

# Despairing of the Despoilers, but Having a Good Life Anyway

**or How I learned what is wrong with the world and how it could be fixed.  
But why it won't be. And how one deals with that.**

*By Ben Gadd,<sup>1</sup> 2007, lecture given at the University of Alberta*

**Intro:** Would you like to save the world? I have very much wanted to save the world. Regrettably, I have not been able to do so. There's no shame in that. Even David Suzuki has admitted publicly that he can't save the world.

What has surprised me of late is the discovery that at the age of 26 I did the very best thing I could have done to save the world, and at the time I had no idea that it was.

You, too, may have already done your bit to save the world. By the end of my speech, you should be able to judge whether you have or not.

**H**ere is an opening quote for you: "Since Knowledge is but Sorrow's spy, it is not safe to know." This famous line is from the work of Sir William Davenant, a 17th-century playwright and poet laureate of England.<sup>2</sup> In my life I have certainly discovered the truth in Sir William's words. The inverse—that not knowing is safer than knowing—may also be true at times, but I hope to persuade you that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ignorance is anything but safe. I will get back to William Davenant.

First, though, let me tell you where I'm coming from. I was born in the United States in 1946 and brought up to be a protester in a country that offered much to protest. Economic disparity, social injustice, racial discrimination, obsessive militarism ... the list of protestables was long, and in learning to deplore it all I was much influenced by my father. He was a journalist and a left-winger, a socialist in Colorado during the McCarthyite 1950s. He went so far as to grow a beard. That alone made him a marked man in those terribly conformist, witch-hunting years.

Thus, the family suffered. My dad would work for one newspaper for a while, then he'd write something that didn't please the local establishment. Or he'd get

---

<sup>1</sup> Author's contact info: Box 1557, Jasper, AB T0E 1E0 • 780-852-4012 • [bengadd@telus.net](mailto:bengadd@telus.net) • [www.bengadd.com](http://www.bengadd.com)

<sup>2</sup> From *The Just Italian*, Act Five, Scene One, 1630.

detected as a commie by the boys at the American Legion. Either way we would have to move to the other side of the state.

This drove my mom crazy. Literally so; the ambulance would take her screaming and crying to the hospital in the throes of “hysteria” triggered by having to give up yet another home. At such times my father would put my mother on the train to Ohio, where she would recover in the care of her well-off Republican parents.

My brother and I always went, too. We lads enjoyed these vacations. The food was good and our granny doted on us.<sup>3</sup>

Back in Colorado, however, the playground bullies were waiting, sons of those Legion types. My brother was a natural athlete and dealt with them easily. I was a nerd, with thick glasses and skinny arms. And a big mouth. This combination assured me of many beatings. My pacifist dad told me to turn the other cheek. This proved to be good advice, actually. Showing submission probably resulted in fewer injuries than I might have sustained by fighting back incompetently.

When most boys reach their teens they rebel against their fathers, but I didn't. My dad and I saw eye-to-eye on most everything. He loved the English language and he loved politics, and so did I. We'd sit by the fireplace until midnight discussing verb conjugations and the principles of anarcho-syndicalism. I read C. Wright Mills, Peter Kropotkin, George Woodcock, Aldous Huxley, Paul Goodman and Gandhi.

In 1958 my dad started his own progressive weekly newspaper in Colorado Springs, by then home to the U.S. Air Force Academy, the huge Fort Carson army base, the John Birch Society and an outfit called the “Christian Anti-communist Crusade.” What a lion's-den in which to set up shop! Nonetheless, my dad did okay with his paper until the following year, when he broke a story about generals and their friends flying to the world's better golf courses on Air Force jets.

Not a wise business decision. The paper's advertising disappeared overnight. My father put out his next-to-last issue as an anti-military leaflet the two of us gave away on a street corner in the middle of town. My dad worked for the local trade unions for a while, but he was too radical even for them, so he had to go all the way to Chicago to find work. There he was discovered by *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which made him one of their senior editors, the best job he'd ever had.

My mum cried when she left the Colorado Rockies. So did I. Yet, for a left-wing activist in training, a big city was the place to be. I got involved with the American Friends Service Committee, which was a mission of the Quakers. The AFSC had a “project house” in a slum on Chicago's west side. At age 17 I spent

---

<sup>3</sup> Not to ignore my sister, the other sibling in my family, but she was much younger than her big brothers and missed all this.

the summer there, working for the Friends. I learned about nonviolent methods of protest and did good deeds for \$7.50 a week.<sup>4</sup>

This was 1963, during the American civil rights movement. I spent a night in jail, along with a lot of other young people, after the police broke up our “sit-in” at a segregated school. We were seated on the ground, white hand in brown, singing “We Shall Overcome,” when a furious Irish cop grabbed us two at a time and threw us—picked us up and *threw* us—into the back of a paddy wagon.

Yup, a “paddy” wagon. Such irony: the Irish of Chicago had once suffered the same sort of treatment they were now inflicting on the people with whom I was committing civil disobedience that morning. This taught me something.

The NAACP bailed us out the next day, and ultimately the charges were dropped. My dad was proud of me. I think he was grooming me for a career on the picket lines. My father could not afford to indulge his own radicalism too far—he was the family’s sole provider—but perhaps he felt he could obtain some satisfaction vicariously, through his elder son. My mother? She worried about where all this was going.

By 1964 my mum had taken as much of Chicago as she could, so she moved us back to Colorado Springs. My father soon followed, editing medical textbooks on contract, safe from the vigilantes.

That was when I discovered that my heart lay in the wilderness of the Rockies, not in the weekly demonstration against the Vietnam War. I became a mountain-climber. Working as a landscaper helped, making me physically strong for the first time in my life. On my days off I was often among the peaks with a rope around my waist. There the objectives were obvious, the methods were straightforward and the chances of success were good. Not so in the unreal world of protest politics, which offered risk without reward.

I was now living a thousand miles away from my fellow dissidents in the Congress of Racial Equality, the peace movement, the Wobblies.<sup>5</sup> And that was fine with my mother. But it was disappointing to my father, who thought I was lost to the cause. However, I did refuse to cooperate with military conscription, which pleased him, and I attended the odd anti-war rally. This reassured him that I might still amount to something.

---

<sup>4</sup> The whole neighborhood burned up in the 1969 Chicago Riots.

<sup>5</sup> The nickname for the Industrial Workers of the World, an old left-wing labor union, powerful for a short time in the early twentieth century. By the 1960s the Wobblies were few, but the organization still welcomed university students and youthful activists such as me. It still exists, and it still has appeal.

**I**n the autumn of 1965 I got married. Cia<sup>6</sup> and I were both barely nineteen. She was a college student from Maryland, hanging out with the local climbers in Colorado Springs instead of dating the Air Force Academy cadets most of the coeds favored. Cia and I were preparing to run off to Yosemite together when her parents arrived, conservative and outraged. They demanded that we marry first. So we did, three weeks after we had met. To us it was only a gesture, not a life-long commitment, but more than forty years later we are still together.

In 1966 Cia talked me into attending the University of Colorado. Her argument was convincing: “Ben, you’ll be much more effective at overthrowing the government if you have a college education.” I tried a number of disciplines at CU—anthropology, English, psychology, biology, philosophy—and I didn’t care much for any of them. Then I discovered geology. Geology was about the mountains, about the rock I was climbing on.

I loved it. My father found it acceptable. He had always been interested in the natural world, and he was respected among Colorado bird-watchers as a very good amateur ornithologist. As far as my dad was concerned, if I wasn’t going to be a revolutionary then becoming a scientist wasn’t all that bad. My mother was relieved.

In 1967 Cia and I gave all our parents their first grandchild. We frequently made the hundred-mile drive to Colorado Springs, where my mum and dad could enjoy little Willy.

But when Willy was a year old, we found that we had to leave Colorado and flee to Canada. This was during the worst of Lyndon Johnson’s tenure in the White House. University campuses across the U.S. were in turmoil over the Vietnam War and threats to freedom of speech. I was alternately going to class and getting ejected from the military induction centre in Denver for urging draftees not to go.

Then I learned that a fellow student at the university had been spying on me. I was probably just days away from getting busted for draft evasion, meaning a couple of years in the slammer. Not a happy prospect for Cia and Willy. We packed up our stuff quietly, moved most of it down to my parents’ place and loaded our 1957 Volkswagen van<sup>7</sup> to the windows with what we thought we might need in a country unknown to us. My brother hopped in and we all headed north, escaping from America at 45 miles per hour. It took us two days and nights to get to Lethbridge, Alberta, where our contact met us at the door with a loaded pistol. He thought that we were the CIA arriving to cart him off to Great Falls. Well, it was three a.m. and he was a recent refugee himself. Plus genuinely paranoid, as it turned out.

---

<sup>6</sup> Pronounced “SEE-ya,” short for “Cecilia.”

<sup>7</sup> Despite the make, model and year, our VW was not a hippie van. We weren’t hippies. This was a great disappointment to our friends, one of whom sadly provided us with a bumper sticker that read, “Reality is for people who can’t take drugs.”

A couple of weeks later I landed a good job in Calgary. We found a comfortable place to live in a city without slums. (We had gone looking for them, figuring to save money on rent.) Before the year was out we had a credit card at the Bay and a new circle of friends. I began to realize what a terrific place Canada was. I became a citizen as soon as I could.

In contrast to life in the United States, where Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were shot not long after we left, Canada was friendlier, more relaxed. No Kent-State-type student massacres here; everyone was nice to everyone else. Never mind your skin color or your nationality or your politics. There were jobs aplenty, and if you could do the work you were welcomed and treated decently. I was a new immigrant among many employed at Canadian Pacific Oil and Gas, where I did my best in their brand-new computer department.<sup>8</sup> I had little time for saving the world, but Cia and I did assist other arrivals on our end of the draft-dodgers' underground railway.

Ah, but there was still that need to protest *something*, you know. I was getting out of practice. It took a few years to discover that, yes, even in Canada there were issues. Not much Canadian, really. Mostly these were bad things being done by the Americans. In 1971 Cia, Willy and I went down to the U.S. embassy in Calgary, with our Canadian-born son Toby in the kiddie pack, and we joined a demonstration against the upcoming nuclear test on Amchitka Island, Alaska.

Carrying a placard and shouting slogans was as exciting as always, but what really made my day was the publication in the *Calgary Herald* of a letter I had written to the editor. This was first time I had tried using satire to make a political point. Here is the letter.

September 20, 1971

In regard to the Amchitka nuclear-test controversy, let us not lose sight of the real issue here. Petty arguments undermine the unity of mankind against our common enemy: insidious, creeping Animal and Plant Life.

The spread of these vicious organisms has been well documented. As recently as three billion years ago, our lovely planet lay unspoiled by Animal and Plant Life. Then, spawning on the high seas, or arriving as some believe from outer space, primitive creatures rapidly gained control of the oceans. The pristine continents withstood attack after attack, but they finally fell, millions of years later, to overwhelming numbers of well-disciplined invaders. Today we are completely surrounded by spiders, wolves and pond scum.

