

Why Are We Here?

The World Future Society asked its members to describe their experiences in realizing the importance of taking an active interest in the future. Here are a few of their responses.

Introduction

When I started working at the World Future Society, one of the first authors I worked with was Lester Brown, founder of the Worldwatch Institute and now president of the Earth Policy Institute. He wrote eloquently and urgently in *THE FUTURIST* about the need to make more sustainable choices in our lifestyles.

I took what Brown wrote to heart when I decided to move to an apartment building that was within walking distance of the office. I do own a car, but I drive less than 4,000 miles a year. I feel that this choice was a healthy one for myself and is in some small way contributing to a cleaner future environment—at least in my own neighborhood.

We at the World Future Society have been looking for other stories about how the study of the future, membership in the Society, or participation at a conference made a difference. In short, why are you here, thinking about the future? Why does the future matter?

We believe that stories told by the voices of experience will help show young people and other potential members exactly why thinking about the future is so vital to individuals and to the world right now.

Here are excerpts from a few of the stories we have received from members so far. And if you are so inspired, please send us your own story! Why are you here?

—*Cynthia G. Wagner*
managing editor
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Driven by the Need for a Better Future: Origins of My Interest in the Future

By *Peter A. Zuckerman*

Editor's note: Probably no other member of the World Future Society suffered a more desperate early life than Peter Avram Zuckerman, who helped found the Society in 1966.

Peter's youth may be summed up as follows: orphaned in Hungary ... supported himself starting at age 12 as a printer's apprentice ... forced to become a slave laborer for the Nazis during World War II ... survivor of three concentration camps, including Auschwitz ... immigrant to America ... U.S. soldier ... a co-founder of the World Future Society in 1966 and the Society's first secretary-treasurer.

Since his retirement from his Society posts, Peter has continued to be an active member of the Society.

Here is his story in his own words.



I started to become interested in the future when I was growing up in Hungary. My family was poor, but a good educational system enabled me to learn about the well-to-do upper classes.

Living in the large city of Budapest, I was able to observe the lifestyles and possessions of the rich. By studying history, I learned about the improvement of the human condition through inventions and organizations. By reading magazines and watching movies I gained a good understanding of the possibility of improving my condition through education and hard work.

I was also indoctrinated in Hungary about the "future." That country had a great historical past, which was destroyed by the victorious powers after World War I. A "better future" became a greeting in schools, indoctrinating the students in hoping to regain their lost territories. I still remember a Hungarian poem, which read: "We are preparing for a better future. God is with us and will be with us." I also learned a poem in the German language that stated: "We are fighting for our future."

My experiences in Europe during World War II contributed to my understanding of how human existence can change. My life in Hungary became increasingly miserable, and culminated in near death during the Holocaust. But I survived, and through the beneficial influence of America my future continued to become better.

Because of my experiences I became concerned about the future. I realized that human societies can take actions that make the future worse, such as causing the rise of Nazi Germany. Alternatively, human societies can take actions to improve the human condition and bring about a better future. The establishment and rise of the United

States is a good example of this positive alternative.

My experiences and concerns led me to the founding of the World Future Society. I was concerned about our future because of the Cold War and the danger of nuclear conflict. My interest in history made me realize that the world at the beginning of the twentieth century had great potential for prosperity and development. This great potential was destroyed by the ruling governments of Europe with World War I. Peace and prosperity were restored after World War II, but the danger of human decline continued. When I learned about the creation of an organization that was going to try to influence the future for the better, I eagerly joined the World Future Society.

The World Future Society became a great stimulus for experts monitoring the trends of our planet, societies, and economies. Even more importantly, negative trends can be countered, and positive trends can be implemented. A massive amount of intellectual capital has been accumulated, advancing human progress. Unfortunately, the future of the human species is not improving sufficiently. Negative trends continue, and many great ideas for improving our future are not implemented.

My own experiences during the period of 1944–1953 provide an explanation. During this period, I spent about 48 months in Germany. From May 1944 through April 1945 the Germans I encountered were mostly evil, participating directly or indirectly in murdering millions of innocent men, women, and children in such places as Auschwitz (see www.hpn.org/pazpax/pazholocaust.html).

