

“Do Fathers and Mothers Matter?”

— ELIZABETH MARQUARDT



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Propositions

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Intentional Families

Among family diversity proponents and increasingly in family law, the concept of an “intentional” family is seen as a positive good. The assumption is that so long as adults choose or intend to form a family in a certain way, such a family will be good for children. A notable feature of an intentional family is the typical absence of either a child’s father or mother from the home.

“until about two seconds ago, ‘motherless’ was a confirmed tragedy”

Single Mother by Choice

Since 1981, *Single Mothers by Choice (SMBC)* has been hosting meetings where single mothers can gather, trade diaper talk, commiserate about lousy family leave policies, and provide tips to curious, would-be SMBC who show up looking for advice. Their ranks include women who became unexpectedly pregnant and, deciding against adoption, abortion, or marriage, choose to raise their babies alone; women who adopt alone; those who intentionally stop using birth control in order to become “accidentally” pregnant in a casual relationship; but mostly (and getting most of the headlines) women who choose their baby’s absent father from a sperm bank. Chapters of *Single Mothers by Choice* around the country have grown from twelve to twenty-four in just the last three years. [See original document for footnotes.] Of late the movement has adopted a new, edgier, and decidedly American moniker: the “choice mom.” America loves motherhood and freedom of choice and the American media loves nothing better than a good story about choice moms.

Open the *New York Times*. The headline “Women opt for sperm banks and autonomy” tops just one of many stories across the country revealing how women today can browse online catalogs and shop for a sperm donor

in the same way they might choose a sectional sofa or a new car. The article quotes one Long Island choice mom saying, “You’re paying for it, so you kind of want the best of the best.” The reporter notes this mom “saw her ability to select a 6-foot-2 blond, blue-eyed, genetic-disease-free donor as some consolation for not getting to fall in love with someone who would most likely have been more flawed.”

Or open the *Washington Post* to the bold heading: “Women in their 30s and 40s choose not to wait for a spouse.” Amid the breathless declarations that “single women are helping redefine the typical American family,” and that “the stereotypes of the 1950s ... have long vanished from many American households,” we do find some hard reality in one choice mom’s story.

ONE CHOICE MOM

Ten years ago, pushing forty, she moved to a new state, bought a house, and began decorating a nursery. She got involved with a man whose attitude about a pregnancy was, “If it happens, it just happens.” After becoming pregnant, the relationship didn’t last long. Of her now nine-year-old daughter, this choice mom reports, “She does cry sometimes about not having her dad around, but we talk about it. ... I do feel guilt sometimes, but we try not to let it overwhelm us.” Yet rather than dwell on the inconvenient fact that children mourn the loss of their fathers, the story swings back to breezy portraits of single moms toting their tots on campus, managing their managerial posts with aplomb, and relying on their own mothers, nannies, and au pairs to provide all the care that they as working single parents cannot.

ONE CHURCH MOM

In her 2006 book *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood without Marriage and Creating the New American Family*, Rosanna Hertz shares the story of “Lily,” a committed Christian from the Midwest who, as a teacher in Boston, realized that her dream was to have a baby alone through artificial insemination. Hertz writes:

Bubbly and outgoing, she never lost her Midwestern friendliness

and directness, but even she hesitated before she approached the pastor of her church with her ‘crazy’ question: should she become a mom on her own? She fully expected her pastor to reprimand her for defying church traditions. But she was stunned by his reaction: ‘I walked out of there and my eyes were just wide. I thought, “Oh no, he didn’t just shut down this road I’m on.” He said, “It’s completely natural that you want to be a mother, of course you want to be a mother. And of course, it would be more perfect if you had a husband. But you would be a great mom. And this church community loves you, and I know they will support you in this.”’

Lily’s pastor then recommended that she bring her question to the church elders. Hertz relates Lily’s words:

‘And I went to talk to them about it when I was more sure I was going to do it and I was thinking the same thing—they are not going to approve of this... I was crying as I was talking about it because it was bittersweet. I really was torn. I wanted to be a mom, but I didn’t want to do it this way. You know? And I finished telling them what I was thinking about, and there was silence. And then the woman who hired me ten years earlier, she reached over and grabbed my arm and said, “Well, bless your heart! That is so brave.” And then there was silence and she said, “I’m getting goose bumps thinking that we might get to support you in this.”’

Lily also checked in with the principal at the middle school where she taught. The principal and head of her department were “sympathetic.” Then:

the principal asked [Lily] to think about how and what she would tell her students. This gave her pause. She decided that if she went forward with her plan and if she became pregnant, she would tell the students that she had been inseminated in a doctor’s office. She especially wanted to convey to the students that there was no sexual ‘misconduct’ on her part: she had not made a mistake but instead had chosen a sexless route to motherhood.

In today’s topsy-turvy world of motherhood, the problem your pastor and church leaders (and your boss) might have with your decision

intentionally to conceive a fatherless child is not the impact such a decision will have on the child, but rather whether you choose the route of “dirty” sex or “clean” insemination.

