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## On Second Thought

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## On Second Thought

### Abstract

{Excerpt} Remembering times past stimulates the mind and helps give perspective and a sense of who we are. Social reminiscence is a gain in performance without practice.

Reminiscing, be it simple, informative, or of the life review, therapeutic variety—different but overlapping types exist—is a uniquely human activity that plays a vital role. By recalling the past, celebrating accomplishments and—as necessary—coming to terms with disappointments, individuals can achieve a heightened sense of personal identity and self-continuity, notably in their social relationships. At the confluence of voluntary memory and events, circumstances, and experience, they can find meaning and coherence in life and work.

### Keywords

Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

### Comments

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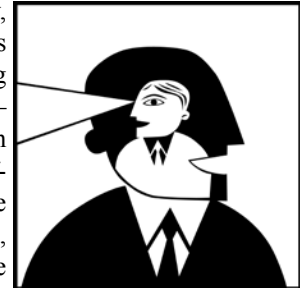
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# On Second Thought

By Olivier Serrat

## Of Family Albums

Reminiscing, be it simple, informative, or of the life review, therapeutic variety—different but overlapping types exist—is a uniquely human activity that plays a vital role. By recalling the past, celebrating accomplishments and—as necessary—coming to terms with disappointments, individuals can achieve a heightened sense of personal identity and self-continuity, notably in their social relationships. At the confluence of voluntary memory<sup>1</sup> and events, circumstances, and experience, they can find meaning and coherence in life and work.<sup>2</sup>



Remembering times past stimulates the mind and helps give perspective and a sense of who we are. Social reminiscence is a gain in performance without practice.

Interestingly, beyond the self-positive and self-negative functions of reminiscence,<sup>3</sup> a wide variety of disciplines now also finds benefits, however indirect, to social functions through simple and informative reminiscing on behalf of user groups. For example, instrumental reminiscence would look to past experience to solve problems in the present; transmissive reminiscence would communicate cultural and personal knowledge of earlier times; narrative reminiscence would use storytelling, with conversational and interactional properties, to convey anecdotal evidence of (usually) positive stories

<sup>1</sup> In psychology, memory refers to the processes used to acquire, store, retain, and later retrieve information. Voluntary memory, the deliberate effort to remember things past, is the binary opposite of involuntary memory, aka flashback, about which little research has been done except in the clinical field where it is identified as a symptom of mental disorders. (No method of studying reminiscence is as yet entirely satisfactory; rather than differentiating sharply between cognitive and clinical psychology, it would help to explore common ground.) Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850–1909), a German psychologist, pioneered theories and research on both processes, which function independently of one another. (Specifically, he classified three distinct classes of memory: sensory, short term, and long term.) He was the first to describe the learning curve—the changing rate of learning after initial attempts; the forgetting curve—the decline of memory retention in time; and the spacing effect—the ability to learn items in a list when they are studied a few times over a long period rather than studied repeatedly over a short period.

<sup>2</sup> Even if man is by nature a social animal, we see ourselves as unique individuals. Hence, the recollection of experience through storytelling satisfies our lifelong need to also be recognized as such by others. Consider what happens when you make friends or engage in a community: you spend time sharing life histories. (To note, reminiscence by means of autobiographical material, e.g., artifacts, family scrapbooks, photographs, and video footage, has become an increasingly widespread approach to promoting older people's mental health in gerontology. Indeed, literature on reminiscence work is rarely published outside medicine, psychology, and social care.)

<sup>3</sup> Identity exploration, problem solving, and death preparation are served by the first. Bitterness revival, boredom reduction, and intimacy maintenance are served by the second. See Jeffrey Webster. 1993. Construction and Validation of the Reminiscence Functions Scale. *Journal of Gerontology*. 48 (5). pp. 256–262. These overlap somewhat with the (more frequently cited) six types of reminiscence identified by Paul Wong and Lisa Watt, namely, integrative, instrumental, transmissive, narrative, escapist, and obsessive. See Paul Wong and Lisa Watt. 1991. What Types of Reminiscence are Associated with Successful Aging? *Psychology and Aging*. 6 (2). pp. 272–279. To note, some of these types are not mutually exclusive: reminiscence can serve different purposes all at once.

and positive emotions.<sup>4</sup> (Obviously, information and communication technologies can now be leveraged to help people reminisce.) Moreover, reminiscing need not be confined to older people,<sup>5</sup> thereby opening possibilities for change and development in groups and organizations, notably through social reminiscence.<sup>6</sup>

### Stimulating the Future by Reminiscing the Past

Reminiscence is the volitional or nonvolitional act or process of evoking and reconstructing memories, typically but not necessarily of one's self in the past, sometimes for the purpose of sharing.

