Woman in the Middle

by Florence Rush

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The woman in the middle is between forty and fifty-five years of age and at the point in her life when her aging parents are becoming increasingly dependent and her children, past eighteen, should be increasingly independent, but are not. Her parents may become helpless, ill, and although her children may be in college or living away from home, they come back for holidays, also become ill, get into trouble and mother is needed. The woman in the middle is caught between two generations. She has about ten or maybe fifteen good years left and if she does not use them for herself, she will never have another opportunity.

Contrary to popular opinion, many women look forward to this period in life when, free at last, they can be concerned with only themselves. Some women plan to go back to school, take a job, study music, travel, or just enjoy some well-earned leisure. There may be those who break down from lack of household chores, absence of children, or the feeling of not being wanted, but that is only because these women have had no alternative way to live beyond child care and housework. If a woman has skills, job opportunity, lives in a world that does not discriminate against women, particularly older women, and is not programmed to believe in her own uselessness, loss of dependent children will never be a problem. The woman in the middle is depressed not because she is going through her menopause or her children have left home, but because wherever she turns, she is prevented from fulfilling herself as a human being. She is not even allowed to control the few years of her life between the end of child rearing and old age.

For the woman who tries to salvage these years, there may be a strange feeling after the last child leaves home, but not for long. It is easy to become accustomed to the lack of chores and obligations, but this happy state, if reached at all, does not last. In this age of interminable child dependency, children, long after maturity, continue to look to their parents for help.

We live in a society that does not assume responsibility for the most elementary human needs and provides inadequate public service for the poor, sick, aged, and young. The old, sick, and poor individual is at the mercy of a community with so little concern for human life that it allows old people to die alone every day from neglect and starvation. Similarly, young people with few legal rights are subject to abuse, exploitation, and forced destructive relationships with parents and guardians. Children and the aged have no protection beyond the family. Because society has failed to make provision, it is, as always, the wife, mother, or daughter who must cope with and find solutions for the needs of the family members. She may do a good job, a bad job, or overwhelmed, may even walk away from the job, but no matter which way it goes, the responsibility for the care of the dependent person belongs to the woman.

My training as a female to fill this role started at an early age. I was the baby daughter, cute, and, I'm told, always had a lot of feeling for other people. At age four, when I saw my mother scrubbing the kitchen floor, I said, "Mommy, why do you work so hard for everyone?" My mother remembered the words well and told them to me very often. She was grateful to have a
daughter who could really feel for her. She often commented that a boy is wonderful but a girl really cares.

At age eight I was awakened in the middle of the night by my father's angry shouts and my mother slamming down the window so the neighbors wouldn't hear. Soon I became aware that my parents' quarrels were part of our normal family life. When I asked my mother why she and father hated each other so much, she told me not to be silly, they really loved each other, but since I was her only daughter and showed interest, and, since she had to have someone to talk to, and since I was a big girl (age ten), she thought it was time I knew what kind of a man my father really was.

When my father learned that my mother confided in me, he demanded equal time and they both complained to me about each other. I was later surprised to learn that my brother, ten years my senior, was totally unaware and unaffected by my parents' actively hateful relationship. They never involved him because he was, after all, a man.

Later, after I married and my children were finally grown and in the process of leaving home, my father had two massive heart attacks. I was drawn into a nightmare of nurses, doctors, and hospitals, while my mother, crying and helpless, also needed attention. I asked my brother to help and he gladly agreed but since he had no preparation for this kind of work, the instruction and supervision required more effort than the job itself, so I did everything. I was soberly informed by family and friends that I had this neurotic attachment to my father which would not allow me to have anyone else care for him. My father got better and enjoyed one good year when we learned he had terminal cancer. Doctors agreed that he had nine months to live but he survived for two years, and I was needed more than ever. I became very efficient at dealing with hospital personnel, became an expert at sick benefits and insurance, and even learned how to read X-rays.

