

Childless and Proud of It

BY JANICEARENOSKY

It's hard enough to opt for marriage sans children without society suggesting you've done so for all the wrong reasons. Either you're selfish and indulgent, an aberrant child hater or a barren, career-crazed boomer who never got his or her act together. What you can never be is rational and intelligent. What you can never be is a normal caring, concerned person who made a difficult decision and stuck with it.

Such charitable conclusions are quickly rejected by a world that craves titillation instead of truth. People would rather cling to colorful absurdities than accept the facts.

Unpopular decisions evoke the wrath of many, jostle the insecurities of some and mystify all but a few. The result is that the majority of people are rendered confused or anxious by untraditional lifestyles and are quick to denounce or distort the reasons for those life choices. What they don't understand or agree with they classify as sick, selfish or scandalous.

So why didn't John and Mary go the baby way? Answer: he must be a passive-aggressive codependent chauvinist with dork tendencies, and she must be a militant feminist who hates kids and doesn't want to ruin her figure. If the truth were made known, a yawning ho-hum would reverberate throughout the land.

Which is why the mass media have limited their "childless" stories to frenzied emotional accounts of surrogate mother this and in vitro that, or sad tales of belated marriages, racing biological clocks and blended families. Reporters would rather interview thirtysomething couples frustrated with infertility problems or childless individuals in second marriages coping with spouses who have children from former marriages than speak to well-adjusted middle-aged couples who say boringly honest things like, "We decided not to have children because we discovered we were happy without them." Statements like that put readers to sleep.

I recently read an article bearing the headline FADING VISIONS OF MOTHERHOOD. The reporter interviewed women who belonged to a national infertility organization called Resolve. Most of the article dealt with regrets and recriminations—weepy oversentimentalized expressions of grief for waiting too long. Only briefly did the writer mention that many women who say they're uncertain about becoming pregnant are really saying they don't want a child. This ambivalence, which merely foreshadows the final negative decision, is something the media—read the public—is unwilling to accept. That a woman or a married couple can equivocate about having children is unthinkable. They must be weirdos.

The truth is dull and ordinary. What could be more

human than people struggling to do the right thing? Which is what the childless couple must ultimately decide. Their prime concern is: will bringing another life into the world be in the best interest of all? This is, after all, the kind of decision a judge might make. How legalistic. How totally devoid of thrills and chills!

It's no wonder, then, that the public would rather believe the worst: if a childless couple fails to fit the "socially deviant" profile, they are automatically entered into the "egregiously stupid and/or selfish" category. Generally, people don't believe adults are either scoundrels or degenerates who tear the wings off butterflies. But childless adults *must* be self-indulgent, Me Generation folks who think they can control everything, including the time and place of conception—except the plan backfired, leaving them with an empty uterus and an even emptier hole in their heart.

Difficult questions: It is not that people are inherently cruel and callous. They just gravitate toward the sensational. The tremendous popularity of supermarket tabloids and bizarre talk shows demonstrates what lengths people will go to distract themselves from what Thoreau called lives of "quiet desperation."

Here is the hard, awful, boring truth: childless people are not ogres. I am not a monster who worships conspicuous consumption, egomania and a "down with family values" attitude. My husband and I are not sexually promiscuous people. We are not Peter Pan creatures who refused to grow up, take responsibility and contribute to our communities.

No, I'm not a militant feminist who hates kids and wants to keep her figure

We are people who posed difficult questions—questions that I, for one, believe few people have the courage to ask themselves. Do we want children more than anything

even if it means one of us giving up his or her career (don't forget the possibility of having special-needs children or the unexpected wish to raise one's own child full time instead of using day care)? Will we be top-notch parents? Do the benefits outweigh the sacrifices? Is having a child something I really need and want or is it something I'm doing to satisfy my parents, relatives and social pressures?

Most childless couples struggle with these questions over a period of many years. It's hard, grueling work—there's nothing exhilarating about the process. Discussions, sharing with contemporaries, reading books and magazines help, but introspection and soul searching are the main roads one must follow.

And when the final destination is reached, there is no flaming bush, no lightning bolt, no vision. At the end of that long highway is a turnoff and a simple sign that says GOOD NEWS! YOU'VE REACHED YOUR DESTINATION.

It's a hard journey. It's never easy to take a different route and it becomes even more difficult when police sirens and men in white coats are chasing after you unable to believe your trunk isn't loaded with mind-altering substances. It isn't; it contains the same boring baggage most Americans lug into their lives. The only difference is we've sorted through ours in a way that most American couples never do. I'm sorry if that's not very exciting.

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