Especially in the latter instance, instrumental, transmissive, and narrative reminiscence might be considered a gain in performance without practice. The premise is that memory in general is created and recreated in social interactions in which moments and, above all, their interpretations at multiple levels of individual and cultural analysis are highlighted, shared, contested, negotiated, enriched, and confirmed, leading to dynamic, fluid, and historical representations and evaluations that define selves, others, and the world. If reminiscing is both shaped by and shapes our understanding of history, and if meaning is created by how we link choices, achievements, and challenges in our lives, stories (such as those told below)<sup>7</sup> can help readers discover, dream, design, and deliver.

*You are today where your thoughts have brought you; you will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you.*

—James Allen

#### Box 1: A Young Person's Guide to Economic Policy in Developing Countries

Economic policy, like other policy, is not just shaped by events: the prevailing intellectual environment matters. Following the reconstruction of Western Europe, after the Second World War, hopes for rapid development in the “Third World” were extravagantly high: political leaders and development economists saw “underdevelopment” as a temporary and primarily material problem to be solved by industrial investment. They also believed that welfare would spread automatically through the trickle-down effect and, accordingly, need not be considered. And so, economic growth was the sole aim of economic policy until the late 1960s. An important factor in this endeavor was development assistance.

Economic growth did improve the lot of the poor in many developing countries and was still favorable throughout the 1970s, despite a mounting debt burden and the first oil crisis (1973–1974), which saw the price of raw materials fall. However, skepticism in developed countries about the adequacy of economic

<sup>4</sup> The importance of the time-honored practice of storytelling needs no emphasis: it performs irreplaceable identity, emotional, and social functions across life spans. First, the stories we tell about ourselves, not to mention their selection and emotional content, go beyond mere recounting of defining episodes to contribute to the development and maintenance of individual identity, e.g., self-presentation and self-image. Second, stories help process stress by allowing us to reflect on what happened. Third, they enable us to connect with one another and shape the world in which we live: reminiscing as a social activity that engages both storytellers and story listeners makes them part of a collective story or history—this is important for dealing with events of cultural significance.

<sup>5</sup> To state the obvious, every person reminisces: we are all constantly reading our lives. That said, derived from age group and lifestyle, there are differences in the function, frequency, and amount of reminiscing. The elderly and the young reminisce more than middle-aged people, which stands to reason since the majority of people in midlife have little time to spare from the demands of work and family. Simplifying greatly, young adults try to keep boredom at bay; older adults aim to solve problems; and people in later life are concerned with maintaining the family relationships and friendships on which they increasingly depend. See Gillian Cohen and Stephanie Taylor. 1998. Reminiscence and Ageing. *Ageing and Society*. 18 (5). pp. 601–610. Much of this is work in progress: given that gender, health, and personality—all of them understudied thus far—may also exert powerful effects on reminiscence, Gillian Cohen and Stephanie Taylor caution that the role of aging can only be seen as one of several factors; what is more, as Paul Wong and Lisa Watt point out, “successful agers” in terms of mental and physical health and adjustment spend more time on positive, e.g., integrative and instrumental, and less on negative, e.g., obsessive, reminiscence. (And yet, for what we know, successful adjustment may be the cause, not the consequence, of these types of reminiscing.)

<sup>6</sup> However, the triggers of reminiscence would differ. Unlike private reminiscence, which may occur involuntarily or be evoked by contextual cues, preceding trains of thought, moods, and emotional states, or in response to current problems, social reminiscence is more likely to be elicited by prompts and questions in conversation or by shared activities and settings, with implications for spontaneity. (Knowledge harvesting in organizations comes to mind; its techniques aim to draw out and package tacit knowledge to help staff adapt, personalize, and apply it; build organizational capacity; and preserve institutional memory.) To note further, the preoccupations of age groups—as should be expected—drive the functions of both private and social reminiscence.

