

RATIONALE FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT

THE MEANING AND THE ROLE FOR BABY BOOMERS- FEMINISTS IN LATER LIFE

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In the wake of the struggle for women's equality in the sixties and seventies, and the unfolding new feminine roles in the eighties, we see a sometimes bruised and discouraged woman who is not yet treated equally. How these "fighters" might become true elders, and what obstacles they need to overcome to do so, are at the center of this work.

Many of us wrote in the eighties and nineties about growing more mature with myriad choices, about finding the divine power—the Goddess—within us. I wrote a book, entitled *Self-esteem for Women: Utopia or Truth for a New Age*, in which I argued that personal growth, independence, self-sufficiency, and carving one's place in history were not only possible but essential. In my view, everything was made possible by tapping into one's inner Goddess.

Well, the Goddess, along with millions of other baby boomers, is now fifty- or sixty-something, and the battles are still being fought. Are those battles really different now? What are we fighting for? What issues do we face now? Have we gained what we were promised?

As far back as we look, we see women's unceasing struggle against a patriarchal power establishment, male arrogance, and second-class status—even third-class status in some countries. And the struggle continues today.

After fighting for equal rights and against negative stereotypes, baby-boomer women find themselves in a society that obsessively worships youth and relegates its seniors to second-class status. Many elderly women end up ignored, mourning their lost youth and freedom, and lacking the rights and privileges for which they once fought. I'm reminded of Simone de Beauvoir's remark in her 1950s book *The Second Sex*: "One is not born but rather becomes a woman ... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature..."

Yes, many great women—Gloria Steinem, for example—have paved the road for us in the twenty-first century. But where are we really in this second half of our lives—or as some call it, "the third phase of life" (after childhood and adulthood)? Jean Shinoda Bolen has said that "In a youth-oriented patriarchy, especially, to become an older woman is to become invisible: a nonentity."

How do women today cope with aging? What's it like to discover that you aren't thirty or forty or fifty anymore? As Gloria Steinem has said, "One morning, I found a sixty-year-old woman in my bed..."

Despite the apparent victories of feminism, women are, in many ways, operating in a survival mode. Traditional values and old longings are still important and will likely always be important: partnership, marriage, equal rights, equal income, equal opportunities, and self-realization; for many these remain a chimera. After two feminist struggles—the feminism of equality of the sixties and the later feminism of differences

(emphasizing the uniqueness of women—a setback for the earlier feminist movement), women are still trying to forge their identities.

Many of us were the first in our families to go to college—or even high school. Despite lingering discrimination, we have had greater employment opportunities than our mothers and grandmothers. Many women today have their own wealth, can travel, vote, hold public office, and still be mothers and grandmothers. Although most of us benefited from the industrial expansion that marked the baby boomer era, we must take responsibility for what that has cost our mother Earth. Countless women now approaching eldership changed the face of politics when they were young, and as Pam Lunn points out in her article, *What Next for the Post-war Baby-boom Generation?* we could do it again.

Baby boomer women grew up around the fighting of the feminist movement in the sixties and seventies; many were feisty revolutionaries. In the eighties, they were invited to embrace the inner Goddess within. Now in their golden years, they imagine a new role as sage, which will help them obtain the freedom they have been chasing since their youth. But what is this new role? What if wisdom is lacking? Where then do they find meaning in their lives?

Elderly woman today face different challenges, some triggering deep, personal questions—namely, what is their role as they age? Reproduction is no longer a goal; nor is raising children. If they had a career, it is in the past, or nearly so. Other traditional caregiver roles—parenting the grandchildren, caring for a husband or other family members—are still available, but this new identity may be difficult to bear. The “aging” woman, with her dry skin and wrinkled body, is no longer regarded as pretty, sexy, vital, or accomplished; she is in her “dimmed time.” What’s the future for this woman? What role should aging women play in our society? What, if anything, is the role of feminists, feminist psychologists, and their studies? Is the fight over? Did we win?

