



Welcome to the age of liberation

Turning 50 can be the start of your most powerful decade with a good mix of energy experience and authority. It's time to let the real you emerge.

THE ESSAY by Susan Wyndham

There was a question I wanted to ask the Prime Minister. He and his wife had popped over from Kirribilli House to enjoy a superior view of the New Year's Eve fireworks from the lawn of Admiralty House, where my husband and I were also guests of the Governor-General. As midnight ticked over and Kevin '07 became Kevin '08, I wanted to know how old he felt. Rudd's birthday falls two days after mine and last September we both reached the ambiguous age of 50. We weren't the only ones. Looking around, I have noticed - as the new owner of a schnauzer or a Vespa sees other schnauzer and Vespa owners - that everyone seems to be turning 50.

Among the famous and once-famous figures born in 1957 are the actors Daniel Day-Lewis, Frances McDormand, Richard E. Grant, Rachel Ward, John Turturro, Melanie Griffith, Steve Buscemi, Kelly McGillis and Stephen Fry. The film directors Ethan Coen and Spike Lee. The musicians Nick Cave, Gloria Estefan, Eddie Van Halen and Patty Smyth. The golfers Nick Faldo and Seve Ballesteros, and ice skater Jayne Torvill. The writers Nick Hornby, Nicholas Shakespeare, Nicholas Coleridge and Sara Douglass. The French president's ex-wife, Cecilia Sarkozy, Princess Caroline and Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg. And Osama bin Laden. This year we will be joined by the likes of Madonna and Michael Jackson.

As baby boomers we have moved through life in the middle of a great demographic bulge, trend-leaders because of our numbers, and as we hit our half-century we make a brief pyrotechnic flash in the sky. There are, therefore, a rash of new books about our condition, a lot of talk and some desperate jokes.

Fifty is a milestone where we can't help

taking stock. While we can't pretend it is only halfway through the average lifespan, 50 neatly dissects adult life. Yes, we are indisputably middle-aged but it is not that simple: we teeter between our clearly remembered youth and glimpses of old age. A "turning 50" blogger likens his age to a photograph of a pink-skied landscape with the question, "Sunrise or sunset?"

We are in "the Permanent Period", according to the American novelist Richard Ford. Frank Bascombe, the sportswriter-turned-real estate agent of Ford's middle-America trilogy, is 55 in the final book, last year's *The Lay Of The Land*, and deep into the Permanent Period. Ford defines this as "the period that, after you're dead, you'll be remembered for. The past is becoming distinct and the future - there's not that much left of it, so you can't really screw it up. So what that should confer is a certain freedom to be who you are and quit becoming, and to be and to be more vividly."

Yet, as a *Publishers Weekly* review of Ford's book pointed out, "Permanence has proven turbulent" for Bascombe. Dealing with prostate cancer and the return of his wife's first husband, his experience "illuminates the preoccupations of the boomer generation; for Frank, an unwritten novel and broken relationships combine with the dwindling fantasy of endless possibility - in work and in love - to breed doubt: 'Is this it?' and 'Am I good?' Frank wonders. The answers don't come easy."

In some ways we are entering our most powerful decade, with a balance of energy, experience and authority. Having slogged up the mountain, made our money, raised our children, paid our bills, we should be able to dance on the peak.

Yet, in our youth-obsessed world, we get clear messages from employers, marketers, and sometimes spouses, that we are yesterday's people. Generations X, Y and Z want us to move aside. Information about retirement and health problems is aimed at "50-and-over" readers. Death is less of an abstraction.



So the 50s can bring on panic, restlessness, fatigue, a desire to wind down or a last charge of ambition. Famous or not, the shape of our lives is defined by now, our direction set, most of our achievements behind us. But we are at a crucial point where it is not too late to change or take on a new challenge.

When We Were Fifty by Christopher Matthews sums up our pleasures and dilemmas in a series of A. A. Milne-style ditties. One begins: "Where lies my future? I'm not quite sure./I'm not all that rich, but I'd hate to be poor./ Should I stay as I am with my safe little life?/ And my safe little job, and my safe little wife?/ Or is 50 the moment to try something new/ While my head is still clear and the skies are still blue?"

A book edited by Ross Fitzgerald and

'The past is becoming distinct and the future - there's not that much left of it, so you can't really screw it up.'

Richard Ford

Lyndal Moor, called *Growing Old (Dis)gracefully: 50 and Over* and due out in April, includes essays from the 50-year-old comedian Gerry Connolly and publisher Diane Young. As Fitzgerald points out, the first letters of the book's title spell GOD - a pointer to the broad spirituality that pervades its musings.

I didn't disturb Kevin Rudd with my question on New Year's Eve as he stood, arms wrapped around Therese Rein, his 49-year-old wife. I didn't need to: at the

pinnacle of his career, he must be feeling energised and purposeful. Fifty might be over the hill for athletes and actresses, but for politicians it connotes vigorous youth. Though the balding Clive James sneers that Rudd's blond hair is "an incipient comb-over", our leader is boyish by comparison with his predecessor, John Howard, who was booted out of the job at 68. He makes 50 look young and potent.

