

"All great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and both must be enterprised and overcome with answerable courage."

-William Bradford

"What's better than a baby?"

Wait- *what?*

It was our first ultrasound. After a few minutes of poking around, our nurse gasped loudly and asked us this strange, life-altering question.

So, what *is* better than a baby? The answer: two babies. We were having twins.

Seven short months later I found myself overwhelmed with joy - and just overwhelmed.

One sleepless night bled into another. Day and night blended together as synapses slowed to a halt. We were too tired to talk. Work happened in a fog.

Our marriage was reduced to indiscernible grunts as we passed in the hallway to tag in and out. With every day that passed, friendships, hobbies - my identity itself - withered on the vine. Slowly, the realization dawned that my life was not going to be the same. My life had not been "tweaked". My life had been *replaced*. The old Brett was dead - killed by his own children.

Why do we do it to ourselves? Why does anyone choose have kids?

It's a question - *the question* - the world is now asking. Once confined to places like Japan and Europe, declining birth rates are poised to take center stage as we near the middle of this century.

Rising (Opportunity) Costs

From the US to China, Mexico to India, we are quickly falling well below replacement value birth rates. Why is this?

While typical journalism focuses on economics, family policy, and climate change, the deeper reality that gets ignored is that children are puzzle pieces that simply don't fit into our age of expressive individualism.

[Expressive Individualism] suggests not only a desire to pursue one's own path but also a yearning for fulfillment through the definition and articulation of one's own identity. It is a drive both to be more like whatever you already are and also to live in society by fully asserting who you are. The capacity of individuals to define the terms of their own existence by defining their personal identities is increasingly equated with liberty and with the meaning of some of our basic rights, and it is given pride of place in our self-understanding.

-Yuval Levin, The Fractured Republic

Growing wealth coupled with the ever-growing power of the internet has opened up exponentially more opportunity than at any point in human history. Middle class workers can afford to travel (and live!) anywhere, date anyone, find any job. We have entered a new era in human opportunity.

The stairway up Maslow's hierarchy of needs has never been so widely available, accessible, and attractive. As a result, the opportunity costs of kids have never been so high.

Expressive Individualism + Kids : Oil + Water

Even for those who do become parents, a quick survey of popular online forums ([e.g.](#)) gives a glimpse into why many of us in the modern world have made this decision. To summarize, in trying to justify our decision, many parents attempt to fit kids into the self-fulfillment ethic of our age.

Common Reasons include:

- "Someone to take care of me when I'm older"
- "Someone to share my life with"
- "An anchor in an uncertain world"

In this view, there's an ROI to all this work and ultimately kids exist for our own sense of fulfillment.

As a dad of five years and a child of 30+ years, I'll share something I do know about parenting. **Your kids' debt to you will never be repaid.** There are incredible rewards for those who become parents, but the sleepless nights, effort, the worry, the sacrifice will never be matched in this lifetime.

So the question remains - why do it? ***Why have kids?***

Turns out, there are good answers - answers that would appear obvious to most people at most points in history.

For us to understand them, though, we need to try and get outside the "life as personal fulfillment" fishbowl that we swim in everyday.

The Case for Kids

1. The Greatest Gift (is theirs - not yours)

Why take on such a demanding lifelong project? What will get you through those dark nights of the soul filled with 3am wails and threenager defiance?

What won't help you is the hope for some future gift they may bestow on you decades from now. Kids are an incredible gift - but when things get tough, the key is not to try and convince yourself of "what's in it for you". Trust me - it doesn't work. Instead, the key is to remember the ultimate gift that *you* are giving *them* - the gift of *life*.

In having a child, you are buying a ticket. It's not for you, but it's a ticket for one soul to take in all that we call life. To witness a quiet sunset, to wonder at the night sky. To search for God, to fall in love. To discover, to laugh. To cry, to learn. To lose. Maybe even to go through the joy and pain of having kids of their own.

Every experience, every thought, every feeling you've ever known - the warmth of a mother's love, making your first friend in school, dancing at your friend's wedding - is *life* - a life given as a gift because two people made a decision to bring you into the world and (if they did it right) to *make hard sacrifices for you* to give you a decent chance at it.

