

## LESBIAN BABY BOOMERS AT MIDLIFE

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We are lesbians of a transitional generation, having come of age in the period between Stonewall and the more progressive-or, at least, lesbian-visible-1990s. In 1969, when the police raided the Stonewall Inn, we were in our teens and twenties. Now we embrace midlife in a time when the public is much more aware of lesbian and gay issues.

We are also part of the baby-boom generation. And just as schools, colleges, the military, and the workplace accommodated our numbers as we grew up, the nation, and we as individuals, is preparing for our old age and retirement. Popular magazines have printed many articles about aging baby boomers who had children late in life and are now raising them while trying to care for elderly parents and in-laws. Aging men, we are told, lose their sexual potency and become more focused on family than on career, while women cope with the relative scarcity of men their age. But in all the discussion of midlife crisis and acceptance of personal limitations, where are the

articles about lesbian baby boomers? How do our concerns differ from those of heterosexual women?

#### AFFIRMING LESBIANISM AND AFFIRMING AGING

Midlife is clutter, distillation, ache and triumph.

-Carmen de Monteflores, "Time's Gifts"

For white women, becoming a lesbian means learning to live as a minority. As females in a male-dominated society, both lesbian and straight women are oppressed, although sexism is usually less apparent to young heterosexual women. As Gloria Steinem has noted, this is the age when women have the most social power, since we are at the peak of our physical and sexual attractiveness. At least for able-bodied, middle-class white women, then, ageism may be the first recognized experience of oppression.

Women who are members of other groups, however, have faced oppression throughout life. And researcher Richard Friend argues that the experiences of lesbians and gay men with stigmatization and discrimination can be translated into skills that help them cope with ageism. Similarly, Nanette Gartrell, a psychiatrist, suggests that since lesbians must actively choose their lifestyle, they develop more adaptive skills than do heterosexuals, who come to terms with their sexual orientation more passively.

These observations suggest that lesbians as a group are better prepared than straight women for aging. The dominant culture does not share this view of contented aging among lesbians, however, often perceiving them (if perceiving them at all) as lonely in their old age, and this idea is reinforced by the invisibility of older lesbians in the media. When older women are portrayed, it is usually as wife or grandmother, roles that are more common to straight than lesbian identity. It is not surprising, therefore, that lesbians who are closeted or isolated from lesbian communities internalize this homophobia. Friend argues that lesbians and gay men who have formed a positive

identity age more successfully than those who have spent their lives "passing" as heterosexual.

Those of us in the generation since Stonewall are sandwiched between the older lesbians, who are often very closeted, and young women who have felt free to experiment with same-gender relationships since high school. We are the bridge that connects the generations before and after us, and tend to be less easily categorized. Depending on our particular situations, we are more or less closeted, more or less politically active, more or less involved in lesbian communities, and more or less homophobic than they are. Our generation transformed lesbian communities from mostly social circles to cultural institutions. The researcher John Grube has referred to pre- and post-Stonewall gay men as "natives" versus "settlers," and these terms also apply to lesbians.

#### APPEARANCE NORMS IN THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY

We all, lesbian or not, are daily bombarded subtly and not so subtly by the swindle, the intense brainwashing of patriarchal media constructions in which anything other than a twelve-year-old face and body on a woman is unacceptable, offensive, shameful, pitiable and blameworthy.

-Robin Posin, "Ripening"

The changes in physical appearance wrought by age tend to be of great concern to heterosexual women. How does aging affect lesbians' concerns about physical attractiveness? Many studies have suggested that lesbians and straight women may be more alike than different when it comes to attitudes and behavior. In *American Couples*, Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz found that gender-role socialization was the most important predictor of attitudes toward a variety of issues in both gay and straight couples-and this may be true for physical appearance. After all, all young women are socialized to value their appearance. For those who become lesbians, whether or

not they are out, their occupational and social roles will be influenced by the privilege that accompanies female attractiveness. It is well known that women (both lesbians and heterosexual) diet more and experience more dissatisfaction with their bodies than do gay or heterosexual men. Thus the changes in physical appearance (particularly weight gain) that accompany women's aging may affect lesbians and straight women in similar ways.

Research has also indicated that women's physical appearance is particularly important for attractiveness to men. Pamela Brand, Esther Rothblum, and Laura Solomon found in a study that heterosexual women and gay men (two groups sexually involved with men) were more preoccupied with their weight, and reported lower ideal weights, than lesbians and heterosexual men.

