

Childless and Content

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ARTICLES



Since she was a young girl, Melanie had always imagined she'd be a mother. Once married, she had begun planning what her nursery would look like. She had had the whole thing designed in her mind. She could see the crib, imagine the stuffed animals and brightly colored toys lined up, the sound of children's laughter that would fill the room.

It only slowly dawned on her that she would never have a baby. First there were months and then years of trying, visits to doctors, fertility tests and tears on her pillow at night.

Now, the room she had dreamed of for a nursery has been turned over to projects, but the scrapbooks she hoped to make aren't going to be filled with the family pictures. There aren't albums stuffed with mementos from children or pictures of babies with merry eyes.

Empty rooms, empty scrapbooks, empty dreams. Painfully, Melanie realized she would have to start over to remake the vision of what her life would be.

As the years passed, she grew accustomed to people asking

when she was going to start her family. She even grew accustomed to it when people stopped asking as she passed the childbearing years.

She learned to prefer the company of men, because whenever she found herself in a group of women it was only a matter of time before they started talking about their children. How does Charlie like his teacher? they'd ask each other. Melanie had nothing to contribute to the conversation. She had nothing in common with these women, who were supposed to be her sisters in the gospel.

Homemaking meetings, and then enrichment meetings, held little to offer her. She once went to a homemaking meeting where the whole theme was SuperMom. Everyone made a shirt with a SuperMom decal on it. When she said she couldn't make the shirt because she wasn't a mother, the teachers tried to talk her into a shirt that said Future SuperMom. Instead she made a shirt that said SuperMe.

Sometimes it seemed bishops didn't know what to do with her. Should they put her in Primary or Young Women, or were those the worst possible callings for a childless woman? As she grew older - and the bishops started getting younger - the nervousness of the bishops often manifested itself as fear. She got so tired of having bishops who were afraid of her. She wasn't contagious, and it was unfair to be treated as though people could catch whatever it was she had.

Unfairness was at the root of it, of course. When she went grocery shopping and parked her virtuous grocery cart, all full of fruits and vegetables and healthy foods, behind a mother whose cart was full of bagged cookies and chips and sugary cereals, the thoughts came. Why did God let her be a mother, rather than me? I would have done such a better job! Does he love her more? What have I done wrong?

Mother's Day was the worst day of the year, of course. For years she folded her hands under her armpits when the flowers were being passed around. She wasn't a mother, and she wasn't going to take one. Then she realized she was only upsetting people who were trying to be kind to her. She stopped going to church on Mother's Day, so she wouldn't have to hurt anyone who was only trying to make her feel better. But staying home was just as hard. As hard as she looked, there was nobody there to throw a pair of chubby arms

around her neck and say, "You're the best mommy in the world!"

As years went by, she was stunned to see that some mothers envied her. One of them who came to her house wouldn't stop raving about the furniture. Finally Melanie said, "Would you trade your four children for my furniture?" Realizing that Melanie was not the one who should be envied, the woman quickly departed.

An Epidemic of Barrenness

Melanie's situation is one that is all too common in the Church. There seems to be an epidemic of barrenness, and a growing army of women in the Church who are denied the joys of motherhood. Many childless women adopt, but many more don't feel inspired to do so. These are the ones who find themselves adrift in the community of Saints. Church members don't know where to put a childless woman - and often she doesn't have a clue, herself.

I know these things, because I'm one of the childless. My story may not be typical, but that may be the point. Maybe there isn't a typical situation as far as childlessness is concerned. Childless people are as different as mothers are different, and one size definitely doesn't fit all.

I didn't plan on being childless. In fact, I didn't plan on any of the things that have happened to me in this life. I saw my parents and thought my life would be a mirror of theirs. I would be get married to someone I'd grow to hate, I'd be poor, I'd have three children, and I would be bitterly unhappy.

To my surprise and gratitude, none of those things came to pass. I have a terrific marriage; we aren't poor, and I am extremely happy. I am also childless.

Oddly, I was prepared for childlessness. When I joined the Church as a junior at Brigham Young University, the first thing I did was run out to get a patriarchal blessing. When I returned home, my roommates gathered around me. "What did it say?" they asked.

I shrugged. "It said I was never going to have children."

My roommates were quick to reassure me that patriarchal

blessings just don't say things like that. "Mine did," I insisted. So we waited until the printed copy of my blessing arrived in the mail. Sure enough, there was nothing promising children in my patriarchal blessing. But there was nothing that said I wouldn't have them, either. Despite what my patriarchal blessing did or didn't say, I knew from the time the patriarch's hands were on my head that I would never have children.

