Composing a Life Study Guide

Composing a Life by Mary Catherine Bateson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Composing a Life is a non-fiction book written in the first-person narrative by Mary Catherine Bateson. In this book, Ms. Bateson takes an artistic approach to achievement. She looks closely at the lives of four of her successful friends and her own life and finds commonalities in how they all have composed very successful lives in spite of numerous discontinuities along the way.

None of the five women in the book have followed a straight path to success. Much of their decisions have been in response to situations and individual needs. They have learned to thrive even when being pulled in many different directions. All of the women have learned to have a high degree of flexibility and they have also learned to be comfortable living in ambiguity. Rather than setting a single goal and moving toward it, they pick up disparate pieces and respond to circumstances, and that allows them to compose a unique and beautiful life.

The five women who are central to the book are Mary Catherine Bateson, a writer, anthropologist, professor, dean, and researcher; Johnnetta Cole, the president of Spelman College, anthropologist, educator, and activist; Joan Erikson, a dancer, writer, and jewelry designer; Alice d'Entremont, an electrical engineer and entrepreneur; and Ellen Bassuk, a psychiatrist and researcher. They span a variety of ages and multiple professional fields, but they share many common themes in the way they compose their lives.

Mary Catherine Bateson uses two central metaphors throughout the book. The first is a music metaphor. Creating a life is like improvisational jazz. One takes bits and pieces of familiar music and rearranges them into a unique new masterpiece. The second metaphor that is prevalent in the book is that of creating a quilt or weaving, where different pieces or threads are cut to fit together and then sewn or woven into a beautiful whole.

Each chapter in Composing a Life centers on a common theme that comes up in conversations with the five women, from care-taking to partnerships to dealing with disillusionment and distrust. The book begins with individual stories of women struggling to create a meaningful life that enriches the world around them. It ends with a call to action for men and women everywhere. In the final chapter, Enriching the Earth, Mary Catherine Bateson makes a plea to everyone to think more globally and instead of competing with one another, more toward creative interdependence. All forms of life need to be nurtured if we are to survive as a whole.

There has been some criticism that this book is not as clearly focused as some of Mary Catherine Bateson's other writing, but that may have been her intent. The book is pieced together just like the quilt she uses so prominently as a metaphor. Various bits of conversations and scraps of research weave together throughout the pages to create a strong whole that suggests multiplicity, flexibility, and care-taking as paths to composing a fulfilling life.

Chapter 1 Emergent Visions

Chapter 1 Emergent Visions Summary and Analysis

Chapter one, Emergent Visions, establishes the premise of the book. It is a study of five women who are composing their lives or they are shaping their lives as they go along rather than picking a static goal for success and moving toward it. The author believes that today women and men are not following the examples of former generations. Instead, they are composing their lives in ways that are not as clear as they were in the past. The book will compare life to an improvisatory art.

In the past, it was admirable to strive toward permanence and stability in life. However, those assumptions have not been true for many of history's most creative individuals. The author claims that they are becoming inappropriate in today's constantly changing world and that a continual redefinition of life is more valuable. Mary Catherine Bateson believes that it is now time to explore the potential of interrupted and conflicted lives. A commitment to constantly refocusing one's life may present enormous creative potential rather than failure.

Mary Catherine Bateson compares life to improvisatory art. Women no longer adhere to the same roles in family and society as their mothers did. They are responding to new situations and improvising their lives as they go along. She compares this improvisation to jazz and how it takes some familiar material and then combines it in new ways to come up with a unique piece of music. Mary Catherine Bateson continues on with the music metaphor, talking about how the rhythms of lives change over time. She also compares composing a life to studying languages and how each speaker combines familiar components of a language in unique ways to express themselves.

Mary Catherine Bateson uses cooking as another metaphor for composing a life. When one does not follow a recipe exactly, they are improvising a meal. That is a lot riskier, but it has the potential of creating an exciting new combination of flavors and textures.

Yet another metaphor that runs throughout this chapter is comparing life to sewing or needlework. She speaks of looking back at the patchwork of personal and professional achievements in her life. Also, when she introduces Joan Erikson as one of the five women studied in this book, she explains that Joan's creative work has been done in scraps of time. Mary Catherine Bateson also talks about not looking for a single role model throughout her life but instead weaving something new from many different threads of numerous role models.

Mary Catherine Bateson uses a series of similes to describe how life is a constant riddle of finding out what disparate parts have in common. Why is a raven like a writing desk? How is a woman like a soldier? Why is designing a computer program like caring for an infant? Extracting a common ground helps one discover underlying convictions that are steady throughout life.

Chapter 2 In the Company of Friends

Chapter 2 In the Company of Friends Summary and Analysis

In chapter two, In the Company of Friends, Mary Catherine Bateson introduces the four women who will be her source of information for this book.

Joan Erikson is a trained dancer, writer, and jewelry designer. She represents for Mary Catherine Bateson the relationship of the physical world to more abstract underlying expressions of human caring and strength. Ellen Bassuk is a psychiatrist who is a wonderful listener and calming personality with an underlying current of mischief. Alice d'Entremont is an electrical engineer who has been a researcher and also the CEO of a high-tech company. Johnnetta Cole is the first black woman president of Spelman College and a woman who has made the transition from campus radical to campus president.

All of these women are continually improvising and composing their lives, using the past to empower the present and use their creative talents to the fullest.

Mary Catherine Bateson comes back to the music metaphor at the end of the chapter when she describes that she has chosen selections from her conversations that resonate with her own experience. She also describes how one composes a life, and it is a constant improvisation. The past empowers the future in the composition to live a creative life.

Chapter 3 From Strength to Strength

Chapter 3 From Strength to Strength Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3, From Strength to Strength, explores the idea that individuals need to move from a core place of confidence and strength in order to grow through discouragement and prejudice. Mary Catherine Bateson explains that all of the women she has worked with on this project have dealt with frustration and difficult choices and interruptions throughout their lives. However, they all continue to creatively reassemble the pieces and move forward.

She uses examples in each of their lives to show how they have been able to move from one place of strength to another and Mary Catherine Bateson also gives examples of instances when there were failures, when they were momentarily unable to overcome obstacles because of starting from a place of weakness or discouragement. She concludes the chapter by calling on all members of society to build settings in which individuals are encouraged to grow and continue their education throughout life.

Joan uses simile in her view that life is like art. It is founded on different kinds of strength. Strength can be found through giving concrete expression to the imagination. Her activities program has given countless patients strength. It shows them that if they can have a basic trust in themselves, that they are capable of doing something, then they will do it. They can use their imagination to do it in their own unique way. This in turn develops confidence and identity.