The similarities between heterosexual women and gay men have also been demonstrated in studies of personal ads, where these two groups are most likely to describe their own physical appearance. Lesbians, however, are more likely to describe their personality characteristics, suggesting that they do not focus on appearance in the same way. Thus, the physical changes that accompany aging may have fewer consequences for lesbians than for heterosexual women in the arena of personal relationships. (The study by Pamela Brand and her colleagues confirmed this; there was no relationship between lesbians' weight and whether or not they were in a partnered relationship.)

Finally, lesbian communities may be more tolerant of diversity in appearance. The dominant culture holds negative stereotypes about the appearance of lesbians, and lesbians, like heterosexual women, tend to be more liked when they look most conventionally feminine. The psychologist Laura S. Brown has argued that lesbians are aware of the parallels between oppression against lesbians and oppression based on appearance. Lesbian communities also use appearance cues to determine who is lesbian, and these cues have changed over time. The Stonewall generation grew up when butch and femme roles were mandated for lesbians. Baby boomers reached adulthood in the age of androgyny, when both lesbians and heterosexual women

# I

## IT IS A LARGE FUTURE

### Z

~/~y friends and I, who are in midlife, **I T care** talking about growing older. We're trading everything we can find on menopause. We make jokes about our memories and our absentmindedness: "Where did I park my car?" and "Why is the lettuce in the freezer?" Many of us wear bifocals and still have trouble reading the small print. We have more aches and pains. We fear serious illness. We have parents who are ill or dying. Most **of us** want to work less and play more.

We also wonder who we are, *really*, in this new world of sliding sexual identities. Are we still lesbians, or are we now passe if we are not *queer* (claiming a deviant sexuality that undermines the paradigm of "straight or gay") or bisexual, or transgendered, or other varieties of **sex** radicals? Has "lesbian chic" done us in? What *does* it mean not to be cutting-edge anymore? Some of us just shake our heads at the new politics, the new language. Some of us feel threatened. Some find change intriguing and challenging.

In Santa Barbara I see three silver-haired lesbians, walking and laughing together, heading toward their **Westfalia van**. And I see a **moment in my future**. I amble up and do car talk as a way **to meet** them. "So, do you like **your van?**" I am drawn **to these women**, to the lines, the edges, the years of stories I saw in their faces. I have questions about what the future might hold for me.

"Well, the dogs and I have traveled all across the country in it," the owner answers in a faint German accent. She turns **her round**, well-weathered face toward **me**. **Her green eyes** spark as she looks me up **and down** and says, "I don't suppose you are old enough for **me to** invite you to travel with **me**, are you?" Then she **steps closer, peers** directly into my face: "**No, I don't** suppose you **are**." We laugh. I touch her, arm and say: "No, I don't **suppose I am**." I walk away, **smiling**. A strong, happy dyke in her late **sixties** has just come on to me, a strong, happy dyke in my forties. And I see that aging as a lesbian can **be fun, filled** with possibilities for adventure, friendship, d-yes!-lust.

dressed in flannel shirts and jeans, and had short hair. At midlife, we marvel at the fashions of "baby dykes" who wear the gender-bending outfits of the queer nation generation.

#### FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

At midlife, our lovers are also granted a particular status. Sometimes this is just because she too is older and people take her seriously. Sometimes it's because the relationship has been going on for years and the family sees her as one of its own. Sometimes it's because we have been alone for so long that when we start seeing someone, our families are happy that we are connected again. Perhaps it's also because most people stop thinking of middle-aged people as sexual objects. Sex isn't the first thing that straight people think of when they see us as a couple.

-JoAnn Loulan, "Now When I Was Your Age"

For lesbians who are out to their parents, midlife may be a time of increasing comfort and decreasing tensions, as their lesbianism can no longer be considered a "phase" that will be outgrown. Theoretically, it should be easier to come out to parents at midlife than at adolescence, when the lesbian is still living at home and financially dependent on her parents. Data from the National Lesbian Health Care Survey indicates that the post-Stonewall generation was more likely to be out to family members than were lesbians who were older or younger, but even among these women, 19 percent of the almost two thousand respondents were not out to any family member and only 27 percent were out to their entire family.

One woman's experience illustrates how coming out to family can be a vehicle for confronting one's own internalized heterosexism. Since reaching forty, Jane had worked to confront what she called the biggest stumbling block to her acceptance of self as a lesbian: "profound internalized homophobia." She began by coming out to

her brother, who greeted her tearful admission with powerful silence. He warned Jane not to tell their elderly parents and then explained that he would not tell his wife or his children, so he didn't want her to leave any incriminating messages on his answering machine. He asked one question only: "Are you with someone?" to which she replied yes. "People should not be alone," he stated, and after that indirect message of support, they never spoke of it again.

