

by Shelley Wood

CHILD-FREE BY CHOICE

Thoughts on a path less travelled

At some point over the last decade of my no doubt declining fertility, my husband and I decided, after a lot of debate and soul-searching, that rearing a family wasn't what we wanted to do with whatever time we have together. Not a common choice in the family-friendly Okanagan. We'll never know the full cost of our decision, any more than people with children can entirely appreciate why we're so content. All I can do is try to engender a little understanding from uncomprehending or disappointed friends and family.

People often assume we've blithely honeymooned too long, or worse, that we catastrophically wandered into childlessness like some kind of reverse teenage pregnancy. In fact, I think it's more common for couples to have children unthinkingly, as if it's the next thing on the list after marriage, mortgage and mutt. In our case, we hit the pause button after the dog then brooded for years before making peace with this choice.

It's been hard: not because I ever wanted a child, but because I've thought I ought to want one. Almost all my friends have families and not to want to join them has inevitably made me feel abnormal and alienated. Mothers, I've noticed, start speaking a different language when their children are still in the womb; they know body-parts I've never heard of. I miss having shared interests as much as I'm delighted to see them so happy and settled. But if this column does nothing else, I hope it prompts some child-rearing readers to invite their childless friends over to a five-year-old's birthday. We may not come, but we'll be so pleased to have been asked.

For all the times that I've heard people hint or say outright that not having children is "selfish," I can only ask, for whom? I can't withhold my love, my time or my savings from something I never brought into existence. More selfish, it seems to me, is having a child to shore up a shaky marriage or to close a void not filled in other ways. I like to think

I give back to this wobbly planet selflessly, in ways important to me, but also presumably to my nieces and generations thereafter. And if I have more child-free time to fret about the earth's future, we all win.

Do I worry about aging alone? Of course. I'm blessed with a mom who is like a best friend and a wonderful mother- and father-in-law who have welcomed me into their family and loved me, despite all my prickly edges and differences. So I am living what I'll be missing, at the same time that I know we've let them down by not bearing grandchildren. But fear of future loneliness is not sufficient reason to choose a path that was never mine. My husband and I have, I think, a rare harmony in the gentle space we've created for each other — we're not going to add square-footage just out of the concern that we'll want guests two-decades hence.

Hopefully we will always love and be loved by other people's children, enough that they will think of us when we're old and include us in their future lives. Rest assured, we are setting the plan in motion, blatantly bribing our favourites with candy and cuddles. And the kids themselves don't judge us, happy as they are to have an extra aunt and uncle, even if there are no cousins in the bargain. **OL**