After my liberation, I became a resident in various locations in Germany, waiting for immigration to the United States, which occurred in January 1947. Unexpectedly, in 1951 I had to return to Germany, this time as a newly drafted soldier in the U.S. Army. I stayed in Germany for about 18 months. My experiences of living in Germany after World War II were good. The Germans were friendly and provided intellectual learning, entertainment, and services.

What created these totally different conditions? The simple explanation is: governments. In the 1944–1945 period, Germany had a totalitarian Nazi government dedicated to war and genocide. Beginning in 1945, Germany gradually developed a democratic government, dedicated to peace and prosperity.

The human species is designed with a capability for cooperation with other humans, but also with a potential for hostility and violence against others. The governing institutions decide which direction we should be moving.

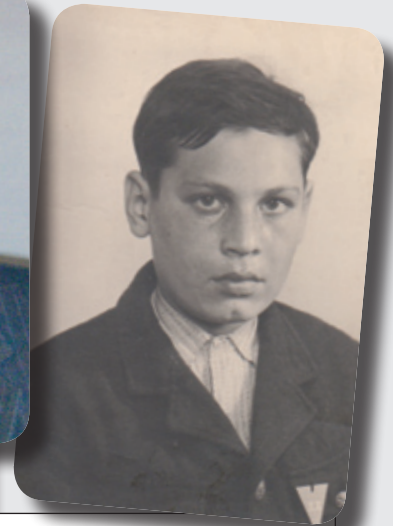
Today, human populations are governed by more than 175 nation-states. About 120 of these are democracies, but most of the others are failed or failing states. Even among many of the democracies the governing institutions will not take the needed actions to bring about favorable future trends for their populations. New social institutions have to emerge to bring about the needed changes.

My interest in the past and the future led me to develop such a social invention. The social institution of the “common good state” would advance beyond the traditional state, which is no longer able to advance the human species to a better future. For more information, I invite you to visit the Web site www.hpn.org/publications/commongood.html.

About the Author

Peter A. Zuckerman has been a consultant for organizations involved with world peace, social justice, and the environment. He helped co-found the World Future Society and was its first secretary-treasurer. E-mail pazpax@earthlink.com; Web site www.hpn.org/pazpax.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



How Peter Zuckerman Tricked His Guards and Saved His Life

My survival instinct made me realize that I must do something drastic. I decided to feign illness, so that at least I could stay indoors during the winter. My ruse succeeded. I was admitted to the infirmary, located at one end of the hangar. This was the place for prisoners who were in the final stage of starvation, or contracted some ailment from the cold weather or unsanitary conditions. The infirmary was without any medication, and merely served as a place for life termination.

By staying in bed week after week, I avoided the rigors of the cold weather that drained the life of the slave laborers. I endured, although continuously tormented by the body lice that infested the entire camp.

In the beginning, three inmates had to share one narrow bed. As one by one the prisoners died, I was alone in my bed, almost in a complete solitude. Again, my mind was able to withdraw from the cruel reality of genocide.

The inaction of my body preserved the precious calories, and slowed down my metabolism so that I still lived, while gradually 400 of the other inmates perished.

—Peter A. Zuckerman

Seeing the Future's Patterns in the Here and Now

By *Richard D. Maltsbarger*

The dirt, the grass, the smell of growth—as a young teen working the family farm, I had ample time to explore each blade of grass I chewed, each bale of hay we stacked, and each tree or bend of the creek where we lived. For me, the acres around the house were an immense universe of life that would continue forever; it was exactly this realization one day that the same rock upon which I sat would persist long after the memory of anything I would do, say, or write that prompted me to begin my thoughts of the future.

As I evolve through college, profession, marriage, and fatherhood, the essence of that solid stone points me to a broader future. It is because of my memories of that natural space that I look to the future and think, despite the humming of daily life, technology, and business, about what I can do to ensure those blades of grass continue to sprout, the dirt continues to enrich, and all growth—of food, humanity, knowledge, spirit, and life—happens for longer than I. While the hectic pell-mell of life occurs, for me, it is these small memories that continue to drive me to think of the future.

In that thinking, I look across the swath of life, much as I looked across the swaths of a mown hayfield, and see patterns—some driven by machinery, some driven by wind, some by my own sweat and labor. It is this looking at the world around, the noticing of patterns, the recognition of the forces by which patterns form, and the thinking of how such patterns will adjust all of our futures that inherently drive me as a futurist. Thinking through tomorrow's scenarios, planning for the uncertainty, and weathering the unexpected storm or calm is a natural and intense attraction for a child of the farm.

