This Wonderful Decision

Being a single mother is difficult, often very difficult. As the lesbian mothers who speak in these pages make clear, and as other research on single mothers documents abundantly, motherhood without a husband brings with it a range of problems. Single mothers, whether they are lesbian or heterosexual, are likely to face financial pressures, the stress of bearing sole or primary responsibility for their children’s welfare, problems in their efforts to manage time and energy, discrimination in housing, difficulties in finding competent child care, and the varied stresses that stem from the need to orchestrate children’s links with their fathers. Though no reliable figures are available, a substantial number (and possibly the majority) of lesbian mothers went to oral history single heterosexual mothers to the pathways that led them to their current situations: they had their children during a marriage or a long-term heterosexual relationship and through various circumstances have made a transition to single/lesbian motherhood.

But increasing numbers of lesbian mothers present a very different picture. Like some heterosexual women who find themselves wondering what their lives will be worth if they never have children, more and more lesbians are deciding that conventional circumstances are not the only context in which a child can be born. They are having children on their own, becoming “intentional” single mothers. Though we have no way of knowing how many, or what proportion of lesbians are taking this path, we do know that the visibility of intentional motherhood among lesbians is increasing. Groups for lesbian considering parenthood are thriving in major cities; books and manuals have been written for women who want to become pregnant.
Lesbia mothers or adopt children; documentary films have sought to present positive images of lesbian families and even the mainstream press is giving significant attention to the phenomenon of artificial insemination among lesbians. Media treatment, not surprisingly, is superficial, tending toward either sensationalism or blandness.

But there can be little doubt that intentional motherhood through donor insemination or, less often, through adoption is becoming a common feature of life among lesbians. Gay media are making more frequent mention of children and family issues, and AIDS care, most rarely, even thought about in connection with lesbians or gay cultural and political events, has become a routine feature in such functions at least of those expected to draw women. San Francisco’s lesbian and gay synagogue, for instance, has so many members with children that a religious school has been opened to provide several levels of instruction, including preparation for Bar and Bat Mitzvah. The coincidence of these developments with the AIDS epidemic and its devastating impact on the gay community in the San Francisco Bay Area cannot be ignored; synagogue members suggested to me that the enthusiasm for activities involving children now evidenced by the men in the congregation seems to parallel their weariness with disease and death.

The Link with Technology: Artificial/Donor Insemination

Artificial insemination has joined in vitro fertilization, embryo transfer, and sex determination among the “new” reproductive technologies commonly being talked about. But artificial insemination, the introduction of sperm into the vajinas by means other than sexual intercourse, is in fact an ancient procedure. According to John Hunter, the earliest recorded mention of artificial insemination is in the Talmud, reflecting its practice in the third century A.D. Originally applied to animal husbandry, as of course it still is today, it was first successfully applied to humans in 1801 by the Scottish veterinarian and surgeon John Hunter. For nearly a century only the husband’s sperm was used (AIH, or artificial insemination by husband), but after experiments proved successful in 1844, artificial insemination by donor (AID) slowly came into use for wives of infertile men.
Aside from mastery of the procedure itself, by which sperm is introduced into the vagina with a needleless syringe at a time calculated to correspond to the woman’s ovulation, the ability to freeze sperm, perfected in 1949, created the basis for expanded use of artificial insemination, both in animals and in humans. Some controversy has surrounded Hermann Muller’s suggestion that artificial insemination be used for eugenic purposes in humans; the infamous plan to store the sperm of Nobel Prize winners for this purpose is only the most publicized of such efforts.

Less well reported is the lack of regulation governing the operation of existing sperm banks, which are under the control of physicians. Not only is medical screening of donors not consistent, but doctors appear to use their personal values as a way of deciding who may use these costly services. As a result, uninsured women as well as lower-income patients may not have the same access to artificial insemination afforded affluent married couples. Meanwhile, debates over the parental status of the donor and the legitimacy of the offspring continue to rage, inflamed by the application of the technology to so-called surrogate motherhood.

Despite these obstacles, the low-tech nature of artificial insemination and the existence of alternatives to established sperm banks have permitted women to exercise some control over the procedure. At the same time that the women’s health movement and self-help gynecology were changing women’s views of their reproductive options, women were beginning to circulate information about how to achieve insemination outside the medical establishment.

Adaptation and Other Options

The right of lesbians and gay men to be adoptive or foster parents is highly contested, and so far efforts to establish the principle of equal treatment in this area have only occasionally been successful. Homosexual adults, even if there is no question about their sexual orientation, are not preferred as parents for children, particularly for the
much-desired healthy Caucasian infants who seem to be in such short supply. Such people are likely to find themselves at the end of a long waiting list with little hope of even having a child placed with them. Their chances increase, of course, if they are willing to adopt so-called hard-to-place children—those who are older, are physically or mentally disabled, are of mixed racial backgrounds, or have not fared well in previous placements. But only in a few areas of the country are agencies willing to consider the possibility that a lesbian or gay applicant might offer a suitable home for a child. Foster placements to lesbian and gay applicants have been increasing in recent years, however, particularly for teenagers who have been identified as homosexual.

Lesbians and gay men who wish to adopt seem to do somewhat better when they make a private arrangement directly with the biological parent or parents, bypassing agency waiting lists. The adoption must still be approved by a state or private agency, but since the evaluation is carried out after the placement, a positive recommendation is more likely. Still in contention, however, is the status of the second parent. Since all states require that unmarried persons adopt only as single individuals, it is difficult to achieve legal recognition for a second parent, either at the time of the adoption or when a biological parent seeks to have the relationship between her partner and her child validated. Some adoptions of this type have been approved, nevertheless, though legal scholars generally doubt that many will follow.

