

# DEFYING

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I love my single life, so please don't feel sorry for me

BY ELEANORE WELLS

**a** few years ago, when I was in my late 40s, a good friend playfully called me an Old Maid. She and I both speak a little Spanish and we occasionally leave phone messages for each other using what we hope will someday be our second language. So I identified myself as Señorita Wells, and she pointed

out that I was too old to be a Señorita. She explained that Señorita, like *Mademoiselle* and *Miss*, is used to refer to a *young* unmarried woman. That really made me think. What do you call a fascinating, charming middle-aged woman who has never had a husband (or children)? There isn't a word to describe us.

I've known all my life that marriage was not for me. I was never that girl who dreamed about her wedding long before she knew who the groom would be. I'm not anti-marriage but, to me, being married is not a better life, it's just a different one.

When I was younger, I was proud of being single. The fact that I'd chosen not to follow the path that's expected of every woman made me brave, out of the ordinary. I dated

fantastic men, and even got proposed to. I just didn't choose to take that path. Friends and acquaintances admired my choice and celebrated with me my quirky difference.

But now that I'm in my mid-50s, things have changed. I'm tiring of the frequent questions and pitying tone about my "plight." At a party recently, I ran into a former colleague, and before I could answer "How are you?" she asked, "Are you married yet?" I always feel like I have to have a quip ready for this question. A quip that's lighthearted but also makes it clear that I think the question is ridiculous. There's nothing wrong with asking if I'm married, but

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HAIR & MAKEUP: NIKKI WANG

A woman with voluminous, curly, reddish-brown hair is smiling broadly, showing her teeth. She is wearing a white collared shirt and large hoop earrings. She is sitting on the grass, and a small, fluffy, light-brown dog is sitting on her lap. The background is a lush green park with trees and sunlight filtering through the leaves.

"Contrary to what others may think, being single allows me to be who I really am," says Eleanore.

There's no denying that we live in a world of "*shoulds*." We judge ourselves and others about who we are and how we live. But when we *challenge those assumptions*—as these three women have—we find meaning and *happiness*.

# EXPECTATIONS

by ELEANORE WELLS, ELLEN SEIDMAN *and* KATRINA KENISON  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB HOWARD

the “yet” implies that this is something I must do.

What was more astounding than being asked the question was the fact that this woman, who was clearly judging my marital choice, was going through her third divorce. It seems that having multiple marriages is more acceptable to people than having never been married at all. How do we single women change people’s perceptions that being unmarried is a valid choice, not a plight? Obviously, I am not the only happily unmarried woman-of-a-certain-age out there. There are lots of fabulous women who are neither wives nor mothers—and all they want is to be acknowledged as the dynamic, fulfilled people they are.

I have my own consulting business, an active social life and great relationships with my family. I have a fabulous circle of friends, many of whom have children who adore their “Auntie Eleanore.” I often have a boyfriend. I support charitable organizations with my money and time, and adore my 11-year-old Yorkie, Danny, who is—contrary to popular myth—a dog and not a substitute child. With all this goodness, how could my being single possibly be a bad thing?

But still there is the question of what to call us. Old Maid clearly doesn’t work because, as the card game of the same name suggests, an Old Maid is a withered old crone with scraggly hair and warts. Then there’s Bachelorette, which makes me think of cocktails, high heels and unencumbered weekend mornings. Though I lost the status a decade or two ago because of the “youthful” requirement, the attitude is still very much a part of me. How about Spinster? It’s archaic and charming, and I like it. But it may be a little staid, so I think I’ll “plus it up.” The moniker for us? *Spinsterlicious*.

*Eleanore Wells blogs about single life at TheSpinsterliciousLife.com.*

“Once I adjusted my expectations for my son, everything changed,” says Ellen (pictured here with Max).



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*I didn’t get the child I expected... and that’s fine*

BY ELLEN SEIDMAN

*m*y son is exceptionally handsome, with a killer smile. He is bright. He plays softball, rides a bike and enjoys the same things I do, like hanging on the beach.