Thus, as a social researcher, I see the world of people and the patterns we create as my future universe. Much as I spent what seemed a lifetime (if only a few years) on that small family farm, I now spend a lifetime looking at new blades of grass, at new fertile soils, and at new growth of all people to see what the future brings. Much as acorns sprout the largest oaks, I see social pattern as sprouts to the diversity of the future. It is for this reason, this life of seeking to understand and learn, I engage as a futurist.

About the Author

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Futurists and the Population Problem

By *Ruth A. Wise*

I like to envision a future where everyone is kind and compassionate, rather than a disrespectful place where life of all kinds, including humans, comes cheap because there are so many of us. That is the way we are now.

I envision a politician somewhere tactfully creating a fair and sensible plan to address overpopulation, instead of keeping his head buried in the sand. Because let's face it, the existence of too many humans is at the root of all of our problems. No one wants to be told they're unworthy of procreating, so any plan would have to apply across the board and not single any one group out.

Futurists are among a growing number of people who "get it." Hopefully, one day, people with decision-making capabilities will listen to futurists, before it's too late.

About the Author

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How Do We Spot the “Unknown Unknowns”?

By Bengt-Arne Vedin

Getting hooked on future studies in the late 1960s, when the famous *Daedalus* issue appeared with results from the Commission on the Year 2000, I shared the optimism that existed then regarding the accuracy of such studies. The first oil crisis put an end to that optimism, but there were other signals of trouble, too.

Let me take a seemingly trivial example. I've been a runner, now jogger, since the mid-1950s, and I used to be alone on my jogging path. From the late 1970s, though, a lone jogger no more: in Hyde Park in London, in New York's Central Park, even in Paris' Bois de Boulogne, there was this stampede. Trivial, but not so trivial if you're in the shoe business, when a bit into the 1980s, three-fourths of the American shoe market was for running shoes.

Not so trivial, either, this signal was about a change in values and attitudes. That was for me an eye-opener. Not only do we have trouble forecasting economic and political change like the oil crisis, but we also take values and attitudes as so unchangeable that we do not even pay any attention to them.

One basic quandary is, What are “the unknown unknowns”? How may these be spotted? By definition, they may not—but then the challenge is to identify them before they reach center stage. Such an ambition might be generalized to a striving for bringing early attention to weak signals—weak signals that are growing to become strong. (And knowing about something potentially disastrous or at least negative may help us avoid it.)

The other theme to explore would be to map the now known previously unknown, thus trying to establish concepts and descriptors for, in this instance, “values, attitudes, and life-styles” (to refer to one such attempt, that of Arnold Mitchell of SRI International; there are others as well). How are values created, or perhaps rather, imbued? How may they change, and to what extent are they constant, unchangeable? What are their effects on our evolving future? How do they relate to something profoundly affecting values, culture?

About the Author

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Making the Most of the Future

By Carmen-Maria Hetrea

Why am I here? To make the future happen, not just for my children, but for all children.

One day I was chatting with a new employee in the hallway. The CEO of my company walked by, then stopped abruptly, turned around, and alerted the new member that talking to me may soon translate into having something to read—an article or even a book. I took that as a compliment.

I am an avid reader, and I'm known among my friends as the "walking index," always ready to point out an article or a book on whatever topic the conversation may revolve around. THE FUTURIST is one of my main sources for retrieving meaningful content and a springboard for further research. I discovered it decades ago and instantly fell in love with it. It's one of the few publications that I read from beginning to end. I consider it the roadmap for my lifelong learning experience. It stretches the limits of my imagination into directions that I can't possibly think of on my own. The articles are well written and inspiring. They are sparks for creative minds, taking the reader into worlds waiting to be explored. It's in the juxtaposition of ideas that innovation and learning happens, and THE FUTURIST provides fertile ground for those seeds.

Having grown up multilingual and having a keen interest in foreign languages and cultures, language structures, etymology, and semantics, I chose to become a linguist. I then began my professional career as an indexer and quickly discovered that I had a whole new world at my fingertips—

content to analyze, structures to build, topics to articulate, semantics to apply, words to work with in new ways. I started to look at words not just from a linguistic point of view but also from an information-management point of view, and new worlds started to unfold before my eyes. With the advent of electronic publishing, more and more opportunities emerged for me in the field of information science, search technologies

and retrieval, product design and features, etc.