Anyway, my father died and left all his money to my brother. I didn't get a penny but fortunately my mother had enough money to manage. At my father's funeral, my mother's widowed state was much discussed but was not of great concern because she had a daughter to care for her. Later, I saw her regularly. I took her shopping, for doctor's appointments, kept her finances in order and responded in addition, to frequent emergencies--she fell, was cheated by Macy's, or a neighbor insulted her. After a year, it struck me that half my life was spent with my mother. I figured out that my mother, now eighty, in good health and with a family history of longevity, would probably live till ninety and if I owed her for the rest of her life, I would not finish paying my dues until I was fifty-five.

During this period, I noticed that my husband was never plagued by similar problems. His mother lived with and was supported by an unmarried sister. When, at my suggestion, my husband sent a check to help with the burden of support, his mother returned the money. She would take help from her daughter but not from her son. I once asked a young woman, who was active in the women's liberation movement and wise in the ways of sexism, why men responded so differently from women to human needs and suffering, and she told me to examine how differently the sexes are raised by their parents. I compared the attitudes of my parents to myself and my brother, and then my husband's parents attitudes to him and his sister. Males are trained to do different jobs, have different responsibilities, and are programmed to feel different feelings than females.

At the other end of the spectrum, I had to cope with my grown children and these problems were no less disturbing or complicated. For eighteen years I had raised my children practically alone
because this is regarded as woman's work and my husband had little to do with the job. I nursed them when they were ill; ran to school when called, helped with homework, made costumes for Halloween, prepared birthday parties, supervised their sex education, worried about stammering, thumbsucking and other neurotic symptoms, in addition to doing the usual cooking and cleaning.

Before I married, I had been trained and worked as a social worker, so when Bob, my oldest son, went off to college, and Anne, my daughter, was in high school, and Bill, my youngest son, was in junior high, I decided to go back to work. I found an agency that would employ me after my long years of absence. Although initially nervous, I soon found the change of scene, the challenge of the job, and the weekly pay check the most rewarding experience in eighteen years. Even though extremely busy, I managed children, husband, home, and job. Six weeks after Bob left for school, he returned in a succession of holidays, usually with guests, that made my head spin and kept me hopping. I never realized that Thanksgiving, Christmas, and intersession were so close. I looked forward eagerly to the free time between intersession and Easter when, soon after intersession, Bob called from school to tell us that he had seriously injured his knee. His father fetched him home and this represented the total sum of his parental obligation. Bob had to be put in traction for about six weeks. Hospitalization was impossible because of the length of time involved, so there was no question but that I would take care of him at home. I carried trays, turned TV channels, entertained visitors, got books from the library, and, because he was a young, healthy man who became bored and irritable from being confined. I also received a large amount of abuse. My supervisor kept wanting to know when I'd come back to work and finally I suggested she find someone to take my place. After seven weeks, Bob went back to school and I was without a job.

It took me six months to find other employment. After a year and a half on my second job, the agency offered to send me back to school, at their expense, to get my master's degree. It would mean giving up income for a year but I would receive, in return, after a year, a supervisory position and a substantial increase in salary. While completing my school application, Bill's school counselor informed me that my youngest child was falling miserably in junior high. He had never been a good student and since third grade I ran regularly to school conferences, supervised his studies and forced him to do hated homework. Nothing helped. The counselor offered no solution to the present problem, thought the difficulty might stem from the home, put it to me to figure something out. and of course I did.

I found a very expensive private school fully staffed with hand-picked educators and psychiatric experts dedicated to help the underachiever. I gave up my school plans in order to earn the money necessary to pay for Bill's private school. Almost every penny I earned went for tuition, psychiatric treatment, carfare, lunches, etc. The school, steeped in psychiatric principles, maintained that students who could not function academically usually suffered from disturbed parental relationships. Since Bill's father had little to do with raising his son, it was naturally I who was the controlling and domineering parent unable to let her son grow up. With years of experience and authority in all matters pertaining to education, and in order to obtain each student's confidence, the school established the rule that parents were not permitted to communicate with any staff member. Since the mother was usually the greatest threat to the child, the school director emphasized for my benefit that I would not be given any information regarding my son's progress. I was not permitted a phone conversation with a teacher and I was warned against trying to wheedle information from my son. I was advised to trust the school and relax control. No one seemed to notice that since I had previously given so much time and energy to Bill and his school problems, what they suggested was like a welcomed vacation. I gladly obeyed.
One year later, I received a phone call from the school psychiatrist who did not bother to disguise his annoyance and impatience with me. He questioned my lack of interest in my son, wondered why I never contacted the school or asked for a progress report. Before I could protest, I was informed that my son was not only failing everything, but was also using hard drugs. When I broke down in tears and confusion, I was told I had good reason to cry because my son was seriously emotionally ill and needed to be hospitalized.