Chapter 4 Opening to the World

Chapter 4 Opening to the World Summary and Analysis

Mary Catherine Bateson opens Chapter 4, Opening to the World, by discussing a worldwide evolution. Humans tend to believe the norms of our own societies are the most natural. We took a giant step forward when we learned to recognize other cultures as also being part of humanity, even if they are different from our own. Mary Catherine Bateson believes that the next step—one that we have not yet completed is to recognize the values in different societies and change our own habits to incorporate valuable information we have learned from those outside of our own communities.

She then uses her own experience and the experiences of her four friends as examples to describe what it's like to live within a foreign culture and how important it is to respect different societies and learn from them, rather than being a detached observer.

Mary Catherine Bateson begins with her own experience and family history to describe how composing a life means opening oneself up to the world. She explains how she has benefitted from growing up in a family of open-minded individuals who actively studied different cultures and learned from them. All four of Mary's grandparents were atheists, and later when Mary's mother and father and later she took an interest in religion, it was a choice, not something they had grown up with. She also explains that her paternal grandfather felt that his own profession as a scientist was a good one but lower than that of an artist. Her grandfather collected paintings, drawings, prints, and also embroidery from all over the world to reflect on life from different perspectives.

Mary recounts a time when she did some fieldwork with her mother in New Jersey. This is where she met and learned to respect people from different customers, particularly Italian and Eastern European immigrants. That experience helped shape her view that today, that for Americans, composing a life means integrating one's own commitments or heritage with a constantly changing society and with the differences among people in the world.

Mary Catherine Bateson uses Johnnetta to exemplify her point. When Johnnetta was growing up, she could hardly imagine growing up in a non-racist world; but today she can imagine it and continues to work for it. Johnnetta now uses her background in anthropology and her prestigious position at Spelman to bring women from all over the world together and show them that there is more than one way of being black and more than one way of being female. Diversity means to go beyond self, and one way to do that is to bring people from different societies together.

Mary uses the metaphor of a crazy quilt to describe how life is pieced together. Even though a crazy quilt is put together with various pieces that come from all over the place, those pieces are still trimmed and shaped into a coherent whole and firmly sewn

together to keep out the cold. Also, crazy quilts are sewn against a backing that provides a basic sense of continuity.

Mary Catherine Bateson concludes the chapter by pointing out that each of her friends on this project has been an immigrant learning to live in a new environment. All of them have had to be open to change, just as their significant others have also been challenged to accept new forms of relationship.

Chapter 5 Partnerships

Chapter 5 Partnerships Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5, Partnerships, describes partnerships the five women have with their significant others and how they shape their creative lives. Among the five women, there is a spectrum of collaboration with husbands and lovers.

Alice and Jack become business partners as well as lovers; this at times threatens the balance of their relationship. Joan and her husband Erik have collaborated on projects throughout their partnership, but Joan takes a more traditional secondary role to her husband's work. Mary and her husband Barkev believe at first that they have nothing in common professionally, but they find that they complement each other when they spend time in foreign countries, working in tandem to understand new cultures. Johnnetta and her husband Robert end up dissolving their partnership when professional ambitions take them in different directions. And Ellen and her husband Steve have a partnership that includes parallel professional endeavors that seldom intertwine. They collaborate on one book, but other than that, their careers grow separately.

Mary makes a point throughout the chapter that men and women can strive for equality in a relationship, but external factors often thwart their efforts. She suggests that there are new opportunities for composing creative lives within this spectrum of partnerships.

It is clear to Mary when she interviews Alice that Alice organizes her life story in three categories. They are before Jack, with Jack, and after Jack. Before Alice met Jack, she was always searching for passionate collaboration. She found that collaboration with Jack.

Mary points out here that as a society we are very romantic about marriage, but we are often blind to the joys and benefits of having a real partnership. There is also often a monetary value put on work and a tendency to devalue any kind of labor that does not bring in money. Mary is struck by the unique way the women she interviews create partnerships that value the work of homemaking, relationship-building, and caring that is necessary to nurture ideas and institutions.

The chapter goes on to give a more detailed account of how Jack and Alice met and the partnership they build together. Jack remains in an open marriage with his wife Jean, sustained by shared parenthood of their daughters. When Jean works late, Jack spends time with Alice, often cooking lavish dinners for Alice and Barkev in his Cambridge home.

Next, Mary takes a look at Joan's partnership with her husband Erik. It is more traditional, in that her first priority is homemaking and childcare, but Joan also collaborates with Erik on all of his projects as an editor. Joan also has her own projects, and she seeks out Erik's input on them. Joan uses music as a metaphor here to explain

how Erik responds to her work. When Joan is working on a book, she often reads it aloud to Erik. He is appreciative and supportive, but not very involved. Joan says that it seems like he can't get into her language; as if it's a different piece of music from his. On the other hand, Joan definitely gets into Erik's language (or music). She edits his work word by word.

Johnnetta and her husband Robert become lovers and also share a passionate political commitment early in their partnership. After they are married, they travel to Liberia in 1962 to work together on a research team that gives them each material for their dissertations. It becomes an important time in cementing their partnership, partly because they are a white man and black woman in Africa, beyond the asymmetries of black-white relationships in the United States. Race is less of an issue in Africa and they are free to openly collaborate.

Mary then jumps to her own relationship with her husband Barkev. They began as lovers who thought of themselves as having completely different professional interests. Barkev was studying mechanical engineering and Mary was studying Arabic poetry when they met. However, over the years they have spent many years in other countries learning together about local cultures. They have learned that they complement each other in efforts to understand new environments, even though they very seldom work directly as colleagues. Mary believes that Barkev makes an invisible contribution to her professional life, encouraging her to work at the top of her talent.

Next, Mary describes the partnership between Ellen and her husband Steve. They both start out as psychiatrists, and they continue on parallel career paths, not intertwined. However, their relationship gains strength when they write a book together and have children together. Mary suggests that men and women working side by side in parallel tasks may present new ways in which they can complement each other in partnership.

Mary bookends the chapter by returning to Alice and Jack's story and some of the problems associated with partnerships. When Alice and Jack's partnership increases in intensity, it throws off the equilibrium of his already rocky marriage to Jean. After counseling, Jean decides she wants a divorce, and Jack moves in with Alice, throwing off Alice's equilibrium by invading her small condominium with his bigger-than-life personality. Finally, when Jack dies suddenly, the divorce from Jean is not final, and Alice is neither an heir nor a widow. She is forced to improvise again and create a new place for herself at the head of the company she formed with Jack.

