

Rejecting Motherhood- Pat Blackett – 23 June 2011

When I was asked to give this talk I had to think of a theme and title and I came up with Rejecting Motherhood. I wanted to be careful to choose a title and theme that would not offend women who are in a completely different category ie, those women who do not have children and who do want them. I also wanted a title that would reflect my situation which involves the life decision to not be a mother, but also to hint at having a rejecting mother and also to reject one's own mother. I think these are the themes, very broadly covered by this talk.

When the programme of themes was publicised, I was surprised how many women said to me that I had chosen an interesting theme to talk about... I can't be sure but I seem to recall that the people who said that to me were women who have children. And I think that's probably because they cannot imagine how it would be possible to live life without children. Obviously as I haven't had children I can't know what it feels like but I think that if you do have them then life would seem unthinkable and also rather empty without them. But for some of us that isn't the case. Honestly. Or rather it's hard to miss what you've never had. And it looks like childfree women might be a growing movement judging by some statistics I found online – how accurate they are, I don't know...

Projections for Great Britain suggest that as many as 20% of women born in 1975 and later will remain childless (McAllister & Clarke, 2000).

And there is even an acronym (is that the correct word?) for people like me - I am officially a GINK -- green inclinations, no kids

Here are very brief outlines of some findings.

Reasons given by the currently childless for not having children at the time of survey (127 women)

'Children do not agree with my current life situation' 38.5

'Resources prevent it' 33.1

'No desire for children' 14.2

'I could forgo children in favour of career advancement' 10·2

'Beyond reproductive age' 3·2

'Undecided' 0·8

I suppose I come in the 14 per cent – no desire for children.

For this evening I can only give my account but perhaps later we'll hear from others who have chosen not to have children for other reasons or those who may want them but can't have them, or those who do have children and wish they hadn't?!

The reasons why women choose to remain childless will be varied and completely personal and uniquely individual. Some want to pursue a career, some don't want to give up important pursuits, their partner doesn't want children and some, like me, just haven't really felt any great desire for them. But had I become pregnant at some point along the line I suspect I would have chosen to have the child. My aversion is not so great that I would have gone against fate... had I been in a position to have a child I would have done. I am extremely fortunate not to have had to make the choice to terminate a pregnancy. I have known many women who have not had that good fortune and the effects are often painful and life long, I know.

The voluntarily childless are often described as being more geared towards independence (Houseknecht, 1987; Carl, Bengel & Strauß, 2000) but also less satisfied with their lives in general (Callan, 1986). The researchers comment that the first aspect (independence) can be supported by the data of this survey, particularly as they pertain to equal rights in gender roles and the perception that children provide few advantages (Carl *et al.*, 2000). The latter aspect (reduced life satisfaction) could not be verified.

It's very difficult to gauge life satisfaction as you have no idea how you would be if you had taken a different path.

Even if they are vaguely aware that there are people with children who are not at all happy, still many people think that living without children increases the risk of unhappiness. This may be true for some people. But there is no good reason to think that it is true for *all* people, and plenty of reasons against thinking so. I would provide myself as a case in point.

Since I can remember I have not had any great desire to get married or have children – it just didn't seem something particularly relevant to me. I suppose the few times I have stopped to reflect on this it did strike me as slightly odd considering I was a woman and was supposed to want these things, although obviously this stereotype of a woman only being fulfilled through being a wife and mother is not as strong these days in terms of defining what a woman is and this may play into the projection that 20 per cent of women who are in their mid 30's now will choose not to have children.

I consider myself to have been very fortunate to have been born at the time that I was and to have been given this choice. I am one of the first generations of women, born in the 1950s who have directly benefited from the women's movement in the 50s and 60s and also the invention of the Pill. In terms of the women's movement I have been able to make life choices that would have been much harder if the women's movement had not questioned the roles that society was forcing women into prior to the second push for women's rights. For a brief period in history in the 60s and 70s, and part of the 80s until Aids came along, women were able to have full, sexual relationships with men with no strings attached and no real worries because they no longer had to fear the consequence of getting pregnant, or to suffer much social stigma from being seen as promiscuous. I have been able to question my direction in life and to ask, do I really want to get married and have children? And, as the answer was no for me, that hasn't really impacted that much on my life in any detrimental way.

