

Introduction

Life can be messy. We never know how it will turn out. This makes decision-making interesting; another potentially messy process with its own twists and turns, highs and lows. Perhaps the most significant, life or death sort of decision that any of us might make in the course of our lives – although it is often not seen as such – is deciding whether to have children. Now, in the 21st century, having children is still seen as the default thing to do for the majority of the world's population. Remarkably, it is also still seen as a personal decision, despite the fact that as a species we are facing, and have played our part in causing, environmental degradation, climate chaos, the sixth mass extinction, international wars, poverty, and desperate inequality.

For a significant percentage of parents having children is a non-decision, because their babies were unplanned. For many others having children is a non-decision, in the sense that it is just something they always assumed they would do. To some it simply makes sense on the subterranean gut level of what it means to be human and alive. Others have children because that is the preference of their partners. Billions of others on the planet do not have the luxury of access to contraception or live in a place where as many children as possible is still the norm, because of rates of child mortality. Even in countries where contraception is widely and freely available some adopt a 'Russian roulette' approach, knowing that whilst they are fertile, children loom as a pregnant possibility.

Whilst babies arrive with ease and surprise for some, others try for a child for years, to no avail. Many of us will probably recognize ourselves as having been in one or more of these categories. This is the interesting thing about this dimension of life; our beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can change as we move through life's cycles – for the majority of us it is far

from a one-off decision. In the age of patchwork-like families many people become mothers and fathers in the role of a step-parent, never having conceived a child of their own, but nevertheless having a significant parental role to play.

When we are well beyond our fertile years the issue of child-bearing and rearing can still shape us, perhaps in the form of regret; 'what ifs', or appreciation that we have followed a less conventional path. Some find themselves in later life in the situation where children never quite happened, or they never got round to having children, leaving them with a host of feelings; from deep regret, to a philosophical ambivalence, through to peaceful acceptance.

This book is about choosing life: what that means, and the endless forms life takes. It also takes into account respect for life beyond our immediate loved ones: our wider communities, nations, people living on other continents as well as the effect of our swelling population on other-than-human life and the biosphere. My intention is that this is a book for men and for women (and for those who are more fluid in their gender identification) despite the title. Having said that, the issues for men and women are very different, given the different societal and familial conditioning in which we are submerged. The book is likely to make more sense to women, given that I write having been societally and culturally conditioned as a woman. Also because 'there is much historical and contemporary evidence to suggest that motherhood is a primary status for women in a way that fatherhood is not for men' (Letherby, 1999: 361). Notwithstanding, I hope some men find it of use and I would welcome more men talking and writing on this theme.

Choosing how to live might include choosing to try for children or choosing a life without children. Or perhaps some of you are at a point where you just do not know and do not know how to decide what to do for the best. Or you might be a woman at the end of your most engaging child-rearing years taking stock

and reviewing life as a parent, before taking a next step.

My choice has been about deciding not to try for children, a decision-making process that has spanned more than 17 years. This book explores different facets and dimensions of that decision-making process, living with the decision, and life beyond decision-making. Each chapter reflects a different aspect of, or theme about, intentional childlessness. I weave together my personal experience with anecdotes, academic research, and conversations about this subject with friends, strangers, colleagues and acquaintances. Several themes in this book are revisited throughout its course, particularly questions around non-parenthood and identity, social conformity and finding our place in the world, reflecting how the decision-making process revisits different facets of our lives over time. You will not find in-depth case studies about intentionally childless women and couples in this book, primarily because there are several existing books which already include these (for example: Carroll, 2000; Ireland, 1993; Van Luven, 2006, and Walker, 2010).

When I started to write this book it felt like a journey about a personal decision – whether or not to have children. My perspective has changed radically over the past 17 years. I am now interested in exploring the relevance of the baby-making decision to the current situation we are in as humans living on planet earth. ‘A private decision with global consequences’, the title of Part II, sums up rather neatly the road I have travelled in my own reflections and understanding.