Chapter 6 Give and Take

Chapter 6 Give and Take Summary and Analysis

Mary Catherine Bateson takes a fresh look at the words symmetry and equality in this chapter. She points out that all five women interviewed for this book have sought out relationships with people who are different not equal. They are not looking for symmetrical relationships. Instead, they want collaborations that are complementary, where each side has something new and different to contribute. This creates interdependence—a term Mary believes we should be striving for in relationships.

Historically, male-female relationships have been asymmetrical in that the man is often superior to the woman and bigger, stronger, smarter, and makes more money. Through a period of raising consciousness that started in the 1960s, women have come to realize that they have much value to add to this world, and they are not inferior.

At first, the goal seemed to be a symmetrical or equal relationship with men. Now, Mary takes it one step further. She points out that the dissimilarities between men and women are important resources for learning about the value of differences. The best relationship between any two individuals may be one that is complementary where each participant contributes their particular talents openly and willingly. Mary believes that will lead to interdependence and a world that is organized in an entirely different way.

She starts with Joan as an example. The Activities Program that she began at Riggs makes a huge contribution to the health of patients, but doctors are slow to recognize it. Joan uses the metaphor of a language to explain her frustration. Art is a language, but the doctors don't understand it. The Activities Program and the therapy can be two things that work together to change people. They can be complimentary.

Next, Mary compares notes with Johnnetta about their experiences in academic administration. They recount some experiences where they are helped by peers and some where they are handicapped by them. Johnnetta uses the term "tweeded" to describe the minds of many men in academia; comparing them to the old-fashioned, rough, tweed jackets often worn by professors. She also uses simile to describe how faculty react to change. Johnnetta says that asking faculty to change a curriculum is like asking someone to move a graveyard.

Mary comes to the conclusion that, particularly in the academic world, relationships are fruitful if you do not pose a threat to your colleague, if you have interlocking interests, and if you have the ability to be truthful with one another. If each person has different strengths, then it is possible to develop a complimentary relationship where both benefit from uniting their different pieces of knowledge.

There is another very important point that Mary Catherine Bateson makes in this chapter. In order for these relationships to be truly complementary, they must be freely

given and freely chosen by both parties. In the past, women have lacked alternatives. Their path in life was not freely chosen, as they were expected to step into the role of homemaker. This role was further devalued because it was unpaid. Now, if women can enter into relationships with friends and colleagues where they have freely chosen their role and freely give the information they have to offer, this is when true creativity has a chance to grow.

Mary admits that she has had a difficult time defining the collaboration she has had with Joan, Ellen, Johnnetta, and Alice for this book. They are friends who have come together for this specific project. They are collaborators, but that doesn't quite include the playfulness of many of their conversations. Mary uses weaving as a metaphor for their relationship. There is symmetry in their mutual recognition, but there is asymmetry when Mary goes off to weave their separate skeins of memory into a single fabric of a book. She goes on to say that these women also weave her into their various projects. Mary wonders if the reason it is so difficult to define their relationships is because there is no one person who is dominant and another who is vulnerable. There is simply a complimentary give and take of ideas.

Chapter 7 Making and Keeping

Chapter 7 Making and Keeping Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7 begins with a simple statement: you keep a house, but you make a home. Then, Mary Catherine Bateson elaborates. She claims that all five women interviewed in the book have been homemakers, but none of them keeps a house in order to define who they are. Their home is not their identity. Mary reuses the music metaphor and says that homes can be joint compositions and so can schools, neighborhoods, offices, and the world.

First, Mary describes Ellen and Steve's home in Chestnut Hill outside of Boston. It is a big, old house, and Mary uses personification when she says the house cries out for a tribe. She also uses the metaphor of an incubator to describe the home. It is a place where growth is encouraged and relationships are reaffirmed. Children and dogs run free around the house and friends are always welcome.

Next, Mary describes Johnnetta's home, Reynolds Cottage on the campus of Spelman College. Johnnetta lives here alone, as none of her three sons live there. Mary uses personification to describe this home, as well, saying that it bears the scars of previous owners. Reynolds Cottage is a public place, because it is part of the Spelman campus, but within that space, Johnnetta has formed a few places of privacy. The home is decorated in a combination of antiques that belong to the college and Johnnetta's own furniture, art work, and family pieces. Mary is struck by the similarity of the layout of this home and that of the president of Amherst College. The buildings signify society's ideas about status, education, and family.

Mary then considers the fact that most women do not go home to relax. Home embodies a whole other host of responsibilities if one has a family. She remembers her days at Amherst when she was jealous of her colleagues who went home at the end of a long day and put their feet up and had a cocktail. When she went home, she would be dealing with domestic emergencies, helping with homework, and preparing a meal for the family.

A study by Heidi I. Hartmann has shown that the presence of an adult male in the house means more work for a woman than a child under ten, even if the man believes he is sharing the housework. Mary believes that what this study does not point out is that work in general is increased by marriage. It is not that males generate more work; it is that new tasks are created by standards and expectations.

Mary admits that she and her husband both prefer to be alone when they have intensive work to do. Johnnetta also admits that it might be difficult for her to be a good president of Spelman if her sons or former husband were living with her. Mary states that she struggles "to be a homemaker without being drawn into the wasted labor of most housekeeping tasks." She describes our society as restless and busy. We work hard

even at leisure activities. Mary uses personification to describe the Sunday paper as an obese bully rather than being a pleasurable leisure time experience. And she uses simile to compare the Sunday paper to the two-hour sermons that bullied our New England ancestors.

Home is associated with the maintenance of relationships and the refreshment of the spirit, but this becomes increasingly difficult as roles are changing in society. Mary struggles to find quality time with her daughter and then realizes that some of the best time they spend together is in the kitchen or in the car. Mary also observes that relationships need the continuity of repeated actions and familiar space almost as much as they need food and shelter. All humans share food in some way. Western traditions in particular use the ceremony of eating together to establish and maintain relationships. She sites Eucharists, Seders, and wakes as examples.

On the other hand, Mary does not see the current decline in formal family dining as a bad sign. She believes it might be better to separate the idea of food as nourishment from food as the currency of care. The latter ties many women unwillingly to the kitchen.

