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HOW TO HAVE A MEANINGFUL LIFE WITHOUT KIDS

LILLI BLACKMORE



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Introduction

Why You Don't Need Kids to Have a Fulfilling Life

*We've been sold a myth. This myth, based on fundamentally flawed logic,
has created generations of dissatisfied and disillusioned women.
Are you ready for the reality?*

The Myth: “Your life just doesn’t have meaning until you have kids.”

One of the many warnings matronly women like to give childfree women and couples is that their lives will be shallow without children. Sure, they say, you can do whatever you want now, but all the glitz of travel and caviar will wear off one day, and then you’ll be alone. Alone with no real meaning in your life, because you spent your youth focusing on yourself instead of something greater.

The Flaw

This has a sobering ring to it, but it’s hardly a criticism exclusive to (or necessarily of) childfree women. I’m sure we can all think of people who had children and still find themselves alone and lost in their old age, after their children have gone on to have children of their own.

The idea that only children can give a woman’s life a deeper, lasting meaning implies that most childfree women are too self-absorbed to have any greater purpose in life than their own gratification. That’s to say nothing of the fact that children don’t exist just to provide meaning to an adult’s life. Children are individuals in their own right, who shouldn’t be treated as a means to an end (the end being the fulfilling life and happy retirement).

The Reality

The idea broadcast to the Victorian woman, which persists to this day, is that the only way for a woman to feel fulfilled and receive lasting love was to have a child. Today, women are increasingly realizing that this belief is false.

Not only are there other ways to obtain love and fulfillment, but the belief that children create happiness has led to generations of unfulfilled and dissatisfied mothers feeling like they got a raw deal. Their children grow up and – of all the nerve – have lives of their own. In the end, the woman who bought into this myth is left alone. At this point, society tells her to shift her desire for love from her children to the hope for grandchildren.

Maybe I'm painting an overly dark picture. After all, most people move onto other things in their later years, like volunteer work. Once they get over the sadness of an empty nest, many women find a job, or if they have a career already, move into community service after they retire. A woman who raises children can still find fulfillment after her children have grown up and moved away.

Which of course begs the question, is doing good in the world just a poor substitute for the love of a child? Or does it just take most people that long to realize that they can get true, lasting happiness in other ways?

Chapter 1

Give

The first way for a childfree person to create meaning in her life is to give.

Give of your time, your money, your energy, your skills, your emotions.

One of the most effective ways of giving is to volunteer. And if volunteering doesn't sound like your cup of tea, remember that there's more to it than soup kitchens and dog walking (both of which are incredibly helpful, by the way). Volunteering can allow you to give in each of the ways I've listed above, making it a rewarding, lasting experience.

Volunteering Misconceptions

My high school experiences with volunteering were slightly – for lack of a better word – disappointing. My teachers, fellow students, and I would all carpool over to someplace, do a minimal amount of mindless work (such as sealing a stack of envelopes), and then go back to school. It seemed like a highly inefficient process to me, and led me to believe that volunteering was just a way for people to feel like they were doing good without getting much accomplished.

However, when I began taking college classes, I had a completely different experience. The lab portion of my GenEd biology course took place at the local park/wildlife preserve. Our goal was to cultivate aquatic flora in a set of newly dug retention ponds. This was in an area of Florida experiencing rapid expansion, which had a noticeable impact on local wildlife. The ponds were, in part, designed to provide a new, safe ecosystem for animals and native plants to flourish.

The Ideal Volunteering Experience

The volunteer work I did at the preserve required:

- learning new skills and implementing them
- genuine effort to do the work properly
- an enormous amount of physical energy

I also gave it sincere emotional energy. I cared about what happened there. The first time I saw a fish leap up out of the pond I was standing in; the moment I discovered the duckweed I'd planted in the submerged, sandy soil had taken root; the day I realized that, as a result of my class' work, birds and reptiles would soon be making their homes around the banks... these were the moments where the emotional investment paid off. To this day, if I ever return home and drive by the park, I feel a genuine connection to it. Some gopher tortoise has a richer, safer home because I stood sweating in waist-high waders planting duckweed to prevent erosion and start a mini ecosystem.