---

<sup>8</sup> At that time CPOG had the biggest, most powerful computer in Calgary: a two-million-dollar Honeywell machine with a total of 32 k (i.e., only 32,768 bytes) of memory.

Man is not an animal! Refusing to be guided by base animal instincts, he often violates “ecological principles” (invented by that notorious pack of pseudo-scientific scoundrels the “biologists”) in his crusade against totalitarian Animal and Plant Life. Buried deep in all of us is the desire to return the earth to its native state, a state in which Man could take his ease at last, released from the wearisome struggle with Nature that has impeded the progress of civilization for so long. A world without flies, without weeds—is it only a dream?

To this end, we need not concern ourselves with the infantile prattle of a few hard-core Animal and Plant Life apologists. Indeed, it would appear senseless to destroy the interior of Amchitka Island with a hydrogen bomb; better it should be detonated topside, where the effects would reach millions of unruly organisms which are, I have been told, now plotting an all-out assault on virgin lands near the North Pole.

Several years ago I looked forward to a similar explosion in the atmosphere, in which the Van Allen Belt was to be temporarily disturbed. From the safety of our own homes, we could have watched Animal and Plant Life withering under the resultant burst of cosmic radiation. But, unfortunately, the test was cancelled owing to misinformed public outcry.

Gentlemen, let us reason together.

B. Gadd, Calgary

There were anti-test rallies all round the world, but the blast went off as planned on November 6. Still, this was the beginning of Greenpeace, Canada’s greatest contribution to the environmental movement. Cia and I joined, of course.<sup>9</sup>

By 1971 we were exploring Banff National Park, the Kananaskis area and the peaks around the Columbia Icefield. Oh, my—the Canadian Rockies were gorgeous. They outdid the American Rockies, hands down, in everything that appealed to us.

But wouldn’t you know it, greedy people of the sort doing evil deeds elsewhere in the world were at work in the Canadian Rockies, trying to mess the mountains up for money. This *really* bugged me. Threatening the human species with nuclear annihilation was bad enough, but wrecking the Rockies for profit was beyond the pale. I became active in the Alberta Wilderness Association, which was new in those days.

---

<sup>9</sup> We belonged to Greenpeace for many years, but we quit when the organization became too big and began calling us up during supper, asking for money. We can’t stand that.

Also new was the provincial government of Peter Lougheed. Lougheed's party was genuinely "Progressive Conservative" compared to the departing Social Credit MLAs, who were banished to their hoodoos in Dinosaur Provincial Park. In its early days the Lougheed government was willing to listen to conservationists. We got some sizable chunks of the Alberta foothills and front ranges set aside as protected areas. Hey, I thought—there was *hope* for this province!

Not so in the national parks, where Sunshine Ski Area and the ski hill at Lake Louise were growing cancerously, fed by permits from Ottawa. I can remember going to an "open house"<sup>10</sup> in 1976 at the Banff Springs Hotel about the first big Sunshine expansion. The smiling park superintendent, who spent most of his time chatting with the ski-area representatives, had a "Ski Sunshine" button pinned to his uniform. We enviro-guerillas set up our display of anti-development information in a corner of the room, uninvited. The banner was, "Sunshine—don't be snowed!"

We just stood there quietly, giving our side of the story to anyone asking, and we lasted most of the morning before hotel security was called by Parks Canada to throw us out. A CBC television crew arrived soon after, and we made the evening news.

In October of 1977 the Liberal government gave Sunshine most of what it wanted. Two hundred and fifty marchers—I was one of them, of course—responded by carrying anti-ski-area picket signs down Banff Avenue.

We did so again in 1992, when Sunshine applied for another expansion. This time they got approval in principle from the feds even before the environmental impact study had been done!

**A**nd so it has remained. A succession of Liberal and Tory prime ministers has proven to be overly friendly to commerce in the national parks. Outside the parks, Alberta's premiers have turned nearly all of our province over to the oil and gas industry, and a good bit of it to the loggers—I mean to the coal *company*, because only one outfit, a huge multinational, owns all the mines in the province.

When it comes to saving this country's incredible landscape and wildlife, governments at all levels continue to fail.

That's understandable. Too many people are clamoring to use public lands for their own selfish purposes, and some of these folks are rich enough to buy

---

<sup>10</sup> Real public hearings, where any interested parties were entitled to have their say—and the press was there to listen—were abandoned by Parks Canada at about this time in favor of "open houses," which were much less embarrassing to the agency. At an open house you dropped in, looked at some displays, chatted with a bureaucrat or two, filled out a comment form and left. No crowd in attendance, no microphone to line up at, no panel of higher-ups listening to you, no reporters, no TV cameras. And, of course, no results.

influence with whatever party is in power. They do so quite legally, through political contributions, and they get what they want regardless of the rules.<sup>11</sup>

This kind of soft corruption is a general problem in our society. Since the end of the idealistic 1960s and 1970s it has become markedly worse. Wealthy right-wingers are the usual culprits, and they have been dominating the political scene ever since the Reagan Revolution. Time after time, the regimes supported by these people have not acted in the best interests of the public.

Why does this go on and on? And why has the left wing been affected, too? Why did the supposedly liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin carry on with the policies of the Mulroney Tories?<sup>12</sup> Why did the 1991 NDP government of British Columbia, heralded as wonderfully progressive, go bad in its second term? What the hell is wrong with the world?

These are not rhetorical questions. Something really strange is happening, something beyond party politics and ideological differences. Maybe it's a huge international conspiracy. Maybe it's the ghost of Richard Nixon. Maybe it's the dark side of the Force.

Actually the cause is obvious, at least to me. So obvious that it is easily overlooked. It's also disheartening. Sometimes I wish I hadn't twigged to it. What I am about to say in the next 20 minutes may be upsetting for some of you to hear. Please feel free to leave if you don't care for it. But it's the core of my lecture this evening, and it needs to be said.

To my way of thinking, our problem is not, at its root, political. It is biological. It goes way, way back. And the solution—if there is one—is going to require looking far, far ahead. It's about numbers of people, about *overpopulation and the effects of crowding*.

Let me explain.

Crowding causes stress. By “stress” I am referring to a whole suite of well-documented physiological and psychological responses.<sup>13</sup> Any mammal that normally lives in small numbers feels stress when it finds itself surrounded by too many others of its own kind. Primates, including humans, are very sensitive to this. We become fearful, irritable and quick to lash out. Having loaded up the planet

---

<sup>11</sup> Loopholes and technicalities ensure that the rules need not be enforced. A 2005 federal-court decision in favor of allowing a particularly destructive coal mine on the boundary of Jasper National Park revealed that Canadian federal and provincial governments cannot be forced to uphold environmental regulations if they are not inclined to do so. For a synopsis, see [www.sierraclub.ca/national/media/item.shtml?x=867](http://www.sierraclub.ca/national/media/item.shtml?x=867).

<sup>12</sup> All the governing parties in Canada have moved to the right. The federal Liberals under Paul Martin were far more conservative than the Liberals under Lester Pearson or Pierre Trudeau. Gordon Campbell's B.C. Liberals, hardly liberal in the small-“l” sense, are an extreme example of this.

<sup>13</sup> A lot has been published on this. It's covered in basic psychology texts. Check the web for recent books and articles.



with humans, we now experience crowding-induced stress practically anywhere we live.<sup>14</sup> I think it is quite likely that much of today's social and political malaise is a consequence of simple overpopulation. Even in Canada.

Wait, wait, you may be thinking. Canada is overpopulated? Canada has only 32 million residents in a country of nearly 10 million square kilometres. Canada can't be overpopulated. Canada is often described as being *under*-populated.

But hear me out. Everything is relative. Crowding is partly a matter of perception, and Canada is beginning to *feel* crowded.

Anyone could get that impression when passing through the chains of intergrown towns and cities in southern Ontario, but what about the rest of the country? Here, too, the population is building. It has always been concentrated along the U.S. border, and the growth is mainly urban-sprawl development, meaning tract housing, business "parks" and shopping centres. Take a drive through B.C.'s lower mainland, or visit southern Vancouver Island. Things are very, very busy. In Alberta there are a lot of us scurrying around under that big sky. The number of residents has more than doubled—from 1.5 million to 3.2 million—since Cia and I arrived 39 years ago.<sup>15</sup>

And it's not just the quantity of Albertans, it's what we are doing to the place. The province's air, once so incredibly clear, is now hazy with pollution. The streams are unsafe to drink from. The forest is a patchwork of seismic lines and clear-cuts. People are everywhere, racing around in overpowered SUVs. The small towns and mid-sized cities I remember from three decades ago are now much

---

<sup>14</sup> Unlike our hunting-and-gathering ancestors, who lived in small groups scattered over large territories, we now live in large groups crowded into small territories. Dozens of families live in apartments in a single building. This is unnatural for us. It's stressful. Furthermore, we don't work with people we know well, and we constantly have to deal with strangers. Thus we don't care much about one another. Psychologist/anthropologist Robin Dunbar, of the University of Liverpool, thinks that the maximum number of people we can deal with comfortably in our day-to-day lives is about 150. A couple of years ago I read of an anthropological study—sorry; can't find the reference (can be seen second-hand at [homepage.eircom.net/~interfriendpublisher/biologicalquakerism.html](http://homepage.eircom.net/~interfriendpublisher/biologicalquakerism.html))—that found that among tribal peoples generally, when any particular band reached about 25 individuals, factions developed and the group split. Yet we now live in cities of millions. I am amazed that this works at all.

Here's an interesting bit of allied information: about 9000 years ago, at the beginning of the Neolithic period in Europe, when rapid population growth began and people abandoned hunting and gathering for farming, the level of violence in society seems to have ramped up, as suggested by a sudden increase in the number of broken skulls [*Discover*, August 2006].