This is what I imagined my son would be like when I first learned, eight years ago, that I was pregnant with a boy. What I never expected: that Max would have cerebral palsy.

The day after Max was born, he ended up in the pediatric intensive unit. I’d had an easy pregnancy, working until the very end, and a delivery that ended in a C-section when Max

didn’t progress through the birth canal. The next morning, as I was feeding Max, he turned blue. I yelled for a nurse; she whacked him on the back and said it was common for babies to have mucus in their lungs.

A few hours later, he turned blue again; this time, the nurse whisked him up to the intensive care unit, where a resident realized he was having seizures. They sent him for an MRI. Two days later, the hospital’s top pediatric neurologist wanted to talk with me and my husband, Dave.

“Your baby has had a stroke,” the doctor said, gravely. “A bilateral stroke.”

I was too shocked to even cry. A stroke? Wasn’t that something that happened to elderly people? How was it possible that my newborn had suffered a stroke? Dave put his head down on the table in the conference room and sobbed.

As it turned out, there is an estimated 1 in 4,000 PLEASE TURN TO 55

occurrence of strokes in babies. The doctor told us the grim possibilities: Max might never walk or talk. He could be cognitively impaired, and have vision and hearing problems. Not only was my baby not going to turn out to be the child I'd imagined, but he was also going to be my worst nightmare.

Those first few years with Max were the toughest of my life. Early childhood is a time defined by milestones, and Max didn't hit any of them. Reading *What to Expect The First Year* made me cry—I ended

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*I was so focused on Max doing things in the usual way that I failed to enjoy the child in front of my eyes.*

up giving it away. At friends' birthday parties for their 1-year-olds, I watched all the other kids his age walking, babbling, shoveling cake into their mouths, and realized just how far Max was lagging behind. He wasn't crawling, and even grasping a spoon was challenging for him; the brain damage had impaired his muscles.

All parents have expectations for their child. Sometimes they're beneficial: You can set the bar high and help him leap to it. Yet they can be dangerous, too. My hopes for Max only set me up for disappointment. I was so focused on his doing things in the usual way—the way so-called “typical” kids do—that I failed to enjoy the smiley child in front of my eyes who actually was accomplishing things, only on his time frame, not anyone else's. “Look at what he *is* doing, not at what he *isn't*,” a doctor told me, and I took his words to heart.

As the months passed, I grew to appreciate every mini-move

forward as much as the major milestones. At age 2, Max began to crawl. Then he scooted around with a walker—defying the doctors who said he might never walk. On his third birthday, he tentatively took a few steps from his dad's arms into mine and we both cried tears of joy. The next year, he said his first word (“No!”).

Time doesn't just heal all wounds; it refreshes your sense of hope. It helps you see all the possibilities that exist instead of mourning the ones that don't. To this day,

no expert can tell me what the future holds for Max, so I've learned to have but two expectations for him: that he do stuff as best he can and that he stay happy. He does, and he is.

Max is 8 now. His speech is limited and sounds slurred, so he uses an iPad with a communication app to speak words for him. He is on a Little League team for kids with special needs, where a volunteer helps him hold the bat—and he whacks that ball hard. He has balance and muscle coordination issues and cannot yet ride a two-wheeler, but he speeds down our street on a little tractor like a demon. He has some cognitive delays but he learns fast and, of course, knows just how to torture his 6-year-old sister.

He is bright and exceptionally handsome, with a killer smile...like the son I always imagined.

