

Is life really just the end of the line?

By Joyce Madelon Winslow

I am an endangered species: a woman at midlife with no children and one surviving parent, 84. That means there will soon be no familial generation to buttress mine against death. No progeny will carry on what I've learned and believe.

It's humbling to be the last frontier, the sum total of all that my ancestors produced — ancestors who, presumably, go back to caveman times, who survived wild animals and their own primitive instincts, who carried their courage and candlesticks onto immigrant ships. How did it happen that centuries of personal gene pools will dead-end with me?

The answer has to do with being part of a transitional generation. I am a baby boomer, raised to be a good wife and mother who puts her husband's career first. But I also am a member of the first generation of women who went to college en masse.

Suddenly, women were two things: potential mothers and budding professionals. For many of us with career goals, that began a long, difficult struggle to manage children and jobs. For others,

it was the beginning of a choice: career or marriage. But sometimes solutions happen without making a choice, as in my case: I wound up divorced and childless.

I am not alone. About 17% of U.S. women 40 to 44 years old have no children. I wonder how many of them, like me, once equated children with housework and dirty diapers, and career with excitement and travel — but now regret what they've missed.

In 1971, when we boomers were deciding between a baby and an advanced degree, we were getting (and giving our-

selves) mixed messages. Our mothers told us, as they had been told, that children were everything. But we college graduates questioned whether we could be content proffering pabulum and discussing detergents.

A whiff of what the future could hold

The University of California, Berkeley offered one of the first courses on breaking out of traditional women's roles. As a fledgling journalist, I wrote about the course. After the article ran, women in their 30s, 40s and 50s confided to me, a twenty-something, how frustrated they felt with their lives. That made a big impression.

So did my mother. I can still see her crying, her body bent over the ironing board where 15 of my father's shirts hung neatly pressed. "Who am I?" she asked, more of herself than of me. "I'm your mother and Daddy's wife, but who am I?"

Still a child at the time, I made a big decision without knowing it: to work every day like my father and never be marooned in suburban isolation like my mother.

There are other events in the personal chain of events that finds me childless today. Not long after my article on that liberating college course appeared, sexual discrimination lawsuits set the stage for capable young women to apply for jobs and get them — women who had been hearing such comments from job recruiters as, "Why aren't you home tending to a family?"

And then there was *Ms.* magazine. Its questions about traditional roles shook the foundations of my daily married life.

"Next week, you cook," I said to my husband after I shopped for and put away the week's groceries. He didn't know how to cook, nor did he want to learn. On the nights he made dinner, we ate peanut butter and jelly. A year later, we divorced.

What could be predicted, and what could not

Our transitional generation was born with one foot in the old values and the other stretched toward new values. I knew in my 20s that there would be a price to pay for this wide straddle. What I hadn't foreseen was that as time went on, love would be harder to find than a job — and that work would lack the luster it seemed to have when I was younger.

Recently, I asked my female friends whether motherhood was the reward they thought it would be. Their answer: at times.

"I love my kids," one said, "but you give your life over to them, and you have little control over how they'll turn out."

Indeed, my friends — all warm, loving, supportive and financially secure people in their 50s — have raised, collectively speaking, kids who never married, kids who had children out of wedlock, kids who got into drugs, kids who dropped out of school, kids who barely speak to them, kids who divorced and came home with their kids expecting financial help and built-in baby sitting. Only a handful of kids have had — and have given their parents — an easy time.

Still, I regret not having had my chance at that roulette wheel. A job, as we now know, is just a job. But family, no matter how exasperating, is your past and your future. The poignancy of that hits hard at midlife, when mortality rustles past like taffeta skirts.

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Childless

Almost 42% of the 60.2 million U.S. women ages 15 to 44 years old in 1995 were childless:

Age range	% childless
15-19	90.7
20-24	64.3
25-29	43.8
30-34	26.7
35-39	19.7
40-44	17.5

Source:
U.S.
Bureau of
Census

By Genevieve Lynn, USA TODAY