

# The Two-Income Trap

by Suzanne Venker

A POST HILL PRESS BOOK

ISBN (eBook): 978-1-61868-884-2

THE TWO-INCOME TRAP: Why Parents Are Choosing to Stay Home

© 2014 by Suzanne Venker

All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means without the written permission of the author and publisher.

Post Hill Press

109 International Drive, Suite 300

Franklin, TN 37067

<http://posthillpress.com>

\* This book sample does not contain endnotes.

## THE TWO-INCOME TRAP

In 1999, \$500 million dollars' worth of self-help books was sold. *Five hundred million dollars.* Seems to me if what feminists said were true, that getting women out of the home and into the workforce would make them happier, women would be too busy being joyous to scour the self-help section of the bookstore. "I don't think women as a group are much happier now than they were in the 50s," admits psychologist Mary Pipher.

They are not. And the reason is that women don't want their professional accomplishments to come *at the expense of* motherhood. That's the underlying issue. What most women want is to be successful at work and at home. And they can be. But not if they follow the cultural script feminists have laid out for women.

Look, I get it. I understand the pull between work and home—I sometimes feel I have more ambition than I know what to do with. But like most women, I've curbed this ambition in order to raise a family. We never talk about this because that would be taboo. In postfeminist America, a woman is viewed as incomplete if her ambition isn't embraced full throttle.

It's time for that nonsense to change. Most women are some combination of "working mother" and "stay at home mother." When looking at their lives as a whole, women want to be wives and mothers as well as independent workers. Most of us make choices every day about how to make this happen. If I didn't have children, I'd have a completely different life. My husband and I probably wouldn't choose to live where we do (St. Louis is a great place to raise kids), and work would be the focus of my life—just as it was prior to having children. And when my children are grown and gone, I expect my life will look like that again.

When we choose to have children, we choose a new life. We choose a life of trade-offs. That's why the idea of 'having it all,' at least at the same time, is bogus. Women *can* have

most of what they want over the course of their lives, but they'll need to adjust their expectations. And they'll need to broaden their view of what it means to be successful.

I was fortunate to have received this message early on. Most of the women in my family are highly educated yet still managed to incorporate at-home motherhood into their lives. They did this in various ways. Some married early and started their careers later; some postponed marriage and had long careers beforehand; and some quit working once they saw how challenging it was to balance career and family and modified their plans accordingly.

Because of their example, I've always known I would have both work and motherhood in my life. But never once did I consider doing both at the same time. Nor did I get the idea that an educated woman can't be bothered with caring for babies—that she either gets an education and pursues a career *or* she raises kids. But I did get the message that 'having it all' at once was not the way to go.

It's so important for women to absorb this early on, for if there's one thing young women want to know, it's how they will balance work and family when the time comes. The answer is sequencing. When women sequence their lives, or plan for the various seasons of a woman's life, they make space for both work and family.

In other words, women should assume the opposite of what they do now. Assume you *will* be at home with your children for a period of time and will thus be out of the workforce awhile—perhaps up to 10 years, depending on the number of children you have. That's not how women are taught to map out their lives. They're taught to assume a job will be the focus of their lives, and children will magically orbit around it. They're being set up to fail—because that is not at all what happens.

So how does a woman sequence her life? First, choose a career that works well with motherhood. In the past, women chose professions like nursing and teaching in large part because these jobs are flexible. Flexibility is key.

What about those careers that don't offer women the flexibility they want? That is a quandary, no doubt. The choice to pursue a demanding career will come at a cost. Those who pursue such careers pay a big price for their achievement in the long hours they must commit to their careers. That is the nature of the game.

The second component of sequencing is for women to live near their families of origin once they have children. Women need help when their babies arrive! Millions of mothers are exasperated today because no one's around to help them. Some can substitute with friends, and some women have enough money to pay for babysitters or nannies. But most do not. That's when family help becomes priceless.

The third requirement is to be smart with one's money prior to motherhood. One of the reasons people say families need two incomes is because couples got used to living the good life prior to having children. I know the idea is to "live it up" before you settle down—get all those trips in, etc.—but saving money prior to motherhood, or just being more frugal, helps alleviate the blow couples face in having to lower their standard of living after they become parents.