Single Father by Choice

UNITED KINGDOM

Browse the newspapers of the world and you can read reports of the proud new single father by choice (SFBC). In the United Kingdom is Ian Mucklejohn, father of three. In 2001, at the age of 54, Mucklejohn became the father of triplets conceived with an egg donor and a separate “gestational” surrogate mother, both living in the United States. (A gestational surrogate carries an embryo that was conceived with another woman’s eggs. A traditional surrogate carries a baby conceived with her own eggs.) Mucklejohn readily admits he used services in the U.S. because one is not allowed to buy a woman’s eggs in Britain, nor can one circumvent the right of the surrogate mother to decide to keep the child if she changes her mind after the birth. By contrast, in California, a destination of choice for would-be fathers from around the world, anything goes. A man can purchase his eggs, pick his surrogate, and head home with his three babies. His only remaining and sometimes significant legal struggle is to convince the local authorities to provide the children citizenship and birth certificates with a blank in the space for “mother.”

INDIA

In 2005, a 46-year-old accountant named Amit Banerjee became India’s first single father by choice. The IVF doctor who performed the procedures, Sudarshan Ghosh Dastidar, sits on the Indian Council of Medical Research which along with the National Academy of Medical Sciences are the only organizations overseeing ethics regulations for reproductive technologies in that nation. Dr. Ghosh Dastidar enthused that the new father “was a perfect candidate for ART (artificial reproductive technology). As a physician I could not deny him the available technology that hundreds of childless couples are opting to fulfill their dreams of a family.” Hoping to head off an ethics debate in his country, the doctor continued, inexplicably, “One cannot deny the right of procreation to a married adult, who unfortunately in this case was divorced. But he is

financially stable to support a child and has a family that is more than willing to bring the child up.” And what about the loss for the child of never knowing his or her mother? The doctor replies with a question, “What about a child whose mother dies on the delivery bed?” In other words, is it not the “right” of would-be parents intentionally to create children with virtually the same experience, and is it not the obligation of doctors to help them?

UNITED STATES

SFBC, gay or straight, are popping up around the United States. For example, Andy Abowitz, a “successful, single gay man living in Philadelphia,” paid a 25-year-old, married doctoral student to donate her eggs and a gestational surrogate to carry the pregnancy, resulting in a girl now two-years old and, more recently, twin boys now four-months old. The egg donor, who perhaps does not fully comprehend that she is the children’s genetic mother, commented “When I got [the pictures], I was so surprised by how much [the two-year-old] resembled me when I was that age.” She enthused, “I think it’s really fantastic when children are born into situations where they’re wanted that much.” And while it’s true the babies’ father seems to want them very much, how will the children make sense of an egg donor and surrogate mother who did *not* want them?

THE BROKERAGE OF CHILDREN

Courts are generally all too happy to stay out of these cases, but sometimes a judge gets wind of what’s up and gets angry.

In 2004, an unmarried, 58-year-old New Jersey schoolteacher, Stephen F. Melinger, contracted through a brokerage agency in Pennsylvania with a surrogate mother in South Carolina, Zaria Nkoya Huffman, to carry his child while her husband was away on active duty in military service. (A not-insignificant number of U.S. surrogates are married to military men, and thus their prenatal health care and delivery costs are shouldered by taxpayers.) She conceived twin girls. When the due date neared, Melinger and Huffman both traveled to Indiana where Melinger checked into a hotel room near the hospital to await the delivery. After their birth, the infant twins spent their early days in neo-natal intensive care. It was in

the intensive care unit where Melinger aroused the concern of nurses when he arrived for a visit with a live pet bird on his arm and on another occasion appeared to have bird feces on his shirt. The nurses also noted that Melinger did not seem to be aware of the kind of care the girls would need, nor to have made any provisions at home to care for them, and that he was planning to drive them back to New Jersey by himself. The nurses alerted authorities and a judge was brought in to the case.

In a fiery letter that was reprinted in local media, Marion Superior Court Judge Marilyn Ann Moores expressed outrage over the whole matter. She condemned the brokerage of children and asked U.S. Attorney Susan Brooks to review the case and the director of the surrogacy agency that arranged it. Moores wrote, “There seems to be no concern regarding the emotional impact on children who learn that they, in effect, were bought and paid for and that their mothers gave birth as a means of obtaining money.” As of 2009, the case was still in dispute although the twins have been permitted to live with Melinger.

MOTHERLESSNESS AND FATHERLESSNESS

The appearance of the single father by choice, aided by doctors and lawyers and thereby achieving the blessing of society, is truly striking. Think about it. Our societies have, sadly, become all too accustomed to fatherlessness. But until about two seconds ago, “motherlessness” was a confirmed tragedy, the stuff of novels and epic films and psychiatric case studies, the one thing we could all agree was a pure tragedy for a child. But now? Motherlessness is suddenly something that professionals in at least some nations will help men to achieve for their as-yet-unconceived children. So long as the absence of a mother (or a father) is intentional such a family structure is seen as being fine for children. And the only reason this change has occurred is because—increasingly in the eyes of society’s leaders—an adult’s right to children outweighs children’s hardwired need for their mother and their father. □

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