<sup>7</sup> The analyses, observations, and interpretations the four stories relay prefigured the third Asian agricultural survey commissioned by ADB in 1997 to explore opportunities and challenges facing rural society in Asia. The author worked to conceptualize and initiate that in 1996 and 1997. See ADB. 2000. *A Study of Rural Asia*. Manila. Available: [www.adb.org/documents/books/rural\\_asia/default.asp](http://www.adb.org/documents/books/rural_asia/default.asp). See also Olivier Serrat. 1996. Memorandum on the Working Group on Rural Asia Update—Themes and Arguments. 24 December. ADB: Manila. Unpublished.

Box 1 *continued*

growth as the sole measure of development mounted because of growing poverty, unemployment, and income inequality in developing countries. (The distribution of welfare depends more on the structure of the economy, which does not necessarily change as a result of economic growth.) Consequently, the growth objective was supplemented by concern for increased employment, redistribution of welfare, and the satisfaction of basic needs. These ideas, however, were not received with enthusiasm in developing countries because they threatened to divert attention from the perceived need to reduce inequalities between countries, and from the developed countries' joint responsibility in this enterprise. Notwithstanding, at the end of the decade, the second oil crisis (1979–1980) provoked a deep economic recession in developed countries and a further drop in the demand for raw materials, which had already been in structural decline as a result of technological advances (stemming from greater efficiency and recovery of used products and the emergence of substitutes). Many countries experienced swingeing adjustment programs. More people than perhaps ever before suffered falling standards of living because of forced reductions in government spending, elimination of food subsidies, devaluations, and privatizations.

The 1980s were overshadowed by the debt crisis and structural adjustments but witnessed also a reassessment of the market mechanism and the role of the private sector, as well as important steps toward the liberalization of the world economy. East and Southeast Asian countries were the only developing countries

*If economists could manage to get themselves thought of as humble, competent people on a level with dentists, that would be splendid.*

—John Maynard Keynes

able to achieve more rapid economic growth than that experienced in the 1960s, largely because they managed to stabilize their economies (via low inflation, realistic exchange rates, and control of government spending), implemented adjustment programs, and therefore attracted more development assistance. Because of the retreat of

central planning in the 1980s and the apparent success of East Asian countries, there is now a desire for less government control, finance sector liberalization, more private enterprise, more autonomy for government-owned enterprises, and more reliance on competition.

Signs of a world order geared to economic performance, and of a division splitting the South and the East into front-runners, those of intermediate pace, and stragglers appeared in the 1990s. Front-runners are countries whose economies feature high levels of technical innovation in products and production processes, and in methods of organizing production, distribution, and marketing. Countries of intermediate pace have economies that will certainly not lead the field but which will have sufficient comparative advantages in certain sectors to derive a measure of benefit from their activities. The stragglers are those whose economies do not have enough inherent vitality to stay the pace. With the end of the Cold War, symbolized by the breaching of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the political relevance of the latter has waned and they are being left more to their own devices.

To complicate the situation, however, there is ample evidence to suggest that development does not work when attention is focused exclusively, or even primarily, on economies. Until the 1990s, the reigning worldview that economic growth deserves highest priority went almost entirely unchallenged. Not only was it assumed that the development of economies should be the central preoccupation of public policy, but most corporations, governments, and international institutions exerted all their efforts to this end: societal goals became synonymous with economic goals, e.g., material production and consumption, investment, productivity, growth, and profit. Those favoring societal goals now contend that culture, defined as the total way of life of a people or society, should be the focus of future developmental activity because it is concerned with the entire spectrum of human needs, as well as mankind's relationship with the environment.

Increasingly, some of the less appealing consequences of the Western economic miracle are condemned. They include pollution and destruction of the global ecosystem; heavy exploitation and exhaustion, respectively, of renewable and nonrenewable resources; and satisfaction of the materialistic demands of the few at the expense of the many. Not only is the environment more and more polluted and incapable of generating the resources required to support a rapidly expanding population, but the economic system as a whole fosters the

### Box 1 continued

interests of a small group of countries to the detriment of others. Thus, despite the appreciable gains that have been achieved in industry, agriculture, commerce, health, education, and technology as a result of placing economics and economies at the center of economic policy, these accomplishments have been offset by the numerous inequalities, inequities, and injustices which exist in income distribution, as well as by the colossal damage being inflicted on the environment.

