At age 47, with a solid academic career and a grown daughter, Mary Brown Parlee ’65 fell suddenly in love—with a man she’d known for decades. They had worked together in an MIT lab during the 1960s and spent summers on nearby Maine islands with their respective families. But by the time they took serious note of each other’s romantic appeal, in 1990, both were divorced, single parents who had weathered many years alone. “We knew it was better to be on your own than to be unhappily married,” Parlee says. “It made me more realistic—and more brave,” she adds. “I realized I had to do something or my life was not going to change, and that I wanted someone I could be my whole self with. So when Joe and I got together I knew that I had to take a risk, even though I was scared.”

Forming new love relationships at later ages often requires such renewed fortitude. “Life has left tire tracks on a lot of us by the time we reach our fifties and sixties and it’s hard to take that chance again in loving someone because of what it cost the first time,” asserts Teri (McCannel) Motley ’65, who was divorced when she and Herbert J. Motley Jr. ’65 married 10 years ago. “I was managing OK as a single woman, but things are just richer when they are shared.” Howard L. Needleman, D.M.D. ’72, PD ’74, a widower who remarried in 2001, pushed himself “out there” when the right time came to find a new partner. “Being alone was horrible,” he says. “No one really needed me and I like being needed.”

The rising bulge of older single Americans makes later-life re-partnerings in various forms potentially much more common in the years ahead, thanks to a steady divorce rate, increasing longevity, the rise of financially independent women, and waning stigmas toward singlehood and cohabitation (a growing trend; see page 12H).

U.S. Census data from 2007 report 52.2 million single males and 59.4 million single females over the age of 45. The gender split widens the older people become—women live longer, and men are more likely to remarry in general (and to partner with younger mates, as is popularly believed)—but not by that much. Of those aged 45 to 64, the data show 36.7 million single men versus 38.8 million women; after age 65, that widens to 15.4 million men and 20.5 million women. “The media has helped freak singles out by leading them to believe that older people, women especially, have a better chance of being shot by a terrorist than getting married,” says Pepper Schwartz, a University of Washington sociology professor specializing in relationships and sexuality. “There are still a lot of good women and men out there who are single.” Most of those between 45 and 64 are divorced and, overall, widows far outweigh widowers, especially in the 65 and older category.

Not much hard research has been done on the topic of older re-partnerings, although a national survey revealing the robust sex lives of elders was enlightening (but more on that later).

When exploring later love, the population should rightly be divided into at least...
two groups: ages 45-60 and those over 60, says Schwartz, who has written 14 books, most recently Prime: Adventures and Advice on Sex, Love, and the Sensual Years, a candid memoir of her love life after the end of her 23-year marriage. “These are very different ages psychologically,” she says. The time, money, and emotional commitment each group can or will give to a relationship differs significantly: “The younger group, if divorced or widowed, tend to still have children in the house and are in the thick of their careers, while the older people are looking at career peaks and thinking more about job security, retirement activities, and financial well-being.”

Values obviously change with age, says Needleman, 62, of Needham, Massachusetts. “Family, security, religion, and professional compatibility: these are more important to older people than appearance—looks or dress, ‘popularity,’ and living in the moment.” He and his wife, Leslie Sobel Needleman, share friends, interests, and activities—such as traveling for about six weeks of the year—all of which rise in importance because there is more leisure time available for recreation, entertainment, and family. He advocates partners also sharing the same “ballpark age,” so that what’s “fun” and what one is able to do are mutual: “going out to party at clubs until midnight versus staying home by the fire with a good book and retiring at 10 p.m.”

Cynthia Johnson MacKay ’64 and Warren Joseph Keegan, M.B.A. ’61, D.B.A. ’67, met through his Harvard Magazine personal ad and married in 2007. “I want people to know how different and so much better later marriages can be,” she says. Younger unions are more like business enterprises, as she sees it; there are expectations around working hard, building a home, having children, succeeding in careers. “But when you’re older, it’s pure pleasure,” she says. “There’s no reason to be together except that you enjoy each other; you can negotiate any kind of relationship you want.” The Keegans, for instance, live apart most of the week and together on the weekends. And they have found a prenuptial agreement helpful. In fact, it makes life together “much less complicated: there’s almost no reason to get mad at the other person!”

LINDA J. WAITE, Flower professor of urban sociology at the University of Chicago, is more cautious. All in all, the merging and shifting of kinships that branch out from second or third unions, along with new questions around financial and/or legal responsibilities are essentially unchartered waters, says Waite, whose research centers on aging, health, the family, and marriage. “More things are up for negotiation in later partnerships—and because of that, the chances of misunderstanding and conflict are just much higher.” That said, she adds, research shows that second marriages are not much more unstable than first marriages, for reasons that are not entirely understood.

