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# Women, child-free and single

Margaret Hood Hynan  
*San Jose State University*

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Hynan, Margaret Hood, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1993

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**WOMEN : CHILD-FREE AND SINGLE**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the

Department of Social Science

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Margaret Hood Hynan

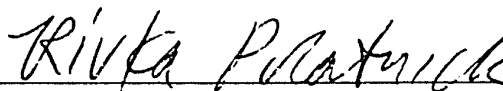
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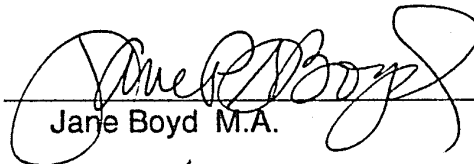
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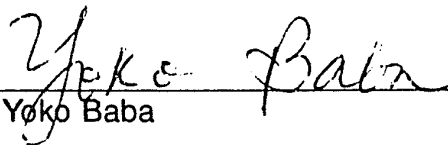
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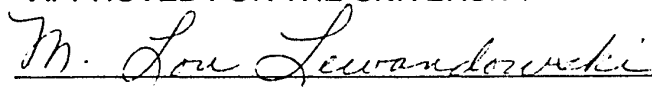


Jane Boyd M.A.



Dr. Yoko Baba

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY





(Thesis adviser: Dr. Rivka Polatnick)

## ABSTRACT

### WOMEN: CHILD-FREE AND SINGLE

by Margaret Hood Hynan

My master's thesis focuses on women who are single and child-free in current American society. The literature review examines current social thought and stereotype. I then present an original study of nineteen single, child-free women who are all Caucasian, and middle class and over forty. This group was decided on to insure homogeneity in this limited study. These women were interviewed and/ or responded to a detailed questionnaire addressing questions pertinent to their lives.

The body of the paper is comprised of these women's life stories (Herstories) gathered from their responses. An analysis follows, divided into eleven sections dealing with family of origin issues, other relationships and work in the world. From this analysis it was concluded that, while many of the women express regret over being single and child-free, their perspective and priorities change over time, and most consider their lives to be satisfying.

Dedicated to my mother, Mary Elizabeth, who died at forty-two, just as I was getting to know her. She told me I could , and now, finally, I believe I can. And to my father, Tom, who eight years ago became the most wonderful role model. I love you both very much.

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## INTRODUCTION

I am a single woman. I do not and will not have children. In my late thirties I entered a period of personal crisis, stumbling against the realization that I would never be a mother. During this time I experienced a deep sense of loss, grief, shame, many identity questions and myriad other feelings. I had also been married and involved in other relationships, but, for many reasons could not sustain balance in this area. I began to think I would always be alone and this thought was not comfortable. I wondered if I would always feel varying degrees of this anguish or if I would eventually reach a resolution point.

I wondered how other women dealt with being childless and single. Were there some women who were never bothered by being childless? Were there, perhaps, women who chose this lifestyle? Or, were most women forever haunted because they did not have children? How did remaining single affect their life satisfaction? Did perennially single women achieve a sense of autonomy? Or were these women bitter, lonely, and isolated in their later years? Were there women out there who didn't care if they were in a couple relationship or not? Did the desire to form a partnership with another human being lessen over time, or did it remain an ongoing source of discontent if not realized? Did single, childless women create fulfilling lives and realities for themselves or were they forever on the fringes?

In good faith, I approached several of my friends who are also single and childless, anxious to hear their perceptions of our shared dilemma. My questions were met with averted eyes. I wondered, was there some sort of stigma attached to being childless that ran so deep that even my friends would not talk to me about it? I began to realize there was.

Finding few other women eager to talk about their feelings concerning being child-free and single, I decided to start with myself. I examined my life and looked at what factors might have set me on the path of being a childless, single woman. To begin with, I was not raised in an idyllic family and had had a rather rough time. Life at home was a bit chaotic and I was exposed to only creaky role models. When I was eleven, my mother had a “nervous breakdown” and left my younger brother and me to submerge herself in the “hippie art culture.” I am now very aware that my mother’s action was not prompted by lack of love for us, her children, but rather, a desperate attempt to reclaim her own life. She struggled for six years longer, finally achieving some success with her art before dying at 42. When I was fourteen, my Dad married a woman only six years my senior. I was subsequently ill equipped to carry out anything approximating a “normal” life course. The messages I received about marriage and having children were not particularly positive. On some level I think I always hesitated to have a child, fearing I wouldn’t know how to “be there” in all the important ways, since no one had really “been there” for me. I also could only

half commit to a relationship, always keeping one foot out the door. Was this true of other women who were childless and single? I decided to find out. If I was destined to be it, I certainly wanted to know about it.

It occurred to me that being child-free and single (I replaced "childless" with "child-free," to accentuate the positive aspects) might be a viable lifestyle in and of itself. I began reading about family types and popular lifestyles and discovered some interesting information. Despite the persistent "rightness" of the nuclear family in American social thought, divergent lifestyles continue to enter the mainstream. The state of California recently sanctioned tax breaks for domestic partners other than just married couples. Homosexual and mixed race couples have become more acceptable in the past few decades. Single parents of both sexes are raising kids. Older women are having babies and raising them with a partner, or partnerless. Artificial insemination is an acceptable way to become pregnant. Gay and lesbian couples are adopting children. Surrogate mothers are bearing babies for the barren. But the woman who chooses to remain child-free and single, no matter the reason, remains the object of pity, social speculation, and ridicule. Others talk about us in whispers, and we whisper about ourselves.

Women are socialized to bear and raise children. That is a fact. Women are socialized to be married. That is also a fact. Society maintains that for women, having children is the norm, and that not to have children is a deviation and therefore abnormal. Society also dictates that there is something amiss with women who remain single. Suddenly, this social mind set seemed

anachronistic to me. Was it not my own business here on the tag end of the twentieth century, to decide what I wanted to do with my body and my time? I did not want to be forced to feel good or bad about my choices or my circumstances because some Big Brother-ish finger pointed at me and told me I should. Where were my “sisters” in all this? How did they feel? I decided to find them and talk to them. I wanted to find research studies that talked about us and what we were up to. I wanted to share what I found. I began formulating questions and these questions eventually became the focus of my master’s thesis.

## CHAPTER I

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Even in the 1990s, with all the social and economic indications to the contrary, the American Dream of the upwardly mobile nuclear family still has the power to charm and mesmerize. This ideal family is made up of two parents and their children. The woman, single or married, who chooses to remain child-free, no matter the reason, stands outside the circle of this Dream. She may become the object of pity, social speculation, and ridicule. Women are socialized to bear and raise children and if they do not they are categorized as deviant. This section explores some of the psychological and sociological implications of being female, child-free, and single as presented by studies done over the past two decades.

American society is fundamentally pronatalist. White, middle class, educated women are expected to produce children. This is imperative to the perpetuation of the desired social structure (Gimenez 1984). Choosing not to have children is, therefore, antinatalist. These women who are expected to have children are the ones who are now postponing it or choosing not to have children at all. They have become equipped with the economic and educational means to make this choice (Faux 1984, 121). Other life opportunities may manifest themselves and be more attractive than having children.

There is cause to suspect that fundamental changes are occurring in the values associated with having children. As economic opportunities for women continue to increase, a wider range of lifestyle options become available. . . . Having children becomes an option rather than a mandate (Seccombe 1991, 191).



The prevailing social stigma associated with non-motherhood maintains that a child-free woman is “a person suffering from low self esteem, who is somewhat deficient in traditional feminine attributes. Certainly, [the image] has been one of a woman who is too selfish to make the sacrifices being a parent requires” (Faux 1984, 25). Most research on women’s roles conducted in the United States reflects pronatalist sentiments. Women who remain child-free have been characterized as “lonely, unfulfilled, insensitive and more likely to have mental problems” (Seccombe 1991, 192).

Remaining child-free is not accepted by society at large, despite fears of overpopulation and its subsequent realities of increased poverty and other social ills. “The image of the childless woman as socially deviant persists” (Faux 1984, 121). The following studies are representative of the opinions created by pronatalist sentiment in society and some of the arguments countering such sentiments.

#### The Message: Woman a.k.a. Mother

The types of characteristics society considers to be “motherly” include the propensity to nurture, the inclination towards self-sacrifice, and the capacity to love without question. Women who do not have children are seen as either a bit more exotic or completely alien. Callan (1983) conducted a study that used fifty mothers and fifty voluntarily child-free wives as the sample. It was concluded that the child-free women were “non-conforming, self-fulfilled, materialistic and individualistic.” Later in the study, it was also concluded that child-free

women were both “selfish and unusual” and were far more likely to be pitied than applauded for their choice. The positive connotation of being “self-fulfilled” somehow transformed into a negative state of being “selfish.”

Traditionally, women have been encouraged to seek validation through family affiliation, while men have been encouraged to seek definition through careers. Women are still expected to eventually find a man, marry, and have children. That isolated studies point to the self-actualizing nature of child-free women has little impact on the traditional view. To the average American woman or man, being child-free is simply not a satisfying or glamorous lifestyle, despite any increase in freedom that may be associated with it.

Women also are confronted by the message that having children is expected of them by men. While not rigidly socialized to be fathers, men are definitely socialized that women should be mothers. They seem to view women who remain child-free negatively (Blake 1979). In their 1983 study, Shields and Cooper gave a test paragraph describing a hypothetical woman who was unhappy with her pregnancy to a group of 135 college men. All the men responded negatively to this image. Another test paragraph, given to the same group, described a young, mother-to-be who was pleased with her pregnancy. This image was greeted with enthusiasm. Apparently men are equipped with a set of “shoulds” where women are concerned, one of them being that women “should” bear children.

The 135 women college students interviewed in a parallel study reflected similar opinions. Even though graduate school and job advancement were

seen as positive steps for female success, in the women's opinion, children were more important for life satisfaction (Shields and Cooper, 1983).

The traditional concept of womanhood has carried with it the implication that women who did not "exercise their capacities" by becoming a mother, remained unfulfilled and untrue to their destinies. In a recent study concerning older child-free women, one respondent stated that, "women are here, partly to have families and all, I really think that's what the female is designed for, I think your life isn't really complete." When the major part of a woman's identity is "culturally defined by the prescriptions of maternal instinct and the life trajectory engendered from it" the implications for women who do not follow the path are consequently overridingly negative (Alexander et al. 1992, 622).

The older child-free women in the Alexander (1992) study had lived for many years with the message that there was something askew with their lives because they had not had children. They questioned their identity as women as well as their own value and fulfillment in life. They had a deep need to feel themselves to be whole people in a world that defined them as "less than" in a vital way. Even women who had achieved status professionally and creatively, and were leading contented lives, expressed great regret when asked to examine their childlessness.

The concept of a maternal instinct, studied in mammals from rodents to humans, maintains that females care for offspring because of a natural biological urge and that this is a gender linked instinct that males do not possess (Alexander et al. 1992). But is a woman's biology truly her destiny?

Perhaps it was, millennia ago. Human intellect and spirit now often triumph over human physiology and its incessant appetites. And, while women have traditionally been viewed as nurturers and through their socialization have internalized this self-image, the need to nurture has not been psychologically verified. Research into supposed “maternal instinct” has been inconclusive (Ross and Kahan 1983).

“Today, most women feel that most of the pressure to mother is cultural, rather than biological or psychological” (Faux 1984, 149). Ross and Kahan (1983) maintain that our biology is our destiny only if we choose it to be, and Polatnick (1984) sees biological determinist arguments as a tool used to keep men in a social position superior to that of women. Polatnick implies that neither sex would choose to raise and care for children because it is essentially low reward work within the social power framework, demanding years of commitment. Since women physically bear children, it has been convenient for a patriarchal society to designate them as responsible for child welfare using biological and psychological arguments.

#### Couples: Woman plus Man

As children, we are socialized to be half of a heterosexual couple. This image is one of the archetypes of patriarchal family values. It is omnipresent in literature and, of course, television and movies. If a woman is not half of a heterosexual couple then she is seen as just half a person, not a whole person as a single male is viewed. And if a woman is child-free, she is also deviating

from the norm. Therefore, a single woman who is child-free, often is categorized as half a person who is socially deviant, though the phrasing may be different.

This categorization, however, is not founded in reality. Women who remain single often do so by choice, from a position of personal strength. They have decided to map their life's course themselves and have set their own goals. They are often vital, energetic women who decide to channel their energy in ways other than wifedom and motherhood.

These women are single because they are strong individuals, confident and competent enough to be alone. They do not flee into marriage because they fear the alternative. They have (or had) opportunities to marry, but as one woman said, 'The right man never asked me.' The potential husbands they have met are not men with whom they wish to spend the rest of their lives, and they refuse to compromise their hopes, their dreams, their lives. They are not willing to marry just to be married, and they are not willing to marry just to have children (Anton 1992, 20-21).

Singlehood increased in popularity in the 1970s, particularly because "the Pill" afforded more sexual freedom outside the formality of marriage. More couples began to cohabit without thoughts of marriage or family. Since marrying was not as weighty a social pressure, women began enthusiastically to explore educational and career avenues once closed to them. The feminist movement was supportive of these advances for women, and was a strong and articulate guide for women pursuing their personal growth and identity.

The specter of sexually transmitted disease in the 1980s once again made monogamy the relationship of choice. Singlehood lost some of its popu-

larity. The staggering impact of AIDS, and the parallel resurgence of conservative family values constricted much of the sexual freedom. Many women and men now choose to be monogamous and married. However, statistics indicate that they are more likely to have the experience of serial monogamy. This term refers to having several partners but only one at a time. Many women have more than one partner during their lifetime. Children are often born into this puzzle of marriage and divorce. And it is still the mother who keeps the children after the couple has been dissolved unless there are extreme indications to the contrary. Single motherhood is becoming more visible. Perhaps women are beginning to think more than twice about having children because of the glaring evidence that they will be single parents after a likely divorce.

The idea of being married is still compelling even though half of all marriages end in divorce. Social pressure is insidiously strong. We seek to complete ourselves, to become whole. We do not want to remain the half persons the media messages tell us we will be. "We go from mother to men with no self in between" (Friday 1987, 22). Even when women, through education and/ or hard work have cultivated a strong self, and become autonomous in vital ways, the urge to be in a couple is still a vivid desire for many.

#### Careers and Kids: What To Choose?

In the past two decades, the Superwoman Syndrome--women combining employment and motherhood--has become prevalent. "Only a generation ago society's greatest reward was reserved for women who devoted themselves

entirely to motherhood. In the coming years, the biggest reward will be reserved for those women who manage to combine motherhood and career successfully" (Faux 1984, 42). Hopefully, in the future, there will be cheaper, more accessible, reliable and safer child care. This will help mothers manage their children and their time and better enable them to "do both" if they choose or must.

However, at present, combining mothering and a career is extremely difficult for many women and can produce much maternal ambivalence (Faux 1984). If a woman is committed to a fulfilling career or craft, does it not seem logical that she might wonder whether she would want to add the full responsibility of raising a child to her life? This often can be a difficult choice and can toss a woman into a maelstrom of questioning, postponing, partially resolving and then questioning again.

The term maternal ambivalence refers to this delay of child bearing, for whatever reason. For many women, the question of whether or not to have children is resolved by time; the biological clock simply stops ticking. Maternal ambivalence also deepens as a woman reaches her middle years. Child bearing and rearing become much more difficult on a physical and psychological level (Faux 1984). Having a child crazed with the terrible twos is not easy at twenty-five. At forty-five, when a woman is used to spending her time otherwise, it can be a horrific experience. Many women resist the idea of combining career and motherhood. They fear that both really demand total focus. The Superwoman Syndrome, with all its time constraints and concentration drain, is not really very

super after all. "Having it all" (career, kids, etc.) takes an incredible amount of energy, and a woman may be too distracted and exhausted to reap the "rewards" a persistent media promises.

Child-free women often report high levels of satisfaction with employment and lifestyle. Susan Bram (1984) compared groups of child-free women with groups of women who, by their own definition, were delaying having children and with groups of women who were already parents. She found that on an educational level the child-free women were more likely to have attained professional status, as had their spouses. Many of the child-free wives were employed in traditionally male jobs, and reported themselves as being androgynous, competitive, and dominant. The child-free couples studied were more egalitarian in their divisions of housework and decision making than were their counterparts who had children. They reported themselves as being happier in their marriages, and more goal and achievement oriented than did the others.

Available data indicate that women's employment rates, the status of their occupations, their incomes, and their educational attainments are negatively correlated with the number of children born (Seccombe 1991). The U.S. census report of 1986 revealed that the earnings of child-free wives exceed those of wives with children by 20%.

Many women are now seeking status and security in their own right as opposed to the meaning children supposedly provide. They may delay child-bearing or decide not to have a family. Again, much of this can be attributed to



the increasing educational and economic opportunities for women, which make the confines of motherhood seem far less attractive (Bernard 1974).

Veevers (1975) reports that the child-free women in her study felt themselves freer to pursue careers; they felt more mobile, and had more creative energy and time. There was also a great deal of emphasis on self-development. These women also rejected rigid sex role stereotyping. They saw women as being well equipped to do things other than the dishes and the laundry. It was also noted that many child-free women felt a lack of support within the feminist movement and found themselves tending to be anti-feminist because of this lack. They resented the feeling that they needed to “do both,” have a family and a career, in order to raise their status in society.

In the early 1970's, when the Women's Liberation movement was fresh and vital, Bernice Lott (1973) questioned a group of college women about their feelings concerning motherhood and feminism. She found that pro-liberation women ranked child-rearing as more creative than anti-liberation women; they also categorized themselves as less interested in mothering. Perhaps these women were fast discovering the other choices that were available to them and no longer saw motherhood as inevitable.

Secombe (1991) suggests that women with non-traditional gender role orientation attribute greater costs and fewer benefits to children. This research also suggests that non-traditional gender role orientation also reduces the desire to have children.

The nuclear family is often less than perfect, despite the social message that it is still the “right” kind of family. Lichtman (1976) and Faux (1984) found, in separate studies, that many child-free women absorbed messages in their own childhood that predisposed them to opt for non-motherhood. The women in these studies felt that it had been conveyed that having children was a very limiting proposition, and, if again given the chance, their parents might not choose to have children. This experience can make a woman less than eager to repeat the same script in her own life.

Aspects of Loss: “If I don’t have a child is part of me missing?”

On the other side of the spectrum, David Gutman (1975) presents a strong argument in favor of parenting when he states that, for most adults, it still affords their ultimate sense of meaning. “The question, ‘What does life mean?’ is automatically answered once they have children; better yet, it is no longer asked” (170). Ideas such as this help support the resurfacing of “family values” in American society. Marrying, raising children, and creating a family unit, are somehow supposed to guarantee protection against the angst of human existence and provide a valid reason for being.

Anton (1992) discusses the aspects of loss associated with being child-free. She sees the greatest loss being of love and a sense of continuity. She says that women who do not have children experience the loss of enduring, unconditional love, and the bond between mother and child that often persists

longer than any other bond human beings experience. There is also a loss of the sense of continuity-- a feeling that the cycle of birth and death seems to stop with a child-free woman.

Unfortunately this attitude, which is part of the myth surrounding motherhood in American society, presents an ongoing problem for women. Women are socialized to believe that parenting should be a totally focused heart and soul endeavor. This belief, whose seed is planted when a little girl is handed her first baby doll, is reinforced constantly throughout a woman's life. Men, not being so programmed, report parenthood as being important, but certainly not the entire meaning of their lives.

#### Defending The Child-free Choice

Around the turn of the century an unsigned letter to The Independent, a weekly journal, addressed the issue of the child-free option:

We are not selfish and pleasure seeking people; on the contrary, the principal aim of our lives as well as our standards of human value, is social usefulness. . . . There are innumerable ways of benefiting the world besides bringing children into it (Faux 1984, 113).

This type of social consciousness has persisted and is one of the fundamental premises of child-free focused organizations today.

Gary Cook, treasurer of Northern California's "Resolve," an infertility group, states,

I think that it's a wonderful and marvelous thing to raise children into good citizens and healthy individuals, but it's no less of a feat to dedicate your life to developing your own personal values and artistic abili-

ties, your sense of altruism and community service. Neither is better than the other (Minton 1992, 2).

Leslie Lafayette founded the "Child-free Network" to link childless people with one another. This group is one of a new crop of support groups, workshops, books, and newsletters about the touchy topic of childlessness. Baby boomers are twice as likely as their mothers not to have children. And since baby-boomers are graying rapidly, their choices, and the reasoning behind these choices concerning children are rapidly becoming important topics (Lafayette 1992). It would appear that networking among single child-free women, and the sense of bonding that can result, may help alleviate some of the pressures of the social stigma that purports a child-free woman to be somehow lacking something integral to her womanhood.

A special bond exists among women who have children. Kids provide all kinds of adventures to discuss. Women have always compared the happy and the horror stories, sharing laughter, concern and information about their children. "Motherhood confers the badge of membership, childless women conspicuously lack the badge. Human beings are social creatures; our well being suffers when we feel excluded from the inner circle" (Anton 1992, 84). Child-free women have been excluded from this clan. But, child-free women can now create their own "inner circle" and find the ears, arms, and validation they may need by participating in support groups whose topics range from the child-free state to growing and self-actualizing as a human woman in the many ways

available. The groups are growing in popularity and Anton's 1992 book, Never To Be A Mother, contains many suggestions on where to find and how to form a group.

Anton speaks of rechanneling what she terms "the mothering energy," which is far different from the concept of "maternal instinct." It is a creative, open, loving energy that seeks expression. She suggests that women choose a focus, the most obvious being working with other people's children as a teacher, or a Big Sister, or a favorite aunt. Nurturing older people or those developmentally disadvantaged are other outlets for this energy. However, since these are still traditional ways of putting the female self out into the world, Anton also suggests that women look into themselves and stretch.

Few (women) have ever really tapped the depth and breadth of their intellectual, creative or physical abilities. Because they have never been encouraged to reach for the stars, they hardly dream at all (Anton 1992, 168).

### Growing Older

The social mandate persists that producing children provides a woman with meaning and status that is otherwise unattainable. Having children also supposedly guarantees that family will form a supportive circle in later years, providing the elderly parent with comfort and care. Children, therefore, represent a social investment. They are seen as cement for faltering marriages and security in old age (Blake 1979). Is this actually the case or is it another guise of pronatalist social propaganda?

More than 20% of older Americans have no children and some 5-6% have never married. Does this mean this population is alienated and alone as they grow older? Baum and Cope (1985) found that children were no guarantee against loneliness in old age. The child-free elderly they studied were more resourceful and less lonely than the parent elderly. The child-free elderly were not waiting for visits or care from children, because there were none, whereas the parent elderly suffered because of expectations. Rempel (1985) showed that the well being of child-free elderly matched and often exceeded that of parent elderly. The child-free elderly were more prone to reach out into the community at large to meet their affiliation needs, ending up with a broader base of support. The women, in particular, tend to more closely ally themselves with one another. "Although largely invisible, alternative support networks are utilized by never married women who live on the margins of the nuclear family form" (Morell 1991, 197)

Given an alternative set of life paths that does not include affinal and filial relationships, never married, childless women may become involved in relationships that are central to them and enduring and that, while non standard, are enriching and generative (Rubenstein et al. 1991, 270).

A recent study among older child-free women looked particularly at the regrets associated with not having children. Many of the women saw themselves as sorely lacking something, especially as they got older. Several of the women felt they had failed in life, no matter what else they had accomplished. As they got older and heard friends talking about the accomplishments of chil-

dren and grandchildren, the women in the study said they felt deeply saddened and left out. They had never needed to go to school meetings, help a daughter pick out a prom dress, agonize with a kid who didn't get picked for the team or soothe a wailing grandchild. They felt they had somehow failed and were missing some vital "woman part" (Alexander et al. 1992).

Alexander then attempted to put such negative, emotional feelings within the cultural construct. He stated that women are socialized to have such regrets in later years and to compare themselves unfavorably with women who have the "right kind of family life." These women, as are most of the rest of us, were led to believe that the nuclear family that extends outward to incorporate aging relatives is this "right kind" of family. It would appear, given the continuing disappearance of this kind of family in social reality, that other types of bonding and connecting should be given positive attention (Alexander et al., 1992).

Sociologist David Schneider maintains that blood ties, because of their primacy should ideally include a "code of conduct which offers trust, loyalty, faith, affection and help when needed." In other words, children are expected to be available to assist their parents. But simply because these expectations seem natural to the arrangement, does not mean they are fulfilled. Affinal relationships, which do not have this natural basis, nor the built-in expectations, often do fulfill them. For the women interviewed by Schneider, relationships with collateral kin (nieces and nephews, etc.) and kin-like non kin (the children of friends, etc.) were often extremely supportive and connected (Rubenstein et al. 1992, 276).

Of the thirty-one child-free women who participated in the Rubenstein (1992) study, eighteen described close relationships with siblings, nieces, and nephews. These collateral family ties were considered fulfilling, and the informants often likened the relationships to parent-child ties. This sentiment is echoed by Morell (1991) who suggests that child-free women develop close friendships with children that are related, like nieces and nephews, or unrelated, like children of friends. The women also felt they made special contributions to these children's lives because they were not the mothers and therefore the children could be more open with them.

Eight of the thirty-one women studied by Rubenstein stated same gender, same generation companionate relations were integral to their lives. They generally included features of enduringness, closeness, periods of co-residence, traveling together, and some involvement with each other's families. These women felt a sense of responsibility for one another and "in one sense, these relations may be thought of as modeled on sociolegally sanctioned relationships such as marital ties in which such activities as caregiving are inherent" (Rubenstein 1991, 275).

This group of eight women valued friendships with other women very highly, often referring to their friends as sisters. Friends provided them with a feeling of family that their actual family could not. These women often invested much of their emotional time in one another, more so than their married peers, and thereby reaped rewards far greater in the area of friendship. Several



women reported a feeling of being linked in a semi- familial sense. Other women responded that they looked upon their friends as an “untapped source in a time of need” (Rubenstein 1991, 275).

It appears from the findings of the above cited studies that single, child-free women do get their affiliation and emotional needs met through forming deep, abiding friendships and solid relationships with kin. Much of the stigma associated with elderly women, especially those without children, is permeated with notions of loneliness and alienation. The studies show that this is not necessarily the case. Women who are surrounded with children and grandchildren and husbands may often get tangled in everyone’s life but their own. Their ties, both kinship and otherwise, may be far less fulfilling than the image supported by society. The single child-free woman more often chooses with whom she bonds, and therefore has more time to invest in the pursuit of true intimacy and ongoing support.

### Being Single and Child-free

Most of the studies presented in this literature review have to do with married child-free women, because this is the group focused on by nearly all of the studies. Anton, however, addresses the issues of single child-free women, looking at the double stigma associated with being single and child-free:

A single woman is often subjected to pressure, especially in her twenties and early thirties, by well meaning friends and relatives who ask frequently about her marriage plans or prospects. The pressure usually lessens as one grows older and others’ expectations for her change,

though then, people may say (when the single woman is not there), 'I wonder why she never married,' the implication being that there is something wrong with a woman who never married (Anton 1992, 21).

Even women who are career oriented, well educated, and at relative peace with their life course may continue to give credence to these voices and evaluate themselves harshly. Although these questions are whispers in the background, they may erode a woman's self esteem. Anton then states that often single women remain single because there is nothing wrong with them (Anton 1992, 20).

The women in the Alexander study of older child-free women were less than comfortable with the stereotype of being unfulfilled and "incomplete or less." Alexander saw these women as trying to "uncover the reality behind the idealization of having children." These feelings were openly addressed by one of the respondents, Ms. Newman:

I hear women complaining. They say, 'I can't take this.' And they get depressed too. . . the mothers and the grandmothers because it's too much work. And they have clashes with the family. . . maybe the daughter and the son aren't speaking. . . I hear this from friends. They say to me 'you're so lucky . . . .' So, all these are little pluses. You lose something, you gain something in any situation. And now all these conventions that were so important in my time. . . to me now they don't feel so important at all. I feel you live your life the way you want to. You want to be single, be single. If you want to get married or have children, it's your choice and nobody should be ostracized or criticized for any choice they make in life (Alexander et al. 1992, 276).

## Literature Review Conclusion

In the review of the literature two points emerged that shaped my approach to my study. The first deals with the persistent socialization of women to become wives and mothers and the social propaganda of institutionalized marriage and motherhood overall. The second area is concerned with research methodology, especially in the selection of subject groups.

Women are socialized to have children. This fact is stated and restated by the researchers cited in the literature review. The current reproductive bill of rights offers women two choices: when to have children, and once that choice is made, how many children to have. It is imperative that a third choice be incorporated in this bill of rights: the right not to have children at all. And while singlehood has become more "normal" in the past two decades, women are still expected to marry or at least be in a couple relationship with a man. A solid body of informed literature presenting the lives and attitudes of single, child-free women could help erase the social stigma by challenging institutionalized myth and stereotype.

It is also apparent that there are too few studies using single child-free women as a subject group. Married women are more often studied and this can skew the conclusions derived from studies when extrapolated to include all child-free women.

The concept of the American family is definitely changing and with this change comes the necessary acceptance of many varying lifestyles. Single, child-free women are one important group, deserving closer examination. How do these women define themselves and their relationships? What are their goals? How satisfied are they with their lives? How do they grow and self-actualize? The answers to these and related questions are the primary focus of my study.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

In order to effectively focus my research, I felt it important to keep my research subjects as homogeneous as possible. Therefore, I have examined single, child-free women who are white and over forty years of age. I am a member of this group. My participants are for the most part products of mainstream middle-class cultural standards and norms. I have not dealt with cultural or ethnic variation in this particular study. I also worked within the assumption that women over forty are more comfortable with or reconciled to their child-free state than are their younger sisters. The women in my study range in age from 40 to 96. I have included lesbian women in my study, since they are subjected to the same socialization as heterosexual women.

Originally, it was my intention to incorporate women of different cohorts to assess how attitudes towards being single and child-free might change over time. I have achieved this to some degree in my sample. I found my subjects through networking. I began by asking women I knew if they were willing to participate, or if they knew of any women who might be. I contacted thirty women in all.

The information was gathered with an autobiographical questionnaire and a personal interview. The questions concentrate in the areas of relationships, being child-free, education, family of origin issues, perceptions of socialization, and career or non-career work lives.

Upon distributing the questionnaire I discovered several of the women to be hesitant about completing it. A few said that the nature of the questions brought up issues they were either unwilling or unable to address; others informed me that it would take them longer than they had first thought to complete it. Several of the women I initially contacted and who agreed to participate, later withdrew. I realized, because of the sensitive nature of my subject, that I would need to be flexible and work within my respondents' comfort zones.