This has been an incredibly liberating opportunity for my generation. I'm hoping that this talk will somehow fit in and follow on from previous themes and particularly to what I understand Lucy King talked about in May ie, the feminist movement that she was born into. I have the feminist movement to thank for my life choices and I am truly grateful. I suspect generations of women who have come after me have no idea how much they owe to those earlier struggles and actually take how they are viewed in society and the choices they are able to make for granted.

The pill came into general use in the decade I was born, the 50s and my Mum was on it as soon as it became available. And I have to say that once I started taking it it

felt like a wonder drug. I know so many women that have ambivalent or even hostile feelings towards the pill. But that wasn't my experience. I thought of it as a magic pill that enabled me to remain child free and happy, free of the fear of pregnancy. I actually felt extremely well on it which isn't always the case, I know. I stopped taking it on my doctor's advice, with regret. For the first time in history this magic pill enabled women to have fulfilled, sexual relationships with men, seemingly with no strings attached.

Of course, there have always been role models for women who have chosen not to have children. And I realised that I have always been drawn to these figures myself without being that conscious of why. It isn't just that they haven't had children though.

Here's a short list of women that come to mind: Elizabeth 1, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, Simone De Beauvoir

There have always been ways throughout history whereby women could choose not to be a wife and mother but it would have only been for the few. The main way out I would imagine would be to become a Nun but that wouldn't help those women with a highly independent streak. I have always suspected that Sister Wendy Beckett opted for her caravan because she probably found the company of nuns all day long rather suffocating and restricting. I imagine that had I been forced down the Nun route I'd have ended up as a hermit somewhere, Even being Queen of England didn't necessarily mean that you could opt out. Elizabeth I had to be quite a strategist to avoid being forced into marriage and had a few lucky escapes...

So I suspect my lot in life depending on what century I was born would have been to become a nun/hermit, be viewed with suspicion, possibly as the local Witch or be pitied by my neighbours as the village spinster.

Despite my lack of desire for marriage or children, I do consider myself a rather nurturing person – someone who some might describe as maternal.

So what is a Maternal instinct ? One definition I found is that it's 'an inborn tendency to want to protect and nurture one's offspring.'

I suspect that's not quite right as a definition as it's rather limiting to consider it just about offspring.

I am drawn to look after my plants, animals and the people around me. I have always loved animals and nature. Nothing calms my spirit like being with animals and plants. That has always been the case from as far back as I can remember and a great sadness in my childhood was that I was not allowed pets so I used to make homes and attempt to care for ants, beetles, slow worms, lizards and offer to walk neighbour's dogs.... And another thing to consider concerning the maternal and whether it only links to women... is that during my childhood I experienced my father as extremely nurturing and in a way motherly. His presence was very enveloping and affectionate. Yet I felt absolutely no sense of nurturing from my mother apart from the maternal practicalities of her feeding us, bathing us, dressing us. All my early memories are of being with my father including my earliest memory which is lying on my father's stomach and hearing it gurgling and feeling warm and safe. And he is the one who loved nature and plants and showed me how to care for and respect them.

I remember once being castigated by a radical feminist human rights lawyer who was a friend of my cousin. She accused me of preferring animals to people and that it was positively shameful to be worrying about the welfare of animals when people were suffering. I was rather taken aback and had to think about it for a while. The problem with this is that I can see her point of view and partly agree with her. I understand why she was in such a fury with me but ultimately you can't force yourself to feel something you don't. You have to go in the direction that moves you. And, as I said to her, it takes all sorts to work towards a better world. I'm extremely glad there are people who feel moved to help other human beings and equally I'm glad that there are people who care about the welfare of animals.

Hand in hand with this nurturing side which appears to come from a maternal source within me is the part of me that I suspect has rejected the whole wife, mother route. This is the extremely independent side that values autonomy and the ability to make my own decisions and act on them without having to negotiate and cooperate with someone else. This is key to my happiness and feeling of wellbeing. Also, I enjoy enormously being on my own for quite long periods of time. My idea of bliss is to have a long weekend of four days or more where I know I'm not going to have to see

or speak to another human being. It doesn't happen enough for my liking but those are times I really treasure.

At this stage, I must admit I am rather concerned about how exposing this account of my thoughts on 'rejecting motherhood' will be to a room full of psychotherapists. I suppose it's a risk I will have to take for the purposes of discourse! People often say to me 'you would have made a lovely mother'... I suspect I wouldn't if I am anything like my own mother, which, after years of therapy, I realise I probably am.

