
What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us: Why Happiness Eludes the Modern Woman

Danielle Crittenden

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I'd like to say right off how happy I am to be among friends. When you write a book like this, you certainly need them. I got a taste of the reaction that was to come on the day, literally, that I finished the book. I was in Toronto visiting my family. I had just completed the last edits on the manuscript. I had arranged to meet a friend downtown to celebrate over a drink. As I was walking along the subway platform, a woman without warning shoved me at a moving train. Fortunately, she missed. They told me later she was a schizophrenic. But in retrospect I now realize I'd met my first critic.

Norman Podhoretz in his new memoir quips that if he wished to name-drop, he need only list the names of his ex-friends. In the same spirit, if I wish to name-drop, I need only list the women who have yelled at me. Betty Friedan practically lunged at me across a hapless moderator, shouting that I was "antiwoman." Erica Jong, blood vessels popping, denounced me as "so ignorant." Susan Estrich has called me, I think unkindly, a "modern-day bunny." Indeed, I've begun to darkly suspect that TV producers book me up against feminists purely for the Jerry Springer-like spectacle of women

screaming and clawing at each other.

But then, I have to admit, the feminist reaction comes as no surprise. I've actually gotten quite used to it. For several years now, as a journalist and critic of feminism, I've often been reminded, by my own relatives even, of the old adage "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." To question the impact of the past thirty years of social change upon women's lives is considered both politically incorrect and socially impolite—like lighting up a cigarette in a hospital ward.

And to be fair, from the point of view of the authors of the women's movement, it must seem terribly ungrateful when women of my generation harp upon their movement's failures. Women today enjoy more opportunity, more freedom, more equality than any generation of women in history.

We get up in the morning and go to our jobs as doctors, executives, plumbers, and pilots without, frankly, a second's thought to the efforts that were spent making these jobs seem completely normal. We deposit our paychecks without having to worry that we are getting paid less for the job that we are doing because of our sex. We enroll in science courses with every expectation that we will be taken seriously as scientists. We apply for college degrees with every expectation that we will use them and not let them languish when we become mothers. When we graduate, our first thought is not Whom will I marry? but What will I do? And when we do marry, we take for granted that our husbands will treat us

as equals, with dreams and ambitions like theirs, and not as creatures uniquely destined to push a vacuum or change a diaper.

If Virginia Woolf, in the early part of this century, modestly hoped that women would attain "rooms of our own," we have, at century's end, achieved not only rooms of our own, but apartments of our own, offices of our own, bank accounts of our own, judicial seats of our own, constituencies of our own, and even corporate empires of our own.

In that sense, young women today are enjoying the spoils of our elders' struggles. But if I and other women of my generation seem indifferent to those struggles, it's not because we don't believe in the ideas that launched this revolution. To the contrary. We have believed in them, and we followed them fervently. And that's where the new problems begin. For while feminism, as an organized political movement, may boast fewer members today than the Czech Communist Party, its teachings have seeped into the minds of young women like intravenous saline into the arm of an unconscious patient. As well as taking our opportunities for granted, we take other things for granted too.

We have absorbed the lesson that we should delay marriage and children in order to forge careers. We must not expect our husbands to support us when we have children. We should not assume our marriages will last. Indeed, we should not look ultimately to our husbands and children for satisfaction

and happiness. Those things are best realized in our careers, and in our spiritual growth as individuals.

That this wisdom may be faulty, that it may not lead us to the happiness we desire, is a tough—and startling—lesson to learn. So many of us have plotted our lives according to this wisdom that we don't want to reject it. And yet reject it we must if we are going to solve the problems women face today.

Planning Life from Scratch

So, yes, it's true that we are freer than any generation of women in history to hold positions of power in the workplace and in government. On the other hand, you only have to glance through a newspaper or switch on the news to be subject to a litany of gloomy statistics about our personal lives: We are more likely to be divorced or never married at all than previous generations of American women. We are more likely to bear children out of wedlock. We are more likely to have an abortion or catch a sexually transmitted disease. If we are mothers, even of infants and very small children, we are more likely to work at full-time jobs and still shoulder the bulk of housework as well.

