

OTHER THAN MOTHER

CHOOSING CHILDLESSNESS WITH LIFE IN MIND

A private decision with global consequences



KAMALAMANI



Other Than Mother: Choosing Childlessness with Life in Mind

Written by Kamalanani

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn, PhD

“I hope to create a ‘pregnant pause’ for conscious decision-making with a glimpse of the local and global implications.” (p.18)

I envy Kamalanani’s clarity. Reading her newest publication, *Other Than Mother: Choosing Childlessness with Life in Mind, A Private Decision with Global Consequences*, it was clear that she’s thought about children, motherhood, parenting, and her role in all of this for most of her life. At age 14, she writes, the seed was planted—she couldn’t understand how billions of the world’s inhabitants lacked access to food, water, shelter, how people could damage our environment, and still “carried on having babies when there were all these orphans in the world” (p. 125). Like many teens, she made a pact that she’d have children by a specific age, for Kamalanani that time was to arrive before she turned at 30. But decisions made in youth were replaced with the ebb and flow of life happening in the moment. Drawn to the Bodhisattva path in her 20s, she realized that having children was a choice despite the fact that having children “remains such a culturally affirming, biologically gratifying and for many, very fulfilling role” (p. 141).

Her decision-making process is informed by her work as a body psychotherapist, a supervisor, a friend to women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s who are deciding about motherhood, an ecopsychologist, and a researcher. It is clearly influenced by her meditation practice and Buddhism and her curiosity about how to live life, as well as augmented by 17 years of research into this topic.

From this stance of choice, she continued her path of awakening through her Buddhist studies and meditation practice, by bringing the Dharma and its teachings not only into her life but into her outreach with her work, her community, and in a larger sense her global impact. The theme of choice filters through her thoughts as she considered pros and cons, highs and lows, and whys and why nots of baby-making/motherhood from a conscious and conscientious point of view. Her decision-making process was/is informed by her work as a body psychotherapist, a supervisor, a friend to women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s who are deciding about motherhood, an ecopsychologist, and a researcher. It is clearly influenced by her meditation practice and Buddhism and her curiosity about how to live life, as well as augmented by 17 years of research into this topic.

One of her goals in writing this book was to fill a gap in the literature—while there were academic books and case studies available, she said there weren't any user-friendly, go-to books that looked into the decision-making process of baby-making and its global implications. Kamalamani writes that she hopes to "throw light" on her "particular decision-making process rather than prescribe whether or not anyone should or shouldn't have children" (p. 18). Writing didn't flow easily at first, she shares; yet, the "backbone of the book flowered" when she "realized it needed to be about choosing life rather than life being over because of my childlessness" (p. 20). She explores what that choice means as well as the endless forms that life takes.

My path wasn't so clear, including even with my decision to review the book. It was one of those spontaneous instances that typically constitute many commitments in my life. Kamalamani, a regular SPT Magazine contributor, sent an email about her upcoming book launch, she'd birthed another book, her first, *Meditating with Character*, arrived in 2012. My response to support her writing, which I know is first person with a flair for presence and detail, leapt out of my fingers onto the keyboard—I'd love to review your book for the magazine. She sent a PDF (the book hadn't been published yet), and I placed it in line behind

several other PDFs in the 'to-be-reviewed' file. Fortunately for me the paperback copy arrived before I printed out the PDF.

With book in hand, I settled into a comfortable chair and cracked the spine. I thought I was prepared for any triggers that might arise as I read the book from a "childless" perspective. I wasn't. My route to age 56 with no offspring was less thought out, less considered, less conscious in terms of my role as a mother and it lacked any considerations of far reaching global impacts. To use terms from Kamalamani's book, I fit into two categories: "childless by circumstance" and "involuntary childlessness"—I miscarried twice and faced difficult decisions a third time. Divorced in my early 40s precluded time to fall in love again, develop a healthy relationship and then conceive. I was out of time. Kamalamani is clear that there's a "gray area between voluntary and involuntary childlessness pending on one's perception" and the matter of choice regarding child bearing might be charged for those who can't conceive. This book, she writes, is specifically about intentional childlessness. Thus far in life, she has chosen not to conceive—she has never tried to get pregnant (p. 16).

She offers the top reasons why she's not tried to have children:

1. Having children is not a priority
2. The planet does not need her to add to the population
3. She wants to explore nurturing self, other, world, rather than create mortal children
4. The myth of having it all is simply that, a myth
5. To minimize the dusty household life
6. Truth be told: she just did not want children enough (though she's clear about her love and devotion for her nieces and nephews)

While reading Kamalanani's story, I couldn't stop my past from rising, I had to face my own reflections. Yes, the content created an emotional charge—a mixture of feelings about my actual choices and my lack of conscious consideration. My first husband was absolute—he

refused to bring a child into a life condemned by his genetics and health problems and thus suffer as he suffered. I agreed having no “maternal clock ticking” at age 35 when we wed. Perhaps my not being a mother already was an unconscious choice early on. I never had that teenage draw to babies, never wanted to babysit, never felt any inclination to snuggle with other people’s children. The idea of children never crossed my mind in my twenties; I was single and far too busy teaching elementary school, which included an unofficial role of mother to scads of children. One day, while trail running with the man who became my second husband, he expressed his clear desire to have a family. I spontaneously replied, “of course I want children,” when in fact, I wasn’t sure whatsoever.

