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Sheila Bridges' 'The Bald Mermaid' Dispels The Glamour Of Interior Design And The Myth Of Having It All (EXCERPT) Posted: 08/01/2013 9:26 am EDT Updated: 08/01/2013 10:00 am EDT

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me of in explaining how she layered 49 years of memories, photos and life lessons into her forthcoming memoir, "The Bald Mermaid." "If something's off by a quarter of an inch, it can change the whole thing," Bridges says, offering up her strategy for keeping

As an interior designer, Sheila Bridges is in

the business of detail, a fact she reminds

both her precision and her priorities in And while precision does not equal perfection or "having it all," as Bridges notes in chapter 23 of her book, she does find reward for her attention to detail in her

impressive career among the interior design elite; in the arsenal of wisdom she plans to use to navigate her next 49 years; and in an account of how those things came to

writing the memoir in the slideshow below. For some reason, I convinced myself that relationships in general would get easier as I got older. It turned out the opposite was true. I also hadn't expected them to be quite so transitory or disposable. I struggled with some of my alpha female friends, too-particularly those who had given up their careers to live in the suburbs and

raise families. I'm guessing some of them thought my life was shallow, frivolous, and devoid of meaningful responsibility. It didn't help my case if I shared stories about

going snowboarding in Dubai, flying to the Winter Games in Torino, a birthday

dinner in Vicenza, or two weeks at polo school in Argentina. I totally understood

financially independent women who were focused on their careers and/or

why they were compelled to hang out almost exclusively with other moms who had

kids the same ages as theirs. Likewise, I had a lot more in common with other single,

pass (among others) that is as vivid and multifaceted as the rooms she creates.

Read an excerpt from "The Bald Mermaid" and Bridges' thoughts on

I was able to make peace with the notion that as we get older, our lives stretch in unpredictable ways, and we need to shift in new directions to meet those changes, even though, sadly, it also meant sometimes relationships that used to work no longer do. What I didn't necessarily get-what made me uncomfortable-was seeing several of my old friends channel their inner CEOs to the point where they would still call me fairly often but almost never had time for a conversation. They approached their household tasks, wifely duties, recreational tennis games, and Zumba classes with the same level of intensity and competitiveness they had when they were working their way up the corporate ladder. I would get these 12-second drive-by calls that would go something like this:

"You know what? I'm in the car pool line, I just got to the front and the girls are about to jump in. Can I give you a call back later?"

relate to theirs.

"Hi, Sheila, How're you? What's going on?""

entrepreneurs who ran their own businesses.

"Oh, okay. Bye," I would say, dumbfounded, thinking, Hey, wait a second. I didn't call you, you called me. I might not hear back for another three weeks. Either they

were way too busy or they just couldn't relate to my life anymore, just as I couldn't

"I'm fine. Just busy, I guess. Right now, I'm really excited because I just found out

that one of my new wallpaper designs is going to be featured in the Cooper Hew-"

When we finally did catch up, they often seemed completely frazzled and utterly burdened by the stresses of motherhood, even though they had enlisted small armies of professional helpers in their quest to achieve the perfect cul-de-sac lifestyle.

Apparently, the way you raised children nowadays was to ensure them a full

competitive edge: You gave them absolutely everything money could buy; you

over-scheduled their days with a thousand important activities essential to their

development. As mother and social secretary, it was your responsibility to shuttle

them to and from playdates and all their other scheduled appointments on time. Your husband's job was to fill up the bank account, write the checks, and make guest appearances on weekends. "Sorry Sheila, but this weekend is a little tough. Peter has soccer practice at ten on Saturday, Mandarin lessons at one, millinery class at two thirty, and then it's off to the allergist at three thirty. India has ballet at nine, tennis intensive at eleven, theater workshop at one, Regent rock climbing at two thirty, and papier- mâché at three thirty. Aiden has jazz piano at eight thirty, Metropolitan metalsmithing at noon, Fairfield fencing lessons before Tae Kwon Do, and conversational Russian at three thirty. I need to get to the dry cleaners to pick up Carl's suits by two and be

back to meet the caterer at three, the florist at four and then the kids have to all be

children for the Christmas card. She's the professional photographer from Glamour

home and dressed by five because we've got Susan Greene coming to shoot the

Shots in the Paramus Park Mall. Maybe we can get together next Saturday."

was the one who needed a nap. Didn't kids ever get any down time anymore?