There is no way to gauge how often women undertake relationships with men in order to become pregnant; certainly instances in which men's personal qualities are secondary to women's primary reproductive goals may be far more common than is generally acknowledged. As we saw earlier, some formerly married mothers, both lesbian and heterosexual, tend to view their marriages as arrangements that permitted them to have children under culturally sanctioned circumstances. Not a few of these women, now that their marriages are over, go further and perceive single motherhood as having improved their situation in various ways. These women may see single motherhood as more desirable than motherhood in a mar-
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While at the same time that they are constantly concerned with a range of financial and social problems exacerbated by their status as heads of households,

though it appears that "intentional" mothers may still be in the minority among lesbian mothers, they are the most visible element of the so-called lesbian baby boom, or at least the one that attracts the most opposition. But these mothers afford us special insight into the underlying meaning of motherhood in the wider culture; as levels of social approval are stripped away, we are left with a view of the goals that lesbians and other unmarried women seek to achieve through motherhood and the strategies they employ in their attempts.

Why Do Women Want to Be Mothers?

Perhaps not surprisingly, intentional mothers are no more self-conscious about their reasons for wanting children than many other lesbian mothers. Indeed, some women have so long and intensely yearned for motherhood that questions about it are almost incomprehensible to them. These women’s comments often reveal at the same time a feeling that the conventional context of parenthood—marriage—is undesirable or unattainable.

Michelle O'Neill, a lesbian whose one-year-old son was conceived through artificial insemination, puts it this way:

"We always loved children, particularly babies, ever since I was a very young child myself and I always wanted to have children. My grandmother had [a big family] and it was a very positive thing in my family to have children. Until Michelle learned that artificial insemination was possible and found a way to accomplish it outside the medical establishment, she believed that this valued goal would be denied her.

Similarly, Donna Perrotta, who got married and had girls specifically in order to have a child, felt that motherhood, but not marriage, had always been a goal for her.

When I was real young, consciously I always knew I wanted to be a mother. I didn’t know how I was going to do that... And so I grew older, I went to
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...make comments like... that I was going to remain single and have a
child... That's what I said. That, of course, in those days especially, was taboo
to say. You always got married, you always had kids, but you did it in order. And
I just knew, just knew, just knew. I just felt that very strongly.

Camille Walsh had two children, a nine-year-old daughter and a
seven-year-old son, during relationships with two men. She saw
clearly that her major goal in getting involved in each of these rela-
tionships was to become a mother, and to do it on her own.

I really wanted to have kids. That was clear. When I was a kid I did lots of baby-
sitting and really liked being around kids. I just felt like I wanted to raise
them... And at the time I decided that I was ready it wasn't clear to anybody
else that they wanted to do that also. So I just got pregnant. There was enough el-
ment of doubt [about paternity] in it that [my daughter] became my child rather
than mine and somebody else's.

For some women the desire to have a child is tied explicitly to a
desire to create or enhance a family. Joan Emerson, the mother of a
one-year-old daughter, explains:

I think that I was really into a home-family situation. I wanted to enhance
that... I still wanted that, that sense of family structure. Which my children, I think.

Some women perceive having a child as solidifying their links with
their natal families, allowing them to contribute to the ongoing devel-
opment of the generations. Annabel Jessop, whose six-month-old
son was conceived through insem ination, feels closer to her parents
and siblings since she has become a mother:

I had a strong sense of family when I grew up and I like feeling like I have a
family.

But many lesbian mothers soon found that their desire to have a
child was inseparable with their sexual orientation. Sarah Klein,
who now lives with her one-year-old daughter and her lover, found this conflict especially wrenching.

I've always wanted to have a child. In terms of being held up with being gay, it was one of the reasons that for a long time I was hesitant to call myself a lesbian. I thought that automatically assumed you had nothing to do with children. . . . I felt, well, if you don't say you're a lesbian you can still work with children, you can still have a kid, you can have relationships with men. But once I put the label on myself, it would all be over.

Some others, in contrast, claim not to remember wanting children when they were younger. Kathy Lindstrom had a child by artificial insemination when she was in her early thirties, but says she never really thought about having a child until she was twenty-seven or twenty-eight. The only explanation she can suggest for the timing of her interest is some sort of "hormonal change."

It just kind of came over me. It wasn't really conscious at first. It was just a need.

These comments echo those of Rose Allen, a heterosexual mother whose family background and personal history were quite erratic, and who came to a sudden decision to have a child during an acid trip. She was involved with a man at the time and set out deliberately to become pregnant despite his lack of interest in parenthood. When asked why she wanted to have a baby, she explains:

I just thought I needed one. . . . I guess it was the mother instinct. I don't know. It was just like I needed a child.

The term "need" as an explanation for the decision to have a child is particularly interesting when it is used by women whose situations appear to be at odds with conditions in which one would "normally" become a mother. Some heterosexual women, such as those who live particularly unconventional lives, share with lesbians a sense of being inappropriate aspirants for the status of mother. For these women, biologizing the process may serve to remove the stigma of having made a socially proscribed decision, if they couldn't help wanting to
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be mothers, then they can hardly be blamed for following their "natural" impulses. The claim that becoming a mother is the result of yielding to an involuntary biological urge bears a striking resemblance to arguments that homosexuality itself ought not to be stigmatized because it is the result of innate biological characteristics.17

The undefined need that other lesbian mothers are trying to meet appears to center on a desire to settle down, to achieve adulthood and to transcend the uncertainty of their lifestyles. Ruth Zimmerman, the mother of a five-year-old son, began a relationship with a man because she had qualities she thought would make him a "good" father, although the relationship ended not long after she became pregnant.