My research and numerous dialogues have lead me to look at child-bearing and rearing in a way which acknowledges the global consequences of the decision to procreate. The original reason for my provisional decision not to have children was because of my commitment to practicing Buddhism. As I did that, in parallel with mulling over the baby question, the more I realized that an important emphasis in Buddhism is living with a respect for all that lives and our environment. Given the times

we are in, I am keen to urge people – Buddhist or not – to think about the baby-making decision with the planet in mind, and in view of the nature of their relationship to their planet and other-than-human life, not to mention the tens of millions of children living on the planet without parents, home, love, shelter, and sustenance.

We know that many children are longed for, nurtured, embraced and brought up with a huge amount of love. We also know of children who are unwanted, abandoned, neglected, abused, with lives sometimes being prematurely ended when that torment of never being wanted becomes too overwhelming and unbearable. In my therapy room I often meet the adult versions of such children. Conversely, some children are *so* wanted, with their parents having such a vision for their lives (even before they take their first step), or living vicariously through their children, that they feel unable to be themselves, to live their own lives, until they have realized the pressure they have been under and that their time is their own.

I am not, of course, the first person to be concerned with the hot potato of child-bearing, planetary considerations, and life on Earth. In graduating from Mill College in Oakland, California, in 1969, Stephanie Mills delivered a college graduation speech entitled ‘The Future is a Cruel Hoax’, which catapulted her into the national spotlight. The year before, Paul Ehrlich’s bestselling book *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich, 1968) had been published. Mills had been moved deeply by its message that we humans are facing a future of war, strife and famine – victims of our own reproductive success, and exploiting Earth’s finite resources. Mills announced to her classmates: “I am terribly saddened by the fact that the most humane thing for me to do is to have no children at all” (Mills quoted in Hymas, 2010). Since that time Stephanie has been an ecological activist, and a lecturer in bioregionalism, ecological restoration, community economics, and voluntary simplicity.

In 1972 the National Organization for Non-Parents was founded in California, later becoming the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood (NAOP). It continued until 1982 as a support group for those deciding to not have children, and as an advocacy group fighting pronatalism: attitudes which over-glorify parenthood at the cost of other life choices. It aimed at educating the public on non-parenthood as a valid lifestyle choice, as well as promoting awareness of the problems associated with overpopulation (Blackstone, 2014). More recently, environmental factors for not having children are less often cited in most of the literature I have come across – although in conversation people I have talked to have occasionally cited this as a reason why they decided not to have children.¹ It is refreshing to come across articles like the ones from Lisa Hymas, published in *The Guardian*: ‘I decided not to have children for environmental reasons’ (Hymas, 2011a) and ‘How green are the childless by choice?’ (Hymas, 2011b).

Choosing what to do with the time we have available to us is another hot topic, and an eternal human quest, whether or not we are choosing to try for children. Having the verve to live life – in whatever way we make sense of that – is stretching and challenging. Whilst the great spiritual teachers and inspirers have espoused the importance of living with awareness, authenticity and an ethical sensitivity towards ourselves, others and the world, it is, of course, not as easy as it sounds, particularly in a culture which prioritizes individual freedom and pleasure-seeking, often at the cost of community and the health of other-than-human life and the planet. Similar to the arrival of children, life itself does not arrive with a detailed instruction manual, so the art of muddling through seems to apply to many of us, most of the time.

The emphasis upon individual choice, such a key emphasis in our society since the 1980s, can be a myth. Within our society, let alone on a global level, some are free and resourced to choose

how they live, serving those doing the choosing; the folk with power, position and wealth, and subsequently, political clout.

Even when we are free to choose how to respond to our life situation and what to do with our time, we do not always *know* that we are, because of our doubt, fear, indecision, restlessness, and the immense pressure to conform. This pressure is experienced acutely in the realm of child-bearing. As Kitzinger reminds us: ‘...a woman has little value until she becomes a mother’ (Kitzinger, 1978: 245). Even though she was writing in 1978, Kitzinger’s point is still a valid one. In the last decade or so what is strange is that societal pressure to conform has become more implicit. As Dally says: ‘...societal pressures provide powerful motives but are seldom voiced’ (Dally, 1982: 197), with Pohlman (1969) suggesting that wanting children is primarily due to the need to conform to the pressures imposed by society.

