

PEOPLE! PEOPLE EVERYWHERE! (and not a thought to think)

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QUOTE: “There are 1,198,500,000 people alive now in China. To get a feel for what this means, simply take yourself—in all your singularity, importance, complexity, and love—and multiply by 1,198,500,000. See? Nothing to it.”

- Annie Dillard - For the Time Being

READING: Sometime around 400 A.D., a group of Polynesians colonized a small, very remote, volcanic island in the South Pacific, now called Easter Island. They found an island covered by palm forest, abundantly supplied with fresh water, large seabird colonies, and many species of land mammals and birds. The huge palm trees provided not only palm fruits, but were also ideal for the construction of boats that allowed the early Easter Islanders to hunt porpoises.

The population grew, their civilization flourished. Huge statues were carved from the volcanic rock. More palms were cut down and used to roll and lift the huge statues into place. More palms were cleared to create fields. The palm forests were completely gone by 1400. The delicate tropical soil eroded. With no forest to absorb the rain, springs and streams dried up. As resources became rare, warfare between islanders increased, as did cannibalism.

The population peaked at around 10,000 in 1600, while the quality of life continued to decline. Then the population crashed. When the island was “discovered” in 1722, its population was below 2,000.

I’m guessing that most of us here today have a teensy bit of pioneer thinking in our heads. At least the part of pioneer thinking that says we need a little bit more elbow room around us to live happy contented lives. We moved here to the Northern Neck to get a piece of land where the neighbors aren’t too close, where civilization is not breathing down our necks, even though this means that we have to travel some distance to experience the niceties of life—like museums and galleries and theaters.

But, every year since we’ve moved here I’ve seen civilization creeping in, faster and faster. Subdivisions going in—more drugstores being built—and now, the dreaded Wal-Mart. I have to take the bi-pass around Kilmarnock to avoid the daily traffic jam. More people everywhere you look.

And we live in a tiny little corner of the world where there's no industry to attract people. Imagine what it must be like in towns where there are factories and major stores and malls and entertainment. Wall to wall people.

Looking back at the world population—in the year 0, there were 300 million people, it is estimated. I have no idea how that estimate was made, but I have no reason to dispute it. The population stayed pretty steady for nearly 1000 years—give or take 10 million people. By the time the Pilgrims decided they needed some elbow room and came to America--1620—the world's population had doubled to 600 million people. –600 years. It doubled again by the time of our Civil War. –200 years. It doubled again by the time I was born. –100 years. It doubled again by the time many of us moved to Virginia – in 1990. –50 years. My gosh, people, we're almost as bad as rabbits! If this rate of doubling our population continues as it has been going, by the year 2040 the world population will double itself every year.

But, breathe a little easy here, folks, things might not be as bad as all that. There are scientists out there who feel things are changing. For the better—well, a little bit better, anyway.

Old Mother Earth is no fool. She looks after herself pretty well. Earth works very hard to maintain a balance between supply and demand. Animals—not counting Man—will increase in population only to the point where their habitat will sustain them. Then, if there's no more food for the population, those that can't get to the food die of starvation.

Man has been pretty clever in trying to outwit Mother Earth by thinking up new ways of finding food, of changing their diets. If you can't grow grain because it's too cold, you learn to savor the taste of whale blubber. If you don't have the land to sustain cattle for food, you learn to savor seaweed and crickets. If the land is too dry to grow crops, you pipe in water from somewhere else, or build dikes, pump the land dry, and build where the ocean used to be.

Animals—not counting Man—will not increase in population as long as there are natural predators out there to keep everything in balance. I've noticed on my property that there will be a few years where there seem to be rabbits and squirrels everywhere. But then, in a few years, you start seeing

very few rabbits and squirrels and you often see fox. Pretty soon there's not many rabbits and squirrels for the fox to live on, so the fox population dwindles. Then the rabbits and squirrels come back into power. A balancing act.

Man again has learned to outwit Mother Earth. Mountain lions and bears and wolves kept the human population nicely whittled down to size. So, Man learned to outwit the balance and invented spears and knives then bows and then guns. Not many predators left to keep everything in balance.

Mother Earth produced feisty little organisms that infect humans and often kill them. Organisms like measles and small pox and malaria—I know, you scientific types won't call these organisms, but allow me this gross mixing of germs and diseases and such. Measles and small pox and malaria help keep the human population down. But, along comes Man's ingenuity to do battle with Mother Earth. Man invented vaccines and medicine to get rid of measles and small pox and malaria. Mother Earth strikes back with a new disease—AIDS. Man goes to battle and invented medicines to attack the new enemy. And so it goes.

Man is finally starting to realize that Mother Earth isn't as stupid as he once thought. Mother Earth will win. She'll continue to live on. It's people who are in trouble. People are starving. In huge numbers. There's a website you can go to—the Lovearth Network. There you can watch a big counter, showing the current world population. And you can watch it click, click, click as a new baby is born. Two new babies born every second. Click. Click. Two more people on the earth. Click. Click. Two more people on the earth.

You can take your coke and your sandwich and sit there and watch that counter.