I realize now that as a high schooler, my volunteer experiences of stuffing envelopes were meant to introduce me to the idea of volunteering in a way that didn't require my parents to sign a liability waiver. As an adult, I can now do work that has a real, positive effect on those around me.

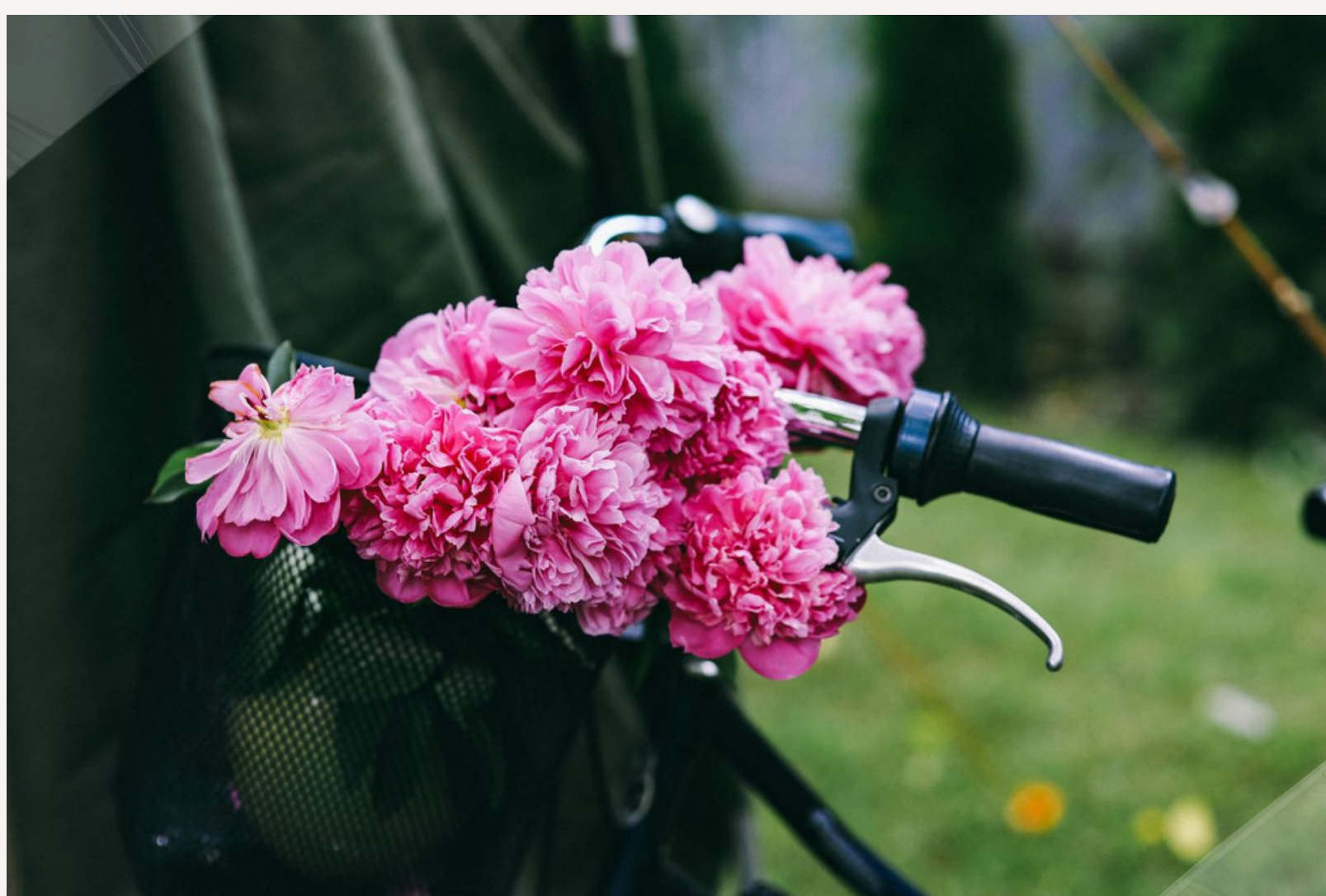
Getting Started

So what can you do to find a meaningful volunteer opportunity? You can certainly find local groups with which to volunteer, and I encourage you to do so. Better yet, organize something to meet a current need in your community.