*Ellen Seidman, a writer and editor, writes the award-winning blog [lovethatmax.com](http://lovethatmax.com).*

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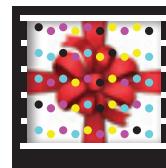
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## “ Being successful isn't always about what you achieve

BY KATRINA KENISON

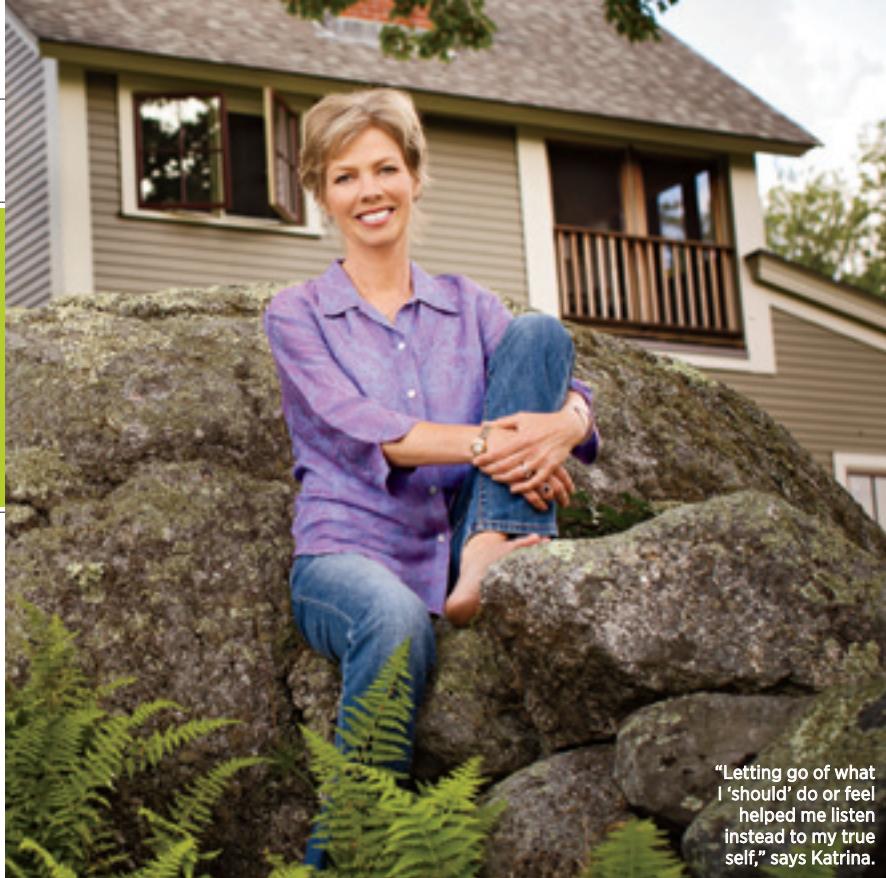
**G**rowing up, I wasn't sure how I would make my mark on the world, but I had a few ideas: make a brilliant discovery, marry a superhero, become a star of stage or screen. Over time, my options narrowed. I was terrible at math and science, superheroes didn't really exist and I was too shy to try acting. Yet from the moment my second-grade teacher presented me with a copy of *Heidi* and said, “You'll like this,” I'd realized there was another option. The road to my future would be paved with words.

My passion for books carried me through college, and to my first job as an assistant for a book publisher. By the time I was 24, I was an editor in Manhattan—a small-town girl from New Hampshire hoping that sheer enthusiasm and a solid Yankee work ethic would make up for my lack of experience and sophistication.

It was a dream come true. But seeing the works of so many talented writers only made me doubt my own abilities. Writers, I'd come to believe, possessed a creative gift that I didn't have. And so I turned away from writing and focused on editing.

But there came a time when “work harder” ceased to feel like the right answer to the questions I found myself asking. Questions such as: “What do I have to offer the world?” and “How do I want to live?”

On my 30th birthday, I finally had to admit that the life I'd so carefully constructed didn't feel like the one I was meant to be living. On the face of



“Letting go of what I ‘should’ do or feel helped me listen instead to my true self,” says Katrina.

it, I had everything: a good marriage, a successful career, recognition. Yet none of it made me feel fulfilled and proud of my accomplishments. I wanted to write, but I had no idea if I had anything to say. I wanted out of the life I was in, but I wasn't sure where else to go.

