



RESEARCH FINGERPRINT

IDENTIFIER

LJRHSS-228615

PEER REVIEW

Double Blind

SIMILARITY CHECK

Perplexity AI and iThenticate

ACCESS

Open Access

LANGUAGE

English

PRINT ISSN

2515-5784

ONLINE ISSN

2515-5792

EDITION

ABBREVIATION

LJRHSS

VOLUME

26

ISSUE

1

YEAR

2026

KEY DATES

RECEIVED

2026-06-10

ACCEPTED

2026-06-23

ONLINE PUBLISHED

2026-08-27

CATALOGING

CROSSMARK DOI

10.34257/LJRHSS228615UK

Online First

Self-Realization and the Forgetfulness of the Future

CORRESPONDENCE →



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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the historical shift in human guiding principles, tracing the transition from religious devotion and nationalistic loyalty to the modern pursuit of self-realization. It argues that this contemporary focus on the 'self'—manifested through hobbies, physical perfection, and extreme leisure—has led to a 'forgetfulness of the future,' most notably evidenced by declining birth rates in the Western world. The author examines the demographic consequences of this shift, including the erosion of pension systems and social standing for the elderly, and proposes state-level interventions to support child-rearing and reorient societal values toward the common good and future generations.

Index Terms: Birth rates • Demographic change • Future orientation • Individualism • Intergenerational contract • Pension systems • Self-realization • social cohesion

FUNDING

No external funding was declared for this work.

CONFLICTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI USAGE

No generative AI was used for analysis or results.

HOW TO CITE

Seiler (2026). Self-Realization and the Forgetfulness of the Future. London Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. Online First. DOI: 10.34257/LJRHSS228615UK



ACCESS
ONLINE



METADATA CONTINUATION

AUTHOR CONTACT QR LEDGER

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ARCHIVAL RECORD

LJRHSS · Vol 26 · Issue 1 · 2026
Article ID LJRHSS-228615 · DOI 10.34257/LJRHSS228615UK
Print ISSN 2515-5784 · Online ISSN 2515-5792

ESSAY

Self-Realization and the Forgetfulness of the Future

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Abstract

The paper explores the historical shift in human guiding principles, tracing the transition from religious devotion and nationalistic loyalty to the modern pursuit of self-realization. It argues that this contemporary focus on the 'self'—manifested through hobbies, physical perfection, and extreme leisure—has led to a 'forgetfulness of the future,' most notably evidenced by declining birth rates in the Western world. The author examines the demographic consequences of this shift, including the erosion of pension systems and social standing for the elderly, and proposes state-level interventions to support child-rearing and reorient societal values toward the common good and future generations.

Keywords: *Self-realization, Demographic change, Birth rates, Individualism, Future orientation, Social cohesion, Pension systems, Intergenerational contract*

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1 Introduction

The question of which principle one ought to live by, what ultimate purpose one wishes to serve in this world, did not present itself to human beings for centuries, indeed even for millennia. The answer was predetermined: one wanted and was expected to lead a life pleasing to God. For the first purpose to eventually enter Heaven and a second deterrent one, to avoid falling into eternal damnation. This prescription for life stretches back to ancient times, to an era when gods dispensed rewards and meted out punishments, and however often individuals may have failed to comply, clearly there is no question that the imperative of living a life pleasing to God held the highest significance for the development of humanity. Even today one may still choose to live by this principle, sparing oneself the need to ponder any alternative purpose for existence.

In the Eighteenth Century – the Age of Enlightenment – this certainty about God slowly began to dissolve. What if there is no God who observes and judges us day in and day out? What then to accept as the guiding principle for one's actions? Just as over the course of time an increasing number of secular authorities had emerged to stand alongside the divine ones, a secular construct eventually came to replace the Kingdom of Heaven; the "Fatherland" stepped in to take its place. "Hold fast to the Fatherland, the beloved! Keep it firm to your heart, those are the roots of your strength," reads a pronouncement from Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, soon after set to music, and to this day included in the songbook of the German Armed Forces. Countless are the poems, aphorisms, and songs that ever since have extolled and continue to extol love of the Fatherland as the supreme value guiding human life. "Germany, Germany above all, above all else in the world!" we once sang, and not only the Germans: peoples everywhere have similarly exalted their own respective countries to the very heavens.

