

The case against having kids

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7/24/2009

Elaine Lui was 29 years old and had been married for a year when she and her husband, Jacek Szenowicz, decided that they didn't want children. "Before that, we didn't give it a lot of thought," says the Vancouver-based *eTalk* reporter who writes the popular celebrity gossip blog *LaineyGossip.com*. "It was just an assumption, 'You get married, you have kids.'" Front-line exposure to a close relative's three young children and the work they required provided a wake-up call, Lui says. "That killed it for us. We just looked at each other and said, 'We don't want them.'"

In the ensuing six years, the couple has been barraged with reasons why they should change their minds, from "Your life will have no value if you don't" to "You'll be so lonely when you get old" to Lui's favourite: "Don't you want to know what your children would look like?" "Any baby we'd have would be of mixed race," she says. "So everyone says, 'Oh, it would be so gorgeous!'" She laughs. "And I'm like, 'Wow, that's really going to make me want to change my whole life.'" It's a life the couple enjoys: they work together on her website (he handles the business side), golf together, engage in community volunteer work, and dote on their dog, Marcus.

As baby refuseniks, Lui and Szenowicz belong to a tiny but growing minority challenging the final frontier of reproductive freedom: the right to say no to children without being labelled social misfits or selfish for something they don't want.

"Are you planning to have children?" is a question Statistics Canada has asked since 1990. In 2006, 17.1 per cent of women aged 30 to 34 said "no," as did 18.3 per cent of men in the same category. The U.S. National Center of Health Statistics reports that the number of American women of childbearing age who define themselves as "child-free" rose sharply in the past generation: 6.2 per cent of women in 2002 between the ages of 15 and 44 reported that they don't expect to have children in their lifetime, up from 4.9 per cent in 1982.

Still, in a pro-natalist culture that celebrates the "yummy mummy," and obsessively monitors baby bumps and the mini Jolie-Pitt entourage in magazines, saying "I don't want kids" is akin to "There's a bomb on the plane." In the past, those who chose not to have children did so quietly, observes Toronto-based poet Molly Peacock, whose 1998 memoir *Paradise, Piece by Piece* was acclaimed a breakthrough for its candid recounting of her decision not to have children. "It has been an intense and underground conversation," Peacock says, noting many childless women contacted her to say, "At last, someone is talking about what I've been living silently."

Increasingly, though, the childless by choice are vocal about it. Laura and Vincent Ciaccio are spokespeople for No Kidding!, a social club for non-parents founded in Vancouver in 1984 that now boasts more than 40 chapters in five countries. Laura, a 31-year-old attorney in New York City, refers to children as a "calling," one that she and Vincent, a Ph.D. candidate in social psychology at Rutgers University, have decided isn't for them. "I didn't want to make such a major lifestyle change just because it was something society expected of me," she says. "Children should be something people have because they really want them."

Speaking up on the subject can elicit a smackdown. Last February, the 37-year-old British journalist Polly Vernon wrote a defiant column in the *Guardian* enumerating the reasons she didn't want children: "I'm appalled by the idea," she wrote. "Both instinctually ('Euuuw! You think I should do what to my body?') and intellectually ('And also to my career, my finances, my lifestyle and my independence?')." The response was terrifying, she reports: "Emails and letters arrived, condemning me, expressing disgust. I was denounced as bitter, selfish, un-sisterly, unnatural, evil. I'm now routinely referred to as 'baby-hating journalist Polly Vernon.'"

Lui, who observes celebrity for a living, rejects what she sees as a pernicious retrograde swing back to the '50s in which motherhood was celebrated as women's highest calling. She points to actress Jennifer Garner remaining relevant in the celebrity press simply by being photographed with her two young daughters, and to Tori Spelling reclaiming her reputation after breaking up her current husband's marriage by churning out bestsellers about motherhood.