Twenty-two of the thirty women contacted participated, nineteen of whom are presented in the final study. The written responses of the other three were too vague to pull any real data from, and they all refused to be personally interviewed. Two of them were nearly eighty and very shy about answering the questions at all, and tended to answer "yes" and "no" to questions that required some elaboration. The third respondent did virtually the same thing, completing the questionnaire without giving me anything I could use.

Of the nineteen women who did participate, eight were both interviewed and completed the questionnaire. Nine women balked at the questionnaire, and were interviewed only. One completed the questionnaire but declined the interview. Another woman lives out of state and she mailed me detailed answers to the questionnaire, which proved sufficient for data collecting purposes.

I used the questions in the questionnaire when doing personal interviews with the nine women who did not formally complete it. Doing this helped insure I collected data similar to that which I garnered from the women who did both.

The questionnaire I developed and used appears in Appendix 3. All of the women's names have been changed according to the confidentiality clause in the human subject research consent forms they signed. All other possible identifying features have been changed, except those which my subjects allowed.

I have studied single women, both heterosexual and lesbian, who are child-free, and hope this contributes something fresh to the existing body of research. I exercised great care to maintain professional objectivity, paying close attention to the responses of my subjects and not embellishing them in any way.

### CHAPTER III

#### HERSTORIES

As I collected the data, I became fascinated by my subjects and their stories. I asked about their backgrounds, their families and their work in the world. I questioned them about their involvement with life and how they engaged their energies and passions. I asked why marriage, if desired, had failed or been elusive. I wanted to know how they felt about remaining child-free and if this had been an actual choice, or if it was circumstantial.

Recounting each woman's voice in story form gives a distinctive sense of where these women have been in their lives; a personal historical perspective of each woman's journey. I feel it is important to communicate as directly as possible what I discovered. I have found a narrative style to be more effective and comprehensible than presenting the raw data in the first person stream of consciousness I experienced while interviewing. I have used a similar technique with the responses to the questionnaires, weaving the answers together into more cohesive language.

Due to the amount of data incorporated in the stories, I have used only a representative sample in the main body of this paper. I have chosen two older women, three mid-age women and two women in their early to mid-forties. Their voices, when heard together, are a solid representation of the group overall. The remainder of the stories may be found in Appendix 1.



Simone at 77: "I never really wanted children, or to be married."

It has taken us a while to arrange this interview. Simone is a very busy woman and has taken several trips to the East Coast during a short span of time. I feel very fortunate to finally find a time we can connect, because my phone conversations with her have fascinated me. Rarely have I had the opportunity to speak with someone who has such a beautiful command of the English language. I am greeted at the door by a bright-eyed, diminutive woman who takes my hand in her tiny one and ushers me into her dining room. There is a portrait of her younger self above the side chairs. She was a very beautiful woman, and still is, in a softer way.

Simone's mother raised three children. Simone's mother's mother raised twelve children. Simone remembers her own mother sharing with her how frightened she had been to have children, having watched her own mother struggle with twelve. The trials of these two women made a distinct impression on Simone.

Born in 1916 to working-class parents, Simone was raised near Boston. She had one sister eight years her junior and one brother ten years younger. She was very close to her siblings when they were children and felt she often served as teacher and nursemaid to them both.

Simone was born with a very active curiosity. Everything was of interest. She had few friends but through the years developed into her own best com-

panion. Her intelligence and wit could prove formidable obstacles to others, and she was best at keeping herself amused. Her first language was French, which was spoken in her home. "I picked up English very quickly when I went to school, but have much empathy for all those children today, who enter school equipped with the wrong language. It can be terrifying." She did extremely well in school, despite being encouraged to take the usual "girl classes," which she found boring and without challenge.

Simone told her father she wanted to be a surgeon and was told that while she certainly had the intelligence, society wasn't ready for women surgeons in 1930. She then told her father she wanted to be an engineer, because she loved taking things apart and putting them back together. Again, she was told that while she certainly could be an engineer, society wasn't ready for women engineers. Her father, very aware of his daughter's intelligence, finally told her that what she should do was go to law school, that society might be ready for her when she graduated. And so she did. She worked during the day and took law classes at night and on the weekends. Her family could not afford to support her financially during this time but provided her with a great deal of emotional support.

Simone's family was an extremely loyal, loving union of people. She remembers them all sitting at the dining room table (the one we sat at for the interview) discussing everything from what to do about the wallpaper, what kind of car they should buy, to world and national affairs. They went everywhere together and enjoyed one another's company enormously. When her sister

finally married and moved, Simone, her mother, father and brother continued to all go out together. "People thought we were two couples out on a date. Despite the fact my brother is ten years younger, I was always so small that I looked younger than him."

Simone passed the Massachusetts bar exam and became a partner in a Boston law firm. She continued to live at home. She contributed financially to the family for many years and nearly became her mother and father's sole support when her father retired.

Her career in law always demanded that Simone attend many functions, and she would either go by herself, something that was slightly scandalous at that time, or allow herself to be escorted by the senior partner in the firm. Wherever she went she had a wonderful time.

I always enjoyed whatever I was up to at a given moment. I never remember waking up in the morning and dreading the rest of the day. That never was my way. I don't get depressed.

Simone thinks men held her in awe. She was very well respected in a profession that was nearly exclusively male, and she was very sharp intellectually, never holding back her opinion on anything. One man stated that he would ask her to marry him but that she, in essence, scared him. That was fine with Simone. She had no real driving interest in getting married. From what she saw, marriage was a trap and a lie, and something from which women could not extricate themselves once it was done. All Simone needed to do was recall her grandmother's life and the aspects of her own mother's life she dis-

liked, to reconfirm her own single lifestyle. Yes, her family was happy, but her mother seemed a shadow of what she could have been. "I wanted something different and I certainly have gotten it."

Simone has traveled extensively. "Traveling was my therapy." She has traveled throughout all of the United States and all of Africa, except South Africa. "I wouldn't want anyone to even think for a moment that I support apartheid, and having a white face there almost screams this." She has also been to Europe several times and to Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan, and India. Her home is filled with art and "flotsam" from her trips. She did much of this traveling alone. "If I had had to wait for a husband or friend I would never have gone half the places I have gone."

Simone's mother suffered a broken hip in the late 1950s. This changed the structure of the family. Simone became much more of a caretaker, despite the fact her father had retired and could help with the care for a while. Simone worked as a lawyer to support the family and then helped with her mother's care when she was home. Then her father suffered a fatal heart attack while caring for her mother one day. Simone had always been looked to as the most capable person in the family and was expected to carry on even though her brother and sister lived close by. And so she did, for many years. Her mother finally had a stroke that rendered her completely confused as to time and place, and she often did not remember who Simone was. Simone was strongly advised to place her mother in a nursing home, which she eventually did. She then moved to New York City. She was fifty years old, and had done all she could do with

Massachusetts law. She bought an apartment on the East River, got a wonderfully prestigious job and began to have a wonderful time. "I had always enjoyed things, but now really began enjoying them more. I was free, and I don't think I had seen the family trap until it was removed, because it has always been there."

New York City quickly became a scary place to live. The city was nearly bankrupt and crime was on the increase. Simone remembers the legions of beggars, seeing middle class white men in fist fights over a taxi cab, and people being bodily ejected from bars as she walked down the street. She also began to feel a bit shaky professionally, even though "Every time I left a job it would take two men to fill it." She was in her late fifties, and, "If you show even a tiny bit of frailty, the push behind you is so strong that you get bowled over by it." She was offered a job in California and took it. She has been here for nearly twenty years and only retired five years ago, at 72. She still acts as a consultant for the corporation, and is on the board of directors. One of the reasons she considered this part of California was because of the local university and access to cultural events. She is now on several committees and boards that help coordinate such events for the university. She is also taking computer courses at a local junior college.

Simone does not actively regret not having children. She never really wanted a husband and was raised during a time you could not really have one without the other and survive emotionally.

I was sexually retarded. My parents never told me anything about sex. I didn't understand the gestation period for babies until I was

in my thirties and certainly made no correlation between my menses and babies until my father told me there were certain times a woman had to be careful. I just wasn't that interested. The men I found fascinating wouldn't even kiss me because I was too formidable and the ones that wanted to I didn't want to spend time with.

Charlie at 61: "When I was younger I thought having a kid would interfere too much with my life."

Charlie greeted me at the door after peering through the curtains to make sure it was me. She offered me coffee and we relaxed in a comfortable, primarily orange living room dominated by a large television and an exercise bicycle. Charlie is a striking blonde woman dressed in a flowing turquoise caftan. I turned on my recorder, which she immediately grabbed and she sang, laughing, a few bars of "My Way."

Charlie is a third generation native Californian and is very proud of that fact. Raised in the Santa Clara Valley, she can remember riding her horse to the small town of Mayfield and having ice cream with friends. Mayfield is now the town of South Palo Alto, part of the suburban sprawl between San Francisco and San Jose.

I'm an only child. I was the only kid in the whole family. I was the total focus of grandparents and stuff. They loved to tell me what to do. They loved to judge me. My dad was just awful to me as far back as I can remember. He called me a tramp and hit me a little bit. We literally did not talk all during high school.

Charlie moved with her mother and father every two years, back and forth from one small town to another, only ten miles apart. Her father would buy a house, improve it and then sell it. "We bounced around. It was awful. I felt really disconnected."

Charlie remembers her mother having a terrible time, never really being happy and certainly being at odds with Charlie's father. She eventually had a "nervous breakdown." Charlie remembers taking her to the rest home. All the

way, her mother was crying, saying no one loved her. She had been advised to leave her husband by her doctors but could never leave him.

My aunt was divorced and the family really made a bad thing out of that and gave her a very hard time. I think it scared my mother and she also felt financially strapped. She had worked only briefly before she married him when she was twenty-two. And then again for a short time to buy a fur coat or something. She was afraid to leave with a small child, me. Her family never knew how my father treated her, I don't think. I had a lot of resentment about her passivity, allowing herself to be pushed around. That's why I think that I, at times, am pushy and refuse to let people push me around.

Charlie's relationship with her mother changed a lot over the years. Her mother became her best friend and Charlie was totally devastated when she died suddenly.

I was a very unhappy child and was treated very badly by my dad. As a result I was quite rebellious and smart-assy toward my mother. But after I came back from New York, after my marriage fell apart, we got really close. My dad had called me to tell me she was sick, but that it was okay and I shouldn't miss work, for God's sake. His work ethic was amazing. I called the hospital and they said to get right down there that it was bad. By the time I got there she was dead. I made all the arrangements. Dad just left me there with all the belongings and everything; he just disappeared. Then, I called work, told them my mother had died and took my phone off the hook and hid for about a week.

Charlie thoroughly enjoyed school, especially high school and college. She attended San Jose State as a drama major. She then went to the Globe Theater in San Diego, on a scholarship. She then went to New York, where she did off Broadway and summer stock

I really loved acting. I wish I could do it now, but I'm too old, there aren't roles, believe me. I have tried out recently for Chekhov's Three



Sisters and I realized I was even too old to play the older sister. They use older men but not older women. Very fine actresses are out to pasture very soon.

Charlie now watches hours of television, which she refers to as "Valium with a plug." She loves movies and frequently lets the television lull her to sleep at night. Currently she is experiencing a lot of fear surrounding some property her father left her; the units just aren't renting as they should, so she watches television even more.

The property is in a really bad neighborhood. If they don't rent I don't have money to pay my own rent. It's really scary and I'd sell it in a heartbeat anyone would buy it. I have no money set aside. I need to work for a place that gives me medical insurance. I pay four hundred dollars a month for medical insurance now. I would work as a temporary secretary without benefits if it weren't for this. The quality of my life would be totally different. I pay several hundred dollars a month for medications as it is, because of the cardiac problems I had and the by-pass surgery. The insurance and drug companies should be shot.

Charlie was married for a year and a half after seeing the man steadily for seven years. After they were married the relationship began to fall apart.

He re-entered my life about four years ago after not talking for twenty some years. And he came and visited and it was really weird. We talk occasionally now. But he's really getting sick. He's drinking and he never used to drink when we were together. I didn't want to get married, ever. I had lots of offers when I was young. But there was no way I ever wanted to get married after my parents example. Finally I got talked into it but it took a long time.

Charlie feels that all of a sudden she is getting old. It sort of crept up on her. She would really love to be in a relationship now, to have someone close

for mutual care and support. She is not interested in marrying again, rather in having something that's committed, but a bit looser.

This last relationship I was in, I was wild for the guy, and probably would have married him. He was rich which is a real plus (laughs). My fears in the last few years are all financial. They're about being alone, getting older, not having money, all that stuff. This guy knew how to handle money, and was going to help me figure out my finances. But it didn't work out. Sometimes I wonder why we all keep trying to do relationships, because they are so hard, and then I remember that there is nothing like it, just nothing at all like it. And nothing can bring you to your knees like one either.

Charlie doesn't remember ever consciously wanting to have a child even when she was younger. She had an abortion during the brief time she was married and says that she never even considered keeping it because having a child would interfere with her lifestyle. She doesn't add how her husband felt about this. She thinks about the abortion often now. If she hadn't had it she would now have a grown child. This is a lonely and often sad thought for her, despite the fact she maintains that the abortion was really okay. She feels a large part of her decision had also to do with a perceived inability to commit to anyone. She had been unable to commit to her husband and surely could not commit to a child.

Charlie has several close women friends and sees them on a regularly irregular basis. She laughs as she cites her television as a replacement for lots of close friendships. She just doesn't have time because there are so many things to watch. "I have three cable channels, who could ask for more?"

Alice at 53: "I used to feel like a failure because I wasn't married and didn't have children."

I didn't meet with Alice for an interview, although I would have liked to. She lives in a suburb of Chicago and that eliminated any possibility of stopping by. She is the aunt of a friend of a friend of mine. I wrote to her, explaining my project, and she replied enthusiastically that she would love to participate. I mailed her the questionnaire. I was so pleased when I got it back. She had obviously spent much time and thought completing it.

Alice was born in a town of twelve thousand people. She says that her family was upper middle class. She has three brothers and two sisters, all younger. Alice remembers her family as being close knit. She was especially close to her maternal grandmother. This grandmother gave Alice a lot of love and support, and spent a great deal of time at Alice's home baking cookies, telling stories, and cooking wonderful meals.

Alice remembers having a good relationship with her mother. She was very loving and sensitive to Alice's feelings. She was always willing to listen and tried not to influence Alice's decisions or tell her what to do. Alice feels her father expected a lot of her because she was the oldest and that was a bit of a burden at times. She often felt she wasn't good enough to live up to her father's expectations, but finally gave up trying to be the perfect child. Her father has drawn closer to her since her mother's death.

Alice's mother and father seemed to be good partners and there was rarely any conflict at home. Alice says she felt safe. There was a lot of

commotion because of all the children around and a lot of activity, sometimes verging on chaos. Alice was very close to her brother and sister who are closest in age to her, but now feels closer to them all.

Growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, Alice remembers girl's roles being very stereotyped. Her parents encouraged her to play sports but there was very little organized for girls. Alice always did very well academically and enjoyed school for the most part. She did feel left out sometimes because most of her friends had boyfriends and she didn't.

Receiving her B.A. degree, Alice pursued a career in teaching. She has taught elementary school for thirty-one years. She always wanted to teach, and has always loved working with children, often feeling she has been the only stable adult in some of her students' lives. She has enjoyed developing new ways to present the curriculum and doing special projects.

For many years, Alice felt like a failure because she wasn't a wife and mother. She no longer feels that way. When she was about forty that dream ceased being so important. She had always put a lot of energy into her job, but remembers her energy increasing at that point. "I became more involved in my work and in the politics of my school district when I came to grips with myself as a single person."

Alice has rheumatoid arthritis. It began to manifest when she was twenty-seven. She says she has had good times and bad times, but on the whole has probably been sicker than the average person. Her family was and is extremely supportive of her. She really has to be vigilant in caring for herself, taking her

medication, getting enough rest and proper food. She is not able to engage in too much physical activity. She thinks that all this possibly interfered on some subconscious level with her being able to find a lasting partnership with a man. She has had long term relationships, but has never married or lived with a man. Alice is definitely open to a relationship now, but it is not an all consuming desire.

Being child-free herself has not prevented Alice from having a life filled with children. Her students have been a major part of her life, as have her nieces and nephews. She sees a lot of her family and two nieces in particular are more like her own daughters. She enjoys having her family to her home and fixing meals, "doing the home-body bit."

Alice has a wide circle of friends and enjoys movies, plays, and going to art galleries with them. She loves going into Chicago and exploring all the cultural events available. She also enjoys traveling to Wisconsin, where her family owns property, spending time there alone, getting back in touch with herself. Alice has a strong spiritual connection and believes strongly in the power of prayer. She feels this has given her a solid internal foundation and feeling of connectedness.

In a few years, Alice is considering taking the early retirement offered by her school district. She doesn't see herself "just sitting." She intends to volunteer her time, working with adults, since she has spent so much time with children. Or, possibly with children, because she has so much experience with them and their welfare is of major concern to her. In any case, she plans to be well occupied after her retirement from active teaching.

Chris at 52: "I wanted the white picket fence dream, but I wanted a man more than kids."

Chris owns a house on the corner of a very wealthy suburb. I am enthusiastically greeted by Mario, a ten year old black poodle, who is Chris's "baby." Drying her hands on a dish towel, she laughs, "There is no time in the week to keep up with the house, the job and the dog, so I do my dishes in spare moments, like waiting for interviewers to come, and things like that." She quickly adds that she has gotten far too busy lately. She is recently out of an intense relationship and is grieving the loss. Being busy helps her focus on other things right now and she is glad of it.

Chris has been anxious about the interview, fearing that it will hit on issues that will cause her further emotional trauma. We sit in her comfortable living room and have a quiet talk about this thing and that thing, waiting for the proper time to begin the formal interview. It comes and I turn on my tape recorder.

Chris was born in the Midwest and she moved a lot with her family. Her parents were both factory workers and needed to be where the work was available. Her mother ran the family. Chris's father's heart was not strong and he also had a recurrent drinking problem. "We were poor. I grew up looking out at slums wherever I was. I vowed I would escape." Her mother was a very depressed woman, who shouldered the burden of the family very grudgingly. She was critical of everything and everyone. Chris feels she received very little affection or support from her mother. She absorbed the message that life was

hard and no one could be trusted, especially men. Her father was a charming, ineffectual man who gave Chris love when he wasn't drinking. She remembers him as being the bright sparkle in an otherwise very gray existence. She barely remembers her brothers.

Chris matured very early. "I had a woman's body when I was twelve. Men always liked me. The first real affection I got was from guys. So I needed them. I felt all I had to offer was the way I looked."

When she was eighteen she fled. "I got on that plane to New York and I vowed from that point forward everything would be different. The old Chris died on that plane, or so I thought. I didn't know then that no matter where you go, there you are."

She became part of the travel industry and through years of hard work became well respected in the field. "Pretty good for a woman who barely finished high school. Even now, when I tell people that they get this look of disbelief. How could I possibly have this high paying job with no college?"

Chris had many relationships with many men. She was sought after and reveled in the attention. Despite her mother's messages that marriage was bad and men could not be trusted, that was what Chris really wanted. "I lusted after the white picket fence dream and everything that goes with it. I didn't so much want children as I wanted the man to take care of me. I was always looking for daddy."

Chris finally married when she was thirty-seven. She says the man she married wanted her, but not children. "He went out and had a vasectomy with

out talking to me about it. No discussion. I had been feeling my biological time running out and was really getting into the nesting thing with the house and all. And then he did that."

They divorced and Chris never remarried. She had relationship after relationship, always managing to keep the men at a safe emotional distance. She always left them. The distrust her mother instilled in her was solidly in place.

I still think all this corporate ladder climbing and world traveling I've done is a replacement for what I really want but have been too afraid to have. A loving partnership with a man is what I really want. I thought this last time would finally be it. I finally let down my guard and allowed myself to love. And look what happened. It blew up in my face.

Often now, Chris feels that there is nothing for her in life. She is bored by her high paying job and travel doesn't interest her any more. She has many women friends but only feels really close to a few. She is fairly active in her church and is currently volunteering time to help disadvantaged children learn to read. Her family is very disconnected, her brothers being mostly out of contact and her mother is in her eighties and very depressed. Chris's father is dead. Chris has been depressed and very lonely lately and has reached out to her family but she gets no reply from her brothers and only lectures from her mother.

You know what I really think I need is to concentrate on becoming the best Chris I can be and not worry so much that I'm getting old and no one will love me. I actually resent the fact that I have always been so focussed on the heart beat of a relationship. But I always have been. I want to be involved in some work I feel passionate about rather than this stuff I do. I want more self-esteem to know I am okay on some deep level.



Tess at 48: "Basically I never had an urge to have a child; in fact I could not imagine having a child."

Tess lives in a cozy apartment surrounded by redwoods. Her home is furnished with interesting, eclectic pieces she has purchased over the past couple of years. She loves to shop for bargains and is very proud of all the beautiful things she has "gotten for cheap." In the last few months she has finally put her pictures on the wall and feels that this is a statement that she really lives here. There was a time not so long ago that she moved four times in seven months, right after the break-up of her very brief marriage. She was devastated and unable to find a suitable place to put down roots. She finally found this place and moved in with her beloved cat, Miss Pearl. Miss Pearl died a few months ago and Tess is still recovering from that loss. Miss Pearl had been with her during the best of times and the worst of times. No one else ever had. Tess offers me coffee and cake and apologizes once again for being unable to complete the questionnaire. It brought up "too much stuff" at a time when she felt much anguish and bereavement. She feels it is far easier to go through it this way, in person, and on tape.

Tess did not have an idyllic childhood. Tess's mother would drink and have affairs with men. "She was a carouser. She was a moral degenerate as far as I was concerned. I would catch her with other men." Her parents were violent and abusive to one another. Tess firmly believes that she is not her father's child. She looks like no one else in the family and by doing some recounting of family history it seems that her father was away on active duty

when she was conceived. "I hated them, my parents, they raised me in such an environment of fear. I never had any friends. Who could in such an environment?"

Tess's grandmother in Nashville was the closest thing to a safe haven she had. Her address is the only address of all the places Tess lived that she remembers.

My grandmother slept in the kitchen in a feather bed, and that bed was the safest place on the face of the Earth, sometimes she'd let me sleep there. She did things for me that no one else had ever done. I always longed for the mother who baked pies and all that, June Cleaver stuff. I never had any mother. I still have a strong longing for a mother.

Tess ran away a couple of times. She lived with her aunt and uncle during her first year of college, even though her uncle did try to crawl in bed with her.

It was ever so much more stable than my home. There was such insanity at home, my dad was in Panama at that point, and my mother went wild. I had no place to study. I was having a nervous breakdown. I would try to study out in the street at night under a street lamp.

Her father forced her to come home and she says that was when she really came "unglued." She was gone as much as possible, hanging out with a "fast" crowd. "I got a sleaze-ball boyfriend, and got pregnant."

Tess felt a lot of responsibility for her brothers. It was hard for her to leave them. They were just little boys when she left at nineteen.

One day I came home and there were police and fire people and everything at my house. My mother had tried to kill herself and the boys were there. I felt tremendously guilty. I was angry enough and defensive enough that no one ever knew how I felt. I had to get out of there and save myself.

Tess can't remember ever wanting to have kids except during her brief marriage to Bill, which ended a year and a half prior to the interview. She did have two pregnancies when she was younger. The first she attempted to terminate with abortion.

I tried to find someone to do it, I finally did and then the day before I was to go in the doctor had a heart attack. Then a friend of a friend of a friend knew a nurse who told me all this bizarre stuff to do and I had to spend the night in a bare light bulb hotel . . . . I did what I was told I thought, and didn't find out I was still pregnant until several months later. The baby was fine. That was a baby that was destined to be born. I gave her up for adoption.

She got pregnant again in her mid-twenties, despite an IUD, and had an abortion that "worked."

A lot of what Tess feels for her mother now is duty and obligation. They are closer that they were before, especially since they are both sober. She is not someone Tess really seeks out. They became closer about six years ago when Tess's life in New York was becoming unsatisfactory. Tess was very upset one day and called. To her amazement, her mother was actually "there" for her. From that point forward they have been closer.

She was thrilled about Bill and me and even gave us a wedding. And she was the first person I called when we split up. It's incredible, she's been there for me. Of course, we took an awful three week trip last fall and things have been strained. But it's all better.

The theater was always Tess's great love. She made up her own plays when she was a child. In high school she was involved with the drama

department. She majored in theater in college. When she moved to the Bay Area the first time she was involved with a local university doing stage management and related jobs.

When she moved to New York she worked as a temporary secretary and acted in plays and on television. She did summer stock. She found producing to be very satisfying.

I produced this really big deal at a huge hotel in New York once. I worked really hard at all of this, and supported myself doing legal secretarial stuff. Two things I said when I left New York, when I was so burned out, were that I never wanted to work in theater again or see the inside of a law firm. And here I am again doing both.

Tess is considering actively seeking a mate. "I'd like to be married to someone who would like to support me so I can pursue my art, my writing, my acting. I'd like to have a house." She has taken certain actions that make her more available to meet someone, and has even considered running an ad in the paper. She would like to meet someone appropriate. She would like to be a wife.

As I started approaching menopause, I really started to crave having a child on a very deep level. It really surprised me. There must be this biological push that transcends the mental stuff. It bothers me to know I'm growing old without kids. I'm a single woman nearing fifty and I find it scary. I have a lot of friends who don't have children, but that doesn't help me. But I never wanted them when I was younger, and I think I can figure out why, seeing where I have been. I even actively wonder about the baby I did have, the one who was supposed to be an abortion. She's nearly thirty now and probably has my grandchildren.

Carolyn at 45 : "Other people's kids are great. I like visiting, but I never seriously wanted any of my own."

Carolyn has just moved into a new apartment in the complex where she has lived for several years. It has a small yard with trees and places to plant. "The lesson in this is that I remained mindful, I didn't exceed what I could do on a given day, and I enjoyed it as I went along." Carolyn seems very satisfied, despite the moving chaos that still surrounds her. She found herself actually enjoying this move, and used it as an exercise in staying present. She feels she has been much more resourceful and creative in solving problems than in the past.

I sit on the floor and with Carolyn nearby sitting in a cane rocker. She first wants to talk about her mother, who has been much on her mind

My mother looked very much like a young Eleanor Roosevelt, a little more attractive, but not much. She was very sensitive about this, especially since her own mother was a very beautiful woman. She felt ugly, physically ugly. She felt compelled to develop other strengths and abilities, which she did. When you think of her generational cohorts who were pressed into working during World War Two and then stopped and were supposed to marry and have babies, physical beauty was very important, even more so than it is now.

Carolyn does not think her mother liked being a mother; she thinks her mother liked the idea of being a mother. "I think she was in love with the idea of having kids, but the reality was something else. She wanted what she thought having kids meant." Carolyn's parents waited until very late to have children largely because of the Depression. Carolyn was born while her father was a medical intern.

“The emotional climate of my home was frenetic. We always seemed to be rushing to get Dad to work (he was an anesthesiologist), or to get to church.” There was a sense of okay-ness on the surface, in Carolyn’s home, “because nothing else was allowed.” Underneath, Carolyn felt she needed to give her mother a lot of space, because her mother was somehow not a safe person to get close to. Carolyn tried to placate her and keep any possible wrath or criticism at bay by being a consistently “good child.” She absorbed herself in activities and projects. “I chose school, music, church and friends. My mother has been easier to take since I moved away and she and my dad retired.

Carolyn and her younger brother quarreled a lot when they were children. When she was in the eleventh grade he was sent to religious boarding school. Eventually he became a Baptist minister and still tries to convert Carolyn each time she sees him. She keeps visits to the absolutely necessary ones, like her father’s funeral. She is essentially estranged from her nieces and nephews, but the price she would have to pay to be closer is too great. Her brother continues to proselitize with religious intrusions, even by mail. Carolyn expects no relationship with him after her mother dies. At her request, her mother is leaving all the assets to her brother. From that point she sees no reason to be in contact with her brother and is relieved at this prospect.

The person who really mothered Carolyn was her grandfather, her mother’s stepfather.

Most of the warm maternal fun was provided by him. He was my early archetype of mother. It came naturally. He married my grandmother when they were both in their late fifties. I was the first baby he’d really experienced. He almost wouldn’t let my mother play with me. I was his

view of a baby and he was a combination of maternal things and a strong grandparent role. A grandparent's role is to love a child irrationally, and that's what he did. I'm convinced I would be one-twentieth the person I am if I hadn't had my grandfather. I desperately needed a healthy figure to help me blossom. He made all the difference in the world. He died when I was nine, which was really tough. Thank God I had nine years.

Carolyn works as the "stress counselor" at a very large teaching institution. She has a doctorate. She is the eye of the hurricane for hundreds of staff members. She wrestles order out of chaos, smooths ruffled feathers, and moderates the un-moderatable. She dries tears, points out the right direction, cajoles, jokes, sympathizes and hugs. She has a mother job. And through it all she is able to remain calm, soft and approachable.

If I were married and had kids, I would have great difficulty with this job. It uses all my extroversion quotient. The guy would have to be very quiet and the kids would have to be nearly brain dead for me to do it all. Some women thrive on that sort of thing; they are the extroverts. I am not that way and it's just fine with me.

She has had relationships in the past, the longest lasting one year, but doesn't feel a need to be in a couple at this point. She is not actively pursuing a relationship, but would find it agreeable if the right man should appear.

Carolyn develops the programs and workshops she presents. There is always something new and exciting in the field that she wants to share with the staff. She finds this a great creative outlet and is always happy to receive feedback about possible changes from the participants.

Much of my reading over the past few years has been about right brain functioning. A lot of people talk about connecting with the right brain and what it thinks that you have to have to keep both parts of the brain happy. Stuff like drawing or writing with the opposing hand, or

doing analog drawings, which are, you think of a problem, draw a solution to it and then turn it upside down. The right brain is the part of the brain that sees things holistically, intuitively.

Carolyn deals with her own stress by meditating and jogging. She started “deliberately” jogging about fifteen years ago when she was a new doctoral student in Michigan. She realized she was going to have to increase her stamina.

Someone taught me to jog slow enough so I could get started. And I just loved it, and I love it still. I have hurt myself a couple of times but I learned from this that I needed to pace myself and take care of myself. I try to do that in the rest of my life, too.

Carolyn is very interested in drawing and painting and has an area set aside for such pursuits in her home. She took a drawing class for awhile and loved it, and has an art table, and during the week spends free time working at it.

