

ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

Every Child's Birthright

[We are glad to have another contribution from our esteemed friend, Dr. Alexander F. Skutch. As usual, his writing expresses with sincere feeling many valuable and positive insights. His basic theme is what he calls, in a beautiful phrase, "the altruism of parenthood." His comments on irresponsible parenthood, from this standpoint, are withering. We hope many readers will feel the positive moral force of his ironic hope that those who do not feel the altruistic leaning to parenthood will remain childless.

We are wholly in sympathy with his feeling about every child's birth-right. We can only hope, however, that more and more people will come to share the ancient traditional feeling, reinforced by the Theosophical Movement and by Gandhiji, that an equal reverence is due to sex regarded as a creative power. This rules out all methods of birth-control except abstinence.—ED.]

IT IS ONE OF MANKIND'S GREATEST TRAGEDIES that human beings can be brought into the world with less careful preparation than many other members of the animal kingdom must make to bring forth their young. Birds, for example—robins and sparrows and thousands of other kinds—cannot hatch their chicks without first acquiring a territory that contains a nest site and adequate sources of food, and building a nest, and patiently warming their eggs for weeks or even months. With such a system of reproduction, casual or careless parenthood, such as occurs with lamentable frequency among men, is an impossibility.

In many other animals that reproduce by means of eggs, including certain fishes and frogs and insects such as bees, ants, and wasps, similar preparations must be made, and care bestowed, before the young emerge from the egg, which corresponds to birth among mammals. The mammalian system of reproduction provides for the embryo developing within the mother's body the safest and most constantly favourable environment, at the same time that it relieves the parent of the need to care actively for her unborn progeny, of whose presence within her she may long remain unaware. To bring forth her young alive, all she need do is to eat well and preserve her own life. Among mammals, the altruism of parenthood hardly appears in the prenatal stage. How different from the situation in birds and wasps and bees!

In many non-human mammals, casual reproduction is checked by the restriction of sexual activity to certain periods of the year, when it will result in the birth of the young in the season most favourable for their nurture, as in spring or early summer in the temperate zones. Moreover,

the elaborate innate courtship rituals which in some species must precede the union of the sexes prevent haphazard insemination. Man, like his domestic animals, has lost the seasonal rhythm of reproduction along with an innate courtship pattern. Is it not paradoxical that the creature which regards itself as the highest member of the animal kingdom, and in some respects actually is, can be born more casually than almost any other warm-blooded animal? In most undertakings, the worth of the product is proportionate to the care which enters into its production. It is often maintained that a human being is of infinite worth; yet untold millions are started on life's path with less forethought than goes into the preparation of a cup of tea!

There are reasons for regretting that we are not hatched from eggs nursed into life by the heat of the parent's body, perhaps by the prospective father and mother taking turns at incubation, as in innumerable kinds of birds. Then only wives and husbands who had a modicum of the virtue of patience, who could co-operate together, who desired babies strongly enough to sit still for them—only such men and women could become parents. And while quietly incubating their eggs, they might meditate, and perhaps hatch out some worth-while thoughts along with their infants!

We mammals cannot by willing it revert to a method of reproduction that was probably followed by our remote ancestors of past geologic ages. But we can resolve that no unwanted baby shall ever be born, and by deliberate effort come at least close to the realization of this ideal. Mankind may or may not be a cosmic accident, but it is pathetic that any individual man or woman should ever be a human accident. If there is any truth in all that we hear these days about the intrinsic dignity of every human being, this dignity must pertain to him from the beginning; and it is difficult to recognize dignity in an accident. The unwanted child seems to have been subtly insulted before ever he was born. Even if, born in wedlock, he escape the social stigma of illegitimacy, he enters the world with a handicap; for he is not welcomed with the eager love which will give him the best start in life.

Margaret Sanger fought for birth-control primarily to emancipate women from the burden of bearing and rearing children they did not want, and now its importance in holding the human population of this planet within reasonable limits is gaining wide recognition. But, above all, we must consider the new life that is about to enter the world. It should come as an invited guest whom we deem it an honour to serve, not as an unwelcome intruder whose arrival we resent.

The best-endowed of parents cannot guarantee that their children will be sound in body, or beautiful, or outstandingly intelligent, or that they

will all their lives escape every one of the countless ills that continue to afflict humanity. But the parent of a child who is not wanted, who is not lovingly anticipated from the beginning, has made a tragic mistake. The very least that every child has a right to demand of those who begot him is that he was conceived because he was desired. To be wanted is the minimum birthright of every human being. The unwanted baby is cheated of his birthright before he is born.

