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## Coping with Father's Day as a Childless Man

by Dr. Robin Hadley

As a man, firstly, let me say how delighted and honoured I am that Jody asked me to contribute to Gateway Women. I'm guessing that a quite a few readers here had a poor experience of male partners; I am genuinely sorry about how some men have behaved and still behave. In this blog, I aim to give some insight from my own experience of involuntary childlessness, as well as knowledge I have gained through my academic research into childless men. Hence, this blog will cover both the personal and the academic and will end with a poem. I hope it gives some insight into what's behind childless men's behaviours and actions.

**So, about me: I expected to be a dad, I wanted to be a dad and at times, I have been desperate to be a dad. How did I not become a dad? I did not become a dad through a whole constellation of circumstances.**

As I am getting older, I think that my upbringing had more of an influence than I thought. I am the seventh of eight children – four girls and four boys. I was born in the early 1960's in a poor area of Manchester, in the northern region of England, UK. At that time Manchester was a city with heavy industry - we had smog that lasted for days at a time, coal was the main form of fuel in the home, and absolutely *everyone* smoked. I was born at home early one January morning and had difficulty breathing; luckily, the midwife had some oxygen and resuscitated me. However, probably because of that I have a 30% hearing loss and constant tinnitus.

In a large family, there is a cascade of care from older siblings down to younger ones. One impact of that was that attention was ambivalent for me growing up. Like all kids I liked attention, but with seven others and parents who were somewhat occupied, sometimes it was not the attention I craved. I left school with only a few qualifications but found a secure job in the local university. Throughout my teenage years, but particularly my later teenage years, I was poor at forming relationships; I was terribly shy and would grow red in the face, stutter, and generally be terribly awkward. Alternatively, I would try to be ultra-confident

but that never worked. I think my hearing loss didn't help because in the pubs or clubs I really struggled to hear anything.

I eventually managed to 'ask a woman out' (what we called dating then!) We fell madly in love and got engaged within months of meeting. We started saving to buy a house, getting married when I was twenty-six and she was twenty, and after a few years we started trying for children. I was scared about the responsibility of being a dad then – my own dad had not been a great role model. Looking back, I think we both were doing 'what was expected' – certainly, my memory is that we were often asked by others when we were going to 'start a family'. We split up when I was twenty-nine and were divorced by the time I was thirty. I was left with the responsibility for the whole mortgage, which it took most of my wages to pay. It was a tough time, I really struggled financially and emotionally as I couldn't afford to have a social life and was very hurt by the divorce.

After about four years, I managed to sell the house and move back to the city. I met and fell head-over-heels with a younger woman who one day gazed into my eyes and said, "I think you be a great dad; I want to have your babies." By now, I felt confident that I would be a good dad, but we split up soon after.

**Around the same time, one of my peers, a work colleague, became a dad. I was painfully envious of him and avoided him at all costs – I felt he had the life I should have had, and it hurt to watch it unfold for him.**

I met my current wife when I was in my late thirties. She's a few years older than me and had wanted children when she was younger, but not by the time we met. We talked seriously about my desire to become a dad and she was direct with me and said, "If you want to be a dad then you will have to find someone else." I did seriously consider my options: leaving the woman I loved and had a fantastic relationship with or taking my chances with finding a younger woman who wanted to have a baby with a not particularly charismatic man earning an average wage in a safe job.

Therefore, it can be seen that there are a number of key factors in my constellation of circumstances that led to me being a childless man:

- **Background:** working class men are more likely to be childless than any other class .