Mary is struck by the diversity of homes and spaces in which the five women in the book choose to live and work. She describes Joan's home next. Joan is the only one of the five women who has spent long periods of time as a full-time homemaker. Joan talks about the sense of openness and light that the tries to create for her husband Erik. She also artfully places brightly colored pieces of art and objects around the home. Mary believes that Joan has the clearest understanding of how objects affect the senses and enrich relationships.

When Mary and her husband visited his family in Beirut on their honeymoon, Mary recalls that she did not really became part of the family until she went into the kitchen and took over the kneading of the bread while the mother was making chee kufta. That act of participating in the preparation of the meal brought Mary into the family.

Mary then talks for a moment about money. None of the five women in the book ever experienced extreme poverty, but each has used tangible symbols of money in different ways to shape their lives. Alice remembers living in poverty in postwar France. People came together and shared the food they had. Alice remembers these times fondly, when the food and the conversation were very good. Mary points out that Americans often find sharing more difficult than giving something away completely.

Johnnetta shares how the bountiful sharing of food in southern black communities was central to the community, particularly after Sunday church services. However, formal daily dining was not part of her family routine.

Mary explains that she and Barkev are old fashioned about the way they conduct their evening meal. They start with an Armenian prayer and pass around serving dishes. Shortly after Mary and Barkev met, Mary wanted to learn to cook Armenian food, because he was very thin at the time. Then, they moved to the Philippines where they had a cook, and Mary never resumed her newlywed standards. When they moved

again, Mary went back to traditional European dishes that were simpler to make. When they moved to Iran, their eating patterns changed again in reaction to the culture.

Today Barkev joins Mary in the kitchen and they share in the preparation of meals. Mary believes that in order for Barkev to move away from the patriarchal expectation of being served and not helping in the kitchen, they had to try a cuisine that was foreign to both of them. The unfamiliar territory has allowed them to alter expectations and create new patterns of behavior.

It was very natural for Alice and Jack to be together in the kitchen. Everyone important in Jack's life was invited into the kitchen. His enthusiasm for cooking inspired men and women. Even after Jack's death, Alice continues to use food as a way to bring people tougher—particularly to promote working relationships.

At the conclusion of this chapter, Mary states that we must transform our attitude toward all work into expressions of homemaking such as creating and sustaining the possibility of life.

Chapter 8 Caretaking

Chapter 8 Caretaking Summary and Analysis

Mary begins Chapter 8 by giving a few examples of how mothers are prone to drop everything, even if they have important high-paying jobs, if their child or significant other is in need. Johnnetta states it perfectly when she says, "Somebody's got to be the mommy."

However, caring is a very broad term, and it can take place just about anywhere. Mary explores different types of caretaking from individuals to institutions like homeless shelters and hospitals.

The role of caretaker historically seems to land on the shoulders of women, but Mary suggests that the reader take a closer look at history. Men care for each other in foxholes; children care for pets. There are numerous ways in which caretaking takes place. Now that the traditional roles in society are blurred, there are even more ways for men, women, and children to care for one another.

She goes on to say that individually, we underestimate the need for caretaking; and as a society, we make inadequate provision for it. Caretaking can and should be done everywhere, all the time. When Johnnetta walks every morning on campus, she is taking care of herself by dealing with stress in a healthy way, but she is also taking care of her students by providing a good model of a healthy, strong, black woman.

Mary then asks the question how much human effort needs to go into caretaking. It is impossible to guess, because the word "care" is very ambiguous. It means different things in different places. Caring for others can be seen in just about every human activity, but today we are often at risk of being without needed care. Mary uses her music and sewing metaphors to describe problem as forcing everyone into improvisation and patchwork. Caretaking is no longer attached to specific roles in society. Everyone can learn it and practice it at home, in the workplace, or wherever they are.

Mary lifts up Joan's husband, Erik, as an example. While Mary is interviewing Joan, Erik develops a ritual of bringing them tea. It is a way of caring for them. Mary points out that homemaking can be done in tandem, but caretaking is always a complementary relationship. One gives and the other receives care. She goes back to the music metaphor when she says that these rhythms of give and take are difficult to develop. It only works when each partner learns to find satisfaction in caring for the other. This is very similar to the syncopated rhythms of lovemaking.

Mary goes into detail about visits Ellen takes to a number of Boston-area shelters in 1987 and what she discovers about different forms of caretaking. Project Hope in Roxbury is a family shelter that only takes six to eight families, but the caregivers work

closely with each family to provide long-term solutions to their homeless situation. Family shelters are a fairly recent phenomenon. Ellen starts to see entire families in shelters around 1983. Before that, it was only individuals.

On the other end of the spectrum, Ellen visits the Pine Street Inn. It is one of the oldest shelters for homeless individuals in Boston. It is designed to stretch resources to meet the short-term needs of as many individuals as possible. The atmosphere at the Pine Street Inn is quite a bit different. There is an air of unpredictability as some of the guests are mentally ill or alcoholic, but everyone receives a hot meal, a shower, treatment for infection or lice, and a cot to sleep on. Their clothes are kept overnight in a heated room that kills vermin. Pine Street never turns anyone away in bad weather, which means sometimes people end up sleeping in the lobby.

After providing these two very different examples of care-taking, Mary says that care-taking always involves commitment and always has a time dimension. At Pine Street, the commitment is brief and primitive. At Project Hope, it is more long-term and complicated, as it includes a complex ethical agenda that teaches responsibility and self-support.

Mary Catherine Bateson suggests in this chapter that caretaking can be learned and must be practiced in all situations from childhood through adulthood. Empathy and attention should be part of every interaction.

Chapter 9 Multiple Lives

Chapter 9 Multiple Lives Summary and Analysis

Women have always been pulled in many different directions. This is a fact that Mary starts with at the beginning of Chapter 9. Whether they are full-time homemakers or also have professional careers, women live multiple lives. Men on the other hand, have been encouraged to focus on one thing at a time and remove distractions.

Mary points out that it is blatantly unfair that a woman who works outside of the home must then come home and work essentially a second shift in the house—one that she has not chosen but has been handed to her. But she also points out that there is a hidden benefit to being able to multitask.

Mary Catherine Bateson introduces the theme of the chapter: women live multiple lives. She refers to one of her favorite works in Arabic literature, the ode of Imru'u I-Qays. In one part of this poem, the couple is making love, and the woman is distracted by the cry of her child. Half of her is turned toward the child and half remains with the man. This illustrates Mary's point that a mother often has to divide her attention between father and child and between different children. This is especially painful for women who are working outside of the home, because their attention is divided even further.