*Economic advance is not the same thing as human progress.*

—John Clapham

Source: Author. 1996. Unpublished.

### Box 2: A Young Person's Guide to Environmental Economics

Until quite recently, it was thought that developing countries could postpone environmental improvements while awaiting economic growth. But better understanding of the links between the environment and economic growth now stress the need to devise approaches for dealing with the former to not derail the latter. This need has been intensified by ever-greater environmental degradation in even the wealthiest of these countries and by the realization that the well-being of developed countries can be drastically affected by activities in the developing world. The fear is that continued population expansion and economic growth, along with the energy- and materials-intensive consumption patterns that they bring, will aggravate environmental degradation in developing countries and hurt one and all.

There is a basis for such fear, even if environmental problems should not be viewed solely through the lens of the affluent. The Asia and Pacific region, for example, contains the world's fastest-growing and most dynamic economies. Their unprecedented development is expected to carry on. However, growth rates—though high—are derived from low levels of per capita income, so that demand for goods and services

*Behold, my brothers, the spring has come. The earth has received the embraces of the sun and we shall soon see the results of that love! Every seed is awakened and so has all animal life. It is through this mysterious power that we too have our being and we therefore yield to our neighbors, even our animal neighbors, the same right as ourselves to inhabit this land. My love of our native soil is wholly mystical.*

—Sitting Bull

will continue to swell. At the same time, continuing high population growth rates are exerting pressure and more than two-thirds of the world's 1.2 billion people living in poverty reside in that region (which now contains 12 of the world's 21 megacities). Policy and market failures are many. Institutions are weak and their absorptive capacities are uncertain.

Naturally, the relative importance that governments in that region assign to resource and environmental issues is changing. Although environmental problems were once considered limited to those resulting from urbanization and industrialization, they now include air and water pollution, land degradation, soil erosion, desertification, deforestation, loss of biological diversity, greenhouse gas

emissions, acid rain, urban pollution, and toxic and hazardous wastes.

Interactions between the environment, population growth, and economies have continual, complex, and multiple feedback mechanisms that are difficult to understand. This has implications for the balance of actions to resolve problems. In brief, uncertainty centers on how physical processes will respond to human intervention, how people will react, and how institutions will echo policy initiatives. Because the environment can no longer be looked upon as an area of marginal concern that is best addressed by natural scientists, social scientists are more and more called upon to provide both analysis and prescription for environmental problems. And economists, once again, make strong claims about their ability to contribute to the debate.

From an economic perspective, nature performs three main functions. First, the environment is a resource base comprising renewable and nonrenewable resources: it provides economies with both raw materials, which are transformed into consumer products by the production process, and energy, which fuels this transformation. Ultimately, all these raw materials and energy are discharged into the environment as



**Box 2 continued**

waste products. From this, it follows that the environment also acts as a waste sink (which refers to its regulating or stabilizing function, including its capacity to process waste products). Last, the environment also serves as an amenity base whose services, e.g., recreational facilities, flow to individuals without the intermediation of productive activity.

Based on this model, economics promises and often delivers predictions to policy makers aimed at environmental management. However, it ignores the environment's primary function as a life support system; ascribes little or no value to the three economic functions that it does recognize; allows substitution between natural and produced capital even though the former is multifunctional and sometimes irreplaceable; provides no guidelines for approaches to environmental uncertainty; and cannot answer questions regarding the equity of resource use across people and through time (intragenerational and intergenerational equity objectives). If, as generally agreed, sustainable development is economic development that endures over the long run, economics must resolve these issues before it can really help society attain the goal of sustainability.

*To waste, to destroy, our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of using it so as to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining in the days of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them amplified and developed.*  
—Theodore Roosevelt

Economic frameworks and methods, however, are founded on an a priori commitment to a particular model of human nature and social behavior, namely, the traditional growth ethos that inspired and sustained developed countries for centuries, and which most developing countries still seek to emulate. This model has become counter-productive and the planet's physical endowment can no longer accommodate such an expansionist worldview. The planet is experiencing negative growth, resource domination, environmental degradation, and species elimination. It is time to examine the underlying social commitments that determine the way we use the environment and the cumulative social impacts of our individual choices.

