



BEYOND BARREN: Putting Childlessness into Perspective

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“What is the Big Deal?”

I always feel like somebody is watching me; not all the time, but too often—particularly when they learn that I don't have any children. It's no big deal, is it? Certainly, that should be the attitude according to current trends. The way I calculate the situation, one in six women must be childless and the number is growing. I am one of seven siblings, six of us girls, and am the only one without a child. Look around your family, friends and colleagues, and I bet you'll reach similar conclusions.

Though very few of us talk about it, the US-based Pew Research Center raised the subject in their June 2010 survey, which shows that nearly one in five American women beyond childbearing years has not given birth. Statistics in the UK paint a similar picture. The Office of National Statistics' (2009) research reveals that almost one in five women is remaining childless.

If there are so many of us, why are people hush-hush about it? Even we

are sometimes tongue tied. Never mind that Pew's data concludes that social pressure to bear children appears to have diminished for women today, at least in the US, and the decision to have a child is seen as an individual choice.

On the surface and in some circles this must be the case or they wouldn't have reported it, but not underground so to speak, and certainly not in my circles.

Definitely, there is still pressure for women to have children, even if it's internal pressure. But don't underestimate the external pressure.

For instance, a couple of years ago at a wedding, I was struck by how the elders of the family spoke openly to the bride and groom about the importance of having children, although the man already had offspring. The bride must have been forty at the time, if not older.

Though she has embraced motherhood and can't think of anything more rewarding, I don't think she would deny the pressures she felt to conceive.

In the same vein, all of my female first cousins, all thirteen of them, have

children. Now, if I cast the net wider, I can come up with about three second cousins who do not have children. This is telling, and I bet my cousins and my sisters will agree that the pressure was there, even if it was illusive. It was, and still is, sketched indelibly into our socialization, and possibly into our biological make-up. I'll come to that later.

The point is, social pressure may have weakened in general, but it has not disappeared. While today's childless woman might not be singled out as readily as she would have been a generation ago, she's still under pressure.

Once this pressure is internalized, it becomes an ongoing yearning, a longing that often strips a woman of her vitality. And for those who voluntarily forego motherhood, the pressure becomes guilt, if only for a short period.

In both situations it comes down to a question of womanhood. Is motherhood the only way by which we can truly be fulfilled?

Of course not, and it is high time



we face the truth, put childlessness into perspective. In short, women who do not have children are normal, happy beings with similar problems and worries as women who are mothers.

We may be a bit unconventional, but so what? I am an African-American from a very small town, living in London with my white English husband. Albeit unconventional, I am not abnormal.

So why is the topic of childlessness often blown out of proportion? I've come up with at least five reasons.

1 – It's personal

Childlessness can be a personal problem, in more ways than one.

First, let me deal with the word itself ... "childless". It's an awful word. You can't help but take it personally. But when you look it up in the dictionary, it just means "without offspring". And that is the fundamental truth. However, the synonym "unfruitful" is not true.

Yet, I can't think of a replacement word. Admittedly, "child-free" sounds better and means having no children, especially by choice. It ought to do, but I don't really feel child-free to be honest, not when I am taking an interest in and worrying about nieces, nephews and godchildren by choice, as if they were my own.

So for those of you who think the word "childless" is part of the personal problem, I see your point. But indulge me if you will, at least for this article. It is not the right platform to pontificate on this matter.

Let's face it, childlessness, child-freeness, whatever you want to call it, is personal enough in its own right, for women and men alike, without debating the word.

Though a concern for men, childlessness can be quite consuming for women, perhaps because our biological

make-up intrinsically links womanhood with motherhood. We are the ones who give birth, and thus have the natural urge to procreate; it's as simple, or as complicated, as that. However, some do insist that the natural instinct, linked to the biological clock, is a load of rubbish.

Of course, there are women who don't want children, and there's nothing wrong with that, but that doesn't mean they don't have a biological clock. Everybody has a master body clock, a rhythm that tells us what to do in terms of basic needs, such as eating and sleeping, and when to do them. Maybe the term "biological clock" is a problem.

But once we understand that everyone has a master clock, which is linked to the biological clock, it might be easier to agree that a woman's biological clock simply tells us when our childbearing time is almost at an end.

Saying that a woman's biological clock doesn't send any alarms is like saying that PMS or menopause is all in the mind! These things, tricky as they are, cannot and will not be ignored ... but that's another story.

Nevertheless, the biological clock can be and is often ignored. Women who don't want children can shut it off, reset it, do whatever it takes to silence it.

But most of them, if not all of them, cannot eradicate their inherent instinct to mother. Though some argue that not everyone has this instinct. At least one acquaintance, who says she's never had it, confessed a moment of yearning, so strong that she nearly adopted two boys she saw on television. Later, she realized that her short-lived desire to become a mother wasn't necessarily about becoming pregnant and giving birth, it was a human instinct to care, to protect, to mother.

