

# *Running Out of Everything But People*

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**October 3, 1993**

Last fall, as my contribution to the Congregation's service auction, I offered to sell the right to select a topic for a sermon which I would then write and deliver on an appropriate Sunday morning. A number of people bid on this dubious opportunity, but eventually Glenn Johnson had the high bid and purchased the right to name a sermon topic. I was surprised, as I always am on such occasions, to see how much interest there was in this proposal, given the fact that it is not very difficult to suggest sermon topics to me. For the most part, you need only make an intriguing suggestion as we shake hands at the door following the service and there is a very good chance that your suggestion will eventuate in a sermon. In truth, however, we were selling something else: the special value of knowing that because the right has been purchased, the suggestion cannot be ignored.

Shortly after the Service Auction, it became clear that with the holidays looming ahead, it was unlikely that I would be able to redeem my promise before the beginning of my sabbatical. However, Glenn and I corresponded during the spring, and he indicated that he would like me to prepare a sermon on the challenge presented to the human community by the unchecked growth of human population on this planet.

I might have known that Glenn would find my weak spot. The issue of population growth has been a concern of mine for a long time, but it is one I have always felt reluctant to tackle in a sermon. To begin with, it has always seemed slightly hypocritical, given the fact that I have already raised my children, to be lecturing younger people about the dangers of unfettered procreation, and it seemed pointless to lecture those who are past that phase of their lives. What is more, concern about population growth seems always to focus on some moment in the future when the consequences of our reproductive irresponsibility will eventuate in catastrophe. And, more to the point, what new information might I hope to add to a subject we all know very well, intellectually at least. However, a deal is a deal, and money had already passed hands, so I found myself beginning to think about the issues of population growth.

I began by remembering the evolution of my own attitudes on this subject. When Beverly and I were first married, we both were enamored of the idea of a large family. At once point we sat down and together drew up a list of names for our prospective children. We ended up with a list of twelve names. I don't know how we thought we would ever support so many offspring on a minister's salary, but then, college juniors have a tendency not to be deterred by practical matters.

Fortunately, we learned a few things in the five and a half years which passed between the time of our marriage and the arrival of our first child. One of the things we learned

was that much as we loved children, it would be irresponsible of us to breed so thoughtlessly. After our second child had been born, we decided that we would adopt a child, because though we still wanted a larger family, we had come to the conclusion that adoption was a more satisfying and socially responsible way to achieve that goal. Mother nature, we then discovered, has an inexhaustible sense of ironic humor. No sooner had we adopted our third son than we discovered that Beverly was pregnant with our daughter. And so, while we did not bring twelve children into the world, neither did we achieve what we believed was a responsible limit of two children.

At this point, I found myself thinking about the demographics of our families of origin. My father was one of ten children. Of those children, one third produced no children of their own. The average number of children in the families of that generation was about 3. Of my mother's three children, one third of us produced no children. The average number of children per family was 2.5. In Beverly's family, one third of the children in her generation produced no children, and the average number of children per family was 2.25. Extending the survey to the next generation, it begins to appear that my children's generation will produce ever fewer children.

This is not a very large sample, nor is it a scientific one, but it served to reinforce my experiential impression which suggests that families in our culture are growing smaller. I don't know whether that is because of economic factors, or social and cultural changes, or because of more effective birth control mechanisms, or because of an increased sense of responsibility, or all of the above, but if those numbers are at all reflective of the larger world, something important may be happening out there.

At the same time I was considering the matter at this personal and anecdotal level, I suddenly became aware that almost everyone I was reading had suddenly rediscovered The Rev. Thomas Robert Malthus, the English economist who, at the end of the eighteenth century warned in a famous and influential essay that human population would grow exponentially, while resources could grow only arithmetically, and that therefore, unless population could be checked, the human race was facing starvation, disease and disaster. In a book entitled *LIVING WITHIN LIMITS*, Garrett Hardin, professor emeritus of human ecology, picks up Malthus' line of thought and argues that the population crisis is not something that will happen in the future, that it is already upon us, that many of the social ills we confront in this country and around the world are intractable precisely because we refuse to understand that they are rooted in a run-away population explosion. In his book *PREPARING FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY*, Paul Kennedy begins with a review of Malthusian theory, and suggests that one of the challenges we face as we move into the twenty-first century is the closing of the global frontier, the loss of empty space into which excess populations may expand. In his book, *A MORAL SENSE*, James Q. Wilson comments upon the role that population pressures play in creating a sense of indifference to those around us. And even in *WALKING TOGETHER*, a book by Conrad Wright written as an historical analysis of the challenges facing Unitarian Universalism, there is the suggestion that one of the great questions we face relates to the fact that the individualism which we have prized and cherished may be a consequence of a brief abnormal moment in human history, a time of surplus land and resources--a moment

which the author believes is coming to an end because of the inexorable growth of human population. He wonders whether our kind of religious values and the cultural structures they have engendered will be able to survive in a world in which we are running out of everything but people.