Source: Author. 1996. Unpublished.

**Box 3: A Young Person's Guide to the Green Revolution**

In the 1950s and the 1960s, excessive interest in industry worked against agriculture in developing countries. Even though agriculture was often their mainstay, accounted for the major share of their national product, and employed the bulk of their population, rural areas were considered to be little more than sources of labor and primary products or markets for industrial goods. Was underdevelopment not a temporary and primarily material problem to be solved by increasing investment in capital goods to promote industrial development? And so, the few government funds earmarked for agriculture went primarily to parastatal enterprises; foreign currency earnings from the export of agricultural products served to finance industrial investment in and around towns; excessive duties on exports of agricultural products made reinvestment in agriculture unattractive; and overvalued exchange rates made the import of agricultural products financially attractive. Having once exported food, many developing countries became net importers. By the mid-1960s, famine loomed in India and Pakistan.

*When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.*  
—John Muir

Toward the end of the 1960s, development planners thought that they had found the Holy Grail: they began to encourage cultivation of higher-yielding varieties of wheat and rice. Yet, two key components of what came to be known as the Green Revolution reflected the industrial model favored

**Box 3 continued**

earlier. They were the priority given to increasing production and a belief in the neutrality of technology. The dominant assumption underlying the first component was that increases in production are the best way to solve the problems of hunger. The dominant assumption underlying the second was that the high-yielding varieties developed were economically, socially, and politically neutral. For these reasons, the Green Revolution embodied technocracy and its proponents never intended to modify the economic, social, and political structures that maintain inequality of incomes and access to resources.

The impact of the Green Revolution is well documented. Agriculture became increasingly productive in many developing countries, with crop yields increasing as much as threefold. These increases were attained through the use of large amounts of inorganic fertilizers and pesticides. However, they were often accompanied by environmental degradation (soil erosion, pollution by pesticides, salinization); social problems (elimination of the family farm, concentration of land, resources and production, growth of agribusiness and its domination over farm production, change in rural and/or urban migration patterns); and by excessive use of natural resources. They also led to a shrinking farm population, much larger farms and fields, and the production of a very restricted number of crops, often grown in monoculture

*What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

or biculture. Moreover, the transfer-of-technology approach embodied in the Green Revolution did not work well outside irrigated areas: it was confined to about one-fifth of all farmland in the Asia and Pacific region. The remaining areas are mainly rainfed, undulating areas found in hinterlands, mountains, hills, wetlands and the semiarid, subhumid, and humid tropics. These areas have a deepening crisis, with populations rising, landholdings becoming smaller, environments degrading, and per capita food production remaining static or declining. In the Asia and Pacific region, about 1 billion people depend on such agriculture.

To a large extent, rural life was also rearranged to suit the new technology. While the Green Revolution was under way, every aspect of agriculture and rural life was reassessed. Social institutions in rural areas were assessed in terms of their presumed contribution to agricultural productivity. At best, agricultural development occurred in spite of these social institutions; at worst, agricultural development required changes in these institutions since they were commonly considered to hold back development. Also, a panoply of modern rural institutions was created to provide technological packages; these institutions were chiefly concerned with marketing, credit, the supply of agricultural inputs (seed and fertilizer), and extension advice. And the small farmers who failed to take advantage of these institutions were characterized as resistant to agricultural change.

Hopefully, it is now finally realized that one of the most important areas of difference between agriculture and the industrial model lies in the great contextual variability of agriculture (where climate, weather, soil, topography, resources, cultural, social, and institutional variations all profoundly affect its viability) as opposed to industry (where the universalism and rationalism of modern science and technology encourage blueprint approaches whereby local variation can be fitted, although not easily, to the design). It is, belatedly, accepted that the contemporary challenges of agriculture in developing countries are not technical since development projects emphasizing capital-intensive, high-input technologies (mechanization, agrochemicals, imported seeds) are in many instances proving ecologically unsound and socially inequitable by mostly benefiting a small portion of the local populations. The questions are, increasingly, socioeconomic and environmental. And so, in the new century, rural development includes two new but crucial dimensions: the ecological management of agricultural resources and the empowerment of rural communities into actors of their own development.

Source: Author. 1996. Unpublished.