The consequences of this are well known, and one need only listen to current debates about military conscription to realize that little faith remains in love of one's country as a reliable force in times of crisis. And this is not merely because today's Fatherland goes and must go by the name of Europe. Even among those who seek to reverse this trend and chant Germany for the Germans, few would likely still declare

as people used to: "Germany must live, even if we must die." The homogeneous body of the nation – the single concept from which such notions originally sprang – never truly existed in the first place, and anyone possessed of even a modicum of realism would certainly deem its future realization impossible. Today, the "call of the Fatherland" remains conceivable only as a summons to defend one's own way of life, which of course appeals to any community thus challenged.

Besides the well-being of the fatherland, the well-being of humanity and all human beings has been a competing supreme value since the nineteenth century. It seems almost forgotten today, but it was a very real phenomenon: the devotion to the triumph of communism, the hope for a classless global society achieved through the abolition of private property. In the 1950s schoolchildren in the GDR were required to memorize a passage from a Russian novel, *Das Wertvollste* (The Most Precious Thing). They recited from it that the most precious possession a human being has is life itself – and that one should live it in such a way that upon one's deathbed, one could truthfully say that one had dedicated all one's strength to the most glorious cause in the world: the struggle for the liberation of humanity. While this ultimate purpose in life was admittedly far more distant than the immediate well-being of the fatherland, it nevertheless served as a constant justification for demanding that individuals perform their labor duties.

None of this holds true today, yet the true extent of our departure from these former guiding principles is revealed by the fact that the ideals in the minds of those who held them were always inextricably linked to a long, indeed virtually infinite, future. Generations were meant to continue within them; children and grandchildren were invariably foreseen in this vision. "Be fruitful and multiply!" – has been a central imperative to the Christian self-perception since the story of Creation. In similar fashion all the "fatherlands" desired population growth. The Marxist vision of the future in particular was always focused on the well-being of future generations, one after another.

But what preoccupies us today? Resource depletion, overpopulation, climate change, the threat of nuclear war – the awareness of the potential end of the Earth's habitability is omnipresent. And, as if to confirm this, birth rates are declining throughout the Western world. In some countries statistics show that each woman now bears only one child in

her lifetime, meaning that the population mathematically halves with every passing generation. In Germany the figure currently stands at 1.35 children per mother, which continues to decline annually; 300,000 births are absent annually if the population level is to be roughly maintained without the aid of immigration. The will to pass on one's own vision of life, one's life style is evidently fading rapidly, and it is this very point that most clearly distinguishes the orientation of our society from that of all previous ones.

Does this give rise to despondency? Not at all, rather the opposite prevails. Appearing self-assured and demanding as people do today, they seem entirely at peace with themselves; their chosen way of life strikes them as in no way open to question. But what value, what standard serves as their guide? There is no single, universally accepted term for it, yet every descriptor revolves around the little word "self." Self-determination, self-unfolding, self-discovery, self-realization – this is the realm of values that has taken the place of devotion to God, love of country, or the salvation of humanity. In the 1950s, the Duden dictionary listed only a few dozen such compound words – beside *Selbstbestimmung* (self-determination), there were *Selbstbeherrschung* (self-control), *Selbstvertrauen* (self-confidence), and *Selbstlosigkeit* (selflessness) – yet the majority were still negative terms, such as *Selbstgefälligkeit* (self-satisfaction), *Selbstlob* (self-praise), *Selbstsucht* (selfishness), and *Selbsttäuschung* (self-deception). By now, there are well over a hundred such words and derivatives, including many new positive ones like *Selbstakzeptanz* (self-acceptance), *Selbstaufmerksamkeit* (self-awareness), *Selbstwahrnehmung* (self-perception), *Selbstvervollkommenung* (self-perfection), or even *Selbstoptimierung* (self-optimization). Evidently the Self demands linguistically ever more nuanced attention and definition as well.