This makes sense to me. In fact, women who do not have children,

whether they choose to or not, seem to be tuned in to this mothering instinct as much, if not more, than mothers. My Aunt Fannie, who didn't have children, had a natural knack for telling us what to do and disciplining us as if we were her children.

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If you haven't heard about the time she kicked my boyfriend out of my parents' home, you're the only one. To add insult to injury, my eldest sister, a married woman and ten years my senior, was there ... and it was broad daylight. Not to mention that I was seventeen. Aunt Fannie ignored all that since she understood that I wasn't allowed visitors during my mother and father's absence.

To say this has left a mark on me is an understatement, and while I have stopped short of repeating such an episode with my nieces, nephews and godchildren—though the jury is still out with the younger ones—they might have a couple of stories to tell about my mothering instincts going into overdrive.

My point is that I know how to mother, how to nurture and protect. I thought I would have children too, but time flew. I grew up, went to university, became career-focused—some would say obsessed—and married late.

Of course, it is not as nice and tidy as that, but I don't want to get deeply personal, at the risk of invading the privacy of others. Furthermore, it is not necessary to go into the details to put the issue into perspective. Let's get on to the next reason that the topic is often difficult to talk about.

2 – It’s Unconventional

Childlessness and convention are juxtaposed. Convention is so firmly rooted in us, that most of us don’t even know it is there until we challenge it or stray from it. For example, I always thought I would fall in love, get married and have children, even with my “grab life by the throat” attitude, so I was stymied when my husband told me (before we got married) that, if he was honest, he didn’t really want another child.

Admittedly, I had sort of grappled with the question on at least one other occasion, but this time it felt serious, perhaps because I was older, in my mid-thirties, and I knew he was the man I would marry, unless of course our views were completely incompatible. You can’t have half a baby.

As I pondered the question for the final time—its weight resting largely with me—my biological clock ticked louder than ever, though another rhythm inside of me wanted to rationalize, ask if my natural urge was all that pure, or if it was tainted by socialization.

The more I considered the matter, the more it became clear that convention had clouded my views more than I wanted to admit. The cross I bore felt heavier than ever; like a volatile struggle between my own wisdom and conventional wisdom. In the end, I concluded that having a child was not the choice for me.

Here, I need to stress how important it was for me to come to this conclusion. I’m not saying that I didn’t consider my husband’s position. I did, and he was quite reasonable and flexible. But in the end, the decision had to be mine; otherwise, I would have surely blamed him forever and driven a barrier between us.

So, had either of us been unilateral, this could have been a deal breaker or a recipe for disaster. It sounds harsh, but I

have seen both ends. When I first came to London, I knew of a woman, well beyond her childbearing years, who openly resented her husband for his hand in her decision to not have children. He refused.

She, however, took no responsibility for the decision and possibly misdirected her unhappiness. Instead of considering that her bitterness had something to do with her lack of decision-making power for her own life choices, she was sure it completely rested with being childless.

Maybe. Nonetheless, a male acquaintance, who doesn’t want children, agrees that every woman should make this decision for herself, even if it does mean leaving her partner behind.

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I am not encouraging women to get packing or force a partner into a space that he can’t live with, but I am saying it is important to own your life decisions. A recent acquaintance did just that, divorcing her husband of eight years because she knew that she wanted a family and he didn’t. You might ask why she married him in the first place. She didn’t know that he didn’t want children but, according to her, he always knew she did. Today, she has a child and feels much better about herself and her decision for taking it into her own hands.

Anyhow, the point is having a child is the norm, the convention. And if you do not fit into that convention, you might be called into question.

Still, one childless acquaintance says she has never been driven or moved by convention. Good for her and others who have such control! But for me, life became a bit tumultuous at one point.

Sometimes I was so overwhelmed by the finality of the choice I had to make that I felt literally sick. That is how deeply seated and stubborn convention was in me.

I suspect I am not the only one. Others have confided that even when they have moved on, convention still had a hold on them, causing them to become wistful if only for the odd moment.

Earlier this year, I met a career woman who would be dividing her time between two major world cities. I congratulated her on this opportunity. “Why not,” she said. “I don’t have kids” . . . as if she owed me this information.

Although she appeared confident, there was something awkward happening, both socially and personally; a slight trace of guilt perhaps for having the freedom to travel this path, and perhaps such a strong curiosity about the opposite path that she was unclear about the one she was on. I suspect convention was blocking her view.

3- It’s Difficult

Life decisions are hard enough without the biological clock and convention weighing in. Looking back on my decision time, I see two important themes that, with the benefit of hindsight, I realized now I overlooked. First, I was miles away from home and thought a child just might restore something that England had somehow taken away. Any woman knows that it is easier to make friends when you either go straight into a job or into a school environment to drop off a child.