So I also use ‘choice’ here to throw light on the fact that for many people the decision to have children is still something of a non-choice. Given the strength of pronatal, pro-nuclear family views, certainly in the culture in which I live, we have collective work to do in raising awareness about the public consequences of child-bearing and rearing. The ‘natural’ option (which we shall explore later) prevailing in mainstream popular culture is to find a significant other of the opposite sex, settle down and have some children. It is still seen as deviant to veer far from that norm – deviant presumably, because of fears of family breakdown and moral decline? I think it takes courage to veer off the path and to take a less well-trodden path. It also takes courage to be a parent, of course. I was glad to be introduced to the work of the philosopher Christine Overall, a mother herself, who poses the question ‘Why have children?’ (Overall, 2012). She presents a careful investigation of the moral issues surrounding the choice to have a child, rather than – for once – asking ‘Why don’t you have children?’

Billions of people alive today do not have freedom of choice.

For those of us who do have the privilege of living in a situation of relative political freedom and peace, with the money, food, shelter, care, and access to health and education services to support our lives, the ‘choosing’ aspect of the title of this book is purposely thought-provoking. The global situation we face in 2015 is hot, and quite literally getting hotter, climate-wise, and having children is a private decision with global consequences. The hot title of Part II is to encourage us to engage with this important subject area, making the decision as to whether or not to have children as conscious as possible. There is also a difference between choice and responsibility. Whilst some have more choices available to them than others, each of us can only live our own lives, no one else can live it for us, or save us, or tell us how to live. So acknowledging a healthy responsibility for choosing how we spend our time is an important starting point.

The matter of ‘choice’ with regards to child-bearing is likely to be incredibly charged for those of you who would love to have children, but are unable; known in academic literature as ‘involuntary childlessness’ or ‘childless by circumstance’. In this case the notion of choice and choosing life might seem crass – even devastating – in the light of the situation in which you find yourselves. I want to clarify that this book is specifically about intentional childlessness – choosing childlessness. If you are involuntarily childless you might find certain parts of the book relevant – for example, the critiques of the pro-baby-making pronatalism of our society and the stereotyping and prejudices towards non-mothers – but it is aimed primarily at those either still in a decision-making process, or those who have decided not to have children.²

The early literature on childlessness had some weaknesses, as McAllister & Clarke (1998: 1) point out, for example, some early studies of childlessness were often not representative, using sampling methods that focused on those who were middle class, married, and female. In some of the early studies of declining

fertility there was often no distinction made between intentional and unintentional childlessness. This is a huge and insensitive over-sight, and a reflection of the lack of detailed attention given to these themes and the people whose lives are affected. Having said that, there can be a substantial gray area, if that is the right word, between voluntary and involuntary childlessness. As we shall see, some make a definite decision to not have children from an early age, with some women asking to be sterilized because of their certainty.

Deciding whether or not to have children is often an unfolding decision, changed by: relationships (or lack of), living situations, life priorities, financial situation, to name but a few factors. Those who have been called the 'ambivalent' childless (see McAllister with Clarke, 1998: 3) never make a firm decision about whether or not to have children and do not rule out later parenthood. Some had postponed childbearing, whilst others had experienced fertility problems. In many cases the process is about weighing up possibilities, rather than making a firm and lasting choice either way. There can be an overlap between those of us who do not choose to have children and those of us who are childless by circumstance. From this point of view I rather like Walker's pithy and rather more flexible definitions of: childfree by happenstance, childfree by choice and childfree by circumstance (Walker, 2010: 6).

'Choice' is a problematic word in other ways. For example, I am acutely aware that my partner and I have never tried to conceive. So it is actually not the case that I have chosen not to have children; more accurately, I have tried to not conceive. For all I know, I may have had difficulties in conceiving. Conversely, I may have conceived and never even realized.