I've heard many accomplished women complain—without a trace of irony—that they don't have the "choices" their own mothers had. Some are women who postponed marriage and children to put everything into their careers, only to find themselves at thirty-five still single and baby-crazy, with no decent man in sight. Some are

college graduates who simply can't figure out how they're going to do it all—or even just one piece of it. They want to marry, have children, have a career, and yet also enjoy the sort of family life that was often absent in their own childhoods as the products of divorce or full-time working parents. Some are working mothers who feel they have no choice but to work; they feel as trapped in their offices as a previous generation of women felt trapped in their split-level houses.

When these complaints are raised with feminists, the predictable, if disingenuous, answer is "Don't blame us." Blame others instead—the men who have hurt us, the society that discriminates against us, the politicians who have not responded to all of our personal needs. Besides, they insist, women have gained too much, changed too much, ever to be satisfied with the simple comforts of hearth and motherhood again. We can't go back, they say, as if that were the end of the question.

But in fact that is the beginning of the question. For there is no going forward, either, until we establish what it is exactly that we want to gain.

The previous generation of women did succeed in shattering the previous assumptions about women's lives. But in the shattering, they left behind a new round of unanswered questions.

How can we be astronauts and lawyers and fighter pilots—and mothers?

How can we be sexually independent—and wives?

How can we demand to be treated identically to men—except for the times when we don't want to be?

And how are men supposed to react to all this?

Feminists like to insist that “old-fashioned” values—as garden-variety morality is now called—and the social institutions that supported them are inconsistent with modern life. We are told that most women have no choice but to work. Today it is considered a luxury for a mother to be able to take even a short time out of the workforce, as if raising one’s own children is now to be seen as the privilege of a rare few, a perk of the wealthy and well-to-do, like yachting. Of course there have always been women who have had to work, and there are many more single mothers today who have no choice but to work. But what we don’t pause to consider is how, in the space of thirty years, and in the richest era of our history, this has come to pass: why so many women—and so many married, middle-class and professional women—feel they have “no choice” when they have babies but to leave them for eight, ten, twelve hours a day, and longer. The idea that only a Rockefeller could afford to raise her own children was certainly not true in other times, not even in the Great Depression. And I think it stems, partly, from a lot of our ingrained feminist attitudes toward marriage and motherhood.

While it is obviously true that you can’t go back in time, it’s not true that the teachings and principles that have guided humans since the beginning of civilization have suddenly become irrelevant. The problem we face as modern people—and particularly as modern women—is how to reconcile

the old with the new. So while young women today may take for granted the professional respect their mothers craved, they can no longer expect marriage and children when they want them, or count upon any special respect from men.

Instead, young women confront the daunting task of trying to plan their lives from scratch, with very little in the way of guidance, and to reconcile their modern ambitions with the old institutions of marriage and motherhood. On the one hand, they wish to be free, strong, and independent—and on the other, to find husbands who will be devoted, stick by them, and support them financially when they need it. They want to have interesting, fulfilling careers—and yet also be involved, committed mothers.

The resulting relationships are often incongruous and flimsy. They remind me of the neotraditional houses you see springing up in suburbs across America, constructed out of plywood and drywall instead of timber and bricks. Traditional structure is not so readily reconciled with modern convenience. Yet modern convenience is something few people today will go without.

So we may pledge to love each other until death do us part—but we blanch at the first hint of sacrifice. We may express strong views on the sanctity of marriage—but we will not impose social sanctions upon those who fail or betray their vows, or even upon couples who refuse to take those vows in the first place. As women, we may be still willing to accept most of the duties of child care—but we certainly won’t

take sole charge of the housekeeping, and we will snap at our husbands if for a moment they expect otherwise.

Many of these changes, like the invention of refrigeration and modern plumbing, seem progressive: Why should anyone stay in a marriage that is unhappy? Why should women compromise their ambitions to raise children? But like those plywood-and-drywall houses, these attitudes have made our institutions much flimsier, and over time they endure less well. The questions we should be asking ourselves are, Why do we have a harder time making our marriages last than they did in the past? Does it have anything to do with the attitudes that both sexes nowadays bring to our marriages: our mistrust of commitment, our fear of losing our identities and compromising our independence? And why has having a child come to seem so unnatural for many women? Why are we so unprepared for motherhood, so surprised at our feelings, and our changed priorities, when we do become mothers?

