

CHILDLESS BY CHOICE

COUPLES WHO SIDESTEP THE PARENT TRAP

'SO," SAYS JERI SEDLAR WITH A MISCHIEVOUS SMILE, "you want to hear how we barbecue children on the weekends." Children, barbecued or otherwise, have never been part of the plan for Sedlar and her husband, Rick Miners. An attractive couple in their forties, still mad about each other after ten years of marriage, they have solid careers in Manhattan (she heads her own marketing company; he's the president of a human-resources consulting firm) and diverse interests that include theater and skeet-shooting. But Sedlar's quip anticipates the sort of comment that couples without children get all the time. When they let it be known that they are childless by choice, they are accustomed to reactions ranging from incredulity to outright reprobation.

The mandate to have children comes not just from proselytizing friends and meddlesome in-laws but from the wider worlds of church and state: The biblical injunction to "be fruitful and multiply" has a secular parallel in the income-tax deduction for

**BY AIMEE
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"I'VE BEEN ACCUSED OF NOT KNOWING WHAT I'M MISSING," SAYS ROSE-MARIE WHITELAW (WITH HUSBAND RUSSELL PIEKARSKI). "I'VE FELT THE PRESSURE FROM PEOPLE QUESTIONING MY SANITY OR MY HUMANITY."

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROBIN HOLLAND



RICK MINERS AND JERI SEDLAR AT HOME WITH JENNIFER.

dependents. Those who dare to be different are variously thought of as selfish, squeamish, or sad. It is often assumed that they are child-haters, that they don't wish to replicate their own miserable childhoods, or that they pine endlessly after the children they do not (read: cannot) have. "We were visiting somebody for a weekend and strolling along the beach," recalls Sedlar, "and this woman said to me, 'Would you ever think of adopting?' I said, 'Why would I adopt? I just don't want children.' And she looked at me like, 'Ohhhhh. . . .'"

IN THIS CULTURE, AS DAN QUAYLE reminded Murphy Brown, a family means Mother, Father, and Junior, and the cultural imperative to meet that standard is strong. The *National Directory of Magazines* now lists 215 titles like *Parenting*, *First Year of Life*, and *Mothering*. Modern television fairly resonates with procreation, from station promos ("At Lifetime, your family matters, and nothing matters as much as the children") to the seemingly requisite pregnancy of every *Today*-show anchor to

the fecundity of Kathie Lee Gifford, who has made a lucrative career out of describing every rattle, wheeze, and word of her offspring, almost from the moment of conception.

Couples who are childless by choice may seem, to the propagating majority, as if they have a limb missing, and many prefer a less stigmatic label. "I always thought that *childless* sounded as if you were deprived of something, like *penniless* or *homeless*," says one man. "*Child-free* is more like 'The dog is free of fleas.'" And, perhaps enlisting support for what they consider a vital and viable choice, one couple asserts, "Every child deserves a childless aunt and uncle."

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ON A SULTRY SUMMER day in the countryside, where Rose-Marie Whitelaw and Russell Piekarski had gone to escape their Upper West Side apartment and visit friends, the languorous mood was broken by a chant from the children of the house: "Rose-Marie got fi-xed, Rose-Marie got fi-xed." This is untrue. At 34, Whitelaw is, as far as she knows, very fertile, and her 33-year-old husband is equally fit. But after seven years of marriage, the two remain strong in their conviction not to reproduce, a decision each made years ago, independently. "I've always been sort of terrified that one of us was going to change," says Piekarski, a production manager for Colgate-Palmolive. "As we hit a certain age, I realize that's less likely to happen."

Piekarski's "parents" were really his grandparents—he never met his birth father, and his mother was so young and unable to cope that she turned over the rearing of her

two sons to her own parents. But Piekarski doesn't feel that his unusual upbringing turned him against being a parent. "I love kids," he asserts. "I don't get moist and gushy about babies, but kids are great." One dissuasion is the example of friends who have children. "I've looked at them and said I don't want that lifestyle myself."