I definitely felt like I was waiting, waiting for something. I wasn't raised to be a career woman. I was raised to feel like I was grown up and finished growing up and living a regular normal life when I was married and had kids. And I knew that the married part wasn't going to happen. I felt like I've known that for a really long time.

The notion that having a child connotes adulthood, social responsibility, and a demonstration that one has "settled down" appears in the accounts of many women, echoing their accounts of divorce and coming out. This assumes particular importance for mothers who perceive their earlier lives to have been chaotic, lacking in purpose or direction. For example, Louise Green, a young counterculture lesbian who had her daughter, now eight months old, through artificial insemination, credits motherhood with making her a more reliable person.

I feel like I have a really huge responsibility and that I knew that I would and it's really grounded me and centered me a lot. I feel like I'm emotionally real together now... I feel like I really like myself a lot more and I think I made a wonderful decision having her. I think it's turned my life into this really good thing.

Louise characterizes herself as a former hippie and describes her earlier life as rather disorganized. Since becoming a mother, she has stopped using drugs and alcohol and has come to place great importance on cleanliness, nutrition, and education. She has attempted a
reconciliation with her family, with whom she had not been in contact for some years, and resumed the conventional given name that she had earlier replaced with a more fanciful appellation.

The search for meaning through motherhood is a quest that lesbians share with unmarried heterosexual women. The settling down that many women seek when they become mothers is linked with their sense of behavior appropriate to their age. These mothers describe themselves as having lived without a focus or worthwhile pursuit until they had a child. Samantha Paulson, a heterosexual mother who lives alone with her seven-year-old daughter in an East Bay suburb, speaks eloquently of the way her child has changed her life.

Prior to [my daughter's] arrival my life was basically go to work, party after work . . . come home, sleep till noon, get up, go out to lunch, go to work, repeat the cycle. I had no hobbies. I . . . did nothing but the basic necessities for the apartment and spent every, every little time there . . . . And after having her, I was proud to stay at home— I wanted to stay at home—and I just started doing the little domestic-type things . . . . I started the first thing I felt was a garden. And then I resumed going to the library, started getting books and reading, started doing little house repair.

Samantha had her child during a rather unstable relationship with a man. Her sense of motherhood as having stimulated the emergence of latent creativity and industry; the implication is that she could not have generated these energies without an external impetus. Similarly, having a baby permitted Rosemary Danske, the heterosexual mother of a two-year-old daughter, to overcome a tendency to let the man she was involved with influence her major decisions. She had become pregnant once before, and at his urging had had an abortion. Her anger about the abortion when it wasn't what she really wanted led to a new resolution.

I just felt I can do it and I never again will get to that point of having a man control anything that is significant in my life and then it just evolved . . . . That I wanted a baby and that I could do it on my own . . . . And, as I got pregnant, it was exactly the resolution that I had planned.
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Achieving Goodness

What some women achieve by becoming a mother seems to be not just adulthood and responsibility but an identity as a "good" woman. Childhood is a time of innocence and discovery, and a woman can gain spiritual benefit by being close to a child and by her contribution to the child's growth and development. One lesbian mother said:

"You get to have a lot of input in another human being's very formative years. That's a real special thing, the privilege of being there, and you get to see them growing and developing and it's sort of like you put in the fertile soil and... hopefully what will happen is that they grow and blossom and become wonderful... I think it's definitely the most important thing that people do... to build the next generation."

Another lesbian, Sarah Klein, put her feelings a bit differently:

"I now feel there's something more important in my life. I'm much more in touch with my death. I know it's coming and I have to not fuck around as much as I used to in terms of doing some things I want to do before I die... I have a chance to change humanity, in terms of a person who will see herself differently than anyone else."

Regina Carter, whose daughter is six, spoke of the meaning of motherhood this way:

"My kid has given me more knowledge than any other experience in my life. She's taught me more than all the things I've ever learned in teaching or education, and I mean that in terms of academic education, spiritual education in general. She's taught me things that no other person, place, or thing could possibly teach me. And these are things that are without words."

Bonnie Perel associates motherhood with honesty and worldliness:

"I've become more at peace with me [since having my daughter]. She's given me a clarity of self... she's made me see that I'm not the same person now as I was when I first started. She's definitely given me self-worth. I've become, I think, a more honest person."
Camille Walsh also emphasizes the basic honesty of children. Being near children allows the adult to let go of the corruption of life in the world.

"I don't really know how to explain it but it was like a freeing process for me. The stuff that normally bother me, you can let go of around kids. . . . It helps me a lot. It helps me in everything I do. It helps me see the world better. I help me get to know people better. It helps me sort out what's happening with the people I work around and all these different things. . . . I'm not sure but I figure we are learning to see things in a different way.

Motherhood then, can bring a woman closer to basic truths, can make her more able to empathize with the feelings of others. Sarah Klein says that being a mother has made her more "accepting" of people who have made decisions different from hers, essentially has enabled her to achieve a level of tolerance that was unknown to her before she was a mother and was "a lot more judgmental."

These feelings are extremely powerful, particularly in such women as Christine Richmond, who experienced a kind of transformative altruism after the birth of her son, now three.