These aspects of life—the pleasure of being a wife, raising children, making a home—were, until the day before yesterday, considered the most natural things in the world. Our grandmothers—or our grandfathers, for that matter—didn't agonize over such existential questions as whether marriage was ultimately "right" for them. They didn't worry that having a baby would compromise them as individuals. Yet we do. We approach these aspects of life warily and self-consciously. A new bride adjusts her veil in the mirror and frets that she is selling out to some

weak, fairy-tale vision of femininity. A new wife is horrified if she finds herself slipping into the habit of cooking dinner and doing the laundry. A new mother who has spent years climbing the corporate ladder is thrown into an identity crisis when she's stuck at home day after day in a vomit-stained sweat-suit, at the mercy of a crying infant.

It is because of feminism's success that we now call these parts of our lives into question—that we don't thoughtlessly march down the aisle, take up our mops, and suppress our ambitions. But feminism, for all its efforts, hasn't been able to banish fundamental female desires from us, either—and we simply can't be happy if we ignore them.

The New Problem with No Name

Betty Friedan, in her landmark book *The Feminine Mystique*, identified what she called "the problem with no name." She recognized that the million individual breakdowns and Valium addictions in American suburbs indicated a more general problem among women. This problem arose, she said, because too many people failed to see that women were human, not only feminine. They were being denied the ability to express and fulfill their human potential outside the home. Today, however, we must recognize a new "problem with no name." This modern problem is exactly the reverse of the old one: While we now recognize that women are human, we blind ourselves to the fact that we are also women. If we feel stunted and oppressed when we're denied the chance to realize

our human potential, we suffer every bit as much when we are cut off from those aspects of life that are distinctly and uniquely female.

Instead we pursue a vision of equality based on sameness with men. Unless we are taking exactly the same jobs, working the same hours, following the same paths, and taking on precisely the same roles in marriage, we will not be equal to men. Yet pretending that we are the same as men has only led us to discover, sometimes brutally, how different we really are. And in demanding radical independence—from men, from our families—we may also have abandoned certain bargains and institutions that didn't always work perfectly but until very recently were civilization's best way of taming the feckless human heart.

Today we should accept that women have now achieved equality in every important way—politically, legally, and within the workforce. Our new goal should be achieving happiness. And that happiness is not as elusive as many of us may think. But instead of looking outside ourselves—to others, to institutions, to politicians, or to movements—to bring it about, we may have to begin with looking at ourselves, and to consider a little remodeling of our attitudes.

Edith Wharton once wrote, "I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms." Our souls are large enough to accommodate many roles. And if we are lucky, these days most of us will live long enough to attempt everything we want. What we must now do is give

serious thought as to the arrangement of these rooms. Modern feminists would have us pack away all our feminine impulses and store them in the attic or basement, and then decorate the rest of the rooms to suit ourselves. Also to avoid the kitchen.

But if our homes are going to be comfortable, expansive places, echoing with the sounds of children, with the smell of good food cooking, a warm husband in our beds, and of course a quiet room of our own in which to work or retreat, then we are going to have to start planning our lives much better than we currently do. This doesn't mean nostalgically wishing to "go back"—as if that were even possible—but it certainly does mean looking back, honestly, at what we may have lost in pursuit of the freedom we have won. We must ask ourselves whether there is any way to recapture what was good in the old ways we cast aside.

To begin with, we are going to have to accept that simply pushing every important decision outside of work to the middle of our adult lives as so many now do is not only impractical, but self-defeating. When you think about it, women are leading lives that are exactly backward. We squander our youth and sexual passions upon men who are not worth it, and only when we are older and less sexually powerful do we try to find a man who is worth it. We start our careers in our twenties, when our bodies are at their readiest for children, and when we have the most energy, time, and flexibility in our lives. Then we try to have babies when our jobs are finally starting to go some-

where—at the most inconvenient time possible, when we are less fertile, have less energy, and have much less flexibility in our lives.

Hooking Up

I wonder if women shouldn't consider leading their lives the other way around—modernizing, as it were, the traditional idea of getting married and having babies younger, in our mid and even early twenties, and pursuing our careers later, when our children are in school.

Many may find this impractical. And it is, of course, considered regressive today for an ambitious woman of twenty-four or so to get married and promptly have a baby. But I wonder if it wouldn't be the most radical and even progressive act such a woman could commit.

