

Becoming a Single Mother

There's a tale by Rilke in his collection, *Stories of God*, in which a young woman named Klara is visited by her old schoolmate, Georg, after many years. Georg has heard that Klara, who suffered much as a girl, had met the unfortunate fate of becoming with child and being abandoned by the child's father, an artist. When Georg goes to visit Klara for himself, he finds that her situation is far from miserable. Klara is quite content to live alone in her flat "filled with light and kindness" with her infant, doing writing and translation to support her little family—a nineteenth-century work-at-home mom. Her old friend is astonished by her "free and simple serenity," and marvels, "but you aren't in the least miserable," to which Klara simply replies, "It's not people's fault if they speak differently of it."

I was in my early 20s when I first encountered this tale about a young single mother distanced from society but quite content to care for her child alone. The woman's utter lack of desire for a man to complete the picture of domestic contentment stuck with me over the years. As I passed through my 20s, having failed (as I saw it then) to find a suitable mate with whom I could begin a family, I thought now and then of Rilke's portrait of Klara writing away in her cleanswept little rooms, her baby asleep at her side. And Klara came to mind once more in my early 30s, when I was seriously considering asking one or more of my male friends to father a child for me. I never took Klara's life seriously as a model for my own—no, I wanted a man around—but I found this man-free picture compelling, nevertheless.

One morning at the age of 34, fresh out of a long-term relationship that I had always hoped would lead to marriage and children but did not, I sat on the edge of the bathtub, shivering in my robe, scared to death that the little blue plus sign would appear in the screen on the tube, indicating an un-

planned and untimely pregnancy. And scared to death that it would not. When it did appear, the image of that sleeping babe, those serene rooms full of light, came back once more. I felt as though my whole life had been leading up to this moment. In a flash, I knew this much: I—we—were going to be okay. I knew that I could do it.

That, of course, was only the beginning of the story.

I am a member of one of the fastest-growing demographic groups in the U.S.: I am an educated, self-supporting, 30-something single mother. Along with recent news reports of this cultural phenomenon come media portrayals from “Murphy Brown” to Madonna, from newer celebrity single moms like Jodie Foster to the Lifetime channel’s “Oh, Baby” about a woman who went to the sperm bank and is now raising her baby on her own. Even a recent “My Turn” column in *Newsweek* magazine features a 30-something woman touting the joys of parenting solo. These portrayals would have us believe that single motherhood of a certain socio-economic class is distinct from the inner-city welfare mom stereotypes. My kind of single-motherhood is supposed to be not only do-able, but downright desirable. After all, I am, as the name of one national organization for single mothers calls it, a Single Mother by Choice. I couldn’t—or wouldn’t—find a man to suit me, so now I have decided to do without the daddy part of the equation. This brand of single-motherhood is a relatively recent phenomenon, one we’re taking with us into the next century. So why does all this media attention remind me of that *Redbook* magazine cover from way back in the early 1980s during the advent of the Supermom myth, in which a woman happily juggles a set of bubbles containing images of hubby, toddler, baby, work, and the myriad of chores associated with running a household? I’m not even married, but, evidently, I can still do it all.

A more realistic and compassionate picture of single motherhood comes from Melissa Ludtke’s (1997) recent compilation of interviews with “unwed mothers” of all stripes called *On Our Own: Unmarried Motherhood in America*. Ludtke’s (1997) inspiration for the book arose from her own anguished decision about whether or not to pursue her dream of having a child even though she had not yet found a mate. In the process of making this personal decision, she became interested in the lives of women who, for whatever reason, had children without a daddy. To her credit, Ludtke (1997) interviews both “Unmarried Adolescent Mothers” and “Unmarried Older Mothers,” giving them equal treatment with regards to the decision to become a mother, the raising of children, and the daddy question. The fundamental choice of all of the women Ludtke talks with, however, seems to be either “married” or “unmarried.” But in the same way that speaking only in terms of “black” or “white” limits the kind of discussion that takes place about race, Ludtke’s dichotomous framework makes possible only a fraction of the discussion that should take place about an issue that I believe has such enormous potential to create change. The choice to become a *single* mother is redefining what it means to become a mother.