[Create the Good](#) has a library of resources about starting your own volunteering efforts. You can do anything from cleaning a river to starting a community garden.

If you're even more ambitious, consider starting your own individual project. Singer, songwriter, and activist Zoe Boekbinder (incidentally a single, childfree woman) started the **Prison Music Project**. The project connects prisoners to music, helping lower recidivism and improve conditions. One woman started this project. You could do just as much.

If your time or physical capabilities are limited, [Skills for Change](#) is an excellent resource for computer-based volunteering. These include local opportunities and more far-reaching options. Whatever route you choose to take, make sure it's something that asks of your emotional energy, not just your time or skills. That's how you create a meaningful volunteer experience that will affect your life for years to come.



[Visit VolunteerMatch.org](#)

[Visit the Prison Music Project](#)

Chapter 2

Learn

Another of the best ways to live a fulfilling life is to continue your education every single day. Learning is what helps us grow as human beings, to continue our spiritual, mental, and emotional evolution. It's really only been since the introduction of an institutionalized (or, perhaps more accurately, an industrialized) education system was put in place that humans began to see learning as something that stopped after one entered adulthood.

The ancient Greeks assumed that learning continued for as long as one's mental facilities were in tact. In *Protagoras*, Plato states, “Education and admonition commence in the first years of childhood, and last to the very end of life.” There's good reason for this view. Multiple studies have shown that brain function is maintained or improved throughout the human life by continued learning. Some even suggest that lifelong learning can stave off Alzheimer’s disease.

Lifelong Learning for the Childfree

As a childfree person, you're particularly well-positioned to develop yourself to your own fullest potential. Parents often set aside their own education to focus their energy on helping their children get the most out of theirs. But being childfree, that's a sacrifice that would be meaningless in your life. And it's a good thing too, as new findings show that “mommy brain” is an actual ailment that (temporarily) affects a postnatal woman's cognition.

How to Keep Learning

Fortunately, education is more accessible now than at any other point in history. Many colleges (including prestigious universities like Harvard) offer full online courses for free. You can do that in your spare time with no financial commitment. How easy is that?

If you're looking for a bit more structure, community colleges are great places to learn a new skill or continue your formal education. These colleges often offer evening classes as well as instructor-led online courses to fit a working adult's schedule. If it sounds like something you'd be interested in, look up your local college's website and view their course catalog.

Sometimes employers even offer to reimburse their workers for completed classes that can be used to help the employee advance. Even if that option isn't available to you, you can still continue your education with the purpose of advancing your career. Many online colleges and universities (including those offering free courses) will send students a certificate upon completion of the course. Even if a course isn't directly related to your field, proof of a continuing education looks fantastic on your resume.

Other Types of Education

Continued learning doesn't have to be academic. If there's a new skill you've been wanting to add to your arsenal, go out and learn it. Take a cooking class to improve your diet and overall health. Sign up for yoga to reduce the pain of a repetitive motion injury. Take an animal care class to become a better pet parent.

