

At 40, Reconsidering Work

What does paid work mean to you? Do you remember the magical powers of your first paycheck? When many of us first started working, a job represented being self-sufficient, becoming an adult, having control of our lives, and finding our talents. For others, work has provided the economic power we need to leave a bad relationship, support our children, and to live as we choose. As we reach midlife, however, many women naturally reexamine the place that jobs and careers hold in their lives.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 22 million women over the age of 45 are in the American workforce. More, a lifestyle magazine for women in their forties and fifties, recently conducted a survey of over 1,200 readers, three-quarters of whom are employed outside the home. The results showed that by the time a woman reaches midlife, career and relationships are less important to her than they were in her 20s and 30s. "Traveling (63 percent) and new hobbies (52 percent) are more important than career (35 percent) or volunteer work (29 percent)." The article also said that "eating a healthy diet," "maintaining old friendships," and "having time for yourself" ranked above "spouse/significant other."

For women who want to consciously create a more powerful, inspired second half of life, redefining your relationship with work is often the first of many course corrections you will make. This process can be anxiety producing, but also very exciting.

When I was younger, most of my choices, with the exception of my very first job right out of college which was that of a flight attendant with Pan American, were made from the outside in. In other words, I chose work based on how much money I could make rather than choosing to do work that I loved or felt passionate about. Nothing satisfied me, I worked in the travel business, sold insurance, became a partner in a catering company, a candy manufacturing company, and even owned a small part of a restaurant. After various setbacks—all arising from my doing work that was not aligned with my true passions—I had to return to working in corporate America with someone else as my boss.

My last corporate job was in a terrific place earning very good income, but I was stressed, overworked, and unhappy. I had been ignoring my inner longings, working at jobs that did not resonate with who I was on the inside and that did not support the kind of life I wanted to lead. There came a time when I had to ask myself which was more important, my salary and benefits, or my sanity? I chose my sanity. At age 60 I left my corporate job to start a counseling/coaching practice that I love, that serves my life and the lives of others.

In our culture, the expectation that we will earn a living is pervasive. When someone asks us what we want to do with the rest of our lives, we usually answer in terms of work—going back to it, retiring from it, changing jobs, adjusting our hours. However it is clear that work priorities shift for women in midlife—and if we ignore this urge to recalibrate our lives, we will tire ourselves out trying to hold back or tamp down those new creative thoughts and energies. Do we really want to define ourselves in terms of the job we do? What doors will open up if we truly reconsider the place that work holds in our lives?

Rethinking your work life doesn't just mean finding a new job or a new line of work. It means seeing who you are and who you are not. It means noticing how your priorities have shifted and deciding to live in integrity with those new priorities. You have to ask yourself, what matters?

Questions to Explore

Where does work fall on my priority list? Could I reduce my hours? Could I reduce the mental energy and anxiety I channel towards work? What aspects of my work life no longer suit me? How is my work impacting my health? How is my work impacting my relationships? Do I feel powerful at work? If not, then where? What were my dream jobs as a child? What experiences do I want to be having right now? How would more work, less work, or different work help me experience those things?

It took me a long time to acknowledge what I really wanted to do and to allow myself to pursue it, but now I find satisfaction and excitement in building a business at a time when so many are thinking of retiring. My advice, recalibrate your life now! Don't wait until you are 60. Investigate today what work means to you and how it can support your meaningful, empowered life.

In love and light,

Lucia Luna

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