

# I CAN DO ANYTHING, SO HOW DO I CHOOSE?

**WITH COUNTLESS OPTIONS AND ALL THE FREEDOM I'LL EVER NEED, COMES THE PRESSURE TO FIND THE PERFECT LIFE.**

Jenny Norenberg

NEWSWEEK

Updated: 4:51 PM ET Oct 17, 2007

For the most part, my women friends and I were kids of upper-middle-class privilege, raised to believe that, with hard work and a little courage, the world was ours. We climbed mountains at summer camp, went to Europe on high-school class trips and took family vacations to New York City and the Grand Canyon. Our parents, like theirs before them, told their kids they could go anywhere and do anything. We took them at their word.

By the time we hit adulthood, technology and globalization had brought the world to our doorstep. Now in our mid-20s, we're unsteadily navigating a barrage of choices our mothers never had the chance to make. No one can complain about parents who started sentences with "When *you're* president..." But we are now discovering the difficulty of deciding just what makes us happy in a world of innumerable options.

Three years ago my friends and I barreled out of the University of Wisconsin ready to make our mark on the world. Julia headed to France to teach English. I started law school in Minneapolis. Marie and Alexis searched for work in San Francisco. Bridget started an internship in D.C. Kristina landed a job in Ireland. The list goes on. Scattering to our respective destinations, we were young enough to follow our crazy dreams but old enough to fend for ourselves in the real world. At a time when our lives were undergoing dramatic changes, so was America. Three months after receiving our diplomas, the Twin Towers came crashing down. We realized that, in more ways than one, the world was scarier and more complex than we'd ever imagined.

Since graduation, we've struggled to make our own happiness. It seems that having so many choices has sometimes overwhelmed us. In the seven years since I left home for college, I've had 13 addresses and lived in six cities. How can I stay with one person, at one job, in one city, when I have the world at my fingertips?

Moving from one place to the next, bouncing from job to job, my friends and I have experienced the world, but also gotten lost in it. There have been moments of self-doubt, frantic calls cross-country. ("I don't know a soul here!" "Do I really want to be a \_\_\_?") Frustrated by studying law, I joined friends in San Francisco to waitress for a summer and contemplate whether to return to school in Minnesota. Unhappy and out of work in Portland, Molly moved to Chicago. Loni broke up with a boyfriend and packed her tiny Brooklyn apartment into a U-Haul, heading for Seattle. Others took jobs or entered grad school anywhere from Italy to L.A. Some romances and friendships succumbed to distance, career ambition or simply growing up. We all lost some sleep at one point or another, at times feeling utterly consumed by cities of thousands, even millions, knowing that even local friends were just as transient as we were.

Like so many women my age, I remain unmarried at an age when my mother already had children. She may have had the opportunity to go to college, but she was expected to marry soon after. While my friends and I still feel the pressure to marry and have children, we've gained a few postcollege years of socially accepted freedom that our mothers never had.

The years between college and marriage are in many ways far more self-defining than any others. They're filled with the simplest, yet most complex, decisions in life: choosing a city, picking a career, finding friends and a mate--in sum, building a happy and satisfying life. For me and for my group of friends, these years have been eye-opening, confusing and fabulous at the same time.

The more choices you have, the more decisions you must make--and the more you have yourself to blame if you wind up unhappy. There is a kind of perverted contentedness in certainty born of a lack of alternatives. At my age, my mother, whether she liked it or not, had fewer tough decisions

to make. I don't envy the pressure she endured to follow a traditional career path and marry early. But sometimes I envy the stability she had.

Once again I've been unable to resist the lure of a new city. So, as I start my legal career in Chicago, I'm again building friendships from scratch, learning my way around a strange new place. Yes, my friends and I could have avoided the loneliness and uncertainty inherent in our journeys, and gone back to our hometowns or stayed in the college town where we had each other. But I doubt any one of us would trade our adventures for that life. I have a sense of identity and self-assurance now that I didn't have, couldn't have had, when I graduated from college. And I know someday I'll look back on this time--before I had a spouse, a home and children to care for--and be thankful for the years that just belonged to me.

URL: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/55960>

---

© 2007