I had neither platform, since I worked as a freelance writer. The problem here was that I wanted a friend, someone familiar around. There’s nothing wrong with that, except it was a self-centred reason for having a child. Soon I got out and made friends.





Next, I had always had doubts about having a child, some of them trivial, but they were mine. For instance, I could never picture myself pregnant, and but who can? And I worried about my low pain threshold, but who doesn't?

The problem was that I wanted a Hollywood pregnancy. There was a lot wrong with that, my friends and sisters told me. Pregnancy and giving birth is a very serious experience. Soon I realized that I had to consider other questions.

These were the matters that kept me awake at night. Was I in the best physical and emotional health for motherhood? Was I prepared for the sacrifices that came with raising a child? Was I financially prepared to provide the best possible existence for a child in this very expensive world? What about external factors that I had no control over, such as the state of the world, including the environment?

And was it fair, or downright selfish, to become an older parent, knowing that there were increased risks for conditions, such as Down syndrome, for example. Of course, children with disabilities are born to younger mothers too and healthy children are born to older mothers, but these were major concerns.

At this point, I want to say that I am not condoning teenage pregnancy or single motherhood among young women; far from it. But I am suggesting that leaving it a bit late can have lifetime implications for parents and children.

Recently, I read an article about a 66-year-old Indian woman who gave birth to triplets. Who am I to say whether this is wrong or right, but I can't help wondering what life will be like for those children with an older mother. Will the children become carers sooner rather than later? Will the mother have the energy and wherewithal to care for her children?

Will she be around to see them grow up?

There are no guarantees in life, but it doesn't seem fair to me.

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Decisions, decisions, decisions! It was a tough one for me, but I'm at peace with my personal choice and my status as a woman: a daughter, a sister, a wife, a friend, an aunt, a godmother, a stepmother etc. It is my fruitful reality, and I'd like to be as comfortable in it as women are who have their own biological children, and not be considered an anomaly. Why not?

4 - It's Isolating

No one wants to feel like they are on the outside looking in, yet sometimes I think that is the way childless women consider themselves. Inundated with the many messages about fertility, and the joys of parenthood, no wonder so many people think that motherhood is the only way a woman can be fulfilled.

Recently, an acquaintance told me that she thought every woman wanted children, even those who claimed they didn't. She—an educated, reasonable person—figured they were just saying they didn't for motives of self-justification.

Not everyone believes childless women when we say we are just fine.

Of course, many of us face emotional upset over the subject, whether it's our choice or not. As I mentioned before, I often felt physically sick when considering the implications. But I

don't believe for a moment that I am not fulfilled. Nevertheless, I was once told as much, during a heated discussion when I advised someone to practice tough love. She told me I didn't get it at all and never would because I didn't have children.

Another time, when I was the only individual among a group of business women who didn't have children, they suggested I try to compare writing a novel to giving birth ... then maybe, just maybe, I would get the gist of motherhood.

Perhaps they were on to something when you consider the blood, sweat and tears it takes to deliver a novel, but it need not be an alternative to childbirth. It is a fulfilment in itself.

In my blog-hopping, I found other women receiving much of the same reaction. This message—if you don't have children of your own, you will not be fulfilled—even shows up in entertainment these days, such as in the play, *The Priory*.

Though the play is meant to be a comedy, I saw nothing funny when a mother said to a childless woman, who had miscarried that she would never know the kind of love she felt for her children. True, but is this the holy grail to fulfilment?

In a feature article this year, a major Sunday paper asked: Does parenthood bring joy? The parents interviewed told of their joy and happiness, but no one concluded that joy or fulfilment came directly from having children. That's not to say it doesn't. I'd like to think it does, but as supportive friends and family with children agree, it is not the only route to satisfaction with self.

As some older people used to say, having a baby does not make a woman ... but admittedly, it can offer something very special to her life, and even a man's.

These days, my father-in-law speaks of when he first held my husband, his only child. He had never experienced anything like it and hasn't since. Many girlfriends and relatives attest to this unique love they feel for their children too. But does this mean that life is incomplete if we never have this personal experience?

“Mother or not, we have to live in our own skin and take comfort in it.”

Of course not, but the fertility advertisements, with their references to fulfillment, certainly suggest that it is the case.

I don't begrudge any woman of motherhood if that is what she wants. I just don't think she ought to count on a child for total fulfillment, no more so than she should a spouse or a job.

Mother or not, we have to live in our own skin and take comfort in it. Only then can we accept ourselves. But even after that, we might not be accepted.

5- It's Anti-social

What do I mean we might not be accepted? Exactly that. Stigmas associated with childlessness go back a long way.