Whitelaw describes her childhood in Scotland and Africa as magical. "I come from a happy family," she says, "and in my early twenties I was kind of romantic about falling in love and 'having his children.' But when I came over here, I au-paired for a couple of years and felt the tremendous responsibility of the demands children make on you, even when you're very fond of them. I realized how difficult it was for a couple to have three occupations: They both have to work and then come home and give to their children."

Friends keep pushing procreation all the same. "I've been accused of not knowing what I'm missing," says Whitelaw. "I've felt the pressure from people questioning my sanity or my humanity." Piekarski has contemplated a ruse. "I've con-

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sidered lying and saying one of us can't," he admits, "but it seems a bit manipulative, and then people would pity us."

Whitelaw is now working on a project called the Community, creating a hub for nonprofit groups trying to improve conditions in the East Village. "I feel like we won't have children, but other people will," she says. "I want to work toward making a better environment for them to grow up in so they really have a childhood."

Women like Whitelaw are no longer such an anomaly. According to the National Survey of Family Growth, conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics in 1988, about 20 percent of women who had no children didn't expect to have any. (That figure had risen from 17.5 percent in 1982.) It's a statistic that does not surprise Leslie Lafayette, a writer and editor from Roseville, California, who last year founded the ChildFree Network. "I think it's a well-kept secret in this country that you can have a very fulfilling and happy life without having children," she says. "There are a lot of ways you can make an impact and a contribution. Only one of those ways is by having a healthy child."

Lafayette believes many people confuse the so-called maternal instinct with societal exigency to procreate. "There were ten years when I wrestled with whether or not to have a child," she says. "I felt left out of the loop, that I must be missing something awesome." After a miscarriage, Lafayette twice made arrangements to adopt and twice canceled the plans, disheartened by talking to parents who confessed that if they had it to do over, they might think twice about having children.

But she has no quarrel with those who insist that all the freedom of nonparenthood doesn't make up for one wet kiss or piano recital. "What I hope to do with the ChildFree Network is take a very pro-child and pro-parent stance, saying that greater consideration about the choice to be a parent would result in a better quality of parenting, and maybe a little less quantity. That's the message: There is an alternative."

Madelyn Berensmann, 51, never knew about alternatives. "Growing up in a rather strict Irish Catholic family, I learned from the very beginning that the purpose of marriage was to have children," she says. "I didn't have

any relatives who didn't have children. There wasn't even a maiden aunt who was some kind of role model or curiosity. By training, I'm a social worker, so I really felt I could contribute more by parenting or nurturing in many other ways. But that was not acceptable, not at all."

Bill Berensmann, 56, didn't escape the breeding message, either. "When I was growing up, I can recall the men I knew saying, 'Ya got another one in the oven?'—that kind of thing. Proving your manhood was having five, six, seven, eight kids, preferably boys. But our lives were always very full and rich, and we traveled a tremendous amount. There was no doubt in my mind that if we had a couple of kids, it was all going to end, that this freedom we'd come to know would be severely restricted."

Neither Berensmann equates living as you please with selfishness. "I've often thought quite the opposite," says Madelyn, "that having your own children when there were a lot of children out there who really needed to be cared for might be quite selfish and egotistical. Most of our friends and family think we have missed a very important experience. Maybe that's true, but we've never felt incomplete." And Bill observes wryly, "Almost all of our married friends with kids have divorced, and almost all of our friends who are childless have stayed together."

Several years ago, the Berensmanns bought a home in Millbrook, New York—which they converted to a bed-and-breakfast called A Cat in Your Lap—but they commute to the city on the days Bill teaches architecture at New York City Technical College. Madelyn leads youth groups for the Rotary and is in her third year in a Big Sister program. Bill coaches baseball and

takes his students to Europe annually. "We've had a lot of kids in our lives," affirms Bill. "We're both fond of kids. But it's rather nice, at the end of the day or the week or the year, to say, 'See ya.'"

