

Changing your career at mid-life

By Marilyn Melville

At the age of 43, after having worked for 13 years in human resources with a financial institution, I was burned out, tired of the office politics and of what I perceived as the endless cycle of useless meetings. I desperately wanted to make a career change but my strong need for security, fear of change and inability to imagine what else I might do, kept me glued to the office, working long hours and unable to take even the occasional afternoon off.

Not knowing what to do, one day I picked up and leafed through a brochure about a workshop entitled *Mid-Life Directions*. The title was intriguing, and I headed off for the weekend workshop. The experience there was subtle but significant. I felt affirmed in who I was and found acceptance for my confused feelings. The opportunity for quiet time to reflect on past achievements, remember my story and even begin to imagine a future was like an oasis for a parched soul.

A year later, at a New Year's Eve party, a woman sitting beside me quite unexpectedly told me about training for mid-life consulting work. I asked her who provided the training and to my surprise, she told me that the same two educators, with whom I'd taken the mid-life workshop a year previously, offered it. Although I lacked the necessary requirement of a Masters Degree, I took a chance and applied for the training. Fortunately I was accepted. This led some years later, to my forming a company that offers workshops and career counselling to adults in mid-life.

My story, I believe, has many elements of what people in mid-life can experience when they want to make a career change. Often there is deep frustration and dissatisfaction with the work that we are doing, but we feel unable to make a change because of our fears, our need for security or our simply not knowing what to do next. Often there is a conflict between a strong desire to work in a more meaningful or creative way and a need for financial security, comfort with the status quo, and a fear of the unknown.

These conflicting needs can lead to a sense of being stuck and the

feeling that there's no way out. Certainly, that was my experience. These are deeper issues that you need to be aware of as well.

Part of the challenge of making a career change in mid-life is enduring the discomfort of these conflicting needs. Another challenge is recognizing that we may be burned out and need time to restore ourselves. Just as overworked land yields only stunted produce, we cannot expect ourselves to be endlessly productive. It took me more than a little while to realize that what I needed was a time of stillness and quiet to prepare the ground for something new to emerge. Granted this is a difficult task in the often frenetic world that we live in, but it is one that is absolutely necessary in mid-life, where the need to "lie fallow" is particularly strong. To find this time may be one of your biggest challenges.

However, the difference between this time and our youth is that in our depleted state we can no longer make something happen out of the sheer force of our will and energy. If we try, we often end up in a bigger mess. In my view, a subtler process is taking place that requires patience and trust that, although the work once found so motivating is ending (which accounts for the frustration and boredom), in time, a new direction will emerge.

Accepting that we are in a process---the image of swimming with rather than against the current in a river is one that I find apt---and staying alert to what we are attracted to, what gives us pleasure or what we most enjoy, are important first steps. Initially allowing time to pursue those interests in a way that restores us, and not focusing too much on outcomes (Will this lead to a new career?) may also be necessary. In my case, I was drawn to a mid-life workshop. Another woman I know, a dental hygienist, was attracted to colours and so began taking painting classes, which over time led to study as an art therapist.

Another step is to be aware that, when we enter into a process, sometimes meaningful coincidences (synchronicities) can occur and point us in a certain direction. My experience of meeting a stranger at a New Year's Eve party, who told me about mid-life training by the educators with whom I'd earlier taken a workshop, is one such example. You can no doubt remember

similar instances of seemingly happenstance occurrences that opened up new avenues in your work and life.

Timing the change is another critical step in making a career change at mid-life. Acting prematurely, out of our discomfort, can put us into an even more unsatisfying situation. A merger in the company for which I worked and the opportunity to take a buy-out package provided the best timing for me to make a change. This is where patience, following our interests or passions, being alert to the unexpected opportunity and proper timing come together to bring about a successful career change.

Finally, I have to challenge the oft-repeated advice: do what you love and the money will follow. Personally I find this a misleading concept, because it often takes us off into an over idealized world of false expectations. It is extremely difficult to make a living from what we love to do. Part of the mid-life process is accepting our limitations. Some people are able to do what they love, but the rest of us in the great middle ground usually need to balance work we love with other work that pays the bills. This is part of the maturing process of mid-life.

While challenging, mid-life is an unprecedented time to learn more about ourselves, to pursue our deeper interests and to do work that is meaningful and that can make a genuine contribution to the world we live in.

Finally, you need to realize that with the possibility of an extended healthy and full life well into our 80's, mid life is really more like a threshold into what can be the most fulfilling and humanizing time of your life. And for many a career change can be an important first step.

Marilyn Melville is a certified Mid-Life Directions consultant who provides workshops and lifelwork counselling for midlife adults.

October 2001