



Ignore the doomsayers: The world is better than ever

Marian L. Tupy

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Are you worried about your future?

Worse, do you even have a future?

Many – especially those born in this century – are asking themselves these questions. In 2021, researchers at the University of Bath in England polled 10,000 people all over the world between the ages of 16 and 25. Seventy-five percent thought that the "future is frightening." Fifty-six percent thought that "humanity" is coming to an end. Thirty-nine percent stated that they were "hesitant to have children" because the future was so bleak.

Are their fears legitimate? Or is it possible there's another side – a brighter side – to the story? Like the fact we are, in fact, the most fortunate human beings – ever?

One could easily add electricity, air conditioning and – lest we forget – indoor plumbing, all of which were, relatively speaking, just recently introduced.

Louis XIV's magnificent palace of Versailles had no proper waste facilities. People relieved themselves where they stood: in hallways, behind curtains, and in the gardens. One

contemporary observer noted that Versailles was "the receptacle of all of humanity's horrors – the passageways, corridors and courtyards are filled with urine and fecal matter."

This is Louis XIV we're talking about – maybe the richest man on earth at the time.

Ask yourself this question: would you prefer to live in a studio apartment with electricity, a window air conditioner, and indoor plumbing or a Versailles palace with none of these things?

In 19th-century London, American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that no one wore white shirts – the pollution *indoors* turned everything dark.

Here's another blessing: antibiotics.

In 1924 Calvin Coolidge Jr., the son of the president of the United States, died from a blister that developed into an infection. He got the blister from playing tennis on the White House court.

"Many of the best doctors of the day were consulted, multiple diagnostic tests were run, and he was admitted to one of the top hospitals in the country," Chelsea Follett, my colleague at the Cato Institute, has written. Yet "he died within a week of infection.... Deaths from sepsis following the infection of a minor cut or blister were extremely common at the time, and no amount of wealth or power could save a patient."

In almost every way life is materially better than it was in the past. And not just the distant past either. For instance, in 1997, a 42-inch TV screen cost \$15,000. Today you can buy one for under \$200.

So why aren't we more excited about the future and the new wonders that await us there?

Because human beings are born complainers. Negative emotions are much more powerful and longer lasting than positive ones. That's just the way we're wired. It only took the Hebrews a

few days to begin complaining to Moses about the food in the desert after they had been liberated from Egyptian slavery. As a species, we're never satisfied.

But the truth is if you are living today, you are the beneficiary of countless life enhancements. And not just in developed countries – almost everywhere.

Consider the following *global* statistics:

Between 1950 and 2020, the average inflation-adjusted income per person rose over 400%. We also live longer, with the average life expectancy rising from 51 years in 1960 to 73 years in 2019 or by 43%. And we are better fed. The daily supply of calories rose from about 2,000 calories in 1961 to about 3,000 calories in 2018. That's growth of 34%. Astonishingly, a recent study from Africa noted that obesity is increasing in urban areas.

Worried about the environment? There's plenty of good news there, too.

We are also safer from natural catastrophes, including earthquakes, floods, droughts, storms, wildfires and landslides. Mortality rates from those disasters fell by almost 99% over the last century.

Also, the world is greening, with the global tree canopy cover *increasing* by an area greater than Alaska and Montana *combined* between 1982 and 2016.

In 2017, some 15% of the planet's land surface was protected from human exploitation. These protected areas were almost twice the size of the United States.

With so much good news around us, why are we so gloomy?

Part of the problem is primeval.

We have evolved in a very dangerous environment. It made a lot of sense for our ancestors to be on constant lookout for real danger posed by wild animals, for example. Today, many dangers are gone, but our genes have stayed largely the same. We are programmed for danger.

The media plays on our fears. Social media has it down to a science. According to one recent study, "for a headline of average length, each additional negative word increased the click-through rate by 2.3%." And so, in a fierce competition for eyeballs, the sky is falling every day all day.

We are literally scaring ourselves to death, with rates of anxiety, depression and even suicide rising in some parts of the world.

So, to maintain your mental equipoise, follow the *trendlines*, not the headlines.

Not only will that put you in a better frame of mind, it will put you closer to the truth.

And the truth is, you have a lot to look forward to.

Marian L. Tupy is editor of HumanProgress.org and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity. He co-authored the recently published book "Superabundance: The Story of Population Growth, Innovation and Human Flourishing on an Infinitely Bountiful Planet."