Let's sketch this out. Let's say a woman started thinking about marriage in her early twenties. By taking marriage more seriously at an earlier age, she would be less likely to waste her time, or her heart, upon the wrong men. I often think love affairs are like chocolates—if we tell ourselves we'll just take one, we take two, and if we allow ourselves two, we'll take four, and pretty soon the whole box is gone. But if young women start to curb their chocolate eating, as it were, there would be another benefit as well. The shrinkage in the number of sexually available young women would have its effect on men. One of the things we musn't overlook is how much women lost in the sexual revolution. So many young women today are learning—the

hard way—that there is a difference between sexual freedom and sexual equality. Our grandmothers might have led more sheltered sex lives, and today young women certainly have more sexual choices. But do we really enjoy more power, or more respect?

I remember pushing my little daughter in her stroller along Third Avenue in New York a few years ago. We came upon a bus shelter displaying a large photograph of a man having sex from behind with a woman he's pushed up against a brick wall. It was an advertisement for jeans. Gee, what would this tell my daughter about the wonderful gains women had made? I wondered. And how on earth was I supposed to explain it to her? "What's that lady doing, Mummy?" I imagined her asking me. "Oh, just getting buggered in an alleyway, dearest. It's one of the many exciting sexual opportunities you'll be able to have when you're older, if you're lucky." Fortunately I saw the ad before she did and cut across the street.

That we may have lost something in this era of the "hookup" is an idea that is just dawning on the generation of young women who feel as sexually free as it is possible to feel and yet are so often powerless to experience anything more with the opposite sex than a series of unsatisfying, often loveless, flings. There's a crude Yiddish expression that sums up the ancient sexual bargain between men and women: "No chuppy, no schtuppy." It means "No wedding, no sex."

Men and women, by the very nature of their biology, have different and often opposing sexual agendas.

Eventually most women want children and, with them, a committed husband and father. But where are they, we might ask? There is no longer social pressure upon young men and women to marry. But there is no biological pressure upon men, as there is on women, to marry. And in a world in which we have so completely severed sexual intimacy from commitment, women have lost their ability to demand commitment when they do want it. In that sense, we are all equal—in our powerlessness. The woman who holds back from sex, waiting for the right man to come along, may find that no right man does—because he can get no-strings-attached relationships elsewhere—just as the woman who has sex freely discovers she has no firmer grasp over him.

And in later life, our power is weaker still. It may seem cruel to point this out, and also deeply unfair, but you don't see many fifty-year-old wives leaving their husbands for twenty-eight-year-old men. Sexual rules—the kind that hold men to certain expectations of commitment—create sexual solidarity among women. If men feel they can flit from woman to woman, a lot of them will. But if women as a group cease to be readily available—if we begin to demand commitment, real commitment, as in marriage—we shall deprive men of their current easy ability to persuade women to share their beds without sharing their lives.

We might also, by the way, discover more self-respect. I for one fail to see how the “hookup” is empowering to women. We do not really want—or at

least very few of us want—to live in a world of unbridled sexual freedom. But since we will no longer tolerate the old informal social restraints upon men and women, we have been obliged to substitute the formal constraints of law. In order to give women the illusion of sexual freedom—but also protection from the consequences of it—we've had to impose increasingly stiff legal controls and penalties upon the sexual behavior of men. Most of these controls have been imposed through sexual harassment laws, which now monitor even the most trivial exchanges between men and women, whether it's an unguarded compliment or, God forbid, an unsolicited invitation to dinner.

The Case for Commitment

But to return to the young woman I was describing, who was considering marrying earlier. By marrying earlier rather than later, this woman could also have her children when she's most physically ready for them, and with much less disruption to her work later on, or her career, if she plans to have one.

To a modern woman, this surrender of youthful freedom might seem unimaginable. But look what she gains on the other end: By the time her second child was toddling off to nursery school, she would still be only twenty-nine or thirty. She could have a third child if she liked; or she could enter the workforce in a job with amenable hours or go to graduate school with an easier conscience because her children would need her less than before. By the time her children were in school for a full day, she would have just begun to

hit her stride at work. She would not have to make the agonizing choice at thirty-two or thirty-three to stop everything now and drop out for a few years to have a baby.

From her employer's viewpoint, too, the time and money invested in her training would not be spent only to see her leave at the moment she became an asset. And most of all, she would have avoided joining the hordes of thirtysomethings speaking worriedly about such things as biological clocks, career versus motherhood, the cost of day care, infertility clinics, and the sudden shortage of available men.