In addition to the books, several church members were kind enough to send me articles and statistics on the topic. One of these came from Keith Nier. It included a copy of a review from *Scientific American* of a book by Massimo Livi-Bacci, entitled *A CONCISE HISTORY OF WORLD POPULATION*. I have not been able to find the book, but the reviewer reports that the author relies upon a "thick skein" of statistics and demographic detail to report "news exciting enough to warrant public celebration in the streets." This Italian demographer concludes from his study of the statistics and his graphing of human population from the paleolithic to the present, that the human growth rate in the industrial world peaked in 1900 and has been declining steadily ever since, having reached a negative growth rate in some European countries, and that the human population growth rate in the poor countries of the so-called developing world are following the same trend, having peaked about 1970, falling even more steeply than those in the developing world in the two decades since. The reviewer concludes:

A worldwide demographic transition is patently in full progress. Conceding at least one doubling of the head count in the next century, we still don't face runaway growth.

So which is it? Have we solved the population problem, or, like those who have suddenly rediscovered old Thomas Malthus, are we in deep trouble because we have refused to take the population problem seriously? As I think about it, it is possible that both are right. After all, that quotation from the book review calmly embraces a truly horrific inevitability. "Conceding at least one doubling of the head count in the next century...." Think what that means--twice as many people on the planet within the next century!

And the problem is, of course, that there is virtually nothing we can do to prevent that eventuality. Changing reproductive rates is like applying the brakes to a speeding train or turning a large oil tanker. It will happen but the consequences of a decision are slow to occur. Demographic change may be real, but slow to impact the population problem, Reversing the growth rate is essential, but any growth rate at all ultimately means more people, and our lowered reproduction rate is working from a much enlarged base. If Mr. Livi-Bacci is right, then the circumstances have combined to produce important changes in human reproductive patterns, but the consequences of those changes will be seen a long way in the future if at all. The most we have now are some encouraging trends and some discouraging realities.

The situation is complicated even more by changes in how and where we live. I was talking the other day with a colleague who still follows the ancient custom of Unitarian Universalist ministers who spend a large part of their vacations in Maine. He was reporting that on the trip home, as he was driving onto the Garden State Parkway, it suddenly occurred to him that there, stretched out before his eyes, were more automobiles than he had seen in an entire month in Maine. In this country and all across the globe,

there is a steady migration of people into urban centers, placing ever greater stress on the ecological and institutional bases of human life. It is not just that there are more people on the planet, but that people are forced together in ever larger aggregations. If our physical and social infrastructures are crumbling, if our political structures seem strangely inadequate, if our cultural inhibitions grow increasingly more impotent, if violence and fear and rage seem out of control, who can doubt that the pressures of population play some central role in that general incompetence, ineptitude and hopelessness with which we tackle our problems?

Nor is it only a matter of where we live, but also a matter of who makes up this growing population. Whenever we talk about population growth we tend to focus on the number of births. But the fact of the matter is that the number of births becomes problematical when it is out of balance with the number of deaths. It is given to each of us once to be born and once to die. But the number of years between these two events impacts population numbers profoundly. One way to look at the population problem is to suggest that is not just that too many are being born; it is also that too many of us are living too long. And, of course, as we grow older, most of us require greater support from the social institutions which make modern life possible. As one example, an inordinate portion of the health-care budget is expended in the last few weeks and days and even hours of life, in a futile struggle to evade the inevitability of death.