Although the details vary from family to family, many lesbians have had similar experiences, and it is not surprising that we usually find our major source of social support among friends, followed by partner, family of origin, and co-workers (see Kurdek and Schmitt). In moving away from family in order to keep the secret, lesbians may visit infrequently and have superficial communication with their families.

#### FRIENDSHIP NETWORKS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

It's important just to know there's a support system, especially for a lot of brothers and sisters who are on the reserves and very isolated, who are afraid to come out. If they do come out, now they'll have some place to go.

-Leota Lone Dog, "Coming Out as a Native American"

Even the briefest observation of lesbian communities demonstrates how important our ex-lovers continue to be to us. Carol Becker has described this phenomenon in her book *Lesbian Ex-Lovers*, and so has Anndee Hochman in her short story "Extending Family," about a lesbian whose partner's ex-lover moves next door with her current lover. Lesbians seem to remain friends with ex-lovers more often than heterosexual ex-husbands and ex-wives do, which helps maintain the size and stability of the lesbian community and broaden lesbian friendship networks. Even a very closeted lesbian can draw on ex-lovers for support; they may be practically the only people who know that she is a lesbian.

Finally, lesbian communities do not seem as stratified by age as the dominant culture, since lesbians of all ages participate in various lesbian social and political events. One of the authors of this essay once lived in a communal household with four lesbians who ranged in age from early twenties to fifties. We viewed ourselves as peers, not as women spanning two generations.

Social support takes on a different importance as we age and come to terms with our physical, psychological, and financial limits. For many lesbians, having forgone traditional marriage and conventional family as a primary source of support, entering middle age brings a renewed sense of the importance of friends. Lesbian baby boomers are thinking about old age in terms of the "old dykes' home," trying to conceptualize retirement living characterized by mutual support and companionship. Ironically, the typical heterosexual woman outlives her partner and faces the same need for community membership as do lesbians, but she has no large community to turn to.

#### PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

My (our) bodies growing older (breast losing elasticity, joints creaking a bit) is fascinating and a source of tenderness for both of us, engendering fantasies about growing old together, starting a sex-positive nursing home for dykes, etc.

-Respondent in a study of lesbian sex at menopause

As the post-Stonewall generation, we have made our way through a myriad of types of relationships as we aged. If we knew other lesbians while we were children and adolescents, they were probably in butch/Femme relationships that mirrored the rigid gender roles of heterosexual marriages of the time. During the so-called sexual revolution, monogamy was frowned upon in many lesbian communities, and lesbians had multiple short-term sexual encounters. These days, middle-aged lesbians strive for long-term relationships.

## THE START OF SOMETHING BIG

Ma. t U u

**O**n my calendar for *July 30, 1994*, "*They're really adults.* **Or belittling** myself for not owning **an apartment.** **Or a car.** **Or** even a remote-control TV. *Subconsciously, I'm still defining adulthood the way my parents do.*

Turning forty does seem like a mishap, an "uh-oh." *How was it possible to go from childhood to adulthood in what felt like forty minutes? I can't stay up late anymore, and I ache and groan more than I used to. When I'm with twenty-somethings, I sound like an old fogey: "Well, back in '76. "*

*Of course, forty isn't old, and I'm happier now than in 1976, when I was just graduating from college. Forty is the start of something big: the rest of my life.*

But *my* parents see it differently. To them, I'm the "poor career girl" *who* couldn't find the right **man**, so she became a lesbian. They wanted to throw a *birthday, party* for me in my hometown and invite all our relatives—a sweet idea, until I realized they expected me to come without my lover. My mother often forgets Katie's name and refers to her as "the other girl."

I see them once a year, but my parents' hold is like a vise grip, a persistent voice that says, "What have you got to show for your life?" I find myself looking at friends with kids and thinking,

That summer I turned forty, my lover's sister called to invite us to her daughter's high school graduation, which was taking place the same weekend as the celebration of Stonewall 25 in New York. When Katie explained our plans, her sister's silence said, "*You're choosing a parade over your niece's graduation?*" Then we both began to have doubts. Maybe a high school graduation *was* more important than displaying lesbian pride; maybe we weren't acting like adults.

**When I told this to a friend, she** said wisely, "But *we're* the adults. **We define** what adulthood means." It seemed so simple, but it **was something** I had been forgetting.

Turning *forty* meant writing a letter to **my** parents—the longest since I came out to them *in* 1984—redefining myself. Your daughter is an adult in a good, committed relationship. She doesn't have children, but she has a family. She can't afford to buy a house, but her rent is cheap. Be happy for her.