Even if children are “out of the house,” reformulations of family life require immense sensitivity on all sides. “Just look at the family vacation: do we take all the kids? What about the grandchildren?” Waite says. “People don’t know what the relationship should be between a woman who has finished childbearing and has adult or young-adult children and a new spouse. Is it his responsibility to help put his wife’s kids through college, or help them buy a house? And what is her role with his previous family?”

Tori Motley recalls that all of their children, then ranging in age from 16 to 32, wore black when she and Herb married. “It’s a reminder that divorce is hard on kids, and that their feelings need to be respected,” she says. “Each of our kids came to her own relationship with the new spouse in her own way.” “Boy, did they give Teri a hard time about transferring to divinity school in Boston based on forming another relationship,” adds Herb. But choosing a wedding date for that March was important to him because he “wanted to attend Teri’s graduation as a husband, not just as a boyfriend.”

Negotiating the ex-partners can add more complications. Teri still shares care and responsibility for a severely handicapped son who lives in Vermont, near his father. And Herb’s former wife lives in the same town as the Motleys, and often shares holidays with them.

When Parlee married her later-life love, Joseph Bauer, in 1991, the youngest of their respective children was 25, so that transition proved relatively smooth. Recently,
the couple moved back to the Boston area from Maine to be near their shared total of 11 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. “My daughter told me, ‘Now it’s time for us to take care of you guys for a change,’” Parlee says, but with all the children and the dual careers, “that hasn’t happened yet. We’re still helping them.”

Needleman disengaged from a previous relationship with a woman who had children still at home because “I did not think I had the motivation to deal with a young family again. It was difficult, but I had to realize that it was not the kind of lifestyle I wanted for my near future, given what I had been through with my late wife’s illness.” As a widower, he felt most comfortable re-coupling with a widow with older children, who had also experienced a happy first marriage. “With Leslie, we were on the same page: both our families had been broken involuntarily,” he explains. “We have one big happy family now, but it has taken a long time and a lot of effort on everyone’s part to get to that point.”

The expectations and practical realities of raising kids keenly affects second and third relationships, says Geordie Hall ’64, of Vermont, who divorced after a 30-year marriage and later began a new relationship with a widow with older children, who had also experienced a happy first marriage. “With Leslie, we were on the same page: both our families had been broken involuntarily,” he explains. “We have one big happy family now, but it has taken a long time and a lot of effort on everyone’s part to get to that point.”

The expectations and practical realities of raising kids keenly affects second and third relationships, says Geordie Hall ’64, of Vermont, who divorced after a 30-year marriage and later began a new relationship with children on both sides. Parents are coping not only with ex-spouses and kids, but with the formation of new rules and new alliances in a new household. “There are differences in parenting objectives and styles,” he explains. (That second relationship, though rife with such conflicts, still lasted eight years.)

Concern for one’s children also contributes to strategies around managing money and estates. “Older people want to make sure their children are taken care of and that their resources go to the next generation—and that has to be negotiated in a different way than if the couple had children together,” Waite says.

When Parlee and Bauer decided to marry, for example, she resigned her tenured post as a psychology professor at City University of New York Graduate Center, sold her “Hudson River-view” home, and moved to Boston. She also signed a prenuptial agreement, based on his lawyer’s advice. “I had been supporting myself, so that was another risk I took,” she explains. “For women on their own, financial independence is very important. It turned out very well; Joe is a kind and generous man, so money has never been an issue between us.”

Pension payments may also be threatened by remarriage (but not by cohabitation). This is especially important for women on their own who have relied on spousal benefits. Because the Social Security rules on payouts to either divorced or widowed survivors who remarry are nuanced and tend to focus on age at time of spousal death, length of original marriage, age at remarriage, and any surviving ex-spouse benefits, women have the option of re-geographic residency to optimize the Social Security benefits.