MARGOT BREIER ONCE HAD a fantasy of adopting twelve children, like Josephine Baker—"a child from every country, a United Nations of children. I guess I grew up. You can't just have children, collect them like teacups. You have to train them and prepare them for the world. Somehow I've always been trying to train and prepare myself."

Part of that energy went toward a career as a theatrical director (her most recent effort was this summer's Off Broadway production of *The Brooklyn Trojan Women*). Breier's husband, David Liu, is the Emmy-winning producer of *Big Bird in China*. Married for almost three years but together for more than ten, both were committed to vocations they deemed too unstable for family life, and both were unwilling to turn children over to another caregiver. "Look at this world," says Liu. "To bring somebody into it, you have to be absolutely vigilant. Otherwise, don't do it."

The couple, who are in their early forties and live in NoHo, enjoy children (one of Liu's great thrills was receiving his Emmy from Kukla, Fran, and Ollie) and various kinds of surrogate parenting. "We have those maternal and paternal urges to raise, care for, help," explains Breier. "Being a director is sort of like being a mother. You have to nurture, you have to discipline, you have to give people space."

But for years, Breier had nightmares about childbirth itself, perhaps because her own was so traumatic (her mother's water broke in a taxi, and a nurse kept pushing the baby back). "The panic and desperation to have children by any means is something I really cannot understand," she says. "It's like wanting to climb mountains: Emotionally, it makes no sense to me." But she thinks all comparisons between parents and non-parents are odious, each with undeniable advantages and sacrifices. "In some ways it's easier because we're freer," she concedes, "but people who have children get such joy and fulfillment out of

DAVID LIU AND MARGOT BREIER.



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raising a child. Our life is not better—it's different."

GOING TO EXTREMES FOR CONCEPTION, with basal-temperature thermometers and turkey basters by the bedside, is a common parable of modern times, and if the dream of having a biological child is quashed, the obvious next step for many couples is adoption. But in *Sweet Grapes*, Jean and Michael Carter argue that choosing to live happily without offspring is just as "successful" a resolution to the crisis of infertility as pregnancy or adoption.

Ironically, Jean is an obstetrician/gynecologist whose every working day meant confronting her own infertility while treating women who were joyfully expecting, or counseling those with unwanted pregnancies. "One day she came home in tears again," says Michael, who is an English professor, "and we realized that she had to get a new job or a new attitude."

The turning point came at a seminar called "From Childless to Childfree" sponsored by Resolve, a national organization for infertile couples. "That got us thinking, and a few years later we decided we wanted to be child-free," says Jean, "but at the time, we didn't have a real idea about what that meant." What it meant, they discovered, was replacing old hopes and plans with new ones: The room intended as a nursery became a music room. The dolls they'd been saving for daughters were given to nieces, and the money set aside for a college fund became their opportunity to travel. And, about a year after their decision to be child-free, Jean came home at the beginning of what promised to be a romantic weekend with a package of contraceptive sponges—an assertion of a final bit of control over their reproductive lives, and an acknowledgment that Mother Nature's sense of humor is strange enough that she'd wait for Jean's fortieth birthday to grant the wish they had stopped making. Now in their early forties, the Carters do not have any regrets or ambivalence about the past few years or about what lies ahead. "I read some studies showing that happiness in old age, however sociologists measure that, has more to do with how outgoing and friend-making people are in their active years than with how many kids they have," says Jean. "There are many examples of parents of five who sit alone in the nursing home."

As an OB/GYN, Jean hears from patients who have three children and are made to feel that's too many, or those who have one

and are made to feel that an only child will be a misfit. "There's not much you can do to be considered normal and above reproach to everybody," she says. "But one of my desires is that we should all learn to accept one another's reproductive choices. I would be the last person to act like having children wouldn't be an amazing experience, but that does not mean that a life without them has to be a wasteland."

