



Reflections on the Birth of *Other than Mother: Choosing Childless with Life in mind*

By Kamalamani

Part of me always anticipated motherhood with warmth, accompanied by an inner mantra: 'I'll have kids by the time I'm 30'. I guess this was my personalised version of what Melanie Holmes calls the 'motherhood catechism' in her book *The Female Assumption: The schooling of females to assume that they will someday become mothers* (Holmes, 2014: 9). It's strange to recall that even by the late 1990s it wasn't obvious, to me, at least, that child-bearing was and is a choice - the first time that I had paid attention to the pronatalism of our societal messages.

My final decision not to procreate emerged from a dream, the day after lunching with my best friend, Vicky, and her sharing with me the happy news of her pregnancy. My life was taking a different path. Yet it had dawned on me only a few years earlier that having children wasn't compulsory. Realising this, I had made the provisional decision not to have them, to sit with this and to see how it felt, after years of never having questioned that I would one day become a mother. It's 14 years since I dreamed that dream, the beginning of my researching and writing about elective childlessness. The day after that dream I found myself deciding to write the book that I had failed to find, eagerly scanning online booksellers.

What was I seeking, searching the web for the book I couldn't find? Affirmation that it was okay to be 31 and without child, maybe some encouragement in living a creative and nurturing life, without bringing an actual flesh and blood earthling into the world. Perhaps I was also seeking reflections on childlessness which were influenced by ecological and spiritual considerations, which were very much on my mind - and still are. That provisional decision turned, year by year, into a permanent decision. I am now 45 and have recently launched my second book 'Other than Mother: Choosing Childlessness with Life in Mind', the fruition of this 14- year-long gestation period.

My writing ground to a halt four years ago. What was wrong? Was this writer's block? Had I run out of steam? No. I realised I was trying to write about something under the influence of the sense of 'lack', which often shrouds the subject of childlessness. This was also a necessary stage in acknowledging that I did, and occasionally still do, feel a sense of lack and loss in being without child; loss on a personal level, and loss in terms of the taboo of being a middle-aged woman who is without child. It signalled to me the need for a shift in the book's structure and the orientation of my life. To feel freer to choose life and to start envisaging a life beyond the decision to not have children; less defined by the decision itself.

With that in mind, 'Other than Mother' is divided into three parts: Part I "The Worldly Winds" explores the backdrop in deciding whether or not to have children, including the cultural changes brought about by a rise in intentional childlessness. Part II "A Private Decision with Global Consequences" explores the pros and cons in the decision-making process, including ecological and environmental considerations. Part III "New Horizons and Baby-sized Projects" explores living with the decision.

I hope this book will support others who are in the midst of this decision-making process. The silver lining in writing a book on and off over 14 years is that my mood changed with different lifecycles and I hope that this is, to some extent, captured in the different flavours of the book. I also hope that it will serve to continue to open up dialogues about child-bearing and rearing, about motherhood and 'otherhood'.

These are hot, controversial, and invigorating themes. Debates on these themes can cascade into streams of polarisations, particularly on the internet - easier, I suppose, to hurl challenges when we can't see the real live person we're addressing in front of us. I hope 'Other than Mother' and many other fine books on this and related subjects will encourage us all to sit back and reflect on our choices, to listen better to one another, and to learn to live with difference rather than immediately fall into fear when it challenges our own status quo and embodied identity.

The hotter issues - quite literally, getting hotter at this point in life on earth - is looking at how we choose to live individually and collectively, as we start to acknowledge more publically the realisation that human activity is seriously endangering life on earth for us humans and other-than-human life. Not just in terms of climate chaos, but in terms of the severe loss of bio diversity, environmental degradation and the growing gulfs of wealth equality. The times of 'great turning' which we're in, to borrow the words of the eco-philosopher Joanna Macy, call for change in how we think and how we live rather than assuming it's going to be 'business as normal'.

Our approaches to child-bearing and child-rearing are an important part of this, hence the subtitle of 'with life in mind.' Not simply because of population concerns, but because in order to have a fighting chance of the longevity of the human species beyond the next few hundred years, we are going to have to develop much more resilient communities; communities which will need to adjust to big shifts in how we produce food and eat, how we recycle, how we keep warm, how we travel and move around the place, how and where we work, and how we communicate and organise ourselves. My book's by line 'a private decision with global

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consequences' invites us to start to dialogue about child-bearing and rearing - or not - as but one aspect of the necessary changes ahead.

These are exciting times on earth. We have the opportunity to courageously engage with difficulty, drawing on the immense resource of human creativity and inventiveness. In writing this book I've been struck by how I've been changed and expanded in engaging with the theme and meeting and talking to many women, and a few interested men, about their experience of child-bearing and being childfree by choice and by circumstance.

