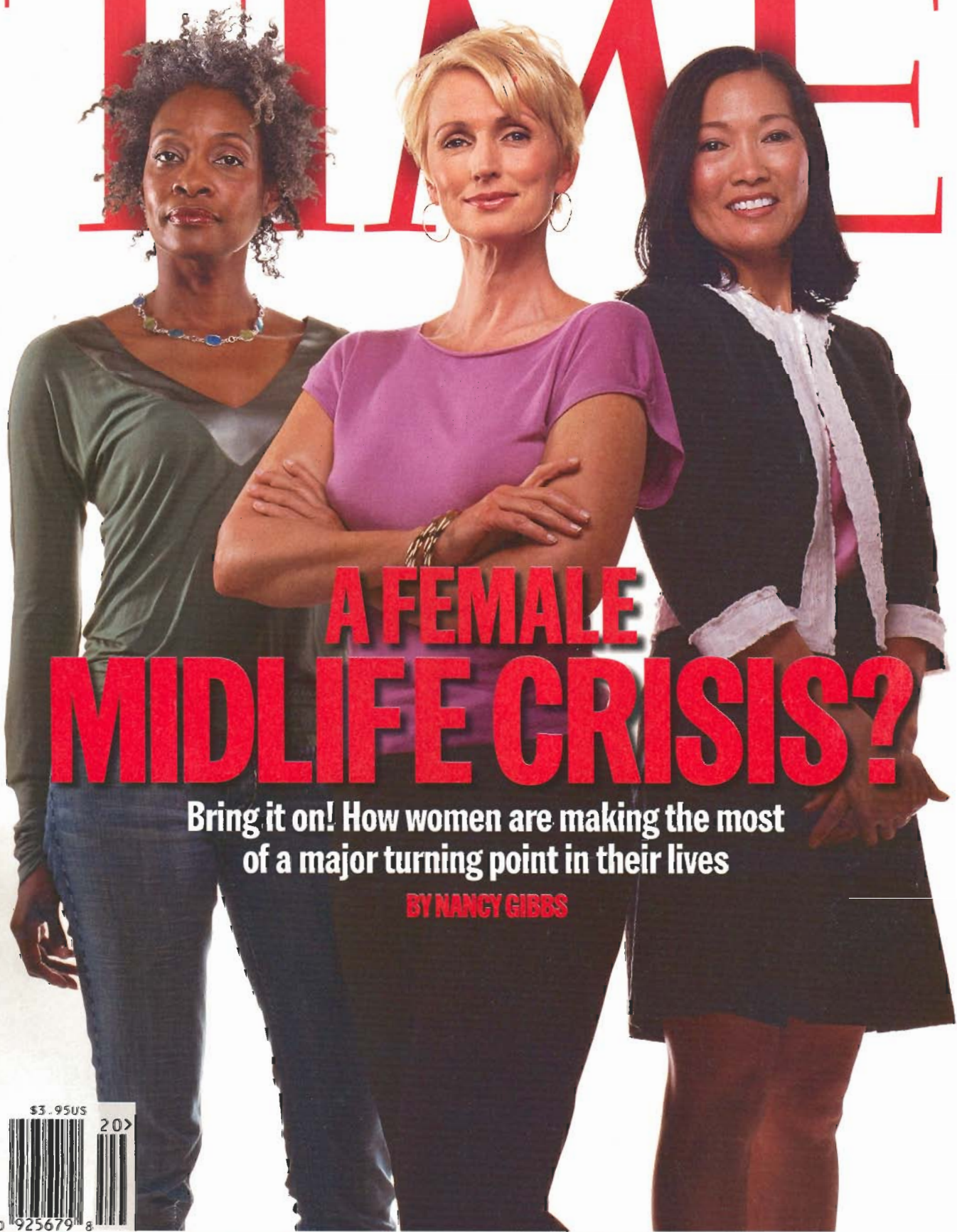


Summer's Hot Movies ■ Inside a Baghdad ER

TIME



A FEMALE MIDLIFE CRISIS?

Bring it on! How women are making the most of a major turning point in their lives

BY NANCY GIBBS

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COVER: Photograph for TIME by Michael Grecco. Models, from left: Marilyn Johnson, Joy Bell, Doris Usui

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Claudia Wallis

Crisis? I'll Take Mine to Go

I'd love an inner journey, but who's got the time?