<sup>15</sup> We are not the only ones noticing this. Consider the main story on page one of the *Calgary Herald*, November 7, 2006: "Growth hurting quality of life: survey." The lead paragraph begins, "More than half of Calgaryans say their quality of life has declined in the past three years, blaming overpopulation, the cost of living and soaring housing costs, a new poll shows."

larger. Alberta is beginning to feel full, hectic, stressed-out. We are not nearly as nice to each other now as we were in 1968.<sup>16</sup>

I think that we are feeling the pressure of the worldwide population explosion. And it works against our better nature. Our evil side, the every-man-for-himself side, is showing itself more and more as our numbers increase. English economist Thomas Malthus recognized this syndrome way back in 1798, during the period we know as the Enlightenment, when scholars were enjoying unprecedented freedom to seek the truth and share their findings. In his famous *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus wrote from his own experience about what was happening as Britain filled up:

*The spirit of benevolence, cherished and invigorated by plenty, is repressed by the chilling breath of want. The hateful passions that had vanished reappear. The mighty law of self-preservation expels all the softer and more exalted emotions of the soul. The temptations to evil are too strong for human nature to resist. The corn is plucked before it is ripe, or hidden away in unfair proportions, and the whole black train of vices that belong to falsehood are immediately generated. Provisions no longer flow in for the support of the mother with a large family. The children are sickly from insufficient food. The rosy flush of health gives place to the pallid cheek and hollow eye of misery. Benevolence, yet lingering in a few bosoms, makes some faint expiring struggles, till at length self-love resumes his wonted empire and lords it triumphant over the world.*<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> By “nice,” I don’t mean just individual behavior and attitudes. I mean the overall friendliness of Canadian society. In 1968 the typical white-collar workweek in Calgary was under 40 hours. Nearly everyone had good job security and a lot of benefits. One modest income would do for a family. You could buy a house on a single salary. My wife and I did. If you wanted to attend university or learn a trade, the federal and provincial governments would give you money to do so. Not lend you money, *give* you money. If you were temporarily out of work, or if you found yourself unable to work at all, there was immediate and adequate support. Schools had enough teachers, and classes were smaller than they are now. Timely medical care was easy to get. Governments funded social programs better. One seldom saw people begging in the streets or living in ravines.

Compare that with the hard-nosed, tight-fisted Canada we live in today, ruled by next month’s bottom line. In this incredibly rich country, the reason always given for failure to help those in need is, “We don’t have the money.” Yet we do have it. Governments routinely generate tax surpluses, and the rich are richer than ever. The reason should be phrased, “We have quit caring.”

<sup>17</sup> From *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Chapter 10. Malthus was also an Anglican parson, and I like the sermon-like quality of his prose. (But not his nasty right-wing politics.) For a general update on the Malthusian view, see [www.dieoff.org/page27.htm](http://www.dieoff.org/page27.htm).

Malthus might just as well have said “the third world,” meaning most of the modern world, which he pre-described perfectly. He said of himself, “The view which he has given of human life has a melancholy hue.” No wonder. For Malthus, the Enlightenment was headed straight for the Disillusionment.

And we have certainly arrived there. The Band, a musical group much loved by my generation, updated Malthus with some of their better-known lyrics —

*Go out yonder, peace in the valley.  
Come downtown, have a rumble in the alley.  
Oh, you don't know, the shape I'm in.  
Save your neck, or save your brother.  
Looks like it's—one or the other.  
Oh, you don't know, the shape I'm in.*<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, society is in terrible shape, crawling with me-firsters pushing and shoving their way through life, trampling over others, willing to do anything to get ahead. Manifestations run from manipulative behavior at the office to aggressive driving on the road, through criminal activity generally and to genocide eventually, the end point, where one entire population kills or otherwise displaces another to take their homes and their land.

A crowded world is an unhappy world. We live in a state of constant low-grade anxiety. We experience vague feelings of dread, doubts about our security, worries about the actions of others, a general mistrust. By way of defense, our own actions tend to become more self-protective, more self-serving.

This is a feedback loop, and it's pathological. Attitudes harden and grow cold. We turn away from one another. We lock our doors, turn on the television and fretfully watch the evening news. The items we see are mostly about crime, violence and suffering, and it's the same in the programs that follow. We fall asleep wondering whether the car will be vandalized, whether the apartment will be robbed while we are at work, whether our children will be abducted from the sidewalk. Outwardly friendly, we actually trust very few people. Surrounded by so many strangers, we learn that each of us is alone. We learn that we cannot assume that others will help us when we are in need. Nor do we wish to help them.

Under such conditions we can expect well-intended belief systems and well-intentioned leaders to fail. The warm-hearted, cooperative and generous among us are overwhelmed by the mean-spirited, the competitive and the aggressive. Left-wingers are thought of as naive and foolish. Right-wingers are seen as tough but realistic. Kindness is out. Kick-ass is in.

---

<sup>18</sup> From “The Shape I'm In,” released on The Band's 1970 album *Stage Fright*.

Such are the signs of a cynical age.<sup>19</sup> We all know that saying one thing and doing another is wrong, that refusing to help others is cowardly and that taking unfair advantage is worse. In our schools and places of worship we decry selfish and unethical behavior. Yet many of us engage in it. The rationale is partly just circumstance—“There’s nothing I can really do for these homeless people, there are so many of them”—and partly pure opportunism: “Sure, this deal is shady, but if I don’t go for it someone else will.” We can expect to see attitudes such as these in any crowded, stressful society. For example, in the average Canadian city.

Our political and economic systems make things worse by placing too much power in too few hands. Those hands typically belong to the wealthy and the ambitious, who are very good at looking out for themselves at the expense of everyone else. Good people reaching positions of power in business and government will find not-so-good people already there, entrenched in the hierarchy and quite able to defend the status quo. They offer the reform-minded a simple choice: abandon your principles, for which you shall be rewarded handsomely, or suffer the consequences.

The consequences in the workplace, including the civil service, range from getting overruled to getting fired. This works downward, too. Your orders are not followed; your co-workers do not cooperate; you get reported to your supervisor. One way or another, progressive decisions get reversed. In politics it’s the same, except that you lose your job by losing the next election to a well-funded opponent. In some countries, your termination is by car bomb.

Sure, progressive leaders as strong-willed as Tommy Douglas never cave in, and they sometimes leave legacies such as Canada’s universal health-care system. But overall, left-wingers active in politics hardly ever accomplish much of what they hope to. And frequently their reforms don’t last.<sup>20</sup> After 41 years on the books,<sup>21</sup> Medicare is under attack and losing ground.

When a party is voted out of power, the public always has high hopes for the incoming politicians, who promise to make things better. Yet any federal or provincial government tends to become increasingly callous in its second or third

---

<sup>19</sup> The opening decade of the new millennium reminds me of the Roaring Twenties. Everybody on the make, a widening gulf between the rich and the poor, homeless people shuffling past restaurants full of affluent patrons eating expensive meals—and then the crash. Followed by a world war.

<sup>20</sup> Occasionally a Mahatma Gandhi comes along, or a Franklin D. Roosevelt or a Nelson Mandela. But look where India is today, or what the U.S. has become since the New Deal, or how South Africa is failing to live up to Mandela’s vision for it. What has become of democracy in the Philippines since Corazon Aquino’s bloodless revolution in 1986? What is life like for most people in the “new” Russia?

<sup>21</sup> Medicare was created by an act of Parliament in 1966.

term, dishonest with the voters and duplicitous with vested interests. Brian Mulroney's government was notorious for this in its first few months. (Mulroney's was the regime that brought us the phrase "hidden agenda.")

We Canadians are a pretty fair-minded bunch, yet our politicians represent us irresponsibly, negligently, just plain *badly*, both at home and internationally. Clearly, too many of our MPs and MLAs are working for someone other than their electorates.

Nearly everyone is working for someone else, which is partly why the world is such a mess. Rather than dealing with the needs of 6.6 billion people,<sup>22</sup> those billions are serving the needs of their bosses. Rather than working together to ensure that everyone on earth has enough to eat, a decent place to live, a healthy environment, good medical care, a proper education, a rewarding job and a comfortable retirement, we live as haves and have-nots, rich and poor, powerful and powerless.

This is how the very rich and the very powerful want things. They prefer a competitive society, not a cooperative one. An overpopulated, under-regulated, winner-take-all world is fine with them, because they are the winners and the takers. They intend to keep things that way. For nearly 25 years we have endured a long string of right-wing "reforms"—what a strange use of the term—that have benefited the well-off, penalized the poor and eroded the middle class.

What the well-off don't seem to understand is where they are heading, where they are taking the rest of us.

The rest of us are that population that keeps doubling and doubling. It is very dangerous to keep this up without adequately regulating what can and cannot be done to the planet. I am speaking, of course, of "development," which can always be traced back to exploitation of the natural environment. Big business, which is the purview of the wealthy and the main engine of development, is often characterized as brutal—a fitting term for its environmental impact. Think of what mining, logging, oil-and-gas extraction, corporate agriculture and urban growth do to the land. Worldwide, the physical impact of so much destructive activity is appalling. The planet's ecosystems are starting to fail. The breakdown may be unstoppable. All of us—rich and poor, first-world and third-world alike—are aboard the same train, and it is speeding toward a colossal wreck.

**H**ere is how the crash is shaping up. On the local level a small environmental loss occurs whenever another shopping centre is built, consuming several hectares of essential habitat for animals and plants. The plants cannot relocate, of course, and the animals have nowhere else to go; it is a rule of ecology that the neighboring niches are already full. So every time a big-

---

<sup>22</sup> Figure for November 5, 2007, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's "population clock" [[www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)]. The world's population is currently growing by over six million *per month*. (In 1946, the year I was born, the world's population was about 2.4 billion.)

box store goes up on a patch of “raw” land, living things get killed. In the language of science, the species that used to live in that place are “extirpated.”

Ramp that up into a major new subdivision in Edmonton, housing 10,000 families. Factor in the species loss from producing the lumber and hardware and food and water and electricity and furniture and household goods and automobiles and fuel that these 30,000 people<sup>23</sup> require. Consider the impact of the sewage and garbage and hydrocarbon exhaust emitted. Multiply that by all the new residential and industrial developments in every major city in Canada. Now add every growing metropolitan area in the United States, Mexico, South America, Europe and Asia. Whoa! It’s easy to see that the natural world is getting clobbered.

For species after species—up to 140,000 per year<sup>24</sup>—the local and regional extirpations are adding up until there are no individuals of these species remaining anywhere in the world, in which case we change “extirpated” to “extinct.” Gone forever, like the dodo and the passenger pigeon and the great auk. These birds represent a few of the famous extinctions. For each of them there are hundreds of species on the “threatened” and “endangered” lists, meaning that they are headed for extinction themselves. And for each red-listed species there must be thousands of wee little beasties and other non-charismatic organisms whose last representatives are winking out unbeknownst to anyone, even to those who specialize in this dreary branch of biology.<sup>25</sup>

The last time the world experienced something as deadly as this was 65 million years ago when an asteroid hit the earth. The ensuing ecological collapse did in at least two-thirds of all life forms, including the dinosaurs.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> That’s 10,000 families at the Alberta (and Canada) average of 3.1 persons per family [data from StatCan, 1996].

<sup>24</sup> This figure comes from species-area theory, and shocking as it is, it is in line with E.O. Wilson’s authoritative estimate in his book *The Future of Life* that one-half of all the world’s 15 million to 30 million species will go extinct within the next 100 years.

