

## The Family

"Civilization is a race between education and disaster" Albert Einstein

Naturally, as overpopulation is one of the root causes of our global economic problems, overpopulation is one of the root causes of our global social problems, because economic and social factors cannot be separated in examination. We should have recognized this and acted upon it long ago, but we haven't. We seek to excuse the effects of overpopulation, but the numbers in themselves are staggering. Ten million children are living on the streets of Brazilian cities, abandoned by their families. Each year in the United States more than 1 million teens become pregnant; more than 800,000 of these pregnancies are unintended. Teen pregnancies in the United States cost state and federal governments an estimated \$16.5 billion in welfare payments in 1985. Sixty percent of all Aid to Families with Dependent Children recipients had their first child as a teen. America leads the industrialized nations of the world in the number of teen pregnancies, births and abortions, counting white teens alone. (40) A National Academy of Sciences study estimates that on any given night a total of 100,000 children of intact families are homeless, while yet more children have run away or been kicked out by their parents. The report says that children under 18 are the fastest growing group among the nation's homeless. (41) Homelessness has been a fact of life for years in impoverished nations. The number of environmental refugees--people who can no longer make a living from the land due to drought, deforestation, etc.--grows daily around the world. Teenage suicide is an unfortunate fact of life in many urban areas.

Social "engineering" to improve a way of life for those at the bottom of the economic scale is costly, and in many cases, marginally effective at best. Many people are aware that they are superfluous to the needs of the economic and social system. The erosion of our living conditions, and therefore our social fabric, becomes manifest in those institutions which are the messengers of social values: The family, education and religion. The family in crisis has been a topic of discussion in the popular media for years.

Debate has raged for decades as to whether overpopulation plays a part in social unrest, unemployment and decaying living conditions. Advocates of the present system maintain that none of these factors have a direct causal relationship to overpopulation; that our large population has been the source of our wealth and general well-being. There is no doubt that population growth has produced economic benefits. There is a reason to examine the fact that the situation has turned around in the last several decades. The economic effects of ecological decline are becoming more apparent and impossible to ignore. In areas where there are large urban populations the impact of the numbers of people is also impossible to ignore. We seem unable to recognize that there is a natural limit to the size of the population of an urban area. When we go beyond that natural limit it is impossible to reasonably provide for the inhabitants. Our large urban areas are studies in crisis management in which urban planning becomes a nightmare. That people have little opportunity in these urban areas is obvious. Large segments of the population are barely subsisting in Mexico City, Calcutta, Sao Paulo and many other areas, some of which have populations that are expected to double in the next few decades.

The social decline of cities in industrialized nations is becoming more apparent. Cities with large populations fight a losing battle with social problems, such as increased poverty, crime, decaying infrastructure and various other symptoms of the effects of overcrowding. But if our

human population is outstripping the capacity of our environment to support our needs, and most evidence suggests strongly that it is, why do our traditions ignore the obvious? To find the answer to that question we must look at the cultural environment which formed and nurtured our present traditions.

Our thoughts and ideas do not occur in a vacuum. The cultural values of a nation are rooted in the institutions of education, religion and family. We are shaped in the image that results from the input of these messengers, and our behavior and decisions that we make for the rest of our lives reflect the traditions handed down to us. These institutions are interrelated in their effects upon the individual. For the most part, though, the family provides its children with an educational and religious framework which is fleshed out in later life by more formal programs of organized religion and organized education. There is ample debate as to which of these institutions should play the greater role in inculcating social and moral values in children. This concern probably stems from the generally accepted notion that values acquired by children during their early developmental phase become the foundation on which they function as adults. In any event, each of us is essentially a product of our family, religious and educational heritage. It is therefore imperative that the mores, values and information dispensed by these institutions embody a clear and concise notion of our ultimate aspirations as members of the human race. As a society we need clearly defined goals concerning our present and future life on this planet. Our social messengers should provide us with the desire and means to attain these goals.

The family is the primary messenger of social values. Parents transmit the values that were given them as the wisdom of their time. Siblings transmit the information or misinformation from their peers to younger family members. Children absorb the example and guidance provided by their parents as to what behavior is appropriate or inappropriate to reach their goals. The impact of this instruction from the family is undeniable.

The family in the past has generally determined its number of desired children in relation to the economic, social and religious systems of its time. Agrarian societies desired large families. One reason children were of value was that their contribution of labor benefited the family. Additionally, because of the high mortality rates of earlier times, a large family was desirable to ensure maintenance of the family structure. Parents with too few children might well outlive their offspring and thus be denied emotional and economic security in later life. This latter factor remains a major impetus for large families in undeveloped countries where starvation and disease make a child's growth to maturity uncertain. When early childhood mortality is lessened in a population, the impetus to have a large family decreases.

