

KILROY CAFÉ

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RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Childbirth is one of the world's most dangerous and costly games of chance, but the gamblers keep playing.

By GLENN CAMPBELL

What would you think of an extraordinarily expensive recreational activity that had a 10% chance of resulting in death or lifelong disability for one of the participants? Is it wise or moral to take part?

People do it all the time. It's called childbirth.

Having a baby is spinning a genetic roulette wheel. Genes of mother and father are mixed up in random ways, and the result could be an Einstein or Mozart. It is far more likely, however, that the experiment will fail and the offspring will have a serious disability.

Birth defects occur in 3-5% of all live births. If you add mental disorders, diseases and accidents of childhood, 10% is a reasonable failure rate. No matter how you add it up, when you create a child there is a substantial chance he will die, suffer trauma or become profoundly disabled before he reaches adulthood.

Most people would engage in no other activity with such a horrible safety record. Why, then, do they choose to make children?

It's not like the human race is in any danger of dying out. There are plenty of children already here and never enough resources to care for them. Why, then, would anyone of conscience want to add still another needy child to the mix?

It is noble to address the needs of a

neglected child. The net nobility vanishes, however, when you yourself created the need. It is like digging a hole only to fill it up again: Yes, you worked hard, but at the end of the day the world is the same as when you started.

Raising a child is monumentally expensive, not just in time and money but in the parents' loss of freedom and potential. Responsible parents cannot take risks; they have to follow a relatively safe and conventional path. Years of your life devoted to child rearing can't be used for other things. They might have been great things that helped many existing children, but you will never know.

Only in recent times have people have had the right to say "No." For most of human history, if you obeyed the sexual urge then babies followed. With birth control came the ability to disengage sex and mating from procreation. You could *choose* to procreate; it wasn't a requirement. At the same time, the world population exploded to unsustainable levels. The ethical response is to not further contribute to the agonies of Man but use your resources for better things.

When you create a child, you create a liability that didn't exist previously. If something goes wrong with this Frankenstein experiment, you will be responsible because you are the one who initiated it. Even if everything goes right, you are essentially deferring your problems to the next generation. You expect your children to do great things instead of you.

So why do people do it? Narcissism, mainly. It isn't done for the child, it is done for the parents, who are trying to fill some hunger or emotional void. It is an off-the-shelf solution to an absence of meaning in their lives.

This is a politically sensitive topic, because all of us our products of childbirth! You can't argue against it without insulting your forebears and a fair number of your friends. When talking to someone who has already invested in this belief system, you have to carefully watch your words, because they are now imprisoned in their choice and have to believe in it.

Furthermore, it is next to impossible to talk anyone out of having a baby. Childbirth is a religious practice, and like all forms of religion, it is immune to logic. By the time you learn about it, the decision has probably been made, so you can only offer the usual congratulations.

Creating a life requires a huge and delusional ego. Like other gamblers, parents think they're special. They inflate the odds of success and discount the possibility of failure. They believe God will protect them. Even if they are not religious, their explanations are invariably filled with self-serving sentiment and circular logic.

Why do they really do it? People hit a blank wall and don't know what to do with themselves. Their romance is running down and going nowhere. They want to buy a ticket on some train that promises to give their life purpose.

If you try it, yes, you'll have purpose! You've just dug yourself a big hole you are obligated to fill over the next few decades. Now you have to believe!

Parenthood can be joyful and will certainly to keep you busy. But that's not the same as knowing who you are, having real creative direction and doing something positive for the world.

—G.C.

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