I remember a few years ago sharing a joke with some of my female therapist friends about my choice in handbags. Now, as we know one of the stereotypes about women is that handbags are apparently considered very important to women... I have never seen much point in them and they do seem to be an awful waste of money. I certainly have never been remotely interested in them apart from their capacity as a useful receptacle to carry things around in and have always argued that a carrier bag functions just as well. Similarly shoes leave me cold. As long as they are comfortable, cheap and don't wear out too quickly that will do me. Here I therefore do differ greatly from my mother on these two points. Shoes are her passion and she always likes to have a matching handbag or an expensive, quality handbag. If handbags are in some way linked to the feminine, and one would have to see the direct symbolic link to a womb I can go with this argument. I do tend to see my womb as a bit of an inconvenience which causes monthly obstacles and difficulties for me and I would, to be honest, rather be without it. I have thought about just having a hysterectomy and have it over with but as it's a major operation under general anaesthetic and I'm a bit of a scaredy cat when it comes to anaesthetic it's probably best to just leave things as they are if possible, I suppose. So ladies do consider your attitude to handbags and what that might mean to your own relationship with your uterus.

On to the political reasons to perhaps choosing to remain child free. I'm not someone who feels strongly either way about children in any political sense although I could go that route if I wanted to appear noble and self sacrificing.

I'm aware of the arguments for both sides. Ie, producing children is bad for the environment, using up precious resources and ultimately selfish versus we need

children to be able to carry on and also to support an aging population, to inject energy and drive forward etc etc. Mine is a purely personal choice (or so I like to think... more of that later)...It's a luxury of living in the time that I do, in the country that I do, the luxury to self determination.... I digress slightly here from my topic but I suppose I am a bit political about the subject of the right to choose when to die. So that is coming at things from the other end this is something I feel quite strongly about. I wondered if anyone had seen the recent Terry Pratchett programme? His argument seems completely rational and sensible and I'm amazed at the uproar it caused and that there is anybody out there who disagrees with him. People should have the right to self determination in a civilised, advanced society. So in that sense I do have a passion that people should have choice to manage their own ending. Surely we should have a choice when it comes to the beginning and the end of life? I thought I'd throw that in so we can have a lively debate later! Just in case my other points leave everyone cold at the end...

Now, how about looking at my choice from the Richard Dawkins, evolutionary, selfish gene point of view I would assume that according to that theory I must have faulty genes somewhere as I don't appear to want to propagate and continue my genes. I'm not particularly interested in my nephews and nieces either so there's something wrong there....

And how about the view from a spiritual/mystical point of view? I've wondered, if there is such a thing as reincarnation, perhaps, because of my highly evolved soul, I won't have to come back again as there won't be any family ties to draw me back.... well we're all allowed a bit of self aggrandisement now and then....

And following on from that grandiosity on the spiritual/mystical theme, I want to talk about my identification with the Greek goddess Athene which goes back to childhood. I always felt an affinity with owls from very early on and collected images of them as a child with plenty of nick nacks for my shadow box... remember those?. I was also very drawn to the Greek myths and, when reading about them, Athena always seemed like the most interesting of all the gods. And as a child reading about her, I was pleased to find out that the bird of Athena was the owl.

Myths are endlessly fascinating and full of meaning and yet why they should be so profoundly meaningful can be obscure. I found this quote which I loved as a description of myths when I was reading around the subject of Athene, Jean Houston

in 'The Possible Human', "I have always thought of a myth as something that never was but is always happening".

Now, I'll own up to even more grandiose ideas as I warm to my theme and you can start getting seriously worried.... I had other things in common with that goddess Athene who never was but is always there... in that I privileged my father over my mother just like Athene who didn't even acknowledge she had a mother... and further was delighted to discover that Athene was born in Libya... which, I was... That final fact was the clincher - it was obvious that she was the one who needed to be honoured by me...

Years later I came across a book called 'Goddesses in Everywoman' by Jean Shinoda Bolen. In it the author, who is a Jungian psychologist, argues that women have archetypes that they identify with and that the Greek goddesses can be seen as archetypes that describe different types of women.

These are images that go back three thousand years, and yet we're still fascinated by them. They're still powerful stories, because they're like collective dreams.

When I read up about Athene I recognised a lot of traits that she describes as being of that psychological type. Athene falls into the category of what Bolen calls, one of the Virgin goddesses.

