

Getting To What's Next

What happens when you ask, “What do I want to do with the rest of my life?” and get no answer? In her new book, **Suzanne Braun Levine** explores the scary, necessary confusion known as **Fertile Void**

EVERY 50-SOMETHING WOMAN I SPOKE TO knew what I meant by “Fertile Void” the moment the words were out of my mouth. It didn’t matter whether she’d just been fired, or divorced, or retired, or hadn’t changed her routine one bit. Sooner or later each had found herself in a prolonged state of confusion just when she felt impelled to take action. Each had felt the spirit of adventure stirring without knowing what action to take.

Alexis is typical. She retired 18 months ago from a long career as a high school teacher, and she’s still searching for her next commitment: “This whole year has gone by, and I think I’ve cleaned *one* kitchen drawer.”

Madeline is also typical. She’s painfully extricating herself from a job of 25 years. “I knew it

was time to go when I heard myself respond to a suggestion by saying, ‘You can’t do that. It won’t work. We already tried it.’” She longs to hear herself say, “I’ve *never* tried that; it might work.” Whatever “that” might be.

We know what “middle age” used to be about: cutting back, scaling down, giving up. We know that isn’t for us. Still, we sense that doors are closing, that a chapter is over. We’re no longer fertile; we’re no longer the trendsetting generation; we’re less likely to make a major mark. So we’re afraid of setting forth with unrealistic expectations: Can I really learn a new language? Start my own business? Can I fall in love? Get a divorce? Close up the house? Do I have what it takes to make changes in my life? **w**



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: HOLLY LINDEY.

We are restless and curious and ready to get to work. But we're also full of doubts—and the doubts and the readiness can cancel each other out, leaving us stymied by a sense of aimlessness. Setting goals at this point will only throw us off course; meaningful goals will emerge in time. But the unknowingness is hard to take.

“This ‘I don’t know where I am’ state creates anxiety . . . because it is unknown territory,” writes therapist Ilana Rubinfeld, who coined the phrase “Fertile Void” to describe a crucial step in the process of change. “It is a time when your old ways do not work and you don’t [yet] have new ways of coping.” In trying to answer The Big Question—*What am I going to do with the rest of my life?*—we’re confronted with a more immediate one: Who am I *now*?

The Fertile Void is a necessary, though bewildering, hiatus—a place of change in which we feel stuck. For a proactive woman, the response to being stuck is to expend more energy, make more lists, go to more seminars, muster more will power, make more

decisions. But the result, she often finds, is that she’s just spinning her wheels. The solution, paradoxically, is not more movement, but less. The cure for “stuck” is “still.”

Up to now, we have pushed through one stage after another—the adolescent wanting to be a woman, the woman wanting to be a wife, the mother wanting her kids to get older so she could get some of her life back. Looking ahead, however, we see very little to go on. That is because *ahead* is right now. The next stage is the shapeless process of the Fertile Void. “It is tempting to push through this stage quickly, to deny the struggles, fears and doubts,” warns Rubinfeld. But, she adds, “By experiencing it fully, you will be able to continue on.”

SLOWING TO A WALK

Rubinfeld’s reminder not to rush is almost an insult to the multitasking skills we’ve acquired at great expense during our adult lives. Until now, we have paced ourselves by the ethic of keeping up and moving up, getting more done, not wasting time. But even if our present circumstances require that we keep up the pace, most of us have begun to feel uncomfortable in overdrive; simple burnout can make us want to slow to a walk. But there is no on/off switch to the pace. It takes time to break free of time.

Most women report spending a year or more in the free fall of the Fertile Void. I spent two years there. After losing my job in a power struggle with my boss, I felt like a conductor without an orchestra. I installed a lovely new roll-top desk in the corner of my bedroom and took on freelance projects. I would sit at my computer and bang out things, interrupted by telemarketing calls and distracted by dust balls and unanswered mail. But, deprived of the energizing uplift of being part of a familiar working group, I found that my day seemed unreal. *I* seemed unreal. Without the defining structure of an office and colleagues, I didn’t feel like a grown-up. The upside was that I saw more of my two teenage kids. The downside was that I became more intrusive in their lives. I brought little to

the end-of-day conversations with my husband and less income to the family.

I kept asking myself: What's next? There was no reply. People tried to be helpful by posing other questions: "Do you want a full-time job?" "Do you want to go back to school?" "Do you want to retire?" "Didn't you always want to paint?" None of which were helpful, because I simply wasn't ready to answer them. I needed more time. I needed time to make peace with time.

When I no longer had to live at the mercy of my watch, I felt like I was swimming through a miasma of undifferentiated hours and minutes. On days when I had three things to do, I would panic that I wouldn't get them done; and when there was nothing I had to do, I would lie in bed and wait for something to happen.

Little by little, I began to rebuild my relationship with time. I took added delight in lunch with a friend when I didn't have to check whether we had been there over an hour. I realized I had stopped reading for pleasure, because I hated doing it in short or interrupted doses; now I could settle in for a hundred pages at a time. I found that work didn't need to take place only in daylight hours. I learned, in short, to take *my* time. And I am gaining clarity about what I want to do with it. I am adjusting to the difference between the unrelenting tick of the clock and the rhythmic beat of a human heart that speeds up and slows down according to what's being experienced. As long as we live by the maxim that time is money, we forget that time is life.