Sometimes I just draw my response to the day. The stuff is my internal experience. The workshop I’m going to this weekend is on art therapy. I’m hoping to use more right brain techniques in the workshops I do, so this is one source of right brain stuff.

Her fantasy of the perfect life is to retire early, in about ten years and move somewhere out in the country, with only a “couple of cows for neighbors.” She wants to just do art, not for resale but for herself. She wants peace and solitude and no responsibility other than making a cup of tea and watching the sun set.



Kate at 42: "Having children wasn't something I felt I had to do."

Kate is a warm and vivacious woman. She radiates energy and interest. She really wants to do this interview, even though she is a bit apprehensive. She is still dressed from work and says she will faint from hunger if she doesn't eat. She offers me a soda, and we sit on the carpet in the company of an ancient feline, Bruce.

When Kate was in her late teens it scared her that the only avenues seemingly available for her were traditional woman things.

When I graduated from high school there were few choices, you could be a secretary, a stewardess, a nurse, or a mom. How could our mothers tell us to look for something better or different, when the choices were even more severely limited for them?

School was a problem for Kate. She had the double difficulty of stubbornness coupled with low self esteem. It took awhile before she committed herself to getting her bachelor's degree. She is currently working on her master's degree. "I didn't even know I graduated with honors for my B.A. until a friend of mine saw my diploma and said 'Oh, you graduated with distinction too.' I was really surprised." Kate plans to apply to Ph.D. programs in clinical psychology. She currently works counseling injured workers for a vocational rehabilitation facility. She acts as a liaison between the workers, lawyers, doctors and insurance adjustors.

She did not plan her career, but the job she currently has she did seek out. It was a different avenue of counseling she felt would be beneficial. She feels she needs to explore various areas of the counseling field.

Kate never felt like getting married was something she had to do. It makes her “crazy” when her women friends say they would “die without a man.” It concerns her that their identity is so bound up with men .

I'm not going to die or fall apart if I don't have a guy. But it's funny, when I was filling all that stuff out, the questions, I was babysitting a five year old for the weekend, and I'd just met that guy that I thought might go somewhere and all these feelings came up. I think I really knew that maybe I was getting to the place where a choice about kids was no longer there. This guy, wow, I felt a soul connection I hadn't felt in so long. It's been over five years since my last relationship and I've like gathered all these tools, I thought and wanted to try them out. Intimacy stuff, there is just another level that you can reach with a man, you can't get there with a woman, and it's because of the sexual stuff. And I felt what I suppose is a longing for a child.

While Kate feels basically fine not being in a couple relationship, what she knows she can't do without, is her core group of five or six women friends.

I don't think I could survive without them. They haven't lost that sense of camaraderie and support. You know how some women will say what they think you need to hear, but they don't believe it? Well, these women don't do that.

Kate thinks she has always rejected the establishment, “as far back as kindergarten when the teachers referred to me as a non-conformist.” She did the protesting and the peace marching relevant to the sixties. She really doesn't think she was radical compared to some people, but certainly radical when compared to her parents. “I developed a core set of values early on which seem

to put human welfare first. Sometimes it makes me feel weird to live in a house and dress well and espouse other things, some kind of contradiction.”

One of Kate’s stronger social positions has to do with her perception of society’s ongoing disregard for children. She sees many of the current social ills as the result of poor or non-existent parenting.

What’s the point of having kids if you’re not going to raise them? Like when I went to pick up that five year old I took care of at this day care place, there were just all these kids. The latch-key kid syndrome. Mommy and Daddy both work, there’s no adult home, the kids bond with television and all it’s skewed messages, so really no one to bond with. Alcohol, drugs and gangs. The gang kind of replaces the family. It’s so different from when I was raised.

Kate’s parents were married in 1935 and had to wait until after WW II to start a family. Her father had been in prison camp. Her mother was then in her thirties, and Kate doesn’t think her mother would have had a family if she had to do it over again. “She had to do it then because that’s what you did.” Kate was raised in a climate where no one discussed anything. No one talked, no one complained.

I remember being really upset when I realized that I was going to have to have a period and men didn’t. Mom assured me that periods and having kids didn’t hurt; well, she lied. I think all women lie about stuff like that, it’s total denial time.

Kate sees her mother as very conservative, but doesn’t think her mother knows why. Her mother won’t talk about it. She is pro-choice, however, which amazed Kate. Kate’s father doesn’t have much to say either. He was the abso

lute authority in the family when Kate was younger and worked constantly. He saw in Kate a stubborn streak he didn't like and tried to stamp it out. A couple of years ago she found herself having to take a very strong stand with her parents, who still viewed her as a wild teenager. She demanded their respect for her as a responsible adult. This created a tense emotional climate for awhile, but Kate definitely feels it paid off. Now, they often call just to say they love her.

Something profound happened to the family after Kate's brother's death, especially to her father. Kate says he started to melt, to soften, and would do things like counsel young couples in the grocery store to spend time with their kids while they are still little. He apparently deeply regretted that he had not. "My sister is making a big effort to raise her kids differently, but, with the person she married, it's just like my parents all over again. But she doesn't discuss anything. And I talk everything out, that's how I function."

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS

The analysis is divided into eleven sections incorporating the answers to the questionnaire and responses gathered during the personal interviews. The sections include relationships with family and others, being single and child-free, jobs, and self-expression. I have presented sections on family of origin first because the relationships the women subjects had with their parents and siblings often directly correlate with their being child-free and single, which are the two categories that appear next. I then present sections dealing with other relationships in their lives, followed by the three final sections on social involvement and creativity.

To make my presentation more clear and cohesive, since all nineteen women are represented, I have separated the women into three groups, based on age. The first group, which I have referred to as the "older group," contains the four women who are ages 73-96. The second, which is designated as the "middle group," is comprised of the eight women ages 48-61. The last group, which I have called the "baby-boomers" because they were all born in that post war era, contains the seven women ages 40-46.

Direct quotes from a representative group of seven women follow the analysis in each section. To incorporate the voices of all nineteen women would present too much raw data. This same decision was made concerning the

Herstories. For the sake of continuity, I have chosen to use quotes from the same women whose stories appear in the previous chapter. The rest of the direct quotes can be found in the Appendix 2 of this study. I have chosen to include one woman in her seventies, one in her sixties, two in their fifties, and three in their forties. This represents an age cluster in the mid-range of the whole group. These women most closely represent the breadth of experience, feelings and perceptions of the group overall. They were neither entirely affirmative or all negative in their answers to the questions in each specific area.

The fact that the women in these groups were all socialized during somewhat different frames is of great interest to me and will serve as the foundation for further study. I have briefly mentioned supposed time influences in the analysis, but to fully explore all the social and historical ramifications is beyond the scope of this thesis.

## MOTHER

In her book, Women Who Run With The Wolves, Clarissa Pinkola Estes states that women receive a legacy from their own external mother [mom], and this becomes an aspect of the psyche, the internal mother (that knocking in our belly that tells us where to go and how to get there). This internal mother has many different voices and can be repellent or nurturing, depending upon the woman's actual experience with her own mother and the internal mother "is made, not only from the experience of the personal mother but also other mothering figures in our lives, as well as the images held out as the good mother and the bad mother in the culture at the time of our childhoods" (Estes 1991, 174).

A woman can be daunted by a hands-on-hips judge for an "internal mother" who is never going to allow success to be successful enough, or woman to be woman enough. Conversely, the "internal mother" can be a stifling presence in a different way, trembling and caving in at a sidelong glance from anyone in perceived authority. Many of the women I studied seem to experience this finger-shaking in their heads about everything from leaving the cap off the tooth-paste, to not having any children, or were equipped with a cowering ghost mother inside that faints and whines if things don't feel or look like they are "supposed to."

"From the very beginning, the mother has to encourage the daughter to be her own person, not to just let her go, but to encourage her" (Friday 1987, 192). Fewer than half of my women subjects received this kind encouragement,

and were relegated to inventing themselves as they went along. A frightening sense of loneliness and disconnection can result.

The bond with the mother is the first made by any human baby. If the bond is unstable and the mother less than available or absent, the girl child may become fearful of establishing other primary relationships in her life. She may be ill equipped to be a partner in a long term primary relationship that demands commitment. This lack can also make it very difficult for a woman to conceive of conceiving. Having a child definitely requires commitment. How can we rejoice in raising children if we feel we were not well raised? Is it really possible to celebrate our own motherhood when our mothers were at odds with their role, or we saw them being crippled by it? How do we form lasting bonds with other adult humans, both women and men, if we cannot trust? Certainly, there are degrees of trust, but fundamental trust begins at the beginning. While a feeling of disconnection from their mother was not reported by all the women I studied, it seems a fairly common thread. Even those who say they loved and respected their mothers, present them as flawed, very human and distracted by their own issues.

As is reflected in the literature review, Lichtman (1976) and Faux (1984) found that many child-free women absorbed messages during their childhood that predisposed them for non-motherhood. Wondering what these specific messages were for my group, I questioned whether the women in my study felt close to and trusted their mothers, considering them to be allies. How did they



experience their mothers when they were growing up? Did they think their mothers were satisfied with the mothering role?

Three of my four women subjects in the older age group (73 to 96) consider their mothers to have been allies and confidants they could rely on. The fourth admits to feeling distanced from her mother. She thinks this is because she was a "surprise" baby, twenty years younger than her siblings. All of these women became caregivers for their mothers in one way or another, but professed few negative feelings about this course of events. They considered it natural. Considering the point in time these women were raised, it is likely they would feel more obliged to care for their elderly parents than the younger women in the study. These older women were unmarried, child-free, dutiful daughters in an America that had not yet proclaimed old as bad and begun to warehouse its elderly. Minnie and Simone, both of whom lived at home with or in close proximity to their parents most of their adult lives, expressed feelings of freedom when their parents died. Both had felt bound by love, and in a way, honored, to be their parents' caretakers for so many years but appreciated the release when it came. Jackie professed similar feelings of liberation but first made me aware of how much she had loved her mother and how bereft she felt at her mother's death. The fourth woman, Grace, would send money home for her mother's support, but was far more disconnected than the other three.

Of the eight women in the middle group, ranging in age from late forties to early sixties, three felt close to their mothers during their growing up years, two did not. Of the five who did not feel close to their mothers when they were

growing up, three developed varying degrees of closeness in the relationship later in life. Tess, whose mother is alcoholic, felt very alienated from her mother when she was a child, but they have established an "arm's length" relationship as time has gone on. Tragically, Emily's mother was killed in an accident when they were finally becoming close. Charlie felt a lot of resentment at her mother's passivity, but they grew closer over time.

Few of the women in the middle group felt that their mothers presented strong mothering models they wished to emulate. While Jenny and Alice presented their mothers as strong and capable in certain areas neither woman has followed her mother's life course. Both Sonny and Chris remember their mothers as being very unhappy. Sonny's mother supported the family for years after her husband's death, and always seemed sad and distracted, although loving. Sonny is certain, from what she has learned recently, that her mother was "clinically depressed." Chris's mother felt trapped by motherhood and often told Chris that she certainly wouldn't have had children if she'd had a choice. Patricia's mother was ill a lot, demanding much attention and Patricia feels some anger that her own life had to shrink accordingly.

While several of the women in the middle group have begun to put their mothers' actions and responses in a larger context as time has gone on, many of the women in the "baby-boomer" group seem to be even more analytical about what motivated their mothers to lead the lives they did. They are also much more critical and aware of how family of origin "dysfunction" can affect the lives of children. Six of the women have clearly negative feelings about their

mothers but several tend to qualify them. Carolyn experienced her mother as “dangerous,” but is aware of the negative influences that may have shaped her mother’s attitudes. Early in her childhood, Dana began to isolate in order to avoid her father’s anger. This also resulted in a wedge between her and her mother for which Dana blames herself. Rachel says her mother did not “have time to be nurturing and supportive,” because she was so busy caring for her own ailing mother. Kate feels her mother was just an actor in her own life, doing what was “supposed” to be done, and did not know how to reach out to her children. Noel was “terrorized” by her adoptive mother, who was an alcoholic, angry woman. Joanne’s mother was also alcoholic, “but a brilliant artist underneath.” Joanne always feared she would someday become her mother’s caretaker.

Only one woman in the “baby-boom” group, Corrie, stated that her mother was a confidant and ally. And yet I found Corrie’s responses to be apologetic and guarded as if she were trying somehow to protect her mother. Corrie says her mother did not make mothering look like “fun,” that she was alcoholic and often clearly miserable.

All of the women feel they are getting closer, even posthumously, to their mothers as time goes on. Perhaps the propensity for family analysis that was strongly apparent in the “baby-boom” group, and evident to a lesser degree in the middle group, has also contributed to their reconciliation with their mothers. Even Noel and Joanne, whose mothers have died, are making peace with their mothers. It is possible that these women can now see their mothers as human

beings with human frailties who really did the best they could in the face of often overwhelming odds. This perspective often is the first step in forgiveness and reconnection.

While many of the women I studied felt love and sympathy for their mothers, only seven really think of their mothers as having been allies and confidants when they were growing up. Some of this can be attributed to the alcoholism of four of the mothers, and to the fact that seven of the mothers worked outside the home, thus putting constraints on their focus and time. The fact that twelve of the women did not feel close to their mothers earlier in their lives may well be a contributing factor in these women's "decision" not to become mothers. There was no close association and therefore little empathy between mother and daughter. Several of the mothers are presented as "good mothers" in the traditional model, but also are presented as being less than happy with their role. This dissatisfaction made an impression on their daughters and made the traditional mothering role seem unattractive.

## VOICES

The following is a representative sample of the women's perceptions of their mothers, in their own words:

Simone at 77:

My mother was afraid of having children. I was born three years after my parents married, which was odd in those days. Her mother had had a dozen children and it had been awful. It left a mark on my mother. I think my mother would have liked to have had more of her own life, but that wasn't done much either back then. One did as one's husband wished. This made a deep impression on me.

Charlie at 60:

My mother loved me. But she had such a bad opinion of herself, low self-esteem, I guess. She just let my dad be the family law. She never did anything for herself, only for him. She seemed scared a lot and had nervous breakdowns. I really loved her, especially later, when we got closer before she died.

Alice at 53:

I had a good relationship with my mother. She was supportive and loving and sensitive to my feelings. I was always certain that she loved me and wanted me to be happy. She was always willing to listen to me and talk things over. She tried not to influence my decisions or tell me what to do. I'm sure she wanted me to marry, but supported my being single. We did a lot together and enjoyed each other's company.

Chris at 52:

The message was that life was hard and you had to survive. She didn't want children, she said that time and again. I think she saw her mother suffer so much by having twelve kids. She talked often about how trapped her mother was. She was always saying if it weren't for us kids she would leave and things like that. She lives in Indiana now, and is 83. I hate it when she visits. We have nothing in common and I feel so much resentment.

Tess at 48:

She [mother] was a scandal. She was a carouser. She was a moral degenerate as far as I was concerned. I would catch her with other men. We have gotten closer, especially since we are both sober. We don't really see eye to eye, but we try harder. I must admit that a lot of what I feel for my mother now is obligation.

Carolyn at 46:

I experienced my mother as strong, unpredictable and dangerous. The messages I got about me were that I needed to be competent and take care of myself. I needed to somehow make things comfortable for her. I basically coped with her by pouring myself into or hiding out in things of which she approved, so she'd leave me alone.

Kate at 43:

Mom was in her thirties when she had us, which was older back then. I don't think she would do it now if she had it to do all over again. She had to do it then, that's what you did. How did she raise us? Well, we didn't talk about things, we didn't complain about stuff, total denial time. Don't talk about politics or religion. We still don't. My mother is really conservative, but I don't think she knows why. And you can't question her reasoning, that's a no-no. It is just the way it is. We don't talk about stuff, even though things are better than they were. My mother acted out her lot in life, or what she thought it had to be. Women got married and had kids and that was that. It wasn't so much what she said, but what she did. Mom still defers to my dad.

## FATHER

The structure of the nuclear family places the father one step back in the initial bonding with offspring. This is especially true in the image presented by the American-dreamed nuclear family. Historically, fathers were not especially encouraged to interact with their children, beyond a requisite pat on the head, or spanking. Father was the bread-winner and did not need the “distraction” of children’s needs and dynamics. It was his responsibility to go out into the “big world” wrestling with whatever dragons approached. When he returned home, exhausted, he might bestow gifts and smiles or beatings and bruises or just plain silence. Then, he would rest and be coddled, so that he would be able to go out after more dragons. This scenario has been slowly changing, especially in the past two decades, as more women are entering the formal work force and the “role” lines between parents are becoming more blurred. Fathers are now encouraged to engage with and experience their children. However, most of this change began long after my groups of women grew up.

Many of the women I interviewed felt very removed from their fathers, a couple adored their fathers from a distance, while a few of them felt their fathers loved and nurtured them. In some instances, the father-daughter bond appears strong; in other instances, the father is viewed as cold and critical, or weak and vacant.

Of the four older women in my study, only one considers herself to have had a really distant relationship with her father. Grace’s father was fifty when she was born, and died when she was in her early teens. They did not make

much of a connection and she often felt she was a “bother” to him. She says, however, that he was a good father. The remaining three women consider themselves to have had good relationships with their fathers. All of these women say they loved and respected their fathers; even Minnie whose father had a “roving foot” and didn’t stay in jobs too long. He had a “good heart” and was a “nice man.” The remaining two, Jackie and Simone, felt their fathers were supportive, encouraging them to pursue careers. Jackie thinks her father did so because he feared she “would become an old maid babysitter for nieces and nephews.” He wanted more for her than that and fearing she wouldn’t marry, pushed her toward a career. Simone’s father apparently was aware that his daughter had uncommon intelligence and knew she would not settle for less than its full expression. These two women experienced an intensity of paternal encouragement that would seem unusual during the time they were raised. Most women of that period were not encouraged to stray too far from wifedom and motherhood.

Of the seven women in the middle group, two women volunteered that their fathers were not really their fathers. Both Sonny and Tess maintain that their mother’s husbands were not their biological fathers despite the fact that the family unit presented them as such. Sonny’s father was “hostile” toward her and she did not feel loved. Tess’s father, an alcoholic, was oblivious to her feelings and was absent a lot.

Of the remaining five women only Charlie professes any truly negative feelings about her father. He was physically and verbally abusive and they did



not have any relationship except an adversarial one until she was much older. Both Emily (whose father was alcoholic) and Jenny became closer to their fathers after their mothers' deaths and think this was largely due to "neediness" rather than desire. Patricia and Alice felt friendly toward their fathers; Patricia being her father's "buddy" and Alice the focus of positive, albeit, difficult paternal expectations. Despite the fact of Chris's father's alcoholism, he was the definite object of her affection and she was much closer to him than to her mother. The trend in this group seems to be the establishment of closer relations with the father, in later years, often after the mother has died. Only Jenny and Alice have fathers who are still alive.

In the "baby-boom" group, only one of the women felt particularly close to her father. Despite the fact he was gone a lot, Joanne feels she was "daddy's girl" when he was at home. They have grown even closer since her mother's death. The remaining women feel everything from discomfort and disdain to outright dislike. Carolyn considered her father a "wimp" and "invisible." Dana's father was an angry man who directed this anger her way, causing her to withdraw. Rachel's father was "responsibly irresponsible." He was gone a lot on business and liked to "play" when he was home. Corrie sees her father as a shadow figure in the family, and still does not feel close to him. Kate and her father had an actively conflictual relationship that has improved through the years. Noel believes her adoptive father liked her and her brother, but was basically ineffectual. He could not or would not protect them from the rages of his wife.

The women in the older group, for the most part, spoke of their fathers with honor and respect. Since they were all raised in the earlier part of the century when the patriarchy was still seamless, this deference appears normal. While a few of the women in the middle group have gained perspective as to what influences motivated their father's behavior both affirming and negative, the "baby-boom" group proved more analytical and critical of their father's actions and family participation as they did with their mother's family involvement. Many of the women saw their fathers as selfishly pursuing their "own thing" at the expense of closeness and interaction with the family. Three of these younger women report that they are currently closer to their father, having gained a larger perspective on their father as a person.

In the overall analysis, thirteen of the women interviewed did not feel they had affirming relationships with their fathers while six felt affectionate towards their fathers and cared for by them. Nine of the women saw their fathers as the dominant authority figure in the family, while five considered him to be a lesser source of power. Three of the women say that their fathers were actually cruel to them. Four women report that their fathers were alcoholic.

The father is often the first male a child experiences. While the closeness quotient is usually not as binding as that with a mother, the influences, good or ill, are still operating. The nuclear family is structured with the father role supposedly providing a sense of security, financial and otherwise. The father has historically represented the larger world, and his interaction with it and rewards from it manifest in family health and wealth. It is quite likely that a

less than positive relationship with a father can predispose a woman to mistrust relationships with men and feel less than secure in the realm beyond the family. A woman who has been so impressed, may well hesitate to recreate such a family structure in her own life, and may choose to remain single and child-free.

## VOICES

The following are reflections of the representative samples relationships with their father presented in their own words.

Simone at 77:

My father was an enthusiastic, interesting man who thought I was wonderful. He made a reasonable living and supported the family until I could help out. He did actively encourage me to become a lawyer.

Charlie at 60:

My father and I had a negative relationship. He didn't talk to me while I was in high school. We only just got it a little bit together after my mother died. We were fairly good friends the last several years of his life. I was able to be there for him when he died.

Alice at 53:

My relationship with my father was good. I always knew he loved me but expected a lot of me, especially since I was the oldest. I sometimes felt I didn't live up to his expectations. I wasn't smart enough or athletic enough. My father felt education and emotional stability were important and I took this very seriously when I was growing up. I tried hard to be the perfect child until I was about thirty.

Chris at 52 :

My dad couldn't keep a job because he had a bad heart and drank, but he was the only one who was soft and kind, even though he was a drunk. I think I bonded with him, and loved his sparkle.

Tess at 48:

As the story goes, my father is not my father. My mother had an affair during World War Two. I believe it. I don't look like anyone. One memory I have of early childhood was when my parents had separated, and we were in Nashville and my father had come to get me at school and we were walking down the corridor. I was very upset and started to cry and he said, 'Oh, don't worry, you have nothing to worry about.' I remember the feelings as if they were yesterday, I knew then that there was no way I could ever tell him the depth of my pain. I was very little.

Carolyn at 46:

I experienced my dad as competent, hard working and invisible. Even though he always participated in family dinners, church and holidays, there was this wispy, I'd-rather-be-working quality about him. This past year when he died, I learned from his siblings how puritanical and self-righteous he was around them. It surprised me because he seemed like such a wimp at home.

Kate at 43:

My dad was raised on the other side of the tracks and developed a kind of stubbornness to survive. I mirrored this kind of stubbornness and am real assertive. Dad's word was law; we used to really get into it. He would say black and I would say white. We do better now, especially since my brother died.

## MOM AND DAD

The relationship between our parents can either have a positive or negative influence in our lives. What we observe has subtle and not so subtle impact. It is from these observations that we gather information on how to grow our own relationships. If our parents were at peace with one another, enjoying each other's company, appearing supportive and loving, we tend to try to build the same qualities into our own relationships. If our parents merely co-existed with little interaction, that becomes a model. If they argued and created an emotional atmosphere of tension and fear, we may internally decide that this is the stuff that coupling is made of, and shy away from it, or recreate the dissonance in our own lives.

One fact is particularly striking among my group of women. All of their parents stayed married. Certainly, from looking at my data, some of these couples would seem to have had good reason to dissolve, but none of them did. Since several of the spouses died fairly young, it is possible that unhappy unions might eventually have come apart had death not been a factor. There were affairs, periods of nonresidence and in a few instances, violence. But, despite these factors, all the parents stayed together. Currently, the United States has a fifty percent divorce rate. Dissolutions are easy to obtain and people leave marriages more often. Social and personal guilt surrounding divorce is evaporating. However, at the time my respondents' parents were married, the messages about marriage and divorce were far different. Divorces were frowned upon, harder to get and, therefore, occurred far less frequently. It was

much more the norm to stay in a sour marriage. And perhaps, it is in part this staying together no matter what the difficulties, that affected some of my respondents so deeply. They are, for the most part, daughters of parents who often disliked or barely tolerated one another. Witnessing discord, disdain or even a simple lack of communication between parents can cause a child to feel insecure or unsafe.

The four older women remember their mothers being subordinate to their fathers. Their fathers were employed and their mothers made sure the men came home to a comfortable environment. Peace at home was very important. None of the women recall witnessing actual conflict between their parents. It is very possible that when these women were raised, quarreling between spouses was a private event. Most interaction, both affectionate and argumentative, was done behind closed doors.

Minnie remembers her mother constantly adjusting home circumstances around the needs and whims of her husband. Simone thinks her parents had a good connection but the balance of family power definitely fell in her father's direction. Her mother was a quiet, submissive woman. Jackie believes her parents loved each other, although she does remember hearing them argue late at night, in tense whispers. Her mother was clearly her father's domestic caretaker, and was very dependent on him. Grace thinks her parents liked each other, but says she was so young when her father died that there may have been undercurrents of which she was unaware.

The middle group is divided, four of the women recalling a harmonious home environment and four recalling disquiet. Alice remembers her family home as being emotionally stable and filled with good humor. Her parents laughed a lot, and were warm with each other. Patricia says she recalls nothing beyond "normal conflict." Jenny and Emily consider their parents to have been happy. They both say that their mothers were clearly subordinate to their fathers. The mothers managed the family and even held jobs outside the home, but both still had a lesser voice in family decision making. Jenny remarks that her father "still doesn't know how to boil water."

Of the remaining four middle group women, three experienced fear in response to the intense negativity in their homes. All three escaped as soon as possible. Charlie recalls a lot of conflict between her parents. Her father was often insulting and "boorish." Chris's parents were abusive to one another and her mother would sometimes pack the family up to get away. Her father was alcoholic but still was "in charge," and her mother felt it imperative to flee the chaos he created. Tess remembers that her "home life dripped with a very palpable violence." Her parents would drink and fight, often involving Tess and her siblings. The fourth woman, Sonny, feels her parents married to escape their growing up circumstances, and never really got along, especially after Sonny (fairly obviously some other man's child) was born.

All of the women in the middle group perceived their mothers as being subordinate to their fathers, even Emily, who perceived her mother as "strong." These women were raised during the decades of the forties, fifties, and early

sixties. This was a period, especially the early part, when the United States was recovering from the second World War. The American Dream was launched and the pervasive social messages involved having a home and kids. Television spread the images of perfect families in weekly series. Father was the “dragon slayer,” and mother tended the home fires and raised the children. Hence, subordinate wives were the norm. Looking back on their mothers’ perceived subordination, several of the the middle group women imply that they wished their mothers had been stronger and not so pliable in relationship to their fathers.

“Peaceful co-existence” was the most positive term that the “baby boom” women used to describe their parents’ relationship. There does not seem to have been a really enthusiastic connection between any of the women’s parents. These women were also raised under the influence of the American-dreamed nuclear family. What the media showed as what was “supposed” to be going on at home, and what was really going on, were often very different things.

Carolyn thinks her parents tolerated each other and tried to work as a team, with her mother being the caretaker of her father in reality. Dana doesn’t understand how her mother could love her father so much and watching her mother cater to him made a negative impression on Dana. Corrie feels her mother did not really respect her father and that they were at odds most of the time. Kate thinks her parents coexisted peacefully and have become more affectionate with each other through the years. Noel says that her adoptive father completely deferred to her adoptive mother, that mother was boss. Rachel’s



parents are much closer to one another today than they were when they were “struggling.” The only real violence occurred in Joanne’s family. Her parents were both verbally and physically abusive to each other and “always in conflict.”

In most instances the balance of power seemed to fall to the father, largely because of the family structure when all the women were growing up. Some of the women felt great sympathy for their mothers who had given up their own aspirations and married and had children. Few of the women witnessed strong loving relationship between their parents. The ones that spoke of a stronger spousal connection tend to be the women in the older group, and their viewpoint may largely be attributed to the time they were raised. The middle and “baby-boom” women may well have gotten the message that being married meant entrapment and a loss of power. There was often an obvious lack of communication and sometimes even violence between their parents. Even the women in the older group, who seem to accept the family power structure as natural, may well have been subtly impressed that women do lose freedom in such an arrangement. Some of the women flatly stated that they did not want to deliberately recreate the trauma they experienced as children and feel this contributed to their perceived inability to commit to their own relationships.

## VOICES

The following are reflections by the chosen group on their parents’ relationships, in their own words.

Simone at 77:

They got along fine, it would seem. They were very courteous to one another and rarely said an unkind word, to my hearing anyway.

Perhaps they were something short of devoted. My mother was very dependent on my father, but that is how things were in those days. She didn't have a life beyond him, and that certainly wasn't appealing to me. My father cared for her for a long time after she broke her hip.

Charlie at 60:

They never got along. There was a lot of conflict, and I really picked up on it when I was a kid. My mother just wasn't happy and my dad was real closed and often angry. He was really into his own stuff and ignored us.

Alice at 53:

My parents got along with each other, and with us. I have three brothers and two sister, so six kids in all. This tended to make our home environment seem hectic, but underneath it was peaceful. The home atmosphere was emotionally stable. Both my parents had excellent senses of humor so we laughed a lot and had fun. They were fun. I consider my home to have been happy.

Chris at 52:

My dad was a drinker and my mother was a martyr. He'd drink, she'd sigh and complain and then let it all build up to the point that she was yelling at him. Sometimes she'd throw things at him. I used to say my father would 'die' every weekend because I would usually find him passed out drunk on the floor at some point and think he was dead. My mother would pack us up every now and then and move us away from dad. They'd get back together and it would start all over again.

Tess at 48:

My parents both involved me as confidants in their sex lives, and told me terrible things about each other. There was a lot of violence between my parents and that filtered down to us. My mother would agitate my father. I hated her. I couldn't trust her with anything. My home life dripped with a very palpable violent sexuality.

Carolyn at 46:

My mother took care of my father. He was a doctor and was always in a hurry to be somewhere. I think they got along okay. I remember them arguing, but I guess it was within normal limits.

Kate at 43:

My parents' interaction did not seem strained or strange for the most part. I do remember they never displayed physical affection like they do now. At times I did not feel safe when they argued or interacted with tension. It was confusing to me.

## SISTERS AND BROTHERS

Siblings are also a large piece of the relationship mosaic. Interaction with sisters and brothers can be a reality check for who we are and how we should function in the world. We have a shared history with our siblings that is unique. We learn, in part, how to fight dirty, fight fair, and share important things, like parents, and whether we should stay in situations, or run. Same gender siblings are mirrors of our own selves, whether they are older or younger. If they are older we may wish to emulate them, and check things out with them as life happens to us. If they are younger we may consider them a happy or grave responsibility. Whatever the connection, the impact of siblings is great. As we mature, staying close to or drifting away from them also leaves impressions and affects the quality of our lives. A few of my subjects had no siblings, a few had no sisters. It is interesting to look at the peace-conflict-closeness equation of the sibling relationships related to me by my subjects.