In this book the seven goddesses fall into three groups. The Virgin Goddesses are Artemis, Athena, and Hestia; the Vulnerable Goddesses are Hera, Demeter, and Persephone, and the Alchemical Goddess is Aphrodite. In each case the goddesses' genealogy and mythology are introduced before their significance as an archetype is explored along with psychological difficulties inherent to this type.

For example, Demeter, the maternal goddess, is an embodiment of the mother archetype. The others are Persephone (the daughter), Hera (the wife) etc.

On Olympus there are six gods, Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Apollo, Ares, Hephaestus, and six goddesses, Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Artemis, Athena, and Aphrodite. One of the twelve, Hestia (Goddess of the Hearth) was replaced by Dionysus (God of Wine), which fits her self effacing character. This act changed the male/female balance to seven gods and five goddesses. But the goddess archetypes Bolen describes in her book are the six Olympian goddesses including Hestia plus Persephone, whose mythology is inseparable from Demeter's.

The Virgin goddesses are described as independent and self sufficient. These goddesses are not susceptible to falling in love. They are not victimized and do not suffer. They represent the need for autonomy and the capacity women have to focus their consciousness on what is personally meaningful. Artemis and Athena focus their attention on external matters. Hestia focuses attention inward to the spiritual centre.

The Vulnerable Goddesses on the other hand represent the traditional roles of wife, mother and daughter. They are more relationship oriented. Their identity and wellbeing depend on having a significant relationship. They are much more attuned to others but also through this they are vulnerable.

All the goddesses are potentially present in women.

The only one who differs is Aphrodite- the goddess of love and beauty - she is beautiful and irresistible. She has many affairs and many offspring. She enters relationships of her own choosing, and is never victimized. She maintained autonomy like a virgin goddess but also had relationships.

One of the things I found rather interesting in this book was the description Bolen gives to focused and receptive consciousness.

Bolen points out that the Greek goddesses lived in a patriarchal society which remains relevant to modern day. And in this patriarchal society the virgin goddesses have their own strategies for survival. Artemis lives separate from men. Athena identifies and joins the world of men. Hestia withdraws into solitude and contemplation. A more psychotherapeutically traditional way of describing these three might be to say they have a 'masculine complex'.

The Virgin goddesses represent every woman who has wanted a room of her own, feels at home in nature, delights in working out how something works, appreciates solitude. In some ways they remain unowned by man and in some ways unpenetrated.

Their quality of consciousness is a focused light. They can concentrate their attention on what matters to them and can become absorbed in what they are doing. People and the object of their interest can have their undivided attention.

The vulnerable goddesses consciousness is that of a diffused light – children and men thrive under this light and as soon as the woman tries to focus more intensely the children and men will become aware of it and the woman will find that she is interrupted by demands...

There's another subtle distinction that Bolen makes between the generations.

Hestia is the oldest, wisest and most honoured goddess and her way was to avoid power altogether.

Demeter, Hera and Aphrodite represented the first generation of goddesses – of the same generation as Zeus.

Artemis, Athena and Persephone were one generation lower than the others, in some way on a daughter level.

Back to my maternal streak and the way animals evoke it. I used to be someone who flinched when someone referred to themselves as Mummy or Daddy in the presence of an animal. However, with my dogs I have found myself being one of these repellent people... It just slipped in one day and I realised that I shouldn't fight it.

There is some strange, perhaps perverse maternal feeling felt by me towards my animals. I want to protect them, to provide them with the best of lives and to fulfil their needs. Why that should be doesn't trouble me. It is a source of joy and fulfilment to me and that's all I need to know.

Being in the presence of animals feels incredibly nurturing, peaceful and healing. If I am with any of my animals I immediately start to feel calmer and enriched. I realise this is not everyone's experience but the draw to be around them is very strong.

Perhaps there is an identification with the animals. I'm really not sure about this as the connection is very deep and feels very natural. But if that is the case then that's fine. I have no need to analyse it further.

Another explanation I sometimes think about for not having children is that I suspect I would not be able to handle the level of vulnerability motherhood would entail. It's bad enough losing a much loved cat or dog or for something bad to happen to it and the worry and fretting that goes on when they are ill or lost. To have that for your entire life would be unbearable. Friends of mine that have children do admit that they had not been prepared for the level of vulnerability they felt once they had given birth and one in particular has told me that had she known how vulnerable she would feel she too might have considered not having children.

As regards my mother, surely having children is innate to a woman? But even what is innate in you may not determine how strongly you feel about it. For example, we have uteruses, and so the whole capacity to be a mother is a biological part of us.

