

Childfree Decision Making

Fact Sheet 5

A Note on Terminology

To most couples pursuing fertility treatments, the word “childfree” is ironic. They feel “childless,” not “childfree,” bereft of the child they strive to produce. Because they are completely hemmed in by medical treatments, hope, disappointments and grief, freedom is not even in their vocabulary. “Childfree is what you call the couple that never wanted children in the first place,” they think. “Childless is what we are now, and what we’ll continue to be if we don’t succeed at pregnancy.”

Childfree is the term preferred by those who have actually chosen this option over another way to resolve their infertility. It offers hope and the suggestion that once they are past grief, childless women and men can experience the absence of biological children with a more positive perspective.

THE DECISION TO BE CHILDFREE

by Mary Ann Jablonski

When I was fighting infertility, I did not believe a child-free life could be a life choice or “decision.” I thought it might be what I would end up “stuck with” if all else failed. I did not have a very positive image of childfree living, to say the least.

My husband and I experienced all the feelings of disbelief and agony as we struggled with our infertility. We did two unsuccessful intrauterine insemination (IUI) cycles and then three unsuccessful in vitro fertilization (IVF) cycles. Through our years of treatment I had to consider the possibility that it just might not work for us. I began trying to picture a future without children. At first, it was unbearable, but I forced myself to list the pros and cons of childfree living. It was hard to come up with even a few items on the “pro” side initially, but over the months, it became easier and easier.

One evening, while logged on to an infertility chatroom on the Internet, I posted the question, “Is anyone out there childfree and happy?” I didn’t think that the com-

bination was possible, and when no one responded, my worst fear seemed to be true. Only much later did I realize that anyone who was happy and childfree would not possibly be hanging out in an infertility chat room—they were all out enjoying their lives!

I moved through a very gradual transition from dreading life without children to appreciating it and ultimately to choosing it. At one point, I was ready to begin my fourth IVF cycle, and I realized something had changed. My thinking at the time was that I “should” do one more cycle so I wouldn’t later blame myself for giving up too easily, but I really hoped it didn’t work so that I could move on and take my life back. As my husband and I talked about this on the evening of our fifth wedding anniversary, we realized that we were ready to stop treatment and to move on. It was like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I could finally start living in the present. Living childfree had become our choice without a flash of lightning, but rather as a gradual, comfortable transition into appreciating the great life we already had.

For us, the pros of a childfree life focus on time and freedom. This includes time to really enjoy each other without the many responsibilities that come with child rearing. We have time to devote to hobbies that we thought we might have to eliminate once we started a family—sailing, sports and world traveling. I had looked forward to becoming a stay-at-home mother, but since that isn’t going to happen, I have continued my career. As a result, we are able to afford a different lifestyle than we had expected, and we can retire early if we choose.

We also recognize that we have options to help others in ways we did not expect. I love volunteering with RESOLVE and I serve as president of my chapter. We both feel a desire and responsibility to share our resources (both time and money) with others as a result of our life choice. Recently, my husband has been bringing home

articles about foster parenting, so who knows what else is ahead for us?

Family and friends who knew of our struggle with infertility were supportive of our decision to stop treatment and live childfree because they saw how peaceful we were with our decision after the years of pain. When people I meet now ask if we have any children, I frequently tell them that we experience infertility and have opted for childfree living. They are usually surprised that I am so open about my infertility, but after having dozens of strangers probing the most private parts of my body, revealing this important part of who I am isn't so hard. I also hope that by my being open, others will be a bit more sensitive toward those who struggle with the fresh pain of infertility.

Recently, the first grandchild was born into our family, and my husband and I checked in with each other to see how we really felt about it. Neither of us felt any twinge of regret that it wasn't our child; we are truly happy for others who have children. It's been two years now since we embraced the childfree decision, and we are fully resolved in our personal infertility struggle. Our 'plan B' is a fulfilling, joyful life.

Mary Ann Jablonski is past president of RESOLVE of Rhode Island. She recommends Sweet Grapes: How to Stop Being Infertile and Start Living Again (Jean W. Carter and Michael Carter. Perspectives Press, 1988) to those who are considering childfree living.

NOT YET...

By Michael Carter

I came across a story as humorous filler in one of my wife's doctor magazines. An 84-year-old man and his 88-year-old wife were being admitted into a nursing home. During the routine history and physical the doctor casually asked the man if he and his wife had any children. He answered, "Not yet."

Printed under the heading "Better Late than Never," it was meant to be a funny anecdote, the kind that gets an appreciative laugh at a cocktail party. But I kept thinking about that old man. I could see him and his wife, 40 or 50 years ago, bitterly asking themselves why they were not able to have children and finding no one who could offer any help.

He probably spent the rest of his life answering that inevitable question with an unthinking, habitual "Not yet," a short answer that speaks volumes. It says that there

was a gaping hole in his life that had never been filled up or even covered over. It says that he spent most of his life consciously and painfully childless.

