

OPINION | We live in a world of reliable miracles

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July 2, 2019

When I'm having a bad day, I trawl the internet for videos of happy cyborgs. My favorites are clips of hearing-impaired people getting their cochlear implants turned on for the first time. The videos follow a soothingly predictable pattern. Mumbly background chatter and shaky cam—the cinematography is rarely good—then a pregnant pause, wide eyes, and finally that peculiar kind of sobbing that human beings do when we are overwhelmed. The pattern is the same whether it's a babe in arms or a full-grown man.

If you catch the right algorithmic wave on YouTube or the right hashtag on Instagram, you can surf for hours in this genre: videos of Parkinson's patients as their tremors are calmed by a new therapy, paraplegics walking with the help of adaptive prosthetics, infants getting their first pair of coke-bottle glasses, and more.

Adorable kittens and soppy love stories do little to warm my cold, dead heart. But show me a part-robot baby flipping out because he heard his mom say "hello" for the first time, and it's onion city.

I'm not deaf or hard of hearing, but I am aware that cochlear implants are not without controversy in that community. As with almost everything you see on the internet, behind the scenes there is invisible labor, difficult setbacks, and the occasional disaster. Hardly anyone posts those on their YouTube channel.

Still, entire religions were once built around the spectacle of someone banishing a severe disability with the wave of a hand. Today any certified R.N. in the right audiologist's office can be a secular saint. When my own worthless eyeballs were corrected with lasers, making me a blind(ish) woman given the gift of sight, I didn't fall to my knees and worship the ophthalmologist. I just got out my credit card. We live in an age of reliable, scalable, profitable miracles.

People are ungrateful wretches, of course. Once anyone can reliably perform a miracle, it immediately ceases to seem miraculous. Babies generated without sex—actual virgin births—are humdrum. We carry nearly all of human knowledge in our pockets. Within a decade, burgers made without meat will be commonplace ([page 10](#)). And the memory of a time when HIV was a death sentence will soon fade to almost nothing ([page 30](#)).

As a species, we're brilliant at focusing on the negative. There are some very useful evolutionary implications of this trait, but an unfortunate side effect is that we always feel like the sky is falling, even when it's 70 degrees and sunny.

But historically speaking, it's a beautiful day.

In 1820, nearly 84 percent of the world's population lived in extreme poverty (roughly less than \$1.90 per day per person). In 1981, according to the World Bank, that number was still 42 percent. Today, it's hovering around 8 percent.

Also in 1820, 90 percent of the world's population was illiterate. Today that number is inverted: 90 percent can read.

Since 1990, an additional 2.6 billion people have secured access to clean water.

And in 1990, zero percent of the world's population had access to the World Wide Web. By 2020, more than half will.

In other words, the people around us are healthy and long-lived. They have words to read and videos to watch. The water is clear and blue. Food is plentiful and delicious. And the soundtrack—whether it's piped in through the latest medical technology or just an ordinary pair of earbuds—is gorgeous.

All of these heartening facts and figures (and much of my hope for humanity) are drawn from an upcoming book, *Ten Global Trends Every Smart Person Should Know*, by Reason Science Correspondent Ronald Bailey and the Cato Institute's Marian L. Tupy ([page 12](#)).

These are mere material gains, the determined pessimist might say. True enough. We are the children of Steven Pinker's "long peace" and the grandchildren of Deirdre Nansen McCloskey's "great enrichment." We are safe and wealthy beyond the imagining of our ancestors, the beneficiaries of an astonishingly lengthy stretch of success for liberal institutions, international trade, and the free exchange of ideas.

These institutions are not automatically self-sustaining. But they are self-reinforcing. People aren't perfectible, and they are prone to both personal and political error. Everything could always go pear-shaped.

But so far, billions of healthier, wealthier, better-educated, and better-connected people have also proven themselves better able to understand and defend the values of the free society.

Politics, of course, is crap. But politics has consistently been crap throughout the last couple of centuries, and yet here we are in the greatest period of global peace, enrichment, and innovation in human history. Truth be told, even the crappiness of politics is way down over the last 200 years. The modes of amplifying the shouting have gotten better, so the whole enterprise is noisier. But it's far less fatal than it used to be. Not every downward trend line is an inflection point.

"Put not your trust in princes," the psalmist warns us, "nor in the son of man in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish." The first bit couldn't be more true. But the rest is absolute rubbish.

Human beings are doing remarkably well lately, especially for such fragile, mortal creatures. As with the cochlear implants, a lot of messiness, horror, and hopelessness are hidden from view. It's wrong to dismiss or ignore suffering just because it's not part of a broader trend. But it is also wrong to despair.

The combined efforts of the sons of man have wrought astonishing changes. And their thoughts do not perish when they die but live on through their inventions and institutions. The dead of the last two centuries have bettered the world not just for themselves but for those of us who came after them. Their legacy is a world rife with boring, ordinary miracles.