I think that probably the biggest thing is my ability to be closer to people, and my capacity for loving them now and I have such a great time to love with somebody in a loving relationship and be happy in that sense. I just feel much more settled in that sense. I don't feel so anxious about what's out there or what might be out there. That's partly partly getting older, but I think it really has a lot to do with them.

On this level, motherhood provides the occasion for a woman to declare her commitment to a kind of authenticity, a naturalness. As we shall see later, becoming a mother also allows women to establish themselves in families. The creation of family ties proceeds both because the mother and her child constitute a new family and because having a child tends to bring her into closer alliance with her family of origin."
Age forms large in the accounts of many intentional mothers. Often the importance of age in the decision to have a child is tied less to a sense of age-appropriate behavior than to a concern with the effect of advancing age on fertility and the health of the child. Women who discuss their decisions in these terms tend to articulate a specific deadline—most commonly thirty-five—after which child-bearing is risky or somehow incongruous.

Clarice Grant, a thirty-five-year-old lesbian whose six-month-old son was conceived through insemination, had considered having a child for many years but had not been motivated to take serious steps in this direction. Once she entered her thirties, however, she felt that she was getting to "the deadline zone of thirty-five, where you have to start worrying about Down’s syndrome." This also proved to be a time in her life when other factors made motherhood a possibility. She had a job from which she could take a leave of absence, she had a long-term lover who could be expected to share parenting, and her lover’s financial situation could provide for both of them without strain.

For similar reasons, Laura Bergeron made a concerted effort to find a donor for her third child when she began to edge toward forty.

I really did want to have a girl, and I was getting older. See, I had my first child at thirty-two, and I was feeling that I didn’t really want to have children past the appropriate childbearing age. I had been doing too much reading about retardation and mongoloids and everything else . . . so I put some ads [for donors] in the paper.

Annabel Jessop voices similar concerns, explaining that they influenced her to go ahead with artificial insemination despite the fact that she would have preferred to wait until she was settled in a long-term relationship.

I decided that I wanted to have a kid, and that because I’m in my thirties, my time was limited. I look at it as a life choice. There’s only so many things you can do in your life, and this is one of the things I wanted to do, and it was time to do...
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Karen Bernstein, a heterosexual mother who also considered thirty-five her deadline for having a child, used similar language to explain the compromises involved in deciding to become pregnant when the opportunity presented itself.

The fantasy was that the lasting love of a man could happen and we'd have a child together. But the reality was that I was all around me was that love and having someone married to their early twenties were disappearing. All of them. So anyway, the feeling was that that was it. Beste my big chance. And I just feel like something was going to happen. That's it.

Whereas these women decided to have children even though they had not yet found suitable relationships, others stress the importance of embarking on parenthood with the help of a supportive lover. These women tend not to view themselves as "single," but as living in situations comparable (or superior) to a heterosexual union in terms of stability and commitment. They describe the decision to become pregnant as having been made jointly, with strong consideration given to the benefits to be derived from having two caretakers and two incomes. Clarice Grant explains:

Looking around at the other couples that were in the birth class that we went to, she's more nurturing of a parent than any of the fathers I've seen around. She spends more time with him. Really wants to, I can kind of sit back and she takes over. . . . I really feel like it's coparenting.

Closely intertwined with other decision-making factors are prospective mothers' assessments of their financial situations and their ability to manage parenthood on their own. Subjective judgments of what constitutes a sufficient income or an adequate standard of living vary considerably, as does the extent to which mothers engage in concrete financial planning.
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Evaluation of financial status can be inextricable from considerations having to do with age, career, or relationships. For both lesbian and heterosexual women who have reached a point of stability in their work, for example, timing tends to have to do with feeling that things are at good financially as they will ever be. Women in this situation usually desire some sense of security from having established themselves in careers; they believe that they will be able to regain their earning power easily once they return to work. After their children are born, however, they often find that they failed to anticipate all the expenses associated with motherhood or that their assessment of their ability to return to work was unrealistic.

Other women’s financial stability derived from knowledge that they would be supported or assisted by friends, lovers, or family. One lesbian mother whose lover supports the family planned the birth with this support in mind, others receive regular assistance from their parents. Some mothers view welfare or some other form of public assistance as offering a regular, predictable, though (they hope) temporary source of income. Despite wide variations in the income on which mothers and their children actually live, women’s evaluations of its adequacy has more to do with the solidity of their support systems than with the amount of money they actually have in hand each month. Those who have an intimate circle of supportive friends or relatives are most likely to perceive their economic situations as comfortable, regardless of their objective financial status.

Many women view their incomes as merely making motherhood possible, in essence as not preventing it, rather than as necessarily providing them with an adequate standard of living. Lilly Parker, a lesbian who has a one-year-old daughter and derives her principal income from AFDC, expressed it this way:

I figured that I’ve been poor most of my life. Not that poor . . . I’d always managed somehow. And that with a child, I’d manage. Also, I figured that I could get AFDC for the first year of my baby’s life . . . because then I wouldn’t have to work so hard . . . And I had a baby so then I could take care of the baby, not to say that somebody else could take care of the baby . . . I felt like AFDC is permanent.
While Lilly talks in detail about the sparseness of her AFDC award, it is clear that she considers the minor inconvenience, which she must endure in order to achieve the more important goal of motherhood. She shares her life with two roommates, has a close and supportive relationship with a sister who lives nearby, and has received some tangible support from her family. She has not told them she is gay.