Ellen describes the difficulty she has sorting out priorities between childcare and her professional life. She mentions that sibling rivalry may be exacerbated by her multiple lives, as her children compete for her attention when she is with them.

Johnetta muses that she has never fully dealt with her multiple roles and she doesn't know very many people who have. She says that most of the time she is able to effectively juggle her time. Then, she uses hyperbole when she says that sometimes she whips herself with some form of guilt for not being a full-time mommy.

Mary goes on to say that women are expected to give way in various situations. She uses the film High Noon as an example of traditional views. The hero is applauded for not letting his love for his new bride distract him from his duty as a marshal; the bride gives up her commitment to nonviolence for love of her husband.

Mary returns to the music theme when she describes how the rhythms vary in women's lives. All five women in this book have always worked, but work has taken on different meanings with different levels of intensity. Mary believes that the style of attention that allows a woman to live multiple lives at the same time may be a genuinely creative model.

Mary is fascinated in her interviews by how many things her four friends are able to fit into one day. When Ellen has children, she does not reduce her professional life. Instead, she reorganizes it. Mary uses the music metaphor to say that Ellen learns to compose the disparate elements of her life in new and less rigid ways. She leaves a

specific career track, where her rhythms were dictated from above, and becomes able to orchestrate her own life.

It may be an example of heightened wisdom to have the ability to juggle multiple lives. It can lead a woman or a man to new heights of creativity. The key is to have the flexibility to order multiple commitments in a way that suits each person, so that they bring vitality rather than drain the person of energy.

Chapter 10 Vicissitudes of Commitment

Chapter 10 Vicissitudes of Commitment Summary and Analysis

In chapter 10, Mary Catherine Bateson tackles another potential roadblock on the way to creative success, separation or division as a result of distrust or doubt. She starts with the statement that all five women in this project are idealistic. Then, she breaks down some of the hurdles each of them has gone through while still maintaining their idealism.

All five of the women have repeatedly salvaged the capacity for commitment in an imperfect system. After the period of disillusionment, they have learned to build a new kind of commitment that does not include dependency.

Mary describes a very difficult time when she was at Amherst. She uses a garden as a metaphor for what happened by saying that if you work all day on your garden, you may forget that your neighbor covets it. The president of Amherst dies unexpectedly, and Mary is at first expected to become acting president, as the dean of faculty usually takes this position. However, a six-person faculty group works behind Mary's back and suggests to the board of trustees that she not become acting president. Mary also uses a natural disaster metaphor. When natural disasters occur, some people rescue the survivors and others start looting. She realizes that she was probably too trusting at the time and did not see what they were doing.

Every one of the five women has experienced a loss of innocence and disillusionment period, but they all used these experiences as opportunities to re-commit to people and institutions. They recognize that the real world is not perfect but they are committed to continually visualizing a better world. They are willing to work within existing systems to create change even if it occurs gradually.

Mary believes, as do her four friends, that a healthy bit of skepticism is good. Go into each situation with eye wide open. It does not good to deny the flaws in society or pretend they do not exist. A true artist will take those flaws and turn them into a larger masterpiece of art.

Mary returns to artistic metaphors in the final paragraph of the chapter. When there is a rent in the canvas or a discord in the harmony, part of the job of composing a life is to find a way to take what is ugly and use it in a broader design. It does not work to deny it completely. One must fold it into a masterpiece. The purpose is to discover grace and meaning in the big picture.

Chapter 11 Fits and Starts

Chapter 11 Fits and Starts Summary and Analysis

Chapter 11 deals with finding one's identity. We will continually ask the question throughout our lives of who we are. That identity will also change over time. Joan is committed to an identity as a dancer, but she has had many additional roles throughout her eighty plus years. Mary finds out that the identity that fits her best is a writer. Nevertheless, she has had a multitude of other roles as well. Johnnetta has to remind herself every morning that she is the president of Spelman College because this new identity has not quite sunk in yet.

Mary uses simile to compare composing a life to making a Middle Eastern pastry or a samurai sword. Each of these things has multiple layers and takes repeated actions to create. She also inserts a weaving metaphor when she talks about how Joan's life has two patterns of discontinuity woven through it such as the discontinuities of bearing and raising three children and the discontinuities of Erik's career. These patterns of discontinuity have created a need for constant reconstruction of Joan's identity.

Patterns of discontinuity fill everyone's lives. They cause us to start and stop and repeat actions over and over. Change is usually very gradual, but what begins to emerge from a creative life well-lived is wisdom. Wisdom is a survival skill. It is the ability to pay attention, respond to change, and adapt to new environments. Joan believes that wisdom is something women have had all along and it's something everyone can practice.

Chapter 12 Enriching the Earth

Chapter 12 Enriching the Earth Summary and Analysis

Chapter 12 takes a global look at humanity as Mary Catherine Bateson wraps up the book.

First, she reviews what she has learned by interviewing these five women and what they have in common. All of the women have cared for their families, but their caretaking also reaches out to the society in which they live and work. All of the women know that their productivity depends on flexibility. All of them are "conservers" where they recycle previous knowledge and relationships. All five of the women live with a high level of ambiguity. All of them work too hard and unfortunately, none of them is superwoman.

When Mary started this book, she had a sharp awareness of discontinuities in the lives of many women, and she started out the project writing bitterly about it. By the end of the project, Mary is looking at discontinuity differently. She has learned that with multiple fresh starts there is always something in the past to work with.

Ultimately, the women in this book are striving for synergy, and when they find it, they feel they are enriching the earth.

Mary concludes with the artistic and music metaphor. Meanwhile, the five women continue to compose lyric commentaries on the world around them. Each woman constructs a life that is her own metaphor for the world at large, offering a message of possibility.

Characters

Mary Catherine Bateson

Mary Catherine Bateson is the author and narrator of this book. She considers herself a writer first but she has also been a professor, a dean, an anthropologist, and a research in linguistics, as well as a mother and a wife. Ms. Bateson is the daughter of two very famous anthropologists, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, but she has certainly carved her own niche in anthropology and women's studies in particular.

Mary Catherine Bateson is a highly successful woman, but she has dealt with numerous disruptions throughout her life. She started this project to take a look at how responding to life's disruptions in a more creative way by continually composing a new life may be a new kind of wisdom and a fresh look at achievement.

Ms. Bateson admits that until recently, the underlying assumption of her life has been to build the family life around her husband's decisions about his career. She rushed her college degrees to fit in with marriage and children rather than abandoning them altogether. Now, she has learned to reject forced choices and embrace multiplicity and flexibility in composing her life.