The saddest part of the story is that it didn't have to be that way. Yes, if he and his wife were going through their infertility crisis now they would have medical and technological opportunities undreamed of in their day. But despite the progress in the treatment of infertility, many of us still will not be able to bear children of our genetic structure and many of us will decide not to adopt. Does this mean we will have to spend the rest of our lives answering "Not yet?"

I don't think so. My wife and I are one of many couples who call ourselves childfree. I contrast to childless. This doesn't mean that we have resigned ourselves to a sad fate. Childfree means that we have taken the strength we found in our struggle with infertility and turned that strength toward making our lives good again. It means taking advantage of the benefits that can come from not having children.

Obviously, choosing childfree is not for everybody. Neither is donor insemination (DI), in vitro fertilization (IVF), surrogacy or adoption. It is one option, one way you can put the crisis of infertility behind you. To me, though, the most important part about the childfree option is that it offers a message of hope to all of us who are infertile: even if you don't end up with a child, you and your spouse still have the potential for a happy, productive life together. It says that two can also be a good size for a family.

But I think that the lessons we can learn from that old man go deeper than the possibilities for living childfree. We can also learn something about what it means to be a man coping with infertility.

Men have a tendency to create narrow, concrete goals for defining success or failure. We tend to think in terms of the bottom line. If we are infertile, then we define success as having a child. But that definition of success can work against us. It can make us single-minded and willing to risk anything, no matter what the physical, emotional and financial costs. Anything less is giving up, quitting. It can also set us up for failure.

When we are dealing with infertility, it's better to have broader, fuzzier goals. I'm thinking of goals like making our lives happy and productive, having a marriage or partnership that thrives, growing and changing as a couple, participating fully in the world around us. There may come a time when trying to have a baby begins to jeop-

ardize these broader goals. But if you keep focusing on these goals, you can make difficult decisions, such as stopping treatment without feeling like a failure. This way, everyone can end up a success, not just those who get babies.

The other typically male trait is the “whatever you want, dear” attitude. This detachment from all the decisions related to infertility is the opposite of single-mindedness. The idea is that infertility is the female partner’s problem so the male fades into the background, giving tacit support, while she makes the decisions. Sometimes this is a way of avoiding the pain of infertility, and it seems easier to let her do it all. But men who approach infertility this way are doing themselves a great disservice.

There is power in making decisions. And there is power for a couple in making decisions together—the power of gaining control over their lives. When a man abdicates responsibility in making decisions that affect him, he gives up control. It’s his life, too, and his fatherhood that’s on the line. Decision-making also enables us to claim an option as our own. No matter what the decision—choices about treatment, IVF, adoption, child-free—the act of making the decision that makes it a good decision. It is the discussion, the wrestling with values, the commitment to a choice that makes it the right decision. Not to be a part of this process is to lose all the benefits that come from it, including a stronger marriage.

The old man in the story lived most of his adulthood with a sense of failure because he defined success in such narrow and concrete terms that he set himself up for failure. He carries with him the forlorn resentment of that “Not yet” because he didn’t know what his options were and couldn’t participate in the decisions that would allow him to regain control over his life. Let’s not let that happen to us.

Michael Carter is co-author with his wife, Jean, of Sweet Grapes: How to Stop Being Infertile and Start Living Again (Perspectives Press, 1988).

CHILDFREE LIVING

By Lynn Brokenshire

It may seem unimaginable to you now, after perhaps years of trying to have a baby, to consider living child-free. This choice could be one of the most far-reaching decisions you will ever make. How do you decide if this is the right choice for you? How do you know that you would not regret this decision in five, ten or twenty

years? Will you ever stop wanting a baby? What will you tell family, friends and coworkers who know you have been trying to have a baby? Are others going to pass judgment on you as a “quitter”? And how will you judge yourself? These are just a few of the questions most individuals and couples contemplating this decision will face. Let’s examine a few of the issues that make this decision so complex.

Individuals and couples often consider living childfree when they find themselves at a crossroads. They may have been told by their physician that the chances of having a baby are remote or impossible, or maybe they have reached their limits on the time and/or money they had decided to spend on treatment or adoption options.

Most reach this point after much trauma and loss; the baby you most desperately wanted is still elusive. Friends and family members are having their second or even third baby. Your life feels “on hold” as everyone around you moves forward. This is an important time to define and acknowledge your feelings. It takes energy to suppress your feelings, energy that could be freed up to help you make decisions with greater clarity and insight. Expressing how you feel frees up that much needed energy. Identifying what causes you frustration, anger or sadness can help you decide which step to take next.

Feeling sad at times about the option of childfree living does not necessarily indicate that a childfree lifestyle is the wrong choice for you. Giving up the dream of having a child is one of the biggest losses you will ever face. It is similar to missing a loved one who has passed away, that special someone whom we wish, at times, that we could share an experience or talk with. These passing feelings of sadness or longing do not mean that we have not resolved their death. Similarly, if you choose to live childfree, periods of longing to experience a parent-child relationship are bound to happen. The key is, are you being consumed by your sadness, or do you feel sad for only short periods of time? If the sadness is pervasive, then either more grief work needs to be done or your decision needs to be re-evaluated. As difficult as it may appear now, it is absolutely possible to work through sadness and despair and to live a happy life without children.

