

## introduction

When the doorbell rang, I indulged in one moment's nervousness and then responded. Ten women were due that morning to begin a nine-week seminar with me as host and lecturer. I had sent each woman my odd invitation to share the seminar and launch her own Unpregnancy. These were all people I knew, though not necessarily well, but who didn't know each other. And *none* of them knew what to expect of Unpregnancy. They were uneasy. I was panicky. I was going to talk about my new idea and ask women to work on their lives together—a risky business.

I was amazed and pleased as we settled in and got down to the subject at hand. As the women introduced themselves to each other, there was a palpable anxiety among us. It is hard, even among friends, to admit that you want more.

As mothers we are blessed. We share our lives with people we love and who love us in return. In this group we were doubly blessed since we were all seemingly happily married, educated, middle-class women.

Still, we were all there because we wanted to be more than just somebody's mom. How greedy would that seem? How needy would we appear? How distasteful is the mother who complains about having to make dinner, change diapers, read bedtime stories, indulge teenage rantings, drive 'tweens all over town or take an extra job to pay for her kid's college? Even when we get a thank-you, it doesn't give us back our time, energy, or opportunity to do something for ourselves.

But that's why we were all there—not just to complain, but to do something about it. To get more and to get back a sense of self we'd lost years ago. (Like the perennially lost sneaker: if we keep looking, will we find it? Tucked inside the couch? In the corner of the coat closet?)

In the throes of giving birth, I think we all lose our empowered, enlightened selves. Our minds are wiped clean of all expectation and we begin anew. Our bodies are shaken first by the need to survive and second by the need to protect and nurture our young. These two strong instincts drive the woman who was out of the mother-to-be. To find her again can be nearly impossible.

Maybe it's as simple as the advice we give toddlers looking for the misplaced sneaker: *Go back to where you last remember seeing it.* I retraced my steps to pregnancy to find my lost self.

This is how I introduced Unpregnancy to the assembled group. If we go back to the lessons and reality of our pregnancies, we will find what we want—more.

As our first session progressed, it was easy to share pregnancy remembrances and intimate labor and delivery stories. These tales rolled off the tongue even when they included lewd gestures or entailed admitting you'd been awful to your husband or an innocent bystander. We could honestly and easily share our feelings from that day so long before and so different for each of us. Among us we had 33 kids ranging in age from 2 to 19.

However, when it came to telling our dreams we were shy and awkward. It's hard to tell someone what you hope for. It is your best-kept secret. But we persevered, talking about Unpregnancy and what it meant for each of us. We wowed ourselves and each other as we dared to articulate what we wished we had become or dared to hope we could become now—a restaurateur, a real estate entrepreneur, a documentary filmmaker, a charitable fund administrator, a renowned architect, a PhD in speech pathology, a jeweler, and an author of a self-help book. We gasped. Until that moment, we had known each other only as playground moms.

The thing that surprised me was the relief and joy in the room. We had admitted to wanting something for ourselves. We had seen that this was hard for every other mother in the room. We had come out of isolation, the isolation that kept our hopes at bay, that whittled away our sense of deserving. We each stayed submerged in others' needs, not seeing to our own, not acknowledging how far we had sublimated our feelings, not wishing for ourselves, not thinking it was possible to escape.

But now we had briefly come out of isolation, spoken our true aspirations and enjoyed the shared validation—the right to our dreams. We experienced a brief, giddy sense of childish pleasure. But then we quickly shifted gears and returned to our normal roles. Realities returned to our consciousness. We all had too many obligations: kids, husbands, jobs, babysitters, volunteer work, parents to care for. Knowing that family logistics can be a

true nightmare, we commiserated about the obstacles.

Peggy, one of the women in our group that day, was a mother of four (ages three to nine) who also cared for her own mother, who had MS. On top of that, Peggy had just moved her 90-year-old grandmother into their house because she needed round-the-clock supervision and Peggy hoped that having her at home would make life easier. Peggy “kept herself sane” by serving as president of her parent-teacher organization. Needless to say, she was overwhelmed. “It is kind of working,” she said, as we all stared in disbelief. Peggy isn’t a saint; she’s just a woman trying to do what she thought was right for everyone who needed her (and sacrificing herself in the process).

Admittedly, a mother has no time. But remember the adage that says, if you want something done, ask a busy person. So ask yourself now what you want today. What can you do today to move toward that dream? Where are you planning and hoping to take your life? Where did you put your old ambitious, centered self? How can you get her back?

It is Peggy who helped me see a one-day-at-a-time strategy. With all her obligations, even she had faith that she could take small steps to claim her time and space and find herself and her passion using Unpregnancy. Before she left the group that day, Peggy shared one of her grandmother’s aphorisms: “Treat today as the present it is meant to be.”