For an increasing number of Americans in the 21st century...

Life Begins At 60

A Report By Gail Sheehy

In January, the first batch of Baby Boomers turns 60. Thanks to healthier lifestyles and modern medicine, many will remain active for decades, like our bathing beauty.

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By Gail Sheehy

The businesswoman in the big chair closes her eyes while concealer is applied by a makeup artist. She is getting ready to speak at an important conference. “I don’t keep a mirror in my office,” she says. “Why spoil my self-image? In my head, I’m still 30.”

In reality, the businesswoman is 60. Believe it or not, that is the birthday to be celebrated in 2006 by the vanguard of Baby Boomers. And right behind them are 43 million more Boomers who will celebrate—or deny—turning 50 next year. Will they approach the journey from here on with a what-the-hell-the-kids-are-gone joie de vivre? Or will they deny the reality of sure maturity and rely on diets and spandex in the effort to preserve their youthful self-image forever?

Age phobia among Baby Boomers is a well-known phenomenon. I was first made aware of it 30 years ago, when I wrote Passages, a book that delineated the stages of the adult life cycle. Readers then age 20 to 30 repeatedly told me they only read up to their own passage; the other side of 30 was a dark continent better left unexplored.

I have a rebellious purpose—to put out the word that midlife today is a gift that keeps giving. In what I call the Second Adulthood, I have a rebellious purpose: to put out the word that midlife today is a gift that keeps giving.

In the space of a single generation, Boomers have fundamentally altered the shape of the adult life cycle. By taking longer to grow up and delaying marriage, parenting and retirement, they have shifted all the stages of adulthood ahead by 10 to 15 years. Science now tells us that after our mid-50s, 70 percent of aging is controlled by our lifestyle: how actively we move around, whether we smoke or drink to excess, how well we sleep, how many close friends we keep up with, and how engaged we remain in life, work and community.

Medicine, together with alternative medicine and the fitness and yoga booms, has expanded the life course so that the average Boomer male is now expected to live into his high 70s and the average female into her 80s. Possibly 3 million or more are predicted to last until 100.

The years between 50 and 75 I call the Age of Mastery. In our First Adulthood, we are bound by our roles—student, apprentice, spouse, parent—and at pains to please those whose approval defines us. But after 50, we can finally be truly ourselves. A Midwestern teacher who re-
cently deposited her last child at college and started her own business spells out a typical attitude: “I’ve spent 50 years of my life pleasing everyone—my teachers, my bosses, my boyfriends, my husband, my children. Now,” she says, “I care about pleasing some people, and the rest can just go fly a kite.”

Free at last! Vital, visible, assured, alluring, veterans of failure, beneficiaries of the financial prudence of their parents—these are more fitting descriptions of the vanguard of Boomers than labeling them by age. By the sheer heft of their numbers and bold expectations, they may frame a new vision of aging.

This is a generation that has made a habit of reinventing themselves. Madonna, who at 47 calls herself Mrs. Guy Ritchie, has eschewed being a “very selfish person” for frolicking with her family on a “veddy British manor” in the English countryside. Her 2004 tour, “Re-Invention,” amounted to a musical seminar for aging Boomers on how to do it (provided they’re rich and famous).

The Goldie Hawns and Kurt Russells have inspired older Boomers not to settle for roles defined by age. Paul McCartney doesn’t allow being knighted to get in the way of remaining a mop-haired rocker who keeps reminding us that our inner child is still very much alive.

Boomer women have broken the biological clock. For 30,000 generations, one of the most basic instincts has been to reproduce ourselves as soon as we are able. But once Boomer women kicked open the doors of opportunity to fulfill themselves as more than breeders, they demanded the medical help to give birth later and later, and they got it. The actress Susan Sarandon was the emblematic late-baby model, birthing two children in her mid-40s. She turns 60 next year and won’t see those children off to college until she arrives at what used to be standard retirement age.

Geena Davis, America’s first (fictional) female President, as star of the new ABC-TV series Commander in Chief, is following the pattern. She gave birth to her first child at 46 and followed up with twins at 48. “I’m so glad I waited,” she says, on the brink of turning 50. “I can be a much better mother now.” This may be the most radical voluntary alteration of the life cycle of all the changes wrought by the Boomer generation.

For the vast majority of American and European women and men today, the 60s are a stage where a maximum of freedom of choice co-exists with a minimum of physical limitations. While some are struggling with serious illness, financial hardship or caretaking of elderly relatives, as a broad generalization, today’s 60-somethings still have active minds and vigorous bodies and enjoy the benefit of a mature perspective on life.

Those in their 60s have active minds and vigorous bodies and enjoy the benefit of a mature perspective on life.

How long would you like to live?
A majority of Americans (58%) said they’d like to live to 85 at least, and 26% would like to reach 95 or older.

When asked, “How long do you think you will live, 43% said they anticipated a lifespan of 85 or beyond, and 10% expect to live to 95 or older.

In 20 years, how do you think life will be for 80-year-olds?
49% of Americans said 80-year-olds will be much healthier in 20 years than 80-year-olds today; 33% said life will be the same as it is for 80-year-olds today; and 9% believe that, in the year 2025, 80-year-olds will be able to do and enjoy virtually everything that 40-years-olds can do today.