The older group of women recall little conflict with their siblings, and three have maintained close ties through the years. Two of the women, Minnie and Grace, had siblings far removed in age. Minnie was twenty-nine when her nine year old adopted brother, Eldon, came to live with the family. Grace was born twenty years after her closest sibling. Minnie often felt like Eldon's mother and Grace remembers being treated like "a little doll." Neither actually grew up with siblings.

Jackie and Simone remember primarily positive interactions with their siblings while growing up. Of Jackie's three brothers, the oldest has died and

she feels reasonably close to the two remaining brothers. Simone, who cared for her younger brother and sister when they were growing up, is very close to her brother and visits him often. Living at home with their parents until they were both well into adulthood, Simone and her brother were often mistaken for husband and wife. Simone did not feel particularly close to her sister, whom she considered "weak."

In the middle group there is a mixture of isolation, alienation, closeness, and caregiving. Both Emily and Charlie felt isolated as only children. Emily's aunt, eight years her senior, did live with the family for a while, but Emily still felt essentially alone. Charlie wishes she had had a sister or brother to bond with and learn how to argue and interact. Chris feels really alienated from her brothers. It saddens her to feel so apart from them, but she says she has accepted it. Patricia has an older sister and brother and is very close to both. Jenny has a "distant but loving" relationship with her only brother.

The three remaining women assumed much of the responsibility for the care of their younger siblings. Tess was the one who "ran interference" in her family, keeping the kids, especially her brothers away from the potential violence at home. She is trying to keep in contact now and has more success staying close to her sister. Alice is the oldest of six children and "felt responsible for them, and always looked out for them." She remains close to all her siblings. Sonny was primary caregiver for her younger sisters and was "more of a mother to my sisters than I was a kid." She is very close to her sisters today.

In the “baby-boom” group, several of the women feel they were very responsible for their siblings when they were younger and all but one have close connections with their siblings now. Rachel provided much of her younger brother’s care when they were children. He is also not married, and Rachel says they are still quite close. Corrie, the oldest child, was a “junior mother” to her brothers and sister, and says she accepted it as normal. She is very close to them all today. Kate was close to her brother, who died very young. She is growing closer to her sister and feels this is a very positive relationship in her life. Joanne remembers being a caregiver for her sister and brother when they were all younger. She worked to establish an even closer connection with her family after her mother’s death. Dana feels she is growing closer to her brother now that they are both adults. Only Carolyn feels truly alienated from her sibling, and has purposely distanced herself from her “raving Baptist maniac” of a brother. She plans to have nothing to do with him once her mother dies.

I think it significant that except for Patricia, who is the only woman who had an older sister close to her in age, most of the women had no sister to really bond with or use as a reference point or role model in ways older or close-in-age sisters often provide. (Grace’s older sister was more like a “second mother.”) My group of women lacked the “mirror” and shared perceptions sisters can provide. The other women who do have sisters, have much younger sisters, whom they looked after.

In the group as a whole, eleven of the nineteen women are the eldest child in the family. Five of these feel they were caregivers for their younger

siblings, assuming much of the mothering role. It is very possible that caring for siblings in this way, at an early age, can make a woman feel like she has already raised children and make her wish to be free of such responsibility. It is also possible that the role of caregiver may become ingrained and set up a need to recreate such “mothering” opportunities in ways other than motherhood itself. Many of women seek out people oriented jobs and careers, where they can provide guidance and nurture. As is presented in the section on “Education and Work,” this focus is not uncommon in the group of women I studied.

## VOICES

The following are several of the women’s thoughts about their connection with their siblings, in their own words.

Simone at 77:

I visit my brother in Florida quite often. We are quite close and enjoy spending time together. I was raised in a very close knit family. I didn’t marry and my brother married late. We both lived at home with our parents. We would travel together, the four of us. We all liked each other so much. My sister married young and moved out, so I didn’t remain as close to her. She was chronically ill, poor woman, and died a few years ago.

Charlie at 60:

I was the only kid. Not having brothers and sisters to fight well with I always was scared to death of fighting and thought it meant the end of relationships. I’ve never really gotten over this. I was also the total focus of any kid attention that was going on in my family and this was a problem. I wanted to go hide a lot.

Alice at 53:

My relationship with my sisters and brothers is great. I am close to all of them and really have been all my life. I was closest to my brother and sister who follow me in the family order. I am the oldest, but now am

close to all of them. When I was growing up I felt responsible for them and always looked out for them. They knew I'd take care of things for them. I always loved them and knew they loved me.

Chris at 52:

I have two brothers and I rarely hear from them. The younger one is mentally unbalanced and the older one is just hard to deal with. I sent him fifty dollars worth of flowers to congratulate him on a new job and I never heard from him. I suppose it makes me sad, but it's been this way for so long.

Tess at 48:

I felt a lot of responsibility for my brothers. They were just little boys when I left at nineteen and it was so hard to leave them. One day I came home and there were police and fire people and everything at my house. My mother had tried to kill herself and the boys were there. I felt tremendously guilty. I was angry enough and defensive enough that no one ever knew how I felt. My relationship with my sister today is pretty good. One of my brothers has AIDS, and the other one is at periodic odds with the law. So I guess all this is as good as it can be under the circumstances. I try to be there for them as much as possible. I think my sister would help me if I needed it.

Carolyn at 46:

My brother became a Baptist minister and tries to convert me each time I see him. I keep visits to the necessary ones, like my father's funeral. Still, he infuriates me with religious intrusions, even by mail. I expect no relationship with him after my mother dies.

Kate at 43:

My brother and I fought all the time and yet we were closer than my sister and I. My sister always seemed a little further removed. Plus, I was the younger sister who always wanted to go with her and her friends. My brother used to like to hang out with me, not always to my delight. His death was absolutely devastating to me and a relief at the same time. My sister and I are closer now than we've been. She used to drive me crazy; she is so normal and I refuse to be. But since she had her baby we've gotten closer and I really crave being around them.



## BEING CHILD-FREE

Research into the supposed “maternal instinct” has been inconclusive (Ross and Kahan 1983). Some of the women I interviewed experienced at certain points in their lives, strong urges to have children, while others have not felt the urge at all. A few of them told me they think the maternal question is more a social push than a biological bulletin. However, many of them did express regret that they now do not have a “family” of the sort that includes children.

Alexander (1992) conducted a study among older child-free women looking particularly at the the regrets associated with not having children. Many of the women saw themselves as sorely lacking something, especially as they got older. Several of the women felt they had failed in life, no matter what else they had accomplished. As they got older and heard friends talking about the accomplishments of children and grandchildren, the women in the study said they felt deeply saddened and left out.

When Nancy Friday was interviewing Dr. Helen Deutsch for her 1987 book, My Mother, My Self, Dr. Deutsch commented that Nancy would always regret not being a mother herself. The words filled Nancy with anxiety. She had been ambivalent for years about having a child, and on close scrutiny realized that she wanted to keep her creative and emotional energies for her work and her marriage. Nancy still fantasizes about what it would have been like to have a son to share with her husband. Her decision not to have a child does not mean she never dreams about what might have been (Friday 1987, 428).

However, in Carolyn Morell's (1991) study the respondents claimed few regrets about remaining non-mothers. Most of their regrets were associated with lost educational opportunities, or career setbacks. These women did not regret not having children; "they never desired to have children in any strong way" (167).

In the oldest group of women I studied, two have felt strong regret during their lives that they did not have children, one felt reconciled early on, while the fourth never felt a maternal urge. Jackie felt that for many years "her life was wasted" because she did not have children, but she slowly adapted. Grace "felt badly at times, and sad" that she never had children, although she feels her "independent streak" would have made successful motherhood essentially impossible. Minnie reconciled herself to being child-free early on and regrets not being a grandmother more than anything else. She also feels that her adopted brother, twenty years her junior, is a bit like a son. Simone would have liked to have had a child as an experiment, to see how she could guide it, but has no real feelings of "loss or frustration."

In the middle group, comprised of eight women, all express varying degrees of regret that they did not have children, though several of them clearly did not want children when they were younger. Emily "couldn't face being a single mother," and had an abortion when she was in her early thirties. She now regrets not having children. Charlie feels sadness as she gets older that she has no children, but can't "remember ever consciously wanting to have a child" when she was younger. Her abortion during her marriage is something

she would probably do again. Tess was pregnant twice, gave the child up for adoption and aborted the second pregnancy. She feels badly now about not having a child, but understands her total lack of desire when she was younger, "seeing where I've been."

The remaining women in the middle group all have what Alice terms "mixed emotions about not having children." While they appreciate the freedom associated with being child-free, all of the women at times feel there is something lacking in their lives. Patricia is "comfortable or resigned to the fact" that she does not have children, but thinks that a woman has to learn to cope with "feelings of inadequacy." Chris never really wanted children, except briefly during her marriage, and then her ex-husband did not. She is at times regretful, but says she never had the "biological urge I hear women talking about." Jenny might have considered a child if she could have been assured it would be a "little girl with braids" and if she also could have been guaranteed a perfect relationship with the child. Sonny feels she "missed out on the fulfillment of maternal emotions," but says philosophically, "it just wasn't meant to be." All of these women appear to be in the process of accepting that they will never have children. It seems that they are often quite regretful but do realize that coming to peaceful terms with the reality of being child-free is very important. As Alice says, "It's viewing the glass half full rather than half empty."

In the "baby boom" group Carolyn and Rachel never really wanted children. Carolyn realized early that she enjoyed other people's kids "but didn't want to raise them myself." Rachel had a cancer scare in her twenties, which

gave her occasion to consider if she really wanted children, and she realized she really didn't care. Kate says that she has made a "conscious decision at this point not to have children," but is not completely closed to the idea. Corrie thinks that much of the reason she didn't have children has to do with her early caretaking of her siblings. She sometimes feels a "baby tug," but knows that she doesn't want children now. Dana thinks she may have made a good mother and has had regrets but "it's never been an everyday thing." Noel, who had an abortion when she was in her twenties, always wanted to have children, and has thought about adopting. Joanne, the youngest woman in the study, is still "maternally ambivalent." She knows she is not too old to have a child, but is also very focused on other things.

In summary, six of the nineteen women say they have few regrets associated with remaining child-free. Seven say they, at times, have been very regretful, but have adapted. Five say it seemed to be what they wanted when they were younger, but now are very regretful they have not had children. Four of the women have had abortions, and experience varying degrees of regret associated with this choice. The youngest woman may still consider having a child.

It appears that several of the women who chose not to have children when they were younger, did not wish to never have children. It was a choice made at the time, and was never assumed to be permanent. Remaining child-free for most of the women in the older and middle groups has been circumstantial rather than planned. All of these women have, at one time or another, with exception of perhaps Simone, felt excluded or isolated because they did not

have children. The younger women do not feel as excluded or isolated. Their child-free state still seems more of a choice, despite the fact that a few of them do express some regret about not having children.

## VOICES

The following statements are some representative perceptions about remaining child-free.

Simone at 77:

I don't have any feelings of loss or frustration related to not having children. I think I would have liked to have had the experience of having become a mother, because to me it would have been like taking material, like a computer, and programming it from birth. That little baby has a lot to learn, especially in that first year, trying to live outside a bag of water. It's got to learn to breathe, to howl, how to monitor sounds, how to get attention when he needs it. I had a man say to me once, 'Don't you just ache to have a child?' And he couldn't understand it when I said I didn't. Not ever.

Charlie at 60:

I don't remember consciously wanting to have a child. I was pregnant when I was married and it never occurred to me to keep it. I aborted it; it would have interfered with my lifestyle. There are times I feel very sad that I don't have children, that I never had a family especially thinking about that abortion I had and being alone without any family. If I hadn't had that abortion I would have a child, I would have somebody now. But I never would have been able to raise a child. If I had it to do all over again I probably would have made the same choice. I never met someone I felt I wanted to commit to, even my ex-husband.

Alice at 53:

I have mixed emotions about being childless. In some ways it's great because of the freedom but in other ways I feel I've missed out on something by not having children of my own. However, I don't really think of myself as being totally child-free. I have spent thirty-one years working with children as a teacher. And I have not only been their teacher, but

also mother, father, counselor, supporter and for some of them the only emotionally stable person in their life for that year. I also am very close to my nieces and nephews, nineteen of them altogether, especially two of the girls. I have many children in my life, so I am not really child-free at all.

Chris at 52:

I never wanted children when I was younger. My obsession has always been with having a significant other. I never had the biological urge I hear women talking about, until I was forty. All of a sudden, I was married, I wanted a baby. David was restless and wanted to sell everything and head for the hills, and I was nesting. We were polarized. I was convinced that every woman had a baby but me. It's hard for me to figure if I really wanted a baby or if it was this nesting thing. My husband wanted me but he didn't want a child. He'd already had one family. He went out and had a vasectomy without talking to me about it. No discussion. The urge lasted awhile and dissolved over the years. I do regret sometimes not having children. I love being with people's kids. I couldn't do that for a long time because it reminded me of what I lacked. It does bug me to grow old with no close family.

Tess at 48:

It bothers me to know I'm growing old without kids. I'm a single woman nearing fifty and I find it scary. I have a lot of friends who don't have children, but that doesn't help me. But I never wanted them when I was younger, and I think I can figure out why, seeing where I have been. I was pregnant in my twenties and had an abortion that didn't take. I had the baby and put her up for adoption. I think about her now, she'd be an adult with her own kids. Then, later, I had another abortion. No, I never wanted to have kids. I never remember wanting them. Oh, much, much later, in the last five years, when Bill and I were together and I thought I was pregnant, I did then. But basically I never had an urge to have a child, in fact could not imagine having a child. But as I started approaching menopause I really began to crave having a child on a very deep level. It really surprised me. There must be this biological push that transcends the mental stuff.

Carolyn at 46:

On two or three occasions, once in my twenties and twice in my thirties, I have thought seriously about whether I wanted kids. Each time

the result came out that I enjoy other people's kids but don't want to raise them myself. And so, I enjoy kids in my neighborhood and friends' kids. I feel I can scratch my itch by renting instead of owning. I really enjoy the freedoms associated with not having kids. My time and money are my own.

Kate at 43:

I have made a conscious decision at this point not to have children. It never seemed an issue prior to this. There was a time in a relationship I would have had children, but it was not a burning desire. Having children was never something I had to do. At some level not having children does bother me, maybe it's social conditioning along with the sadness of loss. I believe the maternal urge is a sociological phenomena. I believe some women have children because they really want to, others because of social pressures. I personally feel maternal toward children and adults. You don't need to fulfill this maternal urge by having a child, there are other ways.

## SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Unmarried women have often been stereotyped as forlorn, reclusive maiden aunts, who hungrily care for other people's children, or embittered career women living narrow, self-centered lives. Happily, this image has been changing, but single women are still often categorized as lonely, alienated, and somehow missing something.

"I wonder why she never married," implies that there is something wrong with a woman who remains single. And although the woman may have a rewarding occupation, many friends, and many talents, she, too, may judge herself in this fashion. Not being a part of a couple, a woman may become hypercritical of herself and wonder what she has done wrong, or, more severely, what is wrong with her (Anton 1992, 20).

For many women, singlehood seems much more of a sore point than remaining child-free. Being in a relationship with a member of the opposite sex is almost essential for membership in the social world. I sensed a certain not-so-quiet desperation in some of the single, child-free women I interviewed, especially in the middle group. As one woman said, "If I don't find a man quick, I'll get old and be totally unacceptable." Unacceptable to whom? To men? To herself? To everyone? This feeling is especially frightening when manifested by women who appear "together," who have created reasonable lifestyles, and are fairly satisfied with their lives in all other areas. It seems staying single automatically undermines self-esteem.



This frenzied need to be part of a couple may cause women to make bad choices. Anton suggests that due to messages they received when they were growing up, many women connect with men who are simply unsuitable.

A woman who saw her alcoholic father destroy himself and his life may try, symbolically, to rescue him through involvement with other alcoholic men whom she thinks she can help. A woman who was abused as a child does not believe that she is lovable or that she deserves love and happiness (Anton 1992, 49).

These women often involve themselves with men who mistreat them or abandon them. They may also have difficulty with men who can be present for them. A deeply rooted fear of commitment often overwhelms a woman's best intention to stay in a relationship.

The culture is rife with what might be called the "Prince Charming Syndrome," and it is nearly impossible for women to remain impervious to the pull of its message. We are cajoled into believing we must become gorgeous, socially well graced, firmly fleshed and coy in order to attract him. A compelling component of this message is that Prince Charming will come rescue us if we're "good" enough in this way. Ironically, if we are realistically "good" enough, living our own full lives, we may not want or need a man to even attempt a rescue. But, women have great difficulty detaching from the pervasive imprinting. It seems to hinder us, prune us back, divert energy that we should have to create and continue our own vital dance. Unfortunately, we remain susceptible to the dictates of society whether we want to or not. This "couple stuff" is impressed upon women at an early age, as is the "baby stuff."

In Anton's group, the women had "opportunities to marry, but as one woman said, 'The right man never asked me.'" The men they have met who were willing to commit to marriage were not the ones with whom these women wished to spend the rest of their lives. They refused to compromise their hopes, their dreams, and lives for something that is less than desired. They were not willing to marry just to be married, and they were not willing to marry just to have children (Anton 1992, 20).

Several of my women respondents were married or had the opportunity to marry or to be in marriage-like relationships. Most have been in couple relationships. For many reasons, none has yet found a partner to whom she could make an enduring commitment.

In the group of older women no one ever married. Two felt they were too independent to make a successful marriage, one held an ideal of a man no one could measure up to, and the last found few suitable men available to her. Minnie never found any man who could "hold a candle" to a male cousin she adored. Grace feels she was possibly "too stubborn" to have made a good partner. She has often felt excluded because she was not married in a very married world, but she "lived through it." Simone always liked men and did date, but felt she was possibly too high powered for men. She also was not willing to embark on a marriage not knowing "what the fellow was going to be like." She wanted to "be able to take the hat back" if she didn't like it. Jackie would have "loved to have been married and had children," but did not find a suitable partner.

Six of the eight women in the middle group have been married, none of the marriages lasting over three years. These represent the only marriages in the entire group of nineteen women. Of the remaining two, one has had long term relationships and the other has not. All of the women say they would like to be in a relationship now or in the near future. The degree of desire to be in a relationship ranges from Jenny, who was briefly married, saying she "would not want to live if I knew there would never be another man in my life," to Patricia, who would like to meet someone, but it's not an "all consuming desire." Alice would like to be in a relationship and says she "sometimes feels inadequate because I am not married or in a committed relationship." Emily, who wanted children much more than marriage, has had long term relationships and now would like a relationship based on "mutual support." Sonny was briefly and traumatically married in her twenties. She says she had "really given up hope" when she met Jim, her fiance. She wasn't engaged when she began this study, but is anticipating being married soon.

Three of the women in the middle group admit to having formed negative opinions about marriage from observing their parents. They all say this negativity has caused them difficulty staying in relationships, despite the fact that being in a relationship is what they really want. Charlie says "there was no way I wanted to get married after my parents' example," but she was "talked into" a short marriage. She confesses to "commitment problems" but really would like to be with a man. Chris feels she received many mixed messages about relationships and thinks this has made it difficult for her to find an appropriate mate.

Still she searches, hoping to find a permanent partner. Tess, whose year-long marriage ended disastrously, would really like to be a "housewife" and is considering actively seeking a mate. She is a bit concerned because she has what she terms "intimacy problems."

It was surprising to find much less active desire to be in a relationship among the "baby-boom" group. I had assumed that the "boomers" would be at least as anxious to be in a couple as the women in the middle group. Perhaps this assumption is my own social conditioning showing. Only Corrie said definitely that she wants a "lifemate." The rest of the women were more or less ambivalent. Carolyn is not "actively looking" but would be amenable to becoming "un-single if the right man appeared." Rachel likes "things to be very simple" and sees relationships as a complication. Dana has had a few long term relationships, but is a bit "discouraged" now. She might be willing to "share space and time if the right person comes along." Kate likes her life style, and says "I don't need a man. I don't need the sex." She would, however, like a man to be "soulful with." Noel had a two year "marriage" with a woman and it took her a long time to recover. She gets lonely and would like "someone someday," but for now is happy staying home with her cat. At present, most of Joanne's energy is going into her new business and she sees the future as being a time when she will have more time to bring to a relationship.

The older women seem to have reconciled themselves to not being in a relationship. While marriage was expected of most women raised when they were, they did not marry and adapted to a single life. Their perspective on

many things, relationships included, seems to have changed with age. The things that were once weighted heavily, are no longer. The desperation and fear associated with remaining single for some of the women in the middle group is notably missing from the older group.

A few subjects in the middle group said they felt like their "time" to be in a relationship was running out and that they view this very negatively. It seems ironic that many of these women, intent on finding a partner, say they have commitment or "intimacy" problems. When they have been in relationships this fact has made it difficult to maintain them. As one woman commented, she has the "come-here-go away syndrome." The desire to be in a relationship and the perceived inability to commit seem to be operating in tandem.

The younger women are involved in many things and, while probably aware of the social pressure to be in a couple, are presently not succumbing to it. The messages of personal strength and autonomy that manifested with the women's movement during the 1970s and 1980s may have been internalized by these younger women. All seem to have a "do your own thing" philosophy, expressed in their own unique ways. Possibly, they are secure enough in their lifestyles that they really don't feel the desperate push to be in a couple that is manifested in the middle group, many of whom were raised in the '50s and '60s when the "American Dream" was still in full bloom. Their ambivalence could also be a product of witnessing the dis-ease of their parents, none of whom were really happy. Perhaps these women have on some level decided that

their energies are better spent in other areas. And maybe they don't need, to the extent that Jenny from the middle group does, the guarantee of "a date for Saturday night for the rest of my life."

When the middle group women were growing up, in the 50s and early 60s, sexual relationships were more confined to marriage than they were beginning in the late sixties. All the women in the study who were at one time married are in this middle group. The advent of the birth control pill, and the resulting sexual freedom, changed the way people dated and married, as is evident in the "baby-boom" group. All of these women have had couple relationships but none has ever been married.

In summary, thirteen of the women have never been married, and the remaining six have only been married once. In the middle group, six have been previously married. All eight would like to be in a relationship now or in the future. Four say they perceive themselves as being unable to commit to a long term relationship. Of the seven women in the "baby-boom" group, none has ever been married, except one lesbian woman says she was in a marriage-like relationship for two years. Three say they are ambivalent about being in a relationship. Only one really wants a relationship right now. None of them reports having "commitment problems."

## VOICES

Following is a representative sample of the women's thoughts on relationships with significant others, presented in their own words.

Simone at 77:

I think I frightened men because of my career as an attorney and the way my mind works. I can't really abide slowness. I have dated in the past, but I never really was deeply involved with anyone. It doesn't really bother me. I never was highly sexed. I don't have a libidinous drive, so none of this was a real problem. I like men and enjoy their company, but in my day you couldn't try on the hat unless you bought it. I wasn't willing to jump into something such as marriage without knowing what the fellow was going to be like. I probably would have fared better in today's society, where cohabitation is fine without marriage.

Charlie at 60:

I had lots of offers when I was young. But there was no way I ever wanted to get married after my parents example. Finally I got talked into it but it took a long time. I did therapy a few years ago and my therapist asked me if I thought it at all strange that the only relationships of any length I had had since my marriage ended were with a married man and a gay man. Talk about commitment problems! If I have a man in my life I never turn it (the television) on. Television is a substitute. I think sometimes I need to get more involved in life and get out there and do the things that I like to do and meet someone. I think getting older is the pits; it removes the choices you once had.

Alice at 53 :

I've had relationships in the past, but my history is a little different because I developed rheumatoid arthritis when I was in my late twenties. This probably worked on me subconsciously in a lot of ways, and perhaps explains some of my hesitancy when it comes to relationships. I like men and would like to have a relationship. I have good male friends, but that's not the same. Sometimes I feel a little inadequate because I am not married or in a committed relationship. I sometimes get kind of lonely even though I have a fairly busy social life and I'm openly accepted and included by my married friends.

Chris at 52:

I think I have always had an image of the white picket fence family, and all this other that I have done, all the world traveling and ladder climbing is not what I really wanted. But I couldn't allow myself the other, because of fear. I was always so critical of everything and men meant a life like my mother's. Men will mess up your life, but I continued with them anyway. Now, I want to get married and spend the rest of my life with the guy. What worries me is that I might not be equipped to carry it off. Bad role models. I am learning, but it feels like I fall back into the doom and gloom I learned from my mother. I have moved from man to man in my life. Early on I thought it was because I hadn't found the right one, but after awhile I realized that maybe it had something to do with me, too. I get scared too because I'm getting older and maybe no one will want me.

Tess at 48:

I have been considering actively seeking a mate. I have taken certain actions that make me more available to meet someone, and even consider running an ad in the paper. I would like to meet someone appropriate. I'd like to be a wife. I'd really like to be a housewife. I never got to be one. I was always scared it wouldn't work. I'd like to be married to someone who would like to support me so I can pursue my art, my writing, my acting. I'd like to have a house. The singles scene is really scary. I don't go to bars and these church things are so sin oriented.

Carolyn at 46:

I've had relationships in the past. The longest one was a year. I think I would really like to be un-single if the right man appeared, but I'm not out there looking. I have friends who want to 'fix me up,' which I think is funny.

Kate at 43 :

I have a man friend who keeps telling me, 'Kate you're lonely, Kate you're lonely,' and I keep saying no! I'm not! I'm not lonely for a man. I like my lifestyle. I don't need a man. I don't need the sex. What I do want is a man I can be soulful with, that's where the loneliness is if it is. I never felt like getting married was something I had to do. Maybe it was how I was raised. Some of my friends would die without men, it drives me nuts. It seems their identity is zero without the guy. You're only pretty if you have a guy next to you, you're only worthwhile if you're with a guy. I



never felt like I needed a man to complete me, I never got that from my mother. If a guy was inappropriate, I'd say oh, well and move on to the next thing. I think women become sucked dry by their own neediness; it's not the men who really do it. We're raised that way, to give and give until we don't have any boundaries left.

## COLLATERAL FAMILY

Several child-free women I know seem to be constantly buying gifts for new grandnieces and nephews, receiving pictures in the mail and planning visits. They seem as proud of these kids as if they were their own. My aunt, who is single and child-free, each year spends much energy and much time on her extended niece-nephew network. She has made herself a well-known presence in their lives, is well-loved, and reaps the benefits. She has created the children that she has wanted.

I have other friends who are close to the children of their friends. In one instance, the girl will come, when she is on school vacation, and stay with my friend. They laugh, eat pizza, go to the movies, go shopping, talk, and share. My friend is 45, and the girl is 15. Another friend just adores her friend's little boy. She cares for him often, and they have developed a very special bond. These two women are also creating the children they want, and sharing time in ways beneficial to the children and the women (as well as the the children's mothers!).

I was impressed by the number of women in my study who consider nieces and nephews to be central to their lives. I had become aware of this type of family connection while compiling my literature review, but that wasn't as real as hearing it from my women subjects.

The Rubenstein (1992) study referred to in the literature review, described close relationships with siblings, nieces, and nephews. These

collateral family ties were considered fulfilling, and the informants often likened the relationships to parent-child ties. This is echoed by Morell (1991) who suggests that child-free women often develop lasting friendships with children who were either related or the children of close friends. These women also felt they made special contributions into these children's lives because they were not the mother and, therefore, the children could be more open with them. According to Schneider, relationships with collateral kin (nieces and nephews etc.) and kin-like non kin (the children of friends, etc.) were often extremely supportive and connected. ". . . Childless women may become involved in relationships that are central to them and enduring and that, while non standard, are enriching and generative" (Rubenstein et al. 1992, 276).

In the older group of women I interviewed, all are close to their extended families. Minnie says she has "lots of family." She is closest to her adopted brother's family and says, "They take good care of me." Grace has many grand nieces and nephews who, "all seem really fond of me, which is a blessing." Simone considers herself to be very close to two of her three nieces. Jackie has one nephew with whom she travels and is very close to her "other nieces and nephews and their children."

In the middle group of respondents, Emily feels close to her "dad's sister's sons." Charlie maintains connection with a young woman cousin who is her only remaining close relation. Alice feels she will always receive any kind of support she may need from her family, and comments that she is very close to one of her nieces, in a "better mothering way." Patricia lives with her widowed

sister and “her kids and their kids are around. I feel I belong.” Jenny feels she was closer to her nieces when they were children. Tess enjoys seeing her sister and her kids, but they live “states away.” Sonny says her nieces and nephews feel like her “grand kids” and she adores them. Chris is not close to her brothers nor her older brother’s children. She has a step-daughter she is in contact with occasionally.

In the “baby-boom” group, only Carolyn feels alienated from her collateral family. She is at odds with her brother who she considers intrusive. Dana sees her nieces and nephew, but felt closer to them when they were younger, especially her nieces. Corrie is “close to all my siblings and their kids.” Kate feels a growing love for her sister and child. Noel has a baby niece she adores, and is close to two cousins and their families. Joanne has close feelings for her sister and brother, but they have no children. Rachel also has no nieces and nephews, but is close to her brother.

Ten of the nineteen women feel close to their nieces and nephews in particular. Five women have no nieces and nephews, but two of these feel close to their larger family. Twelve in all feel close to their extended families, while seven women do not. All of the women do comment that they either experience or understand how vital connection with collateral family can be, especially as one grows older. Being surrounded by supportive people can give a richness to life that may otherwise be missing. Child-free women must often initiate the “family building” process by keeping in close contact with family and friends, who are often busy with their own lives.

## VOICES

The following is a representative sample of my subject group and their perceptions about the relevance of collateral family in their lives.

Simone at 77:

I have three nieces and I'm very close to two of them. My brother married in 1960; he and his wife had two girls. They are beautiful girls. They were educated very nicely. Each girl is now married; they married two years apart. They haven't had any children yet. They and their husbands are professionals. I'm sure they won't have children merely for the sake of having children, but will do it sensibly.

Charlie at 60:

I have one cousin now who is young enough to be my daughter. We're not real close but we are all the family that is left.

Alice at 53:

I have extremely close relationships with two of my nieces. One of them, Emmie, is closer to me than she is to her mother and I have really given her as much love and support as I've been able. I really feel like these two are my own kids, and their mother acknowledges this. Emmie lived with me for quite awhile, but is on her own now. I'm sure I would receive physical and emotional support, should I need it, from any and all my family members.

