

COMING OUT OF THE MENOPAUSAL CLOSET

"I am forty-eight and in menopause." It's time to say it openly.

Speaking Out

The realization landed like a ton of bricks and I hit it running, determined it would not render me querulous or crotchety, and most of all, not silent. I had to speak about it immediately and boldly, as though by clutching it by the neck I could wrest its power and claim it for myself. I saw the conspiracy of silence that shrouded this fact of life for women as constrictive and damaging. And so, for myself, and thousands of other women like me, and for all women everywhere, I yelled it aloud, "I'm coming out of the menopausal closet."

In the beginning I was angry that I couldn't find a good book about menopause. Now there are dozens. And I didn't know who to talk to about it. Because nobody talks about menopause, I observed. And suddenly I knew why. If I admitted I was going through menopause, someone would be sure to nod his (yes, his) head wisely and say, "Ah, that explains her recent behavior. . ." This thought flickered in my consciousness in my conversations with my colleagues in the final days at my work place. Would they dismiss my expressions of turmoil on this basis? I had no way to measure the extent of the influence of my biology either. No wonder menopause is crazy-making.

I happened upon a church bulletin notice that announced the beginning of a "post-forties" women's' group. I figured that "post-forties" must be the euphemism for menopause. After all, who would advertise a group for "menopausal women"? So I joined. And it was with these loving, sensitive women that I discovered how many other women had experiences in common with mine. Here, I could come out with all my feelings, no holds barred. This, in turn, released the others to be more open.

Phoebe, fifty-five, and some time past the menopause, said she "hadn't thought much about menopause," and had just gone through it routinely. One day, after listening intently to me talk openly about my feelings, she wistfully remarked, "You know, I never talked about it when I was going through it. . ." Her voice trailed off, trembling a bit. I looked at her in surprise, then felt my quick anger rise. What silent invisible force tells women this is one experience they must not share? I asked myself.

That was when I made the decision to "go public," to talk about this with others, to raise the consciousness of both men and women about this important aspect of middle life.

The Biological Reality

I began by reading. A major finding, for me, was that the menopause is just one small, though significant, part of a more comprehensive change known as the "climacteric." Men experience this larger period of change too. And the much-talked-about decrease in sexual potency is confused with decrease in desire and attractiveness. Sex just takes a bit longer, but it is just as pleasurable, with the help of modern lubricants and sensitive attention.

Our culture has learned to be more frank and open about other formerly private areas of life—pregnancy, orgasm, homosexuality, death. And we even have rituals surrounding birth, marriage, and death that deal with the meanings of these private areas. At that era, there continued to be silence on this important change in a woman's life, and certainly an absence of ritual.

It was not just the silence I decried. It was also the lack of positive images about this womanly function. When I was young, some of my friends used to call the menses "the curse," and I knew that the phrase "menopausal woman" was usually a synonym for emotional imbalance, embarrassing unpredictability, or carping ineffectiveness.

On the other hand, I liked the phrase *change of life*, because for me, change has always been a tremendously positive image. What's more, "change of life" is an accurate description. Menopause is just one small part of a much larger change known as the climacteric and experienced by both men and women in mid-life. Only we women are forced to face up to this "mid-life crisis" (as it is now popularly called) because of the message of our bodies. For men, the changes they experience in mid-life are more diffuse, harder to pin down, and therefore often ignored, repressed, or misinterpreted. As a woman, I had to deal with my aging and what it implied—death. My body was telling me—in an unmistakably clear way—that there were some things in life that come to an end. So I had to deal with my own finiteness, my growing older.

My blood was flowing no more, my womb could no longer nurture an embryo to birth, and my breasts would not suckle a child. For many women, these changes are a relief. My experience was different, never having borne a child. Because menstruation had never been painful for me, I mourned the loss of my natural rhythms—those twenty-eight-day cycles of tension build-up, then release in the explosive force of creativity as the blood flowed and I could "let go" again. Without these rhythms, I was caught "off balance"—literally, this was hormonally true.

For a few months, I was bewildered and upset—the uncertainty of always waiting, but never knowing when the blood would flow. Once I acknowledged the source of my imbalance, I saw that I could find new and deeper rhythms in the recesses of my being—a new cadence, a new beat. For as a woman, I am so tuned in to my cycles.

The Social Factors of Change

For other women, the time of menopause is also the time when their children leave home, or they re-enter the world of work, or when the shored-up marriage falters. For me, it was a time when my career shifted significantly, producing inevitable feelings of displacement and stepping back. I had immersed myself and my identity in my work—very much as a mother does in her children—and I experienced pain in detaching myself emotionally in order to make room for a larger vision that reflected a broader group. I felt embarrassed by my needs to control and absorb in that "family-like" career situation, but joyously liberated once I faced it. Life proved to be so much larger than my attachment to even a very satisfying career.