<sup>25</sup> To quote from the 2005 report of the UN’s four-star Millennium Ecological Assessment project, “Over the past few hundred years, humans have increased the species extinction rate by as much as 1,000 times background rates typical over the planet’s history” [*Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Synthesis Report*, Chapter 1, p.37]. A good source of info about the current mass-extinction and its seriousness is [www.well.com/user/davidu/extinction.html](http://www.well.com/user/davidu/extinction.html). In 2007 the World Conservation Union IUCN), the most respected source of information on threatened and endangered species, released the following statement: “There are now 41,415 species on the IUCN Red List and 16,306 of them are threatened with extinction, up from 16,118 last year. The total number of extinct species has reached 785 and a further 65 are only found in captivity or in cultivation. One in four mammals, one in eight birds, one third of all amphibians and 70% of the world’s assessed plants on the 2007 IUCN Red List are in jeopardy.” To read the full text, go to [www.iucn.org/en/news/archive/2007/09/12\\_pr\\_redlist.htm](http://www.iucn.org/en/news/archive/2007/09/12_pr_redlist.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Well, not all the dinosaurs died out. Birds, as it turns out, are dinosaurs that survived. For some background, see [www.abc.net.au/science/slab/dinobird/story.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/science/slab/dinobird/story.htm).

Dinosaurs were dominant at that time, just as humans are today. And like the dinosaurs, we are large land animals. Large land animals are highly vulnerable to these “mass extinction events,” as geologists coldly refer to them. The bigger critters are the first to go down.<sup>27</sup> How ironic: through global warming, pollution, habitat destruction and the zillion other harmful waste products of human existence, *Homo sapiens* is bringing on its own demise, no asteroid required.<sup>28</sup>

We may not be the only species to have done this. The geological record is full of creatures that became very common in one period or another—trilobites in the Cambrian, graptolites in the Ordovician, stromatoporoids in the Devonian—then died out, sometimes vanishing in a geological eye-blink. It’s hard to say how many of these species self-destructed by making their environment unlivable, but one thing is clear: outstanding success on this planet is often followed by eradication. Growth for its own sake seems to be a fatal philosophy. Edward Abbey, one of my favorite writers, described it as “the ideology of the cancer cell.”<sup>29</sup>

Trilobites probably lacked scientific insight, but *H. sapiens* is smart enough to see the parallels here, the danger that lies ahead. We know that we are a species inclined to be rough on its surroundings, something like beavers or elephants. Disturbingly, our history suggests that we have little hope of behaving any differently.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the food-gathering equipment of other species, ours is

---

<sup>27</sup> Unlike bunnies and mountain pine beetles, which go through boom-and-bust cycles routinely, we are large, slow-growing animals that take a long time to mature. In a lifetime we give birth to a very small number of young. Thus, we evolve quite slowly. This makes us much more vulnerable to complete extinction, because we produce too few genetically variant offspring that are, by chance, capable of surviving a species-wide die-off.

Further, *Homo sapiens* has very low genetic diversity compared to that of other primates—less over our entire worldwide population than that of “a small group of chimpanzees,” according to an article in *Discover*, January 2004. This shows that, like the cheetah, we are quite vulnerable to extinction.

<sup>28</sup> Here are four recent and readable books about the predicament we are in: *One With Nineveh: Politics, Consumption, and the Human Future*, by Anne and Paul Ehrlich; *The Future of Life*, by E.O. Wilson, as mentioned already; *Collapse*, by Jared Diamond, and—the best read, short and snappy—*A Short History of Progress*, by Ronald Wright. For an interesting and philosophical take on all this, read Daniel Quinn’s novel *Ishmael*, in which we get the bad news from a gorilla.

<sup>29</sup> From “Arizona: how big is enough?” in *One Life at a Time, Please*, a collection of Abbey’s articles and essays published by Henry Holt & Company, 1987.

<sup>30</sup> From the flint-knapper scattering waste chips 200,000 years ago to the entire automobiles we throw away today and the huge holes we dig in search of iron to make more, we humans have shown ourselves to be a wasteful and destructive species. We probably cannot do otherwise.

But even if we were to change our ways and become thoroughly green, at current population levels the world’s ecosystems will still collapse. A NASA study by Marc Imhoff and Lahouari Bounoua [[www.nasa.gov/vision/earth/environment/0624\\_hanpp.html](http://www.nasa.gov/vision/earth/environment/0624_hanpp.html)] has found that we now appropriate 20 percent of the earth’s annual plant growth, excluding that in the oceans or

technological and not self-limiting. It goes out of control as easily as our birth rate does.

But we also know that in small numbers the planet can put up with us. After all, it was able to cope for most of the 190,000 years we existed before we got out of hand. Thus, we might be able to wind down the accelerating extinction event and save ourselves by trimming our numbers back.

How much of a trim is required? This is uncertain, and surprisingly little research has been done on it, but the best available guess I could find<sup>31</sup> is that reducing the population to 1.5 billion might do the job. We have the means to achieve that in only a few generations if we lower our birth rate by half, thereby shrinking our population cooperatively and intelligently before it happens competitively and stupidly in the form of mass mortality.<sup>32</sup>

Let me be clear about this. Regardless of what those in denial are saying,<sup>33</sup> our total count is far too large. The planet cannot sustain it for much longer. One

---

the figure would be even higher, to supply ourselves—just one species among many millions—with food, fiber, wood and fuel. (Re the oceans, recent research by Boris Worm, of Dalhousie University, has shown that populations of all marine species we use as food, anywhere in the world, will have collapsed—shrunk to less than 10 percent of historical numbers—by 2048 [*Science*, 3 November 2006].)

We could certainly reduce our impact somewhat through various efficiencies, but not enough to allow normal survival rates for other species. If our numbers keep increasing at the current worldwide average rate of 1.9 percent per year, thereby doubling the population every 35 years or so, the imbalance will become even worse. Read *The Population Explosion*, by Anne and Paul Ehrlich, or *Juggernaut: Growth on a Finite Planet*, by Lindsey Grant.

<sup>31</sup> See “Optimum Human Population Size,” by Gretchen C. Daily, Anne and Paul Ehrlich, a short paper published in *Population and Environment*, Volume 15, Number 6, July 1994, available at [www.dieoff.org/page99.htm](http://www.dieoff.org/page99.htm).

<sup>32</sup> For information about birth-rate reduction generally, see [www.populationconnection.org](http://www.populationconnection.org), the website for what used to be known as Zero Population Growth, a mainstream pro-birth-control organization. Planned Parenthood [[www.cfsh.ca](http://www.cfsh.ca)] is another. More to the point re population reduction, visit [www.npg.org](http://www.npg.org), website of Negative Population Growth.

<sup>33</sup> Many well-spoken individuals—University of Maryland business professor Julian Simon was perhaps the best known—have espoused the view that continued growth is possible and desirable, even required. I don’t have time in this talk to deal at length with their arguments, which revolve mostly around the idea that the earth’s resources are effectively infinite and that applied technology will support a much larger population, but I am in good company when I tell you that these notions are illogical and factually incorrect. Even if the planet could be made to feed 20 billion humans, it would entail vastly greater environmental damage and hasten the extinction event. Plus we’d all be driven barking mad by the stress.

Some pro-growth spokespeople are well-intentioned. However, like the fuel companies that have pooh-poohed global warming or the tobacco companies that denied the link between smoking and cancer, the pro-growth crowd is not presenting the whole story. Read the Ehrlichs’ book *The Betrayal of Science and Reason*, or go to [www.dieoff.org/page27](http://www.dieoff.org/page27) for a number of short pieces on this topic.



way or another that figure of 6.6 billion is going to come down, perhaps to zero. So it definitely makes sense to opt for the kinder, gentler method and have fewer babies.

**A**nd if we do have fewer babies, what might the world be like? When I think of the possibilities, the word that comes to mind is “utopian.” Imagine the earth with so few people on it that we *need* one another, much as a thinly distributed society has traditionally valued each member.<sup>34</sup>

Humans are naturally gregarious. We get along well with each other—as long as we have enough room to roam. With the crowding-induced stress relieved and our better instincts predominating, a small-population world ought to be a pleasant world indeed. Why fight over territory when there is more than enough to go around? Why fight over food, water and other resources when demand is light and the supply is huge? Rather, when something needs to be done and every hand counts, we are inclined to cooperate. We could cooperate in maintaining a healthy, environmentally sustainable society, collectively dealing with threats to it as they arose.

Here is an interesting angle on life after reducing our numbers. Until farming was invented around 10,000 years ago, the standard lifestyle of our species was hunting and gathering. We know that intensive farming is not sustainable because it ruins the land. We know that wild meat and naturally occurring plants are healthier foods than their agricultural counterparts. If the world was again largely wild, natural foods would become routinely available to us. Would we go back to them? Would we return to being hunter-gatherers? Would we choose to be tribal people dressed in animal skins?

Perhaps so, if we forsook our complex and dangerous technology.<sup>35</sup> Until the population explosion demanded it, we did just fine without it. We were probably *happier* without it. Yet we have come to love our chocolate cakes and our computers and our central heating.

---

<sup>34</sup> I think of the sharing-based traditional culture of the Inuit, a small number of humans in a large and difficult land. Anthropologists have found that sharing rather than competition was a general rule among hunting-and-gathering peoples living at low population densities. However, by the mid-twentieth century, after agriculture and industry had spread throughout the world, there were hardly any of these groups left. (And alas, “utopian” has the added connotation of “unobtainable.”)

<sup>35</sup> It’s worth pointing out that our vast numbers not only make us dependent on our technology, our technology may be dependent on our vast numbers, i.e. with a greatly reduced population we may not be able to maintain the industrial base required to produce the raw materials, machinery, electronics and chemical products that make up so much of our modern material culture. Not that a population of under a billion couldn’t produce the gizmos it really depended on, but I think the list would be a lot shorter.

With this dichotomy in mind, I can envisage a wonderful blend of the old and the new. Suppose it is the year 2307 and we have solved our population problem. We have done so correctly, such that we live comfortably and democratically in much-reduced numbers. We have our pick of the earth's better digs. Let us zoom in on one such place. The local hunters have brought down several tasty wild beasts. The meat has gone onto the spit. Organically grown vegetables have been added to the feast, plus whatever wild delicacies are in season, and the rest of the village has been invited. Everyone eats, drinks, dances and sings into the wee hours—after which the dishes go into the dishwasher, the party photos are sent electronically to friends around the world, and the garbage gets picked up in the morning.

Gee. Not so different from a neighborhood barbecue in Edmonton.

I think life could be wonderful, post-population-explosion. We could be hunters and gatherers with the Internet; we could be brain surgeons with restful homes in the rainforest; we could even be politicians with integrity. We could be pretty much anything we wished to be, because we wouldn't squander our wealth on weapons and we wouldn't live in fear of one another. We would have got past the unhappy, overcrowded stage in our history, leaving behind the undesirable parts of our bad-old-days way of life and keeping what was beneficial. Mainly, we would treat each other much better.

All of this seems possible if, and only if, we reduce the world's birth rate.

