

## The Secret: Clarity

An interview with Ann Daly PhD  
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*How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!*

. . .

*To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.*

. . .

*To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

. . .

*Ulysses, by Lord Alfred Tennyson*

### **In your coaching experience, what is unique about women's mid-life search for clarity about what they want for themselves?**

What I find unique is that newfound sense of freedom women in mid-life often have. I love the willingness that comes with age to say, "I don't care what someone else thinks." Mid-life women shed the desire to please, and this puts them in a very powerful place. I love working with them in that moment, because they're ready and poised for something new.

### **The search for one's passion/dream can be frustrating for many of us. Knowing what to expect can sometimes help people better relax into it. What do you find is "normal" about a mid-life search for clarity?**

I don't think of it as "normal" or "abnormal" but as an essential process of life. The basic process of life is to figure out who we are and what our capabilities are. Stretching and challenging ourselves as far as we can is what makes us feel alive. Learning and trying and risking new things help us expand.

It's a journey that starts when we're born and only ends when we die. But, unfortunately, in our culture we don't really learn how to engage with this journey when we're young. When we are coming of age, or graduating from college, or finding our calling, we are more focused on the standards of the external world. That's not a necessarily bad thing, since we learn some good things from that, but we are trained in life basically by seeking external rewards, not by looking inward.

So mid-life is an opportunity to re-engage with that process from an internal place. We can take more control of our journey. We get the chance to purposefully, intentionally, consciously, and joyfully engage that essence of "beingness"--even though it can be frustrating at times.

## **Are women comfortable with this new horizon?**

I think it's a relatively new phenomenon in our culture. When you think about our mother's generation, women did not have the luxury of taking this time to reexamine and reinvent. It simply wasn't an option for most. This new life progression for women hasn't really sunk into our culture yet. So let's hope that the generations after us will have heard all of us talking about it, and finding our way through it. They'll see that getting to 50 means worrying about so many fewer things, and making choices you didn't know you had before.

## **What is the biggest misconception women have about making change in their lives?**

It's not a misconception exactly, but I don't think women always understand how much power they possess to make change. Even if you have a job you hate, or there are difficult people in your life, being clear about who you are and what you want are is very powerful.

Clarity is the source of that power. Having the willingness to say, "I'm sorry, but no," is key. Saying "yes" to what's important to you means saying "no" to something that isn't. I don't think we always realize that we have more power in our lives than we think. We may be buffeted by external forces, but *we* are a strong force, too.

## **You have said that gaining clarity is a process rather than a result. Tell me about that.**

There is a shift of thinking involved when moving from, "I have no choices. I have to deal with what I'm given," to understanding that we continually make decisions every day and every hour about how we choose to be and how to create our life. Clarity is being able to go through life day to day and hour to hour with a sense of who we are and what we want. We are able to negotiate with all those external forces more powerfully when we engage the habit of clarity.

That engagement never ends, of course, because those forces are always present, whether they are cultural, social, corporate, or familial. Clarity is not something we ever "have," because everything changes over time. As we have more experiences, and as our circumstances change, there are more questions to ask.

The minute we stop asking ourselves, "What's going on? What's happening? What am I feeling? Is this what I want?," we stop developing. That can easily happen in lots of ways and in lots of situations. Clarity is a proactive, ongoing process of inquiry.

## **How does the clarity process work?**

Coaching can help people deal with a specific immediate issue as well as with large, overarching issues. Once a client internalizes the coaching process, she has developed skills to help her go on and be her own coach. She can do that because she has sharpened her awareness of what's going on inside and around her. She knows how to ask the hard questions and make decisions based on that information.

My five steps are tricks to get you to start doing that. It helps you to break through old habits to get to a place of constant dialogue with yourself. The first step I suggest is taking 15 minutes of doing nothing each day. To just stop. You cannot hear anything--

much less your small, still voice--when you're constantly running. We are too in love with distractions.

That's the first baby step. The others are: paying attention, asking questions, asking more questions, and writing it down. Those are steps that will help you to incorporate a process of self-inquiry into your life.

### **What gets in the way the most for women wanting to realize their dream?**

It ranges from distractions to fear to old beliefs and old habits that get in the way at such a deep level we don't even realize it. Those are the three big ones: distractions, fears, and limiting beliefs. Also: fears of failing, of succeeding, of interrupting current relationships in their current states, of upsetting others, no longer being loved or liked if we change the way we do things.

