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How the World Is Getting Better

By: Philip D. Harvey – February 20, 2013

We humans thrive on bad news; we're pre-programmed to respond to threats, and predictions of apocalypse. Good news bores us, so we don't hear much about the remarkable improvements in the human condition in recent years. Here's a quick review of significant developments.

* Life expectancy, perhaps the most objective indicator of human wellbeing, has been rising dramatically. When people live longer it means they have more of life's necessities, and are freer from disease and fatal violence. A few hundred years ago, the average human lived less than 30 years. When I was born, my life expectancy, right here in the U.S., was 63. Babies born today can expect to reach the age of 79, a 25 percent improvement, and more than three times the average life-span in Julius Caesar's time. Worldwide, including all the poorest countries, life expectancy at birth has gone from 46 years in the 1950s to 70 years today. Adding 24 years to the longevity of our species in a mere 60 years is remarkably good news.

*Despite food shortages in some places, there's more food for everyone today than ever before. For most of human history the daily struggle for food dominated life. People rarely had enough to eat. But even as the world population climbed to 7 billion, daily food supplies per person have gone from 2,250 calories a day in 1960 to 2,800 in 2002. The English, who survived on 2068 calories a day in the late 19th century, consume 3412 today. In India, calories per capita were below 1700 as recently as 1950. Today, the figure is 2459. For comparison, consider the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommendations: 2000-3000 calories per day for adult men; 1600-2400 for adult women. In many countries, including the U.S., poverty is now characterized by too much food rather than too little.

* The world's wealth has increased enormously. For tens of thousands of years humans existed at bare subsistence, on the equivalent of \$400 or \$500 per person per year (in 1990 dollars). But wealth skyrocketed worldwide, starting around 1800 with the Industrial Revolution, and growing with the widespread use of electricity; it was \$1500 per capita in 1913 and \$10,700 in 2010. Deprivation has not been eradicated, of course, but this kind of economic growth is new to human history.

In the U.S., where income per capita zoomed from \$5300 in 1913 to \$48,112 today, large numbers of Americans are still classified as poor, but everyone's living standards have improved markedly. Surveys show that 83 percent of the poor say that they have enough to eat; 63 percent have cable or satellite TV; 80 percent have air conditioning; 43 percent have Internet access. But instead of celebrating this progress, we're inclined to find things wrong with it.

* There is much less violence than there used to be. Harvard's Steven Pinker, who has researched this subject exhaustively, recently concluded that "today we are probably living in the most peaceful moment of our species' time on earth." Wars used to kill millions; now the numbers are way down. In World War II, U.S. forces wiped out hundreds of thousands of civilians as part of our military strategy. Now we pay reparations for accidentally killing civilians. Not long ago witches were burned at the stake, slavery and public hangings were commonplace. Cats were burned alive for entertainment. Those practices are gone for good.

What are we to make of the fact that good news is all around us, but we determinedly dwell on the not-so-cheerful? Some blame attaches to politicians, who want us to be afraid of unseen dangers so they can protect us, and some attaches to the media, which revel in violence because it draws eyeballs.

But we seem eager to embrace the dark side. Rather than being glad we lead more comfortable lives than our parents or our grandparents did, we tend to grouse that things are worse than they were last year, or last week.

It turns out that there's a built-in reason for that. Attention to trouble has been vital to our survival. In a recent essay Marian Tupy of the Cato Institute points out that the information entering the amygdala, the part of our brain responsible for emotions like rage, hate and fear, "gets our first attention because the amygdala 'is always looking for something to fear.' Our species has evolved to prioritize bad news." In the struggle for survival, those who constantly feared danger survived; optimists did not.

So the evening news will always lead with violence. There will always be enough bad news to go around. We even create our own bad news with deaths and injuries in many sports and other entertainment.

But have a look at the good news once in a while. I know it's boring, but even as we resist, things are likely to keep right on getting better and better.