

The child-free life and its unexpected dilemmas

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Deciding not to reproduce triggers complex and conflicting emotions.

I knew in my teens, that denying my God-given hormonal urge to reproduce, would be easy. I was a young woman of clear choices, especially when it came to kids. Post-apartheid freedom offered new opportunities for a woman to live the life she chooses. I was set to make the most of that. Coupled with my anti-marriage and anti-convention arguments, the call for a child-free life made perfect sense.

To remain child-free is a serious decision, rarely taken lightly or in haste. It was only later on, that the preponderant factor in my long-ago choice became more neurotic → a doubt about my own psychological suitability for motherhood.

In the mid-nineties and early 2000s, not having children (too many or too early) was in fashion: the modernity of free choice and acceptance of career-obsession meant women had children at later ages. In fact, most of my friends had babies in their late 30s. As I stared at the madness that is parenthood and the toll it takes on near midlifers, it was evident that my choice was both sane and economically prudent.

Then, I turned 40, and more than just my metabolism changed. In my quasi-midlife-crisis ponderings, I understood for the first time both the importance and usefulness of having children. Not that I was suddenly filled with keen envy nor did my biological clock go off like the alarm that wakes you to catch a six am flight. Instead, the insights clicked together like the sensible beauty of a perfectly-assembled Ikea desk.

First, you lose your friends. It is not that they stop liking you. Still, they relish the twice yearly chance to slip through the family escape hatch and drink wine to irresponsible levels with you. The point is, they just spend less time with you and more time with people with children, even if they don't like those parents. Building a reliable network of like-minded people with child-friendly docking stations that allows you to click and drop when you need to, is simply more useful. The child-free friend is also less interesting to talk to because you don't talk about children. You don't know the difference between the Mima Xari Pushchair and Stokke Cruzzi Pram and it shows!

Families have a natural (albeit chaotic) sense of order. This is where kids are useful: they help maintain this order and move everyone along the production line: children become parents, and parents become grandparents. Without a new child, parents who are not moved down the line, panic. If you think you're mothered even as a parent, try that as a child-free person! Especially if you're the only child in the family.

Not being a grandparent is almost embarrassing. What else would you complain about at bridge?

With no grandparent duty, they themselves turn into children. It dawned on me why now I am definitely unable to have children – my parents have turned into opportunistic teenagers who know that my disposable income is untouched by school fees and saving for university...

Parents tend to see things through the eyes of their children – eyes that reveal the world as a new and fascinating place. Child-free people often become more serious as they grow older. Courtesy of children, there is an unbridled joy that allows you to be silly pretty early on in life as well as pretty late. One of the missed opportunities is the chance to be an eccentric embarrassment as an old person. In fact, you have a greater chance of becoming an embarrassment to yourself earlier in life. This is because children are most useful at keeping you 'relevant' in middle age. They force you to stay connected to popular culture. As a parent, the various school and extramural-related groups form the life blood of a functional family. As a child-free person, you do not feel the pressure to have multiple social media accounts. But there is a risk attached to this self-elected isolation. A connected life helps you retain a modicum of 'cool' – even if it is just the ability to demonstrate the

correct use of emojis. In fact, if you are the kind of parent whom most adults would consider old-fashioned, you can steal the show at dinner with a deep knowledge of "...the importance of creating ephemeral content on your own Insta account."

In this hyper-connected world, the threat to child-free people is graver than the inability to navigate digital communication. The astounding advances of modern medicine will see people live to 150 or 200 years old. Where this may excite some, the practical reality is that you will probably run out of money, no matter how high your earnings may be. Whereas choosing to go child-free in the 90s was economically viable since the average life expectancy was around 75, choosing today to go child-free is economically irresponsible. Never before has the notion of a safety net in old age been more significant.

Finally, the most stinging consequence of living a child-free life is the never-ending existential crises you wear like a scarf. Those with children underestimate the delicious distraction of child rearing. In fact, parents have the luxury to blame their failed careers and shattered dreams on the moral high-ground of the relentless pursuit to nurture and provide. The conveniences of the child-free existence present you with idle hours to really unpack the questions about whether your life has meaning. There is no escaping the judgement, both by yourself and those cranky teenagers you call your parents.

Taking the joys and miseries of each lifestyle into balance, parenthood might just come out ahead...

But, for all that lost joy and future uncertainty there is one perk that will be my mainstay: the gentle sound of an uninterrupted Sunday night of quality time binge watching my new favourite Netflix series while downing a bottle of wine...