The final requirement of sequencing is for women to choose a husband who works full-time at a job adequate to meet the family's needs. Too many women today disregard a man's work prospects. They view men as their "equals" and thus assume both of them will work full-time and year-round after having children. But many women come to regret this since it doesn't allow them even the option to stay home. They bought into the lie that looking for a husband to support his wife at all, even for a short time, is backward.

You might be thinking that not all jobs or careers can be ditched for a period of time only to be returned to later, and that is true. But that is a decision women have to make based on their priorities. Everything we do comes at a price. If you bow out of a career in your 30s, you'll be less likely to make it to the top of your field. But the alternative is to land the corner office and not be close to your children or be the "go-to" adult in their lives. That's what trade-offs are all about.

~

It's time to shift our paradigm. Unless a big career is your ultimate goal in life, there's no reason you need to do everything at once. Women have plenty of time to be mothers and to pursue their other interests and passions. "Just as the young never really understand, or believe, that there is a long, long time stretching ahead of them in which to do all the things they want, so many young mothers continue to feel that if they don't move on the question of career now, the world will simply pass them by," writes Midge Decter.

The trick is to get beyond the need to prove your value to the world, for that is how this madness began. Feminists sabotaged motherhood. Women in the past weren't expected to earn an income in order to prove their value because it was plainly evident that what they were doing was of value. That is no longer the case.

By demeaning motherhood, the only way women can earn respect is to get a job. But women who want to be happy are going to have to ignore the culture and listen to their gut. If happiness is the goal, and let's assume it is, for most women being career-focused won't make that happen. It is our relationships at home that reveal how happy or unhappy we truly are.

Quality of life matters, too. Anyone who has read the behind-the-scenes life of a typical dual-income family can see for themselves how crazy that life is. Here's an example, taken from the cover story of a recent issue of *Time* magazine.

It's 6:35 in the morning, and Cheryl Nevins, 34, dressed for work in a silky black maternity blouse and skirt, is busily tending to Ryan, 2 1/2, and Brendan, 11 months, at their home in the leafy Edgebrook neighborhood of Chicago. Both boys are sobbing because Reilly, the beefy family dog, knocked Ryan over. In a blur of calm, purposeful activity, Nevins, who is 8 months pregnant, shoves the dog out into the backyard, changes Ryan's diaper on the family-room rug, heats farina in the microwave and feeds Brendan cereal and sliced bananas while crooning Open, Shut Them to encourage the baby to chew. Her husband Joe, 35, normally out the door by 5:30 a.m. for his job as a finance manager for Kraft Foods, makes a rare appearance in the morning muddle. "I do want to go outside with you," he tells

Ryan, who is clinging to his leg, “but Daddy has to work every day except Saturdays and Sundays. That stinks.”

At 7:40, Vera Orozco, the nanny, arrives to begin her 10 1/2-hour shift at the Nevinses'. Cheryl, a labor lawyer for the Chicago board of education, hands over the baby and checks her e-mail from the kitchen table. “I almost feel apprehensive if I leave for work without logging on,” she confesses. Throughout the day, Orozco will note every meal and activity on a tattered legal pad on the kitchen counter so Nevins can stay up to speed.

It is important for couples to know ahead of time that this is what the quality of their lives will look like if they both choose to work full-time, particularly when their children are young. And the above scenario doesn't even factor in the stress from commuting, or the conflict about how dinner is going to get on the table, or the fights over who's going to do what, etc. When making decisions about work and family, we need to factor in the intangibles. A second income isn't advantageous if the flipside means living a life of chaos and discord. It just isn't worth it.

It seems to me the secret of this conversation is the ability to look forward, into the future. If you know you want children, you should know they will change the entire course of your life. It comes down to prioritizing your non-negotiables. For me, there was never any question that I wanted children and that I'd be home with them. That meant all other decisions I made—what to study in school, what kind of job to pursue, whom to marry, where to live—were tailored around that central goal. This has made, thus far anyway, all the difference in the world.

Does my being at home ensure my daughter will become a perfect child? Of course not. But it does mean she knows I'll be here for her tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that. It means she can count on me not to be a perfect mother but a stable force in her life. Most important, it means she knows I consider her worth my time and attention.

And this will mark her soul for a lifetime.