(please turn to page 12J)
SOMERVILLE, MA
This charming top floor condominium is completely renovated. It has a living/dining room with cathedral ceiling, kitchen with glass front cabinets, granite counters & stainless steel appliances; spacious bedroom; study/second bedroom and tiled bathroom. 
Deck and parking
$265,000

CAMBRIDGE, MA
Avon Hill/Radcliffe - Exquisitely designed and meticulously renovated 11-Room Victorian. Features include a custom built 2,000 book mahogany library, large gourmet kitchen, Master suite, 4 fireplaces, 4 ½ baths, outstanding guest suite, decks, fenced yard, 2-car garage. 
Price Upon Request

CAMBRIDGE, MA
Just off Brattle Street on almost a quarter of an acre is this turn-of-the-century home. Features include a 25’ Living room w/ fireplace & window seat, dining room w/ diamond shaped leaded glass windows, eat-in kitchen w/ granite, master w/ study & sleeping porch, 3rd floor guest suite & family room. 
$1,675,000

CAMBRIDGE, MA
Shingle-style Queen Anne, circa 1890 sits on over ¼ of an acre just behind Brattle Street. Features include a dramatic staircase, 33’ living room w/ sliding glass doors to a 19’ deck, 6 beds, 4 ½ baths, 3 fireplaces, elevator and 2-car garage. 
Price Upon Request

CAMBRIDGE, MA
This 13-room Victorian is between Brattle Street & Huron Village. Open living/dining room, chef’s kitchen/family room w/ granite & stainless, a large master suite w/ fireplace & an amazing home theater and family room. Deck, patio, landscaped yard & 2-car garage. 
$1,895,000

CAMBRIDGE, MA
Just renovated handsome 7 room, 3+ bed townhouse in Huron Village. Living room with fireplace & French door to deck; kitchen with maple, granite & stainless appliances. Master with bath en suite; family room, patio, yard & parking. Near shops, restaurants & Fresh Pond. 
$779,000

CAMBRIDGE, MA
Completely renovated in 2008, this stunning 13-room Victorian is between Brattle Street & Huron Village. Open living/dining room, chef's kitchen/family room w/ granite & stainless, a large master suite w/ fireplace & an amazing home theater and family room. Deck, patio, landscaped yard & 2-car garage. 
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CAMBRIDGE, MA
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$1,895,000

CAMBRIDGE, MA
A short distance to Harvard Sq., this spacious, & dramatic corner co-op with multiple exposures is in a full-service building with spectacular views of the Charles River & Boston skyline. It has over 1800 sq. ft., a corner living room (approx. 28’ x 28’), 2 beds, 3 baths, two 13’ balconies, c/a & garage. 
$1,285,000
Unmarried, Together

Growing up, Brian Newmark ’72 looked at his parents and their married friends and thought “something was missing.” To him, the unions lacked dynamism, the freedom and energy that “led people to grow,” he explains. “It was nothing I was ever drawn to.” That feeling has stuck with him—through three serious, long-term adult relationships and the raising of his now 22-year-old daughter. He and his current partner, Terry Accola, have been together a dozen years, and have bought a home in Lincoln, Massachusetts, but still have no plans to tie the knot.

“One of the nice things about getting old is that it is very freeing: there is a certain letting go of societal dictates, or what others might think of your situation,” says Newmark, a semi-retired psychologist. “Society is definitely tilted toward being a couple and getting married—Social Security and health benefits and tax incentives. People have to be careful not to get married for the wrong reasons: because it’s easier and less expensive. We consciously chose to live together instead.”

They are not alone. The number of heterosexual individuals older than 50 living in “unmarried-partner households” nearly doubled from 1990 to 2006, according to associate professor of sociology Susan Brown at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. “Cohabitation among older adults has increased over the last decade, and since the 1970s, just as it has among younger people,” Brown says. “It’s still a small number, but it is moving only in one direction. The data also suggest that older adults are choosing cohabitation as a long-term alternative to marriage,” rather than a preamble, as is typical for younger adults.

According to U.S. census data that Brown analyzed, 2 percent of that older cohort were cohabiting in 2006 compared to 1.1 percent in 1990. (She notes that the census counts only those who self-report living together full-time.) The over-50 group was also the fastest-growing segment among all the cohabiters categorized by the data, although the 30-39 and the 40-49 age groups contribute greater overall numbers, at 6.6 percent and 4.5 percent, respectively, in 2006.

“Of those who do form a union, one-third choose cohabitation and two-thirds choose marriages,” says Brown, whose work is funded by the National Institute on Aging. The later-life live-ins are also relatively stable, she reports. “The relationship is as likely to end in separation as it is in death, while the average young person cohabits one to two years.”

Confirming that data is a 2007 study published in the Journal of Family Issues, “Age and the Desire to Marry,” which found that “single people at older ages seem to be rejecting marriage,” says coua-
thor Jenna Mahay, assistant professor of sociology at Concordia University in Chicago. “We expected people in their fifties and sixties to be more likely to want to remarry because of perceived gains (help with children, personal finances, etcetera). And what we found was the opposite: they were less likely to want to marry than their younger counterparts.”

