

Labor Pains of a Childless Womb
By Evan Barbee

The patriarchal value system teaches women to esteem motherhood as the highest and most glorious position to which we might aspire. What would happen if some of us chose instead to nurture culture? The traditional view of motherhood is the warp thread of our heritage and a solidifying component in the bedrock of modern society. This long-standing tenet is one our grandmothers and mothers believed and passed on to us along with their wedding dresses. It would seem we as women have been educated to believe that our one, our only great contribution to the world at large is this: rearing children. If this is true, what future remains for those of us who cannot or choose not to give birth to a child? Have we failed? Have we fallen short of our potential? Will we lead empty lives and feel a haunting sense of lack with stories of “what-might-have-been-had-I-only...” casting long, inky shadows across our years?

This issue bears such weight on the direction and quality of our lives that it would serve us well to investigate further. Relying too heavily on the most common narrative for guidance could be terribly damaging to a childless woman's sense of purpose and sense of self.

To put this issue into a historical context, it is important to note that the men who profoundly influenced Western philosophy and religion, the greatest scientific minds and the most respected intellectuals of their day all seemed to agree that the role of women in society and in the home should remain extremely limited. Their writings, still required reading in most college courses, informed the framework for modern society as we know it today. At the time, the participation of women in the world was dictated by rules entirely arranged by men, who, by way of their own cultural conditioning, all met in agreement on this point: that the female nature was temperamental, dangerously inconsistent and not to be trusted; that women should be permitted little involvement in society and exist quietly, demurely in devoted service to husband and child, shut up safely in the home. And so, because we had little or no access to available resources outside of those which marriage might provide, we existed in this perpetual state for generations. Truly at that moment, motherhood was an expected service to be rendered and the luxury of choosing or not choosing this role would have been just that, a luxury that virtually no woman alive could afford.

This cultural “obedience training” seemed to be an effective method for quite a long time, leaving entire family trees full of grey-faced, hollow-eyed women perched dutifully at their posts, upholding society’s expectations of them. These instinct-injured women, having never been permitted to follow their desires, existed in a time of so few options and such narrow, predictable and pre-determined futures that life must have been a suffocating series of small exercises in survival. And so, the hardened woman gave birth to more hard women for a long, long time. These resilient beings built a foundation for us both fireproof and bulletproof. Bravery is a trait we inherited directly from them. No matter what path we freely and joyously carve out for ourselves we must proceed with a great deal of reverence, honoring those who came before in leaving an equally worthy legacy to the generation who will follow after.

Today, because all at once so many millions of factors converged in a beautiful and intelligent way, there is a virtual tidal wave of empowerment sweeping the female sex heavenward. We are excelling in all fields at such a rate that we are breaking down in a day some wall or other that has stood for a thousand years. It is an especially thrilling time to be a woman. We have found our voices, we inhabit our bodies differently, we are participating with the big boys in powerful positions and influencing our environment in a potent way. We are suffering less because we are like-minded in our intention to call attention to the violence and brutality against women, which have been normalized for so long.

And yet, there is a very subtle suffering still whose source is difficult to detect but the affects of which may derail a woman’s life completely. This pervasive, underlying sentiment creeps undetected through our subconscious leaving a trail of volatile sociological assumptions about our gender’s roles, about our bodies, about our inherent value and validity, our power and potential. This corrosive cultural and societal conditioning has been grandfathered into our thinking, our value systems and beliefs and stands as perhaps the most lethal adversary to the soulful life of women.

In the question of motherhood, the same anxiety a woman may feel about missing the tragically small window of time she has to bear a child is probably a familiar feeling for most of us. As we ponder the idea of what “success” will look like to this generation of women, I suspect most of us feel as though we are fumbling around in the dark. While motherhood is an incredibly brave and beautiful undertaking, we are perhaps the first generation to identify satisfaction by some other measure than children or careers. And what would that measure be?

In an attempt to find our own answers to this question we must all first drop the mental constructs we hold about “success” or “happiness” or “fulfillment”. We must remember that when we presence with reality, what is true of women, what has been known and revered for hundreds and thousands of years, and what in more recent human history we have forgotten, is this very simple fact: women bring life.

Women do not only exist as mothers to children, but as touchstones and lightning rods for a great creative force that expresses itself in a countless number of ways. The nature of a woman is hardwired to conceive, to enter into a gestation period, to further develop and refine, and eventually to give birth; if not to a child today, than to a creative endeavor or an experience or a message that may shift the collective consciousness. A childless womb is not empty. It is spacious. It is energetically full and fertile ground that when understood properly and honored, is capable of influencing and purifying a world terribly in need of every woman's wisdom and nurturance. We must lean to not interrupt this process.

Each of us has a calling to mother something. It might never be a child, it might instead be a movement that makes the world a kinder and more loving place for the children of our sisters and neighbors and strangers. What a joy to love every child. How fulfilling to hold every woman with profound respect and in an unconditional positive regard, recognizing her potential even when she doesn't. What a blessing to feel no sense of lack, to feel it a great privilege that we have these torches to carry. What a relief to put down the stillborn dreams of the lives we imagined, and take up the brilliant, breathing lives that we have.

As this great creative force rushes through us, we participate collectively in the miracle of birth. That kind force will manifest in the physical world as the wide-eyed sweetness of a newborn. That loving force will work through us socially and politically as we redeem a terribly fractured culture. These small, quiet self-revelations, just like the dividing of cells as life takes form in the womb, are hidden and mysterious and move with great purpose and instinct toward a greater reality. Whatever we are carrying as we move through life, heavy with possibility, the world needs our contributions and we must bring them forth.