IN RECENT SURVEYS BY SOCIOLOGISTS Walter Gove, of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, and Debra Umberson, of the University of Texas in Austin, couples raising children have higher levels of depression and agitation and lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction than those without children. "There have been many, many studies in the past fifteen or twenty years showing that having young kids in the home is detrimental to well-being," confirms Umberson. "There's a negative effect on mental health and on marriages when people have kids. But most people don't think about that stuff when they decide to do it. The only area in which people who had kids scored better was in what we called 'meaningfulness and sense of purpose'—having kids gives them a reason for living."

That often inchoate need is what motivates many couples to reproduce, claims Manhattan psychologist Susan Bram. "Obviously, people are looking for meaning and purpose in life," she says. "They're looking for a tie to the future. There are people who have actually taken the time to find out that they like children, that child-rearing is creative and fun and exciting. For many people, it's a chance to redo aspects of their own lives, to try and remake a family. Those are all important and compelling reasons." But Bram, who has studied the dour-sounding demographic group labeled the "voluntarily childless," confirms an opinion expressed by many non-parents: that they have given more thought to the idea of *not* having children than most people give to having them. And she thinks the social emphasis on having children now is reminiscent of the fifties. "I call it the parenthood imperative," she says. "There's pressure to have children, but there isn't a lot of help after the conception and the pregnancy. So each couple—or, in many cases, mother—has to become the director of a large enterprise, finding baby-sitters, caretakers, housekeepers. It's very complicated. I don't think that when people have the impulse to have a child they're considering taking on a whole project. And there isn't

as much opportunity to enjoy family life as people deserve."

This is no surprise to Jeri Sedlar and Rick Miners. "You can't imagine how many people have said, 'You guys look so happy—it must be because you don't have kids,'" reports Sedlar.

When the two met, they were working at Avon Products and Miners was engaged to a woman who wanted a child and a dog and a house with a white picket fence. "And she deserved it all," he says. "But it wasn't me. So that sort of went south, and I took up with Jeri. With Jeri, it wasn't an issue." Sedlar, who grew up as the eldest of four in what she describes as an *Ozzie and Harriet* kind of family in Michigan, spent a lot of energy parenting her own siblings. "I knew Rick really wasn't high on kids. There could be a baby in the room for hours and he'd never go look at it. The minute I see it, I'm holding that baby. I love them. I think they're adorable and wonderful. But I've never wanted to be somebody's mom. I want to be more of an Auntie Mame."

Besides running her own marketing company, Sedlar works for the Women's Campaign Fund and Brick Church and serves on the executive board of the YWCA. "When people read my bio, one of the first questions is 'Do you have children?' I guess maybe once a year I wonder if we should have a baby, but then, less than 24 hours later. . . ."

"It's five minutes later," teases Miners. "We just celebrated our tenth anniversary by renewing our vows, and we've never felt that we missed anything. We have a relationship that's very strong, and I'm not so sure I'd want to share Jeri with somebody. I love the cat, but. . . ."

ANN LANDERS ONCE ASKED her readers, if you had it to do over again, would you have children? The responses were "staggering and disturbing": 70 percent said no. It's a statistic that Clifford Landers (no relation to the columnist) quotes when discussing why he and his wife, Vasda, do not have children. "It seems," he says, "at least from a casual inspection, that the heartbreak often outweighs the joy for parents. And I am convinced that having children is truly a genetic lottery."

The Landerses, both professors (she at Columbia, he at Jersey City State College) in their mid-fifties, married 28 years ago after a six-week courtship in Rio de Janeiro. "We never really decided not to have

children—we simply never decided to have children,” says Clifford, “and to me that’s a real distinction, not just semantics. It wasn’t a financial decision, and it wasn’t about career. It was a question of the psychological space in which we found ourselves—that is to say, did we feel that we needed a child to enhance our lives, that there was something in our marriage that would be made better by having children? Although we never sat down and did a cost-benefit analysis, we tacitly decided there wasn’t.”

