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**Another Year of Progress in 2013**

**It's fashionable to be gloomy about the state of the world, but signs of progress are everywhere, if you look for them.**

By Marian Tupy

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Leon McCarthy, a precocious 12-year-old from Massachusetts, was born without fingers on his left hand. The fingers didn't grow because blood flow had been restricted in his mother's womb. Earlier this year, Leon's father Paul built his son a functioning prosthesis using a borrowed 3-D printer and \$10 worth of material. Leon, who declared his new hand "awesome," is now able to help his mother with the groceries. Meanwhile Paul saved his family more than \$30,000 in medical bills.

The McCarthys are not the only family who can give thanks for the marvels of modernity this holiday season. Contrary to popular perception, most people's lives have improved over the last year. Human progress, and the political and economic freedoms that enable it, is making our lives longer, healthier and more comfortable than ever before.

Let's take a trip around the world. This year, Japanese scientists grew human liver tissue inside a mouse and Australian researchers used stem cells to grow a kidney in a lab. These innovations will eventually cut waiting times for transplants and get around the problem of immune rejection. Similarly, British scientists used stem cells to repair a dog's broken spine, bringing the medical profession a step closer to fixing spinal injuries in humans. Other medical advances—from improved understanding of the workings of the HIV virus and causes of depression, to advances in cardiology and human bionics—are too numerous to mention.

Progress was not restricted to medicine. Google (GOOG -0.82%) has launched balloons that can bring the Internet to people in the remotest places on earth, while so-called "cloud schools" are gearing up to remotely teach millions of children in the developing world.

In 2013, for the first time, there were more Indians with mobile phones than Americans, and mobile-phone penetration in Africa crossed the 50% threshold. Never before has it been easier for an Indian woman to call for help or to organize a protest against sexual abuse and harassment. Never before has an African fisherman had such easy access to weather information, or a more convenient way to send money to his mother.

Such advances have brought global life-expectancy to an all-time high. The average human can now expect to live more than twice as long as 100 years ago. Declining infant mortality is reducing fertility rates, as women feel more certain of their children's survival into adulthood. As a consequence, some demographers argue, the world will soon reach "peak" population levels, thus reducing future pressure on natural resources.

More children, especially girls, receive schooling in poor countries. Literacy, numeracy and better access to information will enable young people to assert their political rights against corrupt and authoritarian governments. Girls will be better equipped to strive for equality.

Rapid economic growth in the developing world has not only increased average global per-capita income to a record high of \$12,700 per person, but helped to reduce global income-inequality as poor countries start catching up with rich ones. As people become more prosperous, experience from the developed world shows, they will become more able and willing to pay for cleaner air and water, protection of endangered species and reforestation.

All this sounds like progress. Yet judging by the headlines, and the pronouncements of political and religious leaders, 2013 was a year of growing despondency. Wars raged, women and children were abused and enslaved, people went hungry and mass poverty persisted globally. The world is an imperfect place and will remain so, because we, the human beings who inhabit it, are ourselves imperfect.

But as long as we insist on comparing the world today with an imagined utopia, we will remain blinded to the incremental improvements that make each day in the story of our species better than the day before. Appreciating the progress that humanity made in 2013 does not mean we should not try to make 2014 even better. On the contrary, appreciating the breadth and depth of human accomplishment should imbue our future efforts with renewed purpose and confidence. It should also encourage us to contemplate in an open-minded way the institutional framework of political and economic freedom that made the creation of this magnificent world possible.

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