It was time for the "Childfree Landslide News." Christine Fisher leaned forward and announced this in a soft voice that would sound surprisingly strong when it aired as part of her weekly (at least on Mars, she says, where weeks are 13 days) online show, the "Adult Space Child Free Podcast." She had just put in a day at the pharmaceutical company where she works and was home in her Newark apartment, shoes off, with her husband flopped on a sofa reading in the next room and her two cats roaming underfoot.
She started the podcast, a medley of commentary, news and personal narrative, to reach an audience outside "diaperland" about a year ago. Fisher knew as early as third grade that she did not want children. She had no interest in games that involved playing house or cooing over babies. In the world of childfree men and women, she is what's known as an "early articulator." Now 32, she has had her share of friends who became temporarily unavailable or disappeared when they had kids. Even in the Bay Area, which Fisher finds one of the better places for childfree mingling because of its cultural diversity -- San Francisco has one of the lowest ratios of kids of any U.S. city -- it can be hard for the childfree to connect.

Her listeners are a far-flung demographic, with a few hundred of various ages mostly in the United States, but also scattered as far away as the United Arab Emirates, Norway and Uruguay. The topics are almost as varied. On this winter Tuesday, Fisher reviewed medical news (part of the landslide) about hospital admissions from unsafe abortions in developing countries and hormone-related skin cancer risk, responded to listener feedback (someone named Snerdie wanted to know whether strollers are really allowed in casinos), listed her New Year's resolutions, and gave a "shout-out" to a friend who was ill. Then, in what's become her signature end to the show, she leaned into the microphone and said, "This is Chris the Fixed Kitty saying, 'Keep from breeding!' "

"It's very difficult to find other childfree people," said Fisher, who works part time as a quality assurance associate. "We tend to be a very quiet, closet-type group. When I mention I'm not having kids, I get a few specific reactions. Either someone tells me I will change my mind, which is probably more frequent with the older generation, or they try to persuade me. Or I get this really strange reaction, which is, 'You are so nice.' When you realize there is this public perception that you're cold or not caring, you learn to be quiet about it."

Childfree organizations have been around for a few decades, but new social groups, books, an online magazine, unscripted: the childfree life, and myriad Web sites (Childfree by Choice alone links to 20 other resources) have sprung up in the past few years, their visibility fueled by the Internet but also by changing attitudes. In the 1950s, there was an assumption that everyone would get married, then have children. Family life "proceeded in lockstep," said Stephanie Coontz, a professor at Evergreen State College in Washington and director of research and public education at the Council on Contemporary Families. As many as 80 percent of people thought that staying single and childless was "deviant or abnormal," she said. But in the 1970s, amid
turbulent social change, the availability of the birth control pill and public debate about population growth, those assumptions were challenged. These days, the "vast majority" of people think it is acceptable not to have kids or marry, said Coontz.

"My generation was looking at whether we could have careers and keep our own names," said Coontz. "The next generation was not as interested in that and not as defensive. A lot of these strong feelings are part of the process of sorting out how we deal with this changing world."

Personally, Coontz takes a "middle-of-the-road approach," she said. She has kids but supports the decision of those who choose not to. The childfree often spend more time caring for aging parents or relatives and also end up, through taxes, supporting the next generation. "It's the younger generation that is going to pay for our Social Security and foot some of the bills," she said. "We do owe parents who raise kids a debt."

Even so, the stigma remains. "We're seen as threatening institutions," said Teri Tith, an East Bay woman with a Web site called Purple Women & Friends. Jennifer L. Shawne, author of the 2005 tongue-in-cheek book "Baby Not on Board," was inundated with responses from readers -- and people who just heard about it. Many but not all thanked her, said Shawne, who lives in San Francisco. To some, a decision not to have kids is tantamount to a stand against religious or American values. "I did a lot of
radio call-in shows where I was called names," she said. "One man in Beaumont, Texas, said my husband and I deserved to die alone."

Several people interviewed for this story wanted to be known by a first name only or not identified at all because they were not, as one woman put it, "out." The woman said she was worried about her boyfriend, who is still uncertain about fatherhood. Would her feelings be a deal-breaker? It has happened before.

"There is still a public-policy and religious and cultural stigma," said Elaine, a Southern California blogger known as AlphaGirl, who is unapologetic about the adversarial tone of her Web site -- Childfree: Uncut. Unedited. Uncensored -- but didn't want to use her last name. "For some reason when someone comes forward and says, 'I want to have kids,' no one comes forward and says, 'You will change your mind.' But when I was younger and said kids weren't on the docket, people felt free to question the decision."

