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A Vote Against Motherhood

By Gael Greene

A wife challenges the importance of childbearing.

I don't want to have any children. Motherhood is only a part of marriage, and I am unwilling to sacrifice the other equally important feminine roles upon the overexalted altar of parenthood. Instead of condemning myself to the common syndrome of the unhappy creature who is mother first, wife second, woman third and human being last, I champion the wondrously satisfying love of a woman and her husband, two adults enjoying the knowledge and mystery of each other, tasting dependence, accepting responsibility, yet individual and free.

Femininity is the acceptance, appreciation and enjoyment of being a woman. Motherhood is only a part of it. The complete woman is also devoted wife, lover, playmate, buffer, a man's stimulant and tranquilizer, a creator (in the kitchen if not at the easel or typewriter), an active mind, an unfettered human being involved in activities and causes and battles beyond the boundaries of a particular plot of crabgrass.

The idea that a couple would deliberately choose to remain childless seems to strike sparks of uncontrollable indignation. The decision is not one we have been able to discuss calmly with friends. Occasionally visitors to our apartment—so obviously designed for two adults with no thoughts of family expansion—will ask, "But where do you plan to put a nursery?"

"We're not planning for babies, so we don't need a nursery," I answer.

The shock and disbelief could not be greater if my husband announced he had just accepted a job spying for the Russians and I was busy running a Communist Party cell in the basement boiler room.

Our decision not to have children was neither simple nor sudden. Both my husband and I come from families where children are a major *raison d'être* for marriage and each new grandchild is looked upon as a divine blessing. Under these circumstances it certainly never occurred

to me that one might consider married life without children. Children were taken for granted as a part of marriage. Indeed, as a teen-ager I had rather ambitious plans for a huge brood, mostly boys. (I felt I had been greatly deprived as a child by not having an older brother and was determined no daughter of mine would be so underprivileged.) These were the dreams of an adolescent who had been captivated by the adventures of the Bobbsey Twins and the Gilbreth youngsters of *Cheaper by the Dozen* fame. I wasn't thinking what it might mean to be a Bobbsey's mother. I was thinking what fun it would be to be a Bobbsey twin. "Mother," beyond the warm, loving, gentle creature who was my own, was a vague, inconceivable concept.

Parenthood's real price

Then I began to have doubts. When I looked about at our friends—young couples with children—I was shocked and appalled at what I saw. Men and women floundered under awesome responsibilities, suffered total loss of independence and privacy. Frustration, tension and bitterness strained love. Most frightening of all, women appeared shredded, pulled apart by the demands of a dozen conflicting roles.

In the homes of my friends I received my first intimate and disillusioning insight into the meaning of motherhood. Too many of these mothers had made the supreme sacrifice to motherhood. They felt trapped. They simmered with resentment. For others it was a passive surrender, an automatic, often unthinking, response to a thousand pressures.

I refuse to be pressured into this state of parenthood just because society or some advice columnist tells me it is a noble, joyous state and my sacred duty. Everywhere I turn, there are the voices assuring me that a woman can only know fulfillment through motherhood. My experience tells me differently.

Recently my husband, leafing through one of the ladies' magazines, came across a paragraph in a column of marriage counseling that infuriated him. "In the early months of marriage," it read, "when love is at its height, each spouse is most generous and tolerant. . . ." The suggestion that love reaches a peak with the honeymoon and then begins to taper off as romance fades and reality intrudes is shocking. Implicit in the following paragraphs was the "reassurance" that when the glow goes, various other roles (parenthood) would take up the slack.

From this must follow that line, so often uttered in supposed jest, "Well, the honeymoon is over." Ours is not. Love only seemed "at its height" in the early months of our marriage. We keep discovering new peaks. We enjoy our life and the things we do singly and together. We appreciate the time and freedom to pursue potential talents (even if they should prove to be nothing more than minor skills). We treasure the freedom to pick up and disappear for a weekend or a month or even a year, to sleep odd hours, to breakfast at three A.M. or three P.M., to hang out the DO NOT DISTURB sign, to slam a door and be alone, or alone together, to indulge in foolish extravagances, to get out of bed at seven A.M. on a sudden whim and go horseback riding in the park before work, to become embroiled in a political campaign or a fundraising drive, to devote endless hours to intensive research for a project that might lead somewhere or nowhere, to have champagne with dinner for no special reason at all, to tease and love anywhere, any hour, anytime we please without a nagging guilt that a child is being neglected. We take so small a privilege as privacy for granted; yet, to our friends with children, privacy is a luxury for which they envy us.

I have read too many articles by young mothers and heard too many of my own friends complaining that motherhood is a prison. It is plain that the creation of a

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child, its care and tending a home are not enough for many women. Some turn to a job or back to a career or lock the door of a spare room to make it a studio, trying to serve on three or four fronts at once and serving on none well. Money and a reliable baby-sitter free a mother to spend afternoons haunting museums or studying ballet or serving as a Gray Lady, but money apparently does not buy away a conscience that talks of child neglect.