Even in the latter stages of the Industrial Age when children provided less economic support, birth control was not seen as a necessity. The possible methods of controlling family size were not as effective as those we have today, making it unlikely that family size would be reduced despite the lessening economic spur to raise a large family. The lack of any social pressure or tradition favoring smaller families or discouraging large families gave momentum in the United States to the "Baby Boom" of the decades following World War II. Prosperity during this period encouraged an average of 3.9 children per family, though the society was rapidly moving away from a rural lifestyle. The complete lack of understanding of the need for conservation made the future appear "unlimited."

Presently the major factor in desired family size is economic. Caring for children is expensive, and large families in the modern industrial nations are generally at an economic disadvantage. Birth control, though widely used, is seen only as a means of limiting family size for personal reasons. Implicit in this view of birth control is the idea that there is nothing wrong with having more

children, provided that the parents' economic situation improves. This is an attitude that has been imprinted by example and serves to determine future reproductive behavior--that family size should be determined by the personal economic status of the couple raising the children. There is actually a certain amount of social pressure which maligns people who have a reasonable income and are not doing their "duty" by reproducing. Advocates of larger families attempt to convince us that our future will be compromised for want of sufficient numbers of children.

There is a great deal of social support for procreation. It is unfortunate--and deadly--that the ramifications of excessive world population are not the basis for determining reasonable family size. Considering the effects of population on such problems as contamination of water sources, industrial pollution, the alarming growth of the world's largest cities and the removal of land providing habitats for wild animals, an individual's decision to reproduce is probably the most important life decision. Yet few families are aware of the negative impact of population expansion and therefore do not pass this knowledge on to their children.

The time between assimilation of change in the structure of society and appropriate reproductive behavior has been, and continues to be, painfully slow in comparison to assimilation of technological advances. Traditions worldwide regarding reproductive behavior have remained rigid in maintaining a human population far in excess of manageability, though some countries have been concerned about their population problems and have made attempts to reduce their population. These attempts have always been in response to obvious population stress, however, rather than a recognition that human population should always be in balance with the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. There has been no attempt to relate the reproductive responsibility of the individual to the larger picture of world concern--that we must at some point cut back on our human numbers if we wish to make headway in seeking solutions to our problems. Few people are aware that we are having more children today in the United States in terms of actual numbers than we were during the peak population increase of the 1950s and 1960s.

One of the obstacles to limiting our families is the fact that the cultural information passed on to children by the family on sexual and reproductive behavior varies widely in quality and quantity. The desirable number of children to raise in relation to the carrying capacity available is not the focus of discussion, and it is left to the individual couple to determine that number. Although large families are not the social norm at this time in the industrialized nations, no recognizable pressure is being exerted to ensure a decline in family size. Parents want grandchildren, and many people follow their traditional family patterns of reproductive behavior with little contemplation of the results. Few parents are aware of the global consequences of having more than one or two children, and therefore their children are not aware of any view other than the traditional.

Another contribution to the lagging social response to overpopulation is the myth of the large happy family as supported by various media. As fewer children are needed for any specific purpose--our ability to replenish our species has been overwhelmingly established--most people in industrialized nations are having fewer children. Yet socially, we still have the popular notion that a large family is somehow beneficial, and that the only child is lonely and maladjusted in comparison to children with siblings. Our traditions consider large families a somewhat quaint but harmless aberration in today's society. Candidates for public office feel compelled to demonstrate their good social standing by appearing on television surrounded by their numerous beaming children. Mother of the Year awards are inevitably given to a woman with several children. Popular television programs idealistically portray large families as bastions of love and understanding which, despite the usual conflicts and problems, manage to look to the future with unquenchable optimism. Large

families are depicted as the nuclear units of a better era, an era when values were more concrete as a result of the family interaction making its members less selfish. The only child, in contrast, has always had a stigma of being more unreasonable and demanding, in spite of the fact that sociological studies do not bear out this characterization.

Toni Falbo, a social psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin has studied the "only child" for 11 years and says:

"Despite the stereotype that single children are selfish, lonely and maladjusted, there is really no strong evidence that any of those things are true. Onlys are really indistinguishable from firstborns or people from a two-child family. Kids from each of these groups tend to be above average in self-esteem, educational attainment and achievement motivation in general. Only children generally are as popular as their peers, marry at the same rate and stay married as long as their peers." (42)

But the traditional argument that only children will not do as well as those with siblings still serves to pressure parents. The embedded social wisdom says they should have a second child who will help in stabilizing the first, and vice versa.

