

WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

Take a Walk on the Sunny Side

October 11, 2020

John Hood

In this seemingly endless year of disease, destruction, dissension, and despair, what's an optimist to do?

This is no hypothetical question for me. I'm a naturally optimistic person. As one of my favorite songs goes, "Grab your coat and get your hat. Leave your worries on the doorstep. Life can be so sweet on the sunny side of the street."

A true optimist isn't naïve or blasé. There will always be challenges and problems. And vices are inherent in human nature. We can't simply wish them away. But we can keep our troubles in perspective.

For the vast majority of people you know — indeed, for the vast majority of people on our planet — their ancestors never had it so good. On the whole, we are healthier, wealthier, happier, and freer than ever before.

Since I've already copped to being an inveterate optimist, you may be unwilling to take these assertions at face value. Good for you! You shouldn't take anyone's assertions at face value. You should investigate them yourself.

Let me offer you a place to start: *Ten Global Trends Every Smart Person Should Know*, a new book by the Reason Foundation's Ronald Bailey and the Cato Institute's Marian Tupy. Although you might not guess from the title, their work is something like a coffee-table book for those interested in current affairs. Each trend is illustrated by charts and graphs, with nearby explanations in concise prose.

In truth, Baily and Tupy offer readers far more than just 10 trends. And I can't possibly do justice to the scope of their work in a single column. So I'll stick to a few highlights.

First, although you've no doubt seen politicians and worrywarts assert otherwise, living standards in America and most of the world are not only higher than they were a century ago but have also continued to improve in recent decades.

For example, the share of human beings living in extreme poverty fell from 66% in 1910 to 42% in 1980. That was good news. By 2018, the rate had fallen to 8.6%. That's even better news. Average incomes are up dramatically. Since the turn of the 21st century, income inequality across households and countries has gone down, too.

With regard to our health, deaths per thousand people dropped from 17.7 in 1960 to 7.6 in 2016. Infants and their mothers are far less likely to die than before. Death rates from cancer, AIDS, malaria, and most other diseases have been going down for decades. And contrary to what you might think, we've gotten a lot better at saving people from disasters, too. "The chance of a person dying in a natural catastrophe — earthquake, flood, drought, storm, wildfire, landslide, or epidemic — has declined by nearly 99% since the 1920s and 1930s," Bailey and Tupy write.

Human beings are far less likely to kill each other than previous generations were. Wars between nation-states are becoming rarer. Deaths at the hands of soldiers or police around the world are small fractions of what they were two or three generations ago. The global homicide rate has dropped 17% since 1990. America's violent-crime rate, while ticking up lately, is still far lower than it was in 1990.

Bailey and Tupy depict impressive progress across a range of other measures, including hunger and malnutrition, educational attainment, work and leisure, natural resources, and environmental stewardship. While many of the largest gains in human wellbeing have occurred in the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the authors devote an entire section to depicting recent improvements in living conditions just within the United States.

Of course, material progress isn't the only story. Perhaps we have sacrificed our social, moral, and spiritual wellbeing in search of less-exalted goals. Some critics make that argument, typically on a full stomach.

I'd urge them to take the song lyrics to heart: "I used to walk in the shade with my blues on parade. But I'm not afraid — this rover's crossed over."