Increasing numbers of lesbians are making the decision to become parents, not just rearing the children of one partner's former marriage but bearing or adopting children as a couple. Moreover, lesbians are rearing children later in life than their heterosexual sisters. Aside from the high costs of child rearing and adoption and the relatively lower income of women compared to men, this is no doubt happening because of the lack of norms and role models to define modern lesbian life. Thus, unlike heterosexual women, who often simply assumed they would parent, many lesbian baby boomers assumed the opposite but changed their minds as they aged. This certainly characterizes the women in one local "dykes with tykes" support group, where an assortment of forty-something women marvel about finally deciding to become mothers.

Many heterosexual women turn forty as their children begin to move out; many lesbians are just beginning a family at this age. Although there has been little research on how the lesbian baby boom affects lesbians' aging process, the demographics suggest that middle-aged lesbians may be more likely than heterosexual women to be caring for both aging parents and young children as the "sandwich generation."

Most important rituals for straight women focus on partnered relationships (the high school prom, dating, engagement, marriage, divorce) or childbearing. Some lesbians create rituals around their partnered relationships, such as commitment ceremonies or long-term anniversaries. We are proud to witness such rituals, even while many in the community may deride them for imitating the heteropatriarchy. While our society has few ceremonies for biological markers, anthropology has described the significance of rites of passage such as aging ceremonies among women elders. Rituals of this sort, unrelated to marriage and childbearing, may hold more significance for lesbians and allow us to celebrate the vibrant life course lesbianism offers.

One issue that confronts long-term couples as they age is the death of a partner, and some research has described how lesbians fare

better than heterosexual women after the disruption of a relationship due to a breakup or death. Lesbians have had to be financially independent and are rarely covered by their partner's health insurance. Heterosexual widows are thus more likely to be economically disadvantaged than are lesbians, many of whom have been in the labor force throughout their adult years. Also important in this regard is the less coupled nature of lesbian social and cultural events, which still welcome participation after the death of a partner. Very closeted and isolated lesbians may limit their socializing to a few couples, and in this respect may experience a social marginalization similar to that experienced by heterosexual widows. This pattern is especially likely when lesbians are not out to families of origin, who therefore cannot acknowledge their loss.

#### THE WORKPLACE

We do not follow the traditional woman's developmental line of turning, in our mid-forties, toward career and work fulfillment after having raised our children who have now left the nest. Even those lesbians who have raised children have been involved simultaneously in work. Nor do we follow the traditional male line of development which leads men to seek deeper relationships and greater involvement with family after two decades of establishing themselves as workers.... The patriarchal dichotomy between work and relations, or, for that matter, the rest of life, does not hold for lesbians.

-Barbara Sang, Joyce Warshow, and Adrienne Smith,  
Introduction to *Lesbians at Midlife*

Baby-boomer lesbians reached young adulthood during the current feminist movement, which made available job and career opportunities that had generally been blocked to women of earlier generations. Lillian Faderman has written about the importance of economic opportunities for women in the establishing of lesbian

communities; without them, some women feel forced to marry for financial security.

As a result of the political climate of the late 1960s and 1970s, some lesbians who came of age in those years pursued alternative or low-paying jobs. Some were unemployed or underemployed while very active in grassroots politics. Recently, a friend of ours involved in the fight for partner health benefits remarked: "Ten years ago, who needed health insurance? And who had a partner?" As her comment indicates, lesbian baby boomers in recent years have looked for jobs with more stability, income, and employee benefits.

At the same time, some middle-class lesbians maximized their career chances early on. Being unmarried and often geographically mobile, *they* reached career markers at very early ages. In this respect, these lesbians are similar to men—even down to experiencing midlife crises. We recall the story of a colleague who raced through college, graduate school, and a postdoctoral fellowship, and ended up an assistant professor at twenty-seven, an associate professor at thirty-four, and a full professor at thirty-eight. She was not in the first cohort of women in academia—the ones who were harassed and denied tenure. She was mentored by her father and then by male professors, and had no trouble fitting into the system. By all accounts, she was an academic success story, so successful in fact that by age twenty-nine, she had a major midlife crisis, having done all the things she wanted to do in life and not knowing what to do with the remaining years.

Of course, some lesbians have followed paths similar to those of heterosexual women. Some are pursuing new directions now that their children are older. Others grew up assuming that they would marry and have children, making their own work lives secondary to their aspirations for their families. For this group, coming out may leave them psychologically on hold, since they were not socialized for alternatives to marriage. Carol Thompson has written about grief and loss issues facing lesbians who come out and realize they will

## CIRCLES AND RINGS: A WOMAN'S RITUAL

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As I approached my fifty-fifth birthday, I found myself filled with regrets. While I *was*, for the most part, satisfied with the choices I had made in *my* life, each inevitably carried some loss. A direction unexplored. A possibility never known. Time, that had been lost to my failures of courage, my uneasiness with ambiguity, my fear of judgment, my need for love.

