



Deciding to Have a Child: A Woman's Perspective

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While I was chopping the parsley, my friend Sarah matter-of-factly disclosed her decision to have a child. I was excited and wondered how she could sound so casual about this momentous decision. According to Sarah, she and Wayne had made the decision during a discussion the night before. Recently, they had paid off their land which meant that Sarah wouldn't have to work anymore. She could stay home with their child. The next time I saw Sarah she was pregnant. This process of deciding to have a child seemed so concise in contrast to my own muddled experience around the same decision.

At age 24, I asked Chris, "Do you think you will ever want to have children?" He replied, "No." That was a relief because neither did I. At age 25, I repeated the question. Chris' answer was evasive: "We'll talk another time." At age 26, it was Chris who questioned and I who was not ready to reply.

Age 27 found me browsing through the *Consumer's Catalogue* pricing cribs. I thought them too expensive. A few months later I observed Chris as he played with Mark, the 14-month-old child of our friends. They watched birds on the pond, and engaged in peek-a-boo and airplane rides. Mark squealed with delight; Chris acted with an abandon I had never seen before.

On my 28th birthday, I recalled a previous decision to have my first child before age 30. Time began its relentless pressuring. Chris felt this, too. We went to Central America for the summer. There were so many children. I saw the radiance on the faces of mothers as they nursed their infants. The children seemed so happy there. I came back to Canada to see a child screaming and stamping his feet in a restaurant. I asked myself, "Is this what I want?" I hoped our child would be different. The ambivalence we feel about acting on our will may be displayed in our actions.

Isadora and Josh had been trying to get pregnant for a year, had been at any rate toying with the idea. They had stopped using contraception—which at that juncture was Isadora's diaphragm. But Isadora was just uncertain enough about the decision to do this ambivalently, too. She would leave off the diaphragm for days and days and days and then suddenly use it again once or twice, and then be crestfallen (and also oddly relieved) when her period came yet again. Sometimes she would use the diaphragm without jelly and then take it right out much too soon. Sometimes she would leave it off altogether, and on odd occasions, she would

leave it in. It was as if she felt that this was a decision for God to make, not she, a decision beyond her humble human powers. (Jong, 1984, pp. 113-114)

In considering these incidents we might begin to wonder: What is it to decide to have a child?

The Experience of the Body

I can see no reason why anyone would ever rationally decide to have a child. You feel sick while carrying the child and exhausted from lack of sleep when the child is born. You can say good-bye to sleeping in and the freedom to pick up and go at one's whim. Children are expensive to raise and often show little appreciation for all that you give them. I can't think of one sane reason why anyone would want to have a child. But do I listen to logic? No.

If we need not have a child why would we do so? What is it that makes the decision to have a child of importance? Increased methods and availability of birth control allow (or perhaps demand) one to make a decision or choice. It seems that we can now plan parenthood—or so we tell ourselves. Is the process really this rational or are other forces at work?

34 The body speaks. There may be the feeling of a “biological mission” to be accomplished. We may notice increased sexual desire during our fertile cycles: a monthly reminder of the possibility of conception. Nature compels us to acknowledge our bodily capabilities.

We are capable of motherhood; we may feel that to live fully we must have a child. The desire is to experience what our mother, our grandmother, and a line of women before us did. The thought that we will not fully experience womanhood unless we experience the stirring of life within may sway us in the decision to have a child. The process of deciding to have a child is one of uncertainty. This may center around our bodies. There may be horror of the imagined physical changes that will take place.

I see other women's stretch marks and think of how awful they look. I have just spent two years working out faithfully—for what if I have a child? To be fat and out of shape is something I don't want.

I shudder at the thought of giving birth. The idea of possibly having to have a Caesarian, an episiotomy, a spinal, and simply the pain involved in birthing is pretty well enough to make me say no thanks to it all.

Space

The hesitance in our decision to have a child is reflected in other ways. We recognize uncertainty in the world and wonder if this is a place we wish to bring a child. “Just when I decide to have a child another war or bout of terrorism breaks out. I wonder if I can justify

bringing a child into such a destructive environment.” We consider socio-economic factors knowing that to raise a child is expensive. We consider the ways a child will alter our lives.