What makes a person seem young?
50% answered that they considered a person young if he or she is “active,” “busy” or “energetic.” Others linked youth to “appearance” (13%), “a positive attitude” (10%) or “mental alertness” (5%).

Only 3% of those polled said “age” is the one factor, above all others, that makes them think of a person as “young.”

What makes a person seem old?
30% answered that a physical problem or limitation is the one quality that makes a person seem old; 15% said a mental limitation, while 13% said a person is old when he or she is incapable of self-care. Only 5% cited a person’s actual age.

Research!America is a nonprofit public-education and advocacy group for medical research. For more about medical and health research and its relationship to longevity, visit www.researchamerica.org on the Web.
Turning 60|continued

enjoy the benefit of a mature perspective on life—the first time they possess that poten
tive combination.

The Age of Mastery can't be about coasting until retirement or playing endless rounds of games. It must be a preparation for stages that in the past only the exceptional among us ever reached. Most Boomers expect to continue to work in one way or another—part-time or as consultants, contract teachers, community volunteers or self-employed entrepreneurs—through their 60s and some into their 70s or beyond. This brand-new expectation is fueled not only by their desire to feel a con-
tinuing sense of purpose and social participation but also because they must be prepared to support them-
selves for greatly elongated later lives.

Men in corporate life have typically
topped off around 55, but this generation of grayheads is still in demand. Companies are looking for the two E's—Experience and Energy. The gray-
heads who are the easiest to place, says Ed Koller, president of a leading media-recruitment firm based in Manhattan, are Boomers who have not left their jobs or been pushed out but who have grown bored. They wish to work another five to seven years in

more interesting settings.

Many of today's women entering the Second Adulthood are more feisty than fearful. They don't want a man or a role to define them any-
more. They are defining themselves. As women age and develop greater mastery over their emotions and their environment, many gain deep-
ened confidence, power and inner harmony. Across cultures, older women become more focused, man-
egeral, aggressive and political.

Workforce participation by older
women also has increased dramati-
cally. In 1970, half of women aged 50
to 59 were still working. By 2004, their participation was up to 70 percent.

At Catalyst, a nonprofit research organization working to advance women in business, the trend they see among women who have had significant careers in the commercial world is a desire for a new career in the nonprofit world, says Ilene Lang, its president, who made the change herself. "I
look at my genetic profile—I could live to be 100. Two of my kids are still in college or grad school, so I'm not over the hump yet. Lots of peo-
ple in their 50s are feeling the same way. And they want to put to use the great career expertise, experience and network they have built to help others."

It remains to be seen if the Boomers' youthful zeal for social ac-
tion will be reborn as they reach the stage the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson said calls for "generativity"—the vol-
untary obligation to care for others. Thus far, compared to their parents' generation, Boomers have done less in every measure of civic engage-
ment, including voting and commu-
nity service, according to a report by the Harvard School of Public Health and the MetLife Foundation. Their added years of life give Boomers an-
other chance to create a social legacy of profound importance. All of us have a stake in appealing to this vital generation to give back, in apprecia-
tion for the cornucopia of opportu-
nities they have been able to enjoy in our open society.

Inevitably, at some point in our 50s or 60s, most of us will face a crisis of great magnitude, such as when a serious illness strikes us or our part-
ner, or one or the other is shoved off the career ladder and left hanging in meaninglessness, or a war puts an adult child in harm's way. Dramatic
life accidents such as these strip away the edifice of our well-defined lives, and a hunger wells up for a greater depth of meaning and value in the ac-
tivities of our everyday lives.

The acknowledgement of death
can be an enormous asset in one's life. It pushes us to search for meaningful-
ness. And the search for meaning in whatever we do becomes the universal preoccupation of the Second Adul-
thood. It is rooted in a spiritual impera-
tive that grows stronger as we grow older. Some people are moved to make a spiritual quest. Others do not relate this hunger to any religious be-
lief but feel the need to stretch be-
yond self and even relationships, reaching toward a deeper apprecia-
tion of a collective intelligence work-
ing in the universe.

PARADE Contributing Editor
Gail Sheehy is the author of “Passages,”
“‘The Silent Passage’ and her latest,
“Sex and the Seasoned Woman.”

What Would You Call
The Stage Of Life
Between 60 and 80?

That's what PARADE, the Harvard School of
Public Health and the MetLife Foundation want
to know. Several million Baby Boomers are
entering their 60s with unprecedented good
health, energy and expectations for longevity.
Suddenly, traditional phrases like “senior
citizen,” “old” or “retired” seem outdated.
Author Gail Sheehy has referred to this period as
the “Second Adulthood” and the “Age of
Mastery.” But what would you call this stage of
life? And why? The best ideas may be published in a future issue of PARADE.

Send your ideas to “Stage of Life,” c/o
PARADE, P.O. Box 4943, Grand Central
Station, New York, N.Y. 10163-4943 (include
your name, address and age). Or go to
www.parade.com to send your response and to learn
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