I quit my job the next morning. Twenty-two years later, I remember just one thing about that day: After telling my boss that I was leaving publishing, I went into the ladies' room, looked at myself in the mirror and realized that for the first time in my life I had no idea what I was going to do next. Then I passed out cold.

If someone had told me as I headed off to college that the trajectory of my life would not be a straight climb into adulthood and “success,” but rather a meandering circle that would one day bring me right back to where I started from, I would have been horrified. Surely the whole point of growing up was to prove myself by creating a life that was bigger and more impressive than the one I came from.

Now I know better. Growing up isn't about reaching some final desti-

nation, but about negotiating all the twists and turns in the road, pausing here and there to listen to the soul's quiet direction, and learning to trust the signposts that point the way to our own deeper callings.

As I sit at my desk in this silent house, in a small town just a few miles from where I was raised, I marvel at just how long it's taken, both in years and experiences, for me to come full circle and to reclaim the voice that has been mine all along. Becoming a mother, raising two sons, living to a slower, simpler rhythm in the country, I finally found both my calling and my subject: the grace and beauty of ordinary, everyday life. The lessons, of course, have been revealed not by arriving here at last, but from the journey itself, a journey that has led me from ambition to meaning, from the fast track to a one-lane rural road, from a desire to succeed to the realization that true success doesn't have much at all to do with accomplishment and almost everything to do with creating a life that feels like a fit with who I really am.

*Katrina Kenison is the author of* *The Gift of an Ordinary Day*. PLEASE TURN TO 58

# WHEN THINGS DON'T GO AS PLANNED

We asked psychiatrist Gail Saltz, MD, for a step-by-step plan to help you bounce back

**W**e all have expectations—they're part of what helps move us forward in life. If you hope to have a job that you like and succeed in, you'll work hard toward that goal. Having expectations of your children can help them set their own goals and strive to meet them. Expectations are a combination of our own hopes and wishes and the values, morals and judgments of our surrounding culture and community. The hard part comes when reality doesn't match what you thought would happen. How can you cope? The answer lies in a combination of acceptance and action, and here are three steps to get you there.



## ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE UPSET

When things don't work out as you thought they would—whether it's not having the job you envisioned, a relationship breaking up, or an unsupportive parent—it's truly a loss, and you'll experience all the emotions associated with it. Friends and family may pressure you to "just get over it," but acknowledging and sitting with your feelings is an important step that will help you eventually move on. So allow yourself some time to be sad, disappointed and/or angry. You may even find it helpful to set a deadline; after that point, make an effort to get past the disappointment.

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STEP  
2

## REWRITE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

It's absolutely normal to have those sweeping, general negative thoughts like *I'm a failure*, but you want to try to "rewrite" them so you can regain your confidence. Doing this takes a combination of self-acceptance and a willingness to expand the scope of your expectations. Instead of focusing on what hasn't happened and what you haven't achieved, think of all the things that have gone as you had hoped and what you have accomplished in the other parts of your life.

Another helpful thing to do is to write down your negative thoughts, and

for each one, write a positive thought. Perhaps your career or your marriage hasn't been as fulfilling as you'd hoped, but you're a great artist or a dedicated volunteer at your local hospital. Pulling back and focusing on simple things that you enjoy, like spending time with friends, reading books or gardening, can also help you feel more positive, reframe your priorities and distract you from your disappointment.

STEP  
3

## REGROUP AND MAKE A PLAN OF ACTION

This involves setting smaller, doable goals, which will give you a sense of control over your situation and help

build your confidence. Write down your new goal(s) and specific steps you can take to meet them; aim to check off one step per week. If you're hoping to switch jobs or make new friends, your first goal might be as simple as joining a networking group or book club. Often just connecting with others who are in a similar situation is enough to make you feel like you're moving in the right direction.

Life often doesn't go as planned. The key is to continually reassess our expectations so we learn to appreciate what we can—and do—accomplish. ✨



GAIL SALTZ, MD, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, is a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the New York Presbyterian Hospital and a *TODAY* show contributor.

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