To decide to have a child may be to consider a commitment to the relationship between a man and a woman. If the relationship between a couple is weak, the decision may be to wait before considering children. The reasons given to each other may be vague: The real reason may be beyond awareness. “We decided to not have a child for a while. We never could say why—it was just a feeling we had. A year later we separated.”

We may observe our partner as if they were already a parent. We make judgments about their perceived ability to parent which may influence our decision. There may be pride: “He’s so good with kids.” Or there may be reservations: “With all of his interests he may be not be able to devote enough time to a child.”

In committing to a relationship we are creating an emotional climate in which the child and the parents can exist together. Having known a comfortable family we may wish to recreate that situation and carry on the ways that we have known. A place of support is created. A recognition of the importance of the environment is to recognize the importance of love for the child.

We consider the physical environment as well. For Sarah and Wayne their purchase of the land was a prerequisite to having a child. The desire was to provide their child-to-be with the best environment they could. “We always knew we wanted to have a child. The decision we had to make was *when*. We wanted to have a cabin to take our child to so that he would begin life with an appreciation of nature. It’s paid off—Mark would much rather spend time at the cabin than in the city.”

Alicia and Chas wanted to own, rather than rent, a house. “We really weren’t sure we wanted to have a child, but—just in case—we bought a three bedroom house. Once we bought the house, we still weren’t sure we wanted a child but found ourselves painting one room in pastel colors—just in case.” It seems important to prepare a place for the child to be. Having made the decision to have a child we wallpaper the room, buy a few toys, and perhaps some sleepers. Grandparents help too, knitting clothes and providing toys—making this room a special room—a room for our child.

The Experience of the Child as Other

The process of deciding to have a child with our partner may open up discussion for the future. Yet, as we are beginning to see, we don’t speak about “any” child. We speak with an intention. There is a specific child in mind: “our” child. The nature of having a child may be explored. We may begin to fantasize: “If it were a boy I’d call him. . . .” In considering the future we imagine a projected life and the change that must occur. We begin to see that there will be a

difference in our way of being; we realize that we won't be as carefree as before; in fact we will be full of care. We may wonder: "Are we ready for this yet?"

Just as we are ready to say no or delay our decision we come across a child crying and discover he is lost. The child demands attention. We must respond—who could turn their back on a helpless child in distress? Maybe we help a child tie his shoes or aid in his struggle to clothe himself in winter gear. For a moment we give ourselves over to the child; we become his caretaker. We get a glimpse of a possible future life: We envision ourselves as a parent. The child's smiles or the child's tears appeal to us as a parent. For now, our decision to have a child is swayed toward "yes."

What of those who overcome ambivalence and make a conscious choice? Is the decision then affirmed? I recall my friend and her husband who had firmly decided not to have children. Despite precautions she became pregnant. It was no longer their choice, a decision had been made for them. It seems as though the child had decided . . . and then declined . . . for my friend miscarried. Or, once having a child, death may still take the child away. Is the decision to have a child ever really finished? The question can be raised: Who is it that makes the decision to have a child? We can see that, despite our desire, the decision may lay beyond our will.

The Experience of the Societal Other

Failure to bear a son. Execute! Such was the harshness of the sentence imposed by Henry VIII on Anne Boleyn. Clearly a wife of this man had better decide to have a child. But wait; can this really be called a decision or is it simply fulfilling an expectation? Or, if we do take it to be a decision, who is it that is doing the deciding?

For some women the decision to have a child is implicit in marriage. The question is not, "Will you have children?" but "How many children will you have?" Of some religious faiths the latter is not even a question to be asked. "When I married it was automatically assumed I'd have children. People would have thought there was something wrong if I didn't." Once again, it is the role that decides to have the child. The child is already present in its influence; the preparation for motherhood is inseparably intertwined with the role of wife. All that awaits is for "fate to bless our household—for God to give us a child."

In contrast, some women are no longer expected to be "housewives" but are free to pursue careers. Improved birth control may provide new alternatives. Some women feel free to discuss birth control openly. The question now becomes not, "How many children?" but "Will there be any children?" "My life is so different than my mother's. She was expected to have children; she didn't even question it. I have a choice."

Thus the notion of freedom to choose is implicit in the making of the decision. The decision to bear children is now different from one determined by societal expectations or roles. It involves a consciousness, a person who decides. Critical thought and judgment are implied; a weighing of the consequences of possible actions. In one sense, this newly found freedom weighs heavily. To make a decision consciously rather than blindly (if we are even to consider a blind decision a decision at all) is difficult. Yet, despite the sometimes overwhelming confusion and wish for direction, it allows for a widened range of acting-in-the-world.