I feel much gratitude to the early authors of books I read on this theme, all based in the States, as it happens: Terri Casey, author of *Pride and Joy: The Lives and Passions of Women Without Children*, Mardy Ireland, author of *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood from Female Identity*, and Laurie Lisle *Without Child: Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness*.

More latterly, I have felt the support of Stephanie Mills, across the pond, and Polly Higgins, closer to home, both women who understand what I am trying to do in writing *Other Than Mother* and who kindly agreed to endorse the book ahead of its publication. Graduating in 1969 from Mills College, California, Stephanie Mills delivered a college graduation speech 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 Ehrlich's 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). In the past 40 or so years, Stephanie has been an ecological activist, a lecturer in bioregionalism, ecological restoration, community economics, and voluntary simplicity.

A former practising barrister in London, Polly Higgins now uses her legal skills for just one client - the earth (here in the UK she's sometimes dubbed 'the earth's lawyer...') She is the lead advocate for Ecocide law who legally advises as an independent expert lawyer and is recognised as the world's leading expert on Ecocide law. Polly advocates for a missing law: one that creates a legal duty of care by putting people and planet first, a law that prohibits mass damage and destruction to human and other-than-human life, and makes ecocide a crime. I was fortunate to meet Polly a few years ago at the 'Meeting at the Edge of the Wild' annual UK ecopsychology gathering and was struck by her skill, expertise, care, and friendliness. This was reinforced by her TEDX talks and book on 'I Dare You to be Great' (Higgins, 2014), encouraging

others to realise their potential and make a difference.

I have been gladdened to have these two women endorsing 'Other than Mother' not only because they understand and support the themes I am writing about, but because I have been deeply appreciative of their kindly, thoughtful words. I am but one player in continuing the legacy of keeping this theme alive and in mind, in an era in which there is scarce mainstream attention paid to the ecological and environmental consequences of having children. Taboos still surround this seemingly unmentionable theme, for a whole thicket of reasons. So I am not alone in this work, I am supported by other people who understand the value of this perspective and in turn, I provide support as a friend, therapist, trainer and supervisor.

Dialogue around *Other Than Mother* and this perspective is happening more and more; I have been asked to write articles and chapters in other books in response to the launch of this one. It is heartening to see that there at least some readiness to engage with this theme. This excites me! I long for the day - and hope it's in the not too far distant future - when we can have open, constructive conversations about our life choices, where a woman can be accepted as being childless or childfree by choice without the automatic assumption that she's somehow in reaction to her family of origin, other parents or children. Where women can think through the choice to procreate without feeling the pressure, even implicitly, that motherhood is the central defining factor in her womanhood. I am excited about the creative possibilities for those without child, in shaping their own lives, and, for those who are also concerned by ecological and environmental concerns, being ambassadors for the earth.

I hope we can actively engage with the theme of intentional childlessness as it arises in our therapy rooms. A while back I published an article in 'Therapy Today', a publication of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (Kamalmani, 2009). I was struck by the number of women who wrote to me thanking me for raising the theme in a therapy context, and telling stories of encountering problems in discussing chosen childlessness when in therapy. I hope we go one step further as body psychotherapists, and deepen our understanding of embodiment and childlessness. Having written about the need to reclaim our bodies and explore new terrain in our embodiment in 'Other than Mother', I was heartened to discover the paper by Helen Peterson and Kristina Engwall: 'Silent bodies: Childfree women's gendered and embodied experiences' (2013). In their words:

"To have a 'silent body' is to have a body that does not speak of baby longing" (Peterson and Engwall, 2013:385)

and

"The naturally childfree position and the 'silent body' have transformative power to contest the meanings attached to womanhood and could increase freedom for women to experience womanhood in a variety of ways" (Peterson and Engwall, 2013:387)

Maybe, then, it's not so long until we are more fully able, in the words of Mardy Ireland to, 'reconceive womanhood', allowing women - and men, and those who identify as gender fluid - to be without child and without stigma, being who they are as they live life.

Kamalamani is an Embodied-Relational therapist, Wild therapist, supervisor, facilitator, and writer, living and working in Bristol, England. She's been a practicing Buddhist since her early 20s and loves seeing how age-old teachings and practices are relevant to contemporary life. She works at the interface of body psychotherapy, ecopsychology and ecodharma, drawing upon her experiences of being a development worker in sub-Saharan Africa, a lecturer in International Development at the University of Bristol, her current meditation practice and being a child lost and found in nature. Her second book: 'Other than

Mother: Choosing Childlessness with Life in mind' was published by Earth Books on 29 April 2016. www.kamalamani.co.uk

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