Insults and Incompetence

Even though I knew I would be childless, part of me expected to have children anyway. I bought baby clothes, years before I was ever married. I picked out names. I was ready for motherhood. But motherhood never came. Clark and I had the requisite fertility tests. We were poked and prodded - and insulted. ("It's your fault," said one doctor. "Your husband is a perfect specimen of manhood.")

I was subjected to doctors who were too lazy and too insensitive to treat anybody, much less childless women. One of them kept trying to prescribe antidepressants, not because I was depressed, but because his wife, who was also childless, was depressed. When I humored him and took the antidepressants for a short while, he kept calling me every month with the news that I was pregnant. I was the one who finally read in the tiny letters of the clinical pharmacology sheet that the antidepressant he'd put me on was notorious for causing false positives for pregnancy tests. Why did I have to tell the doctor that?

We thought about adopting, but when a wonderful child was offered to us we got a stupor of thought that told us that adoption wasn't for us. For reasons that were - and are - unknown to us, we were not destined to be parents in this life.

Although the opportunity of motherhood was taken away from me, I was given a great gift at the same time. That gift was that it never occurred to be devastated about being childless. My mantra became the words of the Apostle Paul, who said, "For I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Philippians 4:11).

I can't pretend I have always followed that counsel. When I gained 140 pounds in six months and doctors never figured out why, I grieved. More than twenty years later, I have never

come to terms with that. When I was treated unfairly or cheated by people whom I had trusted, I got angry. When life has dealt me bitter blows, I have had to work hard not to absorb that bitterness.

But at least as far as childlessness is concerned, I was able to accept the situation I was given. I knew this was the Lord's will for me, and that was enough that I never shed a single tear over my childless state. I don't know why more childless women haven't been given that gift, but apparently it was something I needed.

Compensations

As I've lived through twenty-eight years of childless marriage, I have learned that the old saying is true that windows are opened whenever doors are closed. There are compensations for every deprivation we face - even childlessness. And although having children is a wonderful blessing, and even a commandment for those who can have them, we have to rejoice where we are with the blessings we have, rather than wasting our lives yearning for blessings we haven't been given.

Here are some blessings of being married and childless. If you find yourself married and childless, these are some consolations:

- **Being childless means there are only two people in the household.** This may sound like a curse rather than a blessing, but there are advantages here. The biggest one is that if there are only two of you, you can't ignore things that shouldn't be ignored. When two partners in a marriage start drifting apart, it is easier for the husband and the wife to focus on the children, rather than on fixing their marriage - or even recognizing that the problems exist. It is only when the last child has left the nest that the wife turns to her friends and says, "We don't have anything to talk about anymore."

If there are only two of you in the house, you know there are problems as soon as the problems arise. Because you diagnose the cancer early, it is easy to cut it out without a fatality. And even if there aren't problems, the fact that it's just the two of you against the world makes you rely on one another more than other couples are likely to do. People who have only each other to lean on are far more likely to work

hard on the relationship.

· **Being childless gives you the luxury of getting sick.** I catch everything. I have been diagnosed with more fatal diseases than many people have ever heard of. My parents, who were chain-smokers, bequeathed a bad set of lungs to me. Even on a good day, I don't have the energy to raise children. And on a day when I have the flu and can't get out of bed, I'm exceedingly grateful that I don't have to get out of bed even though I can't.

The reverse of this is that childless people do not have children to bring home everything that's going around the school. We've never had to deal with lice, and whatever bug "everybody" has is more likely to pass over our house. If your immune system isn't all that great to begin with, it's good to be able to keep your house at least marginally safe from contagion.

· **Being childless allows you more freedom - freedom of travel, freedom to relocate, freedom to take advantage of opportunities that are denied to people with children.** The freedom of not having children at home to worry about is a very real compensation for childlessness. Think about it. We can travel when hotel rates are cheaper, and when cruise ships are so empty that the cruise lines almost pay us to travel. If one of us is sent on a sudden business trip, the other one can go and make a second honeymoon (or a twentieth, or a fiftieth) out of it. We were able to move across the country when the opportunity presented itself, without having to worry about a traumatized thirteen-year-old who didn't want to leave her friends. We have spent the past ten years as temple ordinance workers - a calling that is denied to mothers who still have children at home.

· **Being childless means that you get to determine how you spend your time.** We have seen families leave the Church because the children's soccer schedule took over their lives. We don't have soccer practice - or piano lessons, or band practice, or any of the other opportunities for children that completely commandeer the life of whoever chauffeurs the children around. Instead of taking children to their extracurricular lessons, we were able to discover and develop our own talents by taking cooking classes and stained glass or drawing lessons of our own. We can also watch what

television shows we want to watch, spend years of our lives not going to Disney movies (or the amusement parks, for that matter!), and invite friends over to the house to visit.