Here's another unconventional idea: by marrying earlier, a woman might actually make a better marriage. We too quickly accept the current wisdom that waiting until one is older and wiser leads to happier marriages. Marriages last not just because the husband and wife love each other. They last because of the time they have spent together, the children and family life they share, the accommodations and sacrifices each has made for the other, and the depth of their intimacy and comfort with each other. Marriage to anyone else seems impossible.

If you wait to settle down until your hair is graying and your heart is bruised, when you have seen a number of commitments you thought were love vanish or waste away, then when you do marry, you may be wiser, yes, but also more broken—less willing to trust another or make the necessary accommodations to married life. I'm struck by the number of my single contemporaries—men and women in their early

to mid thirties—who speak of themselves as if they were still twenty years old, just embarking upon their lives and not, as they are, already halfway through them.

In another era, a thirty-three-year-old man or woman might already have lived through a depression and a world war, and have several children and a mortgage to boot. Yet at the suggestion of marriage—or of buying a house, or of having a baby, or even of committing themselves to a new sofa—these modern thirtysomethings will exclaim, Jerry Seinfeld-like, "But I'm so young!" And in the so-called "serious" relationships they do have, they will take pains to avoid the appearance of anything that smacks of permanent commitment. The strange result is couples who are willing to share everything with each other—leases, furniture, cars, weekends, body fluids, DNA, their relatives—just so long as it comes with the right to cancel the relationship at any moment.

Of course, there is no one prescription for finding happiness. And I can't offer the reader of my book any ten-point plan that will necessarily make it easier to find. My challenge to the reader of my book is simply this: to reckon honestly with the consequences of the changes that have taken place in our lives, and to reckon honestly with our desires and expectations as women. A beleaguered young male friend of mine once joked, "It's not what the modern girl wants that matters—it's what she's going to have to settle for." It is time to settle.

We do have great freedom, and

great opportunities, today. But in order to enjoy that freedom and realize those opportunities, we must understand the trade-offs associated with every choice we make. We must plan our lives better at the outset, understanding that our lives may go differently from men's, and accepting that we can have it all—just maybe not all at once. The beliefs that fulfillment mostly comes from our work, that we can delay marriage and children without consequence, that we should—or can!—live independently of men, are among the great foolish and destructive beliefs of our age. Men and women should not be locked in competition: one sex cannot triumph over the other without hurting itself. Men and women are as inextricably linked and necessary to one another as the food we eat and the children we bear to replace the dead.

I hope for so many things for my own daughter, but above all I hope she understands this: that her fulfillment in life will come from many things, but especially from knowing that she did not only what was right for herself, but also what was right for the people she loved, which in turn will be right for the society as a whole. In understanding this, she will achieve more than merely a room of her own. She will be able, in the freest and best era for women in all of history, to have as many rooms as she likes.

Following her speech, Danielle Crittenden took questions from her American Experiment audience.

Pam von Gohren: I'm with the Minnesota Association of Christian

Home Educators. We have some legislation pending—I think it is going to be rejected—that would decrease the tax on a marriage license and raise it on divorce if a couple engages in premarital counseling. Would you comment on that?

Danielle Crittenden: Many experiments—covenant marriages, all kinds of things—are being tried to shore up marriage. I applaud them in the sense that they are trying to take marriage more seriously and prepare people going into it more seriously. On the other hand, marriages can't survive if the people around them don't support marriage.

Generally speaking, couples who get married these days go in with their eyes wide open and fully expect to stay married "until death do us part." But, unfortunately, marriage can be tough, life can be hard, and as you get older, things change. There is now no social pressure to stay married; if you are in a marriage that makes you unhappy, or you are going through a hard period, everybody around you says, "Well, if you're not happy, you shouldn't be in there." You start to feel like a chump if you stick it through.

We live in a time when a man can walk away from his wife of forty or fifty or sixty years, and his friends will slap him on the back and say, "I'm really glad you found Clarisse, she's fantastic. It doesn't matter that she's half your age—it will make a young man of you." And there are many women today who will break up a family because they are going through a period of frustration.

Efforts to shore up marriage might make us think harder about what mar-

riage is, but I don't think they will guarantee any better long-term results.

Glenn Jeffrey: It struck me as you were talking that women working is not a last-half-of-the-twentieth-century phenomenon; women have worked from the beginning of time. What is different is that in our era women have to leave their family and their children to work. What impact do you think home-based businesses and home-based work and Internet-based businesses will have? Will they affect your timetable?