Such social considerations are niceties that appear ludicrous in our present condition of population excess. In a world already teeming with billions of people, large families are not only archaic, they are tragic. Is it easier to love several children than one? Can several children be more effectively cared for than one? The more pressing question is this: Will larger numbers of children inherit a world of diminished opportunity, despoiled beauty and ultra-regulation due to our lack of responsibility in reproductive behavior? To those who view population control in any form as a Draconian measure, complete with visions of totalitarian commandments interfering with people's right to reproduce, consider the possible alternatives. We can continue as at present, compounding the problems which befoul our air, water and land. We can continue to relegate a great deal of our human population to a life of miserable poverty. We can continue to race to our own extinction. The idea that there is something abnormal about the wretched conditions under which the majority live has not permeated the popular psyche. The idea that each of us as individuals have some responsibility in the population crisis is generally ignored, or perceived as negative thinking.

Our present attitudes toward overpopulation and reproduction are based on denial of reality. "Everyone" knows that the world is overpopulated. It is so ingrained that it appears we no longer take it into account as being a problem within our control. In the United States we can point to a declining birth rate, but our population is still growing (In fact, we are just beginning to see the emergence of another major baby boom). There is no negative connotation if a couple decides to have more than one or two children. It is considered their private decision and the effects beyond their personal situation are not considered. The "miracle" of life is repeated again and again. Women worry about the biological clock that might limit their chances to have a second, third or fourth child. In discussions of the subject, the choice to reproduce is met with congratulations and admiration for the supposed selflessness of a couple willing to raise more than one or two children. It is expected that a couple with a single child will provide siblings so that the child will not grow up abnormally. The joy of parenthood is stressed and fertility is admired. Having no children is still considered out of the ordinary, and there is the expectation that a couple will eventually reproduce. If a couple does not reproduce they are considered to be selfish in wanting to live a lifestyle without children. "Birth Dearth" proponents make it seem our duty to have more children if we are to avoid the collapse of the Western World. Mentioning the "private" matter of family size is considered bad

form. It is considered to be a decision only for the two people involved, not a matter for interference by the state or society as a whole, despite its impact on both.

Most people are ignorant of the impact of their reproductive decisions. People in sparsely populated geographic areas feel that their reproductive behavior is not as harmful because the population in their particular area is not as immediate a source of social and economic pressure. They apparently do not realize that their children might not live their entire lives in the sparsely populated area, and, more importantly, they do not realize that their children will still be contributing to the resource drain and other problems associated with increasing population. But then, few questions are deemed proper when confronting our pro-birth biases. The benefits of motherhood and family are not questioned as to their effects on the society as a whole, no matter how large or inappropriate the family might be. The current epidemic of teenage pregnancy is a source of concern, and rightly so, because of the inadequate ability of children to care for children, and the economic burden on the society to support the children, but there is little concern for the fact that these births contribute to our currently more than adequate population. We are concerned only about the timing.

Adults also indicate that their family has grown unintentionally, as though reproduction was not at all in their control. That is typical of the general avoidance of responsibility when it comes to reproduction. Many of our circumstances in life are beyond our control, but the decision to limit the size of the family is not one of them. We make reproductive decisions in our lives by not making a decision at all. Lack of information about the effects of our reproductive behavior makes it seem unimportant whether a couple has one or 10 children. Our present traditions carry the expectation that children will grow up, marry and have a family as large as they wish, tempered only by their economic status, if they happen to consider economic status as an argument for or against children. This romance with tradition is our biggest obstacle to effective social change that is imperative in our present circumstance. The all-pervasive bias of thousands of years encourages excessive procreation. It is socially approved behavior of the highest order. Any idea to the contrary is considered negative and beyond serious consideration, unless, of course, the people in question are poor and still have several children. Then it is assumed that they lack good sense.

The specific couples' ego-investment in reproducing their own images by combining their genetic makeup is another factor in traditions favoring excessive reproduction. How could one miss the fun of seeing how another example of the procreational experience turns out? Attempting to have a child opposite in sex from the first can to some extent explain the desire for a second child. Self-indulgence can explain further children. The pleasures of interaction between the children and parents are one of the reasons given for having more than one child and, while there is no denying these pleasures exist, it is not a cogent argument for overpopulating the planet. Because the ability to raise children is considered an indicator of stability and maturity, there is the unfortunate social misinterpretation that having and being forced to raise a child will magically bestow stability and maturity upon the parents. It will make them "grow up." Few people think from the outset that they are not well equipped emotionally to raise children, though our social problems indicate that raising children is a formidable task. There are people who could do an admirable job of raising more than one or two if the rest of us would refrain from having any. In a perfect world only excellent parents would have children and there would be no overpopulation, but the chances of that sort of regulation are far less than the present fears surrounding an equitable rationing of reproductive behavior.

