

## THE WORK OF BEING FREE

A sermon by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
October 27, 2019

When was the worst year in all of human history to be alive? According to medieval historian and archaeologist Michael McCormick, who chairs the Harvard University Initiative for the Science of the Human Past, the worst year to be alive wasn't 1349, when the Black Death wiped out half of Europe, or 1918, when the flu killed between 50 million and 100 million people, most of them young adults. Speaking recently to Ann Gibbons of *Science* magazine, McCormick says that the worst year to be alive in human history was the year 536. "It was the beginning of one of the worst periods to be alive," he says, "if not the worst year."

What made it so bad? A dense fog, probably from a cataclysmic volcanic eruption in Iceland, plunged Europe, the Middle East, and parts of Asia into darkness — day and night — for 18 months. One contemporary historian wrote, "For the sun gave forth its light without brightness, like the moon, during the whole year." Temperatures during the summer of 536 plunged, initiating the coldest decade in the past 2,300 years. Snow fell even during the summer, causing crops to fail and countless people to starve. Records from the time show that the people of Ireland had no bread that year nor for the three years following.

Five years later, in the year 541, bubonic plague struck Egypt and swiftly spread across the eastern Roman Empire, wiping out one-third to one-half of its population and hastening the Empire's collapse. All of this happened, I might add, during a time when bloodletting was still in vogue as a medical treatment, and painkillers and antibiotics hadn't yet been imagined.

Do you now feel better about being alive in 2019? I didn't think so. Just because things have been worse in the past or could get worse in the future doesn't mean they aren't bad now. I won't bother giving voice to the litany of things in our lives and in our world that we can justifiably worry about or feel bad about. It's a long list, and you know it as well as I do. Besides, as Richard Haas of the Council on Foreign Relations is fond of saying about the Middle East, things can always get worse before they get even worse.

Jill McDonough is a contemporary American poet who has taught in the Prison Education Program of Boston University. In one of her recent poems, titled "Cindy Comes to Hear Me Read," she talks about a woman she calls Cindy, one of her incarcerated students. In a class on Shakespeare, Cindy writes a paper on Desdemona, a character in Shakespeare's play *Othello* for whom things repeatedly get worse before they get even worse. Cindy apparently struggled with the paper, fearing that Desdemona's end would mirror her own.

But then Cindy was released from prison. She bought new clothes, put on jewelry and makeup, and got a haircut that she chose and paid for herself. When she met someone, she hugged them if she chose — something not allowed on the inside.

When Cindy came to one of Jill McDonough's poetry readings, Cindy talked about her life on the outside. McDonough writes:

...She told me she has  
an apartment now, a *window*, an ocean view. She has  
a *car*, she told me, and we both cracked up. The thought of it  
wild, as farfetched then as when you're a kid playing  
grown-up, playing any kind of house. She has  
a job. She drives there in traffic. Each day  
she sees the angry people. Sweet, silly people,  
mad—God bless them—at traffic. At other *cars*.  
She laughs, she told me, laughs out loud alone  
in her car. People around her angry as toddlers. Whole  
highways of traffic, everybody at the work of being free.

I must say that it's quite generous of Cindy to describe people who get mad at traffic — I've been guilty, and my guess is that you have been too — as sweet and silly. When the 6 train is delayed, or the crosstown bus is late, or the taxi gets waylaid, it's easy to forget that these things have gone wrong in our lives only because a whole lot of other things have gone right. We are politically free to move around and physically able to do so. We live in a place that *has* trains, buses, and cars, and we have the means to use them to pursue whatever goals we have chosen to pursue. Truth be told, getting angry about a momentary lapse in our good fortune seems petulant, even childlike, which must be why Cindy describes people who do so as “angry as toddlers.”

The work of being free includes the continual effort of remembering that freedom is not the absence of challenges, but rather the presence of possibilities.

Some years ago, my wife Holly and I attended a benefit for Broadway Housing Communities, an organization that provides permanent housing to homeless people. We heard the story of an elderly man named Calvin, who explained that he had come to New York when he was 19 or 20 with seven dollars in his pocket and a dream in mind. “I wanted a family,” he said, “and I wanted a nice apartment. I wanted good friends — all the good stuff in life.”

Shortly thereafter, Calvin developed paranoid schizophrenia, and a downward spiral began. He said, “For 30 years, I was out there in the street, in and out of hospitals, in and out of prisons, drinking, drugging.”