The aging phenomenon is not new. After all, we age from birth to death. What has changed is the lens through which we see this phenomenon. Ours is a youth-oriented culture in which the elderly are seen as undesirable, and thus are discarded. Thanks to pioneers, such as Ken Dychtwald, Laura Carstensen, Varda Mulbahuer, who have spoken and written about an “Age Wave,” we now see a fledgling movement, one that is beginning to permeate all layers of research and reflection. There is growing pressure in the fields of public policy, healthcare, social work, medicine, and psychology to explore the issues of aging. This is a fortuitous trend as the United States is home to 76 million baby boomers, the oldest of whom will reach retirement age in 2010.

Feminism and Women’s studies, despite the courageous efforts of many feminists, researchers, and other professionals, needs to reinvent itself. We need to question the ways we define the roles of women in society. The educated woman who finds work in a male-dominated environment, divorces, lives alone, and then grows old without a mate is seen by some as proof of a “mission accomplished.” Of course, the reality is quite different. Despite some undeniable progress and the successes of a few women, mainly those with careers, equality has not been achieved. According to Judith Sugar in a book

entitled *Women Over 50*, the average woman at retirement age has earned \$435,000 less than a man in a comparable position. This gap is even wider for women who did not finish high school, women typically more dependent on the patriarchal establishment to nurture, support, and validate them.

In this work I want to synthesize these two controversial topics—aging and feminism—and discuss the role of aging women. Within the baby-boomer crowd, we find three different “generations”—those born in the mid-forties, the mid-fifties, and the early sixties. All three find themselves lost in the battlefield. Members of the first generation, especially, often discouraged by the meager results of the equal-rights “victory,” have difficulty empowering themselves and their sisters. Weary of trying to raise others’ awareness, seeing their self-esteem slip away, they can’t help questioning, yet again, who they are. Battling their own dependency issues, they now consider retirement—and what do they see? Living twenty, thirty, forty years on the edges of society, without an audience interested in their experiences, knowledge or wisdom.

Struggling with this question myself, a second-generation boomer, I have addressed hundreds of women from different walks of life. I have sought their opinions on what this new role could be. What do they think the core issues are for women? What possible course of action can we take? Is mentor the next role for woman over fifty? Having developed her wisdom, is it time to pass the baton to our sisters and brothers?

Many of the women I’ve interviewed have stressed the importance of becoming mentors, sages, to help younger women meet their needs. One of them, Bonnie Burstein, said, “It’s not about me as an individual, anymore ... I’ve done whatever I can to express my individuality, develop my personal self, now I want to contribute to the well-being of my daughters ... and the Earth.”

Others have remarked that the aging phase is a prime time to reinvent ourselves, to use the still-formidable energy of our mature years with compassion and wisdom. There is, after all, a difference between growing old and growing into an elder. To become an elder takes work and a willingness to struggle continuously for awareness. This struggle for awareness demands a relentless engagement with life and its constantly emerging challenges.

On another front, we must strive to recast the negative image of older women perpetuated by the media, the stereotype of LOLs with grey hair and bent body, sexless and in decay. Sociologists Sara Arber and Jay Ginn claim that by asserting themselves as competent, strong, and resourceful, women can begin to reclaim their right to age without stigma.

Even our use of language can stigmatize women. Throughout the millennia, wise old people have been called “elders” or the equivalent. The last few years, however, have seen the rise of a more youth-oriented culture in which the role of the elder has drastically diminished. Today, there is a renewed interest in the idea of eldership, recognition of the untapped potential of elders to contribute to society.

Various words in ancient languages denoted the role of respected elder, such as the Hebrew *zah-kehn*, the Greek *presbuteros* (Presbyterian), and the Latin *senex*. The English

words *Sir* and *Sire*, the Spanish *Señor*, and the Italian *Signore* are derived from *senex* and continue to suggest respect today. Conversely, many of the pejorative words used to describe older women today were once expressions of the highest respect. For example, the word “hag” today refers to an old and decrepit woman; however, it is rooted in the word “holy.” “Crone” is another one. Today it refers to an old, ugly, woman. But crone, which derives from “crown,” once described a wise woman. The word “witch” derived from “wit,” meaning wise. Once upon a time, it referred to women healers. Today the word is mostly negative, applied to women who are suspicious and cannot be trusted because they exhibit magical, mostly evil powers.

Two thousand years ago, elder women—crones—were honored members of their communities. Younger generations learned from them about herbs and cures for many illnesses, and watched as the respected ones helped the dying pass out of this life. By watching and listening, the young grew in wisdom. The crones were the storytellers, and the young would listen carefully to their wisdom so it would not be lost forever.