Finally, a few mothers view their financial situations as not only enabling but obliging them to have children. Julie Clark, who was left a substantial inheritance, was motivated to adopt a child in part because she herself had been adopted. She felt strongly that it would be selfish or not responsible to fail to share her good fortune with a homeless child. Her views coincide with those of a heterosexual adoptive mother in Marin County. She had adopted two minority adolescents some years earlier because she considered a good salary and felt that she shouldn’t keep it all just for herself.

Though these mothers don’t go so far as to criticize women who don’t extend themselves and their resources in this way, their decisions reflect the concern with selfishness or lack of responsibility among childless women to which other informants often refer.

How to Have a Baby: Choosing A Method

Once a lesbian has decided to have a baby, she has to figure out how to go about it. Heterosexual and occasional lesbian women in relationships with men may seem to have a ready solution at hand, but issues of later obligation may undermine its apparent simplicity. In some situations involving a relationship with a man, his future involvement as a father may be at issue, as may the durability of the relationship itself. All of these questions may be merged with the decision to have a child, making the matter of intentionality murky at best.
Though lesbians sometimes have intimate relationships with the men who fathers their children, this approach is not what most prefer. A sexual entanglement with a man not only may be personally unappealing but may raise potential problems of custody or control. At the same time, insemination by a physician may represent an unpleasant intrusion into one's private life; that is, a threat to one's autonomy. A lesbian may circumvent these problems by opting for insemination outside the medical establishment, but that route may have other unanticipated consequences; in particular, she may not be able to shield her identity from the donor. Finally, adoption is always difficult for a single woman, and a lesbian is likely not to qualify for adoption at all if her sexual orientation is discovered. All the intentional single mothers I interviewed had to negotiate a variety of priorities in deciding to become mothers and in choosing a way to realize that goal, but lesbians had to take their stigmatized status into consideration in devising a strategy.

Relationships with men
Some lesbian mothers I interviewed already had a relationship with a man at the time they decided to have a baby. Though some of these risks were welcome by-products of existing sexual relationships, other women turned to friends or casual acquaintances to become pregnant “the old-fashioned way.”

Becoming involved with a man in an effort to conceive a child may not only lead to awkward entanglements but entail serious risks. Like formerly married women, “unwed” mothers who have ties to their child’s father may find themselves either footing-off alimony or having to compensate divorced children for their father’s failure to show an interest in them. A few such fathers play their social role with enthusiasm, offering both time and financial support to their offspring, but most seem to feel no obligation and some even deny their role in the child’s conception. Women rarely are financially or emotionally prepared to launch the kind of legal battle that must be waged to establish paternity and gain judicial recognition of the father’s autonomy.

Before Laura Bergeron came out as a lesbian, she was in a long-
term relationship with a man. As she moved into her early thirties, she decided that she wanted to have children even though her partner did not.

He had one child already by a previous marriage and there were a lot of problems around visiting the child and he just felt that he didn't want to go through that again. And also he didn't want to be financially responsible for bringing up any more children. So we had a contract that it would be OK if I had a child as long as I was willing to be totally financially responsible, and I agreed to that.

During the time the relationship continued, this apparent arrangement worked fairly smoothly. The father made no financial contribution directly to the children and provided no assistance whatever in their care. More recently, however, he has established a regular visiting relationship with the two boys and with the daughter Laura had through artificial insemination after she came out.

More commonly, such relationships collapse soon after the women become pregnant. If the male partners are truly unwilling collaborators in parenthood, they tend to extricate themselves from the relationship as soon as they can. Lesbians have mixed feelings about these developments. They want their children to feel some sort of connection to their "fathers," but at the same time they may feel relieved to be able to avoid interference or active hostility from these men.

Beth Romano puts it this way:

"I'm glad I did it that way, that I made no compromises. Just in practical matters now, there is no threat. I'm pretty free to do what I want, there is nobody saying, "I'm going to take your kid away.""] (I guess it's rather egomaniacal to say, "I produced this child by myself," but that's how I feel.)

These remarks are echoed by heterosexual mothers who expected or hoped for more from the men who had impregnated them. Samantha Paulson said:

"My daughter's father maintains very little contact. I think he'd like to but he feels guilty about not participating more in her growing up. So every three to six..."
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wouldn't make an appearance or call, but nothing worthwhile. . . . I knew the only reason I was content was because I expected nothing. He said at first that he wasn't going to participate at all or he was saying something. He told me before she was born, . . . He let me know when he was coming down, he said we were. . . . might not even be able to stay around because he couldn't accept the responsibility. So I knew I'd be a single parent. Although somewhere at the back of my mind I thought, he doesn't really mean that, he'll come around. I had some hope, but I always knew that he wasn't willing to be a father.

Many heterosexual single mothers, like lesbians, move back and forth between a strong desire to be independent, to manage motherhood on their own, and wistful sentiments about what might have been. Many of these accounts differ little from those offered by formerly married mothers, regardless of sexual orientation, in which they attempt to rationalize (with little apparent success) concrete disappointments with their children's fathers by insisting on their commitment to independence and autonomy.

Ruth Zimmerman describes the long-term relationship with her son's father before she became pregnant (and before she had come out as a lesbian) and her efforts during her pregnancy to encourage his involvement with the child. The father apparently couldn't decide how to relate to the pregnancy, and finally she gave him an ultimatum: Either stay and be a father or leave altogether. He stayed but continued to be indecisive until he was offered a job too far away to make commuting feasible. The job enabled him to avoid a definitive commitment. Over time, his professional obligations have gradually moved him farther and farther from the Bay Area, although he has continued to make regular financial contributions and to correspond with Ruth.