Individuals often equate considering childfree living with giving up, and really—who wants to be thought of, by themselves or others, as someone who quits? It can help to reframe this issue. Parenting often brings joy and happiness. Who would want to be a parent if they thought it would decrease their satisfaction in life? Can you view living without children as a legitimate lifestyle

that can also provide happiness and fulfillment? If you can, you have simply changed the means to your goal. No one ever expected it would be so all consuming to try to have a baby; therefore it is perfectly reasonable to want to put an end to this process. The painful truth is that we do not always get what we set out for regardless of how noble the desire. It can take strength and courage to accept that this dream may never be fulfilled.

Whatever your typical decision-making style is, you will most likely use it to make this decision. Do you beat yourself up about past decisions: “I should have bought that other house.” “I should have chosen a different career!” Are you able to accept, with few regrets, decisions you have made in the past? Knowing your style, do you think it will make it easier or more difficult to live with this decision in the years to come?

So what do you tell all those people who know how hard you were trying to have children if you decide to remain childfree? Do not expect them to understand your decision to be childfree any more than they understood your battle with infertility. Friends and family often do not know how to give you support. It may be helpful to ask those close to you to simply accept your well-thought-out, difficult decision without advice or judgment. For those who have stories of how someone they know tried just a bit longer than you did (and there is always going to be someone who has tried longer!) and are now proud parents, you can always counter with “You may know someone who finally had a baby after six years of trying, but I know someone who tried unsuccessfully for eight years. And that’s really not the point. I/we have decided to stop because I/we feel this is the best decision for me/us.”

It is often helpful to imagine what your life would be like in the years to come without children of your own. Does the future look empty and meaningless without children, or can you imagine yourself engaged in a fulfilling life? If you are interested in pursuing a childfree lifestyle, you need to explore and identify a variety of ways that could give your life deep satisfaction. These activities may or may not include children. If you truly cannot imagine your future without children of your own, child-free living may not be for you.

Remember, making this decision and knowing that it is the right choice for you will take time. No one experiences this process as a sudden flash of realization. The crisis of infertility often causes lowered self-esteem, which in turn can make you less confident in yourself and your ability to make major decisions. Be patient and

kind to yourself. Adequate time and soul searching will result in the right answer for you. One of the amazing qualities we have as humans is our resiliency. Don’t underestimate your ability to cope. There is life after infertility. Someday—and hopefully soon—you, like many before you, will be on the other side of this crisis, once again ready to enjoy living your life to the fullest.

Lynn Brokenshire is a psychotherapist specializing in infertility with a private practice in San Jose. She is a former president of the Northern California Chapter of RESOLVE.

CHILDLESS, BUT NOT SPEECHLESS

By Jim Drake

Chances are that if you’re reading this article, infertility has already touched your life in some way. If your experience is like mine, and like most that I’m aware of, your infertility did not slip quietly into your world and peacefully co-exist without disruption of your normal life. Regardless of how infertility descends upon someone, they are almost immediately faced with the dilemma of whether to talk about it and, if so, with whom. How much information should one disclose and how widely should details be known? To some it’s a practical question of whether their infertility is anyone else’s business, while to others disclosure is a means of building a support system as a necessary survival aid. I don’t recall ever making a conscious decision about whether to tell my friends or family that my wife Donna and I were having trouble getting pregnant. I just did it. Maybe it was because Donna’s life had always been such an open book and she had inspired me to open up about myself.

I was a computer programmer, and as such worked in a cubical environment at the office. By nature of these tight quarters, my co-workers knew almost every time Donna ovulated, knew when I made an appointment to provide a semen sample, knew when I left for the appointment to provide a semen sample and some even knew my sperm count. I lost whatever sense of modesty I may have formerly had, but at the same time discovered that I had more caring friends and associates than I realized. In Donna’s case, as a music teacher in a new school, she wrote a letter of introduction to her principal and fellow faculty. Most people might have written about their degree and career achievements, but Donna skipped most of that in favor of telling everyone that we were incurably infertile, childfree by choice and that we have wonderful nieces, nephews, dogs and horses instead.

Being childfree is not an option that one can exactly

hide. Conception by means of medical assistance can be kept from public knowledge if desired. Like-like adoption (selecting a child that looks enough like the adoptive parents that no one would ever suspect) can also remain a secret to a great extent. However, I've yet to meet anyone who spent a protracted amount of time and money trying to get pregnant only to have absolutely no one ever ask why their efforts never produced offspring.