I wanted **to find** a way to mark the losses and the regrets,, as well as the deeply satisfying public and private life I had led. I needed to look back with regret, pride, and kindness and to look forward with enthusiasm and optimism.

My partner, Ellyn, planned a ritual centered on the symbol of the double five, representing the dual visions of hindsight and foresight. She called together our community. The lesbians and the heterosexuals. The mothers, the sisters, and the daughters. We began my birthday ceremony outdoors at dusk, at the ending of the day and of a period of my life. Each participant recalled a loss, a disappointment, a place or a time in her life when she could have been braver, stronger, or more whole. Each wrote her regrets on a Post-it note, read it aloud, and then attached her note to one of five helium balloons in the center of our circle. As the sound of the last

voice faded into the stillness of the night, I released the balloons and we all watched them carry off our losses, growing ever smaller and more distant.

After a moment of silence, we all rose and went indoors, forming a second circle for the second number five, representing my future, filled with light, blessings, wishes for the coming year. I *was* given a mazel tov bag, used to

envelop the glass that is shattered in a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, a bag to contain good luck. First one, then another loved one gave me a symbol to place in my bag to carry their wishes into my future. There was an eagle feather, a bird's nest, a perfectly rounded stone, and a paper clip to hold it all together. Ellyn gave me a small *wooden* house to represent the home we were to purchase three months later. Along with it, she offered a ring with three triangles, each encompassing the others. The inner triangle represented *me*; the second, surrounding it, our union as a couple; and the third, enveloping both, our community.

On *my* fifty-fifth birthday, my life, my partnership, and my community were, like the triangles on my ring, embedded in one another. All I had been and would become was held in the circle of the ring *and* the circle of women.

never have the societal approval that is part of heterosexual privilege, or the rituals accompanying it.

Finally, lesbian friendships cut across social class as well as age, which, among other things, affects how people view their work lives. Kathleen Newman's book, *Falling from Grace*, focuses on downward social mobility, on what happens when middle-class people lose their jobs and cannot replace them. One of the individuals interviewed was a gay man, and he was the only respondent whose loss of job did not affect his social network. Therefore, he maintained an important source of stability during an extremely stressful period. We find the same to be true of lesbians.

#### THE DIVERSITY OF LESBIANS AT MIDLIFE

I am wiser now and more reckless.

-Lauren Crux, "The Ripening of Our Bodies,  
the Deepening of Our Spirits,"

As the post-Stonewall generation turns fifty, other issues will come to the fore. As Sarah Pearlman has said: "Early mid-life may be the theory, but late mid-life is the practice." We are well aware, for example, that older lesbians have experienced significant ageism, including from younger lesbians, but the baby boomers have not yet had to face this themselves.

We are also aware that while many of us do not feel old, turning fifty is considered old in countries with high rates of malnutrition and disease. Muriel Miguel describes feeling as though she were at midlife since she was twenty-five; growing up, she saw members of her Native American community die before age forty. Also, gender differences are particularly marked for this generation: At the same time that lesbian baby boomers are turning fifty, the AIDS epidemic is killing young and middle-aged gay men.

There is a world of diversity in the post-Stonewall generation. Those of us who live in rural, conservative, Bible Belt communities

may lead lives not too different from "normal," ... and 1950s. Lesbians in Boston or San Francisco, in contrast, may be part of the mainstream and out to everyone. There may be more similarities between lesbians and heterosexual women of similar political backgrounds in this generation than there are between lesbians with different politics, religion, and other factors.

More than any other factor, whether or not lesbians are out determines to what degree they will be integrated into or isolated from a supportive community. Growing up, many of us thought we were the only lesbian in the world. As a culture, we were socialized to devalue women and to hate lesbians. Coming out, in all its complexities—self-realization, sexual relationships, self-revelation, becoming part of a lesbian community—involved many small and large acts of courage. Our generation was at the forefront of the recent feminist movement, political activism, and current lesbian culture, and we should take pride in our legacy. In the words of Arianne Haley in a letter to *Ms.* magazine: "When all other women have given up hope; when all other women have silenced our voices; we will still be there, wearing our pink triangles and working for the equality of all women. Lesbians were at the start of the movement. Lesbians will be there to the end. We may be your worst nightmare, but we are also your future."

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