This leads me to my other main concern with the notion of 'choice'. In the 21st century those of us in late-stage capitalist societies are obsessed with the illusion of choice. This is most often framed in terms of consumer choice in a world in which we

are so often defined and classified as customers and consumers, rather than as human beings living our lives interdependently with other living beings; human and other-than-human. Our anthropocentrism and consumerism can give us the erroneous idea that we are mistresses and masters of our universes. For some humans in our society it seems as though the world exists as a resource-filled playground designed to meet our needs, rather than seeing the world in relation to our place in a complex ecosystem. Hence the title of this book being 'with life in mind'. Not simply because procreation is obviously linked to population, but looking at much wider factors, such as the threat of our runaway consumption, and the way we treat our home – the planet – and *all* the beings that live here.

Trying for children, and indeed, childbearing and rearing are dimensions in which the stark realities of both the robustness and the fragility of life are much in evidence. Experiences from these realms can shatter, in no uncertain terms, that view that we are mistresses and masters of our universes. I only have to cast my mind to friends, family and clients with this in mind: the heartbreak of friends who have undergone repeated IVF treatment, friends whose healthy, happy children have died, the client or family member or friend who miscarries, the friends bringing up children with chronic health problems, the clients who fear that they will never find a partner with whom to start a family, and the friends and clients who abort the children they are carrying. The distress of these varying, yet commonplace scenarios are compounded by living in a society in which so many of us expect to get what we want when we want it – at least in material terms. In facing the fragile, fast-changing, unsatisfactory experiences we are challenged to come to terms with the ongoing reality of the unpredictability of existence. An unpredictability which can be exhilarating and devastating in about equal measure.

Finally, in researching and reviewing the literature about

childlessness over 17 years I have sometimes been saddened by witnessing the hardening of views and polarizations and the throwing around of stereotypes, from 'yummy mummies' to 'selfish, career-driven Bridget Jones types', and worse still, anti-child comments. As Basten points out: '...a number of views expressed on internet forums are often aggressive and acutely self-assertive' (Basten, 2009: 18). In this book I seek to throw light on this particular decision-making process rather than to prescribe whether or not anyone should or shouldn't have children.

Intentional childlessness is still seen by some as rebellious and socially deviant, so this book may be a challenging read for some. A vocal minority of those who have decided not to have children focus their energies on talking about children and other parents in a demeaning way. What I am seeking to create is mutual respect rather than ever more deeply divided camps of people and opinions. There are a thicket of views and opinions about child-bearing, rearing, and parenting - or choosing not to do so. I hope to create a 'pregnant pause' for conscious decision-making with a glimpse of the local and global implications. May we respect one another and respect difference as we take our next breath and form our next word – myself included.

So choice is an interesting, loaded, culturally-conditioned and complex notion. I am fascinated by how we go about choosing. Or whether we tend to do things in auto-pilot. Whether babies just happen along. For some of us life revolves around a well-crafted plan, for others, it all just happens. Do we solely choose how to respond to any big decisions in life? Or do those decisions, to some extent at least, 'choose us'? Perhaps we respond by creating certain conditions to the best of our current ability and see what happens.

Those moments when life 'chooses us' do seem to happen, ranging from times when a particular decision seems somehow 'fated', when the whisperings of a vocational calling will not go

away, or when a baby is conceived despite a couple being absolutely determined not to get pregnant. My life is, at best, like a gorgeously emerging work-in-progress sculpture. Some days it is beautiful, flowing, engaging and creative, with others joining in with the odd bit of chiseling. On a more scattered day I stare at the tools and the block of stone, perplexed in trying to recall what I am doing. Perhaps you can relate to that or have your own preferred analogy or metaphor.

This book is about choosing – bearing in mind all my caveats about that tricky word – rather than not-choosing. It is about choosing life and keeping the initiative in how you live. The language around childlessness is generally concerned with lack; the words and names speak of lack: elective childlessness, intentional childlessness, unintentional childlessness. Note the repetitive ‘less’. For the sake of shorthand I tend to favor using the term ‘childless’. Being ‘childfree’ seems for some to suggest a greater sense of freedom and choice (Stobert & Kemeny, 2003), whereas ‘childless’ can sound negative or missing out on something special (Walker, 2010: 3). Personally, the term ‘childfree’ leaves me cold, implying that freedom from children is automatically a good thing for one’s health, a bit like something which is sugar-free or caffeine-free, or is used to refer to childfree environments. Other intentionally childless women identify as being an ‘anti-Mom’ (Shriver, 2005).

