On ants, life, and spinsterhood

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A note on entomology: A type of ant has been discovered that engages in suicide bombing. This ant, the *Colobopsis explodens* of Borneo, wriggles so hard when threatened that its body breaks, releasing a toxic slime that repels predators. The ant, of course, dies. The colony survives. Soldiers on a bus into which a grenade is thrown will tell you the same thing. Any of them would fall on the grenade to save the others. In utilitarian terms, this makes perfect sense. The greater good for the greatest number is achieved when ants explode and buses don't. John Stuart Mill would be proud. The suicide-bombing ants, like stinging bees and soldiers, engage in autothysis: self-sacrifice. Individuals matter less than the group's wellbeing.

Humans have often been encouraged to live like this, bending individual will to the greater good. In particular, *women* have been encouraged to do this: the female element of the yin-yang, the yin, is water. It changes to fit its container. Women take men's surnames, fitting into families. Shoes are tied to wedding cars, symbolising the beatings from the father to be continued by the husband; in brutality lies order. Chinese and Japanese ideograms for 'security' are a woman inside a house. It is almost within living memory that Chinese women's feet were bound. (And hobble skirts still exist.) Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* says, of oaks versus willows, "A tree that is unbending is easily broken. The hard and headstrong will fall. The soft and malleable will bend but will not break". Bend, it says, lest you break. Fit in, it says, lest you be cast out. A Japanese saying has it that the nail that protrudes is hammered down. Foucault's Panopticon explains why we self-police: lest we be judged, we conform. And lions hunting wildebeest will separate one from the herd.

The same day I read about the exploding ants, I also read newspaper stories about women who had done things: winning medals, thwarting thieves, and giving statements. In the stories, unrelated to family life, the women were described as 'mother of two' or 'wife and mother' or 'expectant mum'. The women doing other things were nevertheless defined relationally, their identity and worth a calculation triangulated by familial roles.

On the surface, the ants and the women are very different. But the ants of Borneo, it turns out, are not *all* suicide bombers. It is only the minor workers, the *sterile females*, who self sacrifice. Spinster ants are expendable, it seems. And if human women are mainly valuable as wives and mothers, the message seems to be that human spinsters are lesser, too.

I am a spinster. I have not borne children and I'm forty-five, so that ship has more or less sailed. I live alone with two cats. (In the Middle Ages I'd have been burned at the stake as a witch by now, for sure.) Like the original, medieval spinsters, who were sufficiently good at spinning wool to make a respectable living without the need for a husband's protection, I make my own money.

A note on etymology: It is only in relatively recent times that *spinster* carries negative connotations. In semantics, there is propositional meaning and connotational meaning, and while *spinster* may seem the neutral equivalent of *bachelor*, it is not. To be a bachelor is to be a freewheeling playboy, a cad, the prodigal son. A spinster, in contrast, is a cantankerous Old Maid. It is as if society needed a term for women who did not bend to fit the social rules. It is as if the exploding ants had the right idea about expendable spinsters.

It is hardly new, this idea of single women as incomprehensible, even threatening. But it is important to note that many of the basic legalities of spinsterhood *are* very new. My parents, married in 1967, first went overseas on a package holiday to Spain in 1969. Their British passport —their singular, shared passport— has two black and white photographs on the same page. At the top, next to the word 'bearer' is my young, shy dad. Underneath, sporting a beehive hairdo, is my mum. Next to her is printed the word 'wife'. Their passport makes provision for wives because 'bearers' were necessarily men. Nowadays, of course, I have my own passport. But this would have been impossible within living memory.

In 1971, my parents bought the house, in Scotland, in which I would grow up. To do this, they took out a joint mortgage and, like the passport and the trip to Spain, my mum could not have done it alone. Until 1975, UK women were routinely refused mortgages in their own right. The *Sex Discrimination Act* of 1975 changed this in theory, but in 1978 *The Times* published a report showing banks were still demanding male guarantors anyway. (In the US, the relevant year is 1974, in Ireland 1976, and in Australia 1975, although in all jurisdictions discrimination still regularly occurred until the 1980s.) Nowadays, single women are as likely to take out mortgages as single men — although all single people, on one income, are disadvantaged compared to couples. But even in legal terms, getting a mortgage as a solo woman would also have been impossible within living memory. Now, I am lucky enough to live alone with my own mortgage.

How on earth, then, am I to make sense of my spinster life? Do I seek gratitude in such basic equalities? Or do I think beyond this, into what is meaningful? My friends and I have discussed this extensively. Like me, they tick the box marked 'other'. All are queer, childfree, and unmarried, or some combination thereof. And the consensus we have reached is that life is about *security*, *connection*, and *purpose*. This model was developed in conversations but, curiously, it aligns closely with the findings of Emeritus Professor Robert Cummins's 15-year, 60,000-respondent study at Deakin University, Australia. (If only he had asked. My friends and I could have saved him a lot of trouble.)

The first element, security, may be financial, physical, and/or health-related. It is safety, writ large. This may mean affordable housing or a retreat from the neoliberalism that underpins precarious, future-less McJobs. It may mean properly funded healthcare and a system of policing in which black lives, and gay lives, and trans lives all matter just as much as other lives. Without security it is game over, because it is very hard to self-actualize when the rent is overdue and villagers with raised pitchforks are banging on the door. (Of course, Maslow told us this almost a century ago, too.) First, then, there is security.

Then there is connection. Importantly, this need not mean a spouse and kids. In my life, for example, connection is about investing energy into my chosen family: my friends. Connection outside of spouses and children need not be

elusive. (Indeed, connection *within* marriage and parenthood may be illusive.) Though tax laws and workplace norms may not yet reflect this, single, childfree people's lives can be just as connected, just as meaningful, and just as full of service to and care for others. Connection —to other humans, to the earth, and to the broader society— is therefore the second part of what is needed for both *a* good life and *the* good life.

The third component is arguably the most difficult: a sense of purpose. Some (but not all) parents see children as the answer to all three points of the triangle: security in old age, connection now, and a sense of overarching purpose. But this is not to say there is no purpose to the lives of the childfree (indeed, it might be argued that there is no real *point* to replicating oneself, generation after generation either; it's not as if the world is short of humans). Mark Manson writes that finding your purpose means answering the questions: 'what is true about you today —e.g. that you have stopped writing— that would make your eight-year-old self cry?' And: 'what activity makes you forget to eat and poop?' For me, it is creativity, connection, and Mother Nature.

All of which takes me back to the ants. Walking a forest trail, I noticed and stepped over a parade of ants. Online later, I read: 'Next to humans, leafcutter ants form the most complex animal societies on Earth.' On that day, I stepped over the ants. But what if I hadn't? Many would have died. A few might have survived in the raised tread of my shoe. Others, in that fateful place just seconds beforehand, would escape with a story to tell. (Whenever a plane crashes, we hear from those who just missed the flight.) If antmageddon *had* happened, how might the survivors rationalise it? Quite simply, they wouldn't. They couldn't. They would just get on with ant life, their goals ordained by their instincts. I like to think, though, that there's more purpose to our individual human lives than that of ants. There is, isn't there?