

Child Spacing

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La Madonna detta del Latte
Ambrogio Lorenzetti
fl. Fourteenth Century

INTRODUCTION

IT HAS been said that "the trouble with life is that we understand it backwards, but have to live it forward." The following reflection on childbearing has been written to help the married and the soon-to-be married to understand life as it is being lived forward.

Whereas God and Nature—God's 'Vicar General'—desire the utmost happiness possible for man and woman while on earth as measured by their entire life span, many youthful decisions have long-range consequences and are regretted later in life. The limited vision of youth prevents the young from appreciating the fact that the pleasures of life change with age, and that, too often, the misdirected pleasures of youth, which lead them, for example, to avoid parenthood, rob them in later life of the joys of parenthood

and grandparenthood, joys that increase as the years go by. In totaling life's pleasures, we must always remember that the twenty years of life from 48 to 68 years of age are just as long as the twenty years from 18 to 38.

In past years, youth placed more faith in the providential order, which made decision making easier. Today, the siren call and skillful propaganda of social engineers, international organizations and others who are antichild tempt youth to try to outsmart nature and God. But they will not be outsmarted. Children are our greatest pleasures and treasures in life, and the earlier in marriage we have them, the longer we enjoy them.

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I. Man Against Nature

EVOLUTION IS a process by which the fit survive and the unfit perish. The presumption is that existing animal species, by their persistence and perfection over countless centuries, become time-tested models of fitness with characteristic physiologic and reproductive patterns that are ecologically optimal and normative. Unless proven otherwise, the progeny spacing process intrinsic to an animal species must then be assumed to be best for the health and vitality of the species and its constituent individuals as they carry on their life work.

Domestic animals illustrate optimum reproductive patterns. It is not known, for instance, that artificial litter spacing in the cat or dog contributes to the health or longevity of the female of these species. *A priori* there is no reason to believe that man is different in this respect from other animals.

The prevalent practice of artificial child spacing, i.e., the spacing of conceptions beyond normal frequency, is a 20th century phenomenon. In the early Twenties, following World War I, a number of factors stimulated its practice. With the re-

duction of childhood diseases and mortality through immunization and medical advance, the probability of children reaching adulthood was markedly increased and large families more easily achievable. It, thus, was no longer necessary to give birth to eight children to have a completed family of five. Consequently, wives found it tempting and convenient—with increasing occasions to be away from the home—to postpone pregnancies out of the present and into the future.

"Liberated" ovary

An insidious and subtle factor abetting the popularization of artificial child spacing stemmed from the steady displacement of breast-feeding by artificial infant feeding. The bottle made it possible for the mother to disengage herself physically from her complementary coupling with the infant. The infant, thus, lost control over his mother's ovulation, since ovulation resumes earlier and more consistently in the non-lactating woman. Accordingly, the "liberated" woman resulted in a "liberated" ovary and artificial feeding led to abnormally close births and abnormal stresses and strains within the family.

The impression that man is highly fertile was derived from the belief that the small group of non-nursing mothers who had babies every 11 to 12 months were characteristic of all women. This error was exploited by the birth control movement. The reality, however, is that man is intrinsically sterile because of his unique dissociation of copulation from ovulation. This is confirmed by an illuminating paradox: in their twenties women flock to birth control clinics; in their thirties, to sterility clinics. In fact, prior to Planned Parenthood's early Sixties' excursion into world population control, when its concern was directed toward individual families, it did not recommend birth control to newlyweds until after they had established their fertility with a first-born.

Alleged threats exploited

The artificial-feeding-induced false image of closely spaced births, however, set the stage for the big push that led to today's artificial child spacing. Alleged threats of non-spacing to the health and life of the infant, then to the health of the mother, and finally to the "health" of the marriage were exploited by birth control enthusiasts in extensive promotional campaigns. Concerning the "health" of the marriage, the notion was even promoted that sex without

children got marriage off to a good start, contrary to mankind's experience that sex without children tends to eliminate marriage. Today, the ultimate push for artificial child spacing comes from population "explosionists" and social engineers who, under the guise of seeking the welfare of individual couples, promote the concept of "child spacing" to space children out of existence.

To find the paradigm—the optimum and natural interval between births—one must turn to the breastfeeding mother. Here the average interval between births is approximately two years. Sensitivity to the accumulated wisdom of nature gives us reason to suspect that many yet to be discovered subtleties, contributing to the optimum, will relate to nature's spacing.

Artificial child spacing is a practice which has been extensively promoted by birth control organizations, cultivated and implemented by gynecologists, and seized upon by social engineers. The question of intelligent child spacing, however, is too important to be left to these restricted specialties. Instead of wisdom these specialties have substituted myths.