The Experience of Time

Family means familiarity. As young children we look up to our parents as all-knowing protectors. With time we come to see them for the people that they are with their own struggles and ecstasies in life. Our experiences with our family may influence our decision to have a child. Having known a comfortable family we may wish to recreate that situation and carry on the ways that we have known. Or, having experienced little in the way of a loving family, we may experience trepidation at the thought of a family of our own. "My childhood memories are not happy ones. I hesitate to have a child for I fear that I would be no better a parent to my child than my parents were to me."

Wanting to have a child may emerge from the love between a man and a woman. "Sometimes when I look at Lawrence I love him so much that I want to bear his child, almost as a gift to him." It may be a wish for an extension of ourselves, the possibility of creation. This decision may reflect a desire to carry on a lineage. "There are only two siblings in our family. My sister can't have children. In the times when I think that I probably won't have children I get this funny feeling because it would mean the end of our family line." The desire is to provide continuity, generativity.

In deciding to have a child we are beginning to entertain the notion of parenting. Already we ponder: What would it be like to be a mother, a father? We may begin to act like a parent. "When I hold a child on my knee or help them do up their shoes I begin to think: Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to be a parent after all."

And so, perhaps in our conversational discussion we overcome our doubts and make the decision to have a child. Has a decision really yet been made, or does a decision require us to act on our agreement? "The action might have been dreamed and not willed. Only the execution puts our intentions to the test" (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 39). Thus it seems that in spite of all of our preparation and carefully considered plans, to decide to have a child is to finally plunge into the unknown. Even once a decision is made, we may still have second thoughts. "After spending five years weighing the pros and cons of having a child, now that I'm pregnant it seems that all my

thinking was wasted. I'm going through it all again now. So here I am—pregnant, anxious, doubtful—but now, committed.”

The decision to have a child is a difficult one for we are having to make a decision about something with which we can have no immediate experience. When we buy clothes we can try them on, look in the mirror, and wear them around the store. When we decide to buy a car we can take it for a test drive. But there is no taking a child home to “try him out.” We may try to simulate the situation by babysitting another’s child, but as everyone assures us, this is not at all like having a child of our own.

Thus one day women discover themselves “with child.” Despite numerous mental preparations the suddenness of the situation may be difficult to understand—all the more so because to conceive a child is an action that cannot be reversed.

For some, to own an animal fulfills the need to nurture something. We hear people refer to their pets as their “children”: Teachers may affectionately refer to their students as “my kids.” Yet, while there are many similarities between caring for pets, students, and our own children, there are striking differences, too. If, as a pet owner, the burden of ownership becomes too great, the animal can be found another good home. If a teaching position is found to be tiresome, resignation or a shift in duties is possible. Not so with the decision to have a child.

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And yet, despite its ambivalence, the process of deciding is relentless: It “begs” to be made. We may try to ignore or stall, to put off this decision, but the biological body reminds women that this is not a decision that can be made throughout life. Time becomes an important issue; time is passing; time is running out. “Of course, there’s always adoption.”

To adopt is different from having a child of our own blood; it is no longer a cocreation from an act of love. Yet, to adopt is to make a conscious choice that requires much action and determination. There are many forms to fill out and interviews to be had. To adopt, one must be able to display a secure environment for the child, to prove one’s worth as prospective parents.

But then, once having decided to have a child, and having had the adoption agency approve that decision, the execution of the decision is out of one’s hands. The wait is on. The wait extends, as regulations change and it becomes harder to adopt. In this case, the laws of the country, the regulations of the agency, and the natural parents of the child place the decision outside the realm of control of the adopting parents.

We then come back to the question, Is the decision to have a child simply a yes/no choice to be made? Is it really a settlement, a conclusion? Or perhaps just an opening, a beginning? We can see that the decision to have a child involves an intricate web of experiences,

although—as we saw with Sarah—the complexities may not be readily apparent. There is the hope that a conscious exploration of the decision to have a child will increase the likelihood that an infant will be born to a supportive atmosphere; an atmosphere which promises love, rather than abuse or neglect.

References

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