In biblical times, childlessness was more than a misfortune; it was a disgrace in some instances. Women who did not have children were considered “barren”. There, I finally used the word. Pretty naked, isn't it, no matter how you look at it? Unless, of course, you accept it for what it means and move on.

But that is hard to do when, throughout history, children have been intrinsically linked to womanhood as a symbol of fruitfulness.

Christian or not, most people know the story of Elizabeth's barrenness, though she wasn't necessarily disgraced, coming from an esteemed family. Anyhow, the cousin of Mary, mother of Jesus, Elizabeth did not fall pregnant until she was well beyond childbearing years and her husband was elderly.

The birth of her son, John the Baptist, was considered a miracle. And so it was, as was the birth of Jesus.

While these two particular stories are exceptions to the natural process of birth as we know it, we often look to them to confirm the importance of having children, even when we are beyond childbearing ourselves.

Let me be clear that the Christian culture is not the only one with a history of equivocating birth with a woman's fruitfulness. Recently, I heard of a Jewish woman who was embarrassed that she and her husband didn't have children. She felt it was a disgrace to her culture. And I spoke to another from South America with similar feelings, who did not allege to a faith background. She, too, felt major embarrassment that she had not had children.

In certain Eastern cultures, some women feel so pressured that they wonder if their value is determined by their ability to conceive.

Don't misunderstand me, procreation is good; a natural part of life. The opposite, of course, would mean the end of the world, as was threatened in the 2006 movie, *Children of Men*. In the opening scene, the youngest citizen, aged eighteen, dies, forcing humankind to face its possible extinction; a bit far-fetched, but still scary!

We need children, but not everyone can and should have them. That's just my opinion, and one that I won't expand on here. All I am saying is that bringing a child into the world not only has personal

implications, but sometimes economical, even political consequences.

But we're not discussing that here. We are talking about shifting views about, and towards, childless women, putting the issue into perspective. That's do-able, starting with social acceptance.

“You got any chirrun?” Do you remember this line from the movie, *The Color Purple*, based on Alice Walker's award-winning novel? In a drunken stupor, Shug Avery (Margaret Avery) looks up, her eyes on Celie (Whoopi Goldberg), and asks the question.

“I got two chirrun,” Celie says. Though poignant for Celie, (her children had been taken away from her), the question somehow felt derisive to me. And though I had just entered womanhood myself and hardly understood it on any level other than a superficial one, I must have somehow picked up on the weight of such a question to a woman, who either does not have children or has lost them somehow.

“We need children, but not everyone can and should have them.”

Now, I get the question quite often, though some women say it doesn't come to them at all. Progress indeed! It is not an easy one to answer, though it should be. Why isn't it? The question always feels loaded.

Recently, when I was interviewing women for a domestic position, each of them turned the interview on me and asked if I had children. And, in every case, it seems my answer gave away something about me. Rubbish! And at least one woman withdrew her application.





Funnily, however, I have also been guilty of posing that very question. From my own perspective, I suspect I am seeking a kindred spirit, but it is still a conversation stopper; not very sociable.

Another question that kills the social moment instantly is: why haven't you had children, as if you're actually going to answer. Even so, you've likely been prejudged anyhow.

In Natalia J. Garland's 2007 article about Childless Women, she analyzed an exchange between Senator Barbara Boxer from California—a mother and grandmother—and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who does not have offspring. During their meeting, Boxer posed the rhetorical question: Who pays the price (of war)? The Senator suggested in her answer that Rice would never, directly or indirectly, pay the price, because she did not have offspring. Ouch!

Garland felt that Boxer's words implied that Rice was inferior in her womanhood, incapable of empathy for

the welfare of young adults, and not qualified to make a political decision loaded with potential life-and-death consequences.

I'd like to think that exchanges such as this are an exception, but in day-to-day living, people make judgments about childless women all the time, especially in work situations. When Elizabeth Dole ran for president in 2000, reporters often pointed out that she was childless, as if motherhood determined her worth.

In 2010, in the US mid-term elections, Republican Mary Fallin claimed that her experience of being a mother of six made her more qualified to serve as governor of Oklahoma than Democrat Jari Askins, who is unmarried and does not have children.

Both women have impressive credentials, but interestingly enough Fallin won. I hope on her merits and not on her accomplishments as a mother.

A friend and I admitted preconceived notions about former female bosses

who didn't have children—impatient, inflexible, and so on. And yes, we linked these attributes to their childlessness. Of course, now that I am without children, I see the error of our ways.

To be fair, high-powered women get a bad rap anyhow, but childless ones, except nuns and saints, do face a double whammy.

But that was, and still is, so yesterday. Today, it is time to question the big deal, internally and externally, and move beyond “barren”, towards the reality of what it means to be childless. Sorting out the personal and conventional problems and accepting women without children socially is key to putting the situation into perspective. ””

Let's talk!

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