Most commonly, lesbians try to maintain some distance from the child's father because of their concerns about possible threats to custody or to their maternal autonomy. Ruth, for example, harbors some resentment about her former boyfriend's failure to be involved with their son at the same time that she views his behavior as obviously beneficial to her. Because he has kept his distance for so long, she...
reasons, it would not be in his interest to challenge her custody. His name does not appear on the birth certificate and to claim the child he would have to establish paternity in court and become liable for the costs of AFDC during the time his child was supported by public funds, both powerful disincentives.

Some mothers carefully omit the father’s name from the child’s birth certificate to prevent possible custody disputes. Camille Walsh made this choice mainly because she did not trust her children’s fathers:

[There is] some side of me that’s very cautious and I thought if there were something on an official document that that might jeopardize my hold on [my children].

The fear of a challenge to their custody had led many lesbian mothers to distance themselves from the father and to take precautions against his discovery of their sexual orientation. Like formerly married women who have similar fears, women who keep children on their own and whose partners they have at hand to discourage their children’s fathers from even considering litigation. Their strategies are based on various ways of increasing distance from the father (and thereby decreasing his ability to scrutinize their lifestyles) as well as on more formal means to separate him from the family. Mothers reason that fathers who lack legal claims to children will not be motivated to pursue questionable custody litigation, but many of them still experience considerable anxiety about the possibility.

Some lesbian mothers, in contrast, make persistent efforts to bring the father into their children’s lives. Sarah Klein conceived her daughter, now one year old, in a relationship with a man she had selected for qualities she felt would make him a good father. Although he makes no formal financial contribution, he has made a regular commitment to care for the child; the fact that he lives only a few blocks away from Sarah and her lover simplifies these arrangements. Sarah regards him as a parent and anticipates that he will play a vital role in the care of their daughter throughout her life. She apparently has no fear of his challenging her custody and in fact considers him a friend.
Lesbia Moore
and has maintained a social relationship with him apart from the time
devises to the child. The fact that they have continued these ar-
rangements with minimal stress is intriguing in view of his initial
resentment at being "used" for his sperm. Once Sarah became preg-
nant, she terminated her sexual relationship with him, and he reacted
angrily.

He was really pissed off. It was a classic, you took my sperm, you lesbians, you
all plotted against me. . . . It was sad, he was really hurt.

Clearly the consequences of selecting a man as an "inseminator" are
undoubtedly. Although such premeditated conceptions may seem
to preclude future ties with the father (or donor), actual relationships
range from quasi-joint-custody situations such as Sarah's to total es-
trangements.

Some women who want to become pregnant manipulate situations
in which the man is willing, or even eager, to establish a more exten-
sive commitment. Bonnie Pereira reports, for instance, that though
she was a lesbian, she embarked on a relationship with Bob because
she had decided it was time to have a child. He wanted to marry her,
but though she was not even to his having some connection with
their offspring, she was not opposed to any legal entanglements.
Bob visited after when their daughter, Tina, was small, but his in-
volvment gradually waned and eventually disappeared entirely. Be-
cause Bonnie felt that Tina wanted a connection with her father, she
made what she considers major efforts to keep channels of communi-
cation open with him. These efforts have met with no success.

I have done what I can do. I have written, you know, and I have called and I've
been here because I've moved to and so forth and so on, and then I've made it
very clear that he's never going to be turned away from here if he wants to see his
daughter. He's made the decision himself, that he feels uncomfortable, I guess.

More commonly, lesbians tend to be extremely cautious in limiting
their connections with the men they choose to father their children.
Laura Bergeron made a written agreement with the father of her third
child.
"This Wonderful Decision" [69]

We just wrote down a few basic things, which for me, I would never claim him as a parent for any reason. And I would never apply for welfare and give his name for the father. I wouldn’t put his name on the birth certificate. I wouldn’t expect any moral or financial obligations that might come up. In other words, he was just a sperm donor, except that we were doing it in person.

Because she does know the father, however, Laura sees herself as having avoided one of the serious problems presented by donor insemination: the child’s future questions about her father’s identity.

Other lesbians, however, and some heterosexual women as well, perceive a relationship with the child’s father as a threat, mandating secrecy and caution. Lilly Parker, for example, consciously manipulates information about her daughter’s conception in an effort to prevent friends from figuring out his identity. She never told the man that he fathered her child and has no interest in any contribution from him at all.

I don’t want him to be only half-assed involved. I’d rather have no involvement at all. I don’t feel like he is a father. I feel like he’s a donor.

Lilly would like to have another child, but has decided to use artificial insemination if she does so to avoid the problems with secrecy she has had with her first child.


donor insemination

Beyond concerns about the consequences of a relationship with a "father," some lesbians can feel nothing but distaste at the prospect of having sexual relations with a man in an effort to conceive a child. In fact, many of the women I interviewed explained that they had thought biological motherhood was not a realistic goal because they were not willing to consider heterosexual intercourse. For some of those who have discovered artificial insemination, motherhood had become a distant dream, the price to be paid for living in a way that was otherwise comfortable. Joan Emerson, who now has a nine-month-old daughter, explains how she came to choose artificial insemination.
There wasn't any decision. I didn't want to adopt. I wanted to have my own child. I didn't want to go out and pick up. I didn't want to have sex with a man to get her. So artificial insemination was the only way.