For one thing, my career had shifted in important ways. The burgeoning little educational enterprise my husband and I, along with others, had created eight years ago and nurtured along, much like a family, came to a critical point of expansion and we added two new staff persons—younger, very strong persons. We were delighted about the growth of the organization and the quality of persons who joined us. But I hadn't prepared for the twinge of sadness over the inevitable displacement that their coming gave me. I found myself clinging to my position harder than I wanted to. It was so hard to *let go*. I was embarrassed by my needs to control and absorb. But once I faced those needs, I felt exhilarated—liberated. I could go on to something new!

About the same time, my husband and I moved. I am a minister's daughter, quite used to frequent moves (twenty-one before my marriage at the age of thirty-nine). But all that moving had made me drive a stake in the ground after we were married. I wasn't going to move from that first apartment for a long, long time. And in the end, it was not even our own choice to move. A series of three burglaries in our building—two of them in our apartment—made it imperative that we find a more secure place. But although the new apartment was beautiful, with a view of Lake Michigan, I was restless and depressed. Another change, and it was hard.

The Emotional Roller Coaster

In addition to situational changes, there were concomitant emotional changes I began to notice. I was finding it hard to focus on my work, and on other people very consistently. I was far too busy inside myself. And this was a difficult adjustment for me, a person who has been giving and outgoing

I began to be surprised by my need for a great deal of nurturance and reassurance from others. Many times a day I would long for a loving touch. A quick hug, a gentle word, an arm thrown across the back of my chair as my husband and I sit together in a movie meant inordinately much to me. You say, "But we all need those things and all the time." "Perhaps," I said, "but for me, and right now, they are essential."

I have thought about *why* my emotional needs well up with such force in these days. Is it all related to my biology? Well, yes and no. Yes, in the sense that we women are

almost always more connected to our bodies than men are to theirs. We can't be abstract about menstruation, or pregnancy, or menopause. They happen in our bodies. And while they are happening, we are very tied to these events. We become more vulnerable and tender. Literally tender—we are tending to our bodies.

My husband used to sense this when I was having my period, and he would be particularly solicitous and loving towards me. Now when I no longer have those special days each month, I am learning to go to him in those moments of longing, and ask him to strike my hair; I pull his arm around me, and nestle there. Or I see a loved friend; we talk and she hugs me and I cry on her shoulder if I need to. I am not going through menopause *alone* if I don't have to. We need each other.

But the answer is also *no*, my emotional needs are not all merely biology. Some of my needs are rooted in the sense of loss that comes with the finishing of the flow of my blood, the end of my reproductive cycle. It is right that I *grieve* this loss, be *angry* over it, and *fear* the future—let these powerful emotions come. And look for comfort for my grief, release for my anger, and the courage to look the future in the eye and go on.

So much is happening to us women in these middle years. Some women return to work. Our husbands go through their own career crises of mid-life. Our children depart, creating a different family structure and a jarring shift in the marital relationship. How can we separate out the purely biological factors from those that are emotional and situational?

We can't. They are all part of a package called "Change of Life." And both men and women experience it. Perhaps we women are fortunate because our bodies tell us we are changing. We have to face our aging, and our death.

"Only Halfway Through"

This is the specter that haunts us. Our finiteness, and our death. For me, accepting my age and my aging process—as symbolized by the menopause—has been a crucial part in moving on to "Round Two." For *I am only halfway through*. And don't tuck me away on a shelf because my skin has soft folds now, and I take my glasses off and on more frequently. I am rolling up my sleeves and getting ready to plunge into that second half—the half that is not cluttered with the pains of adolescence, and adjusting to marriage, and learning a job, and worrying over children, and going into debt with a mortgage.

I have no desire or need to go back to my youth—the frustrations of infancy and childhood, the agonies and ecstasies of adolescence, the learning of young adult years in the "school of hard knocks." No, I am pressing on. There is another whole life ahead of me. And I have begun it already, by joining that women's group, developing a second alternative vocation in career counseling, asking for and receiving a four-month

sabbatical leave from my work, starting to design a quilt, and beginning the writing of a book. Today is the first day of the *best* of my life

Menopause became my cue to gear up for Round Two of my life. I put a heap of living into the first forty-eight years. Looking ahead down the long road of the next forty-eight, I catch a new image of the woman I want to become. A wise woman, matured by experience, ripened by love, made compassionate by time. Our culture celebrates youthfulness, but I have chosen another attribute: *wisdom*. Actually, I wonder if the famous woman of Proverbs 31 was not going through change of life herself and "*her price was far above rubies.*"