



'Opting In' to Progressive Parenthood: A Personal Challenge to Modern Mothers

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No doubt you've heard of the so-called "Opt Out Revolution" -- as reported by Lisa Belkin in the *New York Times* in 2003 -- of young Ivy League-educated women with big plans to grab those diplomas, frame them, and then hang them on nursery walls instead of corporate offices. Neither accurate nor revolutionary, Belkin's book caused quite a stir; every Cambridge tea and Williamsburg brunch was buzzing with the controversy.

A few years later, third-wave feminist icon Amy Richards is trying to bend the buzz toward a more truly radical revolution: opting in -- to whole, authentic, feminist mothering, that is. In her new book, *Opting In: Having a Child Without Losing Yourself*, she challenges contemporary mothers to remake their lives to match their feminist philosophies and not get caught up in competition and control. In some ways, it is as simple as that old adage, "Don't sweat the small stuff." In others, it is as complex as the feminism Richards helped relaunch into public consciousness with her co-written first book, *Manifesta* (2000). AlterNet managed to catch up with her and ask some questions about the next feminist installment in our long legacy (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Betty Friedan, Adrienne Rich, and more recently the work of Judith Warner, Leslie Bennetts and Linda Hirshman) of politicizing the personal.

Courtney E. Martin: There is an interesting duality in this book. On the one hand, you begin it with a central question: "What is feminism's relationship to motherhood?" On the other hand, it seems that much of *Opting In* is less about the feminist movement and more about looking at all the little, important individual choices that mothers make. Were you surprised by your own shift in focus from the collective to the individual?

Amy Richards: I actually think the small, personal choices that I detail in *Opting In* are feminism. As with my past two books, I think I am very deliberately trying to bring feminism down to a very local, very personal level. Yes, it's the grand things, too -- such as marching down Fifth Avenue and passing legislation, but it's also the very mundane things that we do in our lives. And I think I am trying to get them not to be considered mundane, but re-spun as political. When it comes to parenting, that means where do we send our kids to school? And are those environments open to others? If you have help with child-rearing, how much do you pay your babysitter? Those might seem like little things, but using those examples collectively, it means fighting for equality and fair labor practices.

That said, I did think I was going to write a much more conventionally political book -- helping moms figure out how to run for office or organize for paid maternity leave. And while I still think both of those things are important, I realize that it's better to build toward those things. I've also learned that sometimes women can be more effective not being a part of the system, and likewise, that sometimes the problem isn't the availability of paid maternity leave, but a problem of diminished confidence that makes them not take advantage of what is already there.

That makes a lot of sense. I was thinking of movement as opposed to individual, and you disrupt that dichotomy. You also constantly drive home the point that being self-aware and making educated, authentic choices is the key to feminist mothering -- whether about what kind of birth you want or whether you allow Barbie in the house, etc. You're obviously anti-litmus test here, but isn't it a bit too inclusive? In reality, aren't there more and less feminist choices sometimes?

Absolutely, there is a feminist litmus test. For me, the best way to explain it is that it has to be about more than you. It's great if you want to have and can have a home birth, but can others? It's great that you and your partner can start a chore wheel to have a more equitable household -- but what if you don't even have time to start a chore wheel? Feminism isn't about securing rights just for yourself as a mother, it's about ensuring that others can have that confidence and freedom, too.

Yet it seems so hard for us to really close the gap between our ideology and our day-to-day lives. On Page 9 you write, really beautifully, I might add, "Feminism's crusade remains unfinished because examining the 'personal' is far more threatening than condemning the political." Can you talk more about that? Why is the personal so threatening?

I think it's really hard for us to bring things down to a personal level -- one, because we don't want to be perceived as judging others, and two, we don't want to be vulnerable or exposed. Also, lobbying for legislation simply requires us to say, "Yes, parenting is hard work and it should be remunerated," or to show up at a meeting and testify that early childhood education is an under-addressed problem. But more personal transformation actually requires us to re-examine our lives. For instance, if we really want to be "green," why are we buying that new sweater? If we really want to be a progressive parent, why are we frustrated that we have to pay our babysitter \$18 an hour, which is a living wage, rather than \$12? Personal activism requires so much more from us.

Shifting gears a bit here -- I think some readers will be surprised to see you use the word "femininity" throughout the book, for example on Page 150 when you write, "Reclaiming 'femininity' comes with a radical proposal: making these attributes and choices valuable in their own right for men as well as women." Can you explain what you mean by "femininity" here and throughout the book?

Motherhood is the supreme expression of femininity -- proof that each of us is a woman, at least a woman born woman. And I think that society has tried to use femininity against women, a sign that we are different and really that we are less than. I think the traditional feminist approach to challenging this was to simply make women more masculine, a la Hillary Clinton, but that didn't do much to change the general status of women and thus we had to look at how to make the feminine, in itself, valuable. I'm also challenging how feminists historically treated femininity. For feminists of other generations, femininity, as expressed primarily by motherhood, was something that was required of women, and they naturally rebelled against that -- against the mandate more than the thing itself. This generation is freer to choose to what extent they can/want to embrace femininity.

One of the very "this generation" trends is "mommy blogging," something you rarely mention in *Opting In*. Do you believe it is "parental self-absorption," as you quote David Hochman as saying on Page 212?

