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## Growing in the Family: The Middle Years

Merle Gunsalus

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**GROWING IN THE FAMILY**

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# THE MIDDLE YEARS

*Myth  
and  
Magic*



AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE COLLEGE and U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# THE MIDDLE YEARS:

## MYTH and MAGIC

Merle L. Gunsalus  
Family Life Specialist

As we recognize the fact that all people are growing throughout the entire life-span, it becomes easier to assess quite clearly just what each period of growing means to us as an individual. Aging can be neither ignored nor escaped—but it is something that can provide many basic satisfactions. The process itself is beyond our control, but **how** it affects us is something we can determine. No longer do we believe that a particular age is **THE** most important one.

Since middle-age as a mass phenomenon is only of 20th century origin, we know little of its characteristics and its opportunities. A great deal of study has been made of childhood and of old age but usable facts about middle-age remain to be discovered. Because we have been mainly a youth-centered culture we become 30, 40 or 50 with considerable question, regret, and uneasiness.

There are rich and deep satisfactions to be enjoyed during each decade of life if we will only recognize them. Victor Hugo very happily described 40 as the old age of youth and 50 as the youth of old age. Can you think of someone old at 30 or another who is young at 70? Age in itself does not say that we are either young or old but our attitudes and actions do. Some settle down or slow up at an early age while others never get around to either. Generally, middle age covers the years between youth and old age. Each period of life blends into the one which follows. The child prepares for adult life and the young adult prepares for ripe maturity. We never stop changing even though ages and stages are not always clearly recognizable. We are continually preparing for the future. An inquiring mind which fearlessly and honestly wants to “know the score” is an asset at any age.

### **A PERSONAL CHECK UP**

Have you ever revisited a community or home where you once lived? It is a quick way to see what time has done to people and places. Is it as easy to recognize what the years tell about you? Perhaps some questions will help you to take stock of yourselves.

- \* How do you look at life?
- \* Do you know what kind of a person you are?
- \* Can you usually handle the hardships that come your way?
- \* Are you happy?
- \* How do you look at your failures? At your successes?
- \* Do you live with confidence or do you live with fear?
- \* How long since you've had a physical check-up?
- \* What about your emotional health?

The manner in which you answer these questions will tell you much about how you can spend or are spending the second half of your life.

### **MIDDLE YEARS HAVE NEW MEANING**

Compared to past eras, Mrs. Average Woman of today knows that life holds new meanings for her at middle age.

She is better physically than her mother or grandmother. She is not as old at 40 or 50 years of age as they. Her life expectancy stretches into added years.

Her children are marrying younger. As her family responsibilities end earlier she has additional middle years to use constructively.

There is not as much drudgery in actual physical tasks. More leisure is here to be effectively used.

She has new relationships to work out with her husband when children leave the home for furthering education, marriage, or a job.

She is more attractive if she chooses. She is just hitting her stride.

She may need to decide whether or not she will work for pay outside her home.

She recognizes that preparation for the older years of retirement is necessary. She lays the foundation during youth and middle-age for the kind of oldster she will be because she knows that, like life insurance, she must get it before she needs it. Competency and skill achieved as wife and mother assure a good basis for the living of later years.

**WANT TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT?**

If you have become a well-rounded person who is "growing up" rather than only "growing older," you have already considered what you can do to make middle-age an enriched time for living and for the satisfactions of the coming later years. You have discovered:

**That thinking** about the "empty nest" years while the children are still around works two ways. It makes your family doubly dear and your often hectic schedule easier. Things increase in value as we realize that we shall not always have them. A healthy bit of looking forward helps to take the sting out of middle age.

**That you can** begin to develop inner resources. The busiest wife and mother can take a few minutes here and there to get used to her own companionship. If she learns now to banish worries and brooding and to think deliberately of constructive things, her mind will be a livelier, more worth-while comrade later on.

**That you must** guard against becoming too wrapped up in the children. Mother can not forever enjoy a matching mother-daughter outfit nor belong perennially to mother study clubs. If we really love our youngsters, we must wean ourselves by having lives of our own. Otherwise we burden our children with an unjust responsibility for our happiness later on. We may even become over-possessive mothers who are unable to untie the apron-strings.

**That keeping** in touch with things that interest you will provide a big field for exploration later on. By reading a new book, acquiring another skill, talking to people, you build your resources as an individual. These activities can help build bridges to life ahead.

**That the whole** area of public service in the community becomes increasingly important as the years roll past. Merely keeping busy has no value in itself. Activity that shares and gives is personally satisfying. You are needed in your community.

**That you are experiencing** physical and emotional changes. Frankly recognize that muscle feats are for youngsters. Studies show that the peak of physical stamina is reached in the early twenties and young men of 28 and 29 discovered that even they could not keep up with the kids. By sparing ourselves unnecessary physical exertion and by leading reasonably regular lives, we feel just as vigorous at 40 or 50 as we did at 30.

**It becomes** more difficult to recognize the "stiffness" in our habits of thinking, acting, and feeling.

### TIME FOR LIVING

**Most** people complain that they are too busy to do the things they would like to do. Do you ever say, "I'm too busy"—to live? Let's hope that we can learn to take less pride in just being busy. Sometimes this is used only as an excuse that we lay to today's fast pace of living in a machine age.

**You** are the loser if you're too busy:

To make new friends or keep the old ones.

To be courteous. What is so urgent that you can't take time?

To help someone. Remember that doing favors for others is one of life's most solid satisfactions.

To read. This activity is a necessity as well as a luxury.

To write letters.

To think. Sheer mental laziness becomes a habit.

**Make** more time for yourself. It is possible if you **cut down on your hurrying**. You will also make fewer mistakes. The early Greeks considered a hurried person not quite civilized. Did you ever hear this quotation, "He speeded to an early grave, never to enjoy the time he saved"? **Refuse to become a slave to tight time schedules.** Although we live by our clocks, we do not need to be their slaves. **Learn to make wise choices:** to be selective, to eliminate unessentials. Because habit becomes numbing, it is easy to use time for an activity that serves no real purpose for us. At least once a year ask yourself, "What am I doing that I would be just as well off not to do?" **Planning** puts order into your work. Don't overload. Anticipate what's ahead. Think of courses of action you might choose if suddenly confronted with an important problem. Avoid getting off on a tangent that confuses the issue. Finally, **check on your ability to concentrate.** While diversion is easy, practice building your resistance against distraction. When you are interrupted, practice coming back to the business at hand.

Time will be in short measure for the woman who undertakes more than any human being can perform between sunrise and sunset. The woman who joins too many groups or who does her housework inefficiently will never have enough time either. If we learn to live by our inner clocks, they'll tick off many happy moments. The Finns have a proverb: "God never made haste; there is nothing so much of as time." American slang merely says, "Take it easy."

### LOOK IN YOUR MIRROR

Do you like what you see? It is easy to grow careless about your appearance when you are at home most of the time or when you are not feeling well. That reflection in the mirror can be changed by one person—you. Try a new hairdo

or choose that new dress in a more becoming style and flattering color. Your mental attitude is affected by your appearance. If you care how you look you'll do something about it.

Look more closely. Do the corners of your mouth turn up or down? How many worry lines have you allowed to set in permanently? Although you can't always see attitudes plainly written on a person's face, they do contribute much to the total picture of a person. The way you feel about a person or a thing—or about yourself—influences the way you act.

Keep your sense of humor because it can help you feel and look young at any age.

Can you approve of the person you see when you look at yourself in a mirror? If not, you are the most important person to effect a change. Being young at any age is up to you.

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