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Farewell to Patriarchy

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

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In his inspiring essay "[Population and the Great Transition](#)," Ian Lowe pleads for a new set of values as part of the Great Transition that will include the recognition that "growth without limit cannot continue on a finite planet." Amidst many uncertainties and unpredictable factors, there are two certainties: there is but one Earth and but one Humanity. What is the future of this couple?

During this dance of time and of survival, of Humanity and Earth, the voice of Humanity speaks loudly, through actions and through words. Mother Earth cannot speak. But if she would, what would she say? Listen to how she speaks in actions. Tornadoes. Earthquakes. Relentless drought. Blizzards. Raging wildfires. Devastating floods. Affecting all but foremost the poor. "Enough!" Earth might say, if we listened. We agree. Enough is enough. But enough of what? Capitalism? Population growth? Consumption? Exploitation? All of that? Let's get rid of all of that! Time for the Great Transition. Let's bury the old. Hail the New.

Yet perhaps Mother Earth, who nurtures us, feeds us, and eventually buries us, who cares for us from cradle to grave, does not speak through great and powerful winds. Or through earthquakes and fires. Maybe her voice can be heard in a gentle breeze. Maybe in nothing but a sigh. Like the sigh from Fernanda, a tortoise from the Galápagos species, long believed to be extinct, this month confirmed alive by geneticists from Princeton. They identified Fernanda, named after the Fernandina Island, as the first of her species in more than a century.¹

Maybe there is a voice of hope. Not all is lost. Progress is rarely rapid. It is more often painfully slow. We cannot rebuild—or even preserve—in a generation what has been destroyed in

centuries. New beginnings are often disguised as painful endings, as Lao Tzu would have it. We are living in a painful ending. Perhaps what we are witnessing—and we are lucky enough to be explicitly part of it—is a new beginning. A new era.

The debate about population is not a numbers game, even though it is. We are talking about the creation of new life. The greatest mystery of all. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the creation of new life, of the changeling boy that drives the plot, is surrounded with tragedy: the death of the mother. Titania, the stubborn Fairy Queen, is adamant to keep the boy: "The Fairy Land buys not the child of me." She takes care of the boy in memory of her friend: "But she, being mortal, of that boy did die." Yet not all mortals die of childbirth. Men, like the fairies, do not die during childbirth. Like the fairies, men are not left with physical scars after birth. Men, like the fairies, do not die during pregnancy.

While men and women are equal in many ways, there is no greater disparity between the two genders than in the process of the creation of new life. What strikes me as the greatest contrast is the difference in the risk involved. A man, in a physical sense, risks nothing in the process of the creation of new life. All it takes could be five minutes, even less. Yet a woman risks everything: her own life. No debate on the growth of the global population could be held, I argue, without the recognition of this quintessential fact and without the recognition that global population growth occurred in the context of the global patriarchy.

Global fertility rates dropped from 5 births per woman in 1960 to 2.4 per woman in 2020. Global maternal mortality declined by 38 percent between 2000 and 2017. Still, the most dangerous thing a woman can do in, for example, Sierra Leone (with one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world) is get pregnant. The United States has one of the highest maternal mortality rates of high-income countries. Maternal mortality rates in the United States have more than doubled during the past three decades, increasing from 7.9 per 100,000 live births in 1989 to 17.4 per 100,000 live births in 2018, and currently stands at 23.8 deaths per 100,000 with more than two women dying every day in the United States during childbirth.²

Tokophobia, or fear of pregnancy, might affect women in different ways. But with the growth of female power, the number of children born to surrogate mothers is on the rise. For example, the number of mothers using a surrogate in England and Wales quadrupled in ten years.³ Rich and powerful women increasingly opt for birth through a surrogate mother, effectively “outsourcing” the physical risks related to pregnancy and childbirth. This is not the place to make ethical comments. Yet women, as “mortals,” as human beings, are characterized by a strong instinct for survival of self: Why would that not be true for decisions surrounding pregnancy?

Within a context of changed power structures between the genders, birth patterns will change. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the feuding between Titania and Oberon, the powerful spirits of the Fairy Land, even disrupts the weather. Titania sums up the consequences of their fighting: “Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain, have suck'd up from the sea Contagious fogs.” Perhaps on a global level the extraordinary disbalance in power between the genders in the global patriarchy, similarly, has had a destructive effect on Earth.

Time for a new era, and necessarily so.

“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” That can be crossed off Humanity's to-do list: We did that. It took a couple of millennia. But that's out of the way. We dominated the Animal Kingdom... apart from the giant tortoise Fernanda, who was quietly hiding from immanent dominion—until this month. We were fruitful and multiplied into billions. And billions. And billions. Now what?

In a new era, our relationship with Earth will change. Perhaps we are witnessing the end of the global patriarchy. And the emergency of a global matriarchy. Perhaps the creation of new life will no longer be seen through the masculine paradigm but through the lens of the female experience. Perhaps after the time of “exploring and dominion,” of being fruitful, the Great Transition will herald an epoch of “nurturing and repairing.” For ultimately, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not about feuding fairies or the differences between mortals and the Fairy Land—but about the folly of love. And with the power of love and of imagination, the possibilities of creating the future are infinite—even on a finite planet.

Endnotes

1. Liz Fuller-Wright, "'Fantastic Giant Tortoise,' Believed Extinct, Confirmed Alive in the Galápagos," Princeton University, June 9, 2022, <https://www.princeton.edu/news/2022/06/09/fantastic-giant-tortoise-believed-extinct-confirmed-alive-galapagos>. But perhaps amidst what we observe as destruction, there is creation.

2. "Fertility Rate, Total (Births per Woman)," The World Bank, accessed June 30, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN>; "Maternal Mortality Declined by 38 per cent between 2000 and 2017," UNICEF, September 2019, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/maternal-health/maternal-mortality/>; "Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health," UNICEF, accessed June 30, 2022, www.unicef.org/sierraleone/maternal-neonatal-and-child-health. 1,360 mothers dying in every 100,000 live births; Eran Bornstein et al., "Concerning Trends in Maternal Risk Factors in the United States: 1989-2018," *eClinicalMedicine* 29, no. 100657 (December 2020), <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370%2820%2930401-6/fulltext>; Roosa Tikannen et al., "Maternal Mortality and Maternity Care in the United States Compared to 10 Other Developed Countries," The Commonwealth Fund, November 18, 2020, <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2020/nov/maternal-mortality-maternity-care-us-compared-10-countries>; Donna Hoyert, "Maternal Mortality Rates in the United States," NCHS Health E-Stats, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/maternal-mortality/2020/maternal-mortality-rates-2020.htm>.

3. Olivia Miller, "Number of Parents Using Surrogates in England and Wales Quadruples in 10 Years," University of Kent News Centre, September 22, 2021, <https://www.kent.ac.uk/news/society/29777/number-of-parents-using-surrogates-in-england-and-wales-quadruples-in-10-years>.

About the Author



Martha Van Der Bly is a sociologist, actress, and independent filmmaker. Her company, Rose Rebel Productions, produces films that explore themes of common humanity and shared human destiny. Previously, she was Research Fellow at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics, and Honorary Visiting Fellow of City University London. Her research has won awards from the Royal Irish Academy, the World Society Foundation in Zurich, and the Boekman Foundation in Amsterdam. She holds a PhD in sociology from Trinity College Dublin.

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