

motherhood

I Wasn't Moving For My Kids

By **Fredricka R. Maister** - February 5, 2025

1464 3



When I was in my early 20's, I announced to my mother that I might not want to have children.

Shocked and angered by my honest revelation, she freaked out, "What do you mean...no kids? That's not normal. Don't ever say that in front of anyone. They'll think there's something wrong with you."

Judged and berated by my mother for not embracing motherhood, I felt like a pariah throughout my childbearing years and even beyond. Luckily, some of the pressure to wed and conceive was lifted when my sister married and bore my mother two grandchildren. At least, one daughter had lived up to her and society's expectations!

I used to seethe with unrepressed anger when asked, frequently by married women I didn't know, about my marital status and offspring. To me, it was especially rude and intrusive when it was assumed that I was a mother.

I will never forget the time, when visiting my sister out-of-town during Thanksgiving week, we ran into an acquaintance of hers at the mall. "So you came with your kids," she presumed.

Instantly defensive, I snapped, "What kids! I don't have any kids!" Taken aback by my response, all she could say was "Oh," which infuriated me even more.

Even though I've been comfortable with my life choices and my anger has subsided with the passage of time, I still react to the presumptive notion that I have children--just like I recently did with a woman on the mat next to me in exercise class.

Having just heard that I was relocating to another city, she, a veritable stranger, smiled at me and said, "So you're moving to be near your kids."

"Oh, no. Here we go again," I thought, rolling my eyes in frustration, as I've done countless times before.

"I don't have any kids," I responded, then proceeded to turn away from her. Had she even considered the possibility I was moving for another reason? To pursue a new lifestyle that would be less frenetic, financially easier, and more conducive to my needs as an independent woman living alone? Apparently not.

I am sure this woman did not intend to be rude, insensitive or nosy. Maybe she was trying to be friendly and make small talk, but as a single woman with no children, my knee-jerk reaction to such an immediate assumption was annoyance, not to mention disappointment.

I don't understand how such women, the beneficiaries of Women's Liberation, can blithely expect I am a parent as if that is a given, the only choice for a woman. Don't they know the numbers of women choosing to be unmarried and childless have been trending upwards for years? How I want to say: "Ladies, wake up, this is no longer the 1950's. Women like me are not damaged goods or 'less than!'" To quote the childless, single, 55-year-old actress, Jennifer Aniston, "We are complete with or without a mate, with or without a child...that decision is ours and ours alone."

In my case, I never felt an urgent maternal nudge compelling me to have children. Maybe one day Richard, my partner of 14 years, and I would have had a child, but he died when I was 37 years old and I never met a man afterwards with whom I wanted to procreate. I own and accept my childlessness without regret or bitterness.

Even though I might be perceived as having been a tad snarky, I am proud of myself for turning away from the woman in exercise class before she could express surprise or offer the typical "Oh, I'm sorry," as if I were one to be pitied. Advocating for myself trumped politeness in that instance.

Ironically, these women, I imagine, support a pro-choice position on the matter of abortion. Yet, when faced with a woman who has opted to remain childless for whatever reason--and that reason is no one's business but her own--they seem to stand in judgment of her personal choice.

I've often wondered whether other single, childless women feel as I do when encountering such "tunnel-visioned" women. Whenever I worry that my reaction may be emotionally over-the-top, I always consult with a few trusted friends for their take on the issue.

In my admittedly unscientific survey, every childless friend validated my reaction to the presumption that I had children and shared my discomfort whenever asked, "Do you have kids?" Some resented even being asked if they were married. Rachel noted, "It's been difficult swimming against the expected bridal gown, the house with the white picket fence and having babies, especially since I have a sister who fulfilled those expectations and replicated the prevalent standard."

Interestingly, my friends differ from each other and me in their response to the "kids question." Some have become so inured or accept their powerlessness to change the stereotypical presumptions of the asker that they take it in stride, resorting to such stock answers as "I'm a cat mother," "My husband has four legs," or "I'm too busy being an aunt." Leah told me she no longer gets angry, despite a tinge of regret for being childless, "because the person who assumes you have a child is not thinking with a sensitivity that not everyone is a mother."

However, Susan, a women's rights activist and educator, thought I missed a teaching opportunity, explaining "You might have said, 'No, I'm not moving for my kids. You assume that I have kids, but this is an assumption you need to be careful making. Many women don't have children either by choice (often a painful one), not finding the right father, or infertility. When you ask about kids, you may be calling up deep feelings of remorse, regret, anger, disappointment, etc.'"

Some women might have been comfortable articulating such feelings to the woman in exercise class the way Susan did, but it's not my style to confront others and lecture them on how to behave (that's not to say I won't write an essay about them!). And would the women, stuck in their presumptions about motherhood, even be teachable?

I wonder how I might react next time--and I have no doubt there will be a next time. I am sure I will cringe internally, but I would like to have the calm presence of mind to respond with humor like Phyllis, who, when asked "do you have kids?," matter-of-factly says "not that I know of," or maybe like Maria, who sloughs it off with a tongue-in-cheek "not in this lifetime."

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