And, of course, it is not only where we live, and how long we live, but how we live that matters in dealing with the meaning of the population catastrophe. While it is true that the reproduction rate has dropped significantly in the developed world, it is also true that the impact of each child born in the developed world upon the fragile and non-renewable resources of the planet grows with every passing day. The time was, and in many poor nations still is, when a child could live his or her entire life and leave the planet not much changed as a result. A child born into a middle-class American or European family today will consume tons of irreplaceable resources during a lifetime and leave behind mountains of waste which will still be here long after the individual who produced that waste has fallen from memory. In some sense, the birth of a middle-class Euro-American child may be a greater catastrophe for the planet than the birth of dozens of children in undeveloped, impoverished lands--a reality we ignore when we talk about the richness of our land, and its ability to afford to care for its children.

And yet, how do we confront the realities of this problem? We love children--we are conditioned by eons of genetic development and by millennia of cultural influences to love children, to care for them, to protect them, to help them grow and develop into the very best they can become. What kind of society would we be if we ceased loving our children?

And we respect and love our elders. They are our link to a world we can experience only through the tales they tell; they are a quick source of wisdom and insight that only time and experience can produce and they provide us with role models as we move inexorably through the stages of our own lives. What kind of society would we be if we taught

ourselves to disrespect and to disregard our elders? How do we retain our humanity in the face population problem defined as too many people at one or the other end of life?

Clearly there are some concrete steps that the human community needs to take in the face of the growing global population. Governments such as our own need to support--with money, with moral suasion and with research--efforts to continue and extend the demographic transformation which Mr.Livi-Bacci reports. We should be making contraceptives available to all who are willing to use them, and we should be engaged in explaining to all who will listen the urgency of restricting reproduction--not only in far away lands, not only in inner-city ghettos, but in Short Hills and Summit and Chatham and New Providence and Westfield and everywhere.

Beyond this, we need to continue the effort to help people understand the impact their lives have upon this living planet and its ability to support a population which will almost certainly double in the next century. Every item offered for sale ought to carry a warning label, indicating the non-renewable resources that went into its manufacture and asking the consumer to consider whether this purchase is necessary.

And beyond this, we need to look at the crises in our social, political, economic life through the lens of the demographic realities of an larger, older population. If we were able to do this we might discover that the slogans, the goals, the dreams of the eighteenth century need to be reformulated if they are to be effective in the twenty-first century.

But above all, the population crisis presents us with a spiritual challenge. If the planet is to be able to support a population which will double before it stabilizes, and, indeed, if the human race is to achieve that promised stabilization of its reproductive rates, it is critical that we begin to think of ourselves as one people, all children of one mother, the Planet Earth. So long as we permit divisions of race, or nationality, or culture, or accomplishment to loom large in our thinking, we will always be inclined to think that the population problem is centered in some other place, with some other people. We will be tempted to focus on the irresponsibility of others, of poor ghetto residents, or people who live at a subsistence level some where else on the planet. We will still hear governments urging their people to reproduce at a higher rate, lest they be out-bred by a competing ethnic group. We will still make our choices in terms of the short-range advantage rather than the long-term good.

In an overcrowded world, in a world running out of everything but people, there is simply no room for "we and they." There is only room for "us," and then only if patterns of mutual responsibility emerge among us. In an overcrowded world, there is no room for nationalisms and ethnic divisions, except as they be subordinated to an over-riding globalism. Increasingly, we are one people, sharing one home, the planet earth. Our differences serve to enrich the patterns of our lives; they must not be permitted to blind us to the underlying commonality in which they rest.

And, in a world that is running out of everything but people, we need to develop a new understanding of death as part of the life process. Just as we welcome and rejoice in the

birth of a new child, seeing it not as one more mouth to be filled, but as rich and unexplored potential, so we are challenged to accept death as that last gift we give our world when life has used us up and the time has come for us to make room for the development of that new and unexplored potential.

It seems clear to me that do what we will, there are going to be a great many more human beings on this planet before the next century is over. If we have any hope of preparing for that demographic inevitability, we need to develop the universalist dream of a religion for one world--a religion based upon an affirmation of the unity of all people, upon a commitment of each to the welfare of all and to the well-being of the planet, and an acceptance of the natural processes of life and death. How we shape and structure and advance that kind of religious faith is one of the major challenges we face.

Increasingly, I am convinced that we must find a way to assert in a compelling manner the great truth that we are all one people, all children of the earth, responsible to each other and to the planet, all embarked upon the same journey, all destined to the same end. Increasingly I am convinced that only as that great truth becomes the faith underlying all humanity's varied religious options, will we find the strength and the courage and the wisdom to wrestle with the hard options presented us by the realities of a world running out of everything but people.