Peter Costello - a month older than Rudd - might be wearing his years more heavily. After waiting to succeed Howard as Liberal leader and prime minister, his 50th birthday was followed by defeat rather than consummation. Still, following a patch of redundancy, he will no doubt adapt to a decade or two of corporate success.

"Turbulent permanence" is afoot for many 50-year-old Australian high achievers. The Sydney restaurateur Neil Perry closed his gourmet diner Rockpool soon after his birthday last year and reopened it as a more casual bar and grill, telling the *Herald* after 25 years' cooking, "When you are younger, you're full of fire but at the moment I'm just enjoying the more relaxed attitude to it all." The neurosurgeon Charlie Teo tells me his ambition to become "a famous neurosurgeon" - successfully achieved - has shifted at 50 to a greater focus on pro bono work and mentoring young surgeons.

Teo is not all good works: for his birthday party, he took over the restaurant Guillaume at Bennelong and entertained hundreds of friends with the tenor David Hobson and a DJ. I haven't been to as many fabulous birthday parties since I was 21 - and the wine and food are much better now. At 50, it seems, we have a sentimental desire to bring together our friends and splash around some of our hard-earned money. Superannuation funds be damned, at least for a night.

Kim Walker, dean of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, threw a stylish birthday dinner last September, with food by Kylie Kwong and a bassoon performance by Walker. The composer Elena Katz-Chernin had a birthday concert of her music performed by the Sydney Omega Ensemble in November, including a new work called *Slow Down Lady*. The title is ironic, she says, referring to frequent requests when she's on



the phone to “Slow down, lady”, while the high-energy music changes pace but never slows down. My own birthday was marked by small, extravagant dinners with family and friends, and my presents from my husband showed panache: a plane ticket to France and a (only semi-joking) Wicked Weasel brand red G-string.

Fifty Is Not A Four-Letter Word by Linda Kelsey is an English chick-lit novel published last month, which opens with the heroine’s 50th party. Two days later she is sacked as editor of a women’s magazine, replaced by a man in his 20s, and told her emphasis on sex is “so very last century”. Her husband leaves, her teenage son rebels, her difficult mother dies and she is left at home with a crepey neck and hot flushes – until an affair in Paris restores her confidence and libido. Superficial but, for many of us, true.

This is the decade when metabolism slows, fat overtakes muscle, skin sags, faces wrinkle, hair greys or disappears, and health problems can increase. For women, menopause carries another layer of physical and emotional change; the end of menstruation and childbearing can be both sad and liberating. The best we hope to hear is the dubious compliment, “Doesn’t she look great for her age!” Fear of invisibility can send us running not just to the gym but to cosmetic surgeons and others who promise to make us look 30 again. Mostly it’s a false promise and, I would argue, a damaging state of denial.

Anne Kreamer is an American former media executive who, on the brink of 50, decided to stop dyeing her hair. In her fascinating new book, *Going Gray* (positively subtitled *What I learned about beauty, sex, work, motherhood, authenticity and everything else that really matters*), she writes, “I saw myself for what I truly was: a 49-year-old mother with a much too darkly shellacked helmet of hair,” and realises she has spent \$US65,000 (\$72,425) on staying that way. Most American women – and Australians – are addicted to hair colouring and a false image of youth, including the older Nora Ephron, who wrote in her book *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, “There’s a reason why 40, 50, and 60 don’t look the way they used to, and it’s not because of feminism, or better living through exercise. It’s because of hair dye.”

Having eschewed bottle blonde a decade ago for gradual grey (“ash blonde”, according to my gracious husband) I cheered Kreamer’s

stand. To her surprise, men found her more attractive with grey hair than with brown. Her husband, the writer Kurt Anderson, puts it elegantly: “To me, coloring hair is like painting over the brick or stone or cedar on a nice old house – it’s not necessarily awful, but part of the beautiful essence of the real thing is how it looks as it ages. It’s why we love old cities like Paris and Rome.”

The tougher test was in the job market, where she found her opportunities reduced when she was grey-haired. Whatever happened to the idea of the eminence grise? With 4000-plus orders for Kreamer’s book from Australian bookshops and intense media interest in its publication next month, perhaps we’ll see more well-groomed, confident, grey-haired women in future.

The American gerontologist Dr Robert Butler is famous for predicting that babyboomers will be a “transformational generation ... helping to transform old age”. We’re getting there. In his recent book, *The Art Of Ageing*, Sherwin B. Nuland makes only one reference to the 50s, in this jolting sentence about muscular strength: “Once we reach 50, our tendency to dwindle really takes off.” A century ago, most people were dead at 50; we are still generally fit and looking at another 30 or more years of life. But if we are to make best use of those years, we still have to change attitudes – our own and others’ – so that middle age is seen as the start of a new period of possibilities rather than just the beginning of the end.