Our openness about being childfree began because we were never particularly secretive about any part of our infertility that led up to our ultimate decision. As we progressed through six years of attempt after failed attempt to conceive, including surgeries and drug therapies, we finally reached the end of the road which was named "Unexplained Infertility." We realized that we were dealing with an issue for which, at the time, there was neither a cure nor treatment—antibodies. The news came in two gulps: first that the long-sought-after answer concerning our infertility was at last known, and secondly that there wasn't even an experimental procedure that we could try for success. Once again we were faced with a decision that involved secrecy. What do we tell people about our diagnosis? Should we quietly pursue adoption? Should we prepare to defend our decisions or plans?

Over the next several weeks, Donna and I talked candidly with each other about the prospect of adoption. We wrestled with all the usual fears about family acceptance, risks, finances and a myriad of other demons. We realized that this would be the last decision we would ever make about family building, and we had to do it on our own. So, as open as we had been up to this point, we drew back into strict privacy until we could decide on our next step.

Donna and I arrived at the same conclusion from different directions; hold the headcount in our house to two. Things moved pretty quickly from that point. First, we spread the word among our friends and family that our quest for biological parenthood was over and that we had chosen to remain childfree. The relief we felt was almost immediate. After getting the initial word out, we dipped into our never-used in vitro fertilization (IVF) fund and took a second honeymoon to cruise around the Hawaiian Islands and traded our four-door "family car" for a sporty convertible. On Donna's birthday a few weeks later I bought her a puppy, and a few months later we sold our house and moved to the country. The following summer, Donna scheduled a hysterectomy to end her recurring bouts with endometriosis. This surgery marked the turning point that the rest of our life to-

gether had begun and that our former life was gone forever.

My intention is not to give the impression that this was all cut-and-dry and done without emotion or a second thought. There was plenty of emotion and second thoughts. Today the second thoughts are gone, but the emotion still shows itself from time to time. For example, even 13 years later, it is still painful to see a proud father hold his newborn baby, hug his son after graduation or give his daughter away at her wedding. I know that I will never experience any of these things. It hits me at more unexpected times as well. Like the time I was in a crowded shopping mall and a little girl momentarily missed her father and called out, "Daddy!" to which he immediately responded by taking her hand for reassurance. It suddenly occurred to me that whenever a child cries out "Daddy!" not one of them would ever be referring to me. I'm nobody's Daddy and never will be. The weight of this realization bore down on me like a falling brick wall and I found the nearest exit, walked quickly to my truck, and sobbed for nearly an hour before driving back home. Secrecy? Well, maybe. I didn't immediately tell Donna about each of my experiences as they occurred because I didn't want to cause a setback for her. I didn't relate them to anyone else because no one in my small circle of friends would have any idea about how to deal with me. So, I suppose by strict definition of the word, this was a "secret" since I withheld it from everyone. Sometimes it hurts like crazy to be childless and I can't tell a living soul about it.

Our openness about being childfree is a natural extension of the openness we displayed during treatment. Donna and I are not secretive about our choice to live without parenting. Deciding to be childfree isn't a secret in the sense that we have something shameful to hide, but we don't necessarily share the details about every consideration that led to our decision. Whenever the subject comes up, our short answer is that we don't have children of our own, but we have wonderful nieces and nephews that fill our lives with joy. Sometimes I struggle with whether to say that we actually chose to be childfree because being childfree was a choice we made only after a fierce and lengthy fight with infertility. It's very important to both of us that people, even children and especially Donna's students who ask, know that we were infertile because we wouldn't have anyone assume that we never wanted children in the first place. Something obvious is missing from our lives and we feel a need to tell the whole story about it.

We tell our story to anyone who wants to hear it: in sup-

port groups, at RESOLVE chapter meetings, as panelists and in one-on-one conversation. Donna has led numerous discussions on the topic at RESOLVE symposia. The one thing we know about our story is that there are people who yearn to hear it just as much as we need to share it. In an ironic twist, our childfree story IS our child. As its “parents”, we are gratified to see it working with positive effects among the people it touches. Infertility left us childless, but it didn’t leave us speechless.

Jim and his wife, Donna, live in north-central Georgia, and in 2001, Jim and Donna were selected as RESOLVE’s Volunteers of the Year.

MAKING THE DECISION

by Merle Bombardieri, LICSW
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If you’re like most people going through the crisis of infertility, the phrase “deciding to remain childfree” is probably about as appealing as a set of fingernails screeching across a blackboard. “Choice?” you ask. “We made our choice to have a baby, and it’s not happening. How dare anybody talk about choosing to remain child-free?”

Why consider this alternative? Many couples find it helpful to learn more about childfree living because it calms their panic about not yet having a child. Many infertile women and men have adoption in the back of their minds as an alternative to pregnancy. But linked to this alternative is the threatening knowledge that adoption may not be possible for various reasons.

It’s scary to think of getting turned down by an adoption agency, or hearing your partner reject the idea of adoption. Either of these scenarios may appear to you as nothing less than being sentenced to a lifetime of childless misery. Such a vision will leave you too panicky to make a clear-headed decision.

When you’re in a panic, it’s often helpful to ask yourself, “What’s the worst thing that can happen?” If you can anticipate how you might cope with the “worst thing,” you may feel less desperate and better prepared for making a good decision.

