



and exits entrances:

women's careers in transition

By Melissa Ludtke '73

Illustrations by Michael Glenwood

Sitting outdoors on an oddly warm December 2012 afternoon, I let my boss know I'd be leaving my job as the executive editor at the investigative-journalism institute at Brandeis University. I'd had this job for just one year, but I'd been thinking a lot about whether

I've reinvented myself many times before,
and I'm confident that I can and will reinvent myself again.
But this time is the hardest because my new role
leaves me exposed to my own worst nightmares.

—Liz Wiseman

I'd stay for another. A different job wasn't luring me away. Instead, at 41, I had developed an inscapable itch that I needed to scratch, even if doing so felt a bit irresponsible as a single mother with a daughter in the camp of college.

In my holiday letter to friends, I shared my rationale, if I could call it that, for this life-altering reinvention:

As I progress through my seventh decade, I am directing my energy to activities and projects imbued with meaning and purpose that have the potential of enabling me to "give back" to others. By the end of January, I will be without portfolio, but only as the consequence of having no "given" job, my very own domain in which I will be moving. Instead, I'm embarking on a variety of projects, each of which will call upon skills developed during my decades of being a journalist. And each project will reside in my "zone of passion"—the place inside my core where ideas and initiatives I long to do reside.

That itch I had is the memoir I'm writing as I look back at my life in my mid-40s, when I suddenly found myself as the named plaintiff in the federal lawsuit *Ludtke v. Kube*. The case was about women sports writers seeking equal access to interview Major League Baseball players, and it garnered global attention as a bellwether of women's liberation. Most writing about the lawsuit then—and still now—skipped right over its constitutional anchoring in the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause with gender discrimination at its core. After 37 years, the time felt right to locate my lawsuit in its deserved legal and societal context.

On the day that I'd given my notice, conscientiously, I had long-standing dinner plans with Alice Hammer, *Wellesley* magazine's editor. As soon as we'd ordered, she tossed me an idea for a story: "How about a look at women's lives in transition?" she said. "The spring issue is a good time for it."

My first thought was that *How* could Alice know? I hadn't hinted to her about taking a leap into an uncertain future. Yet, three hours earlier I'd leapt, and now she was asking me to do this story.

Without hesitation, I said, "Yes," then filled her in on my day-

A few weeks earlier, I'd listened to Harvard sociologist and author Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot talk about her book, *Exit: The Journeys That Set Us Free*. Pondering my own exit, I'd typed as fast as my fingers could travel across my iPhone's keys, catching only phrases: "We move across the life cycle. Tag of war, progression and regression. A bold moment and blurred journey. Till the beginnings, uncertain with exits."

Exits happen to all of us, and how we make them matters. But so, too, does the door through which we choose to reenter. Is it one we know will take us toward familiar ground? Or do we choose one that opens into a place we've never been, where we've wanted to explore? Opening that second door is what sets reinvention apart from transition, and such journeys are ones that Wellesley College graduates reassured when they replied to an invitation sent to alumnae by *Wellesley* magazine on Facebook and LinkedIn. Their remembrances of exits made and paths forged from this article's spine:

For some, jobs deserved them. Others deserved theirs, by choice or circumstance. Or as their children found their places in the world, mothers changed their life courses, too. Or as marriages dissolved, women's dependable scaffolding tumbled down, so they set out to build structures to sustain themselves. Or reinvention stemmed from illness, then only to a loved one's, and forced reshaping of ambitions and a rearranging of their lives. Regrets are voiced for a road not taken, yet when it is revisited, women describe with joy what it feels like to pin fresh footprints on paths of passionate interest abandoned long ago.

What does it take "to jump off the bridge," as Carol Chewick Wilson '80 describes doing at the age of 33? That's when she resigned from her job as an investment manager with a family business in Connecticut. She'd slid into banking soon after graduating with an art-history and political-science major and had stayed on that road despite being unhappy in her work. In the year after she jumped, she was recruited as a life coach and non-gifted women "who put themselves last on the list." She knows too well what it feels like when women "spend too much time missing the expectations of others at a significant cost to ourselves." Now, Wilson says, "I'm much poorer and much happier, even if [entrine here] was worse when I did it—and

(and sorry)." Scary, perhaps, but she also describes feelings that surface when women surrender the courage to jump: "Joyful, empowered, enlightened, and excited." Those are feelings we'd all like to experience.

