who had the IQ of a pine cone. He told us on parent-teacher day not to feel bad about his low marks, because he was good in gym, and personal training was a hot profession. When I freaked out later, my husband said I was overreacting. ‘OK, so the teacher’s a jerk,’ he said. ‘But everyone has teachers who are jerks.’”

I have heard hundreds of similar stories. You probably have a hundred of your own to add.

Demands on all fronts. And we people-pleasing women had to make sure that we did it all, that no one’s needs would be overlooked.

But it wasn’t all bad. I did some of the most exciting things in my career in my thirties. And as we will see, many women had their greatest achievements, at home or at work, during this life chapter.