Considering the childfree choice is also helpful in clarifying the values and meanings you attach to parenthood. When you ask yourselves, “Why is childfree living unacceptable to us?” you become much clearer about why you want a child. This new awareness may help you recharge your batteries for further pursuit of pregnancy or

adoption. It’s also useful for filling out adoption applications which ask you why you want to be a parent.

Myths About Living Childfree

The first step in considering a childfree life is to examine the typical myths that surround it.

Remaining childfree means remaining just as miserable as we are right now. Only part of your current pain is from actual lack of a child. Some of it is part of a grief process you’re in the midst of. Another part is the maddening uncertainty of whether or not you will ever get to be a parent. If you decide to remain childfree, you can stop trying and stop wondering. You’ll emerge from the heavy tent of grief, ready to start a new life.

A childfree life is an empty life. Living childfree is empty for those who do not finish grieving and who do not find new interests. Childfree people fill their lives with work, hobbies, artistic endeavors, political causes and they also fill them with children—nieces and nephews, friends’ children, children involved in organizations such as Big Brothers, scouts, at church or temple.

Childfree life can free you up for both personal and professional development. You don’t have to know all the answers before deciding to remain childfree; you can’t always know beforehand. “Once you’ve decided,” reports one couple, “your energy is freed to begin making a new and enjoyable life for yourself.” One RESOLVE member describes the unanticipated, positive unfolding of her childfree life, “I had time to develop other areas of interest... a close relationship with my husband, travel and my work. As I began to make more of a commitment to my work, I began to receive recognition for a job well done.” During her decision-making time, Kathy felt lonely and self-obsessed, but soon began to develop new involvements. “What helped me was to look *out* as well as to look *in*”, she reports. “There are so many people who can benefit from your nurturance and caring.” Theater-going and shopping with favorite nieces and nephews and delivering food to the elderly are examples of pleasurable nurturing activities that have evolved since her childfree decision. A New Jersey RESOLVE member says, “You may be childfree as a parent but your life can be filled with other children who need your love and compassion. I teach girls ages 11 to 14 and they are a real blessing to me.”

Childfree living is never a choice if you’re infertile; it’s just the booby prize you’re left with if you can’t do anything else! For many people, alternatives such as adoption, donor insemination (DI), and in vitro fertiliza-

tion (IVF) are preferable. For those individuals, childfree living would be the end of the road. It would be something they'd simply have to accept because they couldn't afford adoption, because DI didn't work, etc. But no other alternative meets all the needs that a pregnancy conceived by intercourse does. For some couples forced by infertility to re-examine their values, remaining childfree is a good decision. For them it is the next best thing, right after biological parenthood. If you feel strongly that childfree living is a booby prize, that's important information for you to use—childfree is definitely not for you, and you need to select another alternative.

If I remain childfree, I'll feel emotionally wounded every time I see a child. Once an infertile individual has grieved and made a definite decision to remain childfree, s/he tends to feel occasional twinges of sadness, but no more stabbing pain. They'll be able to enjoy children for their own sakes, rather than viewing them as a symbol of the child you never had.

Give yourself time. Trust that your childlessness will be less of an issue when your friends and their children are older. Lynne Wood reports, "It has become easier with time as children of my friends grew older and I moved into my forties. In fact, I find now that as many of my friends are dealing with "empty nests" not only do I (and my husband, too) feel more in step with friends, but I also find myself supporting them through an experience not totally unlike my own."

People who remain childfree are selfish and immature. Their marriages are unhappy. Research does not confirm this stereotype. Extensive psychosocial studies have found childfree couples to be just as happy as couples with children. And contrary to the stereotype of selfishness, a high percentage of childfree people are teachers, social workers or people who spend their weekends doing volunteer work with children or for a social cause. It's far more common for selfish, immature people to have children for selfish, immature reasons.

If we remain childfree, I'll be lonely in old age. Children are no insurance policy against loneliness in old age. You can't be sure what old age will be like. You can't be sure children would live near you, get along with you or be a comfort. Factors related to loneliness in old age include:

- Health,
- Income,

- Ability to maintain old friends and find new ones,
- Extent to which you've built an extended family network,
- Ability to assert yourself in asking for help, companionship, etc., and
- Ability to maintain old interests and find new ones.

One childfree RESOLVE member shared the following, "I don't think having children provides old age security. We would make plans for providing for our old age even if we did have a child. Is having someone to take care of you when you're old one of the reasons you won't consider remaining childfree?"

I'll feel like a fool if I decide to remain childfree. Imagine what people would say. "You mean, after four years, three surgeries and months of Clomid, you're just going to stop trying? How could you? Why don't you adopt?" Or, "You mean, after you finally got to the top of the agency list, and passed your home study, you're not going to adopt?"

No one else can decide for you whether treatment, adoption or third party reproduction is right for you. It's your life; you have the right to decide what to do with it.