Until relatively recently in the last century, when contraception gained widespread cultural acceptability, North American women who were of childbearing age spent the majority of their adult lives either pregnant or recovering from pregnancy while caring for the children they already had. That means we've had less than 100 years to transform the institution of marriage in our homes and our psyches from its primary function as a preserver of family names, power, and fortunes into a partnership between equals. At the same time, a divorce rate that gives married couples about a 50/50 shot at making it might be evidence that marriage is simply not the institution within which equal partnership can best be achieved. Nevertheless, it is still the institution within which most heterosexual mothers raise their children. At the same time, even a glance at the headlines of women's magazines in the supermarket ("Seven New Ways to Drive Him Wild Tonight" or "Is Your Husband Having an Affair? Here's How to Tell") reveals subtle but consistent clues that contemporary heterosexual marriage is still circumscribed by the power and desires of men. We live in a social climate in which mothers who have entire litters of children are celebrated, and in which the right-to-life movement continues to make advances in its war on reproductive choice, including contraception for young women. Losing ground in this arena means losing ground in our partnerships with men, as well.

If that most culturally-sanctioned of choices—to marry and bear children—is still a difficult one for women and men who seek equal partnerships together, then it is all the more difficult for a single mother to forge a path for herself from among the limited paths available to women with children. Certainly, there are pleasures and freedoms for women and mothers who do not live their lives emotionally, financially, and psychologically tied to a male partner. And there are women like Rilke's Klara, who, despite the sometimes overwhelming material and psychological burdens single motherhood presents, are quite content to go it alone. But single motherhood is not an ideal choice no matter how many balls the modern single mom can juggle. Contrary to what Dan Quayle would have us believe about the Murphy Browns of the world, I didn't choose single motherhood because I believe in families without daddies, or because I like my son, Jonah, being in daycare 45 hours a week while I work to achieve the academic tenure that will make our lives more secure. Rather, my choice was but one of many decisions that can be seen as a series of adaptations to living in a culture circumscribed by the interests of powerful men.

These are some of my girlhood "lessons" about growing up female within patriarchy: I am the daughter of a Korean American mother and a Caucasian father. Around the age of ten, I learned through the way other children reacted to my slightly Asian looking appearance that I wasn't really a white person. I learned that my father, who had a series of affairs with other women throughout my childhood, must prefer white women to Asian women like his wife. It followed that the most desirable kind of woman was a white woman, and that in order to appear desirable I must not let my racial ambiguity show. I learned

racial camouflage by attaching myself to tough white boys who smoked dope and drove fast cars. I learned that it was best to forget that I was Asian at all.

Just like most heterosexual girls, I believed I could somehow control my sexual desirability to men and boys by the way I fixed my hair and makeup and clothing. But I also came to believe that my sexual attractiveness was directly related to my (apparent) whiteness. I learned to rely on this control, to trust it, to the exclusion of learning mutuality, respect, and partnership with boys and men. With the help of a therapist, I eventually saw that whatever it was I had to work through about my sexual and racial identity was so powerful that it was taking up the years of life during which most women marry and start families. I kept hearing that women who wait until they are in their 30s to bear children may find that they are unable to have children at all. I took to heart the cultural message underlying this “news”—shame on you for shirking your duty by getting a doctorate, trying to become a writer, wasting your time with men who are not suitable father material. Part of me truly believed that at my age, the eggs in my ovaries were nothing but dying little clusters of potential life inside me that had just wasted away.

And then at 34, unmarried and uncommitted to any man, I learned to my complete surprise that I was pregnant.

I am not suggesting that my parental status came about because of my particular racial and sexual background. I take full responsibility for the risk I took and its consequences. I chose this life, and I love it, warts and all. Certainly, there’s a part of me shouting, “Look, Ma, no hands!” when it comes to caring for and supporting my son as an unmarried and as yet untenured working mother on a single income. I accomplish more now in 15 minutes that I used to accomplish in half a day. But my competence only runs in spurts, and guess who’s “babysitting” Jonah this evening, while I write this essay about single motherhood? He’s big and purple and he sings. So let’s not imagine that women choose this life *instead of* “married, with children.” They choose the best lives they can within a cultural framework that provides most women with a still rather limited array of socially acceptable options regarding marital status, sexuality and parenthood. Given this reality, even if I had the time and resources to do a much better job at single parenting than I am doing, I still say there must be a better way to raise our daughters and sons.

I’ve been on the outside looking in on enough marriages to know that it is seldom a choice to envy. Because women’s choices have expanded in the workplace, but not on the domestic front, women’s work is not getting any easier. The problem is not marriage or the lack of it that’s at the heart of raising our children well. It’s the consumerist mentality that puts one man, one woman and one or more children at the center of a middle-class market culture. Everything from the single-family dwellings to the minivans to the tree-lined neighborhoods in which every family owns their own lawnmower but uses it only once a week perpetuates the fundamentally individualistic framework of the American nuclear family. I, for one, want my son to grow up with a much

broader sense of family, in a world in which he feels connected to and responsible for others, locally and globally.