Traditions concerning male choices in the decision to have children contribute heavily to our current situation of excessive population. Males traditionally have sought to father a male child, and

this unfortunate cross-cultural trend on our planet continues, though the importance of a male child to carry on the family name or inherit the family business has waned in modern industrial cultures. But although our age-old traditions have little or no logic in our present circumstances, we do not make any changes. One would think that we were all feudal families in the Europe of ancient past, each with a coat of arms to defend at all costs.

Socially, we bear the cost of these individual decisions promoted by our traditions. We are beset by a host of problems which seem devoid of solutions. Worldwide, unbelievable numbers of children are abandoned to fend for themselves as best they can in a tragic tableau that is an indictment of our claim to humanity. The lack of positive male images in many families affects such socially costly behavior as drug use, teen-age suicide, teen-age pregnancy, alcoholism and abusive behavior. Single parent families, most of them headed by women, form a growing segment of our society which is left to grinding poverty. The majority of the children in this vicious cycle grow up with the deck stacked against them emotionally, economically and educationally. The continuation of the cycle of poverty is assured through generations. The number of men who leave their families and then neglect the financial support of their children is an international disgrace. Amid the cries of outrage at child support levels from men who are trying to rebuild shattered lives, one must wonder at the fact that many of the same men go on to father more children. Though population control will not solve all of our social problems, an increasingly larger population makes goals of social betterment unlikely. In addition, the social systems created to confront these crises are overburdened to the point of collapse by our procreative excess.

Overpopulation, as we have stated, is an economic problem. It is impossible to quantify the effect of the lack of economic opportunity for young people and their observation of the lack of economic opportunity for their parents. As plants close down and jobs are lost, it is difficult not to interpret these economic trends as evidence that many people are superfluous to the needs of the society. There is the undeniable impression that as people increase in number, their value decreases. We like to think of ourselves as unique, and it is not easy to realize that as humans we are governed by the same forces of supply and demand as any other commodity when it comes to our place in the economic system. The conventional wisdom of the Western nations regarding countries of the Far East with population problems has been that life is not as highly valued in those countries as it is in the West. Life is not highly valued, however, in any situation in which people are crowded by the overwhelming mass of human numbers and are denied access to meaningful participation in society. Life is not highly valued in the cities of the West in which people turn away from crimes being committed, from the problems of the homeless, and from the general deterioration before them. Human dignity is a meaningless phrase when people are competing for the last scraps of garbage in dumps, living in squalor that defies change. Young people envisioning their future are not blind. They can see that they are inheriting a world with immense problems. According to polls they are not filled with the unquenchable optimism that their political leaders offer as an ultimate solution.

Until recently, the fertility rate in the United States has been declining and "experts" such as Ben Wattenberg have been calling for incentives for women to have more children so that our society as we know it will not collapse. In speaking of collapse, he is referring to the expansionist economic system, not the underlying, all-important ecological support system. Other industrialized nations have proposed similar incentives, and some have even implemented them. Our tax system provides one such incentive, traditionally allowing a deduction for each new birth. It is not likely that this incentive encourages very many people to have more children as it does not mean much in the economic life of the family, but it is a reward of sorts, maintaining and encouraging the bias toward

having children at any cost. It is a policy which is indicative of the traditional atmosphere which has allowed our population to balloon. Fortunately, incentives at this point in time are not very effective. People in industrialized nations are generally aware that the incentives being offered will not offset the costs of raising a child. A few people are even aware of the risks to themselves and their offspring if they reproduce indiscriminately, and that knowledge governs their reproductive behavior.

One budding transition offering some hope that we may extricate ourselves from our present predicament is emerging. In the United States and other industrialized nations in the last few decades we have witnessed a radical change in the socio-economic goals of women. The feminist movement has gained momentum and restructured the character of the work place, politics and the society in general. It also has had considerable influence in reducing the population growth rate. As women seek careers, the traditional career of producing children and homemaking cannot demand the large amount of time that it did in the past. The social change fomented by the feminist movement has had considerable impact in challenging traditions that served to increase population. There are some indications that the male role is changing--men are taking a more active part in the task of raising children and homemaking, to a great extent due to the influence of the women's movement, and to the realistic assessment of the duties of parenting and homemaking when both parents work outside the home. However, though any change in this area is certainly welcome, we are looking at minute changes in traditions that have been developed and essentially unchallenged for thousands of years. And recent cries for assistance in raising children--in the form of parental leave and subsidized day care for those who can afford it--seems to swing the pendulum back to denial of our population problem.