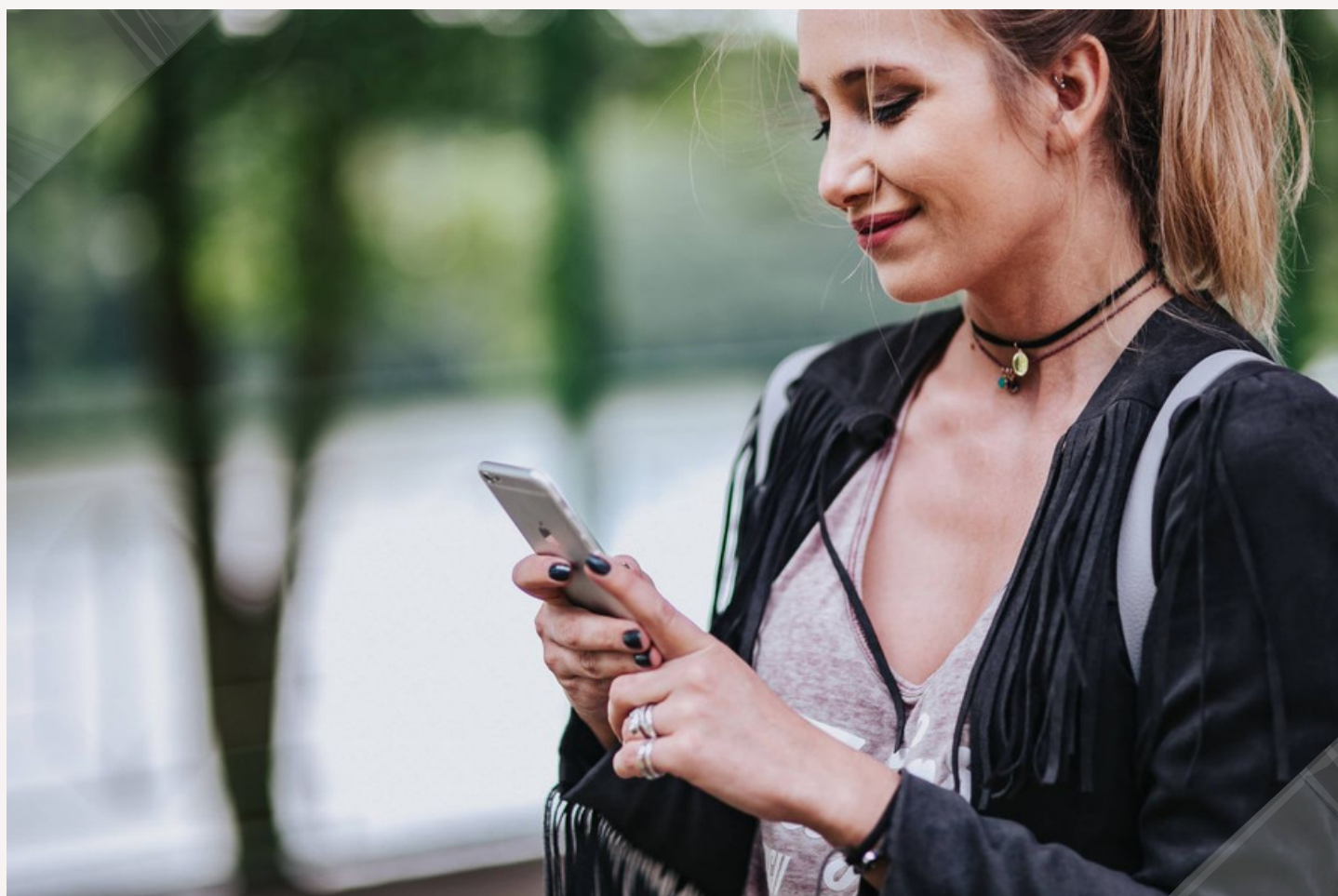
Your new skill doesn't even need to be practical. Have you always wanted to learn ballet? Most dance studios offer adult classes for beginners. Wish you could roller blade? Sign up for inline skating lessons at the local roller rink. Want to be a better skeeball player? There might be a league in your area. When it comes to your continued education, the important thing is to keep your mind (and body) learning new things.

Getting Started

If you have the time and the financial ability, take a class at the community college every semester. If not, take advantage of the hundreds of legit, free online courses from major universities. Be sure to join any online groups they offer so you'll have a support system (as well as a group of fellow learners to hold you accountable).

If you'd like to take free online courses from accredited universities in your own time, I recommend starting with [OpenCulture.com](https://www.openculture.com) This is an amazing resource listing over 1300 online courses.

[Visit OpenCulture.com](https://www.openculture.com)



Sources:

[Mommy Brain: Yes, It's a Thing](#)

[Cognitive Enrichment: Lifelong Learning May Help Prevent Dementia](#)

[Lifelong Learning and the Plastic Brain | Scientific Learning](#)

Chapter 3

Teach

Teaching others not only helps you solidify what you know, it's also a rewarding experience in its own right. By sharing your knowledge with others (either by writing an ebook, a tutorial, or in a more formal situation), you can help enrich someone else's life and, in a small way, contribute to the education level of humanity. Helping to guide someone from ignorance to enlightenment is one of the most fulfilling ways to live your life.

If you don't have any teaching experience, the idea might seem intimidating. But don't let that put you off. Your skills are valuable, and therefore worth sharing. Beyond that, there's someone in this world right now that wants to learn something you know. Don't deprive them of that experience.