Some statistics suggest more women now are childless by choice, but it's hard to come up with a firm estimate because women, on average, are having children older, and demographers don't usually ask why they don't have them. The National Center for Health Statistics confirms that 6.6 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 44 called themselves voluntarily childless in 1995, up from 2.4 percent in 1982. And according to 1998 U.S. Census Bureau statistics, 19 percent of women 40 to 44 were childless, compared with 10 percent in that age group in 1976.

As a group, the childfree are no more homogenous than parents. They include gay and lesbian and single men and women who all, these days, face the same kind of question: Why don't you want kids? Some grappled with infertility, then embraced the childfree life. Others never had the urge to procreate, grew out of it or decided against kids because of a mate who didn't want them. And there are those who say they just can't afford it, especially in San Francisco.

"For us, it's well thought out," said Teresa Marchese, a fitness trainer, whose husband, Jay Mercado, is an artist. "It's the whole financial aspect. Neither of us has the option of quitting work. We rent and we have a fluctuating income. The people I know who are having kids, they're moving back to Oklahoma. We don't want to leave the city."
In one survey of childfree couples, most ranked independence, marital satisfaction and the lack of desire to have kids as top reasons not to have them. To them, the decision was not a "lifestyle" choice, said Laura Scott, a Virginia writer who’s surveyed more than 170 childfree couples about their decision for a project on the subject. Being able to travel or sleep late were benefits, not motivations, for most, she said.

Attitudes about kids also vary. There are childfree people who are annoyed by what they see as a kidcentric society, where they are constantly forced to listen to people talk about their children’s schools, precious achievements or poop. They resent employee benefits that are offered only to parents, or what they see as the burden of doing more than their share of work while people with kids rush off to pick them up. "Work-family benefits?" writes AlphaGirl. "Yeah, right. Lactation rooms in the workplace? Oh, please." She once confronted the human resources department at the large bank where she worked to demand the same flexibility given her co-workers who were parents. The bank didn’t make a policy change, and Elaine said she is disappointed in the lack of progress toward treating all employees equally. "I don't think one group should come before any other," she said.

Many childfree people want to spend time around children, the kind who can be handed back. They just want to find a social universe that doesn’t revolve around children.

"We're getting harder to ignore," said Tith. "We're controversial whether we mean to be or not." Even the term childfree can be contentious. There are people who prefer a hyphenated child-free or childless, names that, to others, imply that something is missing.

Tith joined No Kidding!, a social club founded by a Toronto teacher in 1984, after moving from the Bay Area to Canada because of her husband's job. Through No Kidding! she joined a poker group, worked on the organization's annual convention and made friends who didn't have kids. When she returned to live in a rural East Bay town, she co-founded the San Francisco Bay Area Childfree Meetup, a group that gets together for dinner and winetasting, and started her blog, where she posts her own comments and links to other childfree bloggers -- even some who are not, including a Silicon Valley moms group, that also links to her. ("They found my blog to be an even and reasonable voice, and I was terribly flattered," she says of the moms group).
"Some of us do hate kids, but that makes me uncomfortable because I don't," she said. Tith came to her childfree decision by circumstance, after a medical condition made it clear she couldn't conceive. Married at 22, she and her husband split up, partly, she said, because of the strain of fertility issues. "To me, I would always be one half of an infertile couple," she said. Nine years ago she remarried. Her husband, who thinks that the world is crowded enough, did not want kids.

"I assumed I would want kids," she said. "I had to accept that I couldn't and I made a choice to. But every woman's story is different. You hear all different ones."

Lingba, a Potrero Hill lounge, is crowded and noisy on a winter night when the members of the newly formed San Francisco Childfree Meetup find one another at a corner table. There are about a dozen this time, more than at the previous month's inaugural event. There are several couples, two married women who came without their husbands and many single people. Most are from San Francisco, but a few live other places, including Novato, where, one woman said, "Yuppies go to breed."

"When I said I was happily childfree I might as well have said I was a serial killer," she said.

"I just never realized I did want kids," said Valerie Francescato, the group's founder, who works for a furniture manufacturer. What stops the rude questions, she said, is to say she can't have kids.