Johnnetta Cole

Johnnetta Cole is one of the most idealistic women in the group, but she has also been a radical activist speaking out against injustice and bigotry. Ms. Cole is an anthropologist, an educator, an administrator, and an activist. She is the first black, woman president of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia.

Mary describes Johnnetta Cole as a distinctively Afro-American beauty with long bones, a finely molded skull, honey-colored skin, and blue-green eyes. She was once a campus radical, but now she works within the system as the president of Spelman College to create change. Nevertheless, Ms. Cole still includes at least one detail in her clothing that defies conformity (like a carved ivory Janus-faced pendant).

Johnnetta Cole grew up in Jacksonville, Florida during a time when Florida was very much a part of the Deep South. She experienced racism first hand from childhood on, even though her family was well-respected by blacks and whites in the community. She is divorced with three grown sons; and at the publishing of this book, she is recently engaged to a man she has known since she was eight years old. His name is Art, and he is looking forward to finding out what it will mean to be the "first man" of Spelman College.

Joan Erikson

Joan Erikson is the oldest of the five women in the book. She is in her eighties at the time the book is published. Ms. Erikson is a dancer first, but she is also a writer, editor, and jewelry designer. Mary has known Ms. Erikson since her childhood, as she was friends with Mary's famous parents.

Joan has three children. She is trained as a dancer and dance educator but her career has also included several books and a complex collaboration with her husband's work. Her professional life has always been subordinated to childbearing and her husband's work.

Joan Erikson moves like a dancer. She conveys a graceful beauty that transcends age. She wears clothes that are simple and fluid and usually gray or black to provide a solid background for her stunning jewelry. She explores the meaning of beads that she finds all over the world and uses in her jewelry.

Alice d'Entremont

Alice d'Etremont is an electrical engineer, researcher, and entrepreneur. She started a high-tech company with her lover, Jack, and took over as CEO after his death. Ms. d'Etremont believes technology is an art form.

Alice is wonderful with plants. She lives surrounded by thriving plants and often gives them away to friends. She is a woman of vivid contrasts, dramatic and sexy but also delicate. She loves chunky silver jewelry and large, modern earrings and brooches. Alice is slim but broad shouldered. She has short silver hair, but her eyebrows are still dark and she has nose that imparts character.

Alice d'Etremont spent her childhood in Rumania and played with gypsies even though she was told not to. She developed the idea early on that if rules didn't make sense, she would think carefully about how she would break them. Alice's mother was a math teacher and her father was a physicist with a doctorate in mathematics.

Ellen Bassuk

Ellen Bassuk is a psychiatrist and research on homelessness. She is also the youngest member of the group. Ellen is perceived as a very professional woman, but she has an undercurrent of passion, especially for the issue of homelessness.

Ms. Bassuk was once the director of emergency psychiatric services at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. She was one of the first researchers to make a connection between the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill in the 1970s and the increase in homelessness.

Ellen has fair skin, freckles, green eyes, and short, curly auburn hair. She grew up in a Jewish family in New York, the second of four sisters. Her mother was a full-time homemaker, and her father was a lawyer. Ellen has always been torn between her mother's nurturing model and her father's achievement. She and her husband have one son, Danny, and at the time of publication of this book they were in the process of adopting a second child.

Ellen is a very good listener. She gives the impression of neutrality with occasional flashes of warmth and mischief.

Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson is Joan's husband. He was a long-time friend of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, and Mary has known him since she was a child. Erik was trained by Anna Freud to be a child analyst.

Margaret Mead

Margaret Mead is Mary Catherine Bateson's mother. She is one of the most well-known American anthropologists. Ms. Mead constructs her life around her own professional constancies and makes her marriages conform to her profession. She leaves two husbands and is rejected by the third husband.

Gregory Bateson

Gregory Bateson is Mary Catherine Bateson's father and Margaret Mead's third husband. He is also a very successful anthropologist.

Jack

Jack is Alice's lover and business partner. He is a creative inventor and entrepreneur, and he loves to cook. Jack dies suddenly in 1985. At his death, he is not officially divorced from his wife, Jean; and Alice and Jean end up entangled in a fierce legal battle.

Robert Cole

Robert Cole is Johnnetta's ex-husband. He is a white man who met Johnnetta when they both attended Northwestern University. Robert and Johnnetta have an amicable divorce. Their relationship continues because they share three sons.

Barkev

Barkev is Mary's husband. He was born in Syria, but his cultural tradition is Armenian. Barkev was an engineering student at Northeastern and later went to Harvard Business School. He becomes a social scientist. Barkev is Jack's best friend.

Steve

Steve is Ellen's husband. He is also a psychiatrist who later moves on to academic medicine and then industrial consulting. Steve and Ellen have parallel career paths that seldom cross, but they do write one book together.

Paul

Paul is Alice's ex-husband. Hs is an industrial designer. Alice is attracted to men like Paul and Jack in which she can share the pleasures of solving technical problems.

Julian Gibbs

Julian Gibbs is the president of Amherst when Mary is the dean of faculty. Mary describes him as an easy man to mother. He is a bit old-fashioned in his ways and can only attend to one task at a time. Julian is a willful man who is not a very effective president. He dies suddenly during the time that Mary is dean of faculty.

Objects/Places

Quilt

A quilt is used as a metaphor throughout the book for the creative way that women piece together disparate parts of their lives to create a strong and beautiful whole.

Spelman College

The college in Atlanta, Georgia where Mary Catherine Bateson interviews Johnetta Cole. Johnetta is the first black woman president of Spelman College.

Rumania

The country where Alice d'Entremont spent her childhood. She developed much of her non-conformist personality here—playing with gypsies and breaking rules that she felt were unjust.

Beth Israel Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts

The location where Ellen Bassuk is the director of emergency psychiatric services. This is where Ellen tracks the increase in chronically ill and isolated patients who frequent the emergency room.

Impatiens

This is a type of flower planted on the Spelman Campus, compliments of The Cosby Show as a thank you after they filmed an episode on the campus. Mary Catherine Bateson wonders if someone from The Cosby Show chose that flower as a symbol of the long, slow progress of civil rights in the United States.

Austen Riggs Psychiatric Center

Erik Erikson works at this center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts beginning in 1951 mostly with adolescent patients and developed the concept of a crisis of identity that occurs in young adulthood. Joan Erikson begins working with patients here as well and develops the Austen Riggs Activities Program that she claims is neither therapy nor entertainment. The activity is valuable in its own right.