Remember, the more common a skill is, the more people there are who need a teacher. The more strange and unusual, the fewer teachers there are. So no matter what, what you can teach is needed.

How to Share Your Skills

Online

The internet has made it incredibly easy and far less stressful to share your knowledge with others. Teaching sites such as Udemy allow you to create free or paid courses you can share with the entire world, with no up front cost to you. If you're looking for something less formal, try creating a Youtube tutorial about something you know.

In Person

Would you prefer to teach in person? Reach out to local church groups, youth groups, community art organizations, or public libraries. Offer to teach an introductory class at their venue to gauge the community's interest, then go from there.

Looking for something more formal and long-term? Look up local places teaching what you're skilled in and find out what their requirements are to become a volunteer instructor. Many disciplines require some type of mandatory training or knowledge test, but don't let this intimidate you. Get the certification you need and become an official teacher of what you love.

Whatever way you choose, when you decide to share your abilities with others, the world benefits. No one leaves a legacy like a teacher.

So if you want a meaningful life, teach.



[Learn to become an instructor on Udemy](#)

Chapter 4

Help

So far we've looked at some specific ways you can create a meaningful life without raising children. In this article I'm going to focus on developing a mindset that will ensure you have a fulfilling life whether or not you have kids.

Why Your Mindset Matters

When you set out to create your own business, find the right volunteer opportunity, or start on your career, it's your motivations (more than your precise actions) that will lead to a fulfilling or unfulfilling life. Your specific line of work or lifestyle choices don't matter much in the grand scheme of things; if your intentions are short-sighted and selfish, your life will likely end up shallow and bitter. Whereas if your intentions are genuinely to contribute to the world in a positive way, you'll be more likely to end up feeling fulfilled.

In essence, finding meaning in life means finding meaning in something outside of yourself. This doesn't mean becoming a martyr or neglecting your well-being. It means being truly aware of how connected we all are, and that loving your neighbor is loving yourself.

The Human History of Helping

This idea of finding meaning by helping others is ancient. We evolved as highly social beings, in groups where helping one another was necessary for survival. However, it quickly moved beyond what was necessary. For instance, some of the earliest remains of our human ancestors show that they cared for the injured and elderly. Some cases show evidence of debilitating injuries which would require months of rest. Yet the other tribe members cared for this non-contributing member no matter how long it took them to recover.

Later on, Aristotle philosophized that one finds real friendship in loving, rather than being loved. He remarks that a true friend loves his friend like a mother loves her child; without seeking love in return. This is the essence of having meaning in one's life. To love, to give, and to help for the sake of those things.

Where Kids Come In

Truthfully, I think this is the reason that a lot of people have kids. Think about how often have you heard something like, "When I had my daughter, it all came together. I realized there was so much more to life than just my life" or, "You don't understand love until you start living for someone else." And though Aristotle's ideal of a mother's love is a strong example, you don't need to create a new human to devote your life to the service of others. There are plenty of people who already exist who need help right now.

The "Who" and "How-to" of Lending a Hand

Our world is filled with people who are:

- susceptible to injury
- experiencing financial or emotional hardship
- enduring chronic illness
- suffering from abuse
- at a higher risk for misfortune.

If you are in a position where you can help, then help.

A Note About Intent and Tone

When offering aid, it's important to do so without coming across as patronizing. You should always offer assistance in a spirit of humility, drawn from the realization that if only a few things in your life had been different, you could be the one in need of help. Remember, it's all about intention.

Who

People (human and non-human) who have little to no control over their lives are vulnerable, as their well-being depends on the will of another. These include children, animals, and people who are institutionalized (in prison, mental health facilities, or senior citizen homes). However, they can also be people living in your town who are (through economic and other factors) at higher risk for lower quality of life.

- *Animals*

Animals, especially farm animals and pets, are legally property. And though we have laws in place to protect them from abuse, they are still often seen as and treated like commodities. Yet animals likely have as great a capacity to suffer as humans do. Sadly, unlike many human beings, animals cannot advocate for themselves. That's where we come in.

- *Children*

Childfree people don't necessarily dislike children. In fact one of the reasons some people choose to be childfree is because they can empathize with children. It's easy for a frustrated parent to forget the ways they felt and thought as a child, but the cool childfree aunt remembers.