For us, Family Home Evening consists of dinner out as a couple on Monday nights. Ward members refer to it as our "Family Home Eating," but that weekly date gives us time to spend making our two-person family stronger.

- **Being childless makes for a cleaner house, and nicer furniture to put in it.** Granted, people who would forego having children just for the sake of nicer furniture have their priorities skewed. But if you can't have children anyway, it's a comfort to know that you don't have to work as hard to keep the house clean. If your house is a mess, there's nobody to blame it on but yourself.

- **Being childless gives you the luxury of being able to make mistakes without stigmatizing a child for life.** If you're a parent, every word you say and every gesture you make has the potential of devastating a child.

I remember one day in a Girl Scout meeting a group of us were singing. I was trying to harmonize like a friend who was singing alto, but I apparently really messed it up. My mother, the Girl Scout leader, told me I sounded horrible. That was the last time I ever sang in a group where I thought anyone could ever hear me.

My mother wasn't a bad person, and she was an excellent mother. She made one careless remark, and it traumatized me for life. My tongue has three left feet. I am constantly saying things I regret. Thank goodness I don't have children, or they would have been twitching wrecks by the time they were three.

- **Being childless spares you a whole lot of heartache.** In our twenty-eight years of marriage, we've seen virtually every tragedy that can befall a parent. We've had friends whose children had children out of wedlock - and then went on to keep the children and compound the pain for everyone in the family. We've had friends whose children have died tragically (and when isn't it tragic when a child dies?), and friends whose children have made such terrible decisions that death would have been a blessing. We have had friends whose children committed murder, and we have even had friends

whose children were murdered.

We have never had to stay up at night, praying for a child who was taking drugs or using alcohol or who had left the Church. We have never had the agony of certain knowledge that our daughter was marrying someone who would give her a life of sorrow. We have never had to send a son off to war.

It's important to know that envy goes in both directions. Even as I have envied people who have a houseful of children around them, other people have envied me because I can travel, because our childlessness has allowed us to afford a nicer house, or because - well, they don't need a reason. It's always easier to see someone whose life is different, and to wish you had that other person's life. There are women who tell me they always thought they were destined for more than washing diapers, and reminding them of the sacred role of motherhood is no more helpful for them than it is for me.

Different Ways of Growing Up

I've heard people say you can't be an adult until you've had children, and I strongly disagree with that. There is more than one way to learn the lessons you need to learn in life, and to reach spiritual maturity. Parenthood is certainly a fast track to maturity, but it isn't the only one. Probably the most difficult challenge of being a childless Church member is handling the sincere but thoughtless comments of other members, delivered over the pulpit or in casual conversation.

Being a parent takes a lot of sacrifice. It also takes a lot of courage. I admire people who have children, and my admiration is unbounded for people who have large families and raise those families well.

But it also takes courage to be childless. It takes courage to endure the questions and the ridicule. It takes courage to endure the things that are said about you - both behind your back and to your face. It takes courage to cheerfully ignore the people who tell you that you're childless because you're "not relaxing," and that if you only adopt a child you'll soon have children of your own. It takes even more courage to turn the other cheek when people tell you right to your face that if you were a righteous person the Lord would give you children - and then demand that you tell them about your unrepented sins.

It takes courage for the women who go out and pursue a career after all attempts at childbearing have failed - only to be treated like second-class citizens by other members of the Church who are all too happy to assume they chose a career over children out of selfishness.

It takes courage to stand up on Mother's Day and take the flower so as not to hurt the feelings of anyone else. It takes courage to accept a calling as a nursery leader or a Primary teacher, even though none of those children can ever be yours. It takes courage to stay in the room when every ward conference five years in a row is about how to be a better parent, as though there were no other subject we could focus on than parenthood. It takes courage not to take offense when a well-meaning Relief Society teacher always follows the word "mothers" with "and those of you in the room who are not mothers" - even though a quick survey of the room shows that you're the only non-mother present.

We don't write our own scripts in this life, as much as we may want to. We are poor when we want to be affluent (or at least able to pay our bills!). We are ugly when we want to be beautiful (or at least not-ugly). We are single when we want to be married. And yes, we are childless when we have been told that the most important thing we can do is to be good parents.

All of us - those with children and those without - are God's children. He loves us all. We each get the trials in life we need. Our trials may be a major burden for us, but there are always blessings that compensate. I am convinced that those of us who live righteous lives will not lose any of the blessings of life. Those blessings may be delayed, but they will not be kept from us. If we rejoice in the things we've been given rather than grieve over the blessings we've been temporarily denied, we may one day be able to say with Paul that we have learned, in whatsoever state we find ourselves, therein to be content.