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To bear children or not -- that is the question

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WASHINGTON — — The media-created mommy wars haven't just jumped the shark and entered the realm of "Sharknado." Where women once debated ways to balance family-and-career — a hyphenated oxymoron if ever there was one — they're now clashing over whether having babies is really all that.

To bear children or not — that is the only question left to those with first-world problems.

The scene: A tidy beach where a young couple is basking, carefree. How lovely. No little ones to intrude upon the perfect union of two selves entwined in rapturous indulgence.

This was the cover of a recent Time magazine featuring a story titled "The Childfree Life: When having it all means not having children." The story explored a startling statistic: One in five American women ends her childbearing years without maternity.

Some of that low fertility apparently is voluntary. Note that the title is childfree, not childless. Increasingly, couples — and women, specifically — are deciding against childbearing for a variety of reasons, including the unwelcome prospect that scenes such as that depicted on the magazine cover might become less frequent. The pleasure principle seems to be gaining on the procreative impulse.

Fast on the heels of Time's article came a story from the Guardian of Britain reporting research from the London School of Economics suggesting that smart women don't have children. According to the author of the book "The Intelligence Paradox," maternal urges drop by 25 percent with every extra 15 IQ points. Although he opines that such women are too smart for their own good, one could also infer that you're dumb if you have kids.

Yet another story, this one from the BBC News Magazine, plumbed the stretch marks and "breasts ... like Zeppelins" — as one reader put it — that frequently follow pregnancy and childbirth. The story featured a photographer who wanted to show women's bodies as they really are after pregnancy. Most do not rebound miraculously as celebrity spreads would have us believe. As if we didn't know.

But a young woman considering motherhood might also conclude that trading a young, fit body for *that* isn't worth it. Combined, the three stories seem aimed at discouraging, or at least demystifying, motherhood.

Where to begin.

To the childless, as opposed to the voluntarily childfree, the debate about whether to have a child is no doubt painful. But even among those who can — and do or don't — the conversation is rife with emotion. Everyone feels slightly insulted. Childless women feel that they're viewed critically for not being mothers. Women who are mothers, whether working or stay-at-home, feel inadequate or mocked by iconic images of career women with babies in their briefcases.

Really, isn't it time to retire this faux-ma?

Another scene: I am in the delivery room with my niece moments after she brought her baby girl into the world. She is sobbing. "I feel so sorry for men," she says. "They can't have babies."

She was drowning in hormones, obviously, but never mind. Mothers know of what she spoke. So do fathers, though perhaps in a less immediately physical way. It is the joy that passeth all understanding. And, as with love, you can't explain it to those who haven't experienced it. That's the unspoken truth.

Here's another: Whatever else we choose to do, creation is what we were meant to do.

Sometimes creation takes other forms than parenthood. Would we have a Sistine Chapel if Michelangelo had been distracted by a half-dozen hungry mouths? On the other hand, would we have had Michelangelo if abortion had been available to his mother?

Knowledge of my niece's joy (there is no other word) is the secret code of all parents, including adoptive. Mysteriously, the inevitable pain, suffering and sacrifice of parenthood are also part of that joy. What is a rose without thorns? Life without death is imponderably meaningless. I would argue that without death, there would be no love.

Indeed, what makes parenthood so relentlessly amazing — both the beauty and the beast of it — is the possibility of losing the thing you love more than your own heartbeat. Putting someone else's interests above one's own is the alpha and omega of parenthood.

Every person will find his or her own way in this conversation. Parenting surely isn't for everyone and those who choose to be childfree probably have made the right decision. Then again, it's hard to know for certain that one doesn't want children. Many don't, until they do.

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