The forward-looking minds that THE FUTURIST features had a tremendous impact on my 26 years of postgraduate education. I learned to take the tasks at hand and venture into other areas (disciplines that were none of my business—or so some said), such as biology, design, education, architecture, technology, gastronomy, interior decorating, etc., to find solutions to unanswered questions. The

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIO DANIEL NAVARRETE



"Over There": The author's son, Chris, wearing a "thinking cap" in reverse, metaphorically reaches for the light of the future, the elusive next step.

solutions to problems don't necessarily lie in the area of one's expertise. Everything is intertwined, and yet there is so much order in everything—if only one can see the patterns. In my professional quest for knowledge, I have discovered how my findings also apply to personal areas of fulfillment and happiness, relationships, corporate management, teamwork, economic and social networks, environmental issues, and on and on.

Among the suggestions in my survival kit for our children:

- Our formal education often fails us miserably, taking the joy out of learning. A linear theoretical approach is a miserable approach toward preparing us for the world. I would encourage everyone to plan to be a lifelong learner. Learn to listen and look behind the obvious. You are being shaped by what you find. Be a futurist!

- Dare to be different. Listen to the experts, scrutinize ideas, and then do your thing. But prove and validate along the way. There are bullies everywhere.

- Think out of the box? Does it have to be a box? Now you're in the innovation zone. Miracles can happen there.

- Understand reality. You are not inventing the world, just reinventing it. Rearranging, reconnecting, reshuffling. Know where your effort matters.

- Find your niche. Find something greater than yourself. Be passionate. It is a natural "high." Nothing great can be accomplished without passion. It is not an easy road, but a passionate life is a fulfilling life. With passion, you never have to "work" in your life, and yet you have to start from scratch and keep on scratching.

About the Author

Carmen-Maria Hetrea is director of the Information Architecture and Management team at Encyclopaedia Britannica. She has been directing the information management activities at EB since 1989 in the nascent field of knowledge architecture, with an eye toward the semantic Web. E-mail chetrea@eb.com.

Editor's note: For more of author Hetrea's "survival kit," please visit www.wfs.org/May-June%20files/whyhere.htm.



The Past Is Folly. The Future Is Possibility

By Richard A. Barker

I am a social scientist by nature and by training. I have made a life of observing and attempting to understand human nature, and from this life I have drawn several conclusions. For one thing, there is nothing quite so dated as an era's vision of the future. The future almost never turns out as we imagine it. If it did, we would all be living like the Jetsons. A society's vision of the future says much more about the character of the people than it does about the future.

When a society does not bother imagining the future, it is because the people have already found the answers for themselves. They generally do not consider change to be progress. That is true even today, when people work hard to get to a point in their lives and do not wish to change their circumstances—they do not wish to get old, to be downsized, or to give up the things of youth: lawns, disco, *Peanuts*, and SUVs. In this way, we can understand why many people in industrial society are not interested in contemplating the future. The future is the playground of the dispossessed, the disgruntled, the hopeful, and the extremely curious.

When we look to the future, it is because we value progress. "Progress" is a fairly recent concept, dating from the Renaissance. Before that time, natural philosophy struggled to define the unchanging universal truths, and social systems endeavored to maintain status quo. The concept of progress has its antithesis: It is possible to make things worse in the future rather than better. Of course, better and worse are relative, and that is no more apparent than in current economic and social conditions. Is the modern industrial rat race really progress over the sort of life one finds among isolated tribal groups in the Amazon Valley? The answer depends upon your values.

As a futurist, I have built somewhat of a reputation as being able to predict future circumstances and events with some accuracy. There is nothing mystical about this. For example, when I wish to predict government policies and outcomes, I simply pick the stupidest possible policy decision I can imagine—that is, the one least likely to satisfy the common good. Then, I imagine the worst possible manifestation of that policy. Some think I am a genius when my predictions come true. I have other similar heuristics that are equally effective.

But for all my cynicism and pessimism, I have trouble suppressing my hope, because I do think about the future. I look to the future for resolution of the issues, solutions to the problems, the ending of hunger and disease, and the establishment of world peace. Hope is hopeless when I think about the past. The past is the sum total of human folly; the future is the sum total of human possibility.