With every meal prepared, tantrum endured, opportunity foregone parents are buying their dearest little ones tickets to the greatest ride in the universe.

2. We will need your kids

All over the world, countries are confronting population stagnation and a fertility bust, a dizzying reversal unmatched in recorded history that will make first-birthday parties a rarer sight than funerals, and empty homes a common eyesore.

Maternity wards are already shutting down in Italy. Ghost cities are appearing in northeastern China. Universities in South Korea can't find enough students, and in Germany, hundreds of thousands of properties have been razed, with the land turned into parks.

Like an avalanche, the demographic forces — pushing toward more deaths than births — seem to be expanding and accelerating. Though some countries continue to see their populations grow, especially in Africa, fertility rates are falling nearly everywhere else. Demographers now predict that by the latter half of the century or possibly earlier, the global population will enter a sustained decline for the first time.

[-Damien Cave, New York Times](#)

Ever since God told Adam to "fill the earth and subdue it", humans have been doing just that - until... well, now.

While Paul Ehrlich's [Population Bomb of 1968](#) created seismic shifts in the way we think about children and birth rates, the world with few exceptions (see China) lumbered on. It is only now in the 21st century that we are finally taking Ehrlich's prescription.

The problem is we're overdosing on it.

After a population surge in the middle of the century, we will face a falling population for the first time in the history of civilization. While many would agree that less people would be a good thing, the effects of population decline will be as bizarre as they will be difficult - particularly if the change happens quickly.

"Imagine entire regions where everyone is 70 or older. Imagine governments laying out huge bonuses for immigrants and mothers with lots of children. Imagine a gig economy filled with grandparents and Super Bowl ads promoting procreation."

[-Damien Cave, New York Times](#)

Basic ideas like retirement assume that other humans will be there to keep the world going while we bow out of the workforce. What does retirement look when workers, stock market gains, and real estate appreciation disappear? In fifty years we will look back in confusion on current political efforts to keep immigrants out and populations down.

Fun fact: There's a good chance there will be more Nigerians than Chinese people by the end of the century.

"The biggest problem the world will face in twenty years is population collapse - not explosion - collapse."

Elon Musk (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUXmDiaD_04&t=40s)

So we have kids to give someone life, we have kids for the world, and finally, we have kids for us.

Parenting as The Ultimate Character Builder

When I was 24, I traveled to Peru and hiked the 3-day Inca trail to Macchu Picchu. It was incredible - and at times, tortuous. I still remember the second day, waking up to take on the 14,000 ft. ladder section called "Dead Woman Pass". I was sure it was going to be the dead Brett pass.

Cold sweat dripped down my face despite the 40 degree mountain chill. I sucked the thin air like I was suffocating as I took on twenty feet at a time up this brutal trail. What had I gotten myself into so far from the comfort of my home?

I don't remember that trip because it was easy. I remember it because it was so hard.

That's why we went. We dug deep, we leaned on each other, and ~~in spite~~ *because of* the voluntary trouble and cost we took on, we walked away with a once-in-a-lifetime experience that would form us for the rest of our lives.

Parenting is hard. It is a powerful jackhammer to our self-centeredness, the ultimate pressure cooker of sacrificial love. Kids will test your will, your marriage, your very soul. But if you are

willing to head out on the trail and see it through to the end, you will emerge a tougher, more compassionate, more humble, vastly wiser version of yourself than you could possibly imagine.

People don't climb Mount Everest because it's easy. We didn't go to the moon because it was easy. We do these things because they are hard.

Conclusion

Kids have always required sacrifice. Technological, economic, and philosophical changes in the last three decades have exacerbated the challenge by raising the opportunity costs of parenting to an unprecedented altitude.

Good answers to the question of “Why Have Kids” require us to get outside of our “What’s in it for me?” mentality.

The decision to have kids only makes sense when we ask questions like:

1. What’s in it for our kids?
2. What’s in it for our world?
3. What’s in it for our character?

Through parenting, we give life, we learn to love unconditionally, and through sacrifice we become the best version of ourselves.

True confession: I expected kids to be easy - or at least not *that* hard. Kids are not easy. They are incredible- and they are difficult.

That's exactly why I need them.