It is not enough that parents should desire children as warm little bodies to be fondled and caressed, or as assets to their social status. I know mothers in the humbler ranks of society who welcome their baby as a creature to be decked out in all the poor finery they can afford and paraded about as a sort of animated doll; but their affection wanes as the growing child develops personality and independence. They neglect, if they do not actually abuse, the boy or girl who has become able to perform useful chores for them, to lavish all their love on the latest arrival.

Those who desire children should desire children of a certain quality; they should have an ideal for them. To specify in advance what our children should be is a practice not without danger. It is a great mistake for expectant parents to set their hearts upon having a boy — or a girl — for they are as likely to be disappointed as to be satisfied. Such disappointment may subtly affect the parents' relations with a child of the undesired sex. He is all too likely to discover, before he is grown, that he unwillingly vexed his parents by entering the world with the wrong sex, and such knowledge will hardly strengthen the bonds of affection between child and parent. Although it is natural for a parent who has won distinction in some art or profession, who is perhaps the inheritor of a long tradition of achievement in some particular field, to wish his child to follow in the same path, to insist upon this would be unwise. By temperament and talent, the child may be far better fitted for some other undertaking.

One's ideal for his children, then, must not specify details such as sex and occupation but be of a more general nature. Without great risk of frustration and disappointment, and making unfair demands upon the child, one can hold for him only an ideal of universal validity. The only qualities that we can justly require of a child are those which have been widely approved by the long experience of mankind. To have his child become a man or woman who is loving, generous, compassionate, responsible, self-controlled, temperate, and cheerful — this is an ideal which every parent can fairly hold. These are the qualities that make us lovable: above all, parents should desire a child who inspires their love, which alone can transform into pleasures the heavy sacrifices they must make for his nurture and education. The subject of prenatal influences, which so interested Oliver Wendell Holmes, seems never to have been thoroughly

explored. But it does not appear unreasonable to suppose that the persistently held hopes and ideals of an expectant mother can favourably affect the quality of the child she bears in her womb and nourishes with her blood; just as, it was once widely believed, the unborn child might be harmed in body or mind by some disturbing experience of the mother.

An objection sometimes raised against the wide dissemination of knowledge of birth-control is that it enables people to indulge as freely as they wish in amatory pleasures, without paying the price in consequent parental obligations. On the contrary, I believe that nothing is more greatly to be desired than that people who wish to indulge their passions without begetting children remain for ever childless. If this result could be ensured, not only would the current population explosion be alleviated, but the quality of the human race would improve. Although environment strongly affects the formation of temperament and character, the hereditary factor cannot be ignored. Children born to unwilling parents are, in later years, more likely to resent the duties of parenthood than are children whose parents desired them. The easier the avoidance of parenthood is made, the more the strain of people too selfish or unloving to desire children should dwindle, if it does not wholly disappear from the earth; the more, too, the generous, loving people, who alone make good parents and raise children like themselves, will come to predominate. So let those married couples who wish to indulge their reproductive impulses without the natural consequences thereof do so as much as they like. They will pay for their selfish sensuality by having neither children nor grandchildren to brighten their declining years. Their names and their breed will disappear from the earth, which will be better without them.

Probably the greatest single forward step that mankind could make would be the elimination of careless, irresponsible parenthood. Until this is achieved, humanity can hardly be said to have come of age and be master of its destiny. Our vaunted ability to control nuclear reactions and the courses of spaceships will avail us little if we fail to control something of far more fundamental importance, our own abundance, upon which the solution of all stubborn social and political problems and our very adjustment to the earth which supports us ultimately depend. How many people the earth can support, without undue sacrifice of the values that make life precious, is a problem that will require all the wisdom of scientists and statesmen to solve. And nobody who cares about the future of mankind and the earth that supports it will wish to incur responsibility for a birth-rate that is threatening both with disaster.

Yet to leave some progeny to replace himself seems to be not only the right but the obligation of every person who regards life in the human

form as a priceless gift. Whether or not one wants children and is capable of lavishing upon them the loving care indispensable for their spiritual no less than their bodily growth, is a question which every man and woman must decide for himself or herself. The kinder life has been to him and the happier he is, the more eager will the generous person be to give life to others. That one who finds existence a painful burden should refrain from bringing others into what he regards as a cruel and evil world, is an attitude with which we can sympathize. But those healthy people, avid for life, who avoid parenthood because it will interfere with their pleasures arouse our pity or contempt. They forget that they are living joyously because others made sacrifices for them; and that since we cannot really repay what we owe to loving parents, we must pass on the debt to loved children. Nevertheless, if these carefree people do not feel within themselves the stirrings of parental love, if they do not believe that their lives will be enriched by the experience of parenthood, it is better that they die morally insolvent. For only those who desire and lovingly anticipate their babies give them their birthright.

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