Many women thrive on motherhood and never stop growing. I am thinking of a college dorm-mate who took her degree in archaeology and was hailed in the class yearbook as "the girl most likely to find the ruins of lost Atlantis." Well, the only digging she's done since has been in backyard sandboxes. She has a passel of kids—four, and one on the way, at last count. She obviously loves her life, wades happily through what others might consider sheer drudgery and approaches such tasks as brewing an infant's formula or umpiring a brood of toddlers with all the zest she once devoted to geology expeditions. She's a fine mother, a great wife and an exciting woman to be with.

Yet I see so many of our friends, some of them with children they hadn't necessarily planned on—bitter, frustrated, vacillating between devotion and despair, screaming at their youngsters, tearing into each other. The child is there. Never for a moment would they wish it away, but they seem to be fighting a furious battle as they watch themselves becoming people they never meant to be.

"All I want is just an hour a day to be me," I overheard a woman complain to her husband. "Not to be a chauffeur or a bandage dispenser or a screaming harpy in a torn muumuu. Me, glamorous, calm, funny, in lingerie that isn't held together with safety pins—remember?"

"I don't know why you even call me anymore," a former classmate said to me recently. "I haven't had an original thought in two years, and the only multisyllabic word that's come out of me all week was 'Toidy-seat.' And that's hyphenated, so I don't even know if it counts."

Envy of the childless

Cara left her job as an interior decorator three years ago—reluctantly, in her eighth month of pregnancy. "You don't know how lucky you are," she said, gazing about our living room. "To have a stairway without a kiddy gate and a velvet sofa without stain-resistant slipcovers. If you'd told me three years ago I'd have slipcovers or plastic-laminated anything, I'd have laughed myself silly."

Betty reads medical journals whenever she can sneak the time—while the kids nap or at the Laundromat. "It took me eleven years to become a pediatrician, and I've never even practiced," she says. "I want to go back as soon as all three of the boys are in school, but it frightens me to think I'll be ten years behind."

The more we watch our contemporaries trying to cope with child-rearing, the more we see them bowing to its conflicting demands and surrendering their individualities and dreams, the stronger our decision to remain childless becomes.

Our resolve has been strengthened by the prevailing philosophy of child-rearing. They call it "permissiveness." But it emerges as total child autocracy. All decisions revolve around the child. Vacations

are planned to suit the children. A mother who would not sacrifice a new winter coat to buy her son an English racing bike is looked upon as an unnatural animal. Never mind that mother's idea of a relaxing holiday does not happen to include camping out and cooking three meals a day on a portable barbecue—it suits the youngsters. Girls I met when I first came to New York, who vowed they would never leave the city, have moved to the suburbs: "It's so wonderful for the children." Papa becomes a commuter, and a man and a woman who once shared the world now occupy two separate and distant islands, meeting for a few hours each night.

Parents become children

To be less than the complete mother the community expects one to be leaves a woman racked with guilt. She becomes so much the mother that she may one day find herself treating that tweedy, commuting chap who was once her husband and lover as just another one of the brood—another runny nose to wipe, another mouth to pop a vitamin pill into, another finicky appetite to cater to—an overgrown and petulant child. He even calls her "mom." She calls him "dad," and that sums up their relationship.

"No you may not have another Martini before dinner," she will say in exactly the same tone in which she would forbid the six-year-old another slice of chocolate cake.

I have heard some women say they refuse to bring children into a nuclear-panicked world or into a civilization that has lost all morals. These are not the only legitimate reasons for remaining childless, and I suspect some couples have reached conclusions similar to those of myself and my husband, yet hesitate to express them for fear of being accused of subversion, immaturity or selfishness.

Why then do people have children? They should not be so quick to condemn us for selfishness without first examining their own motives. People have children because they want them. Fine—go to it. But what of those who use their children as pawns or as instruments of revenge or as amusing little pets or as glue to patch a floundering marriage? What of those who don't really like children but have them anyway? And there are such people—just as there are those who don't like cats or jazz or abstract painting. What of those who produce progeny and regard them as a sort of status symbol? What about couples who procreate because they're afraid of being criticized for not having children? And what of those who haven't the courage or interest to face squarely what parenthood will mean or what kind of parents they will make?

Too many men and women who don't really want children, who are selfish, immature, ill-prepared, hostile and baffled, are spawning youngsters with less thought than they would give to the purchase of a new car. These children must suffer.

Whom do I harm by not having children? The nonexistent child? The world—which already has too many? Surely having children for the wrong reasons or for no reason at all or bringing them into an atmosphere of resentment and neglect is the greater selfishness.

There is a choice. Couples should be permitted to make a decision, whether to have children or not, without social pressures. There is no reason why their choice should be regarded as shocking, evil or an affront to humanity. **THE END**