FINDING A NEW PATH

The more we renegotiate our relationship with time, the closer we get to the ultimate power of time: to run out. Karen Van Allen, a psychotherapist, got there about six years ago. She realized that between the time she was a teenager who believed she'd live forever and recent years when she began to face the fact that she won't, she hadn't thought much about her mortality. She began to see that facing what is lost with age is the first step toward finding the passions that will fire the discoveries that await us before time runs out.

Together with Ruth Neubauer, another psychotherapist who had come to the same place in her own life, Van Allen has devised a program for women over 50 called "Retirement or What's Next." The two therapists' experience with nearly 100 women has given them these guidelines for negotiating the Fertile Void:

Get to know the question. "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?" is not a light question," says Neubauer, "In the group, we try to hold onto the question and allow for the messiness of not knowing the answer." If anyone starts to offer advice—to *fix* whatever is broken—Neubauer and Van Allen shift the conversation away from what they call the *I'll take care of you* track. "When someone starts saying, 'Well, what you should do is to get your husband to . . . ' you can see the other woman shrivel," says Van Allen.

When anxiety or impatience creeps in, Neubauer and Van Allen reassure the women that each one has the answer—or *an* answer—she needs. "You might not know what it is by the end of our weekend or even six months from now," Van Allen tells them. But if you keep living with the question, you'll eventually get a sense of where you are on this journey.

Listen to yourself. It isn't easy to sit still, especially when you're uncomfortable, and this is uncomfortable stuff. What you need to know is that *nothing is expected of you*.

Our first presumption about this time of life is that it presents just one more to-do list. So we dutifully line up an agenda of tasks and, typically, it calls for more than a few cleaning-out projects—the attic, the garage, the closets. And then we don't do them. But there's a profound impulse behind the mundane lists: to get rid of the detritus of the past few decades and pack up what matters for the next stage.

Tune in to what turns you on. "This is often very poignant," says Van Allen, "because a lot of women say, 'I don't know.' It is very frightening for them. They don't know if they care about anything.

"We have to make room for that small voice that says, 'I really don't

know . . . but I think maybe. . . I used to . . .” she urges. “A lot of us don’t have big passions, like, ‘I knew from the time I was three I was going to be a concert pianist,’ so we have to issue an invitation to even a little flicker of interest.” Neubauer and Van Allen encourage women to move to music, read poetry, write, draw—anything that will “turn off the censors,” those nagging voices that tell us our dreams are silly or impractical or irresponsible. Or, worst of all, “selfish.”

Van Allen remembers that one of their first clients had a dream—“a very tiny dream, but a persistent one—of volunteering in an animal shelter. That’s what she found on her plate. And she did it!”

Stop listening to others. Whose voice is it in your head that says, “This is not okay?” Most often it’s a parent or a teacher, but it can be anyone who has passed judgment on your self-expression. “There are a lot of obstacles in our way,” says Neubauer. “And the question is, what are they? And who says they are there? And what if you pretended they weren’t there?”

In place of the naysayers, Neubauer and Van Allen suggest imagining a personal board of directors composed of people you know or people you don’t know—“the Dalai Lama, if you want”—who are on your side. Picture them sitting there listening, taking you seriously, and offering encouragement. The objective is not to turn to outside “experts” for solutions, but to establish new voices in your own internal dialogue. As one woman put it, “I found myself saying things I knew all along—but ‘didn’t know’ until then.”

Letting go. There are moments when it may seem as if nothing will be left once the leftovers and and false prophets of a lifetime are cleaned out. And there are moments when the old ways start to look awfully good. Every opening of a new idea means letting go of something, and that doesn’t feel good—even if what you are letting go of hasn’t been good.

Every woman in every group beams memory lapses or reading glasses or a lost waistline. But some find it’s a relief to let go of the constant

preoccupation with looks. One woman finally said good-bye to the assumption—a bond between her mother, her sisters, and herself—that a woman has to make keeping up her appearance a top priority to “keep a man.” She realized that if she cut back on manicures and facials, she would have more time to devote to the other things she now realized she wanted to get to.

Letting go also involves shedding the shoulda-woulda-coulda thinking around past life choices: “Whether you had children, whether you married the person you should have; all of those things need to be relinquished in order to get on with the rest,” says Van Allen. Paradoxically, the same applies to future choices. Van Allen recalled a woman who had developed a clear game plan for her retirement. “She had set the date, she had managed the money. Then her husband got terribly ill, and she had to become his full-time caregiver. There are so many examples of best-laid plans going awry. Even if you figure everything out, you can’t get too attached to it.”

In place of the best-laid plans, we are building a new resource—a mellow confidence in our ability to cope with and even embrace what life brings. So while we cannot let go of the grief and fear that come with a heightened awareness of mortality, we can let go of the notion that we can do anything about it. It frees up psychic energy to stop trying to get a grip on things we can’t control in the first place.

In the Gnostic Gospels, Jesus is reported to have said “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.” The Fertile Void is where the choice is made. It’s the long, slow, deep breath—the gathering in of strength—that precedes a daring leap into the unknown. It’s where we let go of demons and demands we no longer need, and begin building new dreams, one well-lived day at a time. **M**

FROM THE BOOK *INVENTING THE REST OF OUR LIVES: WOMEN IN SECOND ADULTHOOD* BY SUZANNE BRAUN LEVINE, PUBLISHED IN JANUARY 2005 BY VIKING BOOKS, ©2005.