Maggie Walters, the mother of an eighteen-month-old daughter, had been familiar with the idea of artificial insemination since childhood and found the decision easy to make. I hadn't never fucked anyway, so I wasn't going to do it for that. Plus, see, when I grew up, one of my best friends... had been conceived that way... and it wasn't like it was very big thing... So it was just kind of interesting, but it wasn't any big deal.

To several mothers, either specific or vague concerns about custody made artificial insemination seem the only viable option. Joan Emerson explains:

I wanted the total responsibility of the child... I guess I didn't want to take the chance of anybody trying to take her away from me.

Like many others, Joan chose to become pregnant through a medical facility, believing that this way of obtaining a donor would give her the fullest assurance of anonymity. Anonymity, however, is won at the cost of some personal control over conception, a central issue for some women. These women tend to take a strong critical stance toward mainstream medical practice, particularly in regard to the increasing use of high-tech interventions in gynecological and obstetrical care; some of them are committed to various sorts of alternative or non-Western medicine.

The need to exert autonomy during the reproductive process was a central concern to Louise Green, for example. Further, because of her counterculture lifestyle, she felt so removed from mainstream medicine that she did not even consider that such resources would be available to her. Her approach was to ask men she met if they would like to be sperm donors until she found one who was willing. She was careful not to let this person know her full name and after conceiving she moved to another state. Even so, Louise still harbors considerable
anxiety about the donor as a threat to custody, should he ever have the ability to trace her and make a claim.

Louise's nonmedical approach to conception met her spiritual needs as well. She carried out the procedure alone in her room.

I had all these candles lit. ... and it was real quiet and I had the nice music playing that I really liked, my nice cards out. It was real nice, it was real peaceful.

After doing a vinegar douche to help conceive a girl, Louise used a menstrual sponge to keep the semen from leaking out.

While I was laying there I was imagining ... kind of like clouds ... and from the cloud would come like raindrops ... [and] each one was a baby spirit. ... It was like the perfect baby spirit was going to keep and ... come inside me. And so did.

Louise became pregnant on her first attempt, believing that this occurred because of mystical forces. She intended to have her baby at home, where she would be able to create an agreeable spiritual environment, but after a protracted labor she was transferred to a hospital, where she had a long and difficult delivery. Despite the multiple medical interventions and considerable physical trauma she endured, she describes the birth of her daughter in mystical terms.

It was the best thing I ever experienced. I was totally amazed. The labor was like I had died. ... I had just died. She came the same way, I was here again. It was like we'd just been born together.

Louise's story reminds us of the intrinsic, and often spiritual, values women associate with motherhood. By becoming a mother a woman may achieve not only adulthood, but a glimpse of the most ultimate and stirring truths.

Like lesbians who become pregnant through relationships with men, those who resort to donor insemination are fearful of future interference by the biological father. These anxieties may conflict with the desire that many of them feel to share their child with him. Some mothers wish they could have some sort of supportive connec-
Lesbian Mothers

tions with their child’s gendre, and others focus more on what they imagine the child later may want to know about this.

Grace Gerbino used a gay male friend as a go-between to obtain a sperm donation, and gave no thought to possible problems when she was setting up these arrangements. Now she wishes there had been some way to record the donor’s name in case her son may later want to meet his biological roots.

Michelle O’Neill has similar feelings:

“When I did do the insemination, I deliberately did not want to know who the father was. I didn’t want to meet him. I didn’t want him to be a father.”

Some mothers want more information about the donor but not enough to establish his identity. Kathy Lindstrom, for one, feels that it would be good to be able to tell her son about his ethnic background on the paternal side, and she speculates that he will have the same kinds of questions about his father that adopted children have about their biological parents. The unifying assumption here is clearly that “ ethnic background” has something to do with biology or genetic heritage.

Maggie Walters expresses other kinds of misgivings about having a child without a known father. Her concern focuses on whether it is right to bring a child into the world with a lesbian mother and no father. This was the issue that she considered most carefully when she planned her pregnancy, and although the final answer was yes and she artificially inseminated, she still feels that the problem is unresolved.

The reactions of the families of the women who have children through artificial insemination sometimes confound their expectations. Most mothers report that after a period of confusion, the existence of a new grandchild came to overshadow the way the child had come into the world. Michelle O’Neill, who had grown up in a conservative Catholic family, found that her mother would never accept her grandchild. When she told her mother that she was pregnant by artificial insemination, her mother was not only shocked, but
concerned that her daughter’s “freaky” way of getting pregnant would be written up in medical journals. The actual birth seems to have eased these anxieties, however, and Michelle’s mother has been consistently supportive, both emotionally and financially, since the child was born.

Though most mothers ultimately achieve some measure of acceptance by their parents, some families find out-of-wedlock pregnancy, especially by artificial insemination, simply too shocking to manage. Kathy Lindstrom’s mother was very enthusiastic when her brother’s wife had a baby, but she could not summon similar feelings when Kathy became pregnant. The pregnancy has apparently ended their relationship altogether. Although her mother lives in the state, she has made no effort to contact Kathy since the birth six months ago.

Since she’s known I became gay, she’s maintained a visiting relationship, but that’s even harder still since I had the baby. . . . It’s just something that goes un- and . . . I guess she couldn’t approve of my method of having [a baby].

Adoption

Adoption is rarely an option for a lesbian, or for any other unmarried woman, for that matter. Of all the mothers I interviewed, only five had adopted their children—four lesbians and one heterosexual. Three had found their children through public agencies and two through private adoptions.