Danielle Crittenden: We hear a lot about there not being enough women CEOs, yet one of the overlooked economic stories of the decade is how many female entrepreneurs there now are. The number of women starting their own businesses, large and small, is huge. Why is that? Because they have control. In many ways, the workforce and the jobs we have today are inflexible. Some are inescapably so, and if you become a mother and you are in one of these jobs, you are going to have to make a hard choice. More and more women are opting out and creating their own work environments.

It's true that women have always worked. What is new to our generation is married mothers of small children being expected to go back to an office for eight or ten hours a day immediately after they have a baby. There are a couple of things going on here. Part of it is that the divorce rate is high, and even happily married women worry about the risk of leaving their job and leaving themselves vulnerable to later economic troubles.

Another thing is that, just as our expectations of women have changed, so have our expectations of men. I don't hear many people saying to their sons today, "Now, son, when you graduate, you are going to have to get a good, steady job because you are going to have to support a family." Men now come to marriage expecting that second income, and in many ways it is reasonable. They don't get the old deal of marriage—they don't get their shirts pressed and their dinner cooked—so they think, well, great, at least I get a second paycheck and a bigger house and a nicer vacation than I could afford on my own, and maybe a second car.

Then what happens is that the woman who has assured him that she is going to go right back to work after she has a baby says, "Oh my God, what was I thinking? I don't want to go back to work." I've seen this happen many times. The couple has made every financial decision of their lives based on two paychecks, and he says, "What do you mean you aren't going back to work? That wasn't the deal." And on top of that, the guy still doesn't get his shirts pressed or his meals cooked. He's got to come home and do 50 percent of that too. There is a lot of pressure from husbands unless they understand that not everything important that we do in life is accompanied by cash. Unless they value what women do at home, too, that is going to be difficult.

A third factor is taxes. Many people in all but the most elite income brackets find it incredibly difficult to lose that income. Simply cutting taxes would give more women more real

choice about this than almost anything we could do.

Deb Burke: I am thirty-one years old and have two children. I have been married since I was twenty-four, and my husband and I have made some very tough choices. We work opposite schedules because it is important to us to take care of our own children. I don't think I'm different from many other young women who have made the choice to stay home.

I lived in Washington, D.C., for four years with my husband, and I think the picture you paint is more characteristic of the Beltway and urban Washington than of the Twin Cities area. How did you come up with your ideas about what is happening? Is this your own perception of the world, or is it based on studies?

Danielle Crittenden: It is based on a number of things. Obviously, when you speak about women and men so broadly, you are never going to get it completely right. A depressing aspect of writing my book was being constantly faced with generalities. What I was trying to capture is a set of general truths or assumptions that we as a generation share regardless of religious background and family background: If you grew up in this time, what were the messages you received? That was what I was trying to pinpoint.

The Ally McBeal syndrome of the accomplished but crazy thirtysomething woman not able to meet men is generally an urban phenomenon. You see it in Los Angeles, New York, Washington, and in other cities across the

country. But one of the disturbing recent statistics to come from the Census Bureau is how marriage is vanishing: more and more people at all levels of society are simply living together. The idea of sticking to marriage for a long period of time is a value that really has declined.

In Minnesota, there probably are people whose behavior is more traditional, but generally speaking, the values I am talking about are fairly universal.

Penny Steele [a Hennepin County commissioner]: When I spoke to a group of college-age women, I was the token non-left winger. One of our legislators got up and said, "I ran on women's issues"—anti-defense spending. I thought I'd have a little fun, so I said, "I love defense spending and all those nasty things." Some of them came unglued. The point is this idea that women are a monolith, that we check our brains and become part of this women's movement.

My other point is the notion that raising children is somehow for dummies. I fight with liberal Democrats all day, and they are very tough and very smart, but my sixteen-year-old challenges much more of my brain. Nothing you said sounds very radical to me.

Danielle Crittenden: I do think that as women—again, generally speaking—we are connected to each other in certain ways. Most of us eventually want marriage. Most of us want to have children. It is in our interest to protect each other in marriage.

Feminism really did make the per-

sonal political, and it has tried to unite women politically around a set of left-wing issues. I think this is why you feel it is monolithic.

