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# Baby Makes . . . ?

By **Sandy Asirvatham** (/index.php?category=author&s=Sandy Asirvatham) | Jul. 4, 2001

In my late teens and early 20s, I'd occasionally mention that I didn't think I'd ever want to bear children. And the responses--from men, women, young, old, friends, and near-strangers--ranged from bemusement ("Don't be silly!") to extreme puzzlement ("What kind of woman doesn't want children?") to outright indignation, as if it were blasphemous to even voice such a thought. "You must be a *very selfish person*," was how some people presumed to explain me to myself. Nearly everybody had a judgment on the matter; hardly anyone dared say anything as conciliatory as "Well, parenting isn't for everyone," or even something as vaguely supportive as "To each her own."

Although I felt like a circus freak back then, I've since met plenty of women who admit having a similar resistance or at least ambivalence--younger women who don't want children or who consider it an option, not a requirement; older ones who say that, although they love their kids dearly, they might have considered voluntary childlessness if it had ever been presented as a genuine possibility. But even some of these women are apt to explain their mixed feelings as alleged "selfishness"--that they want (or would have wanted) to preserve time and energy for their own dreams and ambitions, that having children would require more from them than they're willing to give.

I'm aware that parenting involves a lot of sacrifice and arguably a certain kind of selflessness. Indeed, a good part of my youthful reluctance came directly out of respect for the difficulty of the job. Did I fear that my own "selfish" goals would be engulfed by the responsibilities of motherhood? Surely I did. But what others might have glibly labeled my "selfishness" was probably more like a lack of confidence, a not-robust-enough sense of self, rather than outright egomania. A more genuinely selfish person would have assumed she could "have it all" without much sweat. I wasn't blessed with that sense of entitlement.

When people say childlessness equals selfishness, the unspoken corollary is that childbearing is somehow the opposite of selfishness, that to put another life on this planet is a pure, noble, altruistic act. This is patently absurd. Why do people have kids? Is it for the kids' sake? Is there a long backlog of potential children out there somewhere, pining away, just waiting around for generous and loving parents to heroically will them into fleshly being? What's far more likely is that people have kids to fulfill their own needs or the perceived needs of their family, tribe, nation. If altruism really were the only motivating factor, you'd expect to see a lot more people adopt children.

Recently, the widening availability of prenatal ultrasound in India and China has led to a dramatic increase of abortions of female fetuses. This phenomenon presents a sociological puzzle: Sex-selective abortions are rising significantly only in these two countries, even though there are plenty of pro-son, anti-daughter, deeply patriarchal cultures across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Researchers have suggested that in all those other cultures, girl babies are relatively valuable because adult women are expected to support their aging parents. In India and China, such responsibilities end for adult daughters as soon as they get married, for they are then considered to "belong" to their in-laws. Only sons have a lifelong obligation to care for their parents; hence, the markedly higher value of boy babies. Here in a wealthy nation with a government-sponsored social system to help care for elderly people, we may not see such bald examples of "selfish" behavior embedded in the childbearing decision--but clearly self-preservation, in one form or another, continues to motivate most human beings who procreate.

Several years ago, I was faced with a vexing situation. I loved a man who really, really, really wanted children. In our years together, although I had not quite relinquished my long-held resistance to childbearing, I had begun to envision the possibility of the two of us creating a great family. We decided to get married, and I tried to muster the faith that pregnancy itself would obliterate my fears and resistance. Fingers crossed, I awaited a transformation, body and mind.

Four years later, it has not happened. It's probably not going to happen, and even though there are some drugs and technologies I haven't yet tried, my beloved husband and I have pretty much decided to walk away from the indescribably awful monthly cycle of trying/failing/trying/failing. For years I deflected other people's attempts to make me feel guilty about my intended childlessness, and yet now I find myself feeling guilty for not doing my utmost to get pregnant, not forcing this upon myself via hormone injections or in vitro fertilization. If my life thus far were a novel, this would be the painfully ironic denouement.

For reasons I can't fully articulate, I've always been attracted to the idea of adoption, even as I felt no attraction whatsoever to the idea of procreation. (I mentioned this conundrum to a college friend, who responded, "That must mean you're not going to make a very good mother." Fifteen years later, I'm still trying to figure out her twisted logic.) In any case, we are looking into the option of parenting without procreating. And I am sure that whatever we decide, there will be an inextricable mix of selfish and altruistic factors motivating us.