**R**educing the world's birth rate is not rocket science. We have the means and the need is pressing. But there is a major obstacle. We will have to overcome the unwillingness of many governments to allow women to control their reproductive lives.

Given the opportunity, women in populous places voluntarily limit births.<sup>36</sup> They realize that having fewer children provides a better life for each child, a better life for the family. But poor, grossly overpopulated countries are typically governed by right-wing males who do not permit birth control. Their priorities are for plenty of citizens, from whom taxes can always be wrung no matter how impoverished they are. Your average third-world ruler wants plenty of cheap labor and plenty of young men who have no prospects and are thus willing to serve as police and soldiers. More often than not, a regime that rejects any sort of birth control short of sexual abstinence justifies its position on theological grounds. And it operates in a one-religion state.

Here in the first world, where scarcity is hardly a concern yet (it will be), birth rates are already low. That's because we are wealthy, we are educated, and we are not living in a theocracy. We understand the advantages of having small

---

<sup>36</sup> International aid agencies have found over and over that if they offer family planning to women in poor countries, the women themselves overwhelmingly support it.

families, and we have the right to regulate our reproduction. We do so voluntarily, not by government decree.<sup>37</sup> We do so especially well in Europe, where people seem to understand intuitively that rising populations have led to terrible wars. The first-world experience with birth control shows that it can be done effectively and without coercion.

We can pass our expertise along to the third world. We have the money to provide cheap, effective contraception to have-not countries with high birth rates. We exercise enormous economic and political clout, which we could use to get reluctant nations on-side.

Sounds good, but I'd be lying if I told you that I held out much hope that this will actually happen. The overpopulation issue just isn't on the program these days. Hardly anyone even speaks of it.<sup>38</sup> Instead, the news is about disease, famine, war and strife of all sorts—the dreaded Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—which are busily cutting into our numbers the hard way.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> In the late 1970s the government of mainland China instituted universal birth control, thereby cutting the country's population growth rate considerably. This was entirely necessary, but the methods used were dictatorial and draconian, with forced sterilization and many other abuses of human rights. China's program is not a good one to emulate.

<sup>38</sup> As an example of this disconnect, consider the eight "Millennium Development Goals" announced by the United Nations in 2005. They are all laudable, intended to improve the lives of the world's poor, diseased and oppressed, but population reduction—which is key to solving such problems—is not among them. [[www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)]

Another example: the *Earth Charter*, a declaration of progressive principles that has been adopted by thousands of forward-thinking organizations worldwide, states that "an unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems," but the document suggests only "responsible reproduction" as a way of dealing with it. [[www.earthcharter.org.](http://www.earthcharter.org.)]

The September 2005 issue of *National Geographic* was dedicated entirely to Africa, where many genocidal conflicts can be traced to inter-ethnic friction between burgeoning populations. Yet nowhere did I find anything about the necessity of bringing down the continent's soaring birth rate, the highest in the world at 41 births per thousand persons each year, or 4.1 percent.

For comparison, the rate in Canada and the U.S. is 14 births per thousand, or 1.4 percent, which is less than the 2.5 percent needed for replacement. We have been below replacement since the early 1970s. Since then, the populations of Canada and the U.S. have grown only through immigration. But lately our birth rates have started to rise. This is thought of as a good thing by some, from whom you will hear that we need many more people in the work force to support the bulge of retiring baby-boomers, who are living longer than their parents did. I doubt the numbers used in these arguments, but even if they are correct, raising taxes would do the job. Still, whenever I see a news item about population, it almost always sounds the alarm about a *decrease* in the birth rate somewhere in the world. The quotes are typically from officials who are worried because they think the economy will suffer. (But see the Calgary *Herald* article I cited in footnote 15.)

<sup>39</sup> The Horsemen can also work rather quietly, as they are doing in Russia. According to news reports, Russia's population has fallen from 149 million ten years ago to 144 million today (see

Of the Horsemen, Disease is pretty scary. Think of the danger of AIDS, now infecting 40 million people worldwide, or the potential for a hugely lethal influenza pandemic. Famine provides pitiful news clips, and Strife can be blamed for general badness in the neighborhood. But War is the big one, the most diligent Horseman. Whenever nations have encountered seriously difficult times—failing food supplies, economic depressions, insane leaders—they have been strongly inclined to cross the nearest border with murder in mind. Right now the world's most powerful military machine is under the control of fundamentalist Christians who are squaring off against millions of Muslims under equally misguided leadership. Both sides are intolerant and blame-seeking. Blood has already been spilled in New York, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Middle East, which is terribly overpopulated and rigidly partitioned along ethnic and religious lines, is a perennial flash point.

Hatred on such a scale could easily compound into the next world war, one in which several of the combatant nations will have nuclear weapons. Chemical and biological weapons, too. If all these are used, we are talking mass extinction for sure. If the actual conflict doesn't do the job, then the other three Horsemen certainly will. They ensure that ten civilians die for every soldier killed.<sup>40</sup>

**G**loom and doom, eh? Not an encouraging forecast. Not what you were hoping to hear, I'll bet. For this reason, many a speaker whose lecture bottoms out at Armageddon will now start climbing back up, presenting the audience with a hopeful view that things can change for the better. Perhaps I should do that, too.

Okay, let us suppose that the world can be saved. How shall we start?

We could begin by writing letters to our elected officials. Lots of us in this room have done that. And we have learned that this works only for issues that are clear-cut and non-partisan not very controversial, such as the value of wearing seatbelts or the need to prevent smokers from lighting up in restaurants. And look how long it took to win even *those* modest reforms.

Next, let's try advertising. Maybe we should all contribute to a massive ad campaign about saving the world by having fewer children.

Hmmm ... not an easy sell.

---

for example [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3984951.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3984951.stm)). Death rates among infants and young people have skyrocketed, leaving a disproportionately small number of working taxpayers to look after the elderly—who are also dying at alarming rates because they don't receive adequate support. Many old Russians are drinking themselves to death.

Valdimir Putin's response to this? In 2006 his government offered women \$10,000 per additional baby!

<sup>40</sup> This oft-cited figure has most recently been confirmed by Kenzo Oshima, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs [<http://ochaonline.un.org/webpage.asp?Page=2038>].

Perhaps I should suggest that you join me in going around with a picket sign—have always been fond of picket signs—emblazoned with the words, “WE ARE ALL GOING TO DIE IF WE KEEP HAVING SO MANY BABIES!”

No, that would be like the bearded prophet in the cartoons who carries the placard with the doomsday message no one heeds. Besides, the anti-abortionists would counter-picket.

Hey, maybe we left-wingers could imitate the right-wingers and *buy* our way to a better world. We could simply pay off the politicians, and they would do our bidding.

On second thought, that wouldn't work, either. Not only are we the good guys and too ethical to do stuff like that, we are also too poor.

Another possibility: we give up on the idea of birth control and start spreading our surplus population around the solar system. Same thing we did 400 years ago, fleeing overcrowded Europe by the shipload. Only this time the New World would be Mars.

Naw, that's science fiction. Mars is not merely across the pond. As the Texans like to say of hostile and inaccessible places, “It's too far and *snaky*.”

Here's yet another scenario. This is a great one: we do nothing, and things work out okay. That's because human fertility is decreasing. In the case of males, exposure to widespread chemical pollutants may be reducing sperm counts. If so, we men may find ourselves lowering the birth rate by inadvertently pouring our testes full of pesticides.

Ah, but it is the women who have the babies. And they are as able to do so as ever. Further, girls are reaching reproductive age *sooner*, perhaps because pesticides are estrogen mimics.<sup>41</sup>

Still, this trend is counterbalanced to some extent by the fact that women in most countries, even in a lot of third-world countries, are using contraceptives more often these days.

An authoritative UN study<sup>42</sup> sorts out these conflicting factors in human fertility to project an overall decline in the rate of population increase. The UN thinks that in the year 2050 we will have only 8.9 billion people on the planet instead of the previously projected 9.3 billion.

However, that's still far too many. And half those 400 million fewer bodies will actually be *bodies*, because the UN expects a significant increase in the death rate. This is not particularly good news. Bottom line: we can't count on the do-nothing approach, except to let it do us in.

---

<sup>41</sup> See *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, vol. 62, pp. 878-884, available at [oem.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/abstract/62/12/878](http://oem.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/abstract/62/12/878).

<sup>42</sup> *World Population Prospects, the 2002 Revision*, available at [www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2002/WPP2002-HIGHLIGHTSrev1.PDF](http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2002/WPP2002-HIGHLIGHTSrev1.PDF)

I guess the only thing left is to suggest, as so many others have, that a “paradigm shift” or a “third wave” or something will come along and save our necks in the nick of time. This is appealing, because it lets me off the hook. But then I start to think of all the problems besetting us, all the intractable geopolitical troubles, the global social ills, the environmental issues ... and I reflect on what really needs to be accomplished worldwide to create the proper climate for success. Somehow we will have to —

- Ban weapons of mass destruction, rein in the world’s military-industrial complex and end the international arms trade
- As an alternative to warfare, teach and apply the principles of nonviolent resistance and the art of peaceful conflict resolution<sup>43</sup>
- Establish better relations among enemy nations and ethnic groups that hate one another
- Replace repressive governments at all levels with enlightened ones
- Remove corrupt civic servants and reorganize dysfunctional government departments
- Build democratic institutions and enact progressive legislation
- Bring in proportional representation, which helps to effect political change
- Protect human rights and civil liberties
- Strengthen intellectual and academic freedom
- Observe freedom of religion—and for those who wish, provide freedom *from* religion
- Ensure that courts are fair, and that police forces are honest and effective
- Guarantee ethnic, cultural and gender equality
- Allow women unfettered reproductive choice
- Make contraception, voluntary sterilization, and, yes, abortion, cheap and readily available everywhere

This list is getting pretty long, eh? But sit tight. I’m not nearly done yet. We also have to —

- Provide clean water supplies, basic sanitation and essential medical services throughout the third world

---

<sup>43</sup> Like the need for population reduction, the need for non-violence is being neglected. To learn more about non-violent resistance, read *Nonviolence: 25 Lessons from the History of a Dangerous Idea*, by Mark Kurlansky (Modern Library, 2006).