Deciding not to have a child doesn't take away the meaning of those years of trying. The two of you shared something important together, and if you're like most couples, you're coming out of the other end more skilled at talking to each other, more aware of your values, and more appreciative of each other. You have the right to shift gears. You may decide to apply your new psychological assets to a different sort of life than the one you'd previously envisioned.

An infertile woman said to me, "I'm so caught up in trying to win the fertility battle that I don't even trust my own wish for a child anymore. It's become such an ego thing, such a power struggle, that I'm not even sure at this point why I'm doing it."

Such a statement could be a mere expression of frustration, but it can also be the beginning of a decision to remain childfree. Here is how one childfree RESOLVE member describes her own power struggle, "Having control over events in my life is critically important to me. Being honest with myself, I can say that I've gotten caught up in an intense power struggle between myself and Mother Nature. At this point, I will say that the

challenge of winning the power struggle has become more important than becoming a parent—although that’s hard to admit! Once I give up the power struggle, I realize that I can be creative and productive without being procreative and reproductive.”

Every infertile person is in a power struggle. Recognizing that you are at war with nature doesn’t mean you should give up pursuing pregnancy. But asking yourself whether the above quote might apply to you may help you sort out the alternatives.

If we remain childfree, we’ll be sorry later. Ambivalence is a normal part of the human condition. Of course, there will be days when you wonder if you would have been happier if you’d made another choice. Everyone wonders, “What would have happened if...?” especially during rough times—a hectic day for a parent, a lonely one for a non-parent.

Remember that infertile those who adopt or choose donor insemination, etc., will also occasionally wonder about their “road not taken.” Rather than ask, “Will I regret my decision to remain childfree?” ask yourself, “Which decision will I regret the least?”

Writer Aimee Liu interviewed both fertile and infertile childfree people, and asked about regrets. The answers were unexpected. She says, “I was surprised to discover how well most people without children adjusted after they’d become childfree. Even among those who had spent years battling infertility, I found few wholeheartedly regretted not having children. Of course, the lives they lived were different than they might have been, but they came to see that difference as a fact of life - rather than a tragedy. The only people who truly regretted not having children were those who had not enriched their lives on their own, who had not used extra time and resources that would otherwise have been spent raising children.”

One RESOLVE member states, “It’s been six years [living childfree], and I can say we’ve no regrets. We look forward to a long and happy life together.”

Guidelines for Decision-Making

There are three different kinds of childfree decisions an infertile individual can make:

1. To stop trying to conceive and remain childfree;
2. To remain childfree if a successful pregnancy isn’t achieved (a decision not to adopt, use a surrogate, etc.)
3. To remain childfree for the present while trying

to make a long-term decision.

Grieving: The Essential First Step

Before you can even begin to consider alternatives to pregnancy, it is necessary to go through a grief process, somewhat like the process you would go through if someone you loved died. It is a matter of grieving for the biological child that you are probably not going to have. This is not a matter of wallowing in self-pity, overreacting, going crazy, or having a nervous breakdown. Some people wonder if letting the sadness out, sadness that they’ve pushed down for so long, is a loss of control. Allowing yourself to feel what you feel, to share it with your partner, to comfort each other, and to share this sadness with others, is actually a way of *gaining* control. Letting it out allows it to come to an end, while pushing it down may sentence you to years of chronic depression. Once you’ve completed the grief process, you’ll still have twinges of sadness about infertility, but you’ll be ready to get on with your life.

Resolution

After you’ve grieved, even if you’re still trying for a successful pregnancy, you have a feeling that life is joyful and meaningful even if you never get to be a parent. Barbara Eck Menning, RESOLVE’s founder, and author of *Infertility: A Guide for the Childless Couple* (Prentice Hall Press, New York, 1988), calls this new set of feelings “resolution.” Only if you have reached resolution are you ready psychologically to embrace an alternative such as adoption or childfree living.

Of course, problems are not always solved in the ideal sequence. People sometimes make decisions before they’ve attained resolution. If you’re having trouble choosing an alternative to having a biological child, it’s useful to ask, “Do I have unfinished grief work?” That, rather than indecisiveness, is often the problem!

Do your grief work before making any decision. Keep in mind that if you consider the childfree choice before your grieving is complete, you may suffer a double dose of mourning. You’ll be responding to two losses (or potential losses—your fantasized biological child and your fantasized adopted child.) Even if remaining child-free is ultimately the best course for you, be aware that preliminary consideration of this option is often quite painful.

Decision-Making Advice

1. **Do your soul-searching before you begin negotiating with your partner.** There are often three different decisions when it comes to

parenthood choices or other important decisions a couple must make—“your” “mine” and “ours.” The final solution a couple arrives at may match one or both partner’s original choices or it may be a compromise. For example, one partner may want to adopt immediately; the other partner may prefer to remain childfree for the next few years. A compromise might be for the couple to get on adoption waiting lists while learning as much as they can about both options.

