



Sally Field

At 53, Field is no longer a Flying Nun. Who is she today? Sometimes even she doesn't know for sure. And that's liberating

In Transition

Known for her leading roles in Gidget, Norma Rae and Places in the Heart, actress Sally Field recently moved behind the camera to direct her first feature film, Beautiful. While preparing for its release, Field wrote about what a lifetime of transitions has meant for her.

MY 12-YEAR-OLD SON AND I HAVE just finished reading *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, in which Dumbledore, the great wizard, says to Harry, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." I've

thought about that sentence a lot lately, because I have to face the press...again. The most difficult thing about promoting a movie is presenting a side of yourself to reporters that they can write about. If you're not really sure who you are (and you're not sure you care to hear what anyone else thinks of you), then your time on the road is going to be exhausting, frustrating and most likely humiliating.

WHEN I WAS 19 AND DOING MY SECOND TV series, *The Flying Nun*, I was terribly depressed. I didn't know enough to realize that I was >



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feeling trapped, without choices. To make things worse, my shrink, who was my surrogate father, had moved away, and I was faced with a new one. I don’t like facing new people. In one of our sessions, however, this doctor gave me a gift that at first I didn’t understand—a cartoon that I have to this day. It’s just a simple drawing of a stick figure standing in a jail with his face pressed against the two bars in front of him. He looks lost. What he doesn’t see is that the rest of the jail—the box—has no other bars. *Turn your head, stick person. Turn your head, Field. Move! Change!*

LOOKED UP THE WORD *TRANSITION* IN MY LITTLE Oxford dictionary; it means passage from one place, state, condition, etc., to another. *Transition* was one of the first terms I learned in acting. When I worked on *Sybil*, a TV miniseries based on a character with a multiple-personality disorder, one of the most intriguing aspects of playing her was coming up with the transitions from one personality to another. What happened to her—*Sybil*—during that change? Was it a struggle? I chose to have a moment of vacancy, a moment when no one filled *Sybil* and she was empty.

Actually, that’s something I have experienced in my life—when one part of me was trying to change, and I felt vacant and lost and terrified. The transition from television to film was a tremendous struggle. No one would even let me in the door. I felt my destiny was in everyone else’s hands. I thought I was powerless. But then I started to repeat to myself: “If I’m not where I want to be, it’s because I’m not good enough...yet.” Which meant it was up to me. Not them.

ABOUT THREE YEARS AGO, I FOUND MYSELF IN that old familiar depression. I was turning 50 and mourning the loss of my youth. Who was I if I was not young? I was facing the sadness of losing that glorious part of myself that had the ability to give birth. At the same time, I found I was mourning the death of my lover, my closest friend: my acting career. Or at least as I had known it for a nice, safe period of time. Thirty years or so.

Acting is what I do best. It has been the place where I can most clearly define myself, know myself. But my career was changing—not because I wasn’t good or successful but because I was no longer young. There wasn’t any place for me. I felt like Scarlett O’Hara, lost in the fog. But then a part of me said, “Mourn and move on, Field. You have three children. You don’t want any more children, for God’s sake! What are you clinging to? The bars in your jail again? Look in another direction.”

SO IN 1996, I STARTED DIRECTING. MY FIRST EFFORT was a TV movie, *The Christmas Tree*, which I also cowrote. I was so profoundly scared when I began the project that my feet

broke out in welts. Why was I so terrified? I had grown up on a set. There was no studio pressure to deliver anything. Yet I was filled with fear. Another transition. A new task. A new process.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote: “I have found that you do have only to take that one step toward the gods, and they will then take ten steps toward you. That step, the heroic first step of the journey, is out of, or over the edge of, your boundaries, and it often must be taken before you know that you will be supported.” The only joy of directing, that first time, came when I realized I’d done it. I’d stepped beyond my boundaries.

I have now directed my first feature. During production, the welts on my feet were still there but were undeniably smaller. I have realized that one of the most important aspects of filmmaking lies in the transitions. The way that the story weaves together visually is up to the director to figure out. Me.

SO HERE I AM AT 53, WITH LITTLE WELTS ON MY FEET, trying to move my face away from the bars before it. Every transition I’ve made has been a struggle. The real ecstasy comes from knowing that I am still alive...or perhaps it’s knowing that these are the times in my life that I feel most truly alive. ●