About the Author

Richard A. Barker is retired after 30 years of teaching at graduate and undergraduate levels and writing five books and a score of articles, including "The Future of Leadership Research," *Futures Research Quarterly*, Spring 1998 (vol. 14, no. 1). He is currently an internal consultant for Engineering Services and Products Company (ESAPCO), 1440 Field of Dreams Way, Dyersville, Iowa 52040. E-mail rbarker@esapco.com or rbarker@farmtek.com.

Exploring the Glocal Society

By Barbara Parker

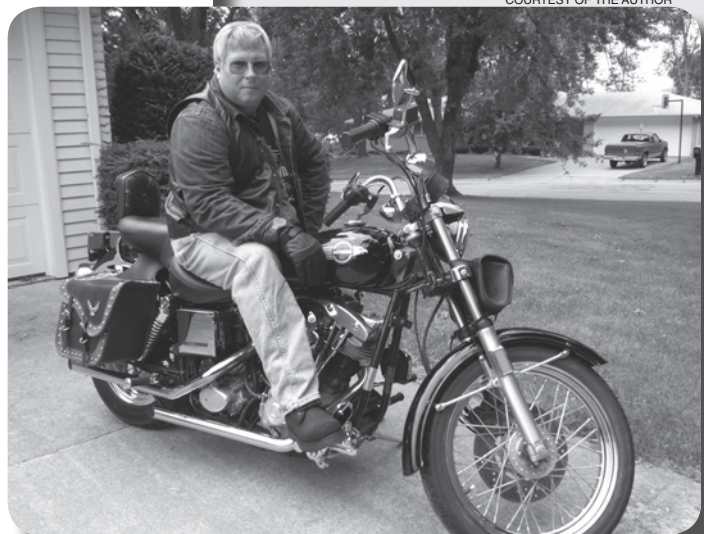
The World Future Society is the doorkeeper to the future of technology and information for the glocal society. Through the exploration of futurology and future tools, the World Future Society teaches me in a shared learning environment how and why it is necessary to understand the things I cannot see, hear, touch, taste, or smell.

This knowledge enables me to help develop solutions to problems, especially social problems like inequality in education, family violence, and poverty.

About the Author

Barbara Parker is an alumna of Anne Arundel Community College and is a graduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park. E-mail ddg21@comcast.net.

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



Emerging from a “Duck-and-Cover” Youth

By Kenan Doyle Branam

As a youth in junior high school in Tyler, Texas, during the mid-1950s, I read every science-fiction book in the city library. There was only one small section of about 50 books. This experience stimulated my interest in the future.

The question is, Why did I seek out science fiction in the first place, and why did my interest continue throughout my life? Of course, there were the current events in my life: I was drilled for surviving nuclear apocalypse as a “duck-and-cover” teenager, believing that the world might end before I reached adulthood. But I suspect my personal perspective was the biggest factor: I didn’t like the world the way it was and wanted to “figure out” how I could make it better. I was hurting and scared. Survival instinct pure and simple!

It’s taken me 60-something years to transform to a more optimistic state of mind, actually a passionate state of mind. Maybe through the wisdom of my varied experiences and learning, I have not only figured out what a better world can be, but more significantly, through the media of the Web, I have discovered “signs” of a large community of like-minded people. For the first time in my life, I can justify hope and faith in the future of humanity.

For now, that like-minded community is represented by the World Future Society.

About the Author

Kenan Doyle Branam, a media consultant and presenter, is founder of Paradigm Communications Inc. E-mail kenan@branam.com; Web site www.branam.com/speaker/.



Collectively Designing Earth’s Future

By Jan Hearthstone

I am here hoping to find people who would be interested in designing the Earth’s future collectively.

As it is now, the future of the Earth is being decided, but only to an extent, by few, with those left out influencing the future very negatively.

About the Author

Jan Hearthstone has written on ecological and social sustainability and spearheads the Model Earth project, “an interactive model of an ideal, ecologically and socially sustainable Earth,” at www.modelearth.org. E-mail hearthstone@myway.com.

Personal Actions for a Better Future

By Ronald Russell

I’ve been an environmentalist since the 1970s, always recycling, reducing waste, etc.