HAVING JUST TURNED 50, I FIGURE I'M ABOUT DUE FOR MY MIDLIFE CRISIS. I mean, I've got most of the prerequisites: a kid who has left the nest for college, 25 years at the same company, hot flashes and an outdated hairstyle. The problem is, I can't quite squeeze it in. I've got this 11-year-old daughter who, while quite tolerant of my yoga habit, just might go off the rails if I indulge my yen for a six-month retreat at an ashram in Kerala. Then there's the college-tuition bill. Do you think Skidmore would cook up an emergency scholarship for my son if my contribution to the family income suddenly dropped to, say, zero? Oh, and there's one more problem. Since my husband is self-employed, we're awkwardly dependent on my company-supplied health insurance. Umm, scratch the ashram.

Many of my friends are also turning 50, and they seem to be having much the same problem. Midlife crisis? Sure, I'll put it on the to-do list, after the dishes, supervising homework and paying the bills. Being part of

the delayed-parenthood generation, quite a few of my friends are smack in the middle of raising kids. At least one of my peers—a champion procrastinator—just celebrated her first child's first birthday. Others have kids that are nearly grown but, real estate prices being what they are, that doesn't mean their nests will be empty anytime soon. And none of them seem ready to retire or take a flyer on a change-of-life career move—at least not voluntarily.

Sometime in the misty past, most of us glommed onto the idea that life progresses neatly from one phase to another. A midlife crisis seemed to fit naturally into this scheme, somewhere around, oh, 47. Now it's as if the pages of Gail Sheehy's *Passages* have been put through a blender. You can have a baby at any age from 15 to 50. You may find yourself back in school at 30, 40 or 60. And that's partly because you can be put out to pasture by your employer at any age at all. University of

Minnesota sociologist Phyllis Moen tracks the breakdown of the "lockstep" life path in her book *The Career Mystique*. What does midlife even mean, wonders Moen, when life's trajectory is no longer linear? "I make fun of people who say that midlife is between 35 and 70, because what in the world is left out?"

And yet turning 50 is no trifling thing, as my friends and I have discovered. Maybe we're too busy and too burdened to run off to an ashram, but in the small slivers of time that we hoard for ourselves, we seem to be bringing the ashram to us. Most of us are rethinking what's important in our lives and making a point of rebuilding old friendships. We're adjusting our frantic pace just enough to notice and savor small pleasures. The birthday gifts are telling: exotic tea and a glass brewing pot from a friend who has discovered that a daily tea ceremony creates an oasis in a long day of caring for an autistic child; an assortment of nut oils, wine vinegars and chocolate truffles from a pal eager to share favorite things from her home in Switzerland. And I, to my amazement, find myself overcoming my technophobia to make giveaway compilations of my current favorite songs. Are those the tokens of a midlife crisis? To me, it feels more like a midlife reappraisal, or maybe even the first hint of that traditional blessing of advancing age: wisdom. That and one of those spiky Sharon Stone hairstyles, and I'll be all set. ■

hospice nurses, started Act Now RNs. Their mission: to make nursing available outside the hospital setting, to help families care for aging relatives by referring them to financial planners, assisted-living facilities, case managers and skilled nursing care. The staff, Bouty says, "is pretty much our age. It's all about getting in there and helping, doing something different and feeling good about what you're doing instead of just working for a paycheck." They knew their target audience was other midlife women: "We are historically and naturally the caregivers in our family ... the majority of our clients are the adult children trying to figure out what to do next."

THERE IS NO TELLING THE IMPACT this generation is going to have as it reinvents what it means to get older and applies its many blessings and ingenuity to the pursuit of health and happiness. "As we age, everything for our generation is going to be different," says Susan Johnson, 54, who quit her job as a Washington lobbyist to become a consultant to families with aging parents and complex medical problems. "We're staying in shape. We're eating healthier. We're Internet savvy. As we start to get into our golden years, we'll be on the Internet, investigating drugs and protocols. And we'll seek help when we need it. If we need a consultant, we hire one. If we need a

coach to teach the latest exercise in Pilates or whatever, we hire people. We are a generation that will continue to invent. We won't just accept what's laid out ahead for us." Now that many Americans, according to a survey, think that full-fledged adulthood begins at 26, there is room for multiple midlife crises. There is the "quarter-life crisis" that hits at 25, the traditional one in your 40s and still another 20 years later. We are living too long and too well to stay settled even in a contented state for more than a few years at a time. And with experience, each new life-cycle crisis stands a better chance of looking like just another chance to start all over again. —With reporting by Melissa August/Washington, Amanda Bower and Deirdre van Dyk/New York, Jeanne McDowell/Los Angeles, Siobhan Morrissey/Boca Raton, Betsy Rubiner/Des Moines and Leslie Whitaker/Chicago



ILLUSTRATION FOR TIME BY LOU BROOKS