



## **Are We Worldly?**

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Reading: "Earth" – a poem by Navarie Scott Momaday

Once in his life man ought to concentrate his mind  
upon the remembered earth, I believe  
he ought to give himself up to a  
particular landscape in his experience,  
to look at it from as many angles as he can,  
to wonder about it, to dwell upon it.

He ought to imagine that he touches it  
with his hands at every season  
and listens to the sounds that  
are made upon it

He ought to imagine the creatures there  
and all the faintest motions of the wind.  
He ought to recollect the glare of noon  
and all the colors of the dawn and dusk  
for we are held by more than the force of gravity to the earth.

It is the entity from which we are sprung  
and that into which we are dissolved in time.  
The blood of the whole human race is invested in it  
we are moored there, rooted as surely,  
as deeply, as the ancient redwoods and bristle cones.

Are We Worldly?

Good morning again!

Yes, I know... sky high prices at the pump, inflation at the grocery store, school funding cuts, several

wars...all critical issues. However, I propose they are all being trumped (not by the “Donald”) by overarching threats to our world, our earth, this own personal planet. Hiding in plain sight (much as Osama Bin Laden) is this oft ignored but “worldly” question: Will we permit the population of the earth to compromise Mother Nature’s ability to provide??

Instability, insurrections, civil wars, mass migrations of homeless people... competition between population pressures and the health of the planet is becoming an ever more urgent concern – now and for the future. The pollution of our oceans, the pollution of our air, the pollution of our entire life support system balloons as a consequence of pressures from this incredibly crowded world.

Current update from the (not always sympathetic) *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Wednesday, June 29, 2011:

HEADLINE: “RESEARCH: WORLD CONTINUES TO WARM.”

The world’s climate is not only continuing to warm, it’s adding heat trapping greenhouse gases even faster than in the past. There is a clear and unmistakable signal from the top of the atmosphere to the depths of the oceans.”

As Tom Friedman of the NY Times puts it: “We heat up, choke up and smoke up, devouring the earth.” Put simply, are we willing to do what’s necessary to insure that our children and grandchildren inherit a habitable planet? What is our moral obligation to them? And, are we courageous enough to face the scope of these issues with honesty?

Listen to the words of Chief Seattle: “This we know: All things are connected like the blood that unites us. We did not weave the web of life. We are merely a strand in it. ..whatever we do to the web we do to ourselves.”

Until quite recently our society claimed it had permission to satisfy its insatiable desires and appetites by subduing nature and exploiting her resources. Interestingly, that assumption may have come directly from some historic religious traditions. An ancient Babylonian myth, from 500 years before the writing of Genesis, was incorporated by some anonymous Hebrew authors into the creation story of the Old Testament: “Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it. And have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth.” Later Christian teaching incorporated this idea and added “the natural world exists for the benefit of human beings.”

The Unitarian Universalist Source of Wisdom states: “Spiritual teachings of earth centered traditions celebrate the circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” I repeat, “harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

For eons there was no problem. Human communities lived hard scrabble lives eking out a precarious existence. Life itself was precarious, death a familiar visitor. Earth and population maintained equilibrium. Then things changed.

Something later dubbed the Industrial Revolution began transforming life on this planet. Suddenly one man had the power of 10. Suddenly one man could fell not one tree, but 10. The capacity of human beings to survive and thrive went up exponentially. The population of the earth also began to expand exponentially.

In 1800 there were 1 billion people on earth. In 1900 it had doubled to 2 billion. By 2000 it had exploded to 6 billion and now, just 11 years later, we’ve hit 7 billion. The U.N. estimates by the end of this very century the world will carry over 10 billion people. These billions will need fresh water, fertile land, shelter, education and jobs. In addition, they may well demand to live the lifestyles they now witness in this technologically interconnected world.

Just imagine the pressures on the natural world. In Africa alone, growth remains so high that the population is on track to triple from 1 to 3 ½ billion—a sobering forecast for a continent already

struggling to provide food and clean water for its people. If we allow global warming to melt the glaciers of the Himalayas the life giving waters of the Indus, Ganges, Yangzi and Yellow rivers will dry up—putting the lives of over 500 million people in jeopardy.

Back in 1974 an organization called *World Watch Institute* was formed by a gentleman named Lester Brown. Educated at the University of Maryland and Harvard, he has been awarded 22 honorary degrees during his career. For decades he has sounded the clarion call concerning the carrying capacity of this planet. How do we manage to feed and care for the burgeoning billions of people and still maintain the health of the earth? He quotes a riddle taught to French school children to illustrate exponential growth:

A lily pond has one leaf in it on the first day; two on the second day; four on the third, with the number of leaves doubling each day. If the pond is filled on the 30<sup>th</sup> day, when is it ½ full?

On the 29<sup>th</sup> day! Could it be our crowded world is nearing the 29<sup>th</sup> day?? I say:

Cut down, cut down, drop the timbers  
Clear the forests, pave, pave, pave  
Empty the seas, spread wide the nets  
Scour the deep, get every one.  
Drill and drill, spill and spill  
Send your oily fingers to the shore.  
Weep salty tears, watch the fresh waters go  
Dry and bake the fields  
Line up the hungry children  
Add one more each year

From my own experience these population issues manifest themselves in a variety of ways in various countries.

As a child taken to Mexico I was exposed, early on, to the contrasts between the poverty of their huge families and the opulence of their churches. I recall watching, for example, an impoverished but pious old peasant, wrapped in a black reboso, approaching the ornate gold altar on her knees; hands outstretched clutching her meager offering. Sadly, the power of the Catholic Church over the people and its prohibition against family planning and birth control contributed to an ever increasing problem: many, many poor, hungry families. Since 1950, the number of citizens in Mexico has risen by a factor of five, from 25 million to 125 million, often destitute people, creating classic population pressures both within the country and across the border in the US.