Sheila Malkind, artist, social worker, and filmmaker, says, “We need to become watchful at the ways we women are represented in the media and in literature, and make our protestations known. Even better, would be to create, cultivate, and publicize our own personal images as active and aging women, happy, self-confident, wise, still eager to learn and to experience life as a great adventure.”

I have talked to many women who echo authors like Barbara Walker and call on us to help our fellow men learn how to stop wars, environmental destruction, and senseless violence, to reinject compassion into our society. The time is right, for both men and women, to help recreate the role of eldership in our society, and to learn how to care for elders with love and respect.

This idea of wise women who become crones, who can now step into the role of mentors for peers and younger generations, speaks truths about the divine nature of human beings. It is a return to the ancient idea of the presence of a divine quality in all women, the Goddess within. Numerous studies have uncovered ancient matriarchal cultures that reached high levels of development. These high accomplishments were usually washed away by the imposition of patriarchal rule. To paraphrase author Barbara Walker, this ripped off humanity of its wisdom.

Of course, wisdom and personal awareness do not necessarily come with age. Wisdom is the result of personal inquiry, the result of balancing creation and destruction, renovation, respect, and consciousness. But achieving that balance comes only with great personal effort, increasing levels of awareness, and an understanding of our own strengths and limitations.

Besides personal forces, such as poor self-esteem, social forces continue to deter women from tapping into their true power. Many women still want to find a mate, want to be protected, supported, and fathered. For some, staying at home and having children is more important than securing an equal-opportunity career. It may in fact be the right decision, but gender inequality and a patriarchal power structure mean that many women do not have the information they need to make an intelligent choice.

Another problem: Many women who fought for self-sufficiency and independence find themselves alone and unfulfilled, in part because they were not able to find a long-term mate who could live up to their standards of liberation. This has created a schism between strong women and comparatively weak men. Women striving to regain their role as Goddess have stripped men of their role as King and warrior, which in turn has created a backlash from men.

Some lament the passing of the old ways, when men were hunter-warriors and women stayed home to gather food and procreate. But one size does not fit all, and women must be free to choose the role that best suits them—whether mother, warrior, crone, sage, medicine woman, or ruler.

This work grew out of years of research in which I have solicited the opinions of 450 women, friends and colleagues. I have ceaselessly struggled with the idea of empowering women to be what they were intended to be: divine creatures who, like Mother Earth, are able to nurture, but also to fight and destroy, to cause sorrow and joy—and to dance with the moon. Such women are able to integrate all these elements into a cohesive truth of divine enlightenment, power, beauty, and wisdom.

Clearly, women tend to be more nurturing than destructive. Barbara Walker has remarked how women who have reached the Croning phase of life, who are wiser after the tribulations of surviving in a patriarchal world, might play the role of “peacemaker, healer, and correcting men’s mistakes.” She adds that crones have the kind of power we need so desperately today “to make men to do what’s right for next generations.”

Women need to understand that along with a left-brain linear intelligence, they also possess a deeper intelligence, more creative and respectful of life. Some call it intuition, but it is really a kind of an emotional intelligence, allowing those who have it to deal with both the quotidian and the divine.

I invite you on a journey to rediscover and rethink the power of women, the forces of the Goddess, and the potential for Crones to mentor our brothers, our sisters, and the Earth. In the eighties, I first wrote about the infinite possibilities for women to overcome oppression merely by tapping into the inner power of their divine feminine, the Goddess within. Two decades later, I still see women struggling to find this truth within, still dependent on patriarchal values that disempower them and steal their voices. Still, I have witnessed many women blossoming, building a strength that has produced positive changes in their lives, in their communities, in the world.

Imagine a world in which the wisdom and power of aging Goddesses guide us through our next challenges, with the shared goal of building a global village that is tolerant, nonviolent, and life-affirming. It is time for all Goddesses, sisters of the moon, to tap into their wisdom, and guide us on a journey of healing and transformation. We need this for ourselves, and for the planet. It is time to nourish the soul, to nourish the planet, to mentor our daughters and sisters, and, at last, to regard our aging selves in a celebratory light.