REDISCOVERING YOURSELF

THE GREAT UNTETHERING

If you're finding midlife uninspiring and feel like you're helping everyone else's boat float except for your own, why not take a grown-up's gap year? Run towards yourself and get your health, joy, spark and wellbeing back.

WORDS BY MONIQUE VAN TULDER

Several years ago midlife had started to feel like one long logistics spreadsheet. The kids might have been taller, but my days still revolved around keeping everyone else afloat.

Back-to-back HSCs and COVID-19 chaos, my husband was enjoying a career renaissance, and I was pinballing between a spluttering freelance career and being the CEO of domestic minutiae.

I was craving space to remember who I was beyond 'Mum', 'Wife', or 'Chief Emotional Officer'. The tipping point came, as it so often does, from one more thing: the sad passing of a long-time friend. Resilience, always my safety net – well, she was nowhere

> "FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS, I REMEMBERED WHAT IT FELT LIKE TO BE SPONTANEOUS."

to be found. "Untethered you is a dangerous state," said sister Michelle, my sage and caution. She was correct. I was utterly without direction. Feeling passed over and perpetually pissed off. So I did what any self-respecting middle-aged woman with a lot on her plate would do – I ran away from my family.

When people ask what actually made me 'run away', I can honestly say it wasn't about chasing happiness or ditching my family. It was about needing to hear myself think. It happened quietly, in that unglamorous way real life does: I went to an interstate family home to 'check the lightbulbs'.

One early morning, sipping hot coffee after decades of lukewarm, I wondered, "When did I become this woman who'd ended up doing little that floated my boat – while keeping everyone else afloat?"

I was 54. I'd spent decades at the top of everyone's 'person we need' pyramid, and the very bottom of my own. Suddenly, the thought occurred: If I don't do something now, I will spend the next 40 years changing lightbulbs and putting out other people's spot fires.

More *Shirley Valentine* than *Eat Pray Love* – I just ... stayed. I drove to the post office and I got a PO box

Clockwise from opposite page: Monique van Tulder 'left home' in middle age to rediscover her life; Parajumping in Austria will make you feel alive; Van Tulder in the snow in Japan; Enjoying the scenery and a snack in Bezau, Austria.

number. I emailed the family: "Here's my PO box number. This is where you can find me." In hindsight, ridiculous, did I really expect a postcard? But a line in the sand. Feeling brave, I switched off my phone and played hooky – from my life.

And the world didn't fall apart.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel guilty. This isn't what committed mums and wives do. But the gift of space is that it forces you to confront your patterns: the ways we mothers and carers often absorb the mental and emotional load, the 'invisible work' of keeping everyone else's lives running while ours slide off the table.

I started sharing little snippets on Instagram – nothing earth-shattering, just honest reflections about feeling both elated and apprehensive. The responses from other women were unanimous: "Do it. Tell us how. Bring back the ideas for those of us who can't leave right now." Apparently, I wasn't alone in wanting to take off (at least for a little while).

WHAT I ACTUALLY DID ON MY GROWN-UP'S GAP YEAR

If you're picturing me basking on beaches or finding myself in a mountaintop retreat, you're only half right. I did have wild swims (yes, even in July, freezing and exhilarating), walked the long way to town, sat and wrote, just for the joy of it. To tease out my thoughts. For the first time in years, I remembered what it felt like to be spontaneous, to say 'yes' to my own company.

My family visited. They missed me. And I missed them, too. But I still missed myself. So, after six months of this 'gap moment', I booked a solo trip to Europe. I visited my dad and my sister, travelled on my own for the first time in years, and tested the limits of my courage (turns out, parajumping off a cliff in Austria is excellent for reminding you that you're alive).

WHAT RUNNING AWAY GAVE ME BACK

If there's a secret to midlife reinvigoration, it's this: you don't have to blow up your life. You just need to make space in it. Whether that's a week alone in a different house, a brisk walk before anyone else wakes up, or saying yes to something that's just for you, these small acts are where reinvigoration lives.

As I travelled for my extended 'moment', I made many new friends, constantly subdued by their incredulity – different languages, same question: "What were the words I used to explain to my husband that I needed a breather?""

"Relationships can mean many things," I told them. "A need for space included.'"

PROFOUND JOURNEYS

But what if you can't just pack up and leave? What if your life has you anchored firmly in place? Exploring isn't about miles travelled. The most profound journeys also happen right where we are. I had a conversation with a friend who was feeling stagnant and looking for advice on finding adventure without upending family life.

"You've just started swimming again," I reminded her. "Why not try every pool nearby, a new one every week?" We gathered 20 'doable' pools. She's still swimming – and still loving the adventure.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Monique van Tulder is the author of *A Grown Up's Gap Year*, podcast host, nutritionist and health and wellness coach. She champions real-life reinvigoration for women – sharing practical ways to reclaim space, spark and wellbeing, without blowing up your life.

Start by running toward yourself, wherever you are. And here's the thing I know for sure: midlife sharpens the horizon – it took running away to be able to reframe space. The reward? Even the mundane feels new again, and my wellbeing – health, joy, and spark – has finally stepped back into the foreground.

I came home and wrote a book about it – *A Grown Up's Gap Year* – because the biggest adventure, it turns out, is remembering what shape you want your life to take. A reinvigorated you is the best gift you can bring to those you love. My marriage is stronger. My relationships with my sons are richer. And I'm more myself than I've been in years. Was I glad to return? Yes – because they are my home.

But I returned changed. Profound journeys don't always require miles; they begin with a single small decision to put yourself back in the picture. So if you're feeling the itch to do life differently, listen to it.

Find one pocket of space. One daily micro-joy. The rest, I promise, will follow. Keep asking: Why not now? And why not you? I didn't want my epitaph to read: "Goodness, why did I forget to live my life?"