For Linda McJannet, Ph.D. ’71, of Cambridge, living with Michael O’Shea, her partner of 17 years, has had a multitude of benefits. When they first got together, it lessened pressure on their respective children to absorb the new partner, and reduced expectations around family holidays and step-relationships. It has since fostered financial autonomy, helped preserve separate identities, and created a comfortable degree of emotional latitude. “Anyone who has been through a divorce knows it’s a horrible experience—the lawyers get richer and everyone else gets poorer. Nobody wants to go through that again,” she reports. “Living together takes away that sense of ‘should it all go crashing’…presumably it’s not going to be such a painful obstacle to moving on with your lives if we want to. I don’t think we’ll want to, but you never know.”

In fact, she and O’Shea have taken it one step further and live together in a two-family house. They share a bedroom and common space, but maintain two kitchens (great for entertaining and holiday dinners), and divide distinctly personal space otherwise. “The downstairs is his male retreat, where he displays his German bottle stoppers and his baseball collection, and the upstairs is ours; then I have a study on the third floor,” she says. “We think it’s the best of both worlds.”

Both couples interviewed split financial responsibilities, but maintain separate bank accounts, benefits, and retirement funds. “We bought the house together,” Newmark says, “and financially we’re sharing a good system as far as we both put in equal amounts and we balance it out in a way that both of us feel is fair.” McJannet and O’Shea do share some business investments, but those are clearly spelled out in legal terms so there are no misunderstandings. “We both agree that whatever estates we have should go to our children,” she says.

At one point, McJannet thought it made better financial sense to take that trip down the aisle. But a visit to an accountant convinced them otherwise. “At any rate, money is not the best reason to make that additional commitment,” she adds. “We agree we’ll take care of each other and see each other through whatever comes and whatever medical valleys lie ahead. I think the model of cohabiting frees you to think about all kinds of arrangements for living with someone you love most successfully.”

~N.P.B.
“Sharing that primal companionship was something I missed a lot when I was single.”

If you’re healthy, they say “wealthy and wise” should follow. Yet diseases and physical ailments absent in younger years can’t help but reverberate in later-life relationships. “Losing someone I loved and shared life with for 30 years was devastating,” says Needelman. “It’s like I was physically ripped apart.” When dating in your twenties, “You don’t ask a person if they’ve had operations, or major illnesses, or ‘Do you have stents in your coronary arteries?’” he adds. “But when you’re older you want to know, ‘Can this person travel to Asia with me? Are they going to need the handicap cart on the golf course?’ I guess we’re all afraid of being hurt and one of my biggest fears is of losing someone again.”

Facing his own need to “re-grow,” Needelman chose physical as well as emotional compatibility. “It’s selfish, but at this point in my life I’m going to be selfish because the window of opportunity is narrowing and I’ve tried to design my life with Leslie and our children around the things that make us all happy.”

Edward O. Laumann, Ph.D. ’64, Mead Distinguished Service Professor of sociology of the University of Chicago, says overall health is closely linked to sexual activity in late life and plays a large role in the success and happiness of late unions. He was a co-principal investigator on the National Social Health and Aging Project, the first comprehensive survey to examine marital history, sexuality, and physical and mental health in Americans aged 57 to 85. The study, published in the 2007 New England Journal of Medicine, revealed that sexual activity doesn’t decline much from the fifties to the seventies, and that most people continue to enjoy each other in the bedroom well into their seventies and eighties.

“Sexuality keeps people motivated to exercise, eat right, avoid getting fat, and take care of themselves,” Laumann says, and declining sexual activity can indicate other potential health problems. Linda Waite, a survey coauthor, noted a significant related finding: 78 percent of men aged 75 to 85 have a spouse or other intimate relationship, but only 40 percent of their female counterparts do. “For most men, aging is a partnered experience,” she says, “but women’s sexuality is more often affected by the death or poor health of their partners.” The most common reason cited for lack of sexual activity was the male’s physical health, Laumann adds, although women were more likely to note a lack of interest in sex.

Parlee says she never knew what “falling in love” was until she found Bauer: “Our time together was like being a teenager all over again”—and that passion has continued to flourish. The Motleys agree the physical relationship is crucial. “Let’s not neglect that warm body,” Teri says, laughing. “Sharing that primal companionship was something that I missed a lot when I was single.”