Having one opinion on blogging is like having one opinion on the media: It's so varied it's hard to really quantify. And I do give indirect props to blogging for being a virtual CR (consciousness-raising) group. Women no longer gather around kitchen tables detailing their frustrations; blogs are a more public version of this, which is very feminist. I think I was hesitant to write too specifically about them, mostly because I was scared it would come back to bite me. And truth be told ... I don't really read that many blogs, and while I did indulge for "research," those communities came less naturally to me than in-person meetings and more individual emails.

Fair enough. I noticed a pattern with quite a few of the themes that you treated: Women found work/life balance, getting pregnant and shared parenting all most difficult when they had their expectations, in your opinion, raised too high. How much of our feminist failings are due to outlandish expectations? What is the balance between idealism and realism when it comes to feminist mothering?

As much as we want to blame society, the media, patriarchy for creating the "myth of the Superwoman," I think that feminism has done a similar disservice to mothers. Feminism indirectly sends a message that certain choices (working, having kids later, not employing women of color to take care of white babies, not being a soccer mom) are more feminist than other choices and thus the woman who doesn't/does make these choices have failed in feminism's eyes. Thus, this generation is fighting two unrealistic standards: one, society's, and two, feminism -- which leaves women feeling like they can't win. That's precisely why I try to bring feminism back to a personal level, because I can't get every woman to make the same choices -- that's unrealistic -- but hopefully I can get more women to trust their own choices.

It's all so hard, isn't it? You write, "Despite everything feminism has achieved, we often depend upon pregnancy to demand attention and respect -- becoming 'mothers' is easier than defining who we are as individual women." (p. 107) A fascinating point, and it had me wondering: Is part of the work of feminism avoiding

the easy way out with regard to identity -- getting married during a quarter-life crisis, getting pregnant when work is unfulfilling and you need something else, etc.?

Ha! That's funny in part because I do think the mere fact that I gave birth "out of wedlock" gives me certain feminist credibility, though there are lots of feminists out there still asking me when I'm going to get married. And yet it wasn't so much a well-thought-out choice -- more circumstantial than premeditated. But yes, I think feminism's job, and this goes beyond parenting issues, is to keep us from being lazy. And yet, feminism requires so much from us that sometimes I often want to just retreat into convention.

One argument I make in *Opting In* is that I'm sympathetic to women who want to "just stay home." It's the societally accepted choice, and it makes sense that people would be seduced by it. I don't think this makes your life easier, but I think you have to explain yourself less. And yet, feminism's job is to get us to not just accept our roles, but legitimately choose them.

You seem generally very inclusive and optimistic, but also consistently skeptical of the potential of a mother's movement. Then you list a bunch of organizations in the back that are part of a contemporary effort to organize around mothering issues: child care, paid sick leave, vacation time, etc. Can you explain? Is it just that you are wary of women becoming too identified with themselves as mothers and losing their other dimensions?

Movements emerge because things fall into place, not because someone called a meeting about creating a movement. I think a movement might happen, but we need to put the steps into place first. And while I am skeptical about "creating" a movement, I wholeheartedly think that people want more community, more connection, and that's part of how we begin to build a movement. The resources are a response to people's desire for community.

So you're arguing for a more organic kind of movement. That makes sense. OK, now we have to get to sex. You wonder "whether more responsibility-balanced couples are rewarded with more fulfilling sexual lives," and then like magic, a new study comes out proving just that. I was wondering, though: How does this square up with the work of sexologist Esther Perel (*Mating in Captivity*), which argues that equal marriages make for boring sex?

I knew the proof had to be out there beyond the anecdotal evidence! And I think that there is a big difference between equal marriages as in 50/50 and respectful, "we're both doing what we can" marriages. If the relationship is all scripted and methodical, tit for tat, then your sex life will be, too -- and that goes for the equal marriages as well as the unequal ones. I think the trick is to make it work in a way where both partners think they have a say over the decisions in the house, and that it's not role-playing; otherwise that's likely what you get with sex, too.

Fascinating. Now for the practical: What are three things that you think every mother

can do in the next week in an effort to not "lose herself" (or reclaim herself if she's already feeling lost)?

Ideally, go away by yourself -- less for her to "get a break" but for him/her, assuming there is a partner, to figure out how it all works, to understand the stresses, deal with the minutia, etc. And she needs this because she needs to know that she can leave and everyone will survive.

If you are unhappy with your workplace or you are watching colleagues struggle, get together and figure out what it is all about. Is it not enough time with your kids or not enough time for you? How can you collectively approach your dissatisfaction and the employer's needs?

Stop measuring yourself by what others are doing -- which is so tough. *They have the Britax car seat, which they say is the safest. Am I a terrible parent for getting the Graco brand?* You have to learn to be confident with your choices. It's a far-fetched example, but long before "green" was chic, I preferred tap water over bottled, but I always felt so cheap when I would ask for tap and often would buckle and just get bottled so I didn't look silly. Sadly, in order to realize that you are equals, you might have to try out "being better."

And buy *Opting In*, of course.

I hope that's a given.

Courtney E. Martin is the author of Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: The Frightening New Normalcy of Hating Your Body. You can read more about her work at www.courtneyemartin.com.

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