The truth is, I am not all that fond of any of these terms, but they are needed here for ease of discussion. I tend to use the term ‘intentional childlessness’ or ‘choosing childlessness’ (or childless for short, meaning intentionally childless in this context) which reflects the fact that this was a positive choice. But please be aware as and when you read other literature on this theme that there is a growing trend for ‘childless’ to refer to those who are involuntarily or unintentionally so and ‘childfree’ for those who are voluntarily or intentionally without child.

In writing this book my creative juices only started to flow

fully when I realized that its backbone needed to be about choosing life, rather than life being over because of my childlessness. The spirit of 'choosing life' first caught my attention watching a film called *The Shawshank Redemption*. The character Andy says to his friend Red: "You can get busy living or get busy dying". At that time in my life – a time of mourning after my father's death – I was erring on the side of getting busy dying, rather than living, so it was a timely wake up call to re-engage with living. Choosing life is also an invitation to bear in mind all of life on this amazing biosphere and the effect our decisions have upon one another and other-than-human life. For me, the form of choosing life happens to be about choosing not to have children; the main thread of this book. For you, it might be about having children. In my mind if the decision is not set in a broader context of choosing life, explorations of intentional childlessness can end up being perceived as defensive – reinforcing the unfortunate, distorted stereotypes of childless women being weird, deviant, anti-social or at absolute worst, child-hating, by virtue of their childlessness. So this is an invitation into a creative exploration of how to live life, with a particular focus upon the decision of whether or not to have children.

However, I would be mistaken to not capture the sense of 'otherness' that I have experienced in choosing not to be a mother – and I know for sure that I am not alone in that experience. Hence the title 'Other Than Mother' acknowledges that those of us without child are in a minority compared to the majority of women who have children and become mothers, even if their average age may be getting later. That is still the status quo. Most childbearing women have multiple roles, but motherhood remains absolutely central in terms of explicit and implicit social norms. In choosing not to have children I still experience from time to time that 'otherness' from socially accepted norms, and I will explore that otherness throughout the course of this book.

Talking about this sense of otherness and opening more

dialogues about how notions of womanhood are still so inextricably tied up with motherhood are important for everyone – men and women, with or without child – in terms of allowing people to live authentic lives regardless of their gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and desire to bear children. Instead of the intentionally childless being seen as deviant or weird, here I invite a celebration of the creativity channeled into other ways of living which do not happen to involve physical child-bearing and rearing.

The content of *Other Than Mother* has been informed by my work in a number of different realms: as a body psychotherapist, as a therapy supervisor, as a friend to women in their twenties, thirties, and forties who are ‘umming’ and ‘ahhing’ over this decision, as a friend to men and women who would not choose parenthood if they had their time again, as an ecopsychologist, and as a researcher sifting through the literature on this subject, from statistics about intentional childlessness trends through to mainstream media commentary and academic literature.³ It has also been hugely influenced by my practice of meditation and Buddhism and a curiosity about how to live. I have noticed how my tone switches in various parts of this book, as I draw on the experience of working in different roles, my own personal experiences and those of folk around me.

A few practical points in navigating this book. Firstly, it is divided into three parts:

Part I – The worldly winds

Part II – A private decision with global consequences

Part III – New horizons and baby-sized projects

These three parts roughly equate to the before, during, and after phases of deciding whether or not to have children. Each part has fairly short chapters with different tones and flavors, and I have structured the book into three parts in the hope that it is a

useful way of dividing the material and inviting you into a process of your own reflections, having read some of mine. Do bear in mind that this is not a linear process, it is generally a messy, creative, human process, so although the book is structured in a way which reflects the before, during and after aspects of the decision, life is not quite so tidy... In other words, be as kind to and as patient with yourself as you can as you read. You might also find that you want to read the three different parts in an order that suits you, perhaps delving straight into the decision-making process of Part II.