When the theme of self-realization first entered the social consciousness during the 1970s – not the underlying idea, which is far older – it initially manifested in the expectation that one simply had to have a hobby. People living in comfortable homes had "hobby cellars;" one could point to one's hobbies as a means of self-definition. Even on questionnaires, the entry "Hobbies" might appear within the biography sections. One could still make fun of such things. Everyone knows the Loriot sketch "Das Jodeldiplom" (The Yodeling Diploma), in which the simple-minded Mrs. Hoppenstedt explains why she is learning to yodel. As a housewife and mother she wants to do something just for herself, to have something of her own and that, she declares, will be her yodeling diploma. The sketch has likely long ago been suspected of being misogynistic, given how regularly workshops for women are offered for all manner of unusual pursuits – from candle-making and batik to cocktail mixing. Women might also opt for Qigong courses aimed at deep relaxation, or painting exercises designed to cultivate sensitivity, and in so doing they would be moving in the very best of circles. Just how little room for mockery remains can be seen in the online commentary following the "Yodeling Diploma" sketch: because men also make a brief appearance in the yodeling school, some speculate that the entire piece is actually a satire on the worthless vocational training courses offered by employment agencies.

However, one need not focus exclusively on women nor solely on elitist pursuits to observe the increasing self-absorption that characterizes the modern approach to life. When men are seen in fitness centers working on sculpting their physiques, one observes a common attempt at male self-perfection. Some will not stop until even the most inconspicuous muscle is clearly defined, and where exercise alone proves insufficient, one resorts to anabolic steroids and protein supplements. And they do this not to be the best at moving furniture, but purely for the sake of self-affirmation, of being able to take pride in their own bodies. For women cosmetic procedures – sometimes undertaken

while during their youthful "beauty years" as the saying goes – exist to reshape through excisions and supplements the features that nature is perceived not to have gotten quite right. Certainly the wish to appear more attractive to others likely plays a role, yet the primary motive is the wish to please oneself.

In this regard, the practice of enhancing one's physical appearance through tattoos is becoming increasingly widespread among both sexes. It would be a mistake to assume that this form of decoration mostly serves social ends, as was the case historically among indigenous cultures, where tattoos served to denote social rank or tribal affiliation. Many contemporary tattoos are positioned in such a way that they remain concealed beneath clothing for most of the year – or even covered up at the office. But at the swimming pool or on the beach, typically anonymous environments with little relevance to one's social standing, one is free to display one's pride in them openly. Nor does the fact that one may, in private and intimate situations, have a surprise in store for their partner enhance their social prestige. Ultimately it functions solely as a form of self-identification, one that derives and retains its value precisely from the fact that it remains known to only a select few.

As an idea or as a purely conceptual construct the desire for self-perfection reaches back far beyond its contemporary manifestations – its origins lie in antiquity. *Gnothi sautón*, the Greeks called it; *nosce te ipsum*, the Romans; know thyself, we say in English. Even then, this injunction implied not merely an accurate self-assessment, but also a commitment to self-improvement – to battling one's weaknesses and evolving, step by step, toward a higher state of humanity. Yet, for over two millennia, self-perfection was understood primarily as self-mastery and self-restraint, virtues that even today have not entirely vanished from the world.

A radical reevaluation of this ideal was brought about by Friedrich Nietzsche and his concept of the *Übermensch* (superman) – a notion subsequently embraced by existentialism, a major current in 20th-century French philosophy. This requires that the individual forms their own existence by shaping themselves entirely according to their own thoughts, desires, and sensations, and by refusing to accept any external conventions whatsoever. In Albert Camus' novel *L'Étranger*, a quintessential text of Existentialism, – a man, acting on a momentary impulse of irritation, shoots and kills a random adversary; he then accepts with near-total indifference the fact that he is subsequently sentenced to death as a murderer. This, the story suggests, is one possible outcome of living life to the fullest – provided that the individual in the process has truly and completely "come into their own."

In such a radical form, the concept of self-realization was naturally, ill-suited for mainstream society, yet it had long since begun circulating in a more palatable guise. One of its foremost proponents was Hermann Hesse, virtually an apostle of self-absorption. In his novels, dating back as far as 1900, he invariably returns to this single, central message: become yourself, be yourself! True to his own profession, it is usually poets or artists in general who seek the path to themselves in this manner, yet the imperative is phrased so broadly that anyone can feel personally addressed by it. It is utterly wrong, states *Demian* published in 1919 "to wish to give anything whatsoever to the world." There exists "no, no, no duty for awakened people other than this one: to seek oneself, to become firm within oneself, to grope one's own way forward, no matter where it leads." Even becoming a murderer is a notion Hesse repeatedly touches upon as the ultimate consequence of this line of thought – and inevitably affirmed.