The patterns associated with these adoptions all resemble those we might expect if we looked more generally at adoptions among single adults. The three mothers who adopted through agencies all received children who were considered “hard to place”—older, of minority or mixed race, and disabled. Those who were successful in arranging private adoptions (both lesbians) became mothers of virtually new-born Caucasian infants with no apparent disabilities. Both of these mothers, however, were employed in health-care settings and were able to learn about impending births under conditions that facilitated the adoption process.

Among the lesbian adoptive mothers, fear that their sexual orientation might undermine the adoption surfaced under a variety of cir-
Lesbian Mothers

In the most benign conditions the matter had not been discussed but, the mother surmised, was suspected. Some of these women thought the possibility had not been pursued because the adoption worker didn’t want to have to stop the proceedings. Eileen Sullivan adopted two children privately and encountered no difficulties negotiating the bureaucratic aspects of the adoption process. At the same time, she feared situations in which she might be forced to answer a lot of personal questions:

"I was afraid the issue of my being gay would come up and on the basis of that they would reject the adoption. That was the real issue. They never asked, or never had evidence enough to ask."

Janet Goldman, who also adopted privately, worked at the hospital where her daughter was born. The social worker who set up the adoption learned that she was a lesbian only after the adoption was final. She has kept in touch with Janet and her daughter, and she says now that she would not knowingly have offered a baby to a lesbian, but that she sees how well the situation has worked out, she’s glad she didn’t know.

Most single women who try to adopt a child are faced with a battery of personal questions and may not be spared direct inquiry about their sexual orientation. When Emma Gibson adopted the first of two disabled minority children through an agency, she was living with a partner. The social worker asked her if the other woman was her lover and she denied it. Nothing further was asked and the adoption went through. Although several years have passed, during which she adopted a second child and broke up with her lover, she continues to be extremely anxious about the possibility of being exposed. Because the lack of answer to a direct question, she fears that she has committed the equivalent of perjury and that she will lose her children if the truth is discovered. Emma’s preoccupation with secrecy is reinforced by her emasculation that she would be fired from her job if her lesbianism were ever revealed. For financial reasons, she recently moved to a working-class suburb far from her old neighborhood and lacks a close circle of lesbian friends. Most of her friends from the
years before the adoptions are not parents, and she finds that she is out of step with their social world now.

Intentional Motherhood: What Is Intended?

American culture places tremendous emphasis on the powers of the individual, on the importance of achieving personal goals through action in one's own behalf. Lesbians who are not mothers share with other childless women a feeling of distance not only from the kinds of things "ordinary" women do but from the special relationship to the spiritual world women can derive from their connection to children. By becoming a mother, a woman can experience a moment of transcendent unity with mystical forces; by being a mother, she makes connecting contact with her inner goodness, a goodness that is activated by altruism and nurtured by participation in a child's growth and development.

By becoming a mother, a lesbian can negotiate the formation of her self; she can bring something good into her life without having to sacrifice autonomy or control. Thus the intentional single mother (whether she is lesbian or heterosexual) can achieve a spiritual personal goal—other goals that come from putting the needs of a dependent being first. By becoming a mother through her own agency, she avoids the central paradox that motherhood represents to married women—a loss of autonomy and therefore of basic personhood in a culture that valorizes individualism and autonomy. Like ending a marriage, having a baby on her own allows a woman to meet her basic personal goals, and the act may as well as a critical part of establishing a satisfying identity in a culture that often blocks women's efforts to be separate individuals.

Being a mother provides many benefits, but becoming a mother is a process that can be pursued in a variety of ways and can help women realize a variety of goals. The specific strategies they select—deliberate pregnancy with a man, artificial insemination, adoption—reflect not only the opportunities available to them, but the particular ends which they seek to enhance. Women who wish to distance themselves from such mainstream institutions as the medical entri-
Lesbian mothers may find it difficult to maintain the anonymity of a sperm donor; those who fear the donor’s intrusion on their lives may seek anonymity at the price of autonomy. There are many ways to go about becoming a mother, and they are as vital a part of women’s objectives as their desire to be mothers.

Motherhood also appears to offer lesbians some resolution of the difficulties inherent in membership in a stigmatized category. On the one hand, intentional motherhood demands specific action of some sort—a lesbian is, after all, unlikely to become pregnant by chance. On the other hand, to the extent that wanting to be a mother is a profoundly human desire, and is perceived as having nothing to do with cultural or political choices, then achieving motherhood implies movement into a more natural or normal stance than a lesbian can confidently hope to experience otherwise. But motherhood also requires planning and manipulation, and thus stands in contrast to one’s natural—that is, unmediated—lesbian identity.

At the same time, however, a lesbian who becomes a mother has effectively rejected the equation of homosexuality with unnaturalness and the exclusion of the lesbian from the ranks of “women.” In this sense, finding a way to become a mother constitutes a form of resistance to the gender limitations, and particularly to the constructions of sexual orientation, that prevail in the wider culture. Curiously, though, this act of resistance is achieved through compliance with conventional expectations for women, so it may also be construed as a gesture of accommodation.

The stories that lesbian and some unmarried heterosexual mothers tell of their ventures into motherhood, of the ways they formulated their aims and acted to achieve them, then, bring together behaviors that can be regarded simultaneously as rebellion and as compliance. For these women, negotiating motherhood consists of forging a path through these conflicting meanings and weaving them together into a rewarding definition of the self.