Weren't they ever allowed to "just play," to use their imaginations and make up

generation of entitled assholes? But what could you say? Were you going to be the

games? Weren't my friends at all concerned that they were grooming the next

Good grief! It was exhausting just listening to this. Forget about the 4 year old; I

first one to convince your Suburban Supermom friends that it was all just a little bit too much? I was never surprised when their kids acted out or their relationships with their husbands fell apart. Most of their men had been cheating on them for years and they chose to turn a blind eye, far more concerned about maintaining appearances and holding onto their toney lifestyles than being positive role models for their children. I felt like some of them had become professional nags—overbearing, bossy, and controlling—hassling their husbands and riding their kids' backs about everything

from keeping up their extracurricular schedules to what topping they should order

on their Domino's thin-crust pizza. God forbid I should have the rare pleasure of

"Thomas, make a right at the light. I said right, not left. Okay, now go straight for

half a mile, then left at the Citgo station." Who needs GPS when you're married to a

riding in the front passenger seat of their Volvo SUV on our way out to dinner.

world-class back-seat driver? "Thomas, what are you doing? Are you not listening to me? I just said left at the Citgo. All right, we're due at the restaurant now, so when we get there you can just drop us at the door, we'll go in and get the table and you go find a parking place." "Thomas, did you confirm the dinner reservation? What?! I thought your secretary

was going to do that."

too much, don't you think?"

have children.

husband and the father of your children.

I would glance over at Thomas with a look of compassion that said, "So very sorry, pal." Then I would jump out, following Boss Lady into the restaurant. In situations like these—and they happened more than you might imagine—I often

found myself thinking, How do these guys stand it? If this is who I have to become in

Once in a while I mustered enough courage to offer an unsolicited opinion. It was

raised us and I think we managed to turn out pretty okay without all the extra

usually something along the lines of, "Hey, our parents worked full time while they

professional help and wall-to-wall extracurricular activities. Sometimes, it gets to be

order to fulfill the married-with-kids dream, then I think I'll pass.

Totally exasperated—lips trembling, jaw clenched, brow furrowed—she would jump

out of the car before it stopped moving. Contrary to what most people believe, you

don't have to be the CFO of a Fortune 500 in order to properly emasculate your

So shoot me for having a momentary lapse, for forgetting the Number One Rule of Maintaining Friendships with Married Woman Who No Longer Have a Career: Don't ever, under any circumstances, question or offer advice about their parenting or marital skills. Ever. Not even when they ask for it. You don't have a husband or children, so what the hell do you know about dealing with men or raising kids? Maybe we could make a deal. Perhaps in exchange, they could adhere to the Number

One Rule of Maintaining Friendships with Single Women Who Held Onto Their

meaningful occupation, our decision not to get hitched, or our biological urge not to

But, seriously, rules like that would never work, even for me. Just because you're not

an entrepreneur doesn't mean you can't come up with a brilliant business idea; just

because you don't have a husband doesn't mean you know nothing of the minds of

men. I knew it would go a long way toward keeping the peace if we could just agree

Careers: Don't ever, under any circumstances, question our choice to have a

to respect one another's personal choices. Many times, the grass appears greener in someone else's life, especially when you're in the middle of having a very bad day. All of these "confrontations" with my friends who had become fully committed suburban wives and mothers led me to reflect on the myth of Having It All. Most of them had bought into it wholeheartedly. But what if it was just that—a charade

drummed up by a dim-witted man and his allies to keep us women forever running

uphill on life's treadmill, wearing six-inch stiletto heels, competing with—instead of

appreciating—one another, always striving to do more, have more, be better, even

enough of our own accord? Who really needed the added social and media pressure

though we were doing a bang-up job already? Weren't we strong and motivated

to be Super Woman, to become the perfect daughter, sister, girlfriend, wife, mother, friend, sister-in-law, godmother, aunt? What if Having It All was overrated? Or if it turned out to be one gigantic elaborately constructed sexist Ponzi scheme we were sold on since we were little girls, one that robbed us of any significant returns on our emotional investment? How come I never saw my male friends clamoring like crabs in a bucket to Have It All? How come you never saw men on Oprah, all choked up as they talked about desperately vying for it? I came to believe you could manifest your own version of

Having It All and that maybe it wasn't about having everything as soon as possible

but instead being satisfied with having some of it, some of the time—and forget

about having all of it, all of the time.

It started one sunny autumn afternoon. I was out in the country driving with the top down, still barreling down the winding road to Having It All. I saw a deer crossing up ahead and braked quickly to a crawl. Where there's one there are always more to follow. Sure enough, two more does came over the embankment, bounding out from behind a row of trees whose clotted colors had changed with the season. They were followed by a little spotted fawn on stilt-like legs trotting unsteadily across the asphalt. I waited until they had all passed in front of my car and across the road before accelerating again. But after about 100 yards, I suddenly thought, Having It All sure sounds like a lot of responsibility; like a helluva heavy mother lode to carry around all by yourself, unless of course you want to throw your back out. So what's wrong with trusting in the belief that it's perfectly okay not to "have it all?"

feeling the warmth of the sun on my bare head and the crisp, dry wind chasing my back, thinking about the stretch of road in front of me and the beautiful Indian summer days ahead. Reprinted from The Bald Mermaid by Sheila Bridges by arrangement with Pointed Leaf Press, Copyright © 2013.

I checked my rearview mirror to make sure no one was on my tail, slowed down,

made a U-turn, and gradually sped up, heading for home with a smile on my face,

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