

Reading & Sermon

Laura Pedersen's adaptation of *The Paradox of Our Age* by Dr. Bob Moorehead

We have taller buildings but shorter tempers; wider freeways but narrower viewpoints; we have bigger houses and smaller families; more conveniences, yet less time; we have more degrees but less sense; more knowledge but less judgement; more experts, yet more problems; we have more gadgets but less satisfaction; more medicine, yet less wellness. We spend too recklessly; laugh too little; drive too fast; get angry too quickly; stay up too late; and get up too tired. We have more guns, but less peace. We are choked with news but starved of meaning.

We fly in faster planes to arrive there quicker, to do less and return sooner; we love too seldom and stay inside too often. We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor. We've conquered outer space, but not inner space; we have more channels but less fellowship; more acquaintances, but fewer friends. We build more computers to hold more information, but have less communication. Our TV screens are larger, our attention spans are shorter. We've become long on quantity, but short on quality.

These are times of more leisure and less fun; more food, but less nutrition. We've added years to life, not life to years. More people die from overeating than starvation, and more people die from suicide than war. We have fewer block parties and more mass shootings. It's a moment when there is much in the window display and little in the stock room. Let us now find the strength to display our courage and indeed take stock.

WE WILL ALL GO TOGETHER
 A sermon by Laura Pedersen
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 All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City

It's what retailers call "bathing suit season," ministers call "wedding season" and gyms call "diet season." It's possible to Google all kinds of diets. If you're like me, you can Google how old the famous fitness cheerleaders were when they died. The results aren't encouraging. Clive McCay of the low-calorie diet died at age 69. Jim Fixx, who helped start the fitness revolution with *The Complete Book of Running* died at 52. Wild foods enthusiast Euell Gibbons was 64. Nathan Pritikin of low-fat diet-fame died at 69, while Dr. Robert Atkins, who promoted the exact opposite diet, died at 72.

Even if we do everything "right", we're victims of circumstances over which we have little if no control. We're fighting everything from genes and accidents to pollution and pesticides. Did anyone else run behind the DDT truck when they were kids, through a thick fog of what was called "the atom bomb of pesticide?" Did the fact that the guys spraying to kill wore hazmat suits not suggest a dance with death? On the bright side, we didn't get any mosquito bites that day.

When I was growing up in a Buffalo suburb in the 1970s, a big news story was unfolding just a few miles away. The ironically named Love Canal was a working-class neighborhood built atop a toxic waste dump that caused homeowners to develop all sorts of cancers while their children were born with horrendous birth defects. Stonewalled by the government, local activists finally took two Environmental Protection Agency workers hostage. *That* made national news. Love Canal became the first government Superfund cleanup site – people were properly bought out of their homes and able to file medical claims.

So why am I taking the time to cheer you up like this? Because it's the decisions we make as a collective society that matter more than any individual choices we make. And if there's no common good there can be no society. What is the common good? Well, it includes schools, hospital emergency rooms, libraries, rebuilding war-torn Europe and Japan, guaranteeing the civil rights and voting rights of Americans, our national road system, meat inspectors and other laws that keep corporations from killing us. Pollution is the number one cause of shorter life spans – pollution of our water, our food, and our air. There are no more Baltimore Orioles in Baltimore. It's the state bird of Maryland... that's awkward.

Starting in the 1970s, activists and politicians collaborated to outlaw leaded gasoline worldwide and reduce lead exposure in paint used in houses, furniture, and children's toys. It's one of the best choices we ever made – lead levels in our blood dropped more than 80%, cutting down on heart disease, kidney ailments, anemia, brain damage to children, and dementia in adults. Sadly, we haven't taken the same action with regard to diesel engines, coal plants, and polluted water systems.

We ignore scientists' warnings at our own peril. In 1952, a "killer fog" of sulfurous coal smoke and diesel fumes poisoned London's air (fans of *The Crown* TV series will recall). Four

thousand people were killed in less than a week and another 8,000 died in the months that followed. For years British scientists had been warning of exactly such a disaster, but no preventative measures were taken. It wasn't until four years after this calamity that The Clean Air Act was passed by Parliament.

In 2013, Australia tightened their gun laws and instituted a buyback of certain weapons. Since then, homicide rates have plummeted by almost half, and suicide rates by 74%. New Zealand made similar reforms following the Christchurch massacre this past March, just nine days after the shooting.

Right now, we're seeing an increase in hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes, droughts, wildfires, mudslides, and floods, with devastating losses to life and property. Rather than enacting laws to lessen the damage, the government is repealing regulatory measures. Our air and water are becoming more polluted by the day. Rollback of EPA regulations is expected to kill more than 100,000 Americans over the next decade. There are more pesticides on our fruits and vegetables, not fewer. There will be more outbreaks of infectious disease and widespread food poisoning. Fact. Maybe the necessary incentive here is to inform celebrities that breathing polluted air leads to premature aging. True.