Later, when I confronted Bill, he swore he did not use drugs, was having the same problems in private school as in public school, and never spoke of this before because he was advised to consult only with staff and never to discuss anything with his parents. I didn't believe him. I dragged him to doctors, put him through physical and psychological tests until one kind psychologist held me down long enough to convince me that Bill was not on drugs. He was not sick, and there was no reason to have him hospitalized. When the panic passed, I gained my senses and took Bill out of school. Very soon after, he got himself a job in a hospital working on a brain research program, ran a computer, experimented with cats, loved his work, and is now getting along just fine.

When my daughter Anne graduated from college, she embarked on a career to conquer the world, and I was her assistant. She went on a diet, lost fifteen pounds, went shopping, got great clothes, got her hair done at Sassoon, got an exciting job, and thus armed, moved out of my home to the world, life, and adventure.

To her horror and mine, she discovered that there were millions out there like herself. Her work, which consisted of an enormous amount of detailed and boring writing, was credited to her boss, and with all her clothes and fantastic figure, no one cared if she lived or died. Married women would not associate with a single girl and a single woman would not be seen with another single woman who was looking for friends. Men, generally in great demand, did not find it necessary to be even passingly polite, and their style was one of utter contempt, particularly toward a woman eager for a relationship. Anne, far away from the security and community of friends at college, had no one but me and this forced dependency resulted in hostility and fear. Unable to cope with the outside rejection and isolation, Anne moved back home, let her frustration out on me, and we fought constantly.

Finally she left her job and experimented with different life styles. She moved to a farm and came home; she went to the coast and came home; she found a commune and came home and nearly exhausted me with her activity and anxiety. Anne's father never got too involved because he did not wish to interfere in problems between mother and daughter. Finally, Anne became aware of her desperate behavior, stopped, found a better and more independent way to live, and we were again good friends.

It is hard, if not impossible, to estimate the cost to a human being in terms of time, energy, pain, and guilt as a result of the above relationships. The woman in the middle is the target of all negative emotions stemming from each family member's failure and frustration, and the damage can never be measured. When things go wrong, and they always do, she bears the burden, the responsibility, and the blame.

If she is to save herself, the women in the middle must learn to reject the myths regarding her family ties and responsibilities. She must no longer accept as natural her designated role as servant to all. She must question and challenge the privilege that excludes men from responsibilities and involvement with other human beings. She must reject the passivity of husbands, fathers, and brothers who sit by while wives, daughters, and sisters struggle alone with
the devastating hardships involved in caring for the dependent. She must reject the lies and advices of the patronizing professionals and experts who, because of their own incompetence and inadequacy, have mystified reality and have shifted the blame for their failure to find social, economic, psychological, and educational remedies onto the mother, wife, and woman.

I am told that the women's liberation movement is for young women, but older women are looking to be liberated from their particular oppression, as well as the oppression common to all women. The only reason I am writing this paper instead of sitting with my poor old mother or sweating over a large family dinner for children and relatives is because my right to my own life has been supported by my sisters in the movement. Being fifty is not so bad if you are not torn by guilt, brutal obligation, and socially induced feelings of low self-esteem. Sooner or later, the woman in the middle is you and me, and together we must find a way not to be crushed.

Florence Rush first came into the women's movement in 1971 as a member of OWL (Older Women's Liberation) and belonged to a consciousness-raising group, New York Radical Feminists, and Westchester Women's Liberation Coalition.