

Natural Consequences: Having Children in a Time of Environmental Crisis
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Twenty-five years ago you could not have paid me to have a kid. By the time I turned 35, I had a list of why kids were not part of my future. I was fine with directing maternal energy towards students or as an auntie, goddess-mom or momentary baby holder, but nothing more, *please*.

Strangely enough most of my peer group had chosen not to have kids. They all had good reasons, and none of them felt called to parent. I felt most comfortable in their company and always felt out of place with people eager to parent. Even though I enjoyed kids, one on one, I was certain that having one of my own would distract me from the work I felt called to do, and that list kept asserting that having a kid made no sense.

My partner and I met two weeks after my 35th birthday, and not long after that, we agreed that having kids would not be part of our future as a couple. We created our double-fueled list of reasons including: the world was such a mess that it was not fit for having babies. Of course, our lives were way too busy and we barely saw each other. We were not fans of the neuroses fostered within nuclear family life. We saw the cost of having a first world child on the ecosystem. And we felt that our nurturing feelings were best directed towards the support systems that could build a better world. We were very clear about this and neither of us had any ambivalence about our decision, despite pressure from our families, and the few friends I had with kids. Only three of my local artist peers had chosen to have kids. With most of our closest friends choosing not to have children, we felt supported in this choice, for the most part. We did not judge our friends who chose to have kids because we recognized that some of our generation needed to raise smart, creative, empathetic, social justice, feminist and ecologically minded youth.

About four years after getting married, I had become increasingly disabled by an environmental illness caused by childhood exposure to pesticides, living in the smog of Los Angeles and the aerial spraying of Malathion. As a result of the limitations created by the illness, I had begun to look at my life through a new lens. I could no longer do everything I had on my list: traveling, exhibiting, giving talks and even just teaching my classes had become a huge strain. As my world of outside activities began to shrink, I started meditating more frequently and working with my dreams.

During this time, I began to hear a voice in that liminal place between wakefulness and sleep, between daily activities and stillness. The voice was that of an ageless, genderless being, asking to come in. While I was open to learning from different planes of reality, I had little experience other than the glimpse that a brief experimentation with psychoactive substances in my teens had given me. My analytical mind first thought that this "visitation" was a permutation of my illness or a peculiar manifestation of my biological clock (I was 39). Despite my attempts to silence the voice, it persisted.

After attempting dialog with this “being” using my own rational voice: “other women are trying to make babies, go to them!” Or “do you really want to come into this sick body and sick world?” The voice continued to insist that s/he wanted to be born to me. I finally shared the story of these “visits” with my husband.

Surprisingly enough, he said, “I guess there’s something going on here that we’re supposed to respond to; we better get to work.” Despite some lingering ambivalence, we stopped using condoms. I became pregnant immediately, and soon after went into my studio to paint images of angry and sad pregnant women. I was not ready emotionally or physically, so when I miscarried a few weeks later, I was grateful. The few friends and family we told about the pregnancy were not so easily relieved of their grief, but again I pulled out my list of why having a child was not good for me, for us or for the planet.

Soon after the miscarriage I found myself more disabled by my illness than ever, and had to give up driving due to my constant coughing fits. Conversations with people were quite limited for the same reason. I did not know how to talk without wheezing.

I should mention that my relationship to the academic institution in which I was teaching at the time was also quite fraught. I had been denied sabbaticals by two deans and was working in a dysfunctional art department. Despite my joy for teaching and the gratitude of my students, I was exhausted and burnt out. These circumstances exacerbated my state of health. I had begun to contemplate what it might be like to leave tenure and academia.

During the summer of my 40th year, we went to teach in central Vermont, at the Institute for Social Ecology, a place where I’d happily been an artist in residence for several summers. My husband and I had been co-teaching a course in “activist art in community” and I wasn’t going to let my illness get in the way.

When we first arrived I could barely walk up the stairs to our apartment, but being in Vermont always had a beneficial effect on my immune system, so I was confident that I’d be able to climb mountains within the month.

A woman teaching community health at ISE invited us to visit her at her home deep in the rural hills. Over a cup of tea, she counseled us and told me it was time for me to leave Los Angeles saying that I had become a sponge for the toxins there. I argued that my students needed me and how was I going to find another tenured job. She asked me what good I was to students given how sickly I’d become. More discussion ensued, and somehow her words went in deeply. On our drive home we decided definitively to leave Los Angeles so that I could reclaim my health. Four days later our son was conceived. This time I was strangely ready for becoming a parent because I had given up analyzing the repercussions of my choices. We took that proverbial leap of faith into the unknown.