### **What questions should women seeking clarity ask themselves?**

First of all, you need to be kind, gentle, and compassionate with yourself—don't be judgmental. That's a hard one, harder than 15 minutes of doing nothing a day. You need to be able to observe yourself as though you're a fly on the wall. The ability to step back a little, to simply observe oneself, to merely gather information without judging, is a skill that takes some time to develop.

“What” and “how” questions are the best, because they are open-ended. For example: “What was going on with me when I threw those shoes across the room?” “What was that about?” “How did it get to the point I felt . . . ?” Those are high-information, low-judgment questions.

You just begin pulling some threads to see what is going on. Once you can do that, you get addicted to the inquiry. We don't realize what fascinating creatures we are. Each of us is such a conundrum of fears, beliefs, desires, motivations, etc. I don't think we give ourselves credit for being so fascinating!

Continuing to ask the hard questions is the gold mine for getting to our desires. We need the courage to ask questions we don't want to ask. Resistance is really important. It tells you exactly where you need to go, not what you need to run from. When you feel the resistance, take a breath, be kind, gentle, and compassionate . . . and ask the hard questions.

### **We talk to many women whose search for more fulfilling and meaningful work ends with something intriguing yet seemingly impractical. What advice could you give them?**

The reality is that it's all challenging. None of it is easy. I myself got to the point where there was no choice. Staying in the same place wasn't an option. If you feel that committed, you find a way. And keep in mind that, although it's easy to think we need to make a dramatic change, that isn't always so. And not everyone has that luxury.

That challenges some of our cultural assumptions that our passion must be played out in our 9-to-5 job. I think a disabling myth of our culture is that you have to make money from your passion. If you can, that's great. The increase in women

entrepreneurs tells us that people are trying to do this. But that's not possible for everyone. I think we need to leave that behind. It makes people feel unhappy and guilty.

Julia Cameron's book *The Artist's Way* was one of the first to make the point that you can find creative ways to incorporate your passion into the texture and soul of your life. If your passion is to sing and you're 54 and you don't have much of a voice, but you love to sing, you don't have to quit your job and try to be a diva at the Met. Join your neighborhood chorus. Write songs. Collect vocal music you love, and sing along.

Once you practice clarity, then you can take the attitude, "This is what I do because I want to send my kids to college, but this is what I do because it feeds my soul."

### **What is the key for incorporating our passion into our lives?**

Making the time to do it. It isn't going to drop from the sky. It's really challenging to make time for your passion when it's not central to your life, and that's why you need the commitment that comes from being clear. Clarity comes from that process of inquiry we've already talked about. That's how you know, "This is it!," and you know it from the bottom of your soul. "There is where I'm going to go." How you get there is a creative act. But someone with a vision that clear and who is that committed will not be stopped.

Clarity is seductive. People who are clear and committed are the people we follow, whom we want to be around. The more clear, passionate, and committed you are about your vision, the more easily you will find the help you need to figure out the "how." I'm *not* saying you that just throw it out to the universe and wait for it to come to you. It's a lot of work, and you have to learn the techniques for creating it.

### **You have made quite a career switch yourself. What was your biggest learning experience?**

I learned that my essential driver is to reach for more, to learn, and not to stay stuck.

As a teenager I was drawn to Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem *Ulysses*. It is told from Ulysses' point of view as he's older and yearning to have the adventures of his youth again. The final line is: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

During my transition I finally learned why I was so drawn to that poem. Doing one thing for 17 years, I had gotten rusty and musty. I could see that I wasn't going to be happy unless I threw myself into a situation where I had to learn all over again. I saw that always striving and seeking was a theme in my life.

My father was my biggest champion. He instilled in me that I could do anything I set my mind to. When he passed away a few years ago, and I was feeling bored and stale in my work life, it seemed to me that staying in my position would be dishonoring everything that he had been and envisioned for me. That is part of what made me courageous enough to go for it.

I always knew how to learn in an academic sense. I knew how to get those external rewards. The thorny question for me was: how willing was I to learn deeply about myself and discover parts of me that I *didn't* know before? Believe me, challenging myself in that way can be excruciatingly difficult on some days. I'm in a place, building

my own coaching/consulting and speaking business, where I have to learn what I didn't know before. It's an "extreme makeover" of sort!

I love to engage women in this process, to help them find their essential driver. To help them get to that place where second best isn't good enough. This is what it's always been about for me, but I just never framed it that way before. This is women's final frontier: engaging our individual essence at the deepest level.