Hesse however was not a nobody: he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his work, and he remains to this day the most widely read German author in the world. The editions of his novels *Demian*, *Steppenwolf*, and *Narcissus and Goldmund* have found audiences of several million

readers in a dozen countries each, and continue to do so. Moreover, the Indian rites of self-discovery – Yoga, the Vedas, and Transcendental Meditation – now ubiquitous throughout the Western world, were introduced into the cultural mainstream in part through one of Hesse's works, *Siddhartha*. According to surveys by now more than ten million Germans regularly or occasionally attend yoga classes, embarking on the “path to oneself,” a journey bolstered by a plethora of self-help books available on the subject. One could ask why this phenomenon has not long since entered the realm of everyday conversation as a shared collective experience. Yet this path is defined a priori as an infinite journey, so it is impossible to convey to the outside world how far along one has actually progressed, so no societal dialogue regarding it ever takes place.

There are, however, forms of self-discovery and self-realization that do spark public debate – risky leisure pursuits for instance, such as mountaineering. While mountain climbing has undoubtedly always been intertwined with the quest for self-affirmation, in earlier times it also held the promise of fame and prestige, particularly for those who were the first or among the first to successfully complete a summit ascent. But those times are long gone. Today, the entire pursuit of mountaineering is a purely self-absorbed endeavor – one that registers in the public consciousness solely due to the high number of fatalities that occur in its wake. In the Alps alone this figure stands at around 300 deaths each year. Yet thousands still travel annually to the world's highest peaks, paying exorbitant sums to join the throngs of climbers vying for the chance to say they have stood atop such a mountain. No one sets out to lose their life in the process, yet the sense of self-satisfaction is all the greater the more extreme the dangers one has braved to achieve it. When the skier Laura Dahlmeier perished in a mountaineering accident in the Karakoram last year, she was mourned for many reasons, but never for the fact that she had exposed herself unnecessarily herself to such peril.

However, what characterizes the present day is not the willingness to put one's life at risk – a readiness that has always existed. “He who places himself in danger shall perish therein,” states the Bible, as an admonition to treat the life God has bestowed upon us with care. What is characteristic of our time is that society does everything in its power to protect those from harm who voluntarily endanger themselves. To stick with the example of mountaineering: highly professional organizations have emerged for mountain rescue in the Alps, funded not only by donations and membership fees but also by taxpayer money. Yet they are called out to an ever-increasing number of emergencies – often caused by inexperienced and poorly equipped recreational enthusiasts who naturally enough expect that upon making an emergency call, help will arrive immediately and possibly free of charge. Consequently the question sometimes arises as to whether individual risk-taking should really be encouraged to the extent that rescue operations can effectively be factored into one's own plans from the outset. A ZDF television series, “Die Bergretter” (The Mountain Rescuers) which has been running for 15 years however refrains from passing harsh judgment on those who endanger themselves. At least in this instance, it is still the rescuers rather than the daredevils who serve as the role models. In virtually all other extreme sports, however, attention has long since shifted to the daredevils themselves, rather than to the paramedics who carry them away.

But can't all such forms of self-absorption simply be dismissed with a shrug as long as we can afford them? This becomes difficult when one considers that they also contribute to the everwidening “child deficit,” a shortage that pre-exists anyway due to apprehensions about the future. Children are the exact opposite of self-absorption, demanding that one care for them with a spirit of self-sacrifice – how apt that word truly

is! Every pregnant woman knows her unborn child drains a significant portion of her energy, and after the birth, parents, or rather hopefully the parents, must take their children into account in everything they plan to do. Yet anyone who has experienced this will attest that it can be equally enriching and fulfilling. This realization remains undiscovered for as long as the courage to have a child of one's own – what a telling turn of phrase in itself! – falls by the wayside, giving way instead to faintheartedness.

