

# • communion

THE FEMALE SEARCH FOR LOVE



bell hooks

author of the national bestsellers

*All About Love and Salvation*

*One*

---

aging to love, loving to age

EVERY day I talk to women about love and aging. It's an over-forty thing to do. The exciting news is this: Everyone agrees that aging is more fun than it has ever been before. It has its joys and delights. It also has its problems. What's new for many women is that the problems don't always get us down. And if they do, we don't stay down—we pick ourselves up and start over. This is part of the magic, the power and pleasure of midlife. Even though trashing feminism has become as commonplace as chatting about the weather, we all owe feminism, the women's liberation movement, women's lib—whatever you call it. It helped change how women see aging. Many of us feel better about aging because the old scripts that told us life ends at thirty or forty, that we turn into sexless zombies

## C O M M U N I O N

who bitch bitch bitch all the time and make everyone around us miserable were thrown away. So it does not matter that feminist movement has its faults—it helped everyone let these scripts go. And I do mean everyone.

We have changed our ways of thinking about aging and we have changed our ways of thinking about love. When the world started changing for women because of feminist movement and a lot became more equal than it ever had been, for a time it was only women who had been allowed a taste of power—class privilege or education or extra-special-hard-to-ignore-gifts—who most “got it” and “got with it.” These women were among the feminist avant-garde. Often they had exceptional advantages or were over-achievers. While feminism helped these women soar, it often failed to change in any way the lives of masses of ordinary women. Many advantages gained by women’s lib did not trickle down, but the stuff around aging did. By challenging sexist ways of thinking about the body, feminism offered new standards of beauty, telling us plump bodies were luscious and big bellies sublime, that hair hanging under our arms and covering our legs was alluring. It created new possibilities of self-actualization in both our work lives and our intimate lives.

As women have changed our minds about aging, no longer seeing it as negative, we have begun to think differently about the meaning of love in midlife. Beth Benatovich’s collection of interviews *What We Know So Far:*

## AGING TO LOVE, LOVING TO AGE

*Wisdom Among Women*, offers powerful testimony affirming this fact. With prophetic insight, writer Erica Jong declares, "I believe that this is a moment of history in which we are engaged in a kind of spiritual revolution—the kind of revolution that creates pathfinders. . . . Older women are again being accorded their ancient role as prophetesses and advisors. . . . That's the great transformation that's happening again in our time. In looking to things other than the body beautiful for inspiration, we're being forced to redefine the second half of our lives, to become pathfinders." Difficulties still abound for aging women. What's most changed is the constructive way women of all ages, classes, and ethnicities cope with these difficulties. Open, honest conversations about the myriad ways empty-nest syndrome, the death of parents or a spouse, and/or the deeply tragic death of a child all create psychological havoc in our lives have helped. Our talk of this suffering would be stale and commonplace, were it not for all the creative ways women are attending to the issue of aging both in midlife and in the postsixty years. The courage to choose adventure is the ingredient that exists in women's lives today that was there for most women before the contemporary feminist movement. Contrast the women who suffered breast cancer silently with the women today who speak out, who proudly and lovingly claim their bodies intact, whole, and beautiful after surgical removals. Poet Deena Metzger boldly proclaims

## C O M M U N I O N

the beauty of the one-breasted woman on a poster. Theorist Zillah Eisenstein tells all about breast cancer, her personal story, in *Man-made Breast Cancers*. In these ways women in midlife are changing the world.

In the exciting world of women I was raised in—an extended family with lots of great-grandmothers, grandmothers, great-aunts, aunts, daughters, and their children—I learned early that aging would be full of delight. Women around us talked about the prime of their life as though it was indeed the promised land. Like beautiful snakes, they were going to reach their prime, boldly shed their skin, and acquire another—this one more powerful and beautiful than all the rest. Something in them was going to be resurrected. They were going to be born again and have another chance. These were poor women born into a world without adequate birth control, a world where having an abortion could end one's life, psychologically or physically. They were women who saw menopause as a rite of passage in which they would move from slavery to freedom. Until then they often felt trapped. This feeling of being trapped was one they shared with women across class. Even women who were solitary, celibate, and quite able to manage economically lived with the ever-present fearful possibility that all that could be changed by sexual coercion. In their world, once a woman was no longer able to bear children, she was just freer—midlife, the magic time.

