



Depression settled in. It was 1975, our senior year at Radcliffe College. Sitting on the industrial gray carpet of our concrete high-rise dorm, my three roommates and I glumly agreed that the future looked bleak, very bleak indeed. Katharine Hepburn, in a magazine article, had just announced to the world that she had sacrificed marriage and motherhood for her movie career. We had modeled ourselves on this classy, independent female; she was the lawyer, the athlete, the something of our dreams—and she always got Spencer Tracy in the end. Now she was telling us we had to choose? “A cop-out,” we asserted vehemently.

Surrounded by professors, peers and news media who all endorsed the idea of careers for women, we simply weren’t interested in hearing about necessary choices. We needed to believe it was all possible—career, marriage, and motherhood. It would not be until two years later, long after I had forgotten Hepburn’s pronouncement, that my viewpoint on this touchy subject changed radically.

It was the fifth wedding I’d been to in 1977, and as far as I was concerned, it was the fifth too many. When I turned twenty-four that year, still single, I had begun to feel increasingly uncomfortable with the square cream-colored envelopes which appeared in my mailbox month after month. As I watched my peers fall into formation one by one, like Canada geese lining up in a V wedge, I dreaded the arrival of their marriage announcements even more than the bill from New England Telephone.

Sitting at the wedding-supper table, with bride and groom presiding from either end, I kept thinking how much we had all changed in the two short years since college. This particular woman had made enormous career sacrifices to stay in close proximity to her fiancé—sacrifices we would have found unthinkable during our college years. The conversation at my end of the table moved from the subject of marriage to the prospect of children. Smiling, the groom reassured us that they weren’t planning to start their family for about five years.

I thought privately that this would be just the wrong time from Karen’s point of view—with a new Ph.D. hot in her hand, she would be tramping around looking for a job. Then, from an entirely different conversation at the other end of the table, her voice came drifting down

past coffee cups and dessert plates: “Oh no, I don’t intend to have children for at least ten years.”

The timing of the remark was purely coincidental, and yet it could not have been more perfect for provoking a confrontation. Mark picked up the discrepancy in their time schedules immediately. He set his jaw and stared straight into her eyes. “If you wait that long, my dear,” he announced icily, “I will have sorely misjudged you, and I will be gravely disappointed.”

Everyone fell silent. The day was supposed to be a joyful joining of two lives, but it seemed that the long expanse of wedding table was one of the smaller things coming between these two. Karen’s new husband, I thought cynically, must believe she is one of the new line manufactured under the brand name “Superwoman”—a species capable of cooking, cleaning, raising children, and entertaining his clients—all while simultaneously pursuing a full-time career of her own that would interfere with none of the above.

The entire incident took me aback: as a single woman, I hadn’t had to do much compromising—yet. What scared me most was a gut feeling that in all probability Mark was not that different from most men I knew. As I started to look around at other women, I realized that many of us were in a quandary, waging a recurrent power struggle with our mates, lovers, or ourselves. Our unwillingness to admit the need to compromise was becoming more and more problematic.

The problem put down roots when we were young, and, initially, it was not limited to women alone. My friends and I grew up with parents who gave us everything we asked for in addition to everything they thought we needed. A generation of children raised on TV, movies, airplanes, summer camps, ten million games, college, Europe—things which had been luxuries to our parents were the status quo to us.

Making choices was never an issue, at least not until later on—not until it was almost too late. Never needing to choose left us nearly incapable of setting priorities. But society expected us, as adolescents, to enter the adult arena by making decisions. Again, we were offered a full spectrum of choices, a selection which our parents—and certainly our mothers—had never even dreamed of. It all provoked a crisis. Not having developed the requisite skills in culling one course from alternatives, many of us developed a self-protective reflex: a curious lack of interest in anything specific, a void where career drive and

ambition were supposed to be champing at the bit. Soon it became a social commonplace not to know what you “wanted to do after college.”

We got no sympathy from our parents, who simply could not understand what our problem was, who could not see that all our options had created a first-class prison. Of course, at the time, we attributed our uncertainty to a chic freewheeling approach to the future. “Let it be, let it be” was the refrain from a popular Beatles song of the early 1970s and that’s exactly what we did.

