

Life has its moments. Sometimes we get so beaten down that some of us can't find the wherewithal to rise again. "I did not ask to be born," my brother Helmut said in his suicide note. "Don't hate me."

How well I understand the sentiment! Yet none of us asks for the trouble that comes knocking. At times I'm sympathetic to the view that humankind is an experiment gone awry and the sooner its ends, the better.

More people than you'd guess believe that Earth would be better off without its human grazers. Among them are scientists who estimate that we are well on the way to inevitable demise: Our rapacious appetites have caused an over-exploitation of the earth's resources, ushering in a "sixth extinction" that will wipe us out alongside the species that our cities have displaced, not to mention their being hunted and fished into oblivion. These thinkers range from Nick Bostrom, who directs Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute to John Leslie, a thoughtful-provoking scholar at Ontario's University of Guelph. In "The World Without Us," Alan Weisman has meticulously gathered their views, besides adding his own speculations of how our aggrieved planet would endeavor to heal itself if we were gone, all bulging billions of us.

"Every four days human population rises by 1 million," he writes. That's another million hungry mouths joining the too-numerous ones already here. Do we seriously think we can go on like this? The intelligent solution, Weisman suggests, would be to "limit every human female on Earth capable of bearing children to one." He cites Dr. Sergei Scherbov of the World Population Program on the likely results: by mid-century, human population would have dropped by one billion. In contrast, if we go on as we always have, over nine billion of us will crowd the planet by mid-century.

Yet how can we possibly impose such a draconian program? Even China, with its mandated one child per family, is not able to impose the restrictions uniformly across its populations.

What we can do, those of us willing and able: refuse to propagate ourselves. So suggests VHEMT, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement. It has developed websites in eleven languages. Far from the wacko group our wishful thinking might imagine it to be, VHEMT was founded by Les Knight, a thoughtful, soft-spoken schoolteacher, says the author.

"We have too many active breeders," Les Knight is quoted as saying. "China . . . still adds 10 million a year. Famine, disease, and war are harvesting a fast as ever, but can't keep up with our growth." Knight urges us to avoid the agonizing massive die-off that will occur, should we ignore what's ahead. We could endeavor "gently laying the human race to rest."

Humans may well cause their own extinction via nuclear warfare, muses Richard Dawkins. He takes comfort in the thought that some life forms are likely to survive, even if it be radioactive rats. Feasting on spilled larders, ghost supermarkets, and human remains, their populations will balloon for a time; once the food supply diminishes, it will crash. At that point they may turn on the cockroaches that will have scavenged alongside them. Before that happens, however, they may have evolved into kangaroo-sized hoppers. Who knows, they may even have developed a superior intelligence. "Will rodent historians and scientists eventually organize careful

archeological digs (gnaws?) and reconstruct the peculiar and temporarily tragic circumstances that gave ratkind its big break?” Dawkins ponders this question in “The Ancestor’s Tale,” a footnote referencing Douglas Dixon’s “After Man: A Zoology of the Future.”

Weisman, too, waxes melancholic on contemplating the human demise. Alongside ecological destruction, we’ve created magnificent works of art and architecture, musical and poetic compositions. To think, it will all come to nothing!

Still, something of our essence may yet survive. Weisman includes an account of Carl Sagan, who in 1977 was asked to “express the essence of human identity to an audience that had never seen humans” by creating something to be incorporated into the outer-space travels of Voyagers I and II. Thus it is that each of these robotic pioneers carry 6-by-9-inch goldplated aluminum attachments that bear plaques with line etchings depicting a naked human male and a female, the woman’s silhouetted womb transparent to reveal the fetus growing within. Pictures include diagrams of DNA, the solar system, photographs of nature, towns and citiscapes along with women nursing babies, men hunting, children contemplating a globe, athletes competing, people eating. A goldplated disk carries recorded greetings in 54 languages, plus “voices of dozens of other Earth inhabitants, from sparrows to whales.” Further, the disk contains 26 musical selections: Luis Armstrong to Navajos to the Queen of the Night aria from Mozart’s “the Magic Flute.”

Launched in 1977, both Voyagers have long left the solar system. Goldplating will ensure the continuity of their cargo for “at least a billion years, probably much longer,” writes Weisman. Although their discovery by some outer-space intelligence is slim, “It might be the closest that any human artifact might get to a chance at eternity.”

What if, early in his abbreviated earthly sojourn, my suicidal brother had decided against fathering children? His youngest hanged herself at twenty-two, imitating her father’s method of exiting life. I no longer hear from her brothers, now in their forties, but I know that both find it extremely difficult to cope with daily existence. Though it’s unlikely they ever read Weisman, much less heard of VHEMT, they have remained unmarried. I wish I could tell them, I understand.