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Interview with Donna Ward

Single people without children remain invisible in society far too often, says Donna Ward (70). The Australian writer wants to change that. "My life is just as complex and multi-layered as that of married women."

When did you realize that you would remain single for the rest of your life?

"Honestly? I still haven't. I've had a few relationships, some of them very interesting. I loved one man so much that I wanted to marry him and have children. Until I realized that all the work would fall on my shoulders. I have every respect for women who raise children on their own, but I knew I needed a partner for that. People sometimes say: maybe you're too picky. Don't women have the right to be picky? Maybe some aren't picky enough. Second-wave feminism taught me to stand up for my rights and say no. Germaine Greer and the Australian Ann Summers told me through their writings: if you marry, marry well. Say no to a bad marriage. And I did.

Have you never doubted whether that was the best decision?

I have no problem admitting that I had imagined my life differently and that I didn't get what I wanted. I was certainly sad about that, but *it didn't kill me.* As a single person, you're supposed to say that you chose it completely, but just like some married women, I have the right to say: my life didn't turn out the way I thought it would. My relationship status is the result of all kinds of small and larger decisions in my life. There wasn't a single moment when I decided: I'm going to stay single. That realization only dawned on me when I was over forty.

What made you change your mind?

One by one, I saw my friends get married and have children. When your best friend enters into a relationship, her focus shifts to her partner. We had a group of friends who got together every Sunday afternoon. When children came along, those gatherings were suspended during the school holidays and eventually stopped altogether. I understand, my friends had other priorities and busy lives. Maybe they thought I had suddenly found a whole new circle of friends to go to parties with, but that wasn't the case. Of course, I made new friends here and there, and some of my friends reluctantly came back later in life, when their children had already left home. Deep friendships that touch your soul can withstand so much elasticity."

That sounds painful.

"That's just how it was. If you remain single, you end up on the sidelines of other people's lives. It's mainstream to settle down and start a family. Helen Gurley Brown, who published the well-known book *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962, marketed the image of the happy and, above all, young single woman who claims her own sexuality and builds a career. But the real happy ending is that she eventually meets a man and gets married. The downside of that myth is that

those who don't succeed are seen as failures. There's something wrong with you; you're incapable of commitment. I resist that."

When you were already over sixty, you wrote a book about it, *She I dare not name: a spinster's meditations on life*. 'Spinster' or 'old maid' is not exactly a positive term.

"I ran a small publishing company for a while, and experience taught me that you have to grab people's attention. I knew that the word 'spinster' would do that. It tells it like it is. You know right away that I have never been married, widowed, or divorced. Call it what you will, but I am proud of it. I want to be able to be as proud of myself as married women are of their lives. My life is just as complex and layered. It has just as many dark and difficult moments as women who have difficult children or a husband who cheats on them. I want to be able to say that too. We assume too often that we have control over our own lives. That's not true. The only thing we can control is how we deal with what happens to us."

We have a saying: he who writes, remains.

Words outlive human beings; in the best case, they remain behind as fossils that will one day be excavated. My main aim was to make my life and that of my fellow sufferers visible and to broaden the conversation. Policymakers are very concerned with the average family: dual-income couples with children. Financially, single people do not have it easy. They also miss out on tax benefits. During the pandemic, people like me were completely forgotten. I have rarely felt truly lonely, but I did then. Because the government abandoned me."

How so?

"Single people who had sex with someone else were allowed to visit them. I didn't have anyone like that. For weeks, I didn't talk to anyone, the walls were closing in on me, and they almost merged with my skin. A plumber came to repair my toilet, and when he left, I felt violated. I was psychologically strong enough to understand why I felt that way, but it was awful! And I wondered: what if another crisis breaks out, or a natural disaster? Will they also help all families and people with partners first?"

Are you taking precautions against this?

"I started the organization Singlehood in Australia, of which I am the CEO. I bring together researchers working on this theme—that's why I was a guest at the University of Antwerp ( ) this week. Interest is growing worldwide. Politicians in my country have picked up on the message and promise to roll out more policies for single people during this term of office."

"I tell anyone who wants to hear that one evening I drove to the emergency room alone when I had a severe allergic reaction. I called a friend and a neighbor, but neither of them could take me. My neighbor had just eaten and drunk a bottle of wine, so she didn't want to get behind the wheel. Elderly care is also not equipped to deal with residents who have no family members to look after their interests. I am pushing for every policy measure to be tested on single people, as

is already the case with women and indigenous peoples. If I succeed, I will truly leave a fossil behind in this world, and it won't even have to bear my name.

Is that what gives meaning to your existence?

"There are many things that can give meaning to life. For most people, it is having children and grandchildren. If you focus only on that, I think you miss out on a lot. The only meaning that life itself has is that we are, very briefly, embodied consciousness. For a moment, we wake up in the vast universe of planets and solar systems. You have to experience that miracle to the fullest. Step outside and connect with the world you live in, the nature around you, and the history of humanity. You only get five minutes. In a flash, it's over."

Veerle Beel