Nuland writes philosophically, “Beginning in middle age, we must study how to be old ... in the first 40 or 50 years of our lives, we devote much thought and industry to being like others, emulating those we admire, and fitting into a mould that enables us to fill the desired and admired niche in the trajectory of a career and a social station ... But once we begin to separate ourselves, we bit by bit become freer to continue to mature in ways distinctive to ourselves ... age becomes a liberator.”

When we were 20, my peers and I threw away our bras and believed we would never grow old. At 50 it’s time for us to throw away the hair dye and help win back respect for middle-age and beyond. We have to remain enthusiastic, open-minded and well-informed but there’s nothing wrong with a well-earned patina. The role model is not Paris Hilton but Paris, France.

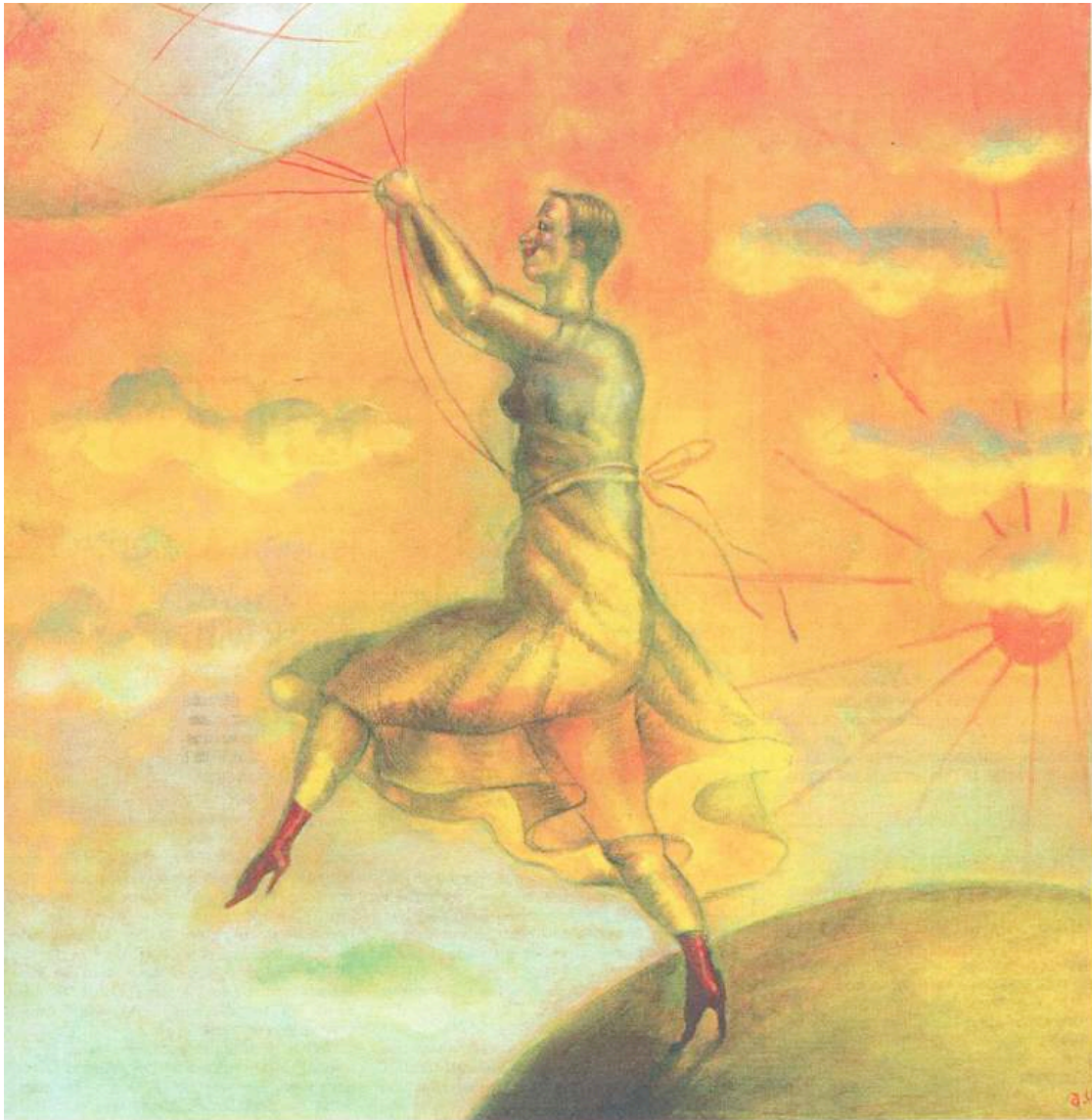


Illustration: Amanda Upton

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