Iran

Mary Catherine Bateson and her husband live in Iran for a number of years. During that time, Mary works as an educator and also as an anthropologist, specifically studying American women who marry Iranian men and are finding ways to meld their American backgrounds with Iranian culture.

Joan's Jewelry

Joan's creativity comes out in her jewelry designs. She carefully searches for beads from all over the world and finds out about their meaning within various cultures. Each piece of jewelry is artistic and also symbolic. Joan takes bits and pieces that she finds in many different places and combines them into a beautiful piece of jewelry. In the book, this becomes a metaphor for the way that women compose their lives creatively in bits and pieces of time and space, fits and starts, often while they are also being responsive to the needs of others.

Demonics

The business that Jack and Alice start together. The name Demonics stands for on-demand printing by electronics. It is a double pun, because it also describes the printer's devil that Jack replaces with his new technology. After Jack's death, Alice renames the business Rise Technology and closes a lucrative deal with Canon that Jack started before his death.

Project Hope

A homeless shelter for women and children in Roxbury, Massachusetts run by the Little Sisters of the Assumption. This shelter attempts to address all of the problems that these women face, from dealing with bureaucracy to housing subsidies to welfare payments to getting their children into schools. The shelter can accommodate six to eight families at one time, and they work with the families to achieve long-term solutions.

The Pine Street Inn

One of the oldest and most famous homeless shelters in the country, located in the Boston area. The goal at the Pine Street Inn is to give short-term support to as many individuals as possible by stretching their budget to the limit.

Themes

Life is Improvisation

Throughout this book, Mary Catherine Bateson compares living a successful life to improvisation. It is like when a jazz musician improvises a piece of music. They start with bits and pieces of tunes that are already familiar and then draw those unrelated pieces of music together to create a unique piece of music.

Composing a life is very similar. Every detail is very seldom planned in advance. Individuals respond to circumstances that life brings them and create a next step.

Improvisation requires flexibility and adaptability. It also requires awareness. Those who are successful in living life as improvisation are those who are very aware of their surroundings. They respond to needs and nurture those around them.

Life is also improvisation, because it is full of surprises. No two days are ever exactly the same. Wisdom comes from practicing responses to the discontinuities or the fits and starts in life. One must be willing to continually start over and put together the notes as you find them. One has to be comfortable with ambiguity.

Women as Role Models

Women have had to be more adaptable than men in the past. Now, they can serve as role models in a world that is changing rapidly. Historically, women have been forced to take on multiple roles. Even full-time homemakers deal with many different distractions within a day. Add a career to that, and the multiplicity of one woman's life is staggering.

There are many reasons that the word "wisdom" is so often associated with female images, such as Sophia, Athena, and the Shaktis. Women have become wise, because they have learned how to readily adapt to any situation.

They are caretakers, too, and know how to nurture their family. But it even goes beyond that. Women have practiced responding to the needs of others. They don't just do it at home. They are also caretakers at work, with friends, and in various places in society.

The rhythm of women's lives can also serve as a role model. Women have an amazing ability to find hidden reserves of strength and stamina. Pregnancy is a very good example of this.

There is much that society can learn from women: responsiveness, multi-tasking, nurturing, listening, and finding strength and vitality in life. Women are constantly seeking synergy through various activities that complement each other rather than competing with one another.

Partnerships

There is a certain give and take in partnerships, and it is very seldom completely even. In fact, it is preferable for a partnership to be asymmetrical.

The five women in this book seek out personal and professional partnerships with people who are different. In this way, they strive for complementary relationships that foster interdependence rather than competition, superiority, or dependence. It is much more effective to have partners who have different strengths and weaknesses. Then, they can complete each other rather than compete with each other.

All of the women in this book experienced personal and professional partnerships that worked and those that did not. Partnerships must first be chosen freely by both parties. They also must contain a degree of trust and commitment in order to survive. Some of the most fruitful partnerships the women in this book talk about are those in which the partners complement each other.

Each of the five women interviewed for this project have combined work and intimacy with one of their partners. Oftentimes it works beautifully and adds a new kind of vitality to projects. Women are more likely to strive harder for success if they are working on something that will also benefit their partner.

Commitment and Skepticism

Idealism is often connected to dependency. If you believe strongly in something, you depend on it to be true. What happens when doubt and mistrust work their way into the mix?

Mary Catherine Bateson talks about the tricky balance between commitment to an organization or an idea and having a healthy amount of skepticism. It is not an admirable quality to be blind to the truth. Questioning is a necessary part of self-preservation and independence.

Idealism is childlike and often carries with it a high degree of dependency. Eventually, there is disillusionment when something is discovered to be flawed. And finally, there is a renewed commitment to the person or institution in spite of its flaws. This renewed commitment is more autonomous and less dependent. One can work within a flawed system or relationship to create a different level of commitment that is equally strong and a lot smarter.

The world is not perfect, but one must be willing to work within a system to change things to make them better. Usually, that change is very gradual, but it is worth the wait.

Style

Perspective

Composing a Life is written from the point of view of the author in the first-person narrative. Mary Catherine Bateson is the narrator, interviewer, and also participant in the project.

Ms. Bateson questions her four friends, compiles the information, organizes it into loose categories, and then filters their responses through her own views on composing a life.

The four women who Mary interviews also reveal their points of view in direct quotes that are included throughout the book. However, all of the information is seen through Mary Catherine Bateson's eyes, as she has decided ultimately what quotes to include.

Mary Catherine Bateson's point of view is changed slightly through her interviews with her four friends and gathering research information for this book. She goes into the project with some anger over the discontinuities that women have to deal with in life. However, she emerges from the project looking at discontinuity quite a bit differently. Every time the women have had to start over, they are always able to pull something from their past to work with.

Tone

The language of Composing a Life is primarily academic but it is also very artistic. Mary Catherine Bateson comes from an academic anthropology background and her grounding in academia is revealed in her writing style. It is more clinical than emotional.

However, Mary Catherine Bateson is also a creative person, and all four of the friends she interviews have threads of creativity in their lives. Therefore, there are passages throughout the book when Mary Catherine Bateson liberally uses figures of speech, particularly simile and metaphor, to add a creative flair to the project as a whole.

Throughout the book, two metaphors are prominent. The first metaphor compares composing a life to music improvisation. There are multiple references to composing, improvising, rhythms, and lyrical passages. The second most prominent metaphor is that of creating a quilt. Mary Catherine Bateson continually talks about piecing, stitching, weaving, cutting, and connecting pieces of a life together.