“Motherhood is the ultimate whitewash,” she says. “Steal someone’s husband, or be a drug addict, then become a mother and you’re redeemed.”

In a culture in which Jennifer Aniston’s childlessness provides weekly tabloid lamentations, a female star who goes public with a decision to remain so demonstrates courage. In a recent interview in U.K. *Cosmopolitan*, the 36-year-old actress Cameron Diaz, who is childless, expressed a disinclination to have children, citing environmental reasons: “We don’t need any more kids. We have plenty of people on this planet.” She noted stigma still exists: “I think women are afraid to say that they don’t want children because they’re going to get shunned.” But she also expressed optimism the tide was turning: “I have more girlfriends who don’t have kids than those that do,” she said.

Now the childless in North America have their most defiant advocate in a mother of two: Corinne Maier, a 45-year-old French psychotherapist whose manifesto, *No Kids: 40 Good Reasons Not to Have Children*, created a furor when published in France last year. Count on the same happening when it’s released here this week. Among Maier’s hard-won advice: “If you really want to be host to a parasite, get a gigolo.”

The societal shift in attitudes toward childlessness is most evident in language, with the buoyant “child-free” replacing “childless,” a word stigmatized for conveying a void or handicap. The childless minority has always been with us. But in the past why they didn’t procreate wasn’t the concern of mainstream academic study or social debate: to the extent it was even considered, it was assumed that they couldn’t due to some biological reason or chose not to for negative reasons, such as having had a bad childhood themselves.

The arrival of the pill in the 1960s, which allowed women to delay childbearing, also permitted them to forgo it altogether. Support groups popped up to allow like-minded people to congregate—the first being the National Organization for Non-Parents formed in Palo Alto, Calif., in 1972.

With the advent of the “child-free” came a rethink of the reproductive imperative, formerly assumed to be hard-wired in every human brain. But as demographer David Foot, a professor of economics at the University of Toronto, points out, social factors also play a role, the most significant being female education, which was also abetted by the pill’s arrival. “The higher the education a woman has, the greater likelihood that she won’t have children,” he says. This is consistent across cultures, he notes. The birth rate in Iran, where women go to university, is lower than that in the U.S., where census data reveals voluntarily childless women have the highest incomes compared to other women. In the U.K., 40 per cent of university graduates aged 35 are childless; it has been estimated that at least 30 per cent will stay that way.

Why this is happening is the subject of much theorizing: educated women delay childbearing until it’s no longer an option; they refuse to pay what economists call the “motherhood premium” in which the salaries of university-educated women plateau after childbirth and then drop, while fathers’ incomes are unaffected; they recognize that raising children is a sacrifice of time, money and freedom they’re not willing to make; or they simply don’t want to have children and are able to say no.

(The matter is complicated, Foot observes, because income level is also linked to procreation. What is known is that paying women to have children doesn’t work: the only variable proven to increase the chances of women having children is to offer a supportive social network, as evident by the rising fertility rates attributed to government initiatives in Scandinavian countries and France, where generous tax breaks, incentives, and maternity- and parental-leave provisions have resulted in the birth rate rising to 2.7 per woman, the highest level in Europe.)

A growing literature on childlessness has emerged. It has been deemed a “revolution” in *The Childless Revolution: What It Means to Be Childless Today* by Madelyn Cain, herself a mother. Academic treatises such as Mardy Ireland’s *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood from Female Identity* attempt to diffuse stereotypes. There are also the cheerleaders, viz. Nicki Defago’s *Childfree and Loving It!* And the issue has been politicized in books such as Elinor Burkett’s *The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless*, which contends the “child-free” subsidize “breeders.”