Chris at 52:

I am not close to my brothers. One has kids, but they live across the country. I rarely hear from them. I do, however, have step-children from my marriage, and my step-daughter calls me occasionally.

Tess at 48:

I don't see my sister and her kids too often; they live states away, but enjoy them when I do.

Carolyn at 46:

I really have little contact with my extended family. My brother is not my cup of tea.

Kate at 43:

I actually need to be around my sister and her child periodically. I feel an incredible amount of love for them sometimes, and just can't get enough.

## WOMEN FRIENDS

When we are children we socialize with other children. If we are girls we gravitate toward other girls because of shared interests and a common language. We band together, creating a concept of the world. Little girls have a sisterhood all their own. Often we distance ourselves from boys and decide we hate them. Boys are yucky, smelly and gross. At least we perceive them that way until our hormones shift and puberty arrives. After this point, much is different. The girls we considered friends suddenly become rivals for the boys who are surprisingly no longer yucky. We become alienated from one another and forget the power our union held for us when we were younger. Luckily, as we mature, we often surmount our jealousy of one another and bond once again. More often than not this reunion takes place around experiences of marriage and child rearing.

However, spending time with women who are discussing Jamie's diaper rash, Toni's first dance, or their new grandchildren, can make a child-free woman feel as if she just beamed down to another planet. The issues are just not the same and the way a child-free woman relates to life has a different essential energy. In response to this, child-free women may form support groups to discuss issues, difficulties and interests pertinent to them, and to celebrate themselves.

The child-free women Rubenstein (1992) studied valued friendships with other women very highly, often referring to their friends as sisters. These friends provided a feeling of family that their actual family often could not. The women sustained these friendships over time, feeling that their women friends were more like sisters. They looked upon their friends as an “untapped source in a time of need” (275). And, as Morell (1991) suggests, child-free, single women tend to cement their relationships with other women as they get older. This process creates a stable support network that will persist in time.

All of the women I interviewed agreed that women friends were a great resource. Many of the women have friendships that have lasted through the years and depend on these women friends to be there for them in a familial way. Many feel they have been able to share life’s experiences with their friends in a truer, more intimate way than they could with their families of origin. Other women feel a lack of friends and would like to cultivate more, aware of the rewards and benefits associated with long term affiliation.

In the older group of women I interviewed, Minnie says she has had many friends and is now well connected with the residents in her retirement community. Grace still sends out “a hundred Christmas cards a year.” She also feels “surrounded by lots of friends” where she lives. Simone has had lots of friends over the years, but none have been especially close. Jackie has had several important friends die recently and is not enthusiastic about the prospect of “courting new ones.”



All of the women in the middle group value their friendships with women and see them as a positive support network. Chris, who depended on men for validation most of her life, has especially begun to value her women friends since “men seem to evaporate.” Jenny gravitates toward women more like herself, single and child-free, rather than the married group with whom she used to associate, because they have more in common. She has had several of her friends for many years. Patricia considers her sister, who is older, to be her closest friend. Charlie thinks she would have more friends if she didn’t escape into the television so much and sometimes makes a concerted effort to reach for the telephone rather than the television “clicker.” Sonny sees her women friends as being a “mainstay in the relationship area for many years,” and will keep it that way, despite her upcoming marriage. She has several friends who are also child-free.

In the “baby-boom” group, Carolyn would like to have more and closer women friends, and sees this as a priority. Dana has “many close women friends in the gay community” and she feels she gets a lot of support from them. Rachel sees herself in transition where friends are concerned. During her “hippie” period she affiliated with a large group, but that shifted into couples. While not really bothered by her “loner” status, she is interested in finding women who share her philosophy. Corrie says she has eight very close women friends and spends as much time as she can with them. Kate has five women friends with whom she is tightly connected; three of them are also child-free. Noel has

many women friends in and out of the gay community whom she intends to keep in her life "for years to come."

All of the women in my study placed high value on friendships. Many of them felt their friendships would afford them ongoing support in years to come. A few expressed the desire to have more women friends in their lives because they could see the benefits associated with this kind of relationship. Many of the women report strong connections with other child-free women because of common interests and concerns.

## VOICES

The following are perceptions concerning the importance of friendships in the lives of the representative group of women.

Simone at 77:

I have had very many friends in my life, none of whom I would consider terribly close. There have been periods when I socialize with my business associates and discuss matters with them. I seem to have good rapport with those with whom I work. My family however, seemed more a social focal point than those outside. I am close to my brother now and to his wife.

Charlie at 60:

I have a few good friends and more women friends than men friends. I think I would have more friends if I wasn't addicted to television. I watch things on television to take me out of myself. I have three movie channels and cable.

Alice at 53:

I have four or five close women friends. We do things together. One of them is child-free and I am probably closest to her because we share more in common. I love entertaining all my friends in my home.

Chris at 52:

I have a really strong support network of women friends. A few of them don't have kids so we can be there for each other as much as possible. I really have learned to count on them in recent years. Before, I would always count on whatever man was around, but now it's my friends. Men seem to evaporate and they are from another planet anyway.

Tess at 48:

I have one really close friend who I have had for over twenty years. She was one of the reasons I moved here from New York. I have a variety of friends I socialize with now; sometimes we're closer than others, but we are always in fairly close contact.

Carolyn at 46 :

I don't have as many female friends as I would like. There are about three women that I consider good friends, and I have many female acquaintances. I am so busy with my job that often I need to spend time alone. I'm rather anti-social sometimes, but it fits for me.

Kate at 43:

I have about five close women friends. They are my heart beat. Without these women in my life I don't know where I would be emotionally. They have all been an enormously, caring, supportive group.

## EDUCATION AND WORK

Occupation, career-oriented or not, is an important expression of a woman's self in the world. Since work takes up so much time and energy, the more rewarding it is on a personal level, the more satisfying a woman's life may be.

Veevers (1975) reported that the child-free women studied felt themselves freer to pursue careers; they felt more mobile, and had more creative energy and time. They also placed a great deal of emphasis on self-development. These women also rejected rigid sex role stereotyping. Susan Bram (1984) found that on an educational level the child-free women she interviewed were more likely to have attained professional status.

In the group of older women I studied, three have college degrees, two having advanced degrees. Grace has a master's degree in social work and says she "thoroughly enjoyed working with people." Simone received her J.D. and worked as a patent lawyer until her recent retirement. She is still actively consulting. Jackie completed a bachelor's degree at Stanford University and worked for the American Embassy in Europe. The fourth woman, Minnie, had many different jobs, from running her own "chicken business," to being a school cook. She was not college educated, but never found that a problem, and enjoyed all her various "careers."

In the middle group all the women but one are college educated. One woman is currently in graduate school. Only two of the women currently work in

the field for which their education prepared them. Most of the women have jobs that involve working with other people, either directly or indirectly. The woman with a high school education has achieved professional status.

Emily was a grade school teacher for many years, and loved “working with all those children.” Alice has been a school teacher for over thirty years, and has loved her job “most of the time.” Jenny, who has a computer science degree, admits that her current job in management “has its drawbacks because I often feel like an adult babysitter,” but she is content for now. Charlie, who received a degree in theater arts, has done administrative work for years. Tess, who like Charlie has a degree in theater, works as a legal secretary, and has in the past, often to support her acting. Sonny finds her current job in customer support “stressful and draining.” She hopes to do something of a more “helping nature” when she completes graduate school. Patricia has “always worked in a clerical capacity,” and sees herself happy in her accounting job until retirement. Chris, who has a high school education, is an executive in the travel industry. She says her current job is “boring and doesn’t really contribute anything to anybody.”

In the “baby-boom” group, all but two women have college degrees. Only two of the women work in fields that coincide with their education. Two other women say they have “throw-away” degrees, popular during the late sixties, that equipped them to do nothing practical. One woman is currently pursuing an advanced degree, and two others run their own businesses.

Carolyn, who has a Ph.D., works as a stress counselor for a very large teaching institution. Dana, who earned a degree in physical education, works for her family business and is also a manager of a swim and tennis club. Rachel manages a large department at a local university. She would someday like a "more people oriented career." Kate works as a vocational counselor, and thinks this dovetails well with her current educational pursuits in clinical counseling. Joanne, a college graduate, has just started her own food sculpture business, and is very excited and nervous to be out on her own after working for a large hotel as an assistant food service manager for many years. Corrie, a high school graduate, feels she is "making a positive contribution" as a hospital unit coordinator. Her flexible hours allow her time to pursue outside interests. Noel works as clerical support at a hospital and also runs her own housecleaning business.

Nearly three fourths of the women I studied graduated from college, and one third of these are working in a field closely aligned with their field of study. Four others have at times but do not rely on it as a means of support. Of the five remaining women who are not college educated, one has a high profile career, three have done mainly clerical work, and the last has had a grab bag of jobs.

Eleven of the women I interviewed are seriously interested in helping other people. They either now have or aspire to jobs that fulfill this need. Eight of these women are employed helping others either directly or indirectly. Three others are interested in pursuing helping careers, finding their current jobs unsatisfying. They are teachers, provide administrative support, or work in the

health professions. It is interesting for me to note that seven of these women were the oldest children in their families, four of them considering themselves as having been caretakers for their siblings. This suggests that an early responsible, caretaking role may predispose women to seek this type of situation in adult life. While having children automatically provides a caregiving role, child-free women must be inventive in order to include this dynamic. Two other women, who were the eldest children and caregivers for their siblings, have stayed away from caretaking professions.

## VOICES

The following statements are a representative sampling of my respondents' perceptions of their work life.

Simone at 77:

I became an attorney in my twenties, which was a long time ago. I had such an active curiosity about things. I put myself through school by working. It was good for me. My parents really never gave me anything but lots of love and self-esteem. I gave myself the rest. I worked in Boston for years and was senior partner in one of the largest law firms of the day. Then I worked in New York for several years. I was courted by a large firm out here in California and took the job primarily because New York City was going bankrupt under the tutelage of Mayor Beame and was becoming a dangerous place to live, and also because of this job's proximity to Stanford University. I wanted to be near a cultural center. So, I moved here and worked with them for eighteen years. I retired five years ago and now do some consulting. I also am on several boards at Stanford and help organize cultural activities.

Charlie at 60:

I worked as a temporary secretary in New York for about ten years, doing whatever while I did acting. I have good office skills, I type

real fast and all that crap. Then I worked here at Stanford for about sixteen years. It was a great job. I counseled master's students. Then I got a job at Apple with their marketing department. Then I got laid off. Then my dad died. I did some more temp. stuff and now I have this job where I work with all these foreign people. They're all just learning English and I teach them social dancing on Fridays. I am the only Caucasian in the organization. I just had my review and their major criticism was that I treat everyone equally. That simply is not valued by their culture the way it is by ours, so I got dinged for it.

Alice at 53:

I have been a school teacher for over thirty years. I chose to become a teacher and received my degree at Marquette University. I have loved my job most of the time. I am currently working with third grade blue collar kids. I plan to teach one more year and then take the early retirement that has been offered me. I still intend to work, but would like to do something with adults

Chris at 52:

I hate my job. It's boring and doesn't really contribute anything to anybody. I secretly feel I am paid way too much for what I do. I work as a corporate travel manager and have been in the travel business for years. Someday it's all I can do not to quit, but I'm used to living at this level, so I don't.

Tess at 48:

I work as a legal secretary and have done this kind of thing for years. I used to work temporary as a secretary in New York while I was waiting for acting jobs. The job is a job, stressful and not very exciting. It's what I did to support my acting and maybe that's what is happening again for me now.

Carolyn at 46:

I am basically an introvert, in a very extroverted job. I need to make time for myself to be still, be quiet and nurture myself. It has gotten easier for me to say 'no' to people. I needed to learn how to say 'no.' I am a stress counselor at a large institution and what I get to do on my job is something different from what you would have to do for someone who is developmentally a child. These people are not children. They are ambulatory, mostly very high functioning adults, all the time, even when upset.



I try to help them focus and get down to what is really going on, so they can cope with themselves and each other.

Kate at 43:

I currently counsel injured workers for a vocational rehabilitation facility. I act as a liaison between the workers, lawyers, doctors and insurance adjustors. I did not plan my career, the job I currently have I did seek out. But it is a different avenue of counseling and I felt it would be beneficial to me. I need to explore various areas of the counseling field. It fits with my overall plan and degree in clinical counseling.

## SELF-EXPRESSION

Child-free women have often been denigrated for their “lack” of biological offspring. They have not made an “appropriate” contribution to society, no matter what else they may do. The women themselves begin to believe this negative imagery and deeply internalize the associated pain. They have not followed the social mandate to bear children and therefore nothing else they ever do really counts for much because it is merely a “substitute.” Certainly, this does not have to be the case.

Linda Anton (1992) suggests that child-free women discover and use their creative vitality in different ways, such as directing the energy outward to work for positive social change. Nancy Friday (1987) maintains she would not have had as much time for her writing or her relationship, both of which are integral to her, if she had had children. Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1991) speaks of the different kinds of children a woman can have, apart from the strictly biological. Involvement in art, literature, music, politics, social issues are personal, internal are only some of the creative avenues open to women. Georgia O’Keefe and Katharine Hepburn are two child-free women who found fulfilling expression in their art. It is possible for women to develop their talents or cultivate their genius and “follow their bliss.”

In the group of older women I interviewed, Minnie has done “handiwork” most of her life. She mastered the process of rug hooking from its basics, purchasing and then dyeing the flannel with her own choice of colors. I saw several of her rugs when I interviewed her and they are uncommon works of art. Grace

was very absorbed in a demanding career, and didn't feel she had time for much else. She insightfully states that as you get older it's wise "to be interested in the things you can still do," and now very much enjoys reading classical literature and listening to music. Simone collects art and her home is filled with beautiful statuary and paintings. Jackie has always loved music, for which she thanks her mother. She has begun playing the piano again since her retirement, and finds it a very soothing, enriching activity.

In the middle group of women, Charlie and Tess are both actors. Theater has often been the presiding passion in their lives. Both have worked at temporary jobs off and on to support their acting. Tess is currently involved in a play and Charlie would love to find a satisfying part but worries she is too old. Emily sculpts and paints. She is finding more time to devote to her art since her retirement and is getting more in touch with her "inner artist." The other women are less personally involved in creative expression. Patricia considers herself more of a spectator, and enjoys music and art. Chris has been encouraged recently to try drawing, but feels a bit "blocked," but she has become involved in modern dance, which she finds very "freeing." Jenny's home and garden are her canvas; she fills them with light and color. Sonny paints ceramics to give as gifts to friends and family. Alice thinks there can be nothing more creative than helping children learn, and has focused much of her time and attention on her teaching.

In the "baby-boom" group, Joanne is a sculptor by profession and also draws and paints. She says she becomes so absorbed in her work that she thinks of little else. Noel looks forward to a time soon when she can "put energy

back into my photography and painting.” She would like to write a children’s book and incorporate some of her photos or paintings. Carolyn is very interested in fine art, and sometimes comes home and just draws her “response to the day.” When she retires, she just wants to “do art.” Dana views her tennis game as an art form, “like some marvelous dance.” Rachel loves words and music but doesn’t consider herself particularly creative. Corrie also doesn’t consider herself to be creative, but pursues things “holistic” and is a certified hypnotherapist. Currently, most of Kate’s focus is on her doctorate, but she finds music relaxing and loves to read things other than scholarly tomes.

In the overall analysis, five of the nineteen women are or have been deeply involved in creative expression. The rest of the women are either involved in a less committed way, hope at some point in the future to be more involved, or they consider themselves spectators without the time it takes right now to be so involved.

## VOICES

The following are representative statements concerning these women’s involvement in creative self-expression.

Simone at 77:

I have collected art from all over the world. I have some unique and beautiful things. Perhaps this is not what you mean, but the way I have gone about it is creative to me. I also have put together an extensive library. I have books on everything you can imagine. I also am very interested in my projects at Stanford. We put together cultural events for people to enjoy.

Charlie at 60:

I really loved acting. I wish I could do it now, but I'm too old, there aren't roles, believe me. I have tried out recently for Chekhov's Three Sisters and I realized I was even too old to play the older sister. They use older men but not older women. Very fine actresses are out to pasture very soon. Our society thinks older men are just fine and charming and all that, but older women should disappear when they hit forty. When women hit fifty they get invisible. Everyone treats you differently.

Alice at 53:

I have always put great energy into my teaching. It is a great expressive outlet for me. What can be more creative than helping children to learn and be enthusiastic about the process?

Chris at 52:

I don't really 'do' anything creative. I've been told recently by a handwriting analyst that I am very creative and should do drawing or something like that. It's appealing but I never feel I have time for anything like that. I have been doing modern dance lately and it's a new freedom. Maybe I'll get more involved.

Tess at 48:

Theater was my passion. When I was a little girl, I would give productions in the front yard. I did some stuff in high school and then I was a theater major when I first went to college. I was a stage manager in New York, and acted in plays and on television and things like that. I did summer stock. I did some producing, which is one of the most satisfying things I have ever done. I am currently acting in a wonderful play, and it feels good. It took me a long while to get back to this point.

Carolyn at 46:

I have, for the last four or five years, been interested in making forays into drawing and painting. I took a drawing class for awhile and loved it, and I have an art table, and increasingly spend time during the week.

Kate at 43:

I am pursuing a doctorate in clinical psychology. This has been my dream so long that I would be deeply disappointed if I did not pursue it. This is creative as far as I am concerned, learning how to juggle all I

have to juggle and getting my Ph.D. I also am creative on my present job. I create employment or training for individuals who possess disability. Oh, I do love to listen to music and read for pleasure when I have time, which I rarely have.

## VOLUNTEERING

Linda Anton (1992) writes about "rechanneling the mothering energy," and one of the ways to do this is to reach out into the larger community offering time, energy and love. Older adults are often isolated and need attention and there are organizations that focus on the needs of children. Many women become involved in "mothering the planet earth in an attempt to counter the pollution, exploitation and nuclear destruction that threaten the planet" (142). Several of the women I interviewed find ways to extend themselves in an effort to make a difference in the world.

Minnie was involved volunteering in her home town with the "Ladies' Aide Society" during the first World War and with the Red Cross during the second. She is active at her retirement community, putting together events of interest for the residents. Grace's career in social work absorbed much of her "people energy." She would like to volunteer now, but her health is a little tenuous and prevents her from getting around as much as she would like. Simone is currently volunteering time at a local university, putting together cultural functions. Jackie busied herself with volunteering when she retired. She is the director of the altar guild at her church and is available to help young people affiliated with the church.

In the middle group, Emily has volunteered as an art docent, and Alice has done hospital volunteer work. Charlie employs disadvantaged people to assist her in maintaining her property. Patricia has volunteered in the past but is not actively involved at present. Chris has been a Big Sister and is currently in

volved with church projects. Sonny also was a Big Sister and is still close to one of the girls she "sistered." Jenny doesn't volunteer, but sees it as a necessity in society and as a possibility for her in the future. Tess is active in the Twelve Step program to which she belongs.

In the "baby-boom" group, Carolyn has volunteered her services as a counselor. Dana does not formally volunteer, but is available to her friends when they need help. Rachel is very involved with her work and doesn't volunteer in any specific way, but sees herself helping the kids on her staff. Corrie has worked with disabled children in the past and is currently considering re-involving herself, possibly doing hearing tests for children at a local hospital. Kate has volunteered with the Girl Scouts, and other community service organizations. Noel worked on a hotline that dealt with abused children for several years. Joanne has worked with disabled children in the past and would like to teach art to homeless children at some point in the future.

In the overall group analysis, most of the women I interviewed have volunteered time and energy. They, for the most part, feel that making an individual contribution to the larger society is very important. Many of the women have acute social consciousness, and this is also reflected in the fact that many of them have had in the past, have now, or aspire to, jobs which directly benefit other people.



## VOICES

The following is a representative sample of my subject group's feelings about volunteering their time and energy.

Simone at 77:

I volunteer time at the University, helping to coordinate cultural functions. I really love to stay involved with this sort of thing. I am on several advisory boards also, and these are gratis positions.

Charlie at 60:

I hire recovering addicts to help me maintain the property I own. I do this on a consistent basis, and I think it gives them a focus and it sure helps me.

Alice at 53:

I have volunteered at a local hospital and helped there in the past. I also feel, that while it wasn't a volunteer position, that teaching all these years and endeavoring to create a loving, nurturing atmosphere in my classrooms has benefited many children.

Chris at 52:

I was a Big Sister to Frankie for seven years. In a way I felt kind of like a chauffeur and didn't really consider us all that close, but I saw her several years after we had discontinued our formal relationship and she told me what a big difference I had made in her life. That was wonderful to know. Right now I am working with a little girl, helping her learn to read. It's part of a project my church does, working with disadvantaged kids. I feel a little lost, but I have so much compassion for her and really want to help.

Tess at 48:

I have been very active for years in a Twelve Step program. I do service work and help new people. It feels good to know I'm helping people the same way I was helped. I'm on the phone a lot.

Carolyn at 46:

So much of my work is people oriented. I don't really volunteer per se, any longer. When I was in Michigan I had two volunteer jobs, and held them for five years. I was a mental health consultant for the inten-

sive care unit at a hospital and also volunteered at a crisis clinic where I answered crisis phone calls and saw walk-in clients.

Kate at 43:

I volunteered with the Girl Scouts. I recruited and helped plan new projects. I also volunteered with Community Companions. I have been involved in community service projects for years, it's part of what I believe, a grass rootsy approach. I have worked with bipolar patients. This was a real eye opener for me. These are individuals with the same needs and wants as we have. Their chemical structure is just off compared to ours. I wish so-called "normal people" would realize this and be more tolerant.

## CONCLUSION

I began this study with many questions about being single and child-free. I developed my questionnaire to answer these questions, specifically exploring the areas of family of origin, relationships, work and energy engaged in self-expression. I wanted to know about the life satisfaction of the women I studied. While my sample is limited, several patterns did emerge from the data that helped illuminate my initial questions.

In summary, the participants in my study are all white, middle class women over forty years of age. Over two-thirds did not feel close to their mothers when they were growing up. Few felt their mothers were strongly supportive and reinforcing of their daughters' choices and actions. More than two-thirds of the women did not feel close to their fathers. Only a small number witnessed close, affectionate, parental relations. Several have since reconciled with their parents, especially their mothers; such reconciliation seems to be one of the benefits of growing older.

There appears to be an important correlation between a woman's experience with her family of origin and her decision, whether conscious or not, to remain child-free. Early family experiences also seem to limit the ability to commit to and sustain long term relationships with significant others.

More than half of the women were oldest children in the family. Due to birth order, these women had no elder sibling role models, and therefore the

closest familial role models were their parents. Many of my subjects did not feel affirmed or emotionally supported by their parents. Several were placed in positions of being caretakers for their younger siblings. This suggests the possibility that the women in my group were isolated in their families, with no strong person to rely on emotionally.

Many of the women, especially the younger group, feel that their experiences as children may have predisposed them to non-motherhood. The entire group expresses varying degrees of regret about remaining child-free, nearly two-thirds of the women having been, at one time or another, regretful that they did not have children. All the women who had abortions (one fifth of the group overall) have felt some regret over this decision.

Few of the women have had long term, lasting relationships with significant others; less than one third of the total group married, and these women are all in the middle group. Each of these married only once. The desire to find a significant other was mentioned by all the women in the middle group. The older women say that, over a period of time, they adjusted to the fact of remaining single, and most of the women in youngest group are currently ambivalent about relationships. Many of the women report that their feelings have changed over time concerning being child-free and single.

Nearly all the women place great value on women friends and over two thirds of the women feel well connected with their collateral families. Many of the older and middle women seem to have made their extended families a major focus of their attention. The younger group contains several women who

are just realizing the value of this type of family affiliation, while the others are already making an effort to sustain familial ties.

Regarding questions about education, career, and self-expression, three fourths of the women graduated from college and most of the women have volunteered in the community to help other people. Over two thirds of the women are either currently involved in or seriously interested in pursuing careers that help other people. About half of the women have been or are actively involved in creative pursuits.

While several of the women admit there are areas in their lives they do not consider optimal, most are satisfied with their lives and their direction. The younger group and the older group appear slightly more satisfied than the middle group, who seem more restless and seeking.

It is not clear whether or not the women in my study are predisposed to put their so-called "mothering" or nurturing energy into other endeavours or relationships. As mentioned previously, many of them have assumed caregiving roles either in their formal or volunteer work lives. Since my study examines a limited population it is impossible to draw conclusions about this issue with any authority. In order to more closely evaluate and clearly assess this supposed propensity I would need to look at larger studies that include random sampling of both child-free women and mothers.

Life process and experience seem to foster a clearer perspective and acceptance of choices and circumstances associated with being single and child-free. Opinions and feelings seem to change over time. Will the "middle" and

“baby boom” women arrive at conclusions similar to the ones arrived at by the older women, when they themselves are older? Or, because of the time frame in which each group was raised, will their later in life conclusions be different, because society is different? Following these younger “baby-boom” women would be an interesting correlative study.

The participants in my study are, for the most part, vital, enthusiastic women living fulfilling lives. While many of them have, at one time or another, questioned their life course as single, child-free women, the majority have focused their attention on other interests and pursuits that have proven gratifying.

This study has proven to be an invaluable exercise for me. I was able to meet with most of the nineteen women and spending time in their company was fascinating and thought provoking. Most all of them exhibited a great willingness to share their perceptions and personal wisdom with me. Many of my questions and areas of concern were addressed and discussed. In general, these women have great, good humor and expansive philosophies that have grown from their life experiences. During the course of this project I have found the “sisterhood” I had been seeking and have gained in personal perspective and acceptance of my own single, child-free life.

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## APPENDIX 1: HERSTORIES

This section contains the women's stories that were not included in the main body of the text. They are presented in order, by age, beginning with the oldest woman and ending with the youngest.

Minnie at 96: "What I really wanted to be was a grandmother."

Minnie has left her door open a crack so I can come right in. I buzzed her apartment from the lower level of the retirement home, and she is waiting for me. Seated in an over-stuffed chair with her legs propped up, she waves to me as I enter. Her elfin face is punctuated by blue eyes that smile at me from behind rimless glasses. Her hair is thick and white. She laughs when she sees my mini recorder. She has never seen one so small.

"My relatives gave me a recorder and a lot of tapes. It's a big one. They want me to record my memoirs. But, when I turn it on nothing happens. I just sit there. I can't remember anything then." I decide at that moment to give her the tapes we're making as a gift to her family. I tell her and she is delighted.

Minnie was born in New Jersey, the only child of Dutch immigrants. She was raised and schooled in the city. Her father worked many different jobs,

but they always had enough to eat and a home. Minnie enjoyed being an only child, and says she must have liked the attention. She had many cousins. Most members of both sides of the family immigrated to the United States, except for one uncle who remained behind in Holland because of military service. She remembers greatly enjoying all of her family, but feeling a bit special because she was an only child and all the other families were overrun with children.

Minnie began working directly out of high school doing clerical work and had a great aptitude for it, but found it rather "stuffy." She also worked for a lawyer, whom she found old-fashioned and a bit of a bore. She remembers being interested in getting married and having seven children at one point during her adolescence ("Why seven, I can't remember.") but, as time progressed, never found a man she wanted to marry. She had a male cousin who was her romantic ideal of all a man should be, and no other man ever measured up to this ideal. Besides, there were bad marriages in her family, and it was virtually unheard of back then to divorce, and Minnie never wanted to be the victim of a bad marriage. It seemed many people married and were unhappy and then stayed married anyway. This made no sense to Minnie.

Minnie's parents adopted Eldon when Minnie was nearly thirty. Minnie was thrilled to have the nine year old boy join the family. She loved children and treated him as her own. He had been severely abused and it took a long while for him to trust that he would not be sent away. The family provided a safe place for him to grow. Minnie isn't sure if she was more of a mother or a big sister to the child. Their bond grew through the years and they are very close

today. His children and children's children are the grandchildren Minnie so craved. Minnie always lived at home with her parents. She contributed to the family budget and to the care of her parents as they became elderly. She relates this in a matter of fact way, as if, of course this is what a loving daughter would do. There were bleak years, as her mother became increasingly ill, and Minnie became sole custodian of both her parents. Her father committed suicide three years after her mother's death. Minnie had held on to the farm for them, but quickly sold it after their deaths.

I prayed about it. I'm a Christian Scientist and believe in the power of prayer. I asked for help and got it. A woman who wanted the farm just sort of appeared and gave me more than I wanted for it. I was free then and moved to upstate New York. I was so happy there for nineteen years after I retired. I was involved in so many clubs, and had my garden and so many friends. If my body hadn't started to get old, I would still be there.

Minnie prayed about that too. She was getting ready for a visit to her adopted brother Eldon's home in California, when she idly thumbed through a copy of The Christian Science Monitor. There was an ad for a retirement community a few miles from Eldon's. When she arrived, she asked to visit it, and was put on the waiting list. Three years later she moved into her current residence. "The power of prayer, yes, indeed."

Grace at 83: "I always thought I would marry and raise children. It just didn't happen."

Grace left word at the front desk of the retirement home that I should come right up. I knock more loudly than I'd intended with the large brass door knocker. A deep, quavery voice beckons me to come in.

Grace is a tall, silver haired woman who speaks slowly and carefully. She laughs when she tells me she always sounds like she has had one too many martinis. Twenty or so years ago she was stricken with what she calls "brain fever," and what the medical community calls encephalitis. It robbed her of the use of her right hand and clarity of speech. She also has difficulty walking.

I place my tape recorder on the side of her walker facing her chair and seat myself on the floor in front of her. Her apartment is tiny and filled with beautiful pieces of furniture. Everything is arranged so it is easily reached. She instructs me to look at her bedroom when we are finished so I can see the antique chest of drawers.

Grace was raised in Seattle. She was the youngest of four children born to middle class parents. Very much the youngest. She was the "surprise baby," born when her mother was past forty. Grace says it was rather like being the only child of two mothers. Her sister Anna took charge of much of her care, and Grace disliked being told what to do by so many people. "I developed a real taste for independence then, and it never left me."

Grace's mother was a quiet woman without much "spark." She was good to Grace but always seemed a bit tired and out of focus. Anna was much

more the dominant “mother” in Grace’s life. Grace’s father was a very old fifty when Grace was born and died thirteen years later at sixty-three. Grace doesn’t recall too much about him other than the fact that he worked hard and didn’t have much to say to her. The other brothers and sister were married or gone by the time Grace was a toddler.