Reinvention pushes us to orbit from the inside out. Bonnie Dwyer Leonard '89 leapt this way when, at her 40s, she sent her two sons off to college. After years of being a divorced single parent and a full-time university professor, she realized it was time to fit her own never-burnt. With the financial support of a Mary Eliza Stevens Traveling Fellowship from Wellesley, she set off on her global "midlife voyage."

"Unbeknownst to me at the time, I was caught up in a powerful midlife transition. My outer life seemed to be flourishing," she says, "but my inner life was in more turmoil than I was prepared to acknowledge." Restless in her job, she was also weary at home: "I seriously underestimated the impact of my emptying nest," she says. Traveling on her own to places where she knew no one forced Leonard to confront her turmoil. "I was plunged into an almost existential loneliness, so much that I had to call on a courage and resilience I didn't know I had," she says. "In time, I learned a world could exist where I was no longer a full-time mother."

Her yearlong trip over, Leonard embarked on a two-year job search, ending in her appointment as the dean of continuing education at Wellesley. Nineteen years later, she was ready to audition for *Act Three* of her life, so she adapted what she'd learned from the odds remaining unclear she'd counseled: "One midlife crisis may not be the last time you have to reinvent yourself." So, she did it again, like Wilson choosing the life of a coach for women in transition. Now in her 70s, she's got plenty of new challenges that are part of her reinvention, like figuring out how to run a business and to market what she has to offer. She is also writing a book; its working title is *Midlife Magic*.

Jill Willis '13 pushed through her midlife mark in the comfort zone of her corporate career. "I'd hoped to retire having done the challenging work of a corporate lawyer," she says. Instead, she describes herself as "a non-intentionally retired 61-year-old who is learning to be an entrepreneur." An African-American woman, Willis confronted what she perceived to be "a pattern and practice of employment discrimination" in her former job. Finally, she decided to take a stand to right what she saw as wrong; she filed a legal case that drags on without resolution.

"There is a high price to be paid for taking a stand, so you therefore need to reinvent yourself," she says. Divorced, raising three sons, and selling her Evanston, Ill., home of 23 years because she can no longer afford it, Willis says she feels adrift and depleted of her usual emotional resources. "Just putting this in writing and thinking about all of it now has one-in-two's," she writes in an email. "This doesn't feel like it should be so well. How strong must I be?"

Plenty strong, given that her 20-year-old son had been hospitalized

the week before, as a result of bipolar disorder with schizophrenic features. "I think the stress is one factor for him," she says. "This is the only home he has known." Her 22-year-old son is trying to return to college after his grades were "disrupted by my fragility and my career upheaval," she says. She plans to move to Chicago, where she has never lived, and sell real estate, work she has never done. Her youngest son, a senior in high school, isn't moving with her, instead remaining with friends to attend his suburban high school. In rare her stress, she sought the company of "Wellesley sisters," needing "the relaxation and nurturing of being with them," as she defines it "strength I didn't anticipate needing or think I actually possessed."

"I'm going to stay as positive as I can through this period," Willis wrote one night. "Wonderful things can happen."

Over thousand miles away in Needham, Mass., Riva Greenlinger '86 is also confronting a reinvention period of her choosing. Her heart is anchored by a steady marriage and uninterrupted by the need to move from her family's home. "I've reinvented myself many times before, and I'm confident that I can and will reinvent myself again," she writes. "But this time is the hardest because my new role leaves me exposed to my own worst nightmares."

Instead of going to a paid job, as has been her practice and desire since before she'd graduated from college, Greenlinger is at home, jobless, and nursing down others she'd like to take. "Our youngest daughter suffers from a profound and pervasive depression, along with other anxiety disorders," she explains. "And I do know that love is not enough to address mental health issues." One parent's availability and undivided attention are what Greenlinger and her husband believe is essential right now, so together they decided she'd be the one to leave her job. "I am the one best suited to step away from paid work," she explains, describing her now full-time, nonpaying job as "isolating the therapeutic resources."