The array of narratives reveals that the choice not to have children can be as complex—or as elemental—as the desire to have them, as reflected in *Nobody's Mother: Life without Kids*, a 2004 anthology of essays by a diverse group of Canadian women, and *Nobody's Father* from the male perspective, published in 2006. Many women knew they didn't want children as children, a claim backed by research in *The Childless Revolution* that explores the notion that the impulse not to have children is genetic, like being gay. Most were clear-eyed that the choice required a new anchorage. "Children were not a way of ensuring happiness or endowing my days with meaning," the poet Lorna Crozier writes. "That hard task was mine alone." The American author Lionel Shriver, who never wanted children, writes in "Separation From Birth" that her greatest fear "was of the ambivalence itself": "Imagine bearing a child and then realizing, with this helpless, irrevocable little person squalling in its crib, that you'd made a mistake. Who really, in that instance, would pay the price?"

But no book on the subject has been more provocative or summoned more furor than Corinne Maier's *No Kids: 40 Good Reasons Not to Have Children*. It isn't the first time the Freudian analyst hit the French national nerve: her 2004 book *Hello Laziness: The Art and the Importance of Doing the Least Possible in the Workplace* pilloried the country's famously lax workplace culture. In *No Kids* she deploys an acerbic wit to dismantle the idealized depiction of parenthood perpetuated by the French state, "the fertility champion of Europe," a distinction greeted by the country's media like a sporting triumph.

Speaking from her home in Brussels, Maier says she was prompted to write *No Kids* by a conversation she had with two female friends in their 30s who told her they felt like social deviants because they didn't want children. That perception is well-founded, she writes: "To be childless is considered a defect; irrevocably judged, those who just don't want children are also the objects of pity." But Maier believes "conscientious objectors to this fertility mythology" should be rewarded, not stigmatized. "To have a kid in a rich country is not the act of a citizen," she writes. "The state should be helping those who decide not to have children: less unemployment, less congestion, fewer wars."

She admits there are times she regretted having her own children, now aged 14 and 11, a declaration that has predictably branded her a "bad mother" whose children are destined for a lifetime of therapy. (Yet she's only saying what many mothers silently think but aren't allowed to say. In 1975, Ann Landers famously asked readers: "If you had it to do over again, would you have children?" Seventy per cent of respondents said "no.") Maier reports that when she had her children she was madly in love, a hostage to her hormones. She too bought into the modern parenting mythology that children could be psychic curatives. Raised as an only child, she believed children would end her feelings of loneliness. Instead, she says, their arrival created new forms of loneliness.

The professional provocateur cuts through the gauzy romanticized depiction of parenthood promoted in France, which has far less to do with love of children than "a form of nationalism to enhance our identity," she says. Maier doesn't mince words, calling labour "torture," and breastfeeding "slavery." The idea that children offer fulfillment is also dismantled: "Your kid will inevitably disappoint you" is reason No. 19 not to have them. Much of what she has to say won't be breaking news to most parents: children kill desire in a marriage and can be demanding money pits. Without them, you can keep up with your friends and enjoy your independence.

Research backs Maier's assertions. Daniel Gilbert, who holds a chair in psychology at Harvard and is the author of the 2006 best-seller *Stumbling on Happiness*, reports that childless marriages are far happier. He also reports researchers have found that people derive more satisfaction from eating, exercising, shopping, napping, or watching television than taking care of their kids: "Indeed, looking after the kids appears to be only slightly more pleasant than doing housework," he writes in *Stumbling on Happiness*.

Yet a 2007 Pew Research Center survey found people insisted that their relationships with their children are of the greatest importance to their happiness. Gilbert believes the reason people say this is because they're expected to. He puts it in clinical economic terms: the more people pay for an item, the more highly they tend to value it, and children are expensive: the latest data suggests it costs upward of \$250,000 to raise one to age 18.

