

On Choosing Not to Have Children: three short excerpts from the book

Introduction:

At the heart of spiritual activist Gail Straub's memoir is the issue of choice -- in particular a woman's choice whether or not to have children. This book speaks to the place in all women that wonders how things might have been different if they did or did not have children. This choice was taken away from Gail's mother and is denied to many women around the world. These short excerpts show how this choice played out for Gail in the U.S.A, Russia, and China

The first excerpt takes place in New York in 1987, as Gail along with her husband and business partner, empowerment pioneer David Gershon, engage in an unusual Valentine's Day ceremony to mark their choice.

The second excerpt takes place in Moscow, as Gail tries to defend her choice to a roomful of skeptical Russian women.

The final excerpt takes place in Beijing, China, where Gail learns her translator faces a difficult choice: to betray her mother or her womanhood.

We hope you enjoy these meditations on choice. More information about author Gail Straub and her new book, "Returning to My Mother's House" follows the excerpts.

1. An Unconventional Valentine's Day Ceremony

Now it was 1987. David and I had completed the Earth Run, our business was booming again, I had just celebrated my thirty-eighth birthday, and the clock was ticking away. All our friends thought, well, finally Gail and David must be ready to settle down and have their family. But I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to have children.

Profoundly influenced by the global experience we had just completed, my choice whether to have children or not had become more complicated. The images of poverty and overpopulation we had witnessed in many of the countries where we had just worked were painfully real to me. On the other side of the equation, I felt deeply connected to the global family, hundreds of members of which we had grown to love during the last three years. Didn't I want to have children so they could part of this inexplicably diverse and marvelous human family?

Back at home, I took long mountain valley walks searching for clarity. I pondered being pregnant and giving birth, which many of my women friends described as being far and away the most moving experience in life; the primal pull to continue my lineage; the opportunity to love another being unconditionally. On the other side, I considered the positive social and ecological implications of not bringing another child into our fragile, overpopulated planet. I contemplated how rich and fulfilling my life with David already was, and how many ways there are to give birth

in this world.

Just below the surface of these rational considerations deeper currents were stirring. I feel certain that the dissolution of my own family after my mother's death played a central role in my decision to start a family of my own. My unacknowledged yet potent heartbreak at the loss of my family caused my heart to shout: "Why would ever start a family when it might be torn apart, when you could lose it all so suddenly, so soon in life?"

And then there was my mother's ineffable voice reminding me of the difference between mothering as a calling and mothering as a should. It was her heart's struggle, her genuine push-pull about mothering, and all that she lost by her "choice" to have children that spoke to me most hauntingly during my period of discernment. Mom's voice was reminding me that staying true to the feminine requires conscious choice, listening deeply within and choosing from this subtle interior guidance. Having lost her way to exterior pressures, she was warning me to pay attention.

Ultimately I decided that mothering in the traditional sense was not a calling for me. I have little regret over my choice. What is less clear is whether "I" actually made the decision not to have children. Rather it seems I was given just the right mix of life ingredients, a kind of perfect storm, to make a choiceless choice.

Was there space in my tender psyche to really consider having children, or was the imprint from my mother's push-pull about her choice so strong that it left little room than to take the other road? If Mom had lived longer, fulfilling more of her dreams, keeping my family intact, and wanting grandchildren, would I have made a different choice? If David had wanted children, would this have altered our decision? If I hadn't been immersed in a rich, creative, socially conscious life surrounded with a close community friends where just as many women have chosen not to have children as those with families, would this have changed things? Who knows?

David and I did know that this was one of our most important life decisions and we wanted to make it consciously. We decided to honor our choice with a small ceremony. In retrospect this simple action was deeply significant, and something I suggest to anyone who chooses not to have children. Our ritual represented the baptism of our life aspirations, our decision to mother and father in nontraditional ways. On Valentine's Day we made our choice fully conscious.

We placed a blue flag with the symbol of the earth in the middle of our living room floor. A cobalt blue vase of red tulips at the center of the earth symbol reminded us to imbue our ceremony with beauty and tenderness. Around the earth we place four bowls honoring each of the elements: earth, air, fire, and water. We also chose a symbol that would represent mothering and fathering to each of us. I chose a small statue of Quan Yin, the goddess of Compassion, which I found in China. David chose a bundle of sage from the high desert in New Mexico.

We began with a period of silence and simple prayers stating our intention to make conscious our choice not to have children. First we sat by the bowl of water and talked about what we would lose by not having children.

"We'll never have an opportunity to bring a child into the world that's a unique

combination of you and me," said David.

"We'll never have the chance to express such love, or experience all the ways we could grow and learn by raising children together," I said. Our tears joined the water element.

Next we sat near the bowl of stones and honored what we would gain by our choice.

"We'll have more time and energy to contribute fully to the world through our teaching. I want to offer our teaching to help people live meaningful and empowered lives," I said.

"And I want to give my energy to helping people create more sustainable lifestyles and livable communities," David said quietly. His lifelong commitment to sustainability and social justice were the strongest fibers of his being.