Yet, Greenlinger is keenly aware of the toll this arrangement may take on her own life. "At age 48, these are peak years for realizing or even putting into play my own dreams, like starting a business," she says. "But I am coming to terms with my limits and conflicting needs primarily by praying for a long life while trying my best to improve my own physical and mental health." Her nightmares arise out of a sense of her own vulnerabilities despite great advantages that her education, job history, and family confer on her. "There is a large sense of vulnerability for me in not having my own income, my own area of recognized expertise," she writes. "The nightmares continue because I never wanted to live my life through my children. With my focus on them, I hope I savor their accomplishments without needing to claim them as my own. Nor do I want to take on their struggles as the definition of my own success or failure."

r was children in faraway places, and not her own children, that resulted in Maureen Mahoney-Barracough '74 studying for her final exam in anatomy and physiology on her 60th birthday. Now in her second semester of a two-year graduate program in occupational therapy, Mahoney-Barracough's reinvention was launched at her 50th reunion in 2004.

During the decade after her graduation from Wellesley, she had earned a master's degree in geology/geophysics and had a job exploring geothermal energy. Then she'd paused to raise two sons, intending to return. Some artistic endeavors and civic activities were filling a space that Mahoney-Barracough wanted to expand. She wasn't sure how until that 2004 Wellesley reunion dinner, when she learned about her classmate Ellen Cooper's work as a physician in Africa trying to prevent mother-child transmission of HIV. The two of them decided to transform this medical work into visual stories; Mahoney-Barracough would shoot video and photographs of Cooper with the women and children.

Though this project ultimately didn't come together, Mahoney-Barracough went on her own to South Africa and Uganda to tell women's "stories of courage." After the 2010 Haitian earthquake, she traveled there as part of a medical mission and performed art therapy with children injured in the earthquake. "I was inspired and impressed with how art therapy worked with them. I wanted to be professionally trained to help in this way on future projects everywhere," she writes in an email. To do this meant returning to school just as her older son

was completing his graduate program, her younger son was beginning his, and her husband was contemplating retirement.

Now as she prepares her thesis project, "Arts in Medicine," Mahoney-Barracough finds that she is "weaving together my passion for art and science." She revels in knowing her experiences "have been converging to this point all of my life."

"It's the same path I was on when I entered Wellesley [intending to major in art history, the same path I was on when I was changing diapers, the same path I was on as a geologist when I stood on the edge of an active volcano]," she says. "Transition doesn't change the path—it changes the view. And right now the view is beautiful."



For Anne Conley Weaver '67, majoring in music at Wellesley pushed the sciences aside. As a child she'd gone on hospital rounds with her father, who was director of hematology at Johns Hopkins, and she assumed that one day she'd be a nurse like her mother and two aunts.

Instead, she became a professional flutist and choir director, soon after graduation married her high-school boyfriend, and together with him raised their family in Western Massachusetts. Then, at the



"It's the same path I was on when I entered Wellesley intending to major in art history, the same path I was on when I was changing diapers, the same path I was on as a geologist when I stood on the edge of an active volcano. Transition doesn't change the path—it changes the view. And right now the view is beautiful."

—Maureen Mahoney-Barracough '74, on her reinvention as an occupational therapist

age of 44, Weaver was diagnosed with breast cancer. "Being back in the medical environment triggered something in me," she says. Weaver wrote about her cancer experience and gave those thoughts to her doctor to give to patients. She later began to volunteer at the hospital. "I felt like a fish being back in water," she says.

She also began to talk incessantly about her budding interest in medicine with her harp partner, Joyce Berry Rice '81. One day, Rice pushed back, telling her, in so many words, "to stop talking about it and go for it." Weaver barreled ahead, despite slim chances of being admitted at her age and her father's efforts to persuade her not to try.

"He was horrified," she says. His concern stemmed from when he'd served on the Hopkins admission committee; applicants were in their 20s and 30s, not females in their late 40s. He recalled, too, his grueling years of training.