- Put more money into public health, and halt the HIV epidemic
- Worldwide, improve nutrition and physical fitness generally
- Boost emergency preparedness, so we can deal with the mass social dislocation and other hardships that global warming will bring on
- Beef up the social safety net for all, with special attention to the needs of the young, the old and the infirm
- Stop abuse of children as workers, slaves, prisoners, soldiers, child brides and prostitutes
- Assist education—especially literacy for girls in poorer countries—by ensuring that it is entirely tax-supported and truly universal
- Hire more government inspectors and allow them to enforce health, safety and environmental regulations properly
- Tax the rich and their wealthy corporations enough to restore the funding for indispensable government services such as the ones listed above, which have been crippled for lack of money and staff
- Add an extra levy to all, and protect this money well, to care for the retired as the birth rate declines<sup>44</sup>
- Get control of capitalism, which leads to unhealthy concentrations of wealth and power, meanwhile demanding constant population growth
- Encourage cooperatives and other non-competitive ways of doing business, especially in housing and banking
- Halt privatization of public services and return ownership and control to the public
- Increase wages, bolster job security and strengthen workers' rights, to give everyone a decent living and a sense of worth, which engenders responsible citizenship
- Make exploitive labor practices and corporate damage to the environment unacceptable anywhere in the world
- Erect high standards for doing business generally and apply them in all nations, such that no country attracts investors looking only for cheap labor and lack of regulation

---

<sup>44</sup> As per a previous footnote, this is so that fewer numbers of young people do not find themselves burdened disproportionately in supporting larger numbers of old people. After equilibrium is achieved at a reduced population, there will always be more working-age people than retired people, so this would no longer be an issue.

- Set up energy-efficient, inexpensive public transport everywhere, and reduce the distances we need to travel to work
- Decrease the environmental impact of global distribution and transport by relying more on locally grown food and locally produced goods
- Switch over to energy sources that do not emit CO<sub>2</sub> or otherwise pollute the atmosphere, that do not produce nuclear waste or destroy ecosystems<sup>45</sup>
- Ensure that all agricultural and industrial activities use minimal amounts of water and raw materials, take up the least land and use the least energy

Okay, I'm nearing the end of the list. Finally, we must —

- Adopt organic farming, and de-industrialize the raising of animals
- Stop overfishing the sea, ban indiscriminate methods that produce “by-catch” and prevent further net-dragging damage to the continental shelves
- Quit dumping waste of any kind or quantity into the oceans
- End fish-farming and other harmful forms of aquaculture
- Outlaw the hunting or gathering of any species that is in decline, whether on land or in the sea
- Switch from clear-cut logging to true selective cutting, and protect old-growth forests
- Make certain that the things we manufacture are not produced wastefully or with dangerous byproducts, that they are minimally toxic and easily recycled
- Clean up existing environmental messes
- Prevent destruction of the world's remaining wildlands
- Award foreign aid only to countries that have instituted these reforms or clearly are trying to do so

All these major steps and many smaller ones will have to be taken if humanity is to reorder itself for its own good and survive long enough to reduce the world's population to no more than 25 percent of what it is now, preferably to

---

<sup>45</sup> Solar energy is now cheap enough to significantly reduce the burning of fossil fuels. Solar can be used for heating nearly anything, and it generates electrical power efficiently. Wind power, in the form of the large windmills currently used by the dozen on “wind farms,” is proving to be visually unattractive and tough on birds, too many of which get killed by the rotating blades. A new and interesting electrical generator is Ocean Power Delivery's “Pelamis” device, a 120-metre-long floating, jointed tube, tethered to the seabed. Each Pelamis unit generates 750 kilowatts of power by flexing as waves pass by it. This sounds pretty benign to me. Of course, the devil may turn out to be in the details. But see the Pelamis at [www.oceanpd.com](http://www.oceanpd.com).



less than ten percent.<sup>46</sup> As the population declines, governments will have to keep working together to maintain such a program for several generations, meanwhile overcoming the effects of global warming until the atmosphere begins to cool off, which will take at least 300 years *after* we cut our carbon emissions back to pre-industrial levels.

This is, ahem, a challenging agenda. Yet the lives of our children and grandchildren depend on it. One would think that such a realization would motivate the United Nations and the G-8 countries to get cracking. However, the U.N. is losing its influence. The G-8 leaders meet behind police barricades to chart the course of “business globalization”—i.e. multinational corporate greed—which is only aggravating the world’s problems. In Canada we seem always to be preoccupied with such vital issues as the standings in the National Hockey League. U.S. support will be essential, but the Americans are going through a reactionary phase, fighting weird religio-imperialist wars and growing more and more paranoid about the terrorism that such conflicts breed. We won’t get any help from them. Instead, when we commit Canadian soldiers to fight alongside the U.S. military in Afghanistan, we are acting *like* them.

Alas, it seems that we are stuck. We need to de-crowd the world in order to stop perilous crowded-world behavior, but perilous crowded-world behavior is preventing us from de-crowding the world.

I can’t think of any way to solve this circular problem, and no one else seems to have figured it out either. And the time allotted for answering the question has run out. So I’m going to be honest with you. It looks as if we are hooped. Everything points ominously to the same conclusion: the current mass extinction is going to claim its creators, and soon. It may happen in one go, via mushroom cloud, or it may be more gradual, requiring a generation or two of misery as the ecology of the planet goes haywire.<sup>47</sup> Either way, the complex systems required to feed our huge population will fail, and our numbers will crash. Either way, the future looks grave indeed.

---

<sup>46</sup> Many of the economic, social and political measures in this list are needed to make conditions livable in overpopulated countries from which citizens are fleeing. Waves of refugees and economic migrants are known to destabilize destination countries and could overwhelm their own attempts at population control.

<sup>47</sup> If we are to go out with a whimper, not with a bang, it’s hard to say exactly which worldwide environmental upset will ultimately do us in. But how’s this for nightmare material? Continued global warming is likely to release enormous quantities of hydrated methane stored in gel form as “clathrates” in the sediments of the continental shelves. Methane is a much more potent greenhouse gas than CO<sub>2</sub>. If all of this methane were added to the atmosphere, and it amounts to about ten times the world’s known reserves of natural gas, it would heat things up catastrophically. This may have happened at least once before, during the great calamity at the end of the Permian, when 95 percent of all land-dwelling species perished. How ironic—or maybe it would be poetic justice—for our species to have burned enough hydrocarbons to bring forth a planet-killing dose of yet more hydrocarbons. [[www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/education/events/cowen1c.html](http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/education/events/cowen1c.html)]

**T**he truth may set one free, but this particular truth is pretty hard to handle. It is so crushingly hopeless. So damned *sad*. Job One for any organism is to maintain its own kind, yet here we have the entire human race headed over a cliff, and there is nothing a single person can do to stop it. Or even millions of people acting together. Millions more, ignorant and malevolently led, will resist ferociously. This thing has been building up for ten thousand years, through countless wars, tyrannies, insurrections, counter-revolutions, genocides, famines and plagues ... a long and painful journey from one overpopulation-induced horror to the next. The edge of the precipice looms, our speed is increasing, and the brakes have been disabled by madmen.<sup>48</sup>

How does one deal with *that*?<sup>49</sup>

The sixties rock group Ten Years After dealt with it in their song “I’d love to change the world.” They got the cause of the calamity right —

---

<sup>48</sup> Puts me in mind of that old Arab saying, “The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on.” After blaming myself and my fellow barking dogs for failing to stop the caravan and save the world, I now know that we haven’t had the slightest chance of succeeding. This is strangely relieving. The problem of defeatism (giving up too easily) is no longer relevant. We are defeated, plain and simple.

Being defeated simplifies things. Strategic thinking—“If we do thus-and-so, maybe we can win!”—is no longer required. More than ever, I can be directed by my conscience. I can now say and do what I believe to be right, even when it doesn’t appear to advance my cause, because the cause is lost. How odd: in a personal sense, I have won.

Over the years, some of my actions have been seen as counter-productive to one or another political effort in which a disagreeable compromise was required in order to gain a partial victory. I have often held out for better. To me, the ends never justify the means. Obviously not when the end is unobtainable, as is the case now. And I have always disliked compromising on important issues. This grows out of my experience in the American civil-rights movement. Should Martin Luther King Jr. have compromised? Equal seating at the front of the bus only on certain routes? Drinking fountains desegregated only in certain places? Voting rights only in certain elections?

However, I have learned not to be critical of fellow activists who do compromise. This was my father’s mistake. Terribly judgmental, he would attack his friends when they didn’t join him in his radicalism. I used to be the same. But no longer. Rather than alienating people I care about, I sometimes keep my thoughts and feelings to myself.

<sup>49</sup> One can always join the madmen. I know of a veteran campaigner against oil-company abuses in Alberta who has traded a life of poverty and frustration for a secure job as an environmental consultant to the industry he has so ardently opposed. He calls it “going over to the dark side,” and he says he did it partly to feed his family. The dark side is happy to have him, a Jedi knight in his field.

His choice would certainly not be my choice, and some of this chap’s former allies in the conservation movement have dismissed him as a traitor. But he is not publicly pro-development or anti-environmentalist. I think of him as someone who tried long and hard to change the world but found that he simply could not—the Nelson Mandelas among us are terribly few—and thus he has decided to live more normally, working in one of the few occupations open to him at his age. He plans to do so until retirement. After that, well, he will see.

*Population keeps on breeding  
Nation bleeding, still more feeding ...*

However, the refrain was —

*I'd love to change the world, but I don't know what to do  
So I'll leave it up to you.”*<sup>50</sup>

And that's what a lot of people do. They expect someone—the government, the environmentalists, Scotty on the starship *Enterprise*—to beam us up and out of this mess.

Ain't gonna happen. I know that, now. So I deal with the issue as most people do when they have to live with wrongs that can't be put right. I choose to ignore it most of the time. Otherwise I would lose my mind, à la Don Quixote, and go tilting at Wal-Marts.

Instead, I buy things there. Only as second or third choice, you understand ... but there it is: the ability to look the other way and carry on. This comes so naturally to us that it must have survival value. Think of everyone at Auschwitz, prisoners and gas-chamber attendants alike, all doing their chores and counting the days until either the Holocaust was complete or the liberators arrived. At the end of the war, there were surprisingly large numbers of both parties still alive.

Knowing what I do about the impending fate of humanity, sometimes I feel like I'm trapped in some kind of upscale extermination camp. Yet I do my job and pay my taxes, part of the great mass of humanity quietly going about its business, ironic proof that we are basically good-hearted and optimistic beings. And I live in faint hope that something unexpected and unifying will occur, such that we all wake up one morning knowing that together we can beat this thing.

In the meantime it makes me feel better to get all this off my chest. You have been kind enough to provide me with a podium, and I wish to use it for a few more minutes. But not so negatively. Yes, I'm going to lighten up a little. And before the end of my talk I'm going to offer you some very good reasons to keep on keeping on.

Let me start in that direction with another bit of satire, this one in the form of a short speech I was asked to give on the shore of beautiful Lake Louise in 2002. The speech was part of a protest against the planned expansion of the huge hotel there. As far as the environmental groups were concerned, letting the Chateau Lake Louise get any bigger was a very bad idea. We fought it all the way, even going to court about it. And we lost. The judge declared that Parks Canada was lawfully the authority on what was good for the national parks, that Parks Canada had okayed

---

<sup>50</sup> From the album *A Space in Time*, 1971

the project, and that the rest of us could go hang. Clearly the judge was not considering the possibility that political contributions made by the hotel corporation to the governing party in Ottawa might have influenced Parks Canada's judgment.

