

Sunday December 9, 2012

Self-improvement for a civilization

By Jim Taylor

You may remember a self-help mantra from the past: “Every day, in every way, we’re getting better and better.”

Canadian-born author, psychologist, and linguist Steven Pinker says it’s true. His 2011 bestseller, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, claims that violence has been decreasing in our society for thousands of years.

That may be hard to believe, if you’ve just seen a newscast consisting mainly of murder, rape, arson, and war video from Syria or Gaza. But Pinker backs up his claim with more than 100 graphs and charts, and enough facts and figures to overwhelm a sceptic.

Basically, Pinker argues that each transition in civilization has made violence less necessary.

The first came when anarchic hunter-gatherer societies gave way to more settled, more organized, agricultural society. The next big shift came in the Middle Ages, followed by The Enlightenment, when reason began to replace brutality.

The fourth major transition, Pinker wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, “was the respite from major interstate wars that we have seen since the end of World War II... Centuries ago, the great powers were almost always at war, and until quite recently, Western European countries tended to initiate two or three new wars every year.”

The fifth transition deals with the kinds of wars people wage. “The bad news,” Pinker says, “is that the decline of interstate wars was accompanied by a bulge of civil wars.... The less bad news is that civil wars tend to kill far fewer people than wars between nation states.”

Milestone marker

Two factors influence the most recent reductions in violence. One is “the growth of democracy, trade, and international organizations—all of which, the statistical evidence shows, reduce the likelihood of conflict.”

And the other is “the rising valuation of human life over national grandeur—a hard-won lesson of two world wars.”

A major factor in that “rising valuation of human life” was the signing, 64 years ago tomorrow, of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

Wikipedia calls it “the first global expression of rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled.”

The Declaration’s prohibits slavery, torture, and arbitrary arrest, detention, exile, or confiscation of property. It presumes innocence until proven guilty. It guarantees rights to marriage, ownership of property, freedom of speech, democratic representation, work, and education.

And it prescribes responsibilities – cultural, social, and governmental.

Islamic and Asian countries objected that these “universal rights” were not universal at all. They reflected a western bias. The emphasis on private property, for example, ran counter to collective ownership by a tribe or clan; the emphasis on individual freedom to seek work, to marry, to move, all violated caste and family norms.

Honoured in the breach

Nevertheless, the UN Declaration has served as a model for over 70 national charters of human rights, including Canada’s. Which seems appropriate, since the original document was drafted by a Canadian, John Peters Humphrey.

John Diefenbaker's Bill of Human Rights, in 1960, which Pierre Trudeau then absorbed into the new Canadian Constitution in 1982, mirrors most of the Declaration's 30 points.

Even those countries that largely ignore human rights in practice – China being one – still pay lip service to principles of the UN Declaration.

Indeed, a critic of U.S. policy might note that the U.S., one of the original 48 signatories, and a vocal supporter of human rights worldwide, has itself practiced waterboarding, detention without trial, and execution of suspected terrorists by drone strikes – all direct contraventions of the Declaration.

But the mere fact that it is there requires nations to treat it as an ideal to be emulated.

It is rather like the Apostles Creed in Christianity.

A congregation I belonged repeated the Apostle's Creed every Sunday. One day, I confided to my minister that I was having difficulty with its opening statement: "I believe in God the Father Almighty..."

I saw little evidence of an Almighty Anything in a nuclear-standoff world.

"There are days," my minister sighed, "when I have trouble getting past 'I believe'..."

Yet he could repeat the Creed as a standard of what the Christian Church as a whole, past and present, believed.

In the same way