## AGING TO LOVE, LOVING TO AGE

Oh, how I was filled with delight when I heard Mama and her friends carry on about the joys of “the change of life.” They never used the word “menopause.” How intuitively sensible! Had they taken to heart medical ways of defining shifts in midlife, they might have been forced to take on board the negative implications this word would bring—the heavy weight of loss it evokes. Instead they had their own special language. A subtle, seductive, mysterious, celebratory way of talking about changes in midlife emanated from them. Like a perfumed mist whose scent has followed and haunted me, it touches me now. I have arrived. I am receiving the signs. I am in the midst of change.

To Mama, her friends, and lots of other women she would never know, the approach of midlife was exciting because it meant that they were no longer compelled to spend all their time taking care of others. They were finally to have time for themselves. The absence of free time—time spent doing nothing—had plagued them all their lives. And they looked forward to days when time would hang heavy on their hands. Days when they could think about play and rest and forget about work. Listening to Mama and her friends, I never thought about what I wanted my life to be like in midlife; I just accepted on blind faith, with absolute trust, the conviction that it would be sweeter than it had been before. Even if the before was sweet, midlife would be sweeter still. I did not know then

## C O M M U N I O N

that midlife would also be a time to rethink everything I had learned about the nature of women and love.

Most writing by women on midlife talks about menopause as though that's the only "happening" event. Not true. There are so many happening events it's hard to keep track of them all. From day one, when woman hit Earth, she has been the heartbeat of all happening events, except that most of those events were not arranged by her or for her pleasure. Much of what makes midlife magical for women now is that we are the ones making the arrangements—inventing our time and our way. For most of our lives women have followed the path of love set for us by patriarchal pathfinders. Despite our disappointments and heartaches, we have gone along with the program and accepted without challenge and critique the notion that love can exist in a context of domination. A feminist movement and many heartaches later, more women than ever before now know that love and domination do not go together—that if one is present, the other will be absent. For some of us this has caused more heartache. Since domination is still the primary order of the day, women, especially women who desire to be in partnerships with men, want to know how to love and be loved. That's one of the big questions this book answers.

When I first talked with women about writing this book, the most frequently asked question was whether or not love was as important to women in midlife as it was



## C O M M U N I O N

together.” Can we imagine that she would say of a committed relationship to the partner of her dreams “we have only love”? From the perspective of midlife, many women can testify that lasting love matters, whether we know it first or only in romantic friendships and/or in bonds of love with nonplatonic unions.

Lasting love is vital because we know ourselves differently in relationships of constancy where we have witnessed change through time. We cannot really risk emotionally in relationships where we do not feel safe. Commitment is the ground of our being that lets us make mistakes, be forgiven, and try again. Oddly, Pagan Kennedy initially seemed to imagine that she and her friend were creating a relationship whose path had not been charted. While she went back to and discovered the value of romantic friendship in nineteenth-century life, she did not report from the accounts women, who are not in midlife or aging, offer as evidence of the stability and sustaining tenderness of such bonds. She never uses the term “romantic friendship,” which is the name that exists to define the bonds she describes. Folks may fear that term, because “romantic” in patriarchal cultural always evokes the possibility of sexual activity.

If women of all ages freely embrace the term “romantic friendship,” we will open up the space where we can develop primary bonds in platonic relationships that are



## LASTING LOVE: ROMANTIC FRIENDSHIPS

constant, committed, and able to last a lifetime. These relationships ensure that the woman who does not find a perfect mate will still know true and abiding love. And at the end of the day it is this love that sustains us and gives life meaning.