Meanwhile, just when my female peers and I were reaching early adulthood in the late 1960s, the Women’s Movement began to draw big headlines. Our impressionable young minds absorbed the new ideology and rhetoric and incorporated it in our growing conception of ourselves as individuals. Feminism allayed our fears of having too many options. A liberated woman shouldn’t have to choose, we were told. She could do everything.

My grandmother taught me that the only fulfilled woman was a devoted wife and mother. My mother had countered that the only fulfilled woman was a career woman. At twelve, I watched her move excitedly through Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*, saying it was the most important book she had read in a decade. Then she gave it to me. I still have that first edition, filled with her penciled notations from 1965, as well as my own from 1971, when I finally read it. Friedan was a reassuring comfort, a friendly girder of support for my efforts to compromise between these two worlds. Later, I would find that if my college friends had read any one book of feminist instruction, this was invariably the primer.

Women do not have to choose between marriage and career, that was the mistaken choice of the feminine mystique. In actual fact it is not as difficult as the feminine mystique implies to combine marriage and motherhood and even the kind of lifelong purpose that was once called “career”—it merely takes a new life plan—in terms of one’s whole life as a woman. It is wrong to keep spelling out unnecessary choices that make women unconsciously resist either commitment or motherhood—and that hold back recognition of the

needed social changes. It is not a question of women having their cake and eating it too.

Friedan persuaded me that I could please both my grandmother and my mother at once. Still, at that time, if I had had to make a choice, it certainly would not have been to give up a career. Awakening simultaneously to womanhood and to the new literature on the “condition” of the American woman, I was appalled by the tragedy, the crime, the inexcusable waste of being only a wife and mother.

It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women. ... I am convinced there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous. In a sense that is not as far-fetched as it sounds, the women who “adjust” as housewives, who grow up wanting to be “just a housewife” are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps—and the millions more who refused to believe that the concentration camps existed.

Even worse, Friedan told us that one out of every three of our mothers experienced depression or psychotic breakdown after bearing us. Other feminist authors kept pounding us with the idea that bringing new life into the world would be the last nail in our coffins.

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When my roommates and I got to Radcliffe in 1971, few of us worried actively about the practical aspects of careers. Our attitude didn't change over the next four years, either. We weren't at college to prepare, we told ourselves, but to experiment, to enjoy. Of my roommates, three, including myself, majored in English, one in art history, one in visual studies, two in history and literature, and one in social relations. In 1977, only 0.6 percent of the upper-class Radcliffe women were math majors, compared to 2.4 percent of Harvard men.

We sat around and joked that we had no training except reading literature and analyzing art, never willing to deal with the fact that the job market might have no place for intelligent women with B.A.s in

general education—from Harvard or anywhere else. The ivy-covered walls kept all reality at a distance, and our four-year vacation from the facts of everyday living enabled us to procrastinate and dream dangerously when it came to our own futures. We simply assumed that we were going to be the most dynamic group of young women ever to hit the job market. The media were running story after story on the powerful young woman executive, the intern, the government administrator. But on graduation day, very few of my women friends felt comfortable with the all too familiar refrain: “What are you going to do now?”

It was different for my male friends. To graduate from college and still take support from your parents was an acceptable norm for women but an embarrassment for men. So, pushed by social pressure and economic necessity, most of my male peers directed themselves—even if quite unhappily—toward traditional money-making roles in medicine, law, and business. Their role models were etched clearly in the historical ranks of Harvard graduates. Meanwhile, two of my roommates joined the Peace Corps to take a break from immediate decision making. Another, a brilliant young woman who, throughout college, had been trying to get a foot in the door of the communications industry, gave up on looking for a job before she began, and enrolled in a Parisian mime school.

Of course, I had planned just as ineffectively as everyone else. However, I was lucky enough to have an opportunity fall right in my lap with no pavement-pounding required—editing a book of letters. Not until I began looking at the plight of others during the year after our graduation did I realize my good fortune. My Radcliffe classmates, despite their Harvard degrees, had rapidly found that they were required to start at the bottom—as glorified secretaries—of whatever field they were interested in: a lot of typing, phone answering and brownnosing. Many grew angry at being asked whether they took shorthand, and tried to hold out for “better things.” It gradually dawned on us all that there were no “better things” accessible to us. As an employment agent said to someone I knew, “That’s the trouble with you college girls. You all want interesting jobs, when you’ve got no experience.”

Where had we gone wrong?