Landers has given some thought to retirement, a time when children theoretically come back to be parents for their parents. “The idea of having children to look after you in your old age is simply a chimera,” he asserts. “I happen to have grown up in a three-generation home: My maternal grandmother lived with us and made me aware that there was a cycle to life, that old people could still have useful lives with lots of love to give. Now we’ve discarded that. We want to send the old folks to a condominium in South Florida.”

Suburban living in Montclair, New Jersey, occasionally makes Landers feel like an alien. “If you’re without children, you can be pretty isolated there,” he says. But he identifies a connection between his own choice of teaching and the natural desire to pass along knowledge to children. “I won’t get maudlin and say the students in each graduating class are like my children. Somebody else actually raised them, but I can look back on some people over the years and feel I made a difference, and that’s very fulfilling.”

DR. BRAM EXPRESSES THE HOPE for a rapprochement between parents and non-parents, through which those who choose not to have children are no longer typecast as narcissistic. “It certainly would be good to dispel the stereotype of selfishness,” she says. “In a culture like New York City, in fact, parents could reduce some of their strain if they included non-parents in their lives, and non-parents could feel less cut off from family life.”

That sounds good to Pam Meyer and John Haney, who recently returned from a Catskills vacation *en famille* with some friends and their little girl. Meyer and

Haney met a dozen years ago when the British pop band the Monochrome Set came through New York on tour and the musicians, one of whom was John Haney, were put up by friends of their American manager, one of whom was Pam Meyer. “He slept on the couch the first night,” says Meyer. “The rest is history.” Married for eleven years, they now operate a costume-jewelry company called Alchemy—she’s the creative side, he’s the business. Phones and faxes in the couple’s Brooklyn loft ring at rude hours with calls and letters from stores in California and Asia. “The company is my baby,” says Meyer. “I brought it from a \$15 start-up to quite a huge customer base. My baby has turned into a monster.”

There are two cats in the loft, named Girlie and Homer, and, says Meyer, “they’re our babies, too. We’re really obnoxious with them. We coo and talk baby talk.” But there are no babies who require Pablum and powder. “We kind of made the decision from the start that children weren’t for us,” says Meyer. “My parents did not have a happy marriage, and I feel privileged to have such a great friend in John. I don’t want to screw that up.”

Haney’s proscription against children has more global origins. “I guess I’ve long been appalled by the condition of the world and couldn’t see bringing a child into it,” he says. “I saw some of my friends, who I didn’t think would make particularly suit-

able parents, end up in disastrous situations. It made me kind of skeptical.”

“People say, ‘But you’d be such wonderful parents,’” adds Meyer, “and I think we probably would be. We made the decision not to have kids because we do take it seriously. One of the arguments we get is ‘Your child could be the one that changes the world.’ It seems a little vain to me to think a kid with my genes is going to drink apple juice and be extraordinary.”

Now that Meyer is 38 and Haney is 39, the pressure from friends is abating, although “we’re probably on a few FBI lists,” jokes Haney. “We do like children. One little boy I know is into books, so I take great pains over his birthday and Christmas gifts. My best friend’s daughter is a promising musician, so she gets a lot of somewhat arcane music. Nobody was giving *me* Miles Davis albums when I was 12.”

Ever since moving to Boerum Hill—with the antiques shops of Atlantic Avenue in one direction, the Middle Eastern groceries in the other—Meyer and Haney have marveled at discovering a congenial New York neighborhood, and, says Meyer, “I find myself telling friends with children that they should consider Brooklyn. But it doesn’t make us want to have them. I’m doing work that I enjoy, I have a circle of friends that are like family to me, and I have my wonderful husband. If that’s unfulfillment, I’ll take it.”



MADelyn AND BILL BERENSMANN AT THEIR MILLBROOK BED-AND-BREAKFAST.