

NEVER BETTER

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Two days ago, Harper's Magazine delivered an email into my inbox with the subject line: "Not Much to Say Except the World's on Fire." The email contained a collection of articles from the magazine over the past 20 years about, among other things, gearing up for war in the Middle East, ignoring climate change while actively making it worse, the brutal exclusion of immigrants, the inhumane treatment of prisoners, and Jared Kushner. Not only is the world now on fire, the articles collectively suggest, it's been on fire for a long time.

As Richard Hass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, is fond of saying about the Middle East, things can always get worse before they get even worse.

On that front, Kelly Magsamen wrote this week in Foreign Affairs — she was the National Security Council's Iran specialist under Presidents Bush and Obama — that Trump faces a number of critical decisions in the days and weeks ahead. But, she says, "At each decision point, Trump will have only bad options to choose from. He has left himself with no diplomatic channels, a divided international community, and a skeptical Congress."

The world's on fire, both literally and metaphorically. Not only that, the fires burn closer and closer to home. Economic and political problems that once mostly kept a respectful distance from these shores have become our problems too. The consequences of climate change have unleashed record flooding in the Midwest and record wildfires in the West. The resurgence of once-banished childhood diseases and the rise of antibiotic-resistant organisms pose an increasing threat to our well-being. Anti-Semitism is on the rise, gun violence keeps getting worse, and rates of depression and suicide among teens are skyrocketing. If you're inclined to worry, there's a lot to worry about.

Two weeks ago, Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times began his end-of-year column by saying, "If you're depressed by the state of the world, let me toss out an idea: In the long arc of human history, 2019 has been the best year ever."

Kristof quickly added: "The bad things that you fret about are true." But, he goes on to say, "It's also true that since modern humans emerged about 200,000 years ago, 2019 was probably the year in which children were least likely to die, adults were least likely to be illiterate and people were least likely to suffer excruciating and disfiguring diseases." Every single day in recent years, another 325,000 people got access to electricity, 200,000 got piped water, and 650,000 went online for the first time.

On these terms, what counts as terrible is relative to what's experienced as normal. If half of all humans routinely die in childhood, as was the case for much of human history, when only 4% die, which is today's standard, it counts as the best news ever. But if most of those remaining deaths could have been prevented, which they could've been, then even a 4% rate counts as a travesty.

To be sure, if your child is one of the 4% who died in childhood, or if your teenager has been wrestled to the ground by depression, or if your house has been swept away by flood or burnt down by fire, then your experience of suffering is as great as anyone's has ever been. Even so, Kristof's point stands. Over the long arc of human history, things have never been better.

The person who should probably get credit for promoting this perspective is Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker. In his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Pinker suggests that the question we often ask — “Why is there war?” — may be the wrong question. When you look at the sweep of human history, he says, the real puzzle turns out to be the opposite: “Why is there peace?”

For most of human history, Pinker says, devastation and destruction, not peace and prosperity, were the normal state of affairs. Yet today, once-common horrors such as human sacrifice, slavery, genocide, torture, and mutilation are “statistically rare in the West, less common elsewhere than they used to be, and widely condemned when they do occur.” In light of this trend, Pinker says, the question to focus on is “What went right?”

The answer is that a lot of things have gone right in recent centuries, and a lot of things continue to go right, even if we don't always feel that way. Allow me to use All Souls as a case in point. Some of you have responded with alarm at the series of cutbacks that have been instituted as a response to our \$525,000 operating deficit in the past fiscal year. It's true that these cutbacks — to our hospitality and communications budgets and staffing, among other things — are painful to experience. They certainly were painful for the board and me to decide to implement. It is our shared hope that our underlying commitment to growth — growth in ministry and membership, and growth in revenue — will enable us to restore funding soon.

What went wrong? The big headline is that annual giving remained essentially flat last year, falling significantly short of its target. The sanctuary restoration and renovation has resulted in higher than anticipated operating costs in some areas. Also, the baseline cost of running a not-for-profit organization in New York City continues to increase. Asking what went wrong gives us the information we need in order to make necessary changes.