“I didn’t do real well in school, but I liked it. I don’t remember where the idea to become a social worker came from, but all of a sudden it was something I really wanted to do.” Grace graduated from college in Seattle and went to Ohio to graduate school. She didn’t date much in school and she thinks it was because she was always so tall. She says that men were a little put off by her size. This did bother her, but since it was the way things were, she adapted and put her attention into her career. She worked for many years as a psychiatric social worker on the East Coast and in San Francisco. At the time of her retirement in 1975 she was an executive in a social service agency in the South Bay Area. “I can honestly say, I always loved my jobs. I had such a sense of purpose, and I do like helping people.”

Grace never returned home to live after she was thirty years old. Her mother became a bit of a “burden” on the family after Grace’s father died and lived with sister Anna.

I sent home fifty dollars a month to help with her care, and when I think back, that wasn’t really overly generous of me. I got along with my mother and she seemed to think what I did was fine, but we weren’t really friends or anything. She was my mother.

Grace always thought she would marry and have children. She really wanted to raise a family and was very disappointed for awhile when she realized that wasn't going to happen. In retrospect, Grace is fairly sure that she wasn't cut out to be a wife, someone's partner. Her need for independence somehow was greater than her need to conjoin with a man. She was involved with a man for many years and the subject of marriage did arise, but both were too deeply involved in their separate lives to make it a reality. "He lived on the East Coast, and travel wasn't as possible and phoning wasn't very satisfactory. We just drifted apart after awhile. He isn't living any longer."

Grace shared a house with her sister-in-law for twenty years, and then moved into a retirement community. She really enjoys where she lives. Her apartment is exactly the right size for her and she has numerous friends. She is an avid bridge player and enjoys reading, television and music. She also has many friends all over the country and corresponds with them regularly, especially at the holidays.

Grandnieces and nephews visit and call often. Grace feels very well connected with her family, and they are a great support and comfort to her. She says she doesn't really miss having children of her own because of all this closely knit kin.

One thing that Grace deems very important to her contentment is having enough money to be comfortable.

You don't need a whole lot, but you need enough. I have more money coming in now than I did when I retired. And I can give some of it to the kids, which is nice. I have a financial counselor who has invested my money wisely and that is a definite comfort.

Grace is a happy woman, by her own assessment. Certainly, advancing age presents new and confounding obstacles at times, but Grace has accepted this. "My world is not really limited, it's just different. I do what I can do and enjoy what I can enjoy without getting frustrated that it's not like it was forty years ago."

Jackie at 73: "I think I'll always feel there is something missing because I didn't have children."

Jackie is a native San Franciscan and was raised in a middle class family during the Depression. She had three brothers, one of whom was considered the "black sheep" of the family and caused much anguish. Jackie says that it was because of this brother that her parents would argue fiercely into the night. Their persistent conflict made Jackie afraid.

Jackie's father was an Horatio Alger, up-by-the-bootstraps kind of guy, who quit school at twelve in order to support his mom, dad and siblings. He started his own accounting business after WW I and was quite successful. He was a very focused man who probably would be buzz-termed "emotionally unavailable" today. (I can say that with some authority because he was my grandfather.)

I think Dad missed a lot because he was so serious about his work. When we were little I can remember my mother telling us to clean everything up because dad was coming home. She made it very clear that he came first and that we came next.

Jackie's mother was raised in a small farming community on the California coast. She had aspired to be an opera singer, having a wonderful voice and an intense love of music. Few women were allowed to follow their bliss early in this century and were propelled instead into wife and motherhood. And so it was. Four children and much domesticity later, Jackie's mother still greatly missed singing. She would sneak out to attend the opera in San Francisco. Her husband had no sympathy for her, and the few times she tried to sing for him, she was stoutly rejected.

My mother didn't have enough self-confidence, because her husband was so sure of himself. He needed her to take care of him and the house. I know she missed her singing. She played the piano sometimes and would sing to us when we were little. But when she would try to sing to dad, he would read the paper, or something. It didn't mean anything to him. I think it was very hard for her to get no response, so it was easier for her to give it up than fight for it, which was too bad. She gave me a love of music, and I learned piano. I loved the piano, but doing recitals terrified me. I still don't like to play for anyone.

Jackie dearly loved her parents and remembers them as totally supportive and loving of her. Her parents subscribed to the old philosophy of spanking, but her discipline was left to her mother. They strongly believed that if her father spanked her it would give the wrong message to her brothers. Boys did not hit girls, men did not hit women.

I only got two spankings, and I learned my lesson, 'Don't lie.' I still don't understand what led up to the second spanking. Mother and I would even talk about it when I became an adult and we still didn't understand why I took a pair of scissors and carved my name in the grand piano. It didn't make any sense. I'd never been a destructive child. Why they didn't shoot me I don't know. I was about thirteen or fourteen. Something really traumatic must have happened, but I blocked it out.



Jackie attended Presidio Junior High School for a year, but her parents did not like the people she met and did not want her to associate with them. She was, therefore, enrolled in an all girl's school. Jackie did very well in school, so well in fact that she beat both of her brothers on the aptitude test to get into Stanford, where she majored in French. She was active in politics and loved her French and political science classes. She enjoyed school, despite the fact that she was not pledged to a sorority, which was a very big deal in the late thirties and early forties.

I didn't have as much fun as I could have had, because I never had any dates. That's because I was overweight. In those days it was very important. One thing that my mother and dad did that was bad, though I understand it, is that they wanted me to be thinner. They made me feel through the things they did that no one would like me if I wasn't thinner, and that gave me a terrible inferiority complex.

It wasn't until Jackie went to Greece by herself and made a lot of friends that she felt good about herself. It didn't take her long to be glad she hadn't gotten into a sorority.

. . . . those poor women, you had to have a certain number of dates and if your sorority sisters didn't like your boyfriend, or your grades slipped you got in trouble. It was really false, kind of like overbearing parents. But it was hard for me to take that I had been checked over by my peers and found wanting.

After college, she worked as a secretary for a while and became very involved with her baby nieces and nephews. Her father, fearing that she would become an "old maid babysitter" used some of his influence to find Jackie em-

ployment with the Foreign Service. She was stationed first in Greece, and had subsequent assignments in Brussels, Paris, Vienna and Washington D.C.

Jackie retired early, at fifty-two and moved back to California. She felt at loose ends for awhile. Both her parents had died and her immediate family was not as accessible as she would have wanted. She got busy immediately, and took classes and volunteered her time.

“I was young, but I was afraid I would wind up sitting around the house like mother and being a bore to everybody.” She inherited money from her parents and this, coupled with her pension affords her a comfortable lifestyle. She bought a house, which she shared with a friend from the Foreign Service, for thirteen years. She now lives alone and likes it that way.

Jackie has much energy and creativity and has volunteered time at her church for many years. She is currently directress of the altar guild at a large Episcopal church, a position she laughingly says that it looks like she has for life. It takes a lot of creative coordination to get the twenty-five altar guild members all pointed in the same direction at the same time. Jackie enjoys this despite ongoing hassles and having to deal with many members who are getting older. “Younger people don’t have time to volunteer, they work too much. So I deal with these old fogeys.”

When Jackie speaks of them and their foibles it is as if she is speaking of people very far removed, chronologically, from her which they are not. They are simply older in spirit. Jackie is a very young seventy plus woman, who has great perspective, equanimity and humor.

While in the Foreign Service Jackie managed to travel extensively and has continued to do so whenever she can. In recent years she has traveled to the former Yugoslavia, Europe, Spain, Scandinavia and Mexico with one of her nephews. They have become great traveling companions, and enjoy each other's company immensely.

We're both single and don't really have anyone else to worry about. He complains a lot that everything is so expensive, but I tell him, 'What else are you going to do with your money?' But we're bad, we both love to eat and wind up going to very expensive restaurants.

Jackie's singlehood doesn't cause her much concern now, but the fact that she never had children bothers her. Her mother's example of maternal focus really made Jackie feel that she wanted to be a wife and mother. She feels she has missed something. However, she considers herself fortunate to be very close to her nieces and nephews and their children. She is often regarded as the "glue" that hold her family together; without her they would have little contact with one another. She is very supportive of her two brothers. One recently had surgery and she stepped in and assisted with his care. She knows she will receive support in return should she ever need it, but is greatly relieved that she is financially independent, so that aspect of her life is under control.

EMILY at 60: "I wanted to be a mother much more than I wanted to get married."

Emily is a gracious and graceful woman, whose shy smile precedes her wonderful laugh. She is introspective and humorous and was at once pleased and hesitant to participate in the study, especially after she saw the questions.

Emily invited me into her home, which is an eclectic jumble of standing art, hanging art, plants, and fat bookshelves. We sat in the living room looking out onto a patio filled with potted greenery and guarded by Lucy, the cat. We chatted about everything but why I was there. I wanted her to be comfortable, and allowed her to mention the study first. She did and started to cry.

Apparently answering the questionnaire had spiraled upward many feelings and thoughts, welcome and unwelcome. She had just begun to sort out certain confusions about her parents with the assistance of two times per week therapy and the questionnaire intensified the process. Much grief was welling up into her conscious mind, the day we met. We began to quietly review the questionnaire, and to flesh out its answers with the colors and textures of Emily's herstory.

Emily is sixty years old and was raised in Atwater, a suburb of Los Angeles. She believes her family was middle class. An only child, she was raised with her father's sister, Rose, who is just five years older than Emily. Her parents marriage was intact. Emily's father worked as an insurance salesman, and he drank. During WW II he worked as a contract administrator for the government, and Emily's mother, who had worked at a high paying job prior to her marriage and was very capable, ran his insurance business. Rose worked with

her in the office and Emily would come home from school to an empty house. Emily remembers her parents fighting and being afraid. Her mother was a strict Mormon, who insisted Emily attend church, and was very tight with money, while her father loved to drink and spend.

Emily remembers often feeling upset and ignored. "I was yelled at and spanked." She feels that Rose was given far better treatment. Emily compensated by excelling in school. She was put ahead a grade in school, and says she then felt superior to her classmates. Her best friend, Eileen, was allowed to join Job's Daughters, while Emily was not because of the constraints of the Mormon church. Emily felt very left out, and this made her feel inferior. She felt caught in a superior-inferior trap with no middle footing. As she grew older, Emily did what she terms "special things." She wrote for the Hollywood Movie Critic Review and submitted poetry to magazines. Some of the things she most wanted to do, however, like having friends over to her house, were denied her because of her father's drinking. Her high school boyfriend did not have much money, and her mother objected vigorously to their friendship because she wanted Emily to marry a rich Mormon.

Emily left for Stanford University on academic scholarship, promising to mail her laundry home so her mother could tend to it. She was the only girl she knew who received clean underwear postage due. She received daily letters from her mother and Emily feels they had become quite close. They shopped together on frequent visits, and her mother asked Emily to help plan the new

house being built near Pasadena. Emily delighted in planting the garden and helping make bedspreads and covers for the chairs.

When Emily was twenty her mother was killed in a car-train accident. Her father had been driving and escaped without injury. He had had nothing to drink for a year and a half at the time of the accident. The accident was enormously traumatic for Emily who was forced to take an already planned European trip right after her mother's death. She feels she was allowed no time to grieve. Her father joined her half way through, and Emily says they established a level of emotional closeness new in their relationship. Later in the trip, he began drinking again, which was very upsetting to Emily. She thinks he had overwhelming survivor guilt. Four years later he remarried, but the marriage could not survive his drinking. He died eight years after Emily's mother, having literally drank himself to death.

Emily inherited money and stock from her father and this provided at least part of the security she craved. Thirty years later she still has some of the stock and was able to pay off the mortgage on her house in Palo Alto. Choosing teaching as a profession, Emily taught elementary school for thirty years. She had originally intended to teach for a year, and then marry and have four babies by the time she was thirty. But, "Life is what happens to you while you are making other plans."

Long term relationships with men were something that proved elusive, and she had only one. This man now lives in France and they correspond frequently. They were involved when Emily was forty-two and she thought of hav-

ing a child then, but the relationship dissolved. Emily mentions that she seemed to have received a definite message from her mother that if you marry you lose yourself, and this was indeed true for many women in the 50s and 60s. Emily wanted to mother much more than she wanted to marry. Even now, at 60, she thinks of adoption, perhaps a mid-teen Chicana or other minority. She does not look forward to a life without the emotional support of children and it saddens her when people ask her why she did not have children. She thinks her own mother would have been distressed at her child-free state, and she feels it has puzzled the rest of her family, although they say little. Emily would now also welcome a relationship with a man based upon mutual support

Emily had an abortion when she was thirty-three. She was very hesitant to talk to me about the circumstances surrounding it, and yet at the same time seemed anxious to get it out and talked about. She apparently had just begun to let the memories surface and the associated feeling emerge. She had debated whether or not to share this information with me, because she was still so raw. Her eyes filled with tears as she said, "Women just didn't have babies by themselves back then. I couldn't face being a single mother, especially being a school teacher." In the early 60s such "scandal" could and surely would ruin an elementary teaching career. She had an abortion and immediately got on with her life. No time for grieving, no time for a backward glance, until now, twenty-seven years later. This grief compounds the sorrow she has been feeling about her parents' deaths. All of this, she says, is making her feel quite small and has created a "psychological implosion."

Emily does not feel that she ever really decided not to become a mother, but because her 'passages' were so interrupted by her mother's death when she was twenty, her life was bumped off course. She imagines "mother-people" to be soft, present and tender, accepting and loving, and who help children "develop values and behavior that express the dignity and wonder of humans." She feels it is a human longing to create and nurture, and to continue the species. Perhaps she did not personally bear a child that will help perpetuate the species, but she certainly did contribute to the nurture of countless children during her teaching. She is still in contact with many of her former pupils, and feels very fortunate to have had a positive impact on children's lives.

At present, having taken early retirement a few years back, Emily is not interested in working, but she might consider involving herself again in teaching at some point. She has spent time volunteering as an art docent, and is very interested in social issues and "truth." She wishes to spend time getting her home and life in balance. She values being able to approach life in a calm and peaceful manner, paying attention to her days and where her energies go. "The older I get the more I value smelling the flowers along the way. That's trite, but it's true."



Patricia at 52: "I am comfortable with or resigned to the fact I do not have children."

Patricia is a friend of a friend of mine. She was very willing to complete the questionnaire and very unwilling to agree to a face to face interview. She was also unwilling to discuss why she shied away from the interview.

Born in a small town of working class parents, Patricia was raised with three older siblings, two brothers and a sister. She did not have close contact with her larger extended family while she was growing up. They were either deceased or out of state. She remembers her home life as being fairly peaceful and happy despite financial limitations. She was very close to one brother in particular, and has maintained that connection. Her parents were "okay with each other" having normal conflicts but nothing she remembers as being traumatic. Patricia was her father's "right hand tomboy" working with him during the summers. He was very easy going and comfortable to be with. Her mother was more rigid and was the family authority figure.

Patricia did not enjoy school. She felt left out because of a weight problem and because her family was poor in a relatively high income community. She had a small group of friends, but was basically "out of focus" in the larger social picture.

She attended junior college and did not finish an associate of arts degree. She married and did not become pregnant in the seven years she and her husband were together. They were divorced and she never remarried nor has had any other long term relationships.

Patricia has always worked in a clerical capacity and has worked in her present job for nine years as an accounting assistant. She is comfortable with what she does and does not see herself seeking a change, but working where she does until retirement. She enjoys her co-workers, and her job.

I am comfortable or 'resigned' to the fact I do not have children, but to deny that I would not have liked to have children would be false. I have coped with any maternal urges by maintaining very close relationship with my niece and nephews and their friends, over the years. In my opinion, it depends on each individual as to whether they want children and if so how they would feel about not having them. That is determined I think by their circumstances. Society does seem to naturally assume you should have children, and should have to cope with all those feelings of inadequacy if you don't, or you're not normal. Personally I think most single mothers, at times, probably wish they did not have children, especially if their finances are tight. I also think that some tend to be trapped by what they think their role should be and this could possibly explain some cases of child abuse and abandonment when reality sets in.

Patricia sees that her child-free state has allowed her a lot of flexibility she would not have otherwise. Her time and money are her own. She lives with her widowed sister and feels her family will provide her with financial and emotional support should she ever need it. She contents herself with a peaceful social life, a happy extended family, reading and television. She likes her life as it is but would be open to a relationship should one present itself.

Jenny at 48: "I never had much maternal urge."

Jenny is a runner. She runs the hills surrounding her home at least four days a week. She is lithe and very attractive and seems to me to be very intense. She is a friend of a friend of mine and we know bits and pieces about each other already. She was leery of the questionnaire, and so I have agreed to just interview her and answer the questions in that way.

Jenny owns a house on a hilly San Francisco street, one of those houses that hooks up to the house next to it with no space between. I never realized these homes had yards. Jenny has a marvelous back yard that reminds me of a park. Her home is furnished in an eclectic way. A little of this and a smattering of that pulled together into a wonderful whole thing. I comment on how "artistic" it all feels.

Jenny was born in an upper middle class suburb north of San Francisco. She has one brother and claims that she came from an enormously loving, together family.

I was a very shy child. I think this worried my mother. She didn't really push me otherwise, but it was a concern. I was really introverted all through school, until I graduated from college. But, when I went to work it all changed. I had to travel on business trips and I think mom was thrilled and awed that her once timid little girl was suddenly out wearing suits and doing this stuff. She was really proud of me.

Jenny's mother started to work outside the home when Jenny was six or seven. At first the job was only two days a month but then it slowly expanded. The job was with an accounting firm and was shared with one of Jenny's aunts.

Jenny remembers that her mother really enjoyed doing this work. Her mother was a very active, positive woman.

Jenny's thinks her mother and father got along well. Her mother really orchestrated the relationship and kept things harmonious, despite the fact that she appeared subordinate to Jenny's father on the outside. Her parents enjoyed doing activities such as square dancing together.

Jenny says her mother was a mother because that is what you did back then. Women were expected to be wives and mothers and there were few other options. But, Jenny recalls that her mother enjoyed mothering and feels her mother was a good mother. She remembers that they were always very close. Her mother has been dead for ten years now, and Jenny still really misses her.

While in college, Jenny became engaged. The dress was right, the guy seemed right, the future bright, and the parents were doting. Jenny felt very caught up in the romance; the invitations had been sent and most of the plans had been made. But, Jenny panicked and told her gentleman she wanted out.

I needed to put the brakes on and wait. It was only a week after that I realized I didn't want to see him anymore. And I didn't, not ever again. I worked for a year after that and then decided to go back to school. Come hell or high water was going to graduate. I think this whole thing was a turning point for me. To this day, I don't know how I had the guts not to get married when everything was moving that way and it was clearly what I was supposed to do. So, I have been kind of doing things my own way since then.

When Jenny finished college she began a "corporate ladder climb" that has left her at times very well off and successful and at other times, as it has recently, very laid off and collecting unemployment. "Thank God, I had money

saved." The corporate ladder is losing many of its rungs in a flailing 90's economy, but after nearly a year Jenny has found a job in management that requires an hour and a half commute, but she is satisfied.

The time she had off work allowed her to spend more time with Daniel, her gentleman friend, who was dying. She is truly grateful that she was able to be there for him and supportive. We didn't talk too much about this. It was only six months since his death, and her grief was still fresh. She had hoped this time she had found a man who would be a companion and partner for life. "He was diagnosed with melanoma and went down hill very quickly. I am so glad I had all that time to spend with him."

While Jenny holds her parents' marriage in high esteem, she also comments that her mother told her "you learn to tolerate things." Her mother never thought about getting a divorce. Jenny maintains that she wanted an equal partner and if things didn't go that way she just left. That was rather contrary to the message she got from her mother. And when Jenny finally did marry in her thirties, it didn't last long because Jenny wanted to have fun and when it became work she wasn't interested. He wanted a child but she wasn't interested in that either

I never had much maternal urge. Oh, I played with dolls and everything but I don't think I really ever cared about having kids. If the child were a perfect little girl, then it would be okay, maybe, but I doubt it. The thought of having a baby boy had no interest. If I had a daughter, I guess I would want the kind of relationship I had with my mother. All this is fantasy-land and certainly isn't going to happen now.

What Jenny really wants now is a life companion. She wants a man to share time and experiences. She truly feels she would not want to live if she knew there would never be another man for her. She met Daniel through a dating service and is considering doing that again, even though it can be scary to put oneself on the line like that.

It is awful when you have the video tape of yourself made, chatting yourself up and looking as drop dead gorgeous as you possibly can manage, and you go home and wait for the phone to ring and it never does. It's a real ego crusher. But maybe I'll risk it again. I need a man to share my life with.

Sonny at 47: "I missed out on the fulfillment of maternal emotions."

Sonny plays soccer, loves to dance, paints ceramics and is working on her master's degree. She owns a condominium and is very proud that she was able to accomplish this. Briefly married in her early twenties, she has had no long term serious relationships since that time until now. She is very regretful that she never had children. "I feel I missed out on something. I love babies and little children. I never met a man I felt close enough to to want children. I guess it just wasn't meant to be." Sonny feels very stuck in her current job as customer support for a large industrial firm. She is a problem solver and the person to dump on when customers get stressed. This is proving more difficult for her as

time goes on. She would love to do something creative and rewarding. Her master's project focuses on battered women, and she is very interested in working to help these women when she graduates.

Sonny's mother worked outside the home and Sonny cared for her twin sisters, seven years younger. Sonny felt that her father was almost hostile towards her, that he did not love or even like her. She has determined that it may well be that she is not his biological daughter. She has red hair and brown eyes, and is the only member of the family with such coloring, except for one uncle. There was a period of time, after Sonny's two older brothers were born, that her parents lived apart. Her father had an affair with Sonny's mother's sister, and Sonny thinks it is quite possible that her mother had an affair with "Uncle Red-head." Shortly after her parents reconciled, her mother announced she was pregnant with Sonny. This uncle alluded several times "that all might not be as it seemed." Sonny's cousin also has brown eyes and red hair, and once, in conversation with her uncle she exclaimed that they looked enough alike to be brother and sister. Her uncle gave her a queer smile and said, "That is what they say." She questioned him further asking him whether or not he could discuss it and he said no. He and other relatives who could possibly substantiate the story are now either dead or refuse to discuss the matter. Sonny can well understand her father's alienation from her now, but it was terribly hard for her when she was a child. He died when Sonny was thirteen and her mother, whom she loved, became very depressed.

My mother was the center of my life as a child. My father and I were not close. My mother compensated for his lack of feeling. He died when I was thirteen and from there on mother was our bread winner, our everything, our main person. She was thirty-four when I was born, which is okay nowadays, but back then it was old to be having kids.

Her mother came from a very poor southern Indiana family. She was seven when her own mother died, seventeen at the time of her marriage and equipped only with an eight grade education. Sonny thinks her mother was fleeing an abusive stepmother. Sonny's father had been raised on a farm by an elderly childless couple who basically just used him for labor. He had only a sixth grade education. Sonny thinks they married as an escape and immediately started having children.

My mother was extremely bitter against religion and men. She always said that men would hurt me, that they were bad and all this has made it tough for me to have constructive relationships with men. It was really a struggle for her to mother me and my sisters, her second batch, because she was widowed and was our sole support. She was able somehow to buy a house and a car.

Sonny cared for her sisters from the time she was eight years old. She fixed lunch and made sure the chores were done. Sonny never learned how to ride a bike or roller skate, two things she really wanted to do.

I was more of mother to my sisters than I was a kid. My sisters look at me as a second mother even though I was only three and a half years older. My brothers were gone; they were so much older. I got positive feedback from my mother, I was always a little special and now I think it was because I was her 'love child'. I think she was a wonderful role model, in that she impressed upon me that I had to take care of myself, and I always have.

Sonny really wanted to go to college and become a social worker, but her mother wanted her to take business courses so she would have marketable



skills. Sonny was needed to help support the family. Sonny became bored with the course work and quit school. She worked for awhile, was bored with her job, quit and then went back to school. She worked six nights a week and took seventeen units. She didn't do well and was on academic probation. Her self-confidence faltered and she quit again and worked. Sonny didn't go back to school until she was in her thirties, and is now finishing her master's degree.

Mom really impressed upon me that I should do traditional things like be a librarian or something. Usual woman stuff. Of course it never entered into things that I should get married and have babies and have a man take care of me. Mom never talked about that .

Sonny's mother died when Sonny was twenty-six. Sonny and her husband were separated when her mother was killed in a car accident. "I essentially lost two of what I considered the most important people in my life at the same time, my mother and my husband. It was very difficult."

Sonny is in touch with her brothers and is still a mother figure for her twin sisters. She delights in her nieces and nephews, and her great nieces and nephews. "They're like my grandkids." As much fulfillment as she derives from this she has always wanted a loving relationship with a man. For years she struggled with this after her brief marriage fell apart. She wondered, "Why Me?" and became very fatalistic about the prospect of meeting anyone appropriate. So she redirected her attention. She developed many interests and volunteered as a Big Sister for over ten years. She continued with her college education and is currently working on a graduate project that excites her very much. She bought her own home and continued building a wide circle of women friends. She was happy, secure and had reached a feeling of autonomy. Then she met Jim. She now has a very new and wonderful relationship with a man.

She maintains that it never would have happened if she hadn't done so much work on herself, if she had accepted the fact that being single was just fine. She believes that God gave her Jim when she was ready. She believes timing is everything and she and Jim were ready at the same time. They are soon to be married.

Dana at 46: "Sometimes I regret not having kids, but it's never been an everyday thing."

Dana is a walker and I am a walker, so we decide to walk and talk. I hold my tape recorder between us hoping to eliminate the crunching sound the gravel we inevitably have to walk through will make on the tape. She is a tall blonde woman with wonderful sun crinkles. Her stride is longer than mine, and I hustle to keep up with her.

Raised in a suburban city close to San Francisco in an upper middle class family, Dana has one brother, four years younger. Her mother was "the server of the family," a woman who did not work outside the home, rather devoted her life to her husband and children.

My relationship with my mother was loving, but distant, and I withdrew from my father, and still do, to avoid negative comments and criticism. I was close to my brother, and we seem to get closer through the years, although we have some reservations. I often felt threatened at home; there was some conflict between my parents that often seemed to manifest at the dinner table.

Dana has always felt a strong connection with her mother, even though there wasn't much physical affection between them. She thinks her mother was a good mother and that any breakdown in their communication was her own fault. Dana remembers being a withdrawn child, liking to keep to herself and live in a fantasy world. She feels she was not very approachable. She feared her father. Her mother was always there for her if she hurt herself playing and thinks her mother would have reached out more in other circumstances if given the chance.

I didn't talk about anything, I was real closed off. I remember lots of times she would say, 'Just talk to me' or, 'How do you feel about that?,' and I wouldn't talk to her. I think because of my dad, I wasn't willing to talk or open up much to anyone and didn't really begin until my late twenties. It wasn't really my mother's fault.

Dana's father was very distant and only spoke to Dana when there was something wrong. Dana remembers disliking him and being afraid of his anger. She thinks this is a lot of the reason she was so closed down. Dana saw her mother caught in a web from which she felt that she couldn't escape, stuck forever with a man who was so forbidding. Dana hated it as she watched her mother cater to this man and take care of everything he didn't want to be bothered with. Dana vowed her own life would be different.

Dana did not enjoy school except when she was participating in sports. She remembers being very shy, but she was such a good athlete that it moved her into larger social circles. She became editor of the year book and president of the athletic association. She proceeded to major in physical education in col-

lege because she had truly connected with something she loved. Dana didn't really do well in school until her senior year in college. She has worked as a high school physical education teacher, and a swim and tennis club manager.

"I'm just starting to think of way down the road, retirement type stuff. In about twelve years I want to have everything paid for, and then maybe I wouldn't be so scared financially." Security is a big thing for Dana right now, her primary job with her family company is in a bit of jeopardy. The economy is shaky, and she has voluntarily cut back her hours. She becomes concerned about car payments and related expenses. She also manages a swim and tennis club and loves it. She coordinates a lot of activities and delegates a lot of responsibility to other people and is responsible for the maintenance. She has been doing this for eight years and finds it very satisfying.

I love to travel and have been to Europe and Hawaii and lots of places in the United States. In recent years I have found ways to travel inexpensively which is great. I travel with several of my friends and we share expenses and car rental and stuff. My birthday is coming up and a friend and I are going to Mendocino and we're renting a convertible and we'll cruise the coast with the top down. We're staying at the Mendocino Hotel downtown. I really love stuff like that.

Dana feels she is much more open now and able to make and keep friends. She really sees a lot of value in these connections. Her tendency to isolate and need to be alone has been encroached on by a need for good, loving company.

As an adolescent, Dana remembers wanting to have children and says that she did not definitely decide not to until she was forty-four. She feels her

career would have taken a different track, had she had children. She thinks she would have found a way to only work part time, or not at all. Dana says if she could have been guaranteed help with raising kids, she definitely would have had them. But she says she only has maternal feelings for children until they turn eight years old. ("Then they get bratty.")

There have been a few times that Dana has regretted not having children, but it's never been an everyday thing. She thinks she would have been a good mother in some ways and yet probably would be very impatient. The thought of being older and not having a family saddens her.

Dana feels close to her nieces and a little less so to her nephew. When people ask her why she has no children she finds herself being evasive and feeling it's none of their concern. She says her mother still prods her with the "it still isn't too late" thing and her father never says anything at all. She does value the freedoms associated with being childfree, such as the ability to travel when she wants, and the lack of worry.

I have two cats that sort of fulfill my need for love now. I love to come home to something that's happy to see me. I own my own condominium. I've always had a lot of my own time because when I was growing up I would go in my room and isolate. I created my own world when I was a kid.

Currently, Dana lives alone as she has for most of her adult life. She would consider sharing space with a life partner. She has had one long term relationship and is interested in another at some point. She has many close

women friends and is a part of the gay community. She gets much support and love from this community and feels she can rely on them and trust them. "I feel I am in an underground support group."

Rachel at 45: "I realized in my twenties that I didn't care if I had children or not."

Rachel was excited about helping me with my project. She is a friend of a friend of a friend, and we connected well the first time I phoned her. I felt we shared a certain philosophy, even though I could not put my finger on what it was, at first. I mailed her the questionnaire and two days later received a pleading message on my answering machine. Could we please do this in person; the questions are just too much. Of course we could. I was getting used to this response to the questionnaire.

Rachel was born in San Francisco, moving with her family to San Jose when she was three. She still lives in San Jose and smiles at the fact that she has lived in such a small circle for most of her life. "My first boyfriend lived in that store down the street, and the first house that I lived in on my own is two blocks over." She finds it magical to walk through these streets and recall her former selves. I began to understand what we had in common; a mystical spin on life.