Insight from parenthood

The ultimate goal of procreation is not the newborn but the mature adult. An extensive awareness of the dynamics of family life and the family constellation is fundamental in child rearing. Insight should be sought not only from psychologically oriented pediatricians and enlightened psychiatrists but from the

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experience of parenthood accumulated by such parent and child centered counselling organizations as La Leche League International. The goal of medicine—and ecology as well—is not to pit man against nature, but to illuminate his role as preserver and nurturer of nature in conformance with the timeless precept that good art imitates nature.

II. Nature's Subtleties

ALTHOUGH the viability of mother and infant is a basic goal of nature, sensitive students of nature know that her goal is much broader than simple survival. Existence alone is not sufficient. To thrive is the goal, for in the complex scheme of life high-level wellness is critical to species stability and long range preservation.

Useful transmutations

Sensitive students know also that nature is vastly subtle and highly economic as she pursues her goals. As opposed to the single-purposed inventions of man, nature characteristically solves problems through a multifunctional approach. Whereas man creates artifacts such as the highly useful plastics—products which, unfortunately, result in large amounts of not easily disposable waste matter—nature's products are recyclable and ingeniously reappear in endless, useful transmutations. Man's shortsighted, yet exuberant, production of non-biodegradable pesticides and cleaning agents further evidences the problem. In contrast,

the nitrogen cycle exemplifies nature's superb ability to achieve an efficient and economic re-utilization of a substance that makes life on earth possible.

In the area of family life and child rearing, so crucial to man's well-being, man's contemporary promotion of artificial child spacing again illustrates the dangers lurking in man's impetuous interferences with built-in natural mechanisms. Nature's own child spacing interval of about two years, which has long been observed in the breastfeeding mother, is one such mechanism. Delicately interwoven with multiple yet exquisitely precise factors ordered to total well-being, it is the norm that man should imitate. Sub-optimal limits suggest why.

With an abnormally short interval between births—the usual consequence of formula infant feeding—the previously born baby, aged 11 to 13 months, is not yet a competent toddler. His world is more circumscribed. He is still one with mother. The arrival of a newborn becomes an intrusion and an encroachment. In contrast, the naturally spaced child, aged 16 months or older, because of greater locomotory competence, is more centrifugal than centripetal. His horizon is wider; his territorial interests extended; the world has opened up to him. When called by mother, he scoots off in the opposite direction. Because he has entered an expanding universe he is naturally less threatened by the new baby and more predisposed to integrate him as a phase in his growth and maturation.

In the case of the abnormal longer interval between births—the interval exceeding nature's norm and by customary practice a three to four year period—Benjamin Spock's observation of many years ago is relevant. He stated that the child between two and five years of age is most prone to sibling rivalry and jealousy with the arrival of the newborn.¹ If this is so, Spock's observation reenforces nature's built-in prescription of a preferred optimum spacing of about two years. This outer limit conforms to the experience of many that the more years children are spaced apart, the more they are spaced out of each other's worlds with obvious disadvantages to all concerned.

The subtleties associated with natural child spacing and our usual inclination to ignore or dismiss them should remind us once again that the stumbling block is man's understanding, not nature's design. Moreover, despite our reluctance to learn, we would be grossly opaque not to assume that nature still holds a myriad of strategies unknown to man. Perhaps here it is sufficient to recall the self-evident: as well as maximizing what Eastman² has called the "talisman of youth," having children earlier rather than later lengthens the joy of parenthood and grandparenthood.

Protective guardianship

It should be recognized, then, that nature, not man, possesses the ultimate wisdom; that as we strive for intelligent decision-making in the

absence of complete knowledge, prudence dictates that we be doubly thoughtful before we deviate from nature's time-tested way. It is frankly dangerous—as we should now know from the pressing problems of environmental pollution and the tragic breakdown of family life—to distort or challenge nature with tunnel-vision approaches to fundamental life processes or to substitute our narrowed technologic mode of operation for nature's highly intricate and subtle arrangements. It is precisely to the degree that we naïvely and prematurely act on the basis of partial knowledge, forsaking nature's guiding norms in the process, that we lose nature's protective guardianship. In this respect man becomes his own worst enemy.

III. Nature's Prescription

UNLIKE OTHER animals, man is a free agent in respect to his acts. This includes the act of copulation. In lower animals copulatory activity is dictated by automatic, inescapable, chemico-physiologic mechanisms ordering copulation directly to conception and the perpetuation of the species. Man, by contrast, is independent of the copulatory act in respect to whom, when, where and how.

This intrinsic, unique independence highlights man's chief characteristic as an animal. He is a choosing animal—a choice-making rather than an instinct-dominated animal. He, therefore, is an intellectually knowing and reasoning animal as

well, since coin-tossing is not the normal mode of decision-making.