Calvin paused momentarily, and then said, “I don't know if you can imagine being out there in the streets for 30 years, having nothing... You can't take a bath when

you want to, you can't brush your teeth when you want to, you can't even go to the bathroom when you want to.”

Calvin continued with a kind of wistfulness in his voice. He said, “You look at people walking down the street, and some of them have keys in their hands, and you say, wow, I wish I had some keys to some place. I would see lights at night in people's windows, and I would dream, and I would say, oh man, they've got a place to live that's nice and warm and cozy... and here I am sleeping on the curb.”

Near the end of one of Calvin's many hospitalizations, during which physicians finally managed to bring his paranoid schizophrenia under control, a social worker took him to look for an apartment. The first apartments they saw, Calvin said, were filthy and reeked of urine and ammonia. Then the social worker took him to Broadway Housing Communities, where he was shown an apartment that was, he said, really nice. “I'd like to have this,” he told the social worker.

A week later, after an interview, Calvin had the apartment. In his joy, he went out and bought a bedspread — a really ugly bedspread, he admitted, but it was his bedspread, for his own bed, in his own apartment. At long last, he had a key of his own.

For each of us as individuals, and also for our nation and our world, these are dark times. The fog of uncertainty hovers around us and clouds our vision. Even though we know that these may not be the worst of times, we also know that these are not the best of times.

Or are they? I have a key in my pocket. I have a bathroom in my apartment with a bathtub and shower. I have a bed to sleep on and a blanket to keep me warm. I have a chair to sit on and a window to look out of. I have a grocery store to shop in and take-out restaurants to call. I have books to read and music to listen to. I have medical insurance and a supply of medications. I have a bank account and a credit card. I have a driver's license and a passport. I have a representative in the New York City Council and in the US House of Representatives — and two in the U.S. Senate. I have a spouse who loves me, a daughter who adores me, and friends I can count on.

The Swedish physician and statistician Hans Rosling died two years ago, and his final book was published last year. It's titled, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World — and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. The picture most people in the West see in the media and carry around in their heads, he says, is that things are bad and getting worse. We hear about war, violence, natural disasters, and corruption. We hear about the rich getting richer, and the poor getting poorer. We hear that we will soon run out of resources unless something drastic is done.

Rosling dubs this picture the overdramatic worldview, which he points out is both stressful and misleading. Although the world faces huge challenges, he says, we have also made tremendous progress. Worldwide, 90% of primary-age girls attend school, compared to 92% of boys. The vast majority of children get vaccinated.

Why the overdramatic worldview? Just as our bodies have been hardwired by evolution to crave sugar and fat, which kept us alive when food was scarce, our brains

are hardwired for gossip and dramatic stories, which used to be the main source of news and useful information. Today, however, too much sugar and fat is making us obese, and too much gossip and drama is making us anxious and depressed.

The problem, Rosling says, is that we hear about disasters but not about gradual improvements. Negative stories are more dramatic than positive ones, even if they are statistically misleading. Over the past 20 years, for example, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has been cut in half, but in most countries, fewer than 10% of people know this. In the United States, the violent crime rate has been falling since 1990, but the majority of people in the US believe that violent crime is getting worse.

Even though the world is getting better, Rosling goes on to say, not everything is fine. “Think of the world as a very sick premature baby in an incubator,” he says. “After a week, she is improving, but she has to stay in the incubator because her health is still critical. Does it make sense to say that the infant’s situation is improving? Yes. Does it make sense to say that it is bad? Yes, absolutely. Does saying ‘things are improving’ imply that everything is fine, and we should all not worry? Not at all,” he says, “it’s both bad and better. That is how we must think about the current state of the world.”

Things in our lives and in our world are both bad and better. You and I are hardwired by evolution and hounded by the media to focus on what’s bad. The work of being free includes the continual effort of remembering that freedom is not the absence of challenges, but rather the presence of possibilities. Individually and collectively, we have the key to unlock the possibilities that our freedom has granted to us.

Once in a while, we need to take a break from the drumbeat of doom. Turn off the television. Stop the news alerts. Instead, count your many blessings. Take out your key. Look out your window. Enjoy the beauty of fall foliage. Laugh at the chaotic choreography of traffic. Remind yourself of what’s wonderful, and you’ll be better equipped to address what’s not with calm purpose, steady resolve, and never-ending gratitude.