The title of Part I, 'The worldly winds', is taken from a traditional Buddhist teaching. The eight 'worldly winds', traditionally known as the 'loka dharmas' or 'worldly conditions' are: pleasure and pain, loss and gain, fame and infamy, and praise and blame (see Sangharakshita 1998: 7-8). They blow through our lives to a greater or lesser extent all the time. To give an example, we can feel the loss of not having children. Conversely, if we have children, we are likely, even if only occasionally, to feel the loss of having the time and space for things other than parenthood. The trick of a balancing approach to life is to become so familiar with our patterns in how we respond to pleasure, pain, loss, gain, fame, infamy, praise, and blame that we remain unduly swayed by them. This feels like an appropriate title for Part I of this book, as the worldly winds make themselves very much felt in the area of child-rearing or not, with the myriad of views, assumptions and stereotypes of ourselves and others, particularly around the realities and myths of parenthood and non-parenthood. So Part I looks at the various pulls in different directions as we try to decide whether or not to start a family and how confusing a field this can be; how free are we to choose when we are subjected to the worldly winds?

The focus of Part II is upon the decision-making process itself. How do we approach this process? What might be the factors worth considering in this process? Part II includes many of my

own reflections about my decision to remain childless. Despite the fact that it is personal in parts, I hope it extends to more universal themes with wider relevance and resonance. I purposefully wrote this section from a personal point of view as an invitation to encourage you to mull upon your own reflections in this process – and it would be tricky to write in the abstract! The other option is to follow a more ‘case study’ lead approach, or a more academic, theoretical one. Both are interesting and relevant and are available elsewhere (see the references for some excellent examples). My intention in Part II is to invite you deep into your decision-making process from reading about mine.

Part III focuses upon life beyond deciding not to have children; living with the decision. It is called ‘New horizons’ because in my experience new horizons open up when you have decided to remain childless. Much energy can be expended in the ‘will I, won’t I?’ or, perhaps more aptly for many: ‘will we, won’t we?’ Not deciding can be draining and, at times, divisive, for ourselves and those closest to us. Deciding, even provisionally, not to have children can be freeing in giving us a flavor of, and taking seriously, other directions in life. Equally, I think it can feel like an odd time when you first decide not to have children, particularly if that has been a real possibility at times, hence the emphasis on the ‘baby-sized project’ early on in Part III. This part of the book invites a process of absorbing and digesting your decision-making process; maybe initiating a baby-sized project of your own.

Many themes are re-visited during the course of Parts I, II, and III. For example, perceptions of childless women, stereotyping (how we might stereotype ourselves and be stereotyped), how non-parenthood can bring a feeling of otherness because of the prevailing pro-family agendas, and the impact of child-bearing in light of global issues. The reason for re-visiting these themes is because they are themes that I have re-visited in the decision-making process, and, I am sure, will continue to re-visit

in the future. The re-visiting of these themes reflects the nature of this decision-making territory and echoes the research in terms of how people decide to have children. For many people who are 'umming and ahning' it is not an overnight decision. Making an important decision, rather like working as a client in therapy, is about looking at different aspects of the decision for ourselves, rather like looking at the different facets which form the surface of a jewel. As we re-visit different parts of our experience our self-awareness deepens.

As you read this book you will come across suggestions and ideas in the form of 'pregnant pauses' and 'reveries' at the end of some of the chapters. Please feel free to use these in a way which best serves you: reflect on them, brainstorm them, ignore them, or perhaps note them down and share them with a trusted friend. Maybe read them in a more dream-like state, as the name suggests, an important notion in some therapeutic circles, and important as we allow ourselves to be lost in our thoughts and daydreams about this subject matter.⁴ This decision-making process draws as much on our awareness of what emerges in a dreaming state as it does our logical, rational minds. Most importantly, please bear in mind that these pregnant pauses and reveries are only pointers and suggestions, and are not exhaustive. I purposely have not included them at the end of every single chapter, as I think that could become a bit overwhelming. Remember, too, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers and you do not have to share your reflections with anyone unless you wish to. You may decide to engage with the reflections once you have read and digested the whole book. My hope is that each of the chapters should stand alone and make sense, enabling you to delve into the parts which are of most interest and relevance.

I wish you well as you 'choose' life.