That man is a decision-maker also highlights his chief problem as an animal. In the natural order he has no guarantee that the choices he makes are correct, since implicit to decision-making is the capacity to be wrong as well as right. This is seen when the rational is rationalized or displaced by the irrational and when hasty, short range solutions replace sober, long range solutions. Even when we function well intellectually, it is never easy to come up consistently with the right principles and ends or to choose the right means.

Unfortunately, in the arena of sexual and reproductive life, the unhappy, tragic or bitter experience that results from the wrong choices of youth, though it may make one wiser, results in a wisdom which usually comes too late for self-application. The college graduate, sterile from an abortion opted for in college days, who poignantly discovers that she can no longer have children, may be wiser about abortions but this wisdom is too late for personal benefit. Nature gives us only one body: a life-long, non-returnable body, not a practice body to be replaced when the rehearsal is over.

The lower animal does not have this problem. He has no hindsight and needs no hindsight. He makes wise use of his own body through "foresight," the foresight of a built-in, quintessential wisdom distilled from a millenium of experience and

incorporated in the natural order. It automatically directs him to the good animal life.

How then does man, the choosing animal, gain the wisdom to achieve the good animal life? His wisdom, obviously, can only come from the work of the intellectual order. In the case of child spacing, he may be certain that wisdom will not come from social engineers subverting knowledge to gain engineered ends nor from propaganda emanating from voluntary and official agencies and foundations whose true interest is not in the happiness of a person already here, but in the control of present population for the sake of a blueprinted future, a future which increasingly sounds more and more like a blueprinted future for an animal colony rather than a human society.

In contrast, wisdom concerning the good animal life is to be found in the norms of nature whose products we are; from the producer whose directions are available if only we apply ourselves to a study of the producer's manual—the book of nature—the script of which gives rise to nature's prescription. The superiority of a prescription stemming from nature's script rests on the fact that man is a natural entity, not a mechanical entity to be programmed as a computer.

Nature's script for child spacing is based on natural spacing, on a broad biological principle which states that there is a natural spacing characteristic of each species of animal, which spacing gives the

species its optimum health. In man, natural spacing is exemplified in the female who not only bears the child but suckles him through his infancy (without artificial supplements in the first half, and with supplements appropriate to the infant's nutritional needs in the second half). This results in a spacing of about two years, the norm for the human species.

Deviation from this natural regimen brought about by bottle feeding results in premature postpartum ovulation in the fertile woman and an abnormally shortened child spacing of about 12 months. Equally abnormal, however, is the four year spacing urged by population control enthusiasts and planned parenthooders, publicized by mass media and acquiesced to by the unthinking gynecologist.

The practical advantages of natural child spacing are multiple. For the contemporary woman, the following argument based on a comparison of natural and artificial child spacing, and utilizing simple numerical calculations, is perhaps the most cogent.

In artificial child spacing in the woman who plans three children, eight years elapse if children are spaced four years apart (in reality, this will be longer because of the time lag between the decision to have the baby and the pregnancy itself), and it takes six years to get the youngest child into the first grade. On such a schedule the mother has a preschool child or children underfoot for a period of 14 years.

The period is extended if there is an intervening miscarriage or stillbirth. If fortune favors her, however, and her plan progresses according to schedule, and she has her first child at age 24, the preschool period will extend past the age of 38 years. With natural child spacing of two years, on the other hand, the preschool child period for the mother is reduced by four years and she will be only 34 at the close of the preschool period.

With four children on an artificial child spacing regimen, the preschool period for the woman is extended to the age of 42, in contrast to natural spacing which will terminate this period at age 36. With five children the period is extended to 46 on artificial spacing as against 38 years with natural spacing.

Nature's prescription not only shortens the obligations of the preschool period, (1) it brings youth to childbearing and the arduous early child rearing years, (2) it permits children to grow up with more intimately shared lives, (3) it closes the generation gap between parent and child, particularly valuable in the adolescent years, (4) it lengthens the joys of parenthood and grandparenthood, (5) it allows for leeway in case of obstetrical misfortunes and tragic events, (6) it gives parents the opportunity to reexamine their goals while reproductive options are still available and, (7) it rids the couple of the fear of an unplanned pregnancy with each love act permitting them to blissfully ignore birth control for nine

years or more during the period of greatest sexual activity.

If the ecologic era bears any message it is this: when nature is treated well she reciprocates. Nature is for us not against us. All she asks is that her highest achievement, man, be tractable to her teachings—that he be responsive, not rebellious. By following nature's pre-

scription, man not only protects himself against his worst enemy, himself, but he regains his best friend, nature, the nurturer and guide to a happy life on earth. □

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