

Childless by Choice

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On Mother's Day, Celebrating Another Kind of Fulfilled Life

By Jeanne Safer

I WON'T be getting a present on Mother's Day this year, or any other year—no card, no corsage, no breakfast in bed. It's not that I feel sorry for myself or excluded or envious: I'm childless by choice, so I've been spared the anguish that my infertile friends suffered. Nonetheless, I can't help but feel a twinge on the occasion when everybody else seems to be celebrating a central aspect of womanhood—many would say the essential one—which I will never know. It reminds me, bitterly-sweetly, of how different I am.

I wasn't always so mellow about Mother's Day. During the five years

pausal new moms who had belatedly discovered the true meaning of life. What was wrong with me? I wondered. What kind of woman was I for not wanting to join them?

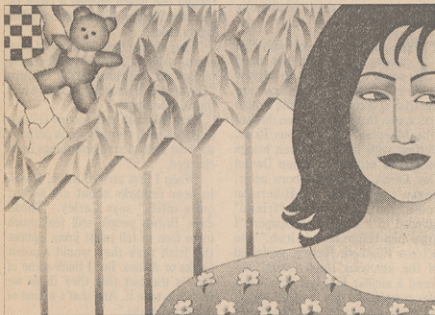
I eventually concluded that motherhood simply wasn't for me, that being the kind of mother I would want to be would interfere too much with my particular prerequisites for happiness—intimacy with my husband, unrestricted commitment to my dual professions of writing and psychotherapy, privacy and spontaneity. On reflection, I realized that it wasn't selfish for me to want to focus on my own life, and I saw that parenthood would afford no real, lasting protection from existential

it's fairly easy for an intentionally childless woman to find a peer group, but things are different once you leave the city limits. There is a camaraderie of shared experience that you are forever excluded from. A friend of mine in North Carolina told me that in her church, all the mothers come up to the altar on Mother's Day and are handed white lilies, while she stays behind self-consciously in her pew. In Indiana, another friend went to an electronics store recently to buy a video camera, and the salesman asked her how many kids she had. When she said she had none, he replied, "So why do you need a video camera?"

Parenthood is such a central fact of life for most people that it's hard for them to imagine another point of view; some are even threatened by it. Many assume there's something wrong with you or find your action incomprehensible or sacrilegious. For them, the only possible explanation when a woman lacks the "maternal instinct" is to assume that an emotional handicap or childhood trauma led her to this decision: Either she and her mother hated each other, or she had to raise 10 siblings, or there's a mental illness in the family, or she's a sexless, driven career woman who (poor thing) doesn't know what she's missing. Many people believe that there is only one right way—their way—to be a real woman or live a fulfilled life, despite ample evidence to the contrary.

Instead of stigma or shame, being childless by choice has given me a sense of power and joy in knowing who I really am, a woman in charge of her destiny. It's wonderful that women in the next generation finally have a choice about whether motherhood suits them, with role models who did it both ways to emulate. It is a comfort to know that mother love isn't the only kind a woman can bestow. I believe that every woman has a responsibility to think seriously about whether she wants that demanding, satisfying job.

Despite the satisfaction of my childless life, I have no doubt that I would have taken delight in the burned toast, the roses, the Crayola masterpieces that mothers all over America will be receiving today. At the same time I know that I too have something precious to celebrate, even if it will never be officially designated on the calendar.



BY MARTHA VAUGHAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

that I struggled to make up my mind about whether I wanted to have a baby, the images that this day evokes haunted me. Could I really be fulfilled without having a family of my own? Would my marriage, my career, my personal interests suffice for the rest of my life? What would be my tie to the future, my identity, my legacy? Could I face old age without offspring and death without descendants?

Every day seemed like Mother's Day to me then, and everybody but me was dying to participate in the festivities. All my friends were either already mothers or were trying to conceive or adopt. My entire generation seemed obsessed with parenthood; every magazine, every TV program, was filled with pre-meno-

angst. I faced my own limitations, my own needs, my own truth, and I'm proud I did, because doing so was the basis of a genuinely examined life.

Now, as menopause approaches, I have resolved most of my remaining doubts and feel confident that I made the right choice. I know and admire many mothers who are as content with their lives as I am with mine, but I have no urge to change places with them.

Most of the time, I feel few regrets and believe that many of the 15 million other American women who made this decision feel the same way. This holiday reminds me, though, that all choices entail losses. There is no "having it all." No mother has the time or the freedom I do, and I don't have the unique relationship she has with her child. There are moments when—healthily, naturally—we envy one another.

In New York City, where I live,

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