Back in the early 80's my husband Michael and I were privileged to visit China shortly after it had opened up to the West. Picture Beijing, a city where the padded blue Mao jacket and pants was the uniform of both men and women. No large buildings, no tall towers, no birds-next stadium, just the Great Hall of the People on Tieneman Square and the ancient Imperial Palace. Traffic consisted of phalanxes of bicycles punctuated by the occasional open truck filled with cabbages. Thousands of women, each with a precious child, rode bikes with their heads and faces covered by chiffon scarves to reduce the intake of polluted air. It created a ghostly moving specter. But it was apparent that China's one-child policy was in full force. Many here in the US decried their efforts for its coercive aspects – but I remember thinking: at least the Chinese were not dying of famine as they had during the period between 1959-1961 when they lost between 15 and 43 million people to starvation. The foresighted Chinese government (albeit communist) knew they had to create stability in their population or again risk mass starvation. Ironically they set the stage for their own monumental

modernization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Now, with liberalizing policies, China is on the cusp of a warp speed industrial and lifestyle change, the scale of which the world has never seen. The looming pressure of ever increasing masses and their desires for American-type lifestyles may presage a much, much greater population versus nature problem.

Very early on our travels led us to the island of Haiti, just recently in the headlines for having suffered so tragically from a horrendous earthquake. We visited initially in 1961, an idyllic tropical island with beautiful, artistic people who were unfortunately controlled by the despot Papa Doc Duvalier and a strong mix of Roman Catholicism and African Voodoo. Fast forward to the 1980's. We happened to be passengers on the last cruise ship to visit the island. Even then the commercial interests deemed Haiti too problematic and too polluted and too poor for the likes of their cruise customers. As we sailed out of Port au Prince we sadly sensed we were leaving these destitute folk to subsist in their own squalor. If you have watched your television recently you will have seen what has happened since. Crowded poverty on an epic scale; hillsides denuded of trees, eroded crop land, open sewers and a huge hungry throng of adults and children unable to care for themselves.

Tom Friedman commented:

“My own daughter went off to college in the fall of 2004, and my wife and I dropped her off on a warm September day. The sun was shining; our daughter was full of excitement. But I can honestly say it was one of the saddest days of my life. And it wasn't the dad and mom dropping their eldest child off at school thing.

No, it was something else that bothered me. It was the sense that I was dropping my daughter off into a world that was much more dangerous than the one she'd been born into. I felt like I could still promise my daughter her room back, but I couldn't promise her the world--not in the carefree way I had explored it when I was her age. That really bothered me – still does.”

You may recently have seen where a brave Evangelical Pastor opened an ecclesiastical can of worms by asking: “Is there really a Hell?” I submit to you there could be a Hell, tragically, right here on earth. But it need not be so!! We, as citizens, approaching our 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations, know we have the intelligence and moral capacity to choose a stable world by insisting on rational policies to treat our earth as our fragile home.

For many years I had been concerned about these issues, but what to do? Problems of this magnitude are so difficult to grasp, and, well, so easy to ignore. I felt confused and powerless! But I wondered: Might the larger question of population imbalance at least begin to be addressed by providing family planning care for the thousands of desperate women who plead for help?

I had heard that Planned Parenthood provides a wide array of preventive services in this country and around the world by promoting just that, women's health and family planning. Consequently I decided to volunteer at Planned Parenthood of Cincinnati, eventually morphing into a paid position for some years as the Cincinnati area volunteer coordinator. Who would have supposed that I, myself, would become the beneficiary of a screening which disclosed my own cancer thus saving my life?

After the Supreme Court decision on Roe V. Wade the Catholic Church backed Right to Life group seized the opportunity to consolidate conservative political power against women's reproductive rights and services. These are the very things that held out hope to begin to balance our families and create a more sustainable society.

Sadly our spineless politicians bowed to right-wing pressure prohibiting, for many years, funding for maternal health clinics in foreign countries, thereby eliminating birth control availability for

millions of vulnerable women. Fortunately this support has recently been reinstated by our current administration. However, there is now a resurgent effort by these same reactionary forces to shut down Planned Parenthood clinics throughout the country (Indiana and Ohio being the latest) and abroad.

So where are we? What does all this actually mean? It means this huge series of challenges is up to us – the here and now generation, to work toward the goal of a sustainable balance of nature.

Our friend Lester Brown has recently created a comprehensive campaign to save civilization, called “*Plan B*”. It is outlined in his transformative book World on the Edge, which begs to be studied.

For us to exert positive global influence we must: advocate and educate; we must insist our policies preserve fresh water and fertile land. We must adopt eco-friendly energy – solar, wind and geothermal. We must invest our creativity and capital in the new green technologies. And we must support the critically important work of Planned Parenthood.

Trumping it all is the need to educate our often cloistered young people so they can understand and then tackle the infinite challenges facing them. That education can be made real by extraordinary trips such as our high school youth just completed in Guatemala. Now, let them mobilize their optimism, their can-do spirit, the exquisite creativity of youth. The countdown has begun; their futures will literally depend on it.

So yes, we can still be fruitful and multiply—tempered by a new awakening to the imperatives of a changing world. Saving civilization is not a spectator sport. Each of us can aspire to create a positive moral legacy by working to preserve a balanced earth for those we love and for all humanity.

According to Tom Friedman:

The world needs a new generation: a generation of strategic optimists, a generation with more dreams than memories, a generation that wakes up each morning and not only imagines things can be better but also acts on that imagination every single day.

So, can we be “worldly?”

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