What can one do in the face of such injustice? The same thing the Russians have been doing for a long, long time: laugh about it. Here is an excerpt from that speech at Lake Louise.

### **The Truth About Convention Centres in National Parks**

Of course we conservationists condemn the construction of a convention centre on the shore of Lake Louise. As well we should. This world-renowned beauty spot is being defiled for the sake of commerce. But I think that the main reason for Parks Canada's approval of the project has not been fully understood, and I am here to explain it.

Such an obvious error in park management is not really about bad planning or bureaucratic incompetence. It's not about the usual things. It's about Parks Canada's special relationship with a type of park visitor few of us understand or appreciate. And what type of visitor is that? It is the **conventioneer**, a special branch of *Homo sapiens* that I have identified as a new subspecies.

Just as Neanderthal man dwelled mostly in caves, *Homo sapiens conventioneerensis* is found mainly at hotels. Its essential habitat has two components. One of these is the hotel room, a temporary den that must have, at its most basic, a hair-dryer, a coffee-maker and a television set housed in a piece of Mediterranean-style furniture. The other habitat component is the convention room itself, a large chamber, typically windowless, in which tables have been set up and covered with white linens that prominently display whatever liquids or solids have been spilled upon them by the conventioneers.

The conventioneers themselves can be identified easily. They all wear name tags. These lend a sought-after sense of belonging to the group, and they allow conventioneers to remember their own names after spending too much time in the hospitality suite. Other identifiers include the mid-priced suits and ties worn by male conventioneers and the perky three-piece outfits worn by female conventioneers. During exciting sessions, the males often remove their jackets and sometimes loosen their

ties. The females, who are watched carefully by all attendees, are not allowed any such comforts. ...

But why is Parks Canada so eager for the Fairmont hotel chain to build this particular convention centre at Lake Louise? Conventions don't really need to be held in national parks. Any city will do. Why build a convention centre here, in the middle of Banff National Park? And why build it in the face of so much opposition, especially when its detractors can cite many clear-cut violations of park policy and much evidence to show how damaging it will be?

Here is the real reason. My research has shown that *every single Parks Canada bureaucrat from the level of park superintendent up is a conventioneer*. Yes! These people may have begun their careers patrolling the park on horseback or cleaning outhouses, but they are all secretly *H. sapiens conventionensis*, and they now spend most of their working hours planning to attend conventions, preparing material to be delivered at conventions, or actually going to conventions. It is little wonder that the management of this agency, for purely practical reasons, needs to have convention centres in the parks it manages. Remember that the word "convention" and the word "convenience" have the same root. ... *Etc.*

Reading that again leaves me feeling like the guy in the teeshirt that bears the message, "I used to be angry, but now I'm just amused."

Well, maybe this is the right attitude. The enormity of the human condition is absurd. We are being *so* stupid! Maybe I should just throw up my hands and spend the rest of my life partying. Maybe I should buy a really big television set, take all the drugs I avoided back in the sixties for fear of losing my mind, and watch the nature channel until the power goes off for keeps.

Nah. That would be too much of a career change for a do-gooder like me. And a bad example for my grandchildren. So, since it is probably too late to save our species from extinction, I'm just going to keep on trying to save the national parks of the Rockies from our species.

To this end the pen is proving mightier than the picket sign. When word gets out that Parks Canada is doing something woefully wrong, the agency can sometimes be embarrassed into "walking the path of righteousness," as my favorite park superintendent used to say.<sup>51</sup> It delights me to think that a few of my more influential

---

<sup>51</sup> That would be Rory Flanagan, superintendent of Jasper National Park from the mid-seventies until the early eighties. Rory was famous for irreverent quips, including the following, which came after a particularly bad day with Jasper's ever-demanding business-owners: "There's nothing about this goddam town that one good forest fire wouldn't cure."

readers may chuckle their way to the phone, call up their member of Parliament and give ‘em hell about that convention centre at Lake Louise.<sup>52</sup>

But why bother to save the national parks if there will be no one around to enjoy them? Here is a reason, and I’d like to believe that it is plausible. Protected areas harbor many wildlife species in ecosystems that are more or less intact. Perhaps a few of those ecosystems will survive our messy departure, allowing some of those species to reclaim the world. This has certainly happened before, when pockets of life made it through five previous major mass extinctions. Maybe we should be thinking of national parks as Noah’s arks.

And here I am, for the past twenty-seven years living with Cia in the middle of Jasper National “Ark.”

As a professional naturalist and the author of some popular books on the Rockies, I am often hired as a guide by park visitors. This is a lot of fun, especially when I take my clients hiking and back-packing in the wilderness. In the winter months I read to classes of schoolchildren from my novel about ravens. (This is even more fun. We get to make noisy bird sounds in the library.) Much of what I do for a living is enjoyable and appreciated by others. Given the conditions under which so much of humanity suffers, I am lucky beyond words. I have all three things needed to make me happy: I live in a place I love, with people I love, doing work I love to do. Despite earth’s despoilers, and even though I despair of them, I am having a good life.

**Y**et Jasper is still part of the wider world, and the wider world is in deep trouble. It’s a worry that’s always lurking, just below the surface, like the “Under Toad” character in John Irving’s book *The World According to Garp*.

Which brings me back to author William Davenant. Here he is again: “Since Knowledge is but Sorrow’s spy, it is not safe to know.” How true! Knowing that the end is nigh is sorrowful knowledge indeed. And it’s certainly not safe for those of us who have chosen to *act* upon what we know. In Canada one can speak out against the wrongs committed by powerful and selfish people without getting killed for it, but they are still nasty people, like the bullies of my youth, and they will try to hurt those who oppose them.

Take the case of Tooker Gomberg, who was Edmonton’s best-known environmental activist. Gomberg suffered personally and often for what he believed, especially when he served as a city councillor from 1992 to 1995. In that position he was able to exercise a little power for the betterment of his city, and thus he was seen by the local despoilers as a threat. They went after him. Defeated, Gomberg left town. He moved to Toronto, where he had another run at civic politics, coming second in the city’s 1999 mayoralty race. But then he grew

---

<sup>52</sup> We environmentalist writers are generally ineffective, but you never know. Every now and again a Rachel Carson comes along.

increasingly depressed about the state of the world. Eventually he took his own life.<sup>53</sup> Famed sixties dissident Abbie Hoffman experienced similar disappointment and met a similar end. His suicide note read, “It’s too late. We can’t win. They’ve gotten too powerful.”

Should Gomberg and Hoffman have chosen ignorance? Would it have been better for them not to have known what they knew? Would it be better for any of us not to know what awaits us all?

Perhaps so, if one’s job is to produce the munitions for it. And certainly so if one is a young child, for whom there are already enough bogeymen. But at the age of majority, ballot in hand, any citizen needs to understand what kind of world they are in danger of voting for. Or, as we know too well, they *will* vote for it. (This has recently happened in Canada. Despite the lessons of the Mulroney years, we have elected another neo-conservative federal government.)

It was Gomberg’s and Hoffman’s role to get the truth out, even when the truth was not what we wanted to hear. It was my father’s role, and now it is mine. It’s what I’m doing right now, in speaking to you of disturbing things.

Life isn’t easy for anyone whose self-imposed job is to do that. I have been whacked hard for it. My family has suffered, just as my father’s family did. Working on positive, creative projects is much more rewarding, and I have made a point of that. But I’m 61 years old. Looking back on how little I have been able to accomplish in saving the wilderness, let alone the world, I’m discouraged.

Still, I keep at it. Admittedly less each year, because I’m weary of it. And because I have been told to avoid stress. (More on that shortly.) But I do what I can.

Yet—why do this at all?

**First reason:** the world is worth it. Our species, remarkable and admirable in so many ways, is worth it. Mostly, though, Mother Nature is worth it. No matter how beleaguered she is, there is always beauty to be found in her. If I can help to preserve little bits of the natural world, those places will provide pleasure to

---

<sup>53</sup> Angela Bischoff, Tooker’s partner, also blames antidepressants and the pharmaceutical industry for Gomberg’s suicide in Halifax in March of 2004. Visit Angela’s website, [www.greenspiration.org](http://www.greenspiration.org).

I can see why environmental activists could be consumed by frustration and guilt. Regardless of our efforts on behalf of the planet, we must still count ourselves among the excess billions of humans. We are not what the world needs. Just by eating and excreting, we do additional damage to the earth’s ecosystems. What should we do? Kill ourselves?

Of course not. Being born wasn’t our fault, and life is too wonderful to spend mired in self-loathing. One need only resolve to do minimal harm, and by example encourage others to take as careful as they can. The nature of our economic system makes hypocrites of us all, but given a choice, a conscientious person does not earn a living through activities that are obviously destructive of the environment. A conscientious person lives modestly, mindful of the connection between earnings and the earth’s finite resources: the more you make, the more you take. Mainly, a conscientious person has no more than two children and brings them up properly.

anyone who goes there, including me, right to the end. And as I said earlier, protected areas may make all the difference to the survival of species other than our own.

**Second reason:** an irrational but compelling sense of duty. Thus did the firefighters rush into the flaming towers of the World Trade Centre. Thus does the conservationist take on the coal companies. Sometimes the lone good guy wins, like the person who stood in the way of those tanks on Tiananmen Square.<sup>54</sup> And win or lose, good guys inevitably receive awards—sometimes posthumously—for trying.

**Third reason:** liberal guilt. It's not fair that my species is wiping out so many other species. It's not their fault that our private party is ruining the planet. And that grieves me. I owe it to the wolverines to give them a chance at survival.

**Fourth reason:** wolverines have rights. This is not an argument I really buy, but if the wolverines ever get lawyers I'd rather be on their good side.

**Fifth reason:** encouraging people to protect the environment and have fewer children can't hurt. It's bound to be doing some good, because it's keeping the earth a little greener. And every green spot is providing us with clean water, breathable air and a climate more hospitable than that of Venus. The more wildland we can keep intact—and Canada has the most in the world—the better the chance that at least a few human beings will survive the disaster ahead. Perhaps they will be within procreating distance of one another.

**Sixth reason:** there is always the possibility, remote but still there, that governments may come to their senses, get together and try to turn things around. If so, they will be looking for help. Those of us who have been engaged in enviro-related stuff for many years, whether as scientists or activists (or both), have acquired some expertise. We could be useful. In the meantime we can be working on that long list of things I mentioned earlier, the things that need doing for planned population reduction to work. These ideas are worth promoting for their own sake, anywhere and everywhere, population reduction or not, because they will improve our lives. We can keep pointing to that list every time a politician might be looking.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Having personally put a lot on the line to stop a particularly obnoxious coal company from destroying a favorite place, my lawyer and I succeeded only in making them blink. (See my article "Fighting Frankenmine" in *AlbertaViews*, Jul/Aug 2005.) Perhaps I should go stand in the way of one of the company's huge coal-hauling trucks. It would be a good symbolic protest, especially if I get run over, because it would prove that, to the average multinational mining corporation, environmentalists are just so many speed bumps on the road to riches.