And, underneath this counter is another counter showing people who die of starvation. Click. Click. Another person has died of starvation. It's unnerving sitting there watching that counter move. Another death. Another death. People dying of starvation while you sit and eat your sandwich. Every year on our planet, 8.5 million people die just of starvation or starvation related diseases.

The world needs to feed over six billion people. We've improved our agricultural techniques, we've irrigated deserts, we've improved seeds, we've increased the distribution of food throughout the world, and still famine looms for millions of people.

Let me illustrate part of the problem for you. This apple will represent the earth. [cut apple in quarters] I'll set aside three of the four quarters that make up the earth because this one-fourth is the land—the rest is water. [cut the last quarter in half]. I'll set aside half of the land area because that is all that is habitable—deserts, ice, frozen mountains take up a lot of space. [hold up the 1/8 apple]. All the people on the planet—6,478,028,451 people—live on this part. [cut 1/8 apple into four parts] I'll set aside these three parts because they represent areas that are not suited for growing food, like cities and roads and Wal-Marts. [peel the 1/32 that is left very carefully] The peel represents the topsoil on which the world depends for food production.

When this topsoil is wasted by careless land management, we starve.

Now, here's where the news starts getting good—in a fashion.

As clean drinking water diminishes, as food on the table shrinks in size, as amount of land available to grow crops gets smaller and smaller, people are having fewer children. If you can't feed your family, you tend to produce fewer mouth to feed.

The world's fertility rate has been dropping on a global level for the past three decades. It has gone from six in 1960 to 2.9 births in the 1990's—that's per woman in her lifetime. In the western world, the fertility rate is falling and even dropping below replacement level. The developing countries fertility rate is just above replacement level at 2.1 children per woman.

Education for woman is rising. As women become more educated, the fewer babies they have. Women are learning about contraception. Women are learning that they have roles to play other than baby producer. And, as a result, women are opting to have fewer babies.

It is estimated by some scientists that the world will reach zero population growth—that is, the number of people who die will equal the number of babies born—in the year 2020 to the year 2029.

This doesn't mean all is goodness and light. Our world problems won't be solved by 2020. But, it does give us breathing space. Space to work on solving the problems of food and fuel and land and water.

Space to work on solving the problems of war and religious conflict, the disparity between the haves and the have-nots. Space to work on the problems of nuclear escalation, of energy wants, and so on and so on and so on.

Obviously, the problems of Mankind don't stop with over-population, although I believe that is the place to start to find some solutions to our ills.

Let's play a game of numbers and you can do with those numbers as you will.

You were all given a number when you entered today. I'm reducing the world population today to 30. Each of you 30 represent 215,934,281 people. That's a lot of responsibility on your shoulders, so listen carefully. Because not all these statistics come out to a whole number, each group may not add up to 30, but we're not doing this to exacting standards.

When I ask you to raise your number, raise it over your head so everyone can see it. And, if your number isn't being raised, keep it flat on your lap. Ready to begin?

You are the world of people alive right now on this planet. You represent everyone. Numbers 1-18, raise your cards. You are the Asians. Lower your cards.

Numbers 19 – 22, you are Africans. Lower your cards.

Numbers 23-25, you are Europeans.

Numbers 26 and 27, you are Latinos.

Number 28, you are North American

To look at this another way, number 28, Mr. North American, raise your card.

The rest of the world, raise your cards.

Okay. Forget your continental identities.

Let's talk about religions.

Number 1-10, raise your cards. You are Christians. I don't know how loosely the people who put these numbers together define Christians, but I suspect UU's are in this number.

Numbers 11-15 you are Moslems

Numbers 16-20 you have no religion

Numbers 21-24 you are Hindu

Numbers 25-26 you are Buddhist

Number 27 you are an atheist

Number 28, you are a Jew

This time forget your religious bent.

Number 30 speaks Arabic

Numbers 28 and 29 speak Russian

Numbers 26 and 27 speak Spanish

Numbers 24 and 25 speak Hindu

Numbers 22 and 23 speak English

Numbers 17-21 speak Chinese

Numbers 7-30 live in sub-standard housing

Numbers 7-13 do not have electricity. Of the rest of you, most would use your electricity only at night.

Numbers 5 and 12 you have half of all the wealth of the world

Numbers 21-30 don't have access to clean water

Numbers 7, 15 and 22 have control over all the nuclear weapons

Numbers 3 and 4 own a car

Numbers 1-20 are illiterate

Numbers 1-15 are malnourished

Numbers 1-5 are white

Numbers 6-30 are non-white

It's impossible not to notice that we here in the Northern Neck of Virginia—North American, white, English-speaking, car owners, who drink clean water, have electricity and live in above standard housing, are far and away in the minority. And, as developing nations across the oceans are expanding in population and we are not, this difference in numbers will only get bigger and bigger. If that doesn't spell conflict, I don't know what does.

All these numbers get a little overwhelming. The problems get almost too large to be tackled. It becomes difficult to put it all in a clear perspective. Let me give you a little help.

In 1977, when Elvis Presley died, there were 48 professional Elvis impersonators.

In 1996, just 19 years later, there were 7,328. If this rate of growth does not change, by the year 2012, one person in four on the face of this earth will be an Elvis impersonator.

And you thought population growth didn't matter!