

WTE Column of Jan 22, 2014. Editor's Headline: "Where do you draw the line on Overpopulation"

As Alan Weisman's latest book, "Countdown," documents, some countries seemingly steeped in religious edicts to "be fruitful and multiply"—Iran and Italy, for example—have birthrates below replacement rates (fewer than two children per couple overall). In the United States, however, the trend is the opposite. Weisman faults environmentalists for failing to highlight Threat Number One of our global predicament: Overpopulation.

He is only partially right. If you've read Lester Brown over the decades (his specialty is agrarian production and -practices worldwide), and if you view his online warnings via Earth Policy Institute, the population dilemma has hit home. Climate warrior Bill McKibben's "Maybe One," has argued for the past five years, we should limit family size to one child.

Unfortunately, our congressional representatives on both federal and state levels seem to have regressed into the dark ages. Agendas feature reduced funding for education and for family planning, more abortion restrictions, and scant family-planning funds for developing countries. Bits of USAID come with unenlightened restrictions, meaning poor women with no access to education keep having babies they can't feed and don't want.

Decades ago, the United States was a zero-population-growth country. Then came Ronald Reagan's simplistic belief in unfettered growth ("It's morning in America!") combined with repressive religious measures to ensure population expansion. I'll speak to that ideology by illustrating a personal observation.

A few weeks ago I hosted a California travel-club couple for an overnight stay. In our get-acquainted chat they indicated, alongside their own two children they raised four adoptees who had come to them as foster children. Back then the policy was that foster kids be handled with minimal emotional attachment, so as not to complicate the kids' transition to permanent homes. Since these strategies damage children's formative minds, the couple decided to adopt rather than foster. Already a number of children had passed through their home, one infant constantly shaking as he suffered neonatal withdrawal symptoms. The only way to calm him was by holding him close, day and night. The infant had four siblings, fostered elsewhere.

The foster children, including the four adoptees, were born to addicted mothers. Sadly the adoptees followed their mothers' ways of living in the streets—except for the youngest. Recruited into the football team of a Georgia university two years ago, he still telephones home to my guests.

I couldn't help fret over a medical/social service that admits pregnant youngsters who are users, delivers their babies, finds foster homes for the infants, then turns the mothers back into the streets without offering choices such as a tubal ligation or IUD implants. What could possibly be gained by continuing the stream of dysfunctional humans?

When Iran's government convinced Ayatollah Khomeine that the country's ruinous population growth must be checked, the cleric gave his consent to dispatch women gynecologists and nurse practitioners who offered counseling in family-planning along with free IUDs, the Pill, and tubal ligations. The medics visited hinterlands on horseback, where impoverished women gratefully availed themselves of their services. There's every reason to believe that addicted prostitutes, the world's poorest of the poor, would do likewise, were these services offered cost-free.

Notwithstanding Hollywood distortions of the "Hooker with the Heart of Gold," earning a living through prostitution is degrading, bearable only when minds are numbed through substance abuse. The young women, who typically begin street life as runaway minors, desperately need schooling and help with family planning.

Back to Alan Weisman, who begins his book with the "Battle of the Babies" existing between haredim Israelis and Palestinians who have been indoctrinated that "the womb" is the most effective weapon against their oppressors. Each side does its best to out-breed the other. Baby strollers jam every landing of every crumbling apartment complex. The Jordan River has become "a fetid ditch." Over 90 percent of wastewater in the West Bank flows untreated into the environment, contaminating aquifers for Palestinians and Israelis alike. A region estimated to sustain 2.5 million holds close to 12 million people. Yet, "God made the problem. He will solve it," Weisman hears from haradim Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Considering a climbing global population, the author wonders if there is an acceptable, nonviolent way to convince "people of all the cultures, religions, nationalities, tribes, and political systems that they must reduce their numbers." Inasmuch as an ecosystem cannot carry excess humanity forever, he asks: "How many people can their land sustainably hold? For that matter, since the influence of the Holy Land extends far beyond its disputed borders, how many people can the planet hold?"

From the Middle East he travels the world over for statistics and tales of population struggles. It makes for fascinating if often grim reading. "How much ecosystem is required to maintain human life? What species or ecological processes are essential to our survival?" he asks. How do we even know when/if our overwhelming presence has pushed "something off the planet that we didn't realize our own existence depended on, until it's too late?"

What if a sustainable population turns out to be less than the 10+ billion we're headed to, or even less than the 7 billion we already number? How do we design an economy that can prosper without constant growth?

Each of us should answer these questions for the sake of humankind's future.