<sup>55</sup> My father used to describe politicians as being "like colored particles, highly visible in the flow but utterly incapable of going against it." (He was paraphrasing Bertrand de Jouvenel, the twentieth-century French philosopher, in his famous essay *The Nature of Politics*.) I've heard it said that if only ten percent of the voters decide to take the high road on a particular issue, as happened in the American South during the civil-rights movement, then the majority will come



**Seventh reason:** enjoyment of the game. Taking on the developers can be entertaining. This is Canada, so the people across the table are usually polite and do not attack you in the parking lot after the hearing.<sup>56</sup> It's fun to go picketing every now and again, to be on television, provide sound bites for the media, etc. Builds poise and self confidence. Keeps one's protestation skills sharp. And if we don't exercise our right to protest we will lose it. (Of course, if we *do* exercise that right in substantial numbers, we will lose it, too.)

**Eighth reason:** the environmental movement has brought some wonderful people through my door. Some have become my friends for life.

**Ninth reason:** when things get really bad, we eco-buddies can help each other. All those survivalist types squirreling away canned food and guns in their basements are just going to wind up shooting each other. During the worst of times—I'm reminded again of conditions for noncombatants during the great European wars—the key to staying alive has been to surround oneself with trusted family and friends, sharing everything and looking out for one another. In really dire circumstances, cooperation works better than competition.

**Tenth and best reason:** trying to do what's right in this world is a basic human instinct, for most of us a more powerful drive than the temptation to do wrong. Without that built-in altruism, our species would have disappeared long ago. Economist Herman Daly and philosopher John Cobb have put forth a brilliant new economics based on this finding. It's the subject of their 1989 book *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*. Daly and Cobb disprove the commonly held belief that ending population growth would be economically ruinous. They show just the opposite: that long-term prosperity actually depends on stabilizing our numbers and then reducing them. *For the Common Good* is an important work, right up there with the *Wealth of Nations* and *Das Kapital*. It's also a whole lot more uplifting. If you haven't read it yet, you should.

Daly and Cobb agree that lending a hand for the planet's health is its own reward. Trying to keep the land beautiful, the rivers pure, the air sweet—to them that's all just plain good. A no-brainer for anyone, really. Doing right by the earth warms the heart, whether one has much success or not.

That alone would keep me plugging away. But to maintain momentum I have needed one more thing. It's the thing a lot of us Green Party types neglect. It is this: we need to kick back and enjoy the world we are trying to save. In Tooker Gomborg's words,

---

around. At that point the politicians will enact progressive legislation and the police will stop beating up the demonstrators.

<sup>56</sup> My dad used to have a beer occasionally with the FBI agent assigned to him, to help the guy get his reports right.

*Explore and embrace the things you love to do, and you'll be energetic and enthusiastic about your activism. Don't drop hobbies or enjoyments. Be sure to hike and dance and sing. Keeping your spirit alive and healthy is fundamental if you are to keep going.*<sup>57</sup>

Yes, we need to play, and it helps if it's physical. Too many environmental activists are unfit, urban-dwelling *in*-activists. We need exercise.

We need exercise outdoors, in the natural world. Cia and I are lucky enough to be surrounded by the mountain wilderness we cherish. We can step off our porch and be on the trail in five minutes, enjoying ourselves in a place we have tried hard to protect. After yet another meeting about yet another threat to the national park, when I'm angry with the opportunists gathered at the gates and even angrier with the park officials who seem much too willing to let them in, there's nothing better than a two-hour hike. It clears the mind and restores the spirit. Evil recedes in the rosy glow of a good workout in natural surroundings.

Why is that? Why is it so attractive to walk in the woods?

I think it's because the wilderness is the place in which our species grew up. That's where we lived back in the days when the world's total population was under a million.<sup>58</sup> Back then we were proud aboriginal hunters and gatherers, not wimpy wage-slaves and Safeway shoppers. We were doing what we had evolved to do, we liked doing it, and the world in which we did it was unspoiled. There were no cities or freeways or coal mines or clear-cuts or oil wells or pig farms or car factories or suburbs or strip malls or army bases or missile silos. To quote the Navaho, we "walked in beauty." I think we miss that.

When I'm in the back-country of Jasper National Park, walking in beauty, the people I meet on the trail might be the same folks with whom I have endured an Edmonton traffic snarl. "Snarl" is right. There, we cursed the situation and each other. In the back-country, though, walking in beauty even if it's raining, we smile and say hello. In the wilds we are few, and thus we are nice to each other. It comes naturally and it feels good. The feeling lingers after the trip is over. Great days in the mountains lead to better days back home.

Thus, outdoor recreation is an essential part of my life. To make sure I get enough, I have a rule of thirds:

---

<sup>57</sup> From a letter Gomberg wrote to his therapist on Earth Day, 2002. At the time, he was regretting not doing these things enough. Two years later he was dead.

<sup>58</sup> In *A Short History of Progress*, page 44, Ronald Wright relates that we hominids required 2.7 million years to people the world with 300,000 inhabitants. That was 30,000 years ago. By 10,000 years ago our population had jumped to three million—this was the beginning of the boom—and by 5000 years ago we had reached 15–20 million. It took only another 50 centuries to breed our current billions.

- I spend about a third of my time making a living. I have to do that.
- I spend another third of my time doing things that I'm not paid for but do anyway, because people I love and care about need the help. This includes everything from household chores to volunteering on worthwhile projects to resisting serious corporate and government misconduct when the need arises. For the sake of my children and grandchildren, I'd better do that.
- I spend the remaining third of my time brightening my life, often through physical activity outdoors. I climb the peaks and ride my bike, hike with family and friends, go cross-country skiing and so on. I can allow myself that.

Observing this rule has counterbalanced the negatives in my life with positives. It has helped to ward off the gray waves of despair when they have swept in. If I have learned what is wrong with the world, I am grateful also to have learned what is right.

Tooker Gomberg was the best of his kind, an inspiration to us all. I wish that he, too, had found a way to deal with all that Knowledge he had. Sorrow might not have stolen him from us.

**S**orrow probably won't get me, but something else will, of course, extinction event or not. And maybe pretty soon. The Gadd family has a curse, and it's cardiac. My father died of a heart attack when he was only fifty-two. For this reason I don't smoke or eat a lousy diet, as he did, and I exercise a lot more. My heart has repaid me well for that by getting me up many mountains. Thus far I have lived eight years longer than my dad did. But one can't overcome unfortunate genetics forever, and now my heart is ailing. Medical intervention has helped a great deal, but I still feel as if I'm nearing the end of my life.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> In answer to the obvious question, of course my own medical condition has probably contributed to my pessimism about the human condition generally. But it's an honest and informed pessimism, the kind that comes with age, regardless of illness. No longer subject to the irrational but essential optimism of youth, I can admit to the facts. And the facts are as cold as the grave that awaits me.

Yet like so many old men, I feel oddly ho-hum about getting grimly reaped. To me, death is just the end of the conveyor belt that we all hop on at birth. I'm delighted to have been able to ride for rather a long time, experiencing a great deal. I have especially enjoyed savoring humanity's accumulated scientific knowledge. It will be lost in our extinction, but perhaps many of our great discoveries will be rediscovered independently by the next species to evolve sufficient intelligence and the required curiosity. With luck, the next species might also evolve better judgement.

And that's okay. My life has already been ample. Full and satisfying. I don't need another twenty years on this planet, and it certainly doesn't need another twenty years of me, a typical North American consuming too much of everything. Maybe I will be around long enough to write a few more books, for which a certain number of trees will be killed to provide the paper, even if it's recycled paper. (Therein lies a unique form of guilt for authors who are also conservationists.)

But when Anubis<sup>60</sup> weighs my heart against a feather, perhaps it will be found to be light. Truly, I feel that way, light-hearted. Not bitter, not hateful. I'm still turning the other cheek, still following the Golden Rule.<sup>61</sup> I hope to retain that frame of mind to my last breath.

If there actually is a reckoning-up after death, the Almighty will surely be wise enough to judge a person's life partly on biological grounds. Was Ben Gadd good or bad for his species? Let's listen in on the decision.

"Well," says St. Peter, "Ben really did want to save the world. And he put in a lot of hours campaigning for worthy causes. But he wasn't a believer, and we can't let him into heaven just for good behavior."

"Right," says the Devil's Advocate. "Send him down to my guy. We have a special spot for infidel environmentalists. Right next door to the secular humanists."

"However," St. Peter continues, checking his notes, "Ben and his wife had only two children. One out of five persons does not reproduce at all, so having only two children is less than replacement. This means that Cia and Ben helped to reduce the earthly population. And God is very big on that these days. I'm sure He was pleased when Ben got a vasectomy at the age of 26. Now *that* was the very best thing Ben could possibly have done to save the world, even though he didn't know it at the time." St. Peter chuckles. "All those letters he wrote to politicians, all those submissions and briefs, all those meetings he attended, all those radio interviews and TV news items, all those demonstrations ... none of it really had

---

<sup>60</sup> Anubis, pronounced "Ann-YOU-biss," was the jackal god of Egyptian mythology. Among other duties, he weighed the hearts of the dead. A feather was placed on one side of the scales and a person's heart on the other. If the heart was lighter than the feather, Anubis judged the person to be good and thus worthy of entering the afterlife.

<sup>61</sup> "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is a precept found in one form or another in all the great religious works that give advice on personal behavior: the Bible, Koran, Talmud, Analects of Confucius, Teachings of the Buddha, etc. Socrates uttered it.

Cia and I also value a motto that one hears in Restoration Movement churches and among the Quakers. We try to live by it.

1. In essentials, unity (we all agree to abide by certain rules)
2. In non-essentials, liberty (for everything else we have freedom of choice)
3. In all things, charity (whatever we do, we are kind and we are fair)

much effect. But it did help a little. And getting sterilized helped a lot. I should probably go ahead and open the gate.”

The Devil’s Advocate has been looking over St. Peter’s shoulder. “Not so fast,” he counters. “It says here that two hundred and twenty-three trees were wasted getting his stupid books printed. *That* wasn’t so good for the world.”

“Hmm ... true enough.” St. Peter thinks this over. He has to hurry, what with the line of souls backing up. “Okay,” he concludes, “let’s do this. We’ll give him two weeks in hell for lack of faith and contributing to deforestation. Your boss gets to work him over a bit, then you have to send him upstairs.”

“It’s a deal,” says the Devil’s Advocate.

“I don’t make deals with the devil,” says St. Peter. “Let’s just call it a reasonable compromise.”

“Perfect. He was Canadian.”

[Speech runs 1:50 in all]

— *Jasper, 28 Oct 2007*