2. **Be sure you both have a chance to express your feelings about the alternatives you’re considering.** People often mistakenly assume that their partner understands their viewpoint. Double-check your partner’s understanding by asking for a re-statement of what they’ve just said.
3. **Use both sides of your brain for optimal decision making.** Good decision making depends on your ability to make allies, not enemies, of your emotional/intuitive powers and rational powers. Do you ever try to push down your feelings and “do what makes sense?” It’s equally important to pay attention to the whole array of feelings you have about parenthood, infertility, adoption, etc.

How do you get in touch with those feelings, and tap those intuitive powers? Dreams, meditation, fantasy, and journal-keeping are all valuable sources of self-discovery.

4. **Take another look at your motivations for parenthood.** How many of the values and meanings that the you place on parenthood would be met by adoption? How many depend on biological parenting? How crucial are the following:
 - Pregnancy, childbirth, nursing,
 - Genetic continuity/ biological immortality,
 - Having a child who looks just like you or your partner, and
 - Having someone to carry on the family name.

Make a list of what specifically you’ll miss if you never have a child. Then go back over the list and write “B” if you think only giving birth will meet that need. Write “E” if you think either adoption or giving birth would meet the need. If your list has more “B’s”

than “E’s,” the childfree choice may be the right alternative. You, your spouse or both of you may just need to do some more grief work and more exploration of adoption.

One infertile couple found that adoption did not meet their needs. They chose instead to remain childfree. Here is what they wrote about their decision, “Giving up the dream of pregnancy, bonding at birth and breast-feeding isn’t easy, isn’t always possible. No one should have to apologize if they don’t feel they can’t give it up in favor of adoption.”

5. **Look at the positive aspects of remaining childfree.** A childfree life is more than just the absence of children. It can mean the presence of other possibilities. If you are considering the childfree option, begin to explore ways to be creative and productive without children. You may find that opportunities to grow as an individual, as a couple, and perhaps as a professional, will have far fewer restrictions than if you had the responsibility of a child.
6. **Expect this decision to be lonely.** Deciding to remain childfree is a hard decision because it is more likely to be misunderstood than supported by family and friends who may view you as quitters or failures. They may fail to grasp that for you, the childfree decision could be a success, an arrival at a positive solution and an end to your pain.

Try not to become offended if others facing infertility have trouble accepting your choice. Remember that this is a loaded issue for them. Your choice to remain childfree may threaten them. If they’re uncertain about their own decision to adopt, and if a couple is disagreeing about their choice, your decision may make them panicky about theirs. Remember that you have the right to choose what’s best for you.
7. **Join a RESOLVE support group.** Many people have found it easier to make a decision when they have both the support and the feedback of others who are facing similar decisions. The support group leader can be a valuable resource for suggesting readings, self-exploration exercises, referrals to a counselor, etc.
8. **Consider seeing a counselor if you feel stuck.** It’s often helpful to have some couples’ sessions with a qualified mental health professional who is knowledgeable about infertility.

An objective third party who has helped others faced with infertility can ease some of your pain and speed your progress.

9. **Don't wait for thunderbolts or neon signs.** Many grow gradually into the right decision, which starts out as a leaning or a possibility. It's often a long and complicated process of evolving into the proper alternative. Ambivalence and uncertainty are par for the course. It's only natural to have some doubts. It may help to know that others who feel confident they chose well report that at the time they made a decision they felt shaky and uncertain about it, and had to trust and hope that they were headed in the right direction. This applies, of course, to decision-making about other alternatives as well.
10. **Give yourself leeway.** A decision to remain childfree doesn't have to be written in stone. You may decide to remain childfree for now, but give yourself leeway for future pursuit of pregnancy or adoption.

When Couples Disagree About Alternatives

What if one of you wants to adopt (or to pursue another alternative such as 3rd party reproduction) and the other wants to remain childfree? It's not advisable to pursue an alternative to which one partner has serious objections. It's generally preferable for the couple to remain childfree until the reluctant partner's objections are overcome.

Of course, it's normal to have mild doubts or reservations, but if a partner is adamantly opposed, the couple is likely to have serious difficulties with the child that ensues. Often a partner just needs more time to sort out feelings, learn more about an alternative, speak to others who have selected the alternative, etc. It's often just a question of lag time. But both members of the couple will be better prepared for parenthood if no one's arm got badly twisted. It's only fair during this "working it out" time that the partner give some consideration to the childfree choice. Actually beginning an adoption process at this point would be risky because you won't be able to offer each other needed support. Being on a waiting list, in contrast, is practical. By the time your names arrive at the top of the list, the two of you may have arrived at a decision!

It's important to figure out whether the partner attracted to the childfree choice is attracted to childfree living itself or whether that preference reflects objections to the alternatives.

