

## Book review

# Dancing with Fear and Confidence: How to liberate yourself and your career in mid-life (by Laura Walker)

Sally Bonneywell

### Article history

Accepted for publication: 16 July 2021

Published online: 02 August 2021



© the Author(s)

Published by Oxford Brookes University

Laura Walker (2020) has written a very useful book which stems from her Masters' research dissertation. It is evidence based with a wealth of solid academic references that boost its credibility, whilst still being eminently readable. Her own business common sense shines through, her experience across many industries and positions supports her research approach with anecdotes and stories to bring the 'real world' in, and to bring the subject matter to life.

Unlike Yates (2014) *The Career Coaching Handbook*, this book it is not specifically aimed at coaches. It is pointed more directly at the end user – the person going through mid-life. As such it sits alongside *The Squiggly Career* (Tupper & Ellis, 2020). *Dancing with Fear and Confidence* is concise, succinct and to the point. It is taut with no spare meanderings and as such it is an efficient read for the busy mid-lifer. It came out just before *Changing Gear* (2021) by Hall and Stokes which is more specifically focused on the transition from full time executive role to meaningful work on your terms – i.e. from second to third stage of life. The two, in some ways, cover similar territory in that they encourage a focus on deepening self-awareness, meaning and decision making. *Changing Gear* examines in depth moving out of full-time work and explores one's purpose and how to choose and create a meaningful life.

*Dancing with Fear and Confidence* is easily accessible and digested – it is a slight volume at only 135 pages (before references) so will appeal to the busy executive. The basic premise is that mid-life angst is real, it can be a challenging time where dissatisfaction can creep up on you and internal conflict is rife. Normalising this and encouraging waking up from 'sleep walking' through your life is explored through simple but effective methods for deepening self-awareness and self-knowledge. These tools and simple exercises are easy to follow and will appeal to the questioning professional desperate for guidance and a way out of their existential angst. Walker then moves on to broaden the exploration to include the social context in which we live and the pull of social systems. This is an elegant enquiry, a soft touch where the reader is guided through some deceptively simple questions that deepen and broaden the introspective process at the same time. Forces such as approval and permission, belonging and isolation and inclusion and exclusion are surfaced and we are encouraged to reflect on how these forces have impacted, and will continue to impact us and our decision making.

From here the book identifies potential pivot points that populate mid-life. Walker makes the point 'It's the pivotal time of your life. And you are pivoting. It's not a choice. The choice is not whether to pivot. It is happening. The choice is how.' (Walker, 2020 p.63). Fear and confidence are examined as powerful motivators and practical suggestions and encouragements are proffered. The final few chapters outline a pathway or three step process to follow – dis-covering, contextual readiness and dancing with fear and confidence. Tried and tested exercises are outlined and simplified to suit the manager audience – the lifeline to help look at formative years and patterns, identifying pivotal strengths and imagining what you want people to say about you at your retirement party. Her simplification of Kegan and Lahey's immunity to change and competing commitments model is masterful. Some, such as the wheel of life, are very basic, but enable the individual to step through a thorough inventory of their life.

So this is a very useful book for people in mid-life who are dissatisfied and want to make a change in their life but don't know how to go about doing it. Will it do what it says on the tin – liberate yourself and your career in mid-life? I wonder if the book alone would enable that to happen. Clearly Walker has identified a ready market – shifts in demographics, the changing nature of work and latterly, the pandemic have forced many people to reflect on their lives and the meaning of work in an unprecedented way. This book is a great resource for them – but for the full benefit, my hunch is that this will only come with the support of a coach/trained professional. Clearly Walker brings all her business savvy to the fore as there is a system of coaching offered via her website. As such it could be viewed as a marketing tool – however, this is a book I have already recommended to my clients who want to do some homework and further thinking outside of coaching sessions. For deeper reflection and introspection, Hollis's (1993) *The Middle Passage: from misery to meaning in the second half of life*, is unbeatable, but I see *Dancing with Fear and Confidence* as a practical, how to guide to support further thinking and action.

## References

- Hall, J & Stokes, J. (2021). *Changing Gear: Creating the life you want after a full-on career*. Headline Publishing Group, London.
- Hollis, J. (1993). *The Middle Passage: From misery to meaning in the second half of life*. Inner City Books, Toronto.
- Tupper, H. & Ellis, S. (2020). *The Squiggly Career*. Penguin Random House, UK.
- Walker, L. (2020). *Dancing with Fear and Confidence*. mPowr (Publishing), Great Britain.
- Yates, J. (2014). *The Career Coaching Handbook*. Routledge, Oxon.