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children, population problems would resolve themselves with no need for government control. And this was about four or five years before the international conference on population and development in Cairo.

So I was a journalist at the time and I was still a little bit skeptical of that, I had a lot to learn about this field, but I really wondered whether that could possibly be true, but it struck me as a rare and really interesting plausible hope in the midst of what I was writing about as a considerable gathering of environmental risk going on in the world. And what Sharon was telling me was that a conviction that I share with Matt, which is that people should determine for themselves when and when not to have children, might in fact be on its own the greatest guarantor and source that population change could be a positive force for the environment and for human well-being generally, particularly when women are the decision makers who are making the key decisions on this. Because after all, women are the child bearers, all of the child bearers last time I checked the data, and the principle child raisers; in the word of one Bolivian women I quote, “They approach the door of death every time they give birth.”

I wanted to get at the heart of the differences between men and women when it comes to reproduction, reproductive intention, reproductive timing, the population and the impacts of all of these that are played out in history. So mine is a book about population growth: why has it happened, what have been its impacts, how it might continue to slow down and eventually end and even reverse now that it’s no longer particularly helpful and instead a source of risk?

The book is also about nature because natural constraints have interacted with population growth ever since the species emerged; and because frankly our relationship with the natural world is especially worrisome right now. Happy Earth Day, by the way.

Finally, it’s a book about women because women are continually and forever on the front lines of population change. All populations, and this is another area where I agree with Matt, all populations are out of control. There’s no hope; they always will be. But women, in the words of one of my chapter titles, are the original population growers when that’s what we needed to survive as a species; and for Lady Humanity the population shrinkers. And when they’re allowed to manage their own reproductive timing, I try to argue in this book, they’re the nearest we have to true population controllers, and that’s exactly as it should be. But there are a lot of caveats and limitations in that statement.

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a question, I found that there was a lot of evidence that that was indeed true that women were both trying to time pregnancy all over history, and in fact, potentially having some success, including delaying first births well before the age of contraception. And that it's possible, and this is really intriguing to me, that their efforts in this regard actually influenced past demographic trends. Now there's not much documentation of ancient contraception, but then there's not much documentation of anything involving the lives of women before recorded history.

But what can be found is pretty fascinating. There's a wealth of medical literature on contraception and abortion -- most of it, admittedly, written by men in Greek and Arabic literature. There are instructions to priests in a 9th Century kingdom in North Central Europe, not far from Belgium, Luxemburg -- a very, very densely populated piece of Europe at that time, before that time, and food scarcity was a constant problem for people living there -- in which priests were counseled on how to stop their parishioners from practicing withdrawal to postpone pregnancy.

There's a 14th century account by a woman of her own affair with a priest on the border between Spain and France, and together they used an herbal pessary, which she describes, which from the description has been guessed at or analyzed to probably have been an ancient emmenagogue. Now that's a word that I didn't know before I started working on this book, and it's a word I guarantee you're never going to see in a spelling bee or on an SAT exam, because an emmenagogue is a substance that induces immediate menstruation.

Why would anybody want to do that? Because it gets rid of any evidence that you might have been or might have been about to be pregnant. If you're a woman you don't need to know about it and nobody else needs to know about it. There's a certain elegance to the way emmenagogues operate that makes it much easier to imagine natural substances being emmenagogues than actually acting as a kind of birth control pill, and all the more so pessaries because they provide a physical obstacle to conception in addition.

So through all of this wanders this interesting figure of the midwife. Now midwives are obviously about helping to bring on healthy births, and that's what most people associated with them and that's most obviously what they do even today. But midwives have always been with women -- that's what the word means -- when they're giving birth and often a woman's first question is, how do I prevent the next one? That's not a man's first question, but it's very frequently a woman's first question. A man's first perspective as I quote in the

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