At the fire element David lit his bundle of sage and offered his commitment to spiritual fathering. "I want to guide and mentor those who are called to work with me. I want to try to be a positive role model of a leader who balances my head and heart, and who walks my talk."

And as we sat with the air element, using the archetype of Quan Yin, I offered commitment to spiritual mothering. "I want to walk the path of compassion," I said. "And I want to be a spiritual mother for those who are called to work with me. I want to help them nourish their spirit."

As we sat with the four elements, it began to snow in our mountain valley. The white hush filled our home and hearts with an unexpected peacefulness. David and I went out for a long walk in the soft quiet of the snow, feeling a sense of peace about the promises we intended to keep. On that snowy Valentine's Day afternoon little did we know what we had put into motion. Though extremely simple, our ceremony had lasting power for us.

Through the years David and I have felt little regret over our choice not to have children, and both of us seem to have fulfilled our commitment to spiritual mothering and fathering with uncanny clarity. David had mentored many in the field of social action and become a leader with a rare ability to balance action and contemplation. I have honored the lineage of Quan Yin by writing two books on compassion. And as the next years of my life unfolded I would become a teacher in the field of spiritual development, fulfilling the role of spiritual mother to many of my students.

These days a surprising number of young women write to me or come to me at conferences where I am speaking and ask how I made my choice not to have children. First, I tell them that any choice means that you will both gain and lose something. No matter which decision you make, make it consciously, because choice is the greatest blessing we have. By making conscious choices we respect the sacred feminine.

I tell them that many voices influence such as decision. Pay attention to your mother's voice, I say, both its positive influence but especially its shadows and unfulfilled dreams. Listen to the earth's voice and its cries of overpopulation and starvation. Carefully hear your partner's voice and whether his or her motivation

to have children is a genuine calling or a convoluted set of societal shoulds. And above all listen to your own voice, the voice that articulates your dreams and your deepest longings. Remember there are many ways to mother and father, many ways to create and nourish life.

2. Defending My Choice in Russia

And so it was on a snowy January morning at the venerable State Pedagogical Institute in the heart of Moscow that we dedicated our empowerment work for Russian women to our dear friend Gale Warner. Our training room was bright red with enormous high ceilings. Zhenya told me it used to be a chapel for young women but now the religious icons were replaced with plaster friezes of Marx and Lenin.

The women began to arrive from all over Russia. There were Natasha, Galina, Anya, Nadya, Olga, Sasha, Vera, Elena, and Irina, among others. How I loved the sound of their names. Zhenya and I greeted each of the seventy-five women with the gift of a long-stemmed red carnation. The big room was filled to capacity and very full with the exuberance and longing of these Russian women.

Welcoming the women, we said how excited, and also nervous, we were about our two days together. I began by telling a fifteen-minute version of my life with Natasha by my side, her melodious voice providing the simultaneous translation from English to Russian. I told of my family and childhood, about my mother and her early death and what that has meant in my life. I talked about my own betrayal of the feminine, my workaholicism, and the constant cultural pressure to place reason over emotion, head over heart.

When I described David and my choice not to have children there was an audible gasp in the room. A few minutes later I learned from the myriad of questions that this choice was unheard of in Mother Russia.

"How can you be a real woman and not have children?" asked a lively young Olga.

I was totally unprepared for the bewildered amazement that my choice had created. "Well," I started off, clearly flustered, "You see I am a woman and I am here." The Russian women began to laugh and I was relieved.

"But seriously, I think there are many ways to mother besides the traditional role. I bet that if some of you really believed you had the choice, you might decide not to have children. You might choose to dedicate your time to other worthy things like writing or research, working for social justice or the environment, or empowering the women in your country."

Now there was total pandemonium in the room. Seventy-five Russian women were talking and buzzing about choice and children, time and energy and dreams, and I was wondering what Marx and Lenin up there on the walls must be thinking. Zhenya and I impulsively changed the training plan and immediately put the women in small groups to tell their stories and talk about what choice really meant.

Soon the room was positively bursting with stories of joy and failure, marriage and divorce, mothers and daughters, the merits and demerits of Russian men, the stress

of careers in medicine, science, politics, business, and grassroots activism. Peals of laughter and tearful hugs abounded in every corner of the room. Lunch was an hour late, but who cared. Hearts were open and ears listened deeply; stories healed and opposites reconciled; appropriate choice was as personal as each individual woman in the room. This was the deep feminine in all her Russian glory.

3. Culture and Choice in China

After a sumptuous banquet of chicken, beef, octopus, squid, and Peking duck, all accompanied by the haunting strains of Chinese classical music and nonstop girl talk with our Chinese sisters, we staggered back to our hotel so full on every level I was ready to collapse. But the day was not over yet.

As I was getting into the elevator, our Chinese escort, Kitty, said she needed to speak to me. "Of course, Kitty, should we sit in the bar?"

"No," she said. "I need someplace private. Let's go to my room."