Shortly after Rachel's baby brother was born, her grandmother was hospitalized for depression and was put in a state facility because the family

had no money. Rachel's mother spent long hours with her. This became a dominant factor in their family life. The hospital was in San Jose and Rachel remembers visiting often and feeling great love for her grandmother who was a wonderful storyteller, despite the profound depression.

Rachel's mother had begun to work at a very early age to support her mother who was beginning to show signs of depression. Rachel thinks her mother would have liked to have had a career. But once she got married, the jobs she held were labeling beer bottles and wrapping meat. She wanted to make a lot of money and was told that meat wrappers made a good wage, and while she found the whole idea repulsive, she did the job for years. She hated housework. She cooked before she went to work and then came home on her break and prepare more food for the family, often saying she wished she had help. When Rachel was old enough, her help was enlisted. Her mother taught her how to iron and other things that Rachel considered just awful.

Rachel was also assigned much of the care of her younger brother. She remembers that she was quiet and very pliable when she was a young girl, willing to go along with the needs of the family. However, real confusion struck her household when she reached puberty. Neither of her parents were originally from the United States and the ideas Rachel was developing about what she should look like and wear and do, differed radically from what her mother thought. Rachel was plain and dressed differently from her peers and found life very difficult. Her mother didn't know how to support a teenage girl when it came to questions about how to dress and how to act. She was very closed.

When Rachel would come to her with a burning pubescent question her mother offered no help or opinion other than to instruct Rachel to find friends with whom to discuss such things. Rachel didn't have any friends. So, never "fitting in" in high school Rachel says she became a very vocal member of the misfits.

Rachel recalls a certain friction and tension at home. She wanted to do what she wanted to do and her parents did not understand. She remembers being quite a rebel. Her mother stressed that Rachel needed to learn some skills so she could get out in the world and earn a decent wage and find a good mate. Rachel was encouraged to take courses such as typing and bookkeeping and other traditional women's work courses.

Rachel began babysitting to earn money for her own clothing when she was around ten. She feels her mother simply did not have time to be as loving and supportive as she wanted to be. Her mother had a real issue about privacy, and could not be intimate. Rachel feels this contributes to her own difficulties in these areas. For years she tried to force her mother to be warm and close and June Cleaver-ish, and it only produced great resentment. Now, Rachel accepts her mother for who she is and they have a wonderful relationship. She says her dad is the type of man who will hug you, insist that you come, sit and talk, then pop in a video and totally ignore you. Her mother, on the other hand, is shy and will say hello, avert her eyes and then suddenly warm up, making you feel at ease, cared about and comfortable.

Rachel says she was a hippie. She was part of the counterculture in the late sixties and early seventies. She attended college for awhile before travel



ing to Europe. She spent nearly two years on a kibbutz in Israel and says a lot of her ideas about having children were influenced by this experience. She had always assumed that she would eventually marry and have children, but after her kibbutz experience she wasn't so sure. She really appreciated the communal care of the children which allowed them quality time with their parents and allowed their parents to pursue work with more focus. This totally contradicted her own experience and everything implied by the nuclear family.

Rachel suffered a fractured back while in Germany and was hospitalized for three months. During this time she connected with a man who, upon his return to the United States, wrote to her every day. When she was well they traveled together. During a routine check for birth control pills, Rachel was informed that she had cancer and would probably have to have surgery. She was enraged and sought second opinions. Her gentleman friend was totally unresponsive and they discontinued their relationship. Rachel found a doctor who determined that she would need a conical biopsy and have to be checked for the cancer on a regular basis. She did not have a hysterectomy. What did happen however, was her awakening to the fact that it did not matter to her whether she had children or not. She really did not care, and this feeling has not changed in the ensuing twenty plus years.

Rachel received a bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts, one of "those hippie degrees." She also received a certificate to teach pre-school. She worked with children and, as she says, "their mothers" until she could no longer stand the frenetic input. She then returned to school to work towards a master's in psy

chology that would enable her to work with adults. It was at that point she was offered an interesting job with the university and she has held it ever since. She has not pursued the advanced degree.

Rachel enjoys many aspects of her job, especially working with the student employees. But as the job has taken on more of a bookkeeping, bottom line spin in recent years she find herself less content. She looks forward to a more people-oriented career in the future, but is in no great hurry. She is very satisfied with her lifestyle as it is, and her job is the fulcrum for it. It is very lucrative and she is able to save money for her future. When Rachel was growing up she felt things were very complicated and very cluttered and so the simplicity she now enjoys is very valuable to her. "The simpler I can make things the better. Even though I wouldn't have been able to state this earlier in my life, this simplicity was internally chosen. This feels like me."

Rachel's grandmother told a special story to her about a community of rabbits. Every year one rabbit would be chosen to deliver the eggs at Easter. This particular year a female, mother rabbit was chosen. Rachel laughs remembering that this mother rabbit had scores of children but was obviously a single mother. There was no "man rabbit" in sight. She thinks she identified with the courage and strength of this female rabbit. Then, at nine, she remembers strongly identifying with Joan of Arc. She also remembers a movie about a woman rescuing a group of orphans and taking them on a cross country trek to safety. Rachel really sees these images as forming solid role models for her, the strong, single, courageous woman. During her hippie days, Rachel really

was attracted to the idea of the “earth mother,” the all loving, all wise, all nurturing mom of everybody, not necessarily her own brood . “It certainly was an alternative to being a suburban housewife.

Corrie at 44: “I think a lot of the reason I haven’t had children is because I actively helped raise my brothers and sister.”

Corrie’s apartment is warm and full of color. She laughs when she tells me it took her thirty years to give herself permission to buy furniture. She feels very comfortable in her current lifestyle. She works as a secretary at Stanford Hospital, and has for the last twenty years. She says her job provides her with many sources of satisfaction, and she enjoys her co-workers very much. Her job is primarily task oriented, but she finds very creative ways to deal with conflict and other people’s angst.

Corrie would love to live in a beautiful home with her “lifemate” when and if such a gentleman should appear. She would fill the home with color, light, music and flowers and move quietly through her days, being in her “now.” She very much values and is very much attuned to “going with the flow.” She has done that for a good portion of the last ten years, finding the sunlight on a gray day, the magical flowers under the rocks and the harmony in the midst of dissonance. She makes lemonade out of the lemons in her life, as the saying goes. Corrie seems to be a very loving woman with a terrific sense of humor. I am acquainted with several of her friends, and they love her dearly. She revels

in “delightful absurdity.” She particularly enjoys the company of people and the company of nature at the same time. An autumn afternoon walk with a good friend is a perfect thing.

Corrie’s mother was and is a very beautiful woman. Corrie says that she had her own radio show when she was younger, and was quite successful and well respected. To Corrie, despite the fact she insists that they were very close, her mother always seemed larger than life and very powerful. Corrie grew up thinking that “it’s not fun to be married.” Her parents seemed to peacefully co-exist, but without much enthusiasm. They did not really enjoy the same things, and often seemed to just tolerate one another. They argued at times and this caused disturbance in the family.

Corrie’s mother did not glow with the joys of domesticity. There was always something missing. Her mother seemed to be looking over people’s shoulders at some horizon that was brighter and more bursting with promise. She never spoke to Corrie about getting married and having children. Corrie’s maternal grandmother had married a man she considered “beneath” her and kept a photo of the man she really loved in the closet. She was looking over people’s shoulders, too, it seems. Corrie’s mother did essentially the same thing, implying that her husband was somehow not good enough for her. Corrie says her mother was like a caged bird. She started to drink. Corrie does not like to talk about this, and phrases it so that the word alcoholic only tickles one’s consciousness. It seems her mother was justified in her drinking and did it in

such a nice, dignified way that it hardly could have made a difference or caused any negativity. But, in listening to Corrie, it is easy to assume it did.

Corrie had spinal surgery a few years ago and her mother asked to be allowed to come and care for her. Corrie, in all her holistic-own-your-own stuff wisdom, made it very clear to her mother that if she were indeed coming to help that she couldn't drink until after four o'clock in the afternoon, when Corrie could make other arrangements for her own care. And she couldn't smoke in the house because it made it so hard for Corrie to breathe. In essence Corrie said, yes, mother please come and care for me, but please don't kill me in the process.

Corrie wasn't always able to defend herself or stand up for what she believed in. That all changed when she was raped. Corrie breathes deeply and laughs. It seems that was the moment when she embraced her life.

It happened when I was thirty. It was an absolutely terrifying experience. I needed to do something with it inside so that it wouldn't destroy me. I turned it into the psychic 'kick' I seemed to need to open up my own life. The rapist and I were eyeball to eyeball. I wouldn't drop my gaze. He looked down first.

After the rape and the trial that followed (he was convicted), Corrie expanded her interest in myriad "new age" pursuits such as meditation, Lifespring, and becoming a certified hypnotist. She felt a renewed sense of questing, the cracking of something frozen within her. She found that she had never begun the separation process from her mother, and worked to initiate this.

She claimed her own attractiveness and right to be in the world and stopped comparing herself to her mother. Corrie became more Corrie and that was a wondrous thing.

Not having had children is a bittersweet thing for Corrie, but through the years she has begun to accept it.

More and more it seems like the right decision for me. Every now and then I feel a real deep urge to be a mom and actually sad that it probably won't happen for me. That urge is never long or hard enough for me to actually act on it. I believe a lot of the reason I haven't had children is because I actively helped raise my brothers and sister and also, until recently never felt fully grown up or adult enough to have my own children. I never really made a clear decision. I also had scoliosis and was concerned about putting the stress of a pregnancy on my back. At this point in my life, while it's still biologically possible, I really am not interested in having a new baby.

Corrie really does want a strong, loving relationship with a lifemate. This became obvious at several points during the interview. However, as much as she desires the intimacy and closeness, she well understands a need for privacy, for a place of her own she can go and shut the door and be undisturbed, a room of her own.

Noel at 41: "I always wanted to have kids."

"Which mother should I talk about to answer these questions?" Noel laughed with some irony as she helped me find the outlet to plug in my tape recorder. "The schizophrenic one who gave me up for adoption when I was very little, or the one who adopted me and promptly became alcoholic and abusive?"

Noel owns a condominium in the hills of a very wealthy community near Stanford University. Barely owns. By the skin of her teeth owns. Working at Stanford Hospital as a unit secretary and cleaning houses at least three mornings a week, has allowed her to squeak by and make the mortgage payments she was left with when a real estate partner got emotional and bailed out unexpectedly two years earlier. Noel was left with the choice of losing a substantial amount of money she could ill afford to lose and a home she loved, or trying to hang on. So, hang on she did, and valiantly, through times that were often very scary. Her adopted mother has died recently and Noel found, to her great surprise, that she will inherit enough money to enable her to refinance her home, making everything more manageable. She had thought she would be left nothing. Preceding the money, some strange and beautiful antiques have arrived and we inspect them with awe and amusement assisted by Little Eagle, the cat, who gives me a round eyed stare as she persistently noses my ankle. Noel says the cat only bites certain people, but she's never sure who the bite-ee will be until it's too late. I give Little Eagle a wide berth. She continues to hold court under a claw-footed chair, and stares at me during the entire interview, as if to say, "Just why are you asking my mother these questions? Why don't you leave and let her get to her job which is petting me?" Noel is not comfortable talking about her childhood, and nervously shifts in her chair, but plunges valiantly ahead, anyway.

So let's talk about my mothering experiences. We'll talk about both mothers, and foster mothers, okay? I never felt like my mother cared about me, and I'm now trying to recreate this mothering stuff at forty years old with a therapist. I've been seeing her for six years and she reassures

me that she cares about me even when I'm not sitting there in her office. She mothers me. I grew up not feeling safe. My birth mother was a paranoid schizophrenic and there is part of me that knows I wasn't held. I look at my little niece, and that's all she really needs is to be held and fed. God knows what happened to me. I grew up feeling that the universe was not a safe place to be, but I have learned through therapy that it is not something that I did or that is missing in me. The first foster home was okay and then I went to stay with my aunt and uncle when I was six. It was wonderful, but they told me I couldn't stay and then my mother who was coming out of a mental institution, put me up for adoption. I went to another foster home which was all the bad things you ever hear about foster homes, physical, sexual, verbal abuse. I think they only took kids in to pay the mortgage.

Noel and her older brother were adopted by the Masons. The Masons were very affluent. Noel felt safe for about a year and then Mrs. Mason started drinking heavily and became very abusive.

She would do such awful things, I couldn't dream up some of these things. Once, my cat had kittens and she put the kittens in a plastic bag with holes in it and stuck it under water until the kittens stopped mewling, I mean you could hear them. I don't think I ever related to her as a mother.

Noel felt she could not be honest about being gay. And when, because of circumstances, she did tell Mrs. Mason, she was met with disdain and disgust. Whatever relationship they may have had crumbled at this point. Hence, Noel's surprise at being included in the will.

Noel always wanted children, but doesn't think she ever really felt ready. The woman she lived with for two years had a child and Noel felt close to the little boy. Sometimes she still thinks about adopting a child or involving herself in a relationship with someone who has a child. But, then again, she feels fairly set in her ways and content with her current lifestyle. She doesn't feel her own



childhood experiences have well equipped her for the mother role. "Look at all this stuff, this is all she left me, chairs, tables and pictures. Oh, and a permanently broken heart."

Suddenly, Noel decides she must run to the laundry room and retrieve her drying clothes. She leaves me with cat-from-hell who eyes me suspiciously as I wander through the apartment looking at pictures and the furniture and other bits and pieces that have come to Noel from her adopting mother's estate. It is really quite a gathering of the ancient and the ornate. I feel my heart catch as I face a picture of a very cute, toothless beribboned Noel, about five, sweet little smile, button nose, great big eyes. What hell that child was put through.

Noel breezes back in with an armload of laundry, tosses it on the couch and returns to her seat opposite me at the dining table.

So, the second part of this query deals with my creativity, right? Well, you know, things have really been on hold for the last year and a half because all I've done is work to keep this place together. Now, with the mother money, things should calm down and I may have time very soon to put energy back into my photography and painting. You know, I guess that is the choice I'm making, to go ahead with that and not have a baby, because if I had a baby that would be my total life, working and taking care of the kid as it grows up. You know, several years ago I took a weekend course at San Francisco State on journal writing and we had a break and I went outside and I remember sitting under this tree and writing. The bushes and trees felt really familiar, and the fog and then all of a sudden I felt really little, like when I was five years old at Golden Gate Park. I lived in the Sunset District then and all these feelings came back and I wrote a poem. I shared it with the class and the instructor told me I was a natural poet. Up until that time I hated poetry. I told you that my name was Alicia Ann before I was adopted, well, after this class I decided

to use that name to sign my art work. Sometimes I feel like I'm time traveling, I go way back to this really young part of myself when I write, so I wanted to honor that by using my original name. I'm really excited about what's next, even the next five years!

Joanne at 40: "Having a baby, if the man is right, isn't totally out for me yet."

Joanne's home is a jumble of paintings, books, sculpture and odd bits of furniture. Reggae rhythms greet me as do two cats. Joanne is a small woman with a wonderful smile. She offers me lemonade and we chat casually for a few minutes about how hot the weather is and that it's lucky there's a breeze. Then, I turn on my tape recorder.

Joanne was raised in Cleveland, with a younger sister and brother. Her parents were both present, "physically anyway." Her mother was an alcoholic who was very frustrated by her role as wife and mother. "I felt close to her sometimes, but clearly couldn't trust her." Her father eventually started his own business that required him to be away from home a good deal of the time. When he was at home, her parents fought and were physically and verbally abusive to one another. Joanne assumed the role of caretaker for her younger siblings, endeavoring to somehow keep them safe from what went on between her parents.

Joanne didn't like school when she was a little girl. "I felt I didn't belong, even in the classes I liked. I think I knew that my life was not like other kid's lives, that something was wrong." She had a few friends but did not feel

comfortable having them to her house because of her mother. "I had a doll collection, dolls from all over the world. I also loved art and music and would make up stories and plays."

Joanne did not feel emotionally supported by her mother, even though she felt her mother loved her. There was no trust and Joanne was very hesitant to share her fears and feelings with her mother. Joanne's mother died in 1980, and Joanne feels she reclaimed her own life at that point. She had always been the emotional caretaker for her mother and worried that her mother would have to come live with her.

Despite feeling closer to her father, his absences made their relationship sketchy. Some time was spent with extended family and Joanne felt close to her maternal grandmother and remembers enjoyable vacations with some cousins.

Joanne attended college but quit a few courses short of a degree in home economics. She worked as a waitress for five years and then secured a job with a large hotel. She started as a pantry assistant gardemanger and then a chef gardemanger. She then worked for eight years as a chef's assistant, finally becoming the administrative assistant to the executive chef in Denver and San Jose. It was during the years of this process that she discovered she had artistic talent. It was mandatory that all kitchen pantry employees be able to sculpt with butter. Joanne was instantly very good at this and received much encouragement and praise. She had always been attracted to things artistic

since childhood, but had been subtly discouraged by a mother who was a frustrated artist. Joanne now thinks that her mother saw the talent in her daughter and was jealous. The support she received from her coworkers at the hotel slowly turned this negativity around.

Last year, Joanne quit her job at the hotel and started her own business in culinary art sculpture, chocolate and butter sculpture, and centerpieces. Leaving her job was not easy for her. She had been there for thirteen years and it provided her with security on many levels. She felt a part of a large family where she was well regarded and included. This was hard to give up, and the transition to self-employment took several months. While Joanne is very enthusiastic about the sculpture part of her business, she is less so about the financial, number crunching part. "I keep waiting for an adult to show up and handle all this for me, and then I realize I am the adult here and need to handle it myself. Scary."

Joanne is currently comfortable without the company of children. She is focusing all her time and energy on her business and her artwork. However, she does not negate the possibility of children if the right partner were to come along. If she was strongly connected to a man who wanted children, she feels she might be willing. Not alone, however, no single-motherhood for Joanne.

She becomes concerned when she contemplates relationships, because they can be so all consuming and she does not want to lose her focus at this point. She has had relationships in the past and really feels this kind of connection is part of the human drama and dance. In the near future she sees

there being time to actively make herself available to connect. "Maybe I'll join the Sierra Club and do their singles hikes and stuff, I hear a lot of people say that. It's good to go hang out with people who are doing the things that you like to do."

Joanne has done a lot of dream work and is interested in yoga. She reads a lot and is fond of music. Most of her friendships center around this kind of activity. She is also included by her married friends, but often feels ill at ease in couples situations.

While Joanne lives alone now is doesn't desire this to be permanently the case. She would enjoy a lifemate, and if this doesn't manifest, she says a friend who shares similar values would make a good companion. Joanne has several women friends who all talk about living together someday in some kind of communal arrangement, for mutual support and caring.

## APPENDIX 2: VOICES

This section contains the basis of the directly quoted responses to the questions in my study. It follows the same categorical format as the analysis section, beginning with thoughts about family of origin and concluding with perceptions about self-expression. The arrangement by age is the same as it is throughout the rest of the text, beginning with the oldest woman and concluding with the youngest.

### MOTHER

Minnie at 96:

My mother was a good, dear woman and a good friend to me. We did many things together, because I was an only child. We even went into the chicken business a couple of times and were very successful. We sold eggs and that sort of thing. I lived with my parents until they died, and really was my mother's caretaker for the last eleven years of her life. That was a dark time for me. I never went anywhere but to work and then came home and took care of my parents. I loved them, but it was hard.

Grace at 83:

My mother was forty-two when I was born. I was sort of an 'oops' baby, not planned but loved a lot. My older sister Anna was sort of a second mother to me and I didn't like it a bit. I would never do what she said, just what my mother said. I think my mother was proud of me when I went on to graduate school. She seemed interested in things that I did. But we were distant in a funny way. Maybe because I was so young. I was like an only child, because my sisters and brothers were so much older.

Jackie at 73:

Mother was always there for us even though Dad always came first. She was always home when we got home from school. We got even closer after Dad died in 1963. She couldn't walk well so we hired a companion to stay with her. It was really hard for us both when I was stationed overseas, but I came stateside on home leave as often as I could. We became each other's confidant. We really were good friends.

Emily at 61:

I remember being yelled at and spanked when I was a kid. Mother forced me to go to the Mormon Church and I wasn't allowed to do many things because of religious constraints. We got along better when I went to college. I received daily letters from her when I went to Stanford. When I came home on vacations we would shop and spend time together. We were planning on how to decorate the new house we built. I made slip covers for the chairs, she wanted me to do that. I was really starting to feel close to her when she was killed when I was twenty.

Jenny at 49:

My mother was always there; we were very, very close. She died a little over ten years ago and I still miss her very much. She was a mother, that's what you were supposed to do back then. I was the one that broke up my marriage and I can remember talking to my mom, she had never thought about getting divorced. They had kids and one income. She said you learn to tolerate things and you get through. What I was saying was that when things weren't fun anymore and I was going to have to make some compromises, well I would have none of that.

Patricia at 53:

My mother was sick a lot and demanded that we all pay lots of attention to her. I felt really lost sometimes, like no one heard what I said, or cared. I was really shy and ate too much.

Sonny at 48:

My mother was seventeen when she was married. She had an eighth grade education and my father didn't make it past the sixth grade. My mom was too young to have developed any interests of her own, and then started having kids immediately. She had a lot of problems and we

think she was probably clinically depressed. But, I always felt I was a little special to her because I was her 'love child.'

Dana at 46:

I have always felt there was a lot of emotion there with my mother, and a lot of love but I think my mother was brought up where there wasn't a lot of hugging or physical contact. Just recently I started hugging and now, I couldn't believe it but she's approached me. Other than that I have always had good feelings about my mother. She was a good mother other than that physical hugging. She was good with skinned knees and stuff but other breaks, like hearts, I would never talk about. I wasn't there so she could be there for me. I didn't talk about anything, I was real closed off. She couldn't be there for me because I wouldn't allow it. I created my own world when I was a kid and used to isolate. I wouldn't let her in.

Rachel at 45:

When I was in my early teens and wanted to be like everyone else, and dress that way, she never said, "Let's go get you something cute." She didn't do that for herself, so she couldn't help me.

Corrie at 44:

My mother and I were close, but I don't think she was very content in the mother role. She seemed disappointed with life. She never talked to me about the joys of being married. I don't think she really thought my father was good enough for her.

Noel at 41:

I never trusted her. I was pretty emotional growing up and I remember when I got to high school she told me I was too sensitive and too temperamental and I'd better just get over it. When I was twenty-five and checked into the psych unit at Stanford, she told me to pull myself together and get back to work. I don't think I ever trusted her. I was always glad I wasn't blood related to her because I hated her. My relationship didn't improve through the years with her. It's weird because there are certain points along the way that she might have told people we were close, that is until I came out to her. Before that, we did things together. I think things would have been okay with her if I hadn't told her I was gay; she just couldn't cope with it. She's one person who should have never been a mother, she was thirty-six when we moved in. For fifteen



years before she adopted us she had been out in the business world and then she tried to run her home like she ran her office and it didn't work out very well. I never felt like my mothers cared about me. The real one is schizophrenic and has been institutionalized for years.

Joanne at 40:

My mom died in 1980 and it was a tremendous relief to me, as awful as that must sound. Until she died I could never picture myself as free. I feared at some point I would have to take care of her. I could not trust her, we were not friends. She was an alcoholic, a very creative, intelligent woman who seemed trapped in a box she could not escape. She really probably was very wonderful under the alcohol. She needed too much. Since her death I have begun to resolve some issues and clear our relationship. In my head now, we are becoming friends.

## FATHER

Minnie at 96:

He didn't stay with jobs very long, he sort of had a roving foot. There was always something else more interesting around the next bend. He did construction in the city for a long while, but there was a depression associated with the first world war and he decided it would be better to be a farmer so he moved to New York for awhile to do that. I went and cooked and cleaned. My mother stayed in New Jersey to sell the house, or really probably just to be there in case my dad got bored. But he stayed with this one for awhile. He was a nice man. It was his idea to permanently adopt Eldon, my little brother. After my mother died he became very lonely. He had had cancer in his ear and spent his ninety-third birthday in the hospital. Well, one Sunday morning I was waiting for him to come downstairs and he didn't come. He usually dressed by the stove because it was warmer for an old person. I finally went upstairs to look for him and thought I saw him standing in the hall. He wasn't standing, he was hanging. He hanged himself. Oh, it was just terrible, it still upsets me all these years later.

Grace at 83:

My father was fifty when I was born. He died when I was thirteen. I remember that he was gone a lot working, and we didn't see too much of him. I think he liked me because he was my father and you're supposed to like your kids. But I think I bothered him. He was really an old

man for his age. I don't think he took very good care of himself. He was a really old sixty-three when he died. I don't remember anything really special about him.

Jackie at 73:

I think Dad missed a lot because he was so serious about his work. When we were little I can remember my mother telling us to clean everything up because dad was coming home. She made it very clear that he came first and that we came next. He really looked out for me though. He was the one who steered me toward the Foreign Service. He was afraid I was going to become an old maid baby sitter for my nieces and nephews. He wrote to me everyday while I was overseas. I really missed him when he died.

Emily at 61:

My father drank, then he stopped for a long period of time. He was driving when the accident that killed my mother happened; a car-train collision. I think he had tremendous survivor guilt. He started drinking again and eventually killed himself with it when I was in my late twenties. We'd gotten closer and then he died.

Patricia at 53:

I buddied with my dad and helped him. I was his right-hand tom boy. We were good friends.

Jenny at 49:

My dad and I are closer to each other since mom died, but still not really close. He still "stone walls" me a lot when I ask him about anything that means anything.

Sonny at 48:

My father was almost hostile towards me. He did not love or like me especially. I don't think I am his biological daughter. I have red hair and brown eyes, and am the only member of the family with such coloring, except for my uncle. My mother had an affair with my uncle when she and dad were separated and I was born after they reconciled. There you go, I think Dad knew I was not his.

Dana at 46:

My dad was hard, there was a lot of anger, like he would get mad if I didn't bring him the right tool or something and then two seconds later he'd be real nice to me. He wasn't so mad at me as mad at the circumstance but I would withdraw. I learned to close down. He was that way with my mother, that way with everybody. He got so angry. My dad never touched me except to grab me by the back of the neck or give me a knuckle rub on the top of my head, or pat me like a dog.

Rachel at 45:

My dad found a way to be responsibly irresponsible. He was a flyer, a navigator. He was gone all the time. When he came back he wanted to play. Finally the financial worries were behind us. He wanted to to Yosemite, out to dinner, all this stuff. But he was emotionally gone. And then he'd physically leave again.

Corrie at 44:

My dad was distant, just sort of there and I still don't feel close to him. We never really shared very much in common, not even family things

Noel at 41:

Mr. Mason was a nice guy, I do remember that. I think he liked us. But any niceness he may have exhibited was overshadowed by his wife. He was really well liked by everyone; he was a real old-fashioned gentleman. My psychiatrist referred to him as benign. But he couldn't protect us from her. He kind of apologized to us once, saying he was married to and committed to her, but it was like he would change it if he could.

Joanne at 40:

My dad was not around a lot. He worked a lot and went on business trips. He started his own business when I was about ten. I was Daddy's girl when he was home though. We have gotten a lot closer since mom's death, but I don't feel I really know him, his stories sometimes surprise me. He remarried about a year after my mom died. His new wife is okay but she has made it very clear that we won't inherit any money. They're going to spend all of it.

## MOM AND DAD

Minnie at 96:

My parents met right after they had both come here from Europe. They had been sent by their families to live with relatives. My mother didn't speak any English. They were both from the Netherlands and would have never met there, which is strange because it was such a small country. But people were more social here, maybe because in the city everyone had to work. My mother's friend from work invited her to dinner and her brother was there. He became my father. They worked hard together and were very devoted. My mother lived into her nineties and my father helped care for her the last years of her life when she was so sick. They cared for each other, I could tell.

Grace at 83:

My parents liked each other. My father was older than my mother, that was the popular thing to do back then. Mother didn't have a whole lot of free time; she was busy with me because I was just little. Father was gone on business trips a lot. I think they got on fine, but I was so young when my father died, there could have been things happening that I wouldn't know about.

Jackie at 73:

I had three brothers, and my oldest brother had a lot of problems. My parents would argue about him constantly. I would hear them arguing at night and it really scared me. I think my parents really loved each other. I know my mother really depended on my dad and would work hard to make sure everything was the way he liked it. He came first.

Emily at 61:

I remember my parents fighting and being afraid. My mother was a strict Mormon, and she insisted I attend church. She was very tight with money, while my father loved to spend money. I think they cared about each other, but sometimes it seemed like they tolerated each other more than liked each other. And then my mother was killed, and I know my father never forgave himself for the accident.

Patricia at 53:

My parents were okay with each other, having normal conflicts but nothing I remember as being traumatic. Dad would get frustrated sometimes because my mother was sick, but that's all.

Jenny at 49:

My mom was very subordinate to my father, she took care of him. I wanted an equal partner, and if things didn't work out my way, well, there was a problem. Over the past few years I have totally rethought that one. I have a whole lot more respect for my mother. She knew how to manage the relationship.

Sonny at 48:

My father died when I was still a kid and mom raised us. Neither of my parents had an education past grade school and I think they fell together to escape bad family lives. They didn't get along before I was born, and while they were separated my mother became pregnant with me. She said I was his child, but I'm sure I'm not. So the whole thing was strained and hard and then he died.

Dana at 46:

He'd sit the chair and she'd do everything for him and I'd think, boy, I'm never going to let that happen to me. I felt bad for my mother and thought she felt the same way, but when my father had a heart attack, I saw how much she loved him and then I thought, gee, it's her life and not mine and she doesn't see it like I do.

Rachel at 45:

My parents are still together; they live in a retirement community. I think their relationship is much better now than when they were struggling. My dad is really outgoing, and my mother is shy, maybe there is a balance there. I don't think I thought being married was much fun as a kid, but it is what people did.

Corrie at 44:

My parents were good partners but not good playmates. They were at odds with one another about socializing. They were affectionate sometimes, but often seemed to want different things. There was conflict

and I always felt threatened and upset when conflict occurred. My mother never spoke to me about getting married and having kids. I don't think she thought it was particularly fun.

Noel at 41:

They didn't fight. He kind of gave in to her a lot, he didn't want any conflict. I think he felt bad for us because he knew how she treated us, but he wouldn't intervene. She was the boss pretty much.

Joanne at 40:

It seems my family was always in conflict. My parents fought and abused each other verbally and physically. It was always threatening to me. I would curl up and try not to be there. I still have a hard time even hearing angry words.