I took on the work of parenting as a mission, and I definitely felt like I had something to prove. Soon after my pregnancy was public, a famous critic told me I was throwing away my career. I was determined to prove her wrong.

The first years in a rural village in western Massachusetts were not easy ones, but there were many consolations. We had sold our house in Venice, CA at a loss, but we still had some cash to live on. I had accrued a year’s worth of sick pay and because I had taken a leave, rather than resigning, we had health insurance for the

family. My husband and I were very under-employed, but that meant lots of time with our infant son. We practiced attachment parenting and wore, bounced and slept with our son for the first nine months. I nursed on demand, and our son seemed to handle the machinations of moving 3000 miles without much complaint.

I, on the other hand, was sicker than ever. I had been exposed to more chemicals in a newly renovated building we lived in during the summer residency at ISE and it caused my immune system to collapse. I had to get intravenous nutrition several times a week, since I could not easily hold food in my body. My son nursed during my IVs so he also received high quality nutrition during that time.

Fortunately my son's birth had a very unexpected result, I became determined to become healthy so I could parent him well. It took time and commitment, experimenting with different protocols, but eventually I was able to take on more of life, and began teaching part-time at different schools in the area and making art in a small community studio space. I became very efficient in my work process, and probably made more art during the first years of his life than I had made in years. Much of the work was about healing, sleep deprivation, coming to terms with motherhood and environmental illness. I showed some of that work all over the country and was able to prove to myself (if not to that unsupportive critic) that motherhood was a great catalyst for my creativity.

For both my privacy and that of our son's I'm not going share much more about journey together, with one exception: fast forward to his 11th year. The film "An Inconvenient Truth" was playing in our local movie theater and our son wanted to see it. Given his precociousness, we agreed to it. When we were leaving the theater, he seemed particularly reserved and I asked him if he wanted to share what the film had provoked in him. He stiffened in response and said he did not want to talk about it.

Months later, we were walking in a busy city and he turned to me and said unprovoked, "If you knew that things were going to be so bad, why did you have me?" We had just visited a museum and seen beautiful things from history, but he had seemed very distracted, lost in thought. Startled, I asked him where this question was coming from, and he said, not skipping a beat, "you know, the movie" as if we were just leaving the theater. I paused for a minute, debating how to respond. Eventually I said, "That movie was made to inspire people to become activists and to wake up people who are asleep. We had you because we believe that a better world is possible and you will be part of the generation to really change things." He didn't pause for long and said, "but I don't want to do that. I don't want to be an activist. I want to be able to have everything I want in life, and that movie tells me that I won't." I saw how forlorn he was and realized that he had touched the core of those deepest misgivings of my pre-mothering self. But I knew that I could not spend time caught up in that angst. He was asking for reassurance, and I had to find a way to offer it without lying. So I said, "you are not being asked to do anything right now except to play, grow and learn about the world and the gifts you can bring to it. There are many others doing the work to deal with climate change. It is not easy, but they are working hard to make things better for your generation. We are involved in that work as well. You need to trust that we will make a difference." He looked at me

with a painful expression, showing that he had not really been reassured and became pensive. Thankfully lunch shifted his energy.

Almost a decade has passed, and our son is slowly blossoming into adulthood. He, like so many of his peers, has not had an easy journey. Anxiety has been a frequent companion, along with other challenges, some of which are probably the genetic legacy of having been born to a mom who was exposed to a plethora of pesticides. Still despite the unique obstacles he has faced, he is a kind and empathic soul, with a good sense of humor, many untapped gifts and a desire to serve others.

We imagine that the most resilient youth will make it through the hurdles in front of them, and we are hopeful that our son is one of the latter. He has expressed an interest in eco-restoration or social justice work, and both are needed. We will see what the fates have in store for him.

So why have kids in a time of ecological disaster, given the tale I have told, without a happy ending? Well, if we were starving and thirsty with not enough food and water, I would say, yes, it might not be so wise to have kids right now. But those who can raise kids to be part of whatever future is possible for our species should have them. We have no way of predicting who will be able to survive the times ahead, but we need kids who start off with good nutrition, compassion and some understanding of their unique gifts. If those traits could be combined with a mixture of good critical thinking, innovative risk taking, mindfulness and street smarts, well, then, we might have a decent chance of creating the society we want in a world where greed, cruelty and fear aren't the gross global products.

I remember there was a time when I looked at parents with small children and thought, "what foolishness and delusion" and now, I say "what courage!" And I remember a time when I heard people saying that people who chose not to have kids were selfish, and now, I say, "glad that they feel empowered to make that choice." May we all come together in the ways needed to support each other in what is bound to be both a challenging and amazing time ahead.