

EVERY CHILD SHOULD HAVE A FATHER, BUT...

The other night my younger sister came over for a visit. She was upset with her studies, irked with her friends and just in an all-around bad mood. By the time she left a few hours later, she was almost happy. No miracles occurred. I simply fed her, talked with her and helped her out by typing a paper for a college class. Afterward, as I watched her get safely to the corner, I felt for a moment what it must be like to be a mother: a pure, sweet selflessness; a distillation of that ability to be connected with another human being in a limitless and mysterious way. It is a feeling I would like to have for more than just a moment.

There has been a lot of talk lately about single women choosing to be single mothers. Far too often they're depicted as cold-hearted and unnatural, shopping for biological fathers with the same meticulous and calculating logic that they would use to purchase a condominium. Actually, they are just ordinary women living in extraordinary times, and, although I'm not yet one of them, I can empathize.

I am a single woman—but not a desperate one. I am not placing classified ads, signing up at sperm banks or asking bright, uncommitted men to father my child. I am also not setting the goal of having a baby as one more accomplishment to add to my résumé. I deplore the phrase "baby hunger," and I'm sick of hearing about that "ticking biological clock." But I'm no stranger to the lonely conditions that urge a woman to have a baby even if there's no permanent mate in her immediate future.

What drives me is not simply a biological yearning to bear a child; it is much more subtle and complicated than that. For one thing, having a baby means beginning a new generation. It means continuity. Although my parents have never been the kind to hint around about grandchildren, I can think of no better tribute to them than giving them some. They would argue with me on this, asserting their pride in whatever I do. But I can't help thinking that the cycle is not complete until I can introduce them to a child of their child. And I can think of no better comfort when they are gone than to know that something of them lives on, not only in me but in my children.

So why not *get married* and have a family? First of all, there is a shortage of eligible men. According to a recent study that takes into account a man's tendency to marry a woman younger than he is, for every 100 white women ages 25 to 29 there are 77 eligible men; for every 100 between 30 and 34 there are 62 available men—and the figures are even gloomier for black women. Subtract men who are undecided or "not ready to make a commitment," and you've diminished the pool even further.

So why weren't we thinking of this back in our early 20s, when the male-female ratio was more to our advantage? For one thing, many of us grew up during a time when our mothers were beginning to regret that they had no career; thus, we were determined to have a career *before* having a family.

More important, the women now choosing single motherhood came of age when the Pill made it easier to have sex without reproduction—and sperm banks and other developments made it possible to have reproduction without sex.

There is a kind of ironic progression in all this: from wanting lovers without babies to wanting babies without husbands. The traditional patterns of romance, love, marriage and family have blurred more for some women than for others, but all women—even those to whom these values are still crystal-clear—must realize that these topsy-turvy times have taken their toll. For most women who are considering it, single motherhood is not their first choice, but it's not their last one, either. They would *prefer* a husband in their family, but they'd rather have a family without one than no family at all.

The primary argument against planned single motherhood seems to be the inevitable damage it inflicts on children. Of course, every baby's birthright should be two loving parents. But increasing numbers of parents who are single through death or divorce do a perfectly competent job of raising their children. And who's to say that single mothers will *remain* single?

Women who've chosen to have a baby without marrying the child's father (or, in some cases, even knowing him) admit the built-in difficulties, but they wouldn't change their minds for anything. "I have always considered my son a gift," writes one single mother. "He is a child who is truly wanted—twenty-four-hours-a-day responsibility and all." Single mothers have as much to teach their children as married mothers and as much love to share—maybe more. Yet their motives are often labeled selfish and single-minded—never mind all the babies brought into the world to snag husbands, "save" faltering marriages or produce heirs.

I doubt that we'll ever return to the days when Mom and Dad, forever married, lived in comfortable suburban bliss with 2.3 children. Now there are all sorts of knobby family trees—single parents, extended families of "yours, mine and ours" and every combination in between. There are also women, their babies yet unborn, who will decide to raise children on their own. The life they choose is not easy—but they are rich in what matters most: an abiding faith in the power of their own love. ■

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