Now I drive a diesel car that is powered by waste-vegetable oil. I don’t want to support fossil fuel/oil companies, which do so much harm to the environment by drilling and so much destruction to peace politically.

But the most important thing anyone who cares about the future can do for the earth is become a vegan.

The leading cause of greenhouse gasses is factory farming, not carbon emission from autos, etc. You cannot be an environmentalist without being a vegetarian. Nothing does more to de-

stroy the environment than factory farming, which is the leading cause of water pollution, greenhouse gasses, and world deforestation.

About the Author

Ronald Russell is a novelist and screenwriter. E-mail ron4arts@yahoo.com.

Hungary's "Bright Future"

By Géza Szathmáry

For 40 years as a citizen of a Communist country, the "Future" had been pounded in my head as identical with "Socialism to be followed by Glorious Communism."

Smothered through everyday experiences, about which we didn't dare to tell anybody off, the Future was turned into an arid abstraction or even into sheer nonsense: Five Year Plans either remained unfulfilled or were exceeded, fulfilled ahead of schedule. For decades, my wife was working with a Planners' Department, enabling me to know even better than others what an official report on "planning a bright future" meant.

Somewhere at the beginning of the 1980s, when Communism in Hungary became more friendly, I started to agonize. I got a German book within my reach: Robert Jungk's *Der Jahrhunderttausendmensch, Bericht aus den Werkstaetten der neuen Gesellschaft* then absolutely unknown to me. [Ed. note: The English version was titled *The Everyman Project: A World Report on the Resources for a Humane Society.*] Annexed among contact addresses was the abbreviation WFS and proper parameters.

Verging on the age of 50, I had been struck by a certain feeling of desolateness. How shall I understand all that is going to happen around me? Could an American periodical, issued by WFS, help my orientation? I thus decided to subscribe, which, believe me, was a tremendous and risky task under an agonizing Hungarian Socialism.

The material I got acquainted with from WFS seemed to be very high-tech obsessed. I have always immersed myself in a back-to-basics knowledge and way of thinking. But THE FUTURIST had been changing in the meantime. And so did I. After a while, we started to strike a common path. More than one of my Letters to the Editor was published in THE FUTURIST, and I became a member of the Futurist Readers' Panel.

Out of curiosity, I took out the first copy of THE FUTURIST that I received: June 1983. I have subscribed to your magazine for 25 years!

About the Author

Géza Szathmáry is a licensed expert in the law of international commerce and of industrial property rights. In the 1950s and 1960s, he was a lawyer with the National Bank of Hungary, working in international banking law and foreign trade. He lives in Budapest. E-mail g.szathmary@chello.hu.



Personal Choices and Planetary Impacts

By Betsy Cagle

Most of us think, "What can one person do to make even the slightest dent in the health and well-being of our planet?" But from my perspective, all the seemingly small things that each one of us does adds up in a big way, just like compounded interest does when there's money in your bank account.

Initially, our small contribution seems like a mere drop in the proverbial bucket, but as time passes and each of us does one other small thing and again one other small thing, it's like a snowball rolling downhill, picking up energy as it goes. Since science has shown us we are all connected at the basic level, it's entirely possible for one small thought or one small action to act like a lightning rod, attracting more and more energy to it; eventually, that one thought or action begins to affect the bigger whole.

As for me, I've done many small things in my lifetime, but the one that comes immediately to mind is that I chose to only have one child. Even 30 years ago I understood the fact that most of the problems and challenges we face today on the planet are due to the fact that there are simply too many people. It's people who use the resources, create pollution, and generally disregard and disrespect our home planet. This planet only has so much space and so many resources. Most of us seem to believe these things are endless, and keeping what we have clean and productive tends to fall by the wayside when there's a lot of money involved.

Human beings are one of the earth's major inhabitants, who can and do cause the most harm, so it's up to each of us to take a good hard look at how many children we bring into the world. We need to ask hard questions, such as, What kind of place will we leave our children? Will we leave it a better or worse place than when we arrived? If we can't answer those questions in the positive, then each of us needs to seriously consider limiting the number of children we choose to have, or better yet, choose not to have any.

I chose to bring my actions into congruence with my principles. And this is the same basic choice each of us must make: to live by our principles. It's the only way we will survive. □



About the Author

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