After taking the requisite premed courses at nearby universities and colleges, she scored high on the MCAT and was accepted early at

University of Massachusetts Medical School, a program with a reputation for accepting nontraditional students. In her class, six students were over 40; she was the oldest at 48. By this time, her father's push-back had turned into praise.

For her, the toughest part of medical school was living apart from her husband for the first time in their long marriage, but once she entered her dual residency in internal medicine and pediatrics, she was able to move back home. On the day after her residency ended, "I opened up my practice in Amherst, complete with electronic medical records, and I'm not a techie," she says.

What surprises Weaver most about her midlife reinvention is not being a flutist who became a doctor later in life. That felt natural, she says, as though "a latent seed had always been in me." It is becoming a businesswoman who built a medical practice that employs 50 others. "There were not a lot of business genes in my family," she says.



'My advice to people who are embarking on a career or other life change is this: Shore up your defenses before starting. Hopefully you won't need them, but if you do, you're prepared.'

—Deborah Bosdy Hamilton '84

Blogging is a route some women take when approaching re-invention. It's a way of redistributing their emotional load, sharing their ups and downs with those who interact with them. In her blog, *Finding My Career Sweet Spot* at 50, Deborah Bosdy Hamilton '84 wrote about her job-hunting experiences "as my way of processing things," and then she was surprised by how many people related and responded to what she was going through. She voiced her frustration when layers of interviews for a job ended in disappointment, and then the seemingly endless and unproductive cycle would begin again. When on a networking visit she received an unexpected job offer, she happily downsize her ambition and, as she says, "left the prestigious jobs" she'd once held to others. In mid-January, heading back to work, in a blog post she titled "My Unexpected Journey," Hamilton described her experience as "just all part of a 'new normal,' the charming of the workplace."

Sarah Reimersen '09 started blogging when she left Australia after working there for nine years and slanting up against her discontent with banking jobs that grew out of her major in economics. As she headed home, change was in the air, but she took a circuitous 14-month route of travel through places like Nepal's mountains. So she started her blog "so let my mother know I was still alive." Her subsequent entries describe her path to culinary school at age 33, and she points to a November 2010 blog post entitled "There's No Use Crying Over Spilt Hollandaise" for a metaphor for her reinvention.

When her hollandaise dissolved into a "great, waxy mess" during a big test, she dissolved inseparably into tears—in front of the chef and class. "I had heaped all my future happiness on this one egg, in this one bunker, and the shocking realization that it may not come out perfectly—despite knowing by now that life doesn't come out perfectly, or at least as you expect it—hit all at once." She graduated from culinary school, fulfilling a lifelong ambition, but has never worked professionally in a kitchen. After a short stint as the COO of a tech startup involving food, in the spring of 2012 she moved to a new city

where she's looked for a job "along the lines of what I used to do." And she adds, "It's not going particularly well." Her years of travel and cooking school do not fit snugly on her résumé, but still she says, "I know that I'll be OK and that I'll never regret my year of travel or the year at culinary school, I took a risk that didn't pay off in the way I quite expected it to, but it doesn't mean it wasn't."

Out of Reimersen's journey emerge life lessons. "My advice to people who are embarking on a career or other life change is this: Shore up your defenses before starting. Hopefully you won't need them, but if you do, you're prepared."

Perhaps at one exits, such shoring up begins. Departures set into motion a process that is in play even at that moment—one of beginning to locate the door through which we'll enter when we're ready to try. Inspired by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's talk, I read her book, and I found words there that were with me as I explored this territory between our exits and entrances, a place called reinvention.

Here's how Lawrence-Lightfoot describes the moment when she knew "I'm out of here!":

The moment when confusion turned to certainty, doubt to clarity, hovering and hazy to tough resolve; when complexity and opacity seemed to become transparently simple; when I stopped making lists of the pros and cons, the opportunities and liabilities, and decided instead to take the leap of faith.

Her words resonate with those of us on the cusp of reinvention, waiting for the moment when we find clarity of purpose and meaning rising within us, giving us the courage to leap.

Melissa Ludtke '73 lives in Cambridge, Mass., and is the author of *On Our Own: Unmarried Motherhood in America*. She is writing her second book, a memoir of her life during the 1970s.