I readily agreed, wondering what on earth Kitty wanted to talk about at this hour after a day like ours. Once we had settled on Kitty's bed she began in earnest. "Gail, today was very emotional for me. Because I am the translator I cover my emotions under my professionalism. But the women's stories got to me and I needed to tell you more of my story." My Chinese sister's lovely face was filled with uncharacteristic sadness, revealing the parts of her that lay just beneath her brilliance and humor.

"Of course, Kitty, what do you need to tell me?" I was now completely wide awake. "Can I make you a nice cup of jasmine tea before you begin?"

"No, no tea, I just want to talk. I have told you some of these things before, Gail. You know that I lost my father in the Cultural Revolution because of his political ideas. And my brother, a prominent physicist, was forced to leave and go to America or he, too, would probably have lost his life. And some members of my extended family did commit suicide during that awful time. I was left to care for my mother, Old Cat. I have always put caring for Old Cat first and my career next. So I am not married and I don't have children. This is very unusual in China." Kitty said sadly, holding back her tears. "I guess I am just an old maid."

Overwhelmed by tenderness for my friend but respecting our cultural differences, I resisted my American temptation to take her in my arms and hold her. I, too, held back my tears and simply took her hand in mine and asked, "Do you want to get married, Kitty?"

"I have never met a man I could fall in love with and I am too old and too modern to have an arranged marriage. And I love how interesting my life is. I like the people from all over the world that I meet and how much I get to travel. I like to serve my country through my work. It's just that there is so much pressure on a woman to marry and have children. I am really an odd goose here in China, Gail."

"You mean odd duck," I said gently, correcting my dear friend's English and realizing yet again how unique and brave, especially how far ahead of her generation, she was. "You know, Kitty, my mother, Jacquie, made the opposite choice from you. She was a gifted artist and she gave up her career to marry and

have a family. I know she had regrets about this and it was part of what broke her heart. And as her daughter I have partly built my life as an answer to my mother's unfulfilled dreams. Perhaps your life is an answer to Old Cat's life?"

Kitty began to cry. "I've never thought if it that way, but I think it's true. Except for me, Old Cat lost her whole family during the Cultural Revolution. If I had left her to live with a husband or a husband's family it would have broken her heart. And I don't think there was room for any more heartbreak in Old Cat's life. My mother is very proud of me. I share the stories of all of my adventures with her and it's almost like she is living them with me."

And now I began to cry. "Kitty, how I would have loved to share my adventures with my mother. She was so young when she died that she didn't see any of my life. It's so hard to know if I have made the right choices, choices my mother would be proud of. I've finally decided that with any choice we both gain and lose. You and I, Old Cat and Jacquie, we all gained something and we all lost something. Maybe the destiny between mothers and daughters is the exchange of these un-lived parts." Saying all this through my tears, I once again had that special feeling that transpires when my own life story is being reshaped by its intersection with another woman's story. In that moment I understood that part of conscious choice is the willingness to embrace the paradox of what is gained and what is lost.

And then Kitty, my self-contained Chinese sister, took me in her arms and said with such sweetness, "Your mother would be so proud of you, Gail. I don't want you ever to wonder about that again. And I have an idea. Would you like to meet Old Cat tomorrow? I want you to share your life adventures with my mother." Her impish grin was never more winning.

"My dear Kitty, I would love nothing more than to meet Old Cat."

And so it was that Old Cat, Kitty and I met for tea the next day in one of Beijing's most famous teahouses. Looking out on a Chinese rock garden framed by weeping willows, we sat in an ancient courtyard surrounded by pots of large-petaled pink lotus flowers. Over heaping servings of steamed dumplings Kitty insisted that I tell Old Cat all about my life. As the tiny old Chinese woman dressed in black silk cooled herself off with a sandalwood fan, her daughter's flawless translation wove the story of my childhood, Mom's illness and death during my years in Africa, my hippie days, and right up to my father's death as the crisis that brought my mother alive again.

Really all I wanted that afternoon was to lose myself in Old Cat's face, a face that told not only her story but also China's story. She didn't know exactly how old she was but she guessed in her late seventies or early eighties. Looking into her eyes I felt such pain and tender compassion, I saw a treasure map of China's telescopic sense of time and human suffering, informing my young American psyche about fatalism and patience. Encoded in the wisdom of Old Cat's face I saw my Grandma Walsh with nine children; I saw Grammie Straub just after Grandpa Straub's suicide and how strong my father was for his mother; and I saw my mother's dreams intertwined with mine in a double helix, a reconciliation of opposites.

As the bright afternoon faded into early evening dusk, we said our goodbyes and Old Cat reminded me that for the Chinese one of the most important things in life was to honor your ancestors and to show the greatest respect for the history

that has come before you. You must honor your mother's memory and you must learn from your past, she told me as her unforgettable visage made a permanent imprint on my heart. At that moment Old Cat became the archetype of China, encapsulating what we had all learned on this trip about time and history, suffering and resilience, individualism and community. Her parting words to me offered not just the wisdom that I needed, but also the wisdom that our youth-obsessed, shortsighted American culture needs. And with her goodbye, Old Cat firmly and tenderly planted the first seed in me to write a book to honor my mother.

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