One RESOLVE member described her decision-making

process, "I wanted to adopt, but my husband didn't. I remember driving home from an adoption meeting and comparing reactions. While I was happily fantasizing about our adopted family, my husband was concluding that adoption was not for him. He just wasn't sure he could fully commit himself to accept and raise a child who was not his own flesh and blood. I was in a dilemma—how could I adopt if my husband was against it? Suddenly, I was very lonely. Infertility treatment had brought us closer, but the adoption issue set us at odds with each other. It was very isolating. We resolved the conflict by going together to a counselor who was very helpful. It turned out that I had never really let go of the hope that I would get pregnant. I had some grief work to do before I could give the childfree choice any consideration. Counseling enabled us to renew our commitment to each other and to our marriage. Only after grieving and renewing my commitment to my husband was I ready to consider and to accept remaining child-free."

Many couples who disagree about alternatives find it helpful to see a counselor for a few sessions to sort out the pros and cons of various choices, and to identify obstacles to decision making. The counselor can teach the couple negotiating skills and new ground rules for communication. An objective, and expert third party, can help you reduce the stress and the time involved in decision-making.

Suppose one partner has persuaded the other to remain childfree. It would be very important for the partner who initiated the decision to be emotionally supportive and sensitive to the disappointed partner. Acknowledging the disappointment and anger is crucial, as is expressing deep appreciation of sacrificing parenthood for the sake of the partner and of the marriage.

Making the Most of Life Without Children

- **Get off the hot seat.** You don't have to justify your decision to anyone else unless you choose to.
- **Don't demand brilliance or perfection from yourself.** Sometimes people feel they must be super achievers or lead an enviable, glamorous life to make up for not having children. You have as much right to be ordinary as anybody else!
- **Don't feel guilty or selfish.** Your decision to live a productive life without children does not make you selfish.
- **Enjoy solitude.** Don't pass up your special ac-

cess to quiet time to daydream, meditate, pray or plan.

- **Deepen your relationship with your partner.** Because you don't have the obligations of parenthood, you have more time for each other. Set aside time for each other. Find shared interests or special projects to work on together.
- **Pursue your career.** Many childfree people have reported a silver lining in the cloud of infertility: further career development. A decision to remain childfree gets your life out of a holding pattern and allows you to plan your career development rather than biding time.
- **Develop a family system.** Family networks are important, and if you're not close to "blood" relatives—emotionally or geographically—create a "chosen" family with friends, co-workers or neighbors. Gretchen Mills explains the importance to her and her husband of family ties, "If you have made conscious efforts to construct a family of your own making," reports Gretchen, "you do have children who are important in your life even though they're not living in your own household." She goes on to say: "We've maintained close relationships with our families of origin. We're all in different parts of the country, but we make special efforts to call and write and to see each other on vacations. We also do this with members of our special "created" family who have moved away. We have consciously constructed a family out of special friendships we have. If you had children in your household you would put a great deal of energy into that child. If you don't have children you have to invest energy in constructing a family."
- **Develop holiday traditions.** Holidays, especially Christmas and Hanukkah, have a strong focus on children and families. Begin to create your own traditional holiday festivities—Christmas Eve at a favorite restaurant, a holiday brunch for your friends, an annual Christmas vacation for two, an Easter egg hunt in your backyard for children of friends and neighbors.
- **Find a path to immortality.** Children are only one way to leave something behind when you die. You can be a special friend or teacher to children who are not yours or you can find immortality through artistic or scientific projects, designing products or buildings or starting a company. Mentoring newcomers to your profession or company can be an opportunity to

nurture and also to have an impact on others. Religion, meditation or an affinity with nature can provide other means of transcending mortality.

- **Find a way to celebrate and validate your decision.** There are adoption announcements and pre-adoption baby showers, but no rituals to celebrate a decision to remain childfree. Privately as a couple, or with caring friends, why not have a celebration dinner or party? Or take some other action that symbolizes the excitement of a new life together. You could go plan a cruise, and follow with dinner and champagne. Or give that first stroke of the paintbrush to the wall of that spare room that's going to be turned into an art studio instead of a nursery. Will you make a career change, go back to school, start an exciting volunteer project? Find a way to make an important symbolic first step you can share with your spouse and then CELEBRATE! You do have something to celebrate - an end to soul-searching, an end to "trying" and the beginning of peace of mind and new horizons. Suppose you still don't feel like celebrating. That's okay. Maybe you're remaining childfree because your partner wanted to so badly. Give yourself time and the day will come when you're ready to move on to new possibilities. Counseling may help you to arrive at this point.

Suggested Readings:

- Alden, P.B. (1996) *Crossing the Moon*. St. Paul, MN; Hungry Mind Press.
- Burgwyn, D. (1982) *Marriage Without Children*. New York; Harper and Row.
- Carter, J. & Carter, M. (1989) *Sweet Grapes: How to Stop Being Infertile and Start Living Again*. Indiana; Perspective Press.
- Lafayette, L. (1995) *Why Don't You Have Kids? Living a Full Life Without Parenthood*. New York; Kensington Publishing.
- Lang, S. (1991) *Women Without Children, The Reasons, The Rewards, The Regrets*. New York; Pharos Books.
- Vissing, Y. (2003) *Women Without Children*. New Jersey; Rutgers University Press.

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