In the 1980s, a crack epidemic resulted in mass incarceration, teenagers in juvenile detention, permanent records, no men to marry, and parentless children. Now we're seeing a repeat of that movie in the form of an opioid epidemic. These are public health crises just like AIDS that require a government response including research, medical help, treatment, support, counseling, and also compassion.

But if no one in my family is abusing opioids, what does the crisis have to do with me? Which brings us to the problem of Charles Darwin. Actually, people have had many problems with Darwin. For one, he so aptly demonstrated that man wasn't created by God, but descended from apes, that this threw a monkey wrench, if you will, into the idea that there's a natural hierarchy in the human race, and made problematic things like slavery, the divine right of kings, and the Hindu caste system. Darwin proved that all living things are related. Full stop. And the evidence is in their forms – the wing of the bat is an alternately adapted version of the human hand. Look at a fish fin and then a bird wing and then your own arm.

Which brings us to the question: Is unforced cooperation possible in a world of egoists, superpowers, businesses, and individuals? Because it means wanting for others, complete strangers, what you want for yourself and your own children and grandchildren.

It turns out the disparity that results from tending just our own gardens is harmful and leads to social dysfunction. Examples are indentured servitude, sweatshop labor, subjugation of gays, and also women with no political or financial agency. Every time we moved *away* from inequality – by abolishing slavery, adopting labor laws, allowing same-sex marriage, giving women property rights and the vote – this country became better and more prosperous.

Globally speaking, the countries where women have the fewest rights and opportunities are the poorest and most conflict-ridden – Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Honduras. Higher gender equality is commensurate with higher overall incomes. How do we define cooperation – by everyone having food and shelter, but just as important is opportunity,

health care, education, and a tax system that doesn't benefit the wealthy while punishing the middle class. In the US, almost 25% of the nation's income is drawn by just 1% of the population. Seventeen percent of Americans are poor by international standards. The life expectancy of our children born today is shorter than in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland plus a few more. So much for American exceptionalism. The rich recently got a tax break. Bankers were relieved of rules to protect the average consumer. Millions don't have or else lost health care.

Twentieth century British polymath Alfred North Whitehead started a movement known as process philosophy based on making our environment more satisfying. He defined God as the summation of human change, focusing on our interdependence – meaning and value do not exist for the individual alone but only in the context of the universal community. Whitehead said, “No one who achieves success does so without acknowledging the help of others. The wise and confident acknowledge this help with gratitude.” Which is similar to when a politician suggests you didn't build your business alone – you had help from the roads you used, the post office, and the education your workers received growing up. And hopefully the clean air and water they enjoyed while their brains were still developing.

Alfred North Whitehead also said, “If a dog jumps into your lap, it is because he is fond of you; but if a cat does the same thing, it is because your lap is warmer.” We can see he had a broad field of study.

All organic life is intricately interdependent like the small community of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, or a country visited by the plague, or my hometown of Buffalo during the Blizzard of '77, when neighbors hopped on snowmobiles to find milk for babies and insulin for diabetics. Currently, we have city slickers voting mostly Democrat and country cousins voting mostly Republican as our views on society are practically at war with one another, and yet we're completely dependent upon each other for survival. For instance, rural areas have *food* while metropolises have Apple stores, the musical *Hamilton*, and good divorce lawyers.

Since 1900, the average lifespan in the US has increased by more than 30 years and 25 of those years are credited to advances in *collective public health*. The great leaps forward in well-being and longevity resulted *not* from your choice to avoid a Twinkie or do Pilates, but because of public sanitation, clean water, safety regulations, medical research, and control of infectious diseases.

My dream is to turn prisons into schools. On day one there are assessment tests followed by placement, classes, gym, music, art, homework, and exams. The parole board checks report cards and so can employment agencies. Is that expensive? Not compared to incarceration, recidivism, addiction rehab, and the damage to families. Sound weird? Yes, well so did the idea that half the population would become amateur taxi drivers. Along with renting your guest room to a honeymooning couple from South Korea. If we forget our smart phone, we often go back home just to fetch it, yet we once managed twenty or even forty years without one.

Unitarian social reformer Jane Addams explained that her settlement house in a poor section of Chicago was *not* a charity. The purpose of Hull House was to give others an equal opportunity; an essential aspect of the Common Good. In 1931, Addams was the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Rather than pouring billions into a bigger and better system of mass criminalization, let's focus on the formation of thriving neighborhoods by investing in quality schools, job creation, housing, public transportation, law enforcement partnerships, drug treatment and mental health care. Fifty years ago, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. warned that, "when machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

Cooperation depends on presumed altruism. We start with being generous until we're punished. Cooperation depends on reciprocation, reputation, and deterrence. Most important, cooperation is dependent on understanding the greater good. Diamond markets have always been famous for how their members exchange millions of dollars' worth of goods using verbal pledges and handshakes. A key factor is that they'll work with one another again. Success results not from punishment or legal threats, but the opportunity for mutually rewarding interactions in the future.