I clearly was not as open and honest with myself as Kamalamani has been and continues to be so. Her process landed me in a conundrum—how do I balance self-reflection and self-acceptance so that I can review my past and not walk away feeling guilty, ashamed, regretful or the reverse angry and justified? I wanted to land in a neutral place of being that resembled more the peace and equanimity she shares within her Buddhist practice and the ‘Karaniya Metta Sutta’ (she shares a Buddhist teaching about metta—translated as universal loving kindness, see side panel).

“The best decisions I have made,” she writes, “have been borne from a fine balance of weighing up pros and cons in a reasoned way, surrounded by a much messier process of listening to my hopes, fears, doubts, fantasies and dreams.”

The book is divided into three parts (42 quick-to-read chapters)

Part 1: The worldly winds—the title is taken from her Buddhist teachings. Kamalamani looks at various pulls in different directions when considering child rearing or not.

Part 2: A private decision with global consequences—her focus is on the decision-making process itself. As she writes, “Decision making is an art rather than a technique” (p. 118). This section includes in-depth personal reflections about her decision to remain childless—what feels right and what still creates some tension in her life.

Part 3: New horizons and baby-sized projects—here she focuses on life beyond deciding not to have children and living with the decision that results in new horizons. She invites readers to experience a process of absorbing and digesting process.

Metta

If you know your own good

And know where peace dwells

Then this is the task:

Lead a simple and a frugal life

Uncorrupted, capable and just;

Be mild, speak soft, eradicate conceit.

Keep appetites and senses calm.

Be discreet and unassuming;

Do not seek rewards.

Do not have to be ashamed

In the presence of the wise.

May everything that lives be well!

**Weak or strong, large or small, seen or un-
seen, here or elsewhere,**

Present or to come, in heights of depths,

May all be well.

Have that mind for all the world—

Get rid of lies and pride—

A mother’s mind for her baby

Her love, but now unbounded.

Secure this mind love love,

No enemies, no obstructions,

Wherever or however you may be!

Is it sublime, this,

It escapes birth and death,

Losing lust and delusion,

And living in the truth!

(Vipassi, date unknown)

Each chapter reflects a different aspect of, or theme about, intentional childlessness. Kamalamani weaves together personal experience with anecdotes, academic research, and conversations with friends, strangers, colleagues and acquaintances. Themes are revisited within these three parts such as perceptions of childlessness women, stereotyping, how non-parenthood can bring a feeling of otherness because of the prevailing pro-family and pro-natal agendas, and the impact of child-bearing in light of global issues. As well, many “themes are revisited throughout the entire book, particularly questions about non-parenthood and identity, social conformity and finding our place in the world, and reflecting how the decision-making process revisits different facets of our lives over time” (p.11). She discusses whether our choices are truly free or not considering the impact and influence of cultural pressures and family expectations.

There are suggestions and ideas at the end of most chapters in the form of ‘pregnant pauses’ and ‘reveries’—invitations to write, to consider, to bring the material inside and contemplate your place within it. The pace and place of these reflective inquires, the questions she poses allow readers to sit back and explore their own lives with curiosity—I hear the therapist as well as the personal explorer in her invitations.

She spends much time capturing the sense of ‘otherness’ that she experienced by not choosing to be a mother. She writes about childless women as being in the minority, that they’re seen as deviant, weird. Instead, she invites readers to celebrate their creativity as it’s channeled into other ways of living that don’t involve physical child bearing and rearing (p. 21). While I heard her experiences feeling the discomfort of otherness, I looked within my experience and just didn’t connect. Maybe, because I’m partly camped with those in the involuntary childlessness category, I haven’t been regarded as strange or deviant—when folks ask me if I have children, I simply reply that it wasn’t meant to be. I don’t share the details, just the outcome. I never felt any pressure to have children, didn’t grow up thinking it was expected. I have never felt anyone judge me because I don’t have kids (or perhaps I’m just oblivious to their smirks). However, people clearly don’t want to go it alone—the National Organization for Non-Parents was founded in California in 1972, and later became the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood (NAOP), to support people who opt to not procreate.

The statistical information regarding intentional childlessness was interesting as well as a look at who these people are in real life. Kamalamani dispels myths about women and

men who choose to remain childless. Overall, there’s no stereotype: they’re rich and poor, white, people of color and from different ethnic groups, jobless, career focused, disillusioned by the free babysitting the provided during their own childhood, men and women, lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, free of obvious ‘baby urges’ and other hormonal surges, out of time, having left it to too late, and so on.

While there’s much to consider when reviewing this book, to save some content for you to read, I’ll come to a place of closure. One aspect of her writing that stays with me, however, needs mentioning: Kamalamani is present on the page. I feel her energy, hear her voice, sense her feelings as she creates personal moments within all the information she provides. I enjoyed reading the book even though it stirred deeper emotions within, posed challenges to my normal way of being. Perhaps I was supposed to read this book at this time to help resolve my own frame of reference as a childless woman in her mid-50s with no chance whatsoever of child bearing. Maybe there’s some positive outtake learning to view life from a more conscientious perspective, to look at my ‘carbon footprint’ and how Earth’s future is in fact partly in my hands. Just as Kamalamani has birthed projects, creations, books, she’s also a steward of the planet and as such takes responsibility for her choices and how she nurtures our world—the people, plants, animals, air, ground, water and energy. Her love shines through.

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