- **Housing:** The importance of being 'settled' and having a place of your own.
- **Early years attachment experience (how you relate to others):** this continues across the life course and has recently been shown to be a predictor for childlessness in older people (Hadley et al., 2018).
- **Timing of entry of first serious relationships:** Compared to my peers I was not in a serious relationship until my very late teens. My first marriage was also later than most of my peers.
- **Timing of exit/entry of further relationship:** My first marriage ended at twenty-nine, just as most of my peers started, or were starting, their families. The three-year gap between my relationships is also significant.
- **Economics:** having little money to socialise and being ahead of my peers in my divorce reinforced my sense of being out-of-sync (off track).
- **Timing of exit/entry into further relationships:** again, exiting a relationship at age thirty-five had consequences for being further 'behind' the expected timing of parenthood. Again, a three-year gap between relationships highlights my difficulties in forming deep relationships.
- **Choice of partner:** I did choose my partner, and some would say that makes me "childless-by-choice". Cold logic would have it that I could have found a willing-to-be-mother partner in my late thirties. However, my judgement was that I had no idea where to find such a partner and didn't think that really anyone would want me.

**As a childless man in my late fifties, quite often people say to me "You're a man - you can reproduce until you die! Look at (insert name of film/music/broadcaster/rich man). He was a father (to twins probably – wonder why) at (insert age over 50)."**

However, the reality for men who aren't wealthy or famous is different; for 'non elite men' becoming an older dad is rarely an option. This stereotype needs to be broken because it denies reality and supports simple stereotypes that form traditional notions of men as invincible because they are always successfully virile.

- Less than 2% of men listed as fathers at birth registration were aged 50 or over in England and Wales in 2016 (Office for National Statistics, 2017).

- The social clock: many societies have expectations of when is a suitable age for a woman or man to be a parent (Billari et al., 2011). Too early and you are heavily castigated ('Deadbeat Dads' or 'Benefit Mums' have been headlines in the UK) and older parents are also 'othered' negatively (Goldberg, 2014).
- Andropause: although still disputed there is a gradual hormonal change for men.
- Sperm efficacy declines around the age of 35 (Yatsenko and Turek, 2018). Many fertility clinics will not take donations from men over the age of 35.
- Semen quality is related to the everyday environment: heat, diet, and stress all adversely affect sperm (Li et al., 2011).
- Men have contacted me to say their mid-thirties were a time of frustration and anxiety for them. It is only when they became fathers that they realised the source of their discomfort. Becoming a father made them feel complete.
- Older men are often paradoxically portrayed in the media as both impotent and a sexual threat (Walz, 2002, Hadley, 2018).

Now there are times when I am very sad not to have been a dad. I am surprised to be revisiting my jealousy, envy, and difference because, unlike my peers, I am not going to be a granddad.

**On this Father's Day, I will put into place my usual strategy of avoiding places that has anything to do with that 'celebration.' Instead, I will do routine tasks – gardening, clearing gutters, updating tax returns, any sort of mundane activity that requires concentration and will have an almost immediate positive outcome.**

I started this piece with describing my pathway to being a childless-by-circumstance man and so it feels appropriate to end in a similar manner. I feel this poem of mine written a decade ago summarises me and my childlessness:

*There's something missing,  
A conversation ended before it began  
Scattering thoughts of cuda, shuda, wuda, dada  
The latent maelstrom of the none man  
There's something missing,*

*holding a life-wide gap,  
breathing wallpaper,  
I am whole and incomplete*

*There's something missing,  
first to be left behind,  
first to be sent in,  
this line is not complete.*

(Hadley, 2008)

Dr Robin Hadley is the UK's pre-eminent academic focusing on the experience of involuntarily childless men. His PhD (Keele University, 2015) examined the experiences of involuntarily childless older men. He is a founder member of the UK campaign group Ageing Without Children ([www.awoc.org](http://www.awoc.org)). Recently he collaborated in research projects on dementia technology; health monitoring technology; and paternal influence on infant feeding. Previous careers include counsellor, deputy technical manager, scientific photographer and kitchen assistant. His counselling practice and his own experience of childlessness led him to self-fund his MA and MSc (University of Manchester, 2008; 2009) on the desire for fatherhood and the levels of desire for parenthood in childless people and parents.

<http://www.robinhadley.co.uk>

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