**Box 4: A Young Person's Guide to Population Growth**

Mortality started to decline in Europe and North America about 200 years ago. In the developing countries, enormous reductions in child mortality occurred between 1960 and 1990, mainly through the prevention of infectious diseases and through improved nutrition. The factors that have been important in the decline of mortality are income growth, improvements in medical technology, and public health programs combined with the spread of knowledge about health. However, death control without birth control has sparked a population explosion.

Two hundred years ago, there were about 1 billion people on earth. The second billion was added over the next 130 years; the third in 35 years; the fourth in 15 years; and the fifth in just 10 years. The

*The problem is no longer that with every pair of hands that comes into the world there comes a hungry stomach. Rather it is that, attached to those hands are sharp elbows.*

—Paul Samuelson

population of the world is now close to 6.3 billion. Each year, it increases by almost 100 million. It was once forecast that the world population would settle at about 10.2 billion by 2100; this estimate has now been revised to 12 billion. More than 90% of this growth is occurring in developing countries, where death rates have been falling without

commensurate declines in birth rates, and much of the population increase will be in cities, as it has been in the past.

The age structure of population in developing countries also gives ground for deep concern. This population contains more children who have yet to reproduce than it does adults (the mean proportion of the population under 16 years of age in developing countries ranges from 40–50%). With age structures so heavily skewed toward the young, the obvious conclusion would be that, when these children reach reproductive age, the population will grow rapidly. Without birth control and with low death rates for children, this will be true. Moreover, the age structure of the population provides a measure of the economic impact of the population. The dependency ratio, the ratio of people over 65 and under 15 years of age to the rest of the population, indicates the proportion of the population that contributes little to the economy and must be supported. A high dependency ratio is a fearful burden on the economy; it is now increasing in most countries.

The worldwide economic slowdown experienced since the late 1970s and population growth mean that incomes have declined in many countries. More than 1 billion people, or one-fifth of the world's population, live in poverty. Between 700 million and 800 million are in Asia and about 500 million of these live in absolute poverty. It is now accepted (if not acted upon) that economic growth is by itself not enough to reduce poverty. Governments must also promote employment and offer poor people the opportunity to acquire skills, health, and the information they require to improve their lives. The proportion of people living in poverty can be reduced if there is, at least, broad-based economic growth; a firm government commitment to reduce poverty; an institutional capacity to design and follow through on appropriate policies and programs; good public sector management that minimizes unproductive expenditures; and a strengthening of essential services such as primary education and vocational training, preventive health care, family planning, nutrition, clean water, sanitation, and rural infrastructure. None of these are easy to achieve.

Population growth adds to the need for employment and livelihoods, which exerts additional direct pressure on the environment. It also increases the demand for food, drinking water, and sewage and solid waste disposal, as well as for energy-intensive products and services such as transportation. To the extent that per capita incomes rise and practices remain unchanged, such demand will be exacerbated. Excessive demand for natural resources from a rapidly increasing population leads directly to environmental degradation as economic, social, and political systems fail to keep pace with demands. In rural areas, inequitable land distribution obliges the poor to live off marginal lands, causing erosion and other environmental problems. To survive, they then tend to use the resource base to derive the quickest benefit: this is an action forced on them by poverty.

One way or the other, population growth will slow down because many developing countries

#### Box 4 continued

simply cannot sustain their escalating numbers. It will happen through family planning and development, or by famine, disease, and war brought about by collapsing economies. The risk to future generations would be less and the options would be richer if population growth were to cease sooner rather than later. The longer population growth continues, the more committed all countries become to a particular set of problems: more rapid depletion of resources; greater pressures on the environment; more dependence on continued rapid technological development to solve these problems; fewer options; and perhaps continued postponement of the resolution of other problems, including those resulting from past growth. The sooner population increase slows, the more time humanity has to redress the mistakes of past growth, the more resources it has to implement solutions, and the more options it has to decide how it wants to live in the future.

*Man will survive as a species for one reason: he can adapt to the destructive effects of our power-intoxicated technology and of our ungoverned population growth, to the dirt, pollution, and noise of a New York or Tokyo. And that is the tragedy. It is not man the ecological crisis threatens to destroy but the quality of human life.*

—René Dubos

Source: Author. 1996. Unpublished.

#### Further Reading

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