My Mommy War
The reader said she didn’t want children. I urged her to reconsider. Here’s what happened next.
By Emily Yoffe
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Hundreds of people have written demanding an apology and a retraction for the “disgusting,” “offensive,” “hurtful,” “appalling,” and “shocking” reply I gave in a recent Dear Prudence column. The letter I got was from a woman in her 30s who was about to marry a wonderful man, and they did not want children. What should she tell friends and family members who were asking when they were going to have kids? I gave some advice on how to fend them off—then added five sentences to this effect: Now that her life circumstances were changing, I wrote, she might want to re-examine this decision not to have kids.

I expected my answer would annoy people, but I was surprised by the fury of the response. You would think my reply was the equivalent of running around the streets with a turkey baster full of sperm, impregnating happy childless women.

What I didn't say in the column was that I understood exactly how the young woman felt. In my 30s, I, too, was comfortably committed to being childless. I, too, had never felt the maternal imperative everyone promised me I would. I, too, looked at my friends with children and concluded, "No, thanks!" Then my circumstances changed when I fell in love with a man who wanted kids. I had to decide whether to let him go, or marry him and agree to have a child.

I knew that I hadn’t thought too deeply about the implications of changing my mind when, at 5:30 one December afternoon, my obstetrician told me the baby would be born in about 30 minutes. I remember thinking, as I pushed, "Could we wait a few hours? I'll be more ready to be a mother at nine o'clock." The baby couldn’t wait, and at 6:10 p.m. our daughter was born. Thus, I crossed over and became, in the parlance of my correspondents, a "mindless breeder."

The majority of letter-writers were not single but happily married and professionally successful—the people you’d expect would make wonderful parents, and in a previous generation probably would have. Many didn’t just write about the adult pleasures of their childless (or “childfree”) life—travel, restaurants, undamaged upholstery, sex in the living room—but expressed contempt for those deluded enough to want to reproduce. As one woman wrote: "My husband and I are childless by choice and I heartily encourage..."
all younger friends to consider it. It is the most wonderful lifestyle, free of whining and sniveling and mini-vans."

What is going on when there is so much scorn for parenthood—the way a society perpetuates itself? Fertility rates are much in the news these days. The United States is rare among developed nations in that it is still producing children at a replacement rate. But many countries collectively agree with the people who wrote to me—that children are a tantrum wrapped in a diaper and not worth the trouble. So, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Spain, among others, are going down the demographic tubes, with shrinking pools of young workers to support growing masses of seemingly immortal retirees.

Many correspondents were past childbearing years and assured me they had no regrets. If I had stayed childless, I would also have felt I had dodged a sippy cup to the head. But the reason I wanted the still young-enough, happy woman who wrote to me to give another thought to the possibility of children is because I know you can thoroughly enjoy your childless years—and also be grateful every day for becoming a mother.

In our society parents do a wonderful job of portraying the difficulties of having children: the financial burdens, the time drain, the guilt, the exhaustion. But we do a lousy job of getting across something else about parenthood: It’s fun! When you are experiencing parenthood from the inside, there is an overwhelming pleasure in the funny, fascinating things your children do. When my daughter was 2, she put her arms around me as I was kissing her goodnight and said to me, “Mommy, you’re a wonderful husband.” That was better than any of the movies I hadn’t been to since she was born.

I noticed something else in the letters from nonparents that I had experienced myself: They have an unrealistic sense of the passage of time—or at least the passage of parental time. They seem stuck on the notion that being a parent means forever climbing a Mt. Everest of diapers (and what happens to these punctilious couples if a spouse ends up needing diapers?). Diapers pass in a snap. It all goes so fast. When our daughter turned 6, my husband and I realized with a pang that we were already one-third of the way through the time she would live with us. And I worry that the writers have an unrealistic sense of their own passage through time—believing they’ll forever feel that nothing is more important than building their career or taking that next trip.

In Maybe Baby, a collection of essays on whether to have children, Michelle Goldberg, a married writer in her 20s, decides she’ll probably stay childless because studies show that childless couples are not only happy, but that having children tends to ruin a marriage. Michelle, maybe I’m an asterisk in these reports, but I can’t recall a single fight my husband and I have had over our daughter (we have occasional fights, but not about her). We still have adult conversation, we go to the theater, we even have sex (granted, not in the living room). But the other night, my daughter, now 10 years old and no diapers in sight, was reading a book on American history and asked my husband about a confusing episode. A week in Paris could not have made my husband happier than telling her everything he knew about Iran-Contra.

Some of the people who wrote to me said it was irresponsible to bring a child into such a lousy world. Making that same point was a letter to the editor in the Washington Post in response to Robert Samuelson’s column on declining population. In the letter, the writer said that after reading Paul Ehrlich’s The Population Bomb 35 years ago he decided not to have children, a decision he encouraged others to make because it “may be one of the best ways to say yes to the future.” This man didn’t have children because of a book that turned out to be wrong! Even Paul Ehrlich, who predicted that by the 1970s the world would be in the grip of catastrophic famine, had a child!

I am one of four siblings, and I come from a hash of an unhappy family. Not passing on more unhappiness was one of the reasons I wasn’t going to have children. But we all somehow ended up in solid marriages, and together we have produced four children. The oldest is a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy, the youngest is the world’s most delightful 1-year-old. They are a better way of saying yes.

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