Put more simply, you go to dinner with seven others and plan to split the bill eight ways. Someone, no names mentioned, orders by far the most expensive dish and four cocktails. In social biology this is known as "Tragedy of the Commons," or what my mom calls "A Party Spoiler." This is where our evolutionary cooperation genes come into play. First is individual restraint. Then there's holding a grudge. Next comes retribution or learning. The over-indulger is not invited the next time OR everyone agrees to pay his or her own bill. And thereby we've evolved and honed a strategy for mutual cooperation. It actually helps that we're programmed either biologically or by our elementary school teachers to feel angry when cheated, and guilty when we know we are the cheater. This sets the stage for correctives or what my mom calls Tit for Tat.

Most interestingly, friendship need not be involved for cooperation to occur and evolve. We've seen this with communal grazing land, informal truces during brutal trench warfare, and nuclear arms agreements with hostile nations. If reciprocity exists there can be something just as good as friendship, which is durability. Once we expect others to reciprocate our transgressions just as quickly as or our cooperation, it becomes wise not to start trouble, operate outside the norms, or cheat. Reciprocity becomes self-reinforcing and progressively more durable, which is why we haven't invaded Canada since 1812, except to buy Tylenol with codeine, Molson beer, and Bay blankets.

However, cooperation means exactly that. Did you hear about the two businesspeople wildly bidding up the price on the last crate of coconuts? It turned out that one needed the shells and one needed the milk. Had they talked to each other they would have found that out.

A current lack of cooperation between various branches of government and within political parties themselves is stressing the system and racking up millions in fees to taxpayers. Voters and parties are often in long-term relationships and this gives parties incentives to

select candidates who will not lose the trust of constituents. It also motivates voters to collectively punish a party for the behavior of its leaders as happened to the Republicans in the wake of Watergate.

We need to fight for each other's health and well-being, not because we're friends but because your decisions affect when I die and vice-versa. It's plain common sense. Unfortunately, as crossing guards everywhere know, common sense is not so common. Thus, it may be time for some added focus to our diet and exercise regimens that includes calling and writing our congresspeople, voting in every single election, and supporting environmental justice. Because staying alive isn't a competitive sport we play against each other – we're all on the same team. And while Nature doesn't need us, we need Nature.

Whether you hail from Outer Mongolia or Lower Slaughter, from deep red Utah or bright blue Hawaii, our genetic makeup is strikingly similar; humans are 99.9% identical. And I think it's safe to say that 99.9% of us, above all else, want a good life for ourselves, our children and grandchildren. It's been scientifically proven that when we help one other we really do help ourselves. And nice guys, or rather nice people, finish first, not last, except maybe in dodgeball.

On January 27, 1838, a young country lawyer named Abraham Lincoln said, "America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves." The Civil War started twenty-three years later. Have we now entered a period of America changing from neighbors helping neighbors to some neighbors helping certain neighbors?

Is there hope? When Airbnb tried to raise start-up funds, people laughed and derided the notion of having strangers in your house. Who would trust strangers to live inside your home, either with you and your family and beloved pets, or while you're away, and leave all your possessions in their care? It's insane! After starting a decade ago by renting out three mattresses on a floor to conference goers, Airbnb has served over 300 million travelers, operates in 191 countries, and is valued in the tens of billions of dollars. In fact, when comparisons are made between people from Russia, Japan, France, Nigeria, Brazil and the US, there is no national outlier with regard to trust and respect and honesty. Canadians are, of course, nicer. CEO Brian Chesky says, "Airbnb, without fundamental human goodness, would not work."

I grew up attending a UU Church and my father was a folk singer. It was the 1970s and we were trying to stop the war in Vietnam, often by singing protest songs in a round. Dad especially liked Tom Lehrer's *We Will All Go Together When We Go*. There was some patter leading into it which told of a philosopher friend who advised people, "Life is a like sewer: what you get out of it depends on what you put into it," and that this song was in the tradition of the great old revival hymns, but it was a 'survival hymn'."

The final chorus went:

*And we will all go together when we go.
Ev'ry hottentot and ev'ry eskimo.
When the air becomes uranious,*

*Oh we will all go simultaneous.
Yes we all will go together when we go*

Tom Lehrer, now 91, taught political science and mathematics for forty years and it just so happens his last class was on the subject of infinity. I think he'd agree that the key to succeeding in almost all aspects of life from foreign relations to building a neighborhood playground, is not to dominate or overcome others but to elicit cooperation. If we understand that, while selfishness might work or appear to work in the short run, mutually rewarding strategies succeed in the long run, and the faster we proceed down this path the faster we speed up the evolution of cooperation. Because we can't have civilization without civility.