Today the decision to forgo having children is invariably attributed first and foremost to social factors: financial burdens, difficulties balancing work and family life, or housing concerns. Yet one must, of course, resist the temptation to draw the opposite conclusion – for example that back in the 1960s, when the birth rate was nearly double what it is today, couples with children enjoyed ideal conditions. Detailed surveys reveal that children are primarily unwanted because they make it impossible to maintain one's accustomed lifestyle. Whether the feared loss involves leisure time, social engagements, or opportunities for travel, the issue usually boils down to a rejection of the duties that children inevitably entail. Even economic concerns typically amount only to what is feared is not a threat to one's existence, but merely a loss of wealth or comfort. Consequently, having children remains out of the question for many people, even were the state to provide greater financial support or offer full-time childcare from dawn till dusk. Which in turn raises the question: why would one want to have children at all?

There is indeed an answer to this. Dynasties deliberately ensure they produce heirs to secure the continued existence of their family and their rule for another generation. But isn't something else to be gained for everyone else as well? Whenever this topic is raised it is always emphasized that the decision of whether or not to have a child is a purely individual matter and of no concern to society, – and that consequently the decision not to have a child deserves equal respect. But the truth is different. Older people depend on younger persons, members of the next generation, to meet their daily needs, provide for their care and comfort, and ultimately to look after them. Naturally the expectation is that no one will pay them for this service. The catch however is that these will be the children of couples who lived right alongside you, couples who actually had these children, raised them, and to do this sacrificed the exotic vacations, the thrill of changing partners, and often the standard of living that you yourself enjoyed in your childlessness.

Viewed in this light, the deliberate decision to forgo children takes on an air of disregard for the future and of self-interest, all the more so if one actively isolates oneself from families with children and mocks their struggles with a dismissive, “It's their own fault!” An increasing number of hotels market themselves as for adults only, a designation that although carrying a slightly sleazy undertone, is nonetheless preferable to the blunt and unambiguous designation, “child-free.” The same trend applies to restaurants. That is, assuming parents with children aren't simply turned away as a matter of routine with a stock excuse like, “Sorry, we're fully booked.” There is scarcely any need to even mention the struggles couples with children face in finding an apartment, although such exclusionary practices are actually prohibited by law. But there is no point in blaming landlords, hoteliers, or restaurateurs for this state of affairs, who are merely catering to the desires – and the wallets – of an evergrowing demographic: the successful, childless elite.

There is no longer any need to point out the consequences of a birth rate that has been too low for decades: a shortage of skilled labor, a crisis in elder care, Germany with the oldest workforce in Europe, the erosion of the pension system – grim tidings on this front never cease. Yet is there a public debate regarding the underlying causes, or how one might take countermeasures to halt this unfolding trend? Far from it; people simply refuse to look. Even the term “Demographic Change”

usually used to address the subject serves as a textbook example of euphemism. “It is not a”shortage of new generations” or “childlessness” that is at hand, rather something is changing within the realm of demography: the statistical study of populations. One could have just as well referred to the transition from black-and-white to color photography as “photographic change”, yet that is clearly not the kind of change at issue here. Even if one accepts the literal meaning of the term, it amounts to nothing more than saying “hydrographic change” instead of “forest dieback” caused by drought. The aim here is to remain as vague as possible, to make the matter appear innocuous and uncontrollable as possible so that no one feels compelled to question their own future-blind way of life.

When Turkish President Erdogan recently called upon his people to have more children, citing a decline in the birth rate to fewer than 1.5 children per woman, the German press responded with nothing but mockery. Who would think of such a thing? Likely they felt reminded of Hitler’s “Mother’s Cross” or his “Lebensborn” program. Yet such associations are no longer valid. Anyone who takes a close look at demographic trends in Western Europe must be concerned about how the ever-growing proportion of people no longer able to work is to be supported. In this country it is proposed that people work longer – a suggestion that the majority however deems unreasonable, and that old-age pensions be financed by requiring civil servants to pay into the pension system, though requiring them to be paid higher salaries. Alternatively, some wish to have the robots employed by industry contribute to pension funding – a move that would likely spell the definitive end for Germany as an industrial hub. Finally – and only tentatively suggested – immigration might also prove necessary; and this at a time when a political party is gaining ever-increasing support – a party that not only categorically rules out immigration but also seeks to expel the millions of immigrants already living here. Yet one thing remains unsaid: pointing out to the generation now entering the workforce that the best safeguard for their future pensions would be to have children of their own. Instead, people continue to pay into the pension fund while lamenting that they likely won’t get much out later on – rather than acknowledging that they are not, in fact, paying in at all, but merely transferring money, month after month, to today’s pensioners.