It was women who used to enforce marriage, who were in charge of the shunning of adulterers. This was in our interest. Even today, it is true that marriage is good for women in the sense that women outside of marriage tend to be poorer and more likely to be victims of abuse. Germaine Greer says that marriage is slavery, but this is really not true.

Modern women shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that we are more independent today than women used to be. In many ways, we are more independent of men, but we are more dependent on other things. This really kicks in when you become a mother. No matter what you do, you are going to be dependent on someone. Many women have to raise children alone, but they are dependent on other things: on the state for benefits, on the whims of their bosses, on their day care workers, on their relatives to help out. Is being dependent upon this fragile network really more satisfying than depending upon the fathers of our children?

Meredith Oyen: A fraction of the kids I work with in a reading tutoring program have two parents, and a fraction of the parents have jobs. How do you bring your values to the community?

Danielle Crittenden: You are either a pessimist or an optimist. Government policy simply follows and reinforces cultural changes of attitude. We have lived through a revolution of attitudes. My hope is that more of us speaking

about it more frankly and challenging assumptions will eventually have an impact.

Everywhere I go, I've received good reactions from younger women. I get clobbered by feminists and older women. At my publisher, Simon and Schuster, my champions were two editors—twenty-four- and twenty-five-year-old women—who said my book spoke to them.

Young women are removed from feminism and the politics of the 1970s, and even the memory of the time. They see the problems ahead of them and don't know how they are going to cope. They like hearing options.

Emily Smothers: I'm twenty-three. I went to college early, when I was sixteen, and I guess I have taken to the idea that everything is driven toward work. Even now, as my friends are getting married, I have heard myself say that it's like a disease. Logically, I know that your idea makes sense—that we actually could achieve the same financial and professional success if we waited for work and had kids now. I'd like to buy into it, but I struggle with it.

Danielle Crittenden: Last week I was at a large college talking to a room full of pleasant young women—only one with a shaved head and a nose ring, so it was fun. They were quiet through my speech and then asked a couple of tentative questions, and afterwards they came up furtively and wanted to talk.

As I was reading my speech and talking to women your age about getting married soon, I was wondering if

horns or antennae were starting to grow out of my head. It's no fun to be the bearer of bad news. I would rather go before a college audience and say: Be anything you want to be. The world is your oyster. Don't settle for anything less. Go for the moon.

My message is, yes, do that, but understand what is going to happen. The women's movement—not Germaine Greer, but our own mothers—with the best intentions in the world, conveyed to us these messages: Don't make the mistakes I made. Don't cut yourself off. Explore the world. Sow your oats.

That had unforeseen consequences.

I told the young women who were horrified by my suggestion of early marriage and motherhood to remember one thing: it doesn't get easier. If you really want to have kids, don't think it is going to be easier at twenty-eight or thirty. Don't think that your life is going to naturally open to kids. It may, but it probably won't. Don't think that you are going to be the same person at thirty-two as you are at twenty-two. That is the message I was trying to get to them.

If you want to be a heart surgeon or the first female president of the United States, it may be that you should never have kids—those may be the types of occupations that you cannot do satisfyingly with kids. On the other hand, as I said to the dismayed young president of the student council, if I wanted to be president of the United States, I would have my kids tomorrow. No one is going to be interested in you for presi-

dent until you are forty or fifty anyway. You can run for Congress later. Have your kids now—you can't do that later.

Trish Reimann: Many college graduates worry about the time gap between finishing their education and starting a job, especially in technological fields, where there is a lot of catching up to do.

Danielle Crittenden: That is a perfectly valid concern, and there are a number of options. You don't have to shut down when you have kids. Most of us don't. There are things you can do with children, though not a lot you can do with an infant. People have gone to night school with children. There are all sorts of things you can do to keep up.

What we are seeing now is women investing everything into their careers in their twenties and then in their thirties dropping out entirely. It's no more practical to go away for five or ten years then. Male and female bosses alike are practicing a new type of discrimination. When you have two job candidates, a thirty-year-old man and a thirty-year-old woman, both childless, what goes through your mind?: Two years from now, I'm going to lose her. He's a better risk.

Unless you are a ballerina or a supermodel and youth is really important, there are lots of things that nobody really trusts you to do right in your twenties anyway. It is far easier to catch up on the new technology than it is to bring new technology to your body and try to catch up on age. n