

Lamenting the decline of the large family

Before long I'm going to visit my family in Vancouver. They're an unwieldy bunch: 22 altogether, including six sisters, three brothers, four step-sisters, eight step-brothers (and me), not to mention throngs of nieces, nephews, cousins, aunts and uncles.

Not all of them live in Vancouver, but enough do to make up a few baseball teams, complete with coaches, umps and fans. I have no intention of seeing everyone while I'm out there. In fact, I'll probably limit my visit to as few as possible, say 20 or 30.

I should admit that one of the reasons I live in Toronto is because no one else in my family, except a few first cousins, lives here. But oddly enough, I also miss my big family — the ram-bunctious mealtimes, the never-ending chiding, teasing and gossip, and the fact that there is always someone to play catch or have a beer with.

There are a lot of reasons why society now encourages us to have fewer children, and most of them I agree with. The Earth does need a sort of "sustainable development" when it

Relating

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comes to new inhabitants who require food and clothing.

I know that those of us in the affluent West already use far more than our fair share of the Earth's resources. And I know that a good chunk of history is against me: 1,900 years ago the historian Tacitus actively discouraged men and women from having children and the average Roman family only had three kids.

Nevertheless, I do lament the decline of the large family. One of the youngest in my clan, I was always surrounded by a barrage of older kids. They tormented me, forced me to do their chores, and kept me awake with the mysterious

noises emanating from their rooms long into the night.

But I was also never at a loss for adventures, both wholesome and of the grown-up kind. Younger children are always yanked quickly into adulthood by their older brothers and sisters, who teach them how to smoke, use words that will make adults nervous, and torment the neighbors' kids. Oh, and how, of course, to avoid blame almost completely.

In my memory, family gatherings were always lively. There were massive snowball fights, with gangs of marauders attacking fortified snow forts; ghost stories and tales of school pranks told around the kitchen table or campfire; and endless games of hide-and-seek played throughout the neighborhood, especially in other people's backyards. There was an endless succession of tree forts being built, renovated and destroyed; and, of course, constant fights over the use of the phone or the bathroom.

Every family has its array of family lore. Our multitudinous family has an

encyclopedia of it, with many items retold every time we meet. That only a few of them appear funny or bizarre to outside audiences lessens their appeal not a whit.

In fact, one of the pleasures in coming from a large family is seeing how "outsiders" fit in. Tormenting visitors or friends (especially new boyfriends or girlfriends) is always a fond pastime in large families. When we were growing up we used to call my mom "The Warden" and many a visitor was convinced that our home was indeed a halfway house for wayward children of all ages.

So I must admit that I'm not very excited by the notion of only having my statistically allotted 2.2 kids. My thoughts more naturally turn to The League of Fathers and Mothers of Large Families, founded in France in 1908 by a certain Captain Maire.

In a picture I recently saw of him in *A History of Private Life*, he is surrounded by his eight children and his (albeit much-beleaguered) wife. The league pressed the authorities to pass laws

protecting and assisting those who represent the country's future. I'm considering setting up a Canadian chapter.

Until then, I'm trying to convince my companion that what we really need to keep us happy and entertained are four sets of twins. "They will provide for us in our old age," I say. "They'll be able to babysit one another ... they'll keep us young." None of this seems to convince her. "Two, possibly three, tops," is all she'll utter on the topic. I have taken this to mean two or three sets of twins ...

When I was a kid — in case you haven't guessed, I grew up Catholic — I often heard the phrase that when we grew up we were to "go forth and multiply."

I still take that literally. I never heard anything to suggest I was only supposed to add, subtract or divide.

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