Pyramid schemes which reward the initial investor at the expense of following investors are illegal, because they allow the former to steal money from the latter. Schemes to bail out the present leaking financial boat by having more and more future workers are similarly bankrupt. We are using our environmental bank account at a rapid rate to maintain our lifestyles, and much of the world seems to want to emulate the industrialized nations as rapidly as possible. If you look at the world as an energy bank and factor in pollution, it is obvious that since the age of industrialization we have drawn out more energy in an extremely short time than was necessary to support life on the planet throughout history. This rapid depletion of resources has been, and continues to be documented by neutral sources. Our account will become overdrawn within a generation or two. That is a simplistic explanation for what is happening, and more technical descriptions are available, but the effect is clear. We are stealing from our children. We are stealing water, air, energy sources of all types, including food. We are stealing the future to pay for the present.

We are not doing this because we are evil people. We are doing this because we either do not know what is happening, or, we refuse to face what is happening. We need to change for the survival of our children. People go to great lengths to protect their offspring from the normal pitfalls of life so they will have a chance to grow and prosper. We pass laws so that our children are not exposed to garments which would easily catch fire, toys which could cause suffocation and trauma which could result from the absence of a seat belt. We attempt to guarantee their financial security in case of mishaps. We save for their college educations, so that they will have a chance to participate in the economic system and go on to have families of their own. We stay vigilant to ensure that they will be free. But we are working against the very things that we wish to accomplish. Personal wealth will not protect our children from ecological crisis. Freedom is less likely in a world of continually rising population. There is no sentiment in natural law. It is neither harsh nor kind. It is simply

indifferent to our schemes, favoring those who follow its criteria. If we continue to embrace traditions which support our irresponsible reproductive behavior then we condemn our children to a dismal future, if a future at all.

The most pervasive and unseen prejudice in our society favors having children, regardless of the consequences to them. We all have been exposed to it, and don't even consider it a prejudice. We believe that the children are the future; it is the theme of much of our advertising and popular culture. Our social messengers do not merely say "have a child." They say "have children, as many as you like. If you are successful you will be able to support them." But there are no benefits in continuous population growth. The day is long past when we had to maintain or increase the number of human beings in order to survive as a species. Most of us have had undeniable benefits from the socialization provided by the family, and that is the most compelling reason that we continue to have families larger than one child. It is understandable. A world philosophy dedicated to reducing the population for the benefit of all of its global citizens will require a radically different view of life. It will seem an attack on one of our basic reasons for living: to have and raise children. It will seem an attack on a major source of self-worth--that of being a good parent. It will require the establishment of traditions which stress the value of having fewer children so that a smaller population will prosper. The family is the logical place to begin the change. We all want jobs, a clean environment with nothing objectionable in our backyards, and all the children we desire, but those objectives are at odds. We can't have it all. Those who contend that we can are either uninformed, unconcerned or lying.

The individual makes his or her decision on reproduction and the effects are ripples throughout the world. We are ignorant of the extraordinary power we have to change the world. Rather than providing masses of consumers and an overwhelming number of laborers, we can force our economies to stabilize. We can recognize that present growth trends cannot be continually expanded in a finite world. It is not hard to see that at present we are not providing for the majority of the human population on the earth. People are starving day by day as we watch on television, and the reports of starvation are few in consideration of the number of people who have too little to eat, too much poverty and misery. Many critics of our present systems contend that it is possible to feed people if that is our first priority. That feeding people should be our first priority is not in dispute; the fact is that it is not our first priority. A realistic assessment of the priorities of the government and business sectors of industrialized nations should encourage people to take charge themselves of their reproductive behavior, rather than allowing themselves and their children to be manipulated as part of the supply and demand marketplace.

It is hard to believe that the family has such power to change the world, but it is the core of our future direction. Information should be available to all, so that responsible decisions about reproduction can be made. Such information should include all aspects of global population growth. At present, **we make our choices by not making any choices at all**, by passively watching as the problems mount. It should be no surprise to anyone that things are out of control. We need population reduction immediately. It is in the best interests of the nuclear family, the community and the global family.