Unfortunately, not many people put this type of critical thought into the decision to become parents. As a result, our world is filled with unwanted children (both in foster care and more frequently at home) and unloving parents. If you feel compassion for children in these situations, reach out your hand and help them.

- *Elderly*

Even more neglected than children are the elderly. Elder abuse is rampant, and we are losing more and more legal protections that strove to keep them safe. Even the most loving adult children are often unable to provide full-time care for their aging parents. The less fortunate elders simply have no family left. And worst yet are those who are neglected by their grown kids. Whatever the reason, this demographic is perhaps the easiest to ignore.

How

Are you filled with desire to help, but not sure where to start or how to serve in an effective way?

If you're looking for a good starting point, Animal Charity Evaluators is a resource that examines the effectiveness of various types of charities and volunteer efforts designed to help animals.

[Animal Charity Evaluators](#)

If you care about kids, you can do good by helping the vulnerable children who are already here. To get started, visit Great Nonprofits' page for at-risk youth to learn about opportunities in your area:

[Great Nonprofits](#)

To lend a hand to the elderly, start by asking local church groups or community centers about programs they offer. You can also contact senior centers in your area and ask how you can help.

[Read Create the Good's guide to volunteering with seniors](#)

Involve Your Business

Whether you work for a large company or have your own small business, you can still involve your workplace. Charity Navigator has written an article with some great advice about giving through your workplace.

[Charity Navigator](#)

In the end...

You don't need to have kids to learn to truly care about someone besides yourself. Instead of creating a mini-me to love, why not focus on people who are already here? Fostering a spirit of generosity directed toward the most vulnerable members of society is one of the best ways to create a truly meaningful life without kids.



Sources:

Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle

Closing Thoughts

Living a Meaningful Life

If you're thinking, “Living a fulfilling life without kids sounds like just being a decent, community-minded person,” you're right. In fact, all of the advice in this ebook could just as easily be applied to parents looking to have a meaningful life before and after raising children. So why do so many people think that having children is the only way for a woman to be truly happy?

The Road Not Taken

Though no studies have yet looked into this, it's my own belief that the reason some childfree women reach middle- to old age and start to regret their decision not to have kids is this: They were constantly told they were missing out, and once the possibility to join in has passed, they wonder.

Like Frost's famous poem says, the road not taken will always draw the mind back in time with wonder. “What would have happened if I'd taken the other path instead?” But when it comes to the decision to have children, it's not just a matter of two roads diverging in a yellow wood. The decision is instead between two roads; one illuminated with signs that say, “THIS WAY TO HAPPINESS” and the other barricaded with graffiti reading, “YOU'LL REGRET IT!”

If you're bold enough to climb over the blockade and travel down the second road, you'll constantly wonder if the signs were correct. The advantage that childfree women have is that we are surrounded by women who have taken the first road. They often talk about their experiences with the first road. And the reports are not all positive.

[Read Orna Donath's *Regretting Motherhood*](#)

The Right Road?

Does this mean that the first road was the wrong road? Not for everyone. But it does mean that the signage is misleading. More than misleading, in fact; it's an outright lie. Motherhood doesn't lead to happiness for every woman. And many childfree women don't regret their decision.

Will you wonder if it would have been a better choice to have children? Probably at some point. However, that's not because some part of you, deep, deep down inside knows you made a mistake. It's because that's simply our human nature. Most (if not all) mothers – even the happy ones – occasionally wonder what their lives would have been like if they hadn't had kids. Haven't you sometimes wondered what your life would be like today if you'd made different decisions back in high school or college? Do you ever consider how things would be different if you'd chosen that other career path you were thinking about?

If you choose parenthood, fine. Just don't choose it because you've bought into the myth that having children is the only way you'll be happy. Remember: *dissatisfaction doesn't come from choosing a particular lifestyle. It comes from putting your hopes for happiness in someone else.* So if you do choose parenthood, don't pin your hopes for happiness on your children. They don't deserve that. And if you choose to be childfree, know that your happiness or unhappiness depends on you and the way you choose to live your life, not your decision to have or avoid children.



For more resources on how to live a happily single or childfree life, visit

The American Spinster