"I had a hysterectomy, but that's not related to why I don't want kids," said another woman, who is from Australia, where she felt as if being childfree wasn't such an issue. After moving to the Bay Area, she said, she finds it hard to socialize with people in her apartment building because they all have kids and they leave her and her husband out of their social plans.

"I said we'd have to rent a couple of kids," she said. "Then I ran across this group and said, 'Thank God.' "

An Iranian American woman who is a financial analyst said she'd been asked if she didn't want kids because she'd been abused or neglected. "They assume something is wrong with me," she said. "I'm 35. I won't change my mind. I hang out with a lot of
Europeans who are a lot more accepting of it. Why do I have to explain myself? It happens so much I'm angry."

"Your best friends disappear. They fall off the end of the earth when they have kids," said Rick, a scientist whose best friend moved to Palo Alto to be closer to work, then became unavailable.

Rick said he's "child neutral" but is leaning toward not wanting them. "I would have to be crazy about someone, then it would have to be financially right." His decision has prompted colleagues to assume he's gay, since he lives in San Francisco and isn't coupled up, with kids. "Whatever," he said. "Some people are so narrow-minded." Men face many of the same stereotypes that women do, he said. People think it's a selfish decision or that there is something wrong with him.

"Do you notice kids in strollers?" asked Rick, as Meetup members sipped their drinks.

"I don't," said the financial analyst.

"I'll stop and pet a dog, but I won't stop and say, 'That's so cute,' to a baby," said Rick.

"I just like peace and quiet," said the analyst.

"I can't imagine waking up four or five times a night," Rick said.

"Friends ask me, 'How's your fabulous life?' said the analyst. "And I say, 'Fabulous!' "

Most of the talk was not about children, or a lack of them, but about hobbies and recent trips and interests. Like people on a first or second date, the childfree were trying to figure out where and if their lives intersected.

Chris Fisher first got involved in the childfree world as a college student in Toledo, Ohio, by joining a mailing list. She was too busy in graduate school -- a stint in medical school before finding her way to a graduate program in biology -- to look for other childfree people. But she was settled enough in her decision by her mid-20s to undergo a tubal ligation.
"I need to do an episode about that saga," she said, in a phone interview during her commute home from work, a time she uses to record her thoughts on an MP3 or return calls. "I was 25 and had known I was going to have my tubes tied eventually."

The time was right because she had health insurance and was about to move. The problem: Her doctor was hesitant because of her age and childless status. "I could have gotten a handgun faster," she said.

Eventually the doctor was "worn down," she said, but only after he saw in her medical records that she'd been stating her intention not to have kids for years. She had to sign a consent form and wait for 30 days to undergo the procedure, guidelines that exist in many states.

"I'm set," she said. "I got a doctor to agree to do this, but it's difficult for women across the country."

She met her husband at a fencing club. She mentioned she didn't want to be a mother, but was looking forward to being an aunt. "He said he wanted to be an uncle," she said. "That was very interesting, in my eyes." Her parents have accepted the couple's decision not to have kids, although they initially thought their only child would change her mind, Fisher said. "They have to settle for grand-kitties," she said.

She and her husband moved from the Midwest to the Bay Area in 2005 for work. He is a physicist in Silicon Valley. "It's hard to express how different this place is," she said. "There is an understanding here that there are many things people devote their lives to. ... It's not the mommies and the non-mommies. We all live in the same world. There is a lot more we have in common than we don't have in common."

Fisher recently scaled back to part-time work so she'd have more time for other pursuits -- photography, writing, podcasting, reading (especially science fiction and horror) and spending time with her husband, who arrived home one Tuesday as she was podcasting and sat in the next room reading. He sometimes makes sound effects, but leaves the content to her. It was while talking to him one day that she came up with the nickname Fixed Kitty. "We were talking about some comment and I said, 'That's why I'm not a parent. I'm fixed. I'm a fixed kitty.' "
"This is where I get to look like Carrie Fisher instead of Chris Fisher," she said, as she put on her headphones, which did make her look a little like the "Star Wars" actress, if you ignored the long pony tail hanging down her back. At various times she had to fend off a cat, which wanted to jump on her lap, then went to sit in an empty box left out for his benefit.

She talked about her New Year's resolution to come up with a better response to people who don't understand her decision. Why is it people feel they can ask if she has kids? Would they come up and ask if she were gay?

"When someone asks why you don't have kids, it gets very personal," she said. "They need to rethink the assumption that there is something wrong if you don't."