Asking what went right, on the other hand, gives us the institutional confidence to make changes and keep moving ahead. This is an extraordinary institution in almost every respect. Page through our bicentennial book and marvel at the difference All Souls has made in our city and nation over the past 200 years. For the first time in our history, we have restored and renewed our sanctuary instead of letting it fall into disrepair.

Together, we have raised \$12 million to fund this effort. Whether you look at the deep commitment and engagement of our congregation, the strategic courage of our Board of Trustees, or the creativity and capability of our staff, lots of things have gone right, and they will continue to go right.

In order to keep our perspective in times like these, Steven Pinker says, we need to remember the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The Second Law says that a system that is not taking in energy will, over time, become less structured, less organized, and less able to accomplish interesting and useful outcomes. It says that things will naturally fall apart and what can go wrong will go wrong. This applies to everything — from institutions to economies to spheres of justice.

Why does Pinker think the Second Law is so important? He says that the Second Law defines the ultimate purpose of life, which is to use energy and information to fight back the naturally-occurring tide of disorder and decline, and instead carve out places of refuge and sources of hope. “Not only does the universe not care about our desires,” Pinker says, “but in the natural course of events it will appear to thwart them, because there are so many more ways for things to go wrong than to go right. Houses burn down, ships sink, battles are lost for the want of horseshoe nail.”

Pinker concludes, “An underappreciation of the Second Law lures people into seeing every unsolved social problem as a sign that their country is being driven off a cliff.” He continues, “It’s in the very nature of the universe that life has problems. But it’s better to figure out how to solve them — to apply information and energy to expand our refuge of beneficial order — than to start a conflagration and hope for the best.”

As many of you know by now, I was born sunny side up. In my heart, I’m an optimist — both personally and professionally. The word optimism comes from a Latin term that means best — the superlative degree of good. In addition to being a psychological trait shared by the bluebirds among us, the term also refers to a way of thinking developed by the 17th-century German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz, one of the inventors of calculus.

Leibniz believed he could demonstrate that nature was ordered toward an ultimate goal or cause, which he called God. Being all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, God had obviously considered all possible worlds before creating this one. Thus, Leibniz concluded, our world must be the best possible world.

Though in my view Leibniz was wrong about God, Leibniz may have been right about this being the best of all possible worlds. To be sure, not everything in the world is good, but it’s not clear that any other combination of human freedom and natural necessity would be better.

Optimism also happens to be the subtitle of Voltaire’s novel *Candide*, published in 1758. It recounts the misfortunes of young Candide and his optimistic tutor Pangloss. Given everything necessary for a happy and successful life, Candide suffers the opposite: every conceivable misfortune, tragedy, and form of abuse. In part, *Candide* is an ironic attack on the optimism espoused by Leibniz. Bad things do happen, Voltaire insists.

Voltaire's primary focus in *Candide* is the alliance between religious fanaticism and the state, which leads to rampant torture and cruelty. At the very end of the tale, Voltaire suggests how one can, as he put it in his most famous phrase, crush the horror. He says, simply, "We need to work our fields," or as it is often translated, "make our gardens grow."

According to Voltaire, saving the world from the peril of the present is like growing a crop. We need to work our fields. We don't need to work other people's fields, or fields in different or better locations, but our fields. We don't need to ponder our fields, or exclaim how weedy they are, or how poor the soil is, or compare them with the best possible fields or the worst. We need to work our fields. The root meaning of the word optimism is "ops," which means power. Optimism comes from the power we have to do the work that is ours to do.

There will never be a better time than this time. There will never be a better time to grow our souls as individuals and as a congregation. There will never be a better time to bolster our financial capacity, expand the scope of our compassion, and extend the range of our mission. There will never be a better time to transform ourselves and our world.

There will never be a better time to do the work that is now ours to do.