The generation now entering retirement is about to feel the bitter consequences of this demographic shift. The first signs of this appeared in late 2025, when several CDU parliamentarians refused to approve a pension guarantee pegged at 48 percent of average wages for even a few more years. Too expensive, was the verdict. What this truly implies is this: We – those of us who come from families that actually had children – would gladly pay for our own parents and grandparents, but certainly not for the tens of millions of others who opted out of making such provisions for themselves. Quite possibly these are the very same people who, when we were children, pushed us aside and turned our parents away when they were searching for housing, the same ones to whom we were nothing more than a nuisance.

But it is not only pension benefits that will decline; an inevitable loss of social standing for the elderly in general is also on the horizon. Even today, questions are being raised as to whether the very oldest among us are truly entitled to every life-extending medical treatment that is technically possible. Such an overwhelming demographic of elderly people the likes of which we will see in the future is historically unprecedented; any hope for honor and respect can at best be entertained only by those who have children and grandchildren of their own. In Japan where this demographic shift began somewhat earlier, criminal offenses committed by elderly people with no surviving family are becoming increasingly common with the sole intention to wind up

in prison. There they enjoy occasional companionship, are cared for, and having grown accustomed to living alone, they are already well-adjusted to the solitude of a prison cell. It is little wonder then that an ever-growing number of recidivists is placing a severe strain on the Japanese justice system. We will also witness the emergence of forms of suicide that are not merely tolerated by society, but actively encouraged – a consequence of the marginalization and disdain for the elderly that is taking root in every sphere of life. Even the very act of referring to the generation now entering retirement as “Baby Boomers” carries a derogatory undertone – as if these individuals were personally guilty of some act of irresponsible excess.

Can such conditions be mitigated in the future? The first step would be for the state to support child-rearing far more extensively than it currently does. Above all, the system of spousal income splitting should be abolished, and every cent of the resulting tax relief should be paid out as additional child benefits. It has long since become absurd to grant tax advantages merely for the act of marrying – especially when so many couples either do not want children at all or, in the case of same-sex couples, cannot have them. It is equally nonsensical to continue granting tax relief to parents beyond the period during which they were financially responsible for their children. Instead, children should be made fully tax-deductible, thereby providing higher-income couples with an additional economic incentive to have them. It would also be essential to give absolute priority to housing seekers with children when allocating social housing. However, recommending earlier marriage – so that women do not have their first child only at age 30, at which point having further children becomes a tight squeeze – is no longer a viable option. Instead, we will likely see a shift toward freezing and preserving eggs and sperm from a younger age in order to offset the inevitable decline in fertility for at least some time. Ultimately and above all else the future-blind self-absorption currently prevalent as a lifestyle pattern must be publicly challenged and replaced by considerations focused on the common good. For it is not the case as is widely believed that a childless society merely shrinks; rather, it first begins to wither away. The landscape of kindergartens and schools thins out as can be observed in Finland, the task of raising children becomes increasingly burdensome, and as the childless increasingly come to dominate public life, parents with children find themselves pushed to the social margins.

However, scientists remain skeptical as to whether the decline in the willingness to reproduce – a phenomenon that aside from Africa is a global one – can still be reversed.¹ For the stability of Western societies, it would be a significant gain if the decline in population could be slowed down. Perhaps – and this is a hopeful thought – the consequences of this decline might over time bring about a shift in attitudes all on their own. The shortage of skilled tradespeople, for instance, is already leading to an increasing demand for neighborly assistance on online platforms; and, as it turns out, such help is indeed being provided in a considerable number of cases. And that is not all. In the wake of disasters such as those already brought about by climate change and those expected to occur with increasing frequency in the future, victims are often aided to a truly astonishing extent; so extensively, in fact, that it is almost as if people had simply been waiting for just such a necessity to arise. Evidently, in such situations, one discovers that it is far more fulfilling to do something useful in community with others than to be constantly preoccupied with one’s own self-realization. Where this realization takes hold, a shift in attitudes toward children might also emerge. Anyone who finds fulfillment in caring for the well-being of others has also grasped that life in the world does not come to an end with the end of one’s own life; and once people begin to think about the future in this way again, perhaps children, too, might once more be welcomed.