Choosing to be childfree

By Kathryn Kingsbury

Do you remember the playground taunt from childhood that begins with the names of a boy and a girl and continues “sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g, first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage”?

From early childhood, we learn that life unfolds in a certain progression. We grow up, we find a life partner, we have children. These days, society gives more allowances for altering this chronology — maybe the baby comes first, or the partners change over time, or we decide to have the baby without a partner. But no baby at all?

“There’s a tremendous amount of pressure for people to have children whether or not they want to,” says Richard Levine, a clinical psychologist with the Independent Psychology Alliance in Madison. He and his partner and wife, psychologist Sandra Eugster, lead groups for people struggling with the decision of whether to become parents. Levine and Eugster have personal experience with this issue: They deliberated for two years before deciding to have a child together. “It’s one of the most important decisions a person makes in his or her life, but often [people become parents] without making a conscious decision about it,” he says.

Janet Thorson Knoeller, a 40-year-old graphic artist from Madison, first gave serious thought to the topic of childrearing when she was in high school. The oldest of two children and the preferred babysitter in her neighborhood, Knoeller knew the joys of playing with enthusiastic toddlers and watching a curious eight-year-old’s thrill at learning a new word or scientific fact. But she also knew that caring for children involves hours of reading the same picture books again and again, cajoling stubborn toddlers into sharing their toys, chauffeuring kids from activity to activity, and negotiating truces between angry siblings. Parenthood “just isn’t in the cards for me,” Knoeller says.

But when Knoeller married four years ago, she was suddenly bombarded with questions from all sides about when she would start having children. When she answered that she wasn’t planning to parent, people told her “You’ll change your mind.” Some even accused her of being selfish — a common misconception about people who choose not to have children, according to Eugster.

“That it’s selfish is one of the most ironic reactions people have,” says Eugster. “One of the most selfish things we do in life is have children. I mean, who are we doing that for? Us. It’s not for them. We don’t even know them.”

Levine points out that parents are often shocked to discover that their children’s personalities are vastly different from their own. “There is never consideration of the fact that we don’t choose our children and our children don’t choose us,” he says. And both psychologists point to studies that indicate marital satisfaction tends to drop dramatically once children enter the picture.

Choosing not to have children is nothing new. But those who made that choice traditionally had to pursue a celibate or near-celibate life. The growing array of birth control options means that sex and marriage don’t have to result in parenthood. In 1975, one in eleven American women age 44 had no children, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. By 1993, that number increased to one in six.

Many people who make the decision not to raise children use the term “childfree” rather than “childless” to describe themselves. Childfreebychoice.com explains the distinction: “The term childless applies to anyone who wants a child and cannot have one. The term childfree applies to anyone … who plans not to raise or bear children for a variety of reasons.”

The reasons people give for not having children are as varied — perhaps more var-
ied — than those that people give for having children. Some are concerned about population growth’s effect on the environment, others feel that they can contribute more to society by putting their energy into volunteer activities, and others have decided that health conditions or other issues would curtail their ability to parent. And then there are those who are simply satisfied with their lives and feel no need to change things.

Maria Vega-Oxley, 41, founder of the No Kidding! social club in Appleton, is doting aunt to “a gazillion nieces and nephews” and a surrogate aunt to many of her friends’ children. The club is part of an international network of social organizations for adults without children (www.nokidding.net) and sponsors an array of activities such as dinners, hayrides, skydiving and pool parties.

The way Vega-Oxley sees it, becoming a parent would mean dramatically curtailing the time she spends with the children already in her life. It would also mean having less time for her other priorities, such as volunteering for local animal welfare organizations.

Vega-Oxley, who is married, strongly recommends that singles discuss their views on child-raising long before relationships become serious. “When I was single and I was dating, one of the first questions out of my mouth was always, ‘Do you want children?’”

Perhaps the reason parenting has become the status quo is because “a basic human need is that, when we die, we leave something behind, we don’t disappear like a puff of smoke,” Eugster says. But she argues that having children is not the only way — or even the best way — to meet this need.

Knoeller concurs. “I find a great deal of fulfillment in doing the things I love and finding out what I love and putting a lot of energy and focus into things I love,” she says. Whether or not we choose to parent, that’s advice from which we can all benefit.

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