In an on-line article for *Hip Mama*, author Susie Bright takes issue with the limited vision of single motherhood in Melissa Ludtke's (1997) *On Our Own*. "Where were the activists, the commune-makers, the tribe-reclaimers?" Bright chides. "I can't believe anyone could write a book about single moms and not look at the cutting edge conversations going on in feminist, queer, and other radical communities about parenting." Bright, who disarmingly declares she is an "I-don't-give-a-shit-about-Daddy" kind of Mommy, is really pointing to a type of single motherhood that isn't single at all: it takes place outside the institution of marriage, but inside a vision of single motherhood that makes room for an alternative kinds of parenting communities.

Not all single mothers have limited themselves to the choice of either finding a suitable daddy for their kids or going it alone. There are women and men whose choices vary widely regarding marriage, partnership, lifestyle, and sexual preference whose lives still involve children they care about, regardless of their own parental status. There are people who live not just in families, but in villages. And that's what I long to give Jonah—not a father, but a village. He'll find his father, biological, spiritual, or otherwise—or perhaps a series of fathers. (Why shouldn't every boy, regardless of his parentage?) It's far more important to me that Jonah learns to envision what being a man and a father could mean, to sustain the possibility that this term could be broadened to include choices not available to the men of my generation or previously.

In English, to "mother" a child means to nurture him or her for a lifetime; on the other hand, "fathering" a child, at least in its most common usage, takes only a matter of seconds. What sort of legacy is that to leave our sons? Raising Jonah in this culture will also mean bringing him up to inheritance of extreme and near-ubiquitous violence, to an unearned sense of entitlement that goes with white, male privilege and the accompanying resentment that in reality this privilege exists for most men only as an idea. It means raising him to destroy or be destroyed on the playground, the gym floor, the street, and in the boardroom; to make the excruciating decision about whether he should register for the selective service; to be assaulted with a barrage of pornographic images attempting to construct a male sexuality that, regardless of Jonah's future sexual preferences, will provide him with confusing and contradictory images about what it means to be a male sexual being. Left unexamined—and little in this culture encourages its scrutiny—white male privilege indicates an inability to view the world from the perspective of the less-powerful or the less-fortunate. That's patriarchy, and it isn't good for anybody.

So I have decided I will raise a feminist if it's the last thing I do. Jonah will learn that becoming a "single mother by choice" was not, for me, a choice against being married to his father. It was a choice in favor of a vision of a kind of parenting that could start with the way I raised him, regardless of my marital status. I'll tell him, for example, about my dear friends and family who stayed

for days on end in those early weeks, and about my doula, who dropped by throughout the first two months to help with breastfeeding. I'll tell him about the naming ceremony, plucked from Korean tradition, that I had for him when he was 100 days old, when his many friends and well-wishers came to read a benediction in his honour and to celebrate his life. I'll tell him about how a different friend came every single night of the week during the semester and sometimes all weekend to help with cooking or chores or to spell me so that I could grab a free hour. Jonah and I will work our way through the difficult issues, making the best choices we can in an imperfect world and working to sustain and nurture the values and the people we hold dear. And when he is ready to become a man, we will figure out some way to make that passage into manhood a meaningful rite for him and those who care about him. He will learn that every well-raised young man is an opportunity to help create the kind of world and the kind of choices for both men and women that he can envision.

It has been over three years since the day I saw that little blue cross appear on my home-kit pregnancy test. I think back to that image of Klara's blissful isolation with her infant and realize that I, for one, could never have done it if I was truly alone. In fact, Rilke's fantasy of a unique woman who somehow makes her way in the world outside the bounds of the traditional choices available to women is one of the oldest tropes in literature—from Mary Magdalene to Hester Prynne to, well, Madonna. It is a myth that single mothers who choose to raise their children without men are trying to do away with daddy. Perhaps that belief is nothing but the old male fantasy, starting with Eve, of a sexually powerful and, therefore, transgressive and dangerous woman. A maneater. I made it through two days of labor without drugs. I made it through that first foggy couple of years with an infant. So I know how powerful I am (and how dangerous when sleep-deprived). But mine is a creative, transforming power—human, or cosmic, if you will, but not exclusively female. And I earned it. If Daddies really feared becoming obsolete, they would find it for themselves. No doubt, some of them already have.

As for that image of Klara and her slumbering babe—persuasive as it has been to me over the years, I'm now two-and-a-half years into single motherhood and I know something she doesn't: just wait until she tries to write with a *toddler* around.

References

- Bright, Susie. 1999. "Exploding the Daddy Myth." *Hip Mama*. Online. December 1. Accessed March 2000.
- Ludtke, Melissa. 1997. *On Our Own: Unmarried Motherhood in America*. New York: Random House.