Mary Catherine Bateson also adds a few end notes and points out various studies to back up her thesis. This adds to the overall feeling that this is an academic book and more specifically a women's studies book.

Structure

The structure of this book has received some criticism. Some say that it is not as focused as her previous works. However, it is possible that Mary Catherine Bateson was deliberately ambiguous in the structure of the book. That coincides with her thesis—that life is constantly changing and redefining itself. There is no direct route from point A to point B when composing a life, so Mary Catherine Bateson prefers to also take a wandering approach to the structure of her book.

The interviews with her four friends are very loosely organized under twelve umbrella themes. Those themes are Emergent Visions, In the Company of Friends, From Strength to Strength, Opening to the World, Partnerships, Give and Take, Making and Keeping, Caretaking, Multiple Lives, Vicissitudes of Commitment, Fits and Starts, and Enriching the Earth.

Within those very broad categories, Mary Catherine Bateson follows the threads of conversations she has with her friends in a very creative, stream of consciousness sort of way. For example, one comment from Johnnetta will remind her of something Ellen mentioned in her interview, and Mary goes directly on to Ellen's comment without much of segue in between thoughts that are complementary.

The book is not presented in chronological order; it is not organized by interview, and it does not follow any sort of scientific method. It is as unpredictable and enlightening as a conversation between five very good friends.

Quotes

"All too often, men and women are like battered wives or abused children. We hold on to the continuity we have, however profoundly it is flawed. If change were less frightening, if the risks did not seem so great, far more could be lived" (Composing a Life, Chapter 1, pg. 8.)

"Fluidity and discontinuity are central to the reality in which we live. Women have always lived discontinuous and contingent lives, but men today are newly vulnerable, which turns women's traditional adaptations into a resource" (Composing a Life, Chapter 1, pg. 13.)

"My mother believed that all women, whether they have had busy multiple careers or are reviving old interests after decades as homemakers, have a hidden resource of energy and vitality for their later years. She called it 'postmenopausal zest'" (Composing a Life, Chapter 2, pg. 28.)

"Composing a life involves a continual reimagining of the future and reinterpretation of the past to give meaning to the present, remembering best those events that prefigured what followed, forgetting those that proved to have no meaning within the narrative" (Composing a Life, Chapter 2, pg. 30.)

"An exploration of the ways women combine the materials of their lives must address this question of needed strengths, strength to imagine something new and strength to remain with it" (Composing a Life, Chapter 3, pg. 37.)

"Most women today have grown up with mothers who, for all their care and labor, were regarded as having achieved little" (Composing a Life, Chapter 3, pg. 39.)

"Human beings tend to regard the conventions of their own societies as natural, often as sacred" (Composing a Life, Chapter 4, pg. 57.)

"The change goes on, and surely the central task of education today is not to confirm what is but to equip young men and women to meet that change and to imagine what could be, recognizing the value in what they encounter and steadily working it into their lives and visions" (Composing a Life, Chapter 4, pg. 74.)

"Men and women often do their best work in tandem, with a clear sense of common direction and a degree of complementarity that allows not only a division of labor but contrasting approaches to the same problem" (Composing a Life, Chapter 5, pg. 78.)

"A man and a woman may struggle for equality in their relationship, but external pressures continually destroy the balance. It's not easy to stand together against the world" (Composing a Life, Chapter 5, pg. 87.)

"For complementarity to be truly creative, it is not sufficient for need to run in both directions; it is necessary to acknowledge that both contributions are of equal value and that both are freely given" (Composing a Life, Chapter 6, pg. 100.)

"Similarity is certainly a premise of this book—but the interest comes from the differences in our situations and stories" (Composing a Life, Chapter 6, pg. 105.)

"it's hard to define the minimum needed to provide a sense of home sufficient to sustain relationships and growth, especially in this society of material opulence in which we generate endless hours of needless work to cancel the savings offered by technology" (Composing a Life, Chapter 7, pg. 125.)

"Sharing is sometimes more demanding than giving; Americans often find it difficult to tolerate the level of interdependence involved in carpooling or sharing a laundry room in an apartment building" (Composing a Life, Chapter 7, pg. 131.)

"In this society, we habitually underestimate the impulse in men, women, and even children to care for one another and their need to be taken care of" (Composing a Life, Chapter 8, pg. 140.)

"We all need someone to cherish and be cherished by" (Composing a Life, Chapter 8, pg. 145.)

"But what if we were to recognize the capacity for distraction, the divided will, as representing a higher wisdom?" (Composing a Life, Chapter 9, pg. 166.)

"Women have not been permitted to focus on single goals but have tended to live with ambiguity and multiplicity. It's not easy" (Composing a Life, Chapter 9, pg. 184.)

"The capacity to combine commitment with skepticism is essential to democracy" (Composing a Life, Chapter 10, pg. 188.)

"Often, American men learn to project their disappointments outward, like Lee Iacocca using his rejection by Ford to fuel new achievements; women tend to internalize their losses. When a proposal is turned down or a job not offered, women tend to say, I wasn't worthy" (Composing a Life, Chapter 10, pg. 206.)

"Composing a life is a little like making a Middle Eastern pastry, in which the butter must be layered in by repeated folding, or like making a samurai sword, whose layers of differently tempered metal are folded over and over" (Composing a Life, Chapter 11, pg. 214.)

"Every loss recapitulates earlier losses, but every affirmation of identity echoes earlier moments of clarity" (Composing a Life, Chapter 11, pg. 222.)

"The stories in this book are stories of women who have struggled and improvised to combine different values, paying the price of criticism or rejection by those who

expected them to conform to other and older visions. Their purity lies in their embrace of multiplicity" (Composing a Life, Chapter 12, pg. 233.)

"Projecting a new vision is artistic; it's a task each of us pursues in composing our lives. One can write songs about sharing; it is hard to write songs about limits" (Composing a Life, Chapter 12, pg. 239.)

Topics for Discussion

In what ways do the five women in this book find their identities?

Is this book only for women? How can men also benefit from the information in these pages?

How is wisdom related to composing a life?

Choose one of the five women in this book and trace the ways in which they are composing a highly creative and successful life.

How does this book alter the traditional concept of achievement?

Describe various ways in which caretaking can take place for men and for women.

What does it mean to go from strength to strength?

Give examples of different forms of homemaking described in this book.

Why is nurturing so important to the future of this world?