But you can biologically be a mother and yet it may not touch the deep archetypal level of the mother. And if that happens, you biologically are a mother, but something really deep doesn't click. This is the case of my mother, I believe.

Now, I've purposely kept this back but I'm sure as psychotherapists you will be itching to get some family history to fit some theory of why I might have turned out the way I have, rather than the proposition that I am a woman who honours the spirit of Athene. Unfortunately, I suspect my background does fit into some psychotherapeutic mould.

So, on to my conception and birth and its relevance to the path I find myself on. As I mentioned, my mum and dad were living in Libya when I was born. They already had 3 children. Marie-Christine who was 11, Peter who was 9 and Nicky who was 18 months. The story both Nicky and I were told from as far back as we can remember is that neither of was planned or wanted and that Mum only ever really wanted two children. Mum tells the story of how it is said that Libya is where the Romans used to send their barren women to get pregnant - it was believed to be a place where fertility increased. So my Mum blamed living in Libya for her fertile state. Apparently when she arrived pregnant with me at the British Hospital in Tripoli the doctor wearily exclaimed 'Not you again'. There was a boom in pregnant women which seemed to back up the Roman belief in Libya's ability to induce fecundity.

However, to counter the wish of my mother that she only have 2 children, my father apparently was delighted at the prospect of another child and promised to buy my mother a gold watch if she had a girl as it would mean that the family was complete and balanced as it would mean they had two boys and two girls.

Mum did have a girl, me, and she named me Patricia after a little girl she knew in Tripoli who she thought was very sweet.

My mother was obviously a woman who did not enjoy the experience of motherhood and I can never really recall having felt cherished or enjoyed by my mother when I was small. I was also particularly prone to quite violent tantrums which didn't endear me to her either and the family myths are full of incidents involving my temper tantrums. My Mum and I always seemed to be at war... and she always won when I was a child. She had quite a severe method of dealing with my outbursts which was to fill a sink with water, place me on a chair and duck my head in the water until I stopped screaming.

As a child I was very attached to all my fluffy, cuddly toys but was left indifferent towards my dolls which always seemed rather hard and plastic and unrealistic... I could certainly never see the point in Tiny Tears! Yuck! But of course my bright turquoise Wonder Woofer dog seemed very alive and real and was much loved for many years.

I have always wanted to have animals in my life and have fulfilled this wish in later life I'm pleased to say. We were never allowed pets as children which caused me much heartache. Although that's not quite true - my mum did finally relent to my persistent nagging when I was about 8 and let me have a hamster and when it inevitably died after a very long life of 4 years I was inconsolable and grieved so deeply that I was not allowed another pet.

So as regards children - other than a tinge of regret as regards an ex partner's wonderful children, I would say, hand on heart, that I am happy with the way my life has turned out mainly because of the space I have managed to find to allow animals and plants to be a part of my day to day life.

I am vaguely aware of the irony that I may in fact be unconsciously carrying my mother's desire forward to not have children. This fear has more than a small element of truth to it as the hypothesis is further strengthened by the fact that my brother who was also 'unwanted' does not now himself have a relationship or children and is in his mid 50s so it's unlikely it will happen for him either.

I suspect our dual rejection by our mother hit him harder. Perhaps because I came along after him or just it's more oedipal because he's a man.

A further twist is that he is almost certainly her favourite. He is the one who elicits the most delight from her when he rings or visits – which is rare. And his brief visits are talked over and remembered long afterwards. This is unlike the visits from my older brother and myself who are her main carers. And on my regular visits to my Mum she often reminds me that I was unwanted – and did I know that. But now I can respond wryly that if she hadn't had me we wouldn't now be drinking a nice cup of coffee, chatting about our week and enjoying the sunshine. This makes her chuckle and she agrees that I'm probably right. She tells me it's much better having grown up children and that she enjoys them as such.

My Mum is now 91 and is suffering from Alzheimer's although it's not that advanced yet. I can't help but find myself more and more sympathetic to her and also find myself attempting to understand her approach to life and the way that she is. We have a lot of characteristics in common but also many differences (example of shoes and handbags).

Finally, to go back to the mythological. I suppose I do feel that I'm in the middle of a Greek myth, even if it is a somewhat mundane, every day one. Because despite feeling that I have been a free agent and that I have remained child free through choice, is the truth more likely that I am actually carrying out my own mother's desire not to have children and that this was my destiny all along? I had no choice after all? I'll leave that to you to decide....