## SISTERS AND BROTHERS

Minnie at 96:

I was an only child really, except for Eldon, and my parents adopted him when I was twenty-nine. He was nine. He was a foundling. Poor thing had been shuttled from one family to another and really trusted no one by the time we got him. There was an ad in the paper for city children who needed good country life. We had lots of fresh air and milk and bread, so my parents had him come. It took a long time to win him over. I don't think the agency would have let us have him if it hadn't been for me being so young. I really was kind of like his mother. He would sit on the stone steps and wait for me to get home from work. We had him about three weeks when I brought him home a kitten. He named it Billy. Well, after dinner I heard a really strange sound. It was Eldon laughing at the kitten. He hadn't laughed before that time. We've been close all these years.

Grace at 83:

My sisters and brothers were all at least twenty years older than me. None of them are living now. My sister Anna was real bossy. She liked to tell me what to do, which I didn't like at all. My brothers adored me and treated me like a little doll. I have nieces and nephews that are more like brothers and sisters, because some were closer in age. I felt close to them.

Jackie at 73:

I had three brothers, two older, one younger. I got along pretty well with two of them but the oldest was "the black sheep." He was a very odd boy. We loved him, of course. He didn't talk until he was four and then came out with complete sentences, like he'd been waiting for the right time. He fought with my parents all the time. He died when he was fifty or so, miserable and alone. I get along well with the two others now. We're fairly close and I know they are supportive of me.

Emily at 61:

I was an only child, except for my father's sister who was eight years older than me. She lived with us for awhile when I was eleven or so. I was jealous of her. It seemed I was the bad kid and she was the good kid. It bothered me a lot. I felt she got the good attention.

Patricia at 53:

I have a sister and a brother. I live with my sister and we are very close. My brother lives out of town, but we visit on a regular basis.

Jenny at 49:

I have one brother and we get along okay. It's kind of distant but loving. I think I can count on him though.

Sonny at 48:

I babysat my sisters from the time I was about eight years old. Talk getting about mothering skills. I fixed lunch and made sure the chores were done. I never learned how to ride a bike or roller skate. I was more of mother to my sisters than I was a kid. My sisters look at me as a second mother even though I was only three and a half years older. My brothers were gone; they were so much older.

Dana at 46:

My brother is four years younger than me and we weren't real close growing up. He's okay, he's a nice guy and we see each other, but I don't feel real connected with him.

Rachel at 45:

I have a younger brother who coincidentally isn't married and doesn't have kids. We're close enough, quite close as a matter of fact, and I'm sure we will be available to each other in the bad times as well as the good. I was responsible for a lot of his care when we were kids, maybe we bonded then.

Corrie at 44:

My mother worked part time, so I was with my brothers and sister a lot. I accepted it as a normal part of life. I acted as friend and junior mother to my brothers. My sister, who was born when I was seventeen, I was her junior mother until about eight years ago. I'm very close to my family still.

Noel at 41:

I have one real brother and a step-sister and step-brother. My real brother is a little hard to take, but I visit because I love my new niece so much. I see my step-brother occasionally, and I do like him.

Joanne at 40:

I am really close to my brother and sister, especially since mom died. I pulled us all together, because I knew we would lose each other after she died if I didn't do something. My sister is one of my closest friends. My brother and I talk often, but we're not as close as me and my sister. Both are married, no kids. When we were growing up I was more like a mom to them than a sister, because my mom was alcoholic and not reliable. Sometimes we were aggressive towards each other, and other times we had fun. We never talked about what was going on at home. We still have trouble doing that. My brother still feels really responsible about mom's drinking, like he should have been able to do something about it. I know better than that, but he carries guilt. He thinks we should have been able to fix her. I guess I was really into caretaking where my sister and brother were concerned.



## SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Minnie at 96:

I had this cousin that I put up on a pinnacle. He was perfect as far as I was concerned. I compared all other men to him and no one could match him. By the time I realized he wasn't as good as I thought, it was too late. I was still spoiled for anyone else. I would look at my friend's marriages and think, "What on earth does she see in him?" Oh, I liked men and had some boy friends, but no one I wanted to marry.

Grace at 83:

I was always very tall for my age and I think this scared the boys. Men don't generally like women who are taller than they are. It used to make me very mad. I really wanted to get married when I was very young, but soon grew too stubborn and independent. There was one man I was really serious about until I was fifty or so. We talked about marriage for a long time, but he was afraid he would make me terribly unhappy. His father had made his mother very unhappy and so my friend assumed he would make me terribly unhappy, because he was cut from the same cloth as his father. What is really probably true is that I would have made him unhappy. I don't think I would have been a good partner. Many times through the years I have felt excluded because I am not married in a world where most people are. This upset me, but I lived through it.

Jackie at 73:

Men never really flocked around me. I had a weight problem, and felt insecure. My parents even told me that no one would like me if I weren't thinner. That was a very bad thing that they did. After awhile I just didn't let it bother me, and went out and had a good time anyway. I had great times in the Foreign Service. There was a man I worked with a long time ago and because of circumstances we couldn't get much closer than we were. But there was something special there and we knew it. He could really make me laugh and I just felt good when I was around him. I thought about marriage and children, but he died suddenly.

Emily at 61:

I had a long term affair with a man who lives in Europe. I thought about having a child then, I was forty-two. I think I always wanted to be a mother more than I wanted to get married. I still correspond with this man. What I think now is that I would like a relationship with a man based on mutual support, someone to go through the rest of my days with.

Patricia at 53:

I was heavy as a child and I think this made me feel quite shy. Boys didn't give a second look. I was married for seven years, no children. It just didn't work, we weren't very happy. Now, I think I would like to meet someone, and maybe I will, but it's not something that keeps me awake at night worrying about. My life is pretty good as is.

Jenny at 49 :

I really want a man in my life. I have tried to think it through, and I feel I have spent my entire adult life in pursuit of the perfect relationship. A lot of years have been spent in relationships, and there have been many years without them, too. I like being in a relationship with a man, unless it's awful and then I leave. I am really thankful I had great role models as to what a successful relationship is. My family has a track record of staying married. I worry though, because I don't feel complete without a relationship. On one level this is very sad, like I don't think I'm enough. I think maybe people will feel sorry for me, you know, oh, poor Jenny, she's still single, poor thing. If I knew there would never be another man in my life I wouldn't want to live. I don't go out by myself or entertain by myself. Yeah, I know, I'm Ms. Corporate America with all the externals, the house and all, but I want a man to share all this with. I want to know I have a date for Saturday night for the rest of my life.

Sonny at 48:

I only had brief, casual relationships after my marriage broke up. My husband cheated on our relationship and was really quite awful to me. I don't know if this created a negative image of relationships or what. I think I wanted to be close to someone but was really scared. I dated but didn't find anyone for me until two years ago, when I met Jim. We are soul mates. I feel more than fortunate. I had really given up hope. This is a solid thing.

Dana at 46:

If I had a relationship, that would be great, but I'm kind of discouraged about relationships now, and just hang out with my friends. I have lived alone a long time but would be willing to share space and time, if the right person comes along.

Rachel at 45:

I've been in a lot of relationships, none of them lasted very long. Some of them have been casual, others passionate. I enjoy relating, but don't feel really lonely because I'm not. I like things to be very simple, that's a real value with me. Relationships often take things out of the realm of simple, into complex.

Corrie at 44:

I really do want a strong, loving relationship with a lifemate. I have had long term relationships in the past, and love the good connections. But, as much as I desire the intimacy and closeness, I understand my need for privacy, for a place of my own, where I can go and shut the door and be undisturbed. A room of my own.

Noel at 41:

I've had relationships in the past. I had one that lasted two years and was real traumatic at the end. I really felt very married to this woman. It took me awhile to recover. I'm pretty set in my lifestyle, but would like someone someday. I get lonely. Even in the lesbian community it is more of a norm to be a part of a couple.

Joanne at 40:

I would like to be in a good, solid loving relationship, a partnership. But later. What is up for me now is Joanne's stuff, getting my business off the ground, taking care of myself. Once this all is more stable, then I will have time and energy for a relationship. Not saying of course, if he appeared at the door five minutes from now that I wouldn't make some minor adjustments in my plans.

## ON BEING CHILD-FREE

Minnie at 96:

Eldon, my adopted brother, was really more my child than my parents. My parents were quite old when they adopted him and I was the one with the energy. I suppose we bonded as people like to say now. I certainly love him like I would think a mother loves a son. The only time I remember missing not having children of my own was when one of my cousins became a grandmother. Now, I would have love to be a grandmother but I guess you have to be a mother first. Eldon's children wanted to call me grandma, but I wouldn't let them. They had two grandmas already, because Eldon got married twice, so I am their very special Aunt Minnie.

Grace at 83:

I always thought I would have children. I wanted to have children. But I had this independent streak that probably would have made me a terrible wife. I always wanted things the way I wanted them, thank you! You have to compromise so much when you are married. When I was in school I thought I would definitely get married and have children, but after that the thought sort of faded. I got busy with my career and time passed. I felt badly at times, and sad that I didn't have children, but it faded over time. Now I have so many grandnieces and nephews that it's like I have kids. They really keep a watchful eye.

Jackie at 73:

It was a terrible disappointment to me that I never married and had children. If I had met someone I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. I would have preferred being a homemaker to being a professional woman. For many years I felt that my life was wasted, but I got over that and had a good life, but I still feel I missed one of the most awesome and beautiful experiences a woman can have.

Emily at 61:

I had an abortion when I was thirty-three. Women just didn't have babies by themselves back then. I couldn't face being a single mother, especially being a school teacher. I don't look forward to a life without

children, it makes me sad. Funny, the abortion stuff is really coming up for me now, and that was thirty some years ago. I never grieved it then, just got on with things. I think it's a normal human desire to have children. I wanted to mother much more than I wanted to marry. Sometimes I think of adopting a teenager even at my ripe age. I do not look forward to a life without the emotional support of children and it always upsets me when someone asks me why I didn't have kids. I stay in touch with many of my former students and that feels good.

Patricia at 53:

I am comfortable or "resigned" to the fact I do not have children. To deny that I would have liked to have children would be false. I have coped with any maternal urges by maintaining very close relationship with my niece and nephews and their friends, over the years.

Jenny at 49:

My husband wanted to have kids, but I didn't. This was a problem. It's funny, but when I did think of having kids I had a specific image in mind like having a daughter, and having the same relationship with her that I had with my mother. Everything would have had to be beautiful, everything would have had to be perfect. No problems. I thought to myself that this is so well defined that it's not really what happens in life. The thought of having a baby boy had no interest for me. All I wanted was a little fluffy braided girl, that was too specific and I knew I shouldn't do it. You can't send them back after a thirty day trial.

Sonny at 48:

I feel I missed out on something, I love babies and little children. I missed out on the fulfillment of maternal emotions. I never met a man I felt close enough to to want children. I guess it just wasn't meant to be.

Dana at 46:

I think I would have been a good mother in some ways and yet I probably would be very impatient. There have been a few times that I have regretted not having kids, but it's never been an everyday thing. When my nieces and nephews were little I really loved being around them, but then I'd get worn out after a couple of hours. I think when I think of being older and not having a family it makes me sad. I imagine that

the ideal mother would be very well-liked, active, creative and curious, as well as emotionally present and equipped with the capacity for unconditional love. I'm not sure I could have played the whole game.

Rachel at 45:

With all the trouble about the possible hysterectomy when I was in my twenties, I really got a good look at the fact that I really didn't care if I had kids or not. And then living on the kibbutz, and being a part of their communal child care, I realized there was a better way to care for kids than this nuclear family stuff we do in the United States. Until then, I always thought I would eventually marry, and then I wasn't so sure. When I was a hippie, I was always attracted to the "earth mother" thing. It certainly beat being a suburban housewife with kids. I don't think I miss not having kids; it doesn't really bother me. I think it bothers my parents more, especially my father who was born to be a granddad.

Corrie at 44:

More and more it seems like the right decision for me. Every now and then I feel a real deep urge to be a mom and actually sad that it probably won't happen for me. That urge is never long or hard enough for me to actually act on it. I believe a lot of the reason I haven't had children is because I actively helped raise my brothers and sister and also, until recently never felt fully grown up or adult enough to have my own children. I never really made a clear decision. I also had scoliosis and was concerned about putting the stress of a pregnancy on my back. At this point in my life, while it's still biologically possible, I really am not interested in having a new baby.

Noel at 41:

It's weird, I grew up always wanting to have kids, but with all the craziness in my life and only really beginning to look at my stuff in therapy in the last few years, I never really felt ready. I've thought about adopting a kid, but I just think it's not going to happen for me. Maybe I'll get in a relationship with someone who has a kid. But, I look around at where I live and the way I live, and I'm not sure I want to give all this up. I think I've gotten kind of selfish. I think making a commitment to a kid scares me. If I adopted a kid, it probably wouldn't be a little kid, and they would come with their own set of problems, like I did, and I don't know if I'd be able to handle it or cope with it. Or want to. I do have my new little

niece. Seeing her, I sometimes think that I could have a baby here and keep it for a year here and then move. I really wish sometimes I had a kid. I had an abortion. God, I'd have a fifteen year old now.

Joanne at 40 :

Not having children certainly has certain freedoms associated with it. My time and money are my own and I can do things like start my own business without worrying about them too. I'm still a little maternally ambivalent, as you say. I still could biologically have a child, but let me tell you, I wouldn't consider doing it on my own. Single motherhood is out. If "Prince Charming" should appear and desperately want children, I would consider it. Maybe. But being a single mother is not something I want to do.

#### COLLATERAL FAMILY

Minnie at 96:

I have lots of family. I have many cousins and "nephews and nieces." They all seem to stay in contact, even though most of them are still back East. Eldon's family is the closest, and most of them are here in California. Betty, one of his grandchildren is coming to help me clean tomorrow. They take good care of me.

Grace at 83:

I have many relatives, old and young. I have something wrong with my eyes right now and my relatives are calling me all the time to see how I am doing and can they help me. My grand-nephew from Sacramento came last week and took me to lunch. They all really seem fond of me, which is a blessing. And even though I don't have a lot of money, I like to give them a little when they need it to help buy a house or a washer or something. That's what families are for, to help one another.

Jackie at 73:

I am very close to my nieces and nephews and their children. I have family parties to get everyone together at one time. I visit all of them often now. I feel I can count on them and they can count on me.

Emily at 61:

I am reasonably close to my dad's sister's sons and really feel like I could count on them if I needed to.

Patricia at 53:

I live with my widowed sister and her kids and their kids are around. I feel like a real part of the family being here. It's comfortable and not something I would wish to change. I feel I belong.

Jenny at 49:

I am close to my brother and he has three daughters and I shared close time with them when they were little but not so much now.

Sonny at 48:

I adore all my nieces and nephews, and my great nieces and nephews. They're like my grandkids. We do all the holiday and birthday stuff together. It's really wonderful. I love my family.

Dana at 46:

I really love my nieces; they have always been special. My nephew is a little too much for me, but I love him. I felt closer to them when they were younger but I'm sure I will maintain contact with them. They're my family.

Rachel at 45:

My brother isn't married and has no kids, so the niece, nephew thing doesn't exist for me. But I do work with a lot of young adults and that is a good feeling. They kind of regard me as one of them which is fun.

Corrie at 44:

I am close to all my siblings and their kids, and feel I'll get all the support and help I need when I get older. My family feels good and knit well together in that way.

Noel at 41:

I absolutely adore my little niece and love spending time with her. I also frequently babysit for a friend of mine and love her little boy. I'm also really close to two of my cousins and their families. We do holidays and stuff like that.



Joanne at 40:

I have pulled my family, brother, sister and father together in the past several years and I go back East to visit often. I don't have any nieces and nephews and my peripheral family remains periphera

## WOMEN FRIENDS

Minnie at 96:

I have had lots of friends. I hated to move here from the East Coast because of that, but the time was right in a lot of ways. I have lived here nine years and am acquainted and friendly with very many of the residents in this community.

Grace at 83:

I have always had loads of friends. One woman I have known since the second grade. I sent a hundred Christmas cards every year. And living here in this retirement community it's like I can live alone, which I like, but I'm surrounded by lots of friends. We're busy doing things all the time. It is hard as you get older, because friends are dying, but that's the way life is, it doesn't last forever.

Jackie at 73:

Several of my closer friend have died recently. That happens when you're this age. It's really hard to adjust; I miss them. I don't have much energy to court new ones. My friend who lived here with me for thirteen years, well, we were supposed to be each other's family and stay close and all. But after several years it just didn't work out and she moved back East. We're not even really good friends anymore. It's really quite sad.

Emily at 61:

I have a few women friends I am quite close to. We enjoy walking, going to plays and having meals together. We talk about everything and it feels good.

Patricia at 53:

I have several friends I go to social functions with. My sister, whom I live with, is really my closest friend.

Jenny at 49:

When it seemed like all my friends were having babies, I kind of drifted away. I didn't see the old group much. I was into the career thing and started hanging out with single women, women like myself. I have a few close women friends now, one in particular I've known for twenty-five years. We're like sisters almost.

Sonny at 48:

I am close to a few of my friends and we talk a lot on the phone. When I played soccer I did things with the team members. I really like interacting with women, they have been my mainstay in the relationship area for many years.

Dana at 46:

I have many more friends now than I ever have had, I seem to connect and stay in better touch than I ever have before. Gee, if you call people once in a while they call you back and you get together, what a concept! I wish I had known more about this friend thing earlier on. I have many close women friends in the gay community. I really do get a lot of support and love and feel I can really trust them. But sometimes I feel I am part of an underground, hidden support group and this makes me sad because it's kind of isolating, like a secret.

Rachel at 45 :

As I started getting older and my friends started getting married, I really began to see a change in the relationship that we had had. Before, the things I did with my friends was really the core of my life. My whole identification was with a group of people, it was in the hippie time. It was the group instead of couples and I was in this mode for a long period of time. I used to have a whole lot of friends I would party with, but things have slowed down and changed. I no longer have that bond. I'm sort of in a transition period where friends are concerned.

Corrie at 44:

I have eight close women friends with whom I share time and philosophy. I don't know what I'd do without their love and support.

Noel at 41:

I have lots of women friends gay and straight. Many of them I have had for years. I intend to keep them in my life for years to come. I work evenings though, and this makes it hard for me to go and do and be social with them as much as I would like. But they're there, and we talk on the phone a lot.

Joanne at 40:

I have several close women friends. They are mostly of the creative, explorative sort. I do dream classes and yoga classes and things like that and meet friends who enjoy what I enjoy. I can count on several of them for emotional sharing and support.

## EDUCATION AND WORK

Minnie at 96:

I had a lot of different jobs. I did bookkeeping right out of high school. I didn't like it very much, but it paid seven dollars a week to start and that was good money for a woman back before the first world war. Things were going well and then they signed the Armistice. I was fired to make room for one of our boys coming back from the war. That happened again after World War Two. I was a Fuller Brush man, and was selling a lot of brushes, but I was retired to make room for a soldier who needed a job. But, I showed them. I went to work for a competing company and stole the territory. People liked me. My mother and I had a chicken business and we did well with that. Then, my last job was cooking for a school. I did that for twelve years. I really loved it. I used to add a little of this or that to make food the kids would like. I made green jello for St. Patrick's Day which wasn't on the set menu. The kids loved it. When I retired, the mothers had a big party for me and gave me a pin.

Grace at 83:

I loved my career in social work. I got my master's degree and then worked as a psychiatric social worker for many years. I worked for a nearby social service agency until I retired in 1975. I had encephalitis and it left me unable to write very well or speak very clearly, but I have adapted. Until that time I thoroughly enjoyed working with people.

Jackie at 73:

The Foreign Service was a good place to be as a single person; it is a sort of family. I made many friends and no one cared if I was single or not. Living in Paris was a dream; it was a fluke I got there. I was just in the right place at the right time, and it was the most fascinating job I ever had. I worked in the press attache's office. Eisenhower visited twice, Kennedy visited once and all the news that went out from those presidential visits came from my office. NATO used to be in Paris, and every year they had a NATO summit and all the news came from our office. I got to know a lot of the White House journalists. They're very knowledgeable people, very interesting.

Emily at 61:

I chose teaching as a profession and taught elementary school for thirty years. I also taught Spanish. I had originally intended to teach for a year and then get married and have babies. But it didn't happen like that. I just loved teaching, working with all those children. It was very gratifying.

Patricia at 53:

I have always worked in a clerical capacity and have worked in my present job for nine years as an accounting assistant. I am comfortable with what I do and don't see myself seeking a change, but working where I do until I retire. I enjoy my co-workers, and my job.

Jenny at 49:

I am a manager of a lot of people right now and sometimes it feels better than others. I really do feel confident that I am good at what I do. I was laid off from my last job because of down-sizing and didn't work for nearly eight months. That was really scary because I own a house and have payments and all, but I made it through. So, even if my job has drawbacks, I am glad I have it.

Sonny at 48:

I feel stuck sometimes in this job. I get really tired of people calling me up and complaining, but that's my job, to field complaints. I do customer relations. It's really stressful and draining. I hope when I finally

finish my master's that I can find something more in line with my guts. I really want to help, be a real helper. I would find that much more satisfying.

Dana at 46:

Things aren't humming along for me too well right now. our family business isn't doing well, so I offered to cut back my hours, because I feel like my dad is paying me and I'm not doing anything, so I don't feel too secure and I'm looking for other part time work. Maybe I'll do housesitting for a real estate agent or something and still go to the store two days a week, but if the store goes under I probably will substitute teach.

Rachel at 45:

I enjoy many aspects of my job, especially working with the student employees. It has taken on more of a bookkeeping, bottom line spin in recent years and I would prefer to work more with people. I look forward to a more people oriented career in the future, but am in no great hurry. I may return to school, I may not. I am is very satisfied with my lifestyle as it is. It is very lucrative and I am able to save money for my future. I like things quiet and peaceful and simple when I am not at work.

Corrie at 44:

I have worked as a hospital secretary for many years. I like the people I work with, and feel like I am making a positive contribution. I really can help the patients indirectly by dealing well with their families, the doctors and nurses. It's a demanding and stressful job, but I am able to work part time and pursue the things I love the rest of the time. This balance in my life really works well for me.

Noel at 41:

I have my own business cleaning houses which helps supplement my job at the hospital. I do like my job but am really tired of working evenings. It cuts into my social life a lot, and my job can be really stressy.

I've worked at the hospital for many years. I took time out to go to optician's school and worked in that field for five years, but really didn't like it after awhile, and went back to the hospital.

Joanne at 40:

I almost got my degree in home economics and did some work with preschool kids for awhile. Then, I became a waitress for five years. I

got a job with a big hotel doing relish trays and such and went on from there. I wound up as the administrative assistant to the chef and worked in that capacity for several years. It was very hard for me to leave. But I really have felt on an intuitive level for a long time that I could start my own business, and I have. I do decorative food sculpture. I'm doing okay so far and really believe that the sky is the limit. I can do this thing well. I feel like a little kid a lot, looking for an adult to come along and tell me that it's okay, but I'm going with it and it feels wonderful.

## SELF-EXPRESSION

Minnie at 96:

I did handiwork most of my life until the last few years. My hands just don't do what I want them to now. I made hooked rugs, and did weaving. The weaving was wonderful. I wove beautiful cloth, but it got a little hard to move the loom around. The rugs I made were from scratch. I would buy my own flannel and dye it the colors I wanted. I often designed my own patterns. I made chair covers too. People say they are like art work, and they are real pretty. I made a dining room rug once. That was a job! All of it takes a lot of time and patience.

Grace at 83:

My career in social work was very consuming, and demanding. I found myself wanting to read or play bridge or do something that didn't take too much energy. I used to love to play golf and do outdoor things, but as one gets older, one's interests change. That's a good thing, to be interested in the things you can still do. I read classics and listen to music, things I can do from my favorite chair.

Jackie at 73:

Working as the altar guild directress at my church gives me an opportunity to work with all the wonderful colors and symbols particular to each Christmas season. Making the church a beautiful place is very satisfying. I am also playing the piano again, which is satisfying.

Emily at 61:

I wish to spend time getting my house, yard and self in order, and to sculpt and paint and do flower arranging, and to continue to be a

student of what it is to be human, a part of all creation. I have volunteered as an art docent in the past and may do so again.

Patricia at 53:

I like music and plays and things of that nature, so I guess I participate more than actually do. I enjoy what other people have created.

Jenny at 49:

My home is the best expression of me, that and my garden. I like everything to be beautiful and well kept.

Sonny at 48:

I paint ceramics and like to make gifts for my family and friends. It really takes a long time and last Christmas I was up all hours finishing what I started to put them under the tree.

Rachel at 45:

I love light, color and space, lots of space, and I love words and music, but I'm not particularly artistic.

Noel at 41:

I love taking pictures with infrared film and then painting them in a little, a tulip here or a tree there. And I love to paint pictures of nature. I'll have more time soon to do this I hope.

Joanne at 40:

I love to paint and do sculpture. I do it for a living, kind of, with the food sculpture. But in the last few years I have really begun to do my own thing and I love it. I was discouraged by my mother to do art when I was a kid, but feel free now.

## VOLUNTEERING

Minnie at 96:

During the First World War I helped a lot with the poor. It was sort of a ladie's aide society. And then again during the second war, with the Red Cross.

Grace at 83:

My job was so bound up with people's lives, doing social work, that I didn't really think of volunteering. And now, when I do have time, I can't get around very well. I use a walker and had to sell my car. The church wanted me to do some things for them, but they would have had to bring things to me and that was a bother.

Jackie at 73:

When I first retired I got really busy volunteering. My family was not as available to me as I had hoped and I was lonely. Now, through my church I have been able to help young people on occasion and find this very rewarding. There is one young woman, in particular that several of us rallied and helped in a time of great personal need. I like doing things like that. I also am the altar guild directress and really feel I am doing a good service here.

Emily at 61:

I have worked as an art docent, doing tours and explaining particular shows and things to patrons.

Patricia at 53:

I have volunteered in the past with church and things like that but am not actively involved right now.

Jenny at 49:

I don't volunteer. Maybe I will in the future. It seems that it is really necessary in a society as off the mark as ours is. Kids need help. Old people need help.

Sonny at 48:

I volunteered as a Big Sister for over ten years. I was very close to one girl I "sistered" and we still stay in touch. I really felt I was making an impact, really helping. I feel a lot of love for her and enjoy watching her changes.

Dana at 46:

I don't volunteer, I have too many jobs and am trying to keep it all together. But I am available to help my friends if they need me.



Rachel at 45:

I am really busy with my work. While it's not really volunteering, I work with a lot of kids who need a point in the right direction sometimes. This makes me feel like I'm helping

Corrie at 44:

I volunteered to work with autistic children and have been a cuddler in the intensive care nursery of the hospital. I am considering administering hearing tests to little kids on this same unit.

Noel at 41:

I am not actively volunteering right now. I haven't had time, trying to work two jobs to keep my house. In the past I volunteered with a hot-line dealing with abused kids. Maybe sometime soon. Something with animals or little kids.

Joanne at 40:

In the past I have worked with cerebral palsy kids, and kids with cystic fibrosis. I have also worked with hospice bereavement education, student tutors for educational progress. Of late I have done more event coordinating than actual hands on. I would like to teach art to kids on a voluntary basis, particularly homeless kids. I'd like them to be able to make something and then have it for themselves, they have so little. It's something they could be proud of.

## APPENDIX 3: QUESTIONNAIRE

### DEMOGRAPHICS

1. What is your age?
2. In what size town were you raised?
3. What was your socioeconomic group? Working class, middle-class, or ??

### FAMILY OF ORIGIN

1. How many sisters and brothers do you have? What are their ages?
2. Were you raised in a two parent home? If not, what was the arrangement?
3. Did you know any of your grandparents? Were you close to aunts, uncles and cousins?
4. Was your mother employed outside of the home? If so what impact did this have on your family? What impression did it make on you?
5. Did your parents get along well? Were they devoted to one another or distant?
6. Please describe your relationship with your mother. Did you feel you could count on her? Was she supportive of you? How did your relationship with her grow and change throughout your life?

7. Please describe your relationship with your father. Please be specific.
8. What was your relationship like with your siblings? Please describe.
9. Are you currently close to your siblings and their children?
10. If you were not raised by your parents and/ or had no siblings, please describe in detail the circumstances in which you grew up.

#### EDUCATION AND CAREER

1. Did you attend college? Where? What degrees have you been awarded?
2. Please describe your job history.
3. Did you plan a career or did you 'fall into' your employment?

#### SOCIALIZATION

1. Traditionally, girls play house and tend baby dolls. Was this true in your childhood?
2. Did you like grade school? Did you feel a part of the group? Did you feel left out? Why? Please elaborate.
3. Did you like high school? Did you feel a part of the group or left out? Why? Please be specific.

## LIFESTYLE

1. During your life have you usually lived alone or with other people?
2. What are your current living circumstances? Do you live alone or with a roommate?
3. If you live alone, is it because you prefer to do so?
4. What are your personal interests? How do you like to spend your time?
5. Do you now or have you ever volunteered time doing community work of any sort? If so, please describe your involvement.
6. Do you feel comfortable and secure in your lifestyle?
7. Have you more or less planned your life or just "gone with the flow"?
8. Do you have many women friends? How many of them do you consider very close?.
9. What things do you consider to be central to your life satisfaction and continued contentment?

## CHILDREN

1. Please, as best you can, describe your feelings about remaining child-free?
2. What is your image of a mother?
3. What freedoms do you associate with being child-free?
4. Does growing older without the company of children concern you?

5. Have you many friends who are child-free?
6. Did you ever feel you had to choose between having children and having a career?
7. How do you react when in the company of women who are discussing their families and children?
8. Have you ever felt excluded because you are child-free?
9. If people ask you why you don't have children what do you answer?
10. When you were an adolescent did you intend to have children?
11. Did you make a conscious decision not to have children?  
If so, when and why?
12. If you did not make a conscious decision not to have children, how was the decision arrived at? Were there physical reasons? Did you postpone the decision until it was biologically too late? Please be as specific as possible.
13. What was your family's reaction to your child-free state?
14. What is your personal experience with the maternal urge? There are several schools of thought on this phenomenon. Some feel it is biological, some feel it is psychological and some feel it is a sociological

phenomena; in other words, women are socialized to feel maternal. Please elaborate on your own personal experience and opinions in this area.

### RELATIONSHIPS

1. Have you had long term couple relationships in the past?
2. Have you lived with either a marriage or other type of partner for an extended period of time? Please elaborate on the circumstances.
3. Do you see yourself surrounded by supportive friends and collateral family (nieces and nephews etc.) as your "family of choice" as you grow older? Please describe.
4. How do you feel about your singlehood in a society where marriage, for good or ill, is the norm?