No Kids is less anti-child polemic, however, than scathing cultural criticism. Maier lampoons the modern family ("an inward-looking prison focused on the child") and the prevailing mindset that celebrates reproducing one's DNA as "the

ultimate objective of human experience.” Over-attentive focus on children saps cultural creativity, she argues: “Children are often used as an excuse for giving up on life without really trying. It takes real courage to say ‘Me first.’ ”

Parents, not non-parents, are the selfish ones, she avers: “Every baby born in a developed country is an ecological disaster for the whole planet.” She’s pessimistic about these babies’ future prospects, telling French women their children will be “loser babies,” destined for unemployment or to become factory drones. Maier blames contraception, which allows people to opt out of parenthood, for irrevocably altering the parenting dynamic. Once, “people had children because they had them,” she says. Now, every child must be a desired child, which requires of parenthood a “performance worthy of Superman or Superwoman.”

And that in turn has created a backlash among the childless that is less focused on children than on modern parenting itself, what Lui refers to as the “mommy cult” and Vernon calls the “pampering cult of Bugaboo-wielding, Mumsnet-bothering dullness.” Like Maier, Vernon doesn’t like what parenting does to grown-ups: “Spare me the one-track conversations. Spare me the self-righteousness, the sense of entitlement . . . Spare me the pretensions of martyrdom and selflessness.” There’s nothing selfless about having a baby, she argues, pulling out The Planet card: “You really want to be selfless? Adopt, lover.”

Shriver is less righteous about the non-parenting choice, admitting “there is something nihilistic about refusing to reproduce, selfish in the worst way.” She explains: “Take individual fulfillment at the expense of parenthood to the limit, and one generation has a cracking good time, after which the entire human race, poof, vanishes from the planet.” (This, in fact, is precisely the goal of the most extreme childlessness advocates out there: the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, which says, “the hopeful alternative to the extinction of millions of species of plants and animals is the voluntary extinction of one species: *Homo sapiens* . . . us.”)

Now that we’re a full generation into voluntary childlessness, research is beginning to reveal the longer-term consequences. Ingrid Connidis, a sociologist at the University of Western Ontario and the author of *Family Ties and Aging*, has conducted pioneering studies among people 55 and over that distinguish between those who are childless by choice and those who are childless by circumstance. All have adapted, she says: “But the childless by choice are more content, have higher levels of well-being and are less depressed.” She has also compared levels of satisfaction between the childless and parents, dividing the latter group into parents who have a good relationship with their children and those who do not. “Parents who don’t have good relationships with children are not as happy as people with good relationships with their children or people who are childless by choice,” she says.

Molly Peacock’s husband, Michael Groden, an English professor at the University of Western Ontario, says he has no regrets about not being a parent. Now 62, he says fatherhood was never a life goal. He and Peacock, who dated as teenagers, married 16 years ago, “Reconnecting with me sort of made that a conscious thought for him,” she says.

As part of his doctoral dissertation, Vincent Ciaccio is investigating why men choose to remain childless—new terrain. As with women, the reasons are all over the map, and include “betterment of relationships,” “career motivations,” “fear of failure as a father,” “not liking kids,” and “the desire to remain in their current lifestyle.”

Connidis’s research also explores the common concern that the childless will be lonely or bereft in old age. She found they’re no less lacking in support than those with children. “They’ve created their own network,” she says, noting people without children are more likely to end up in a nursing home. Her conclusion: “There’s no guarantee that having children will make you happy or not having them will make you sad.”

Of course, the idea that parenting choices should bring happiness one way or the other has modernity written all over it. But what any happiness appears to stem from is not children or their absence but rather the ability to make the choice.

Maier, who’s a brilliant contradiction of her own claim that women have to choose between motherhood and success, knows her polemic would have been ignored if she didn’t have children; she would have been judged “a bitter, jealous old hag,” she writes. *No Kids* puts her in a no-win position, she says with a laugh: “People think I’m a bad mother. But if I didn’t have children, people would have said I’m a person who is not happy because I don’t have children.”

It's an ironic Catch-22 that it takes a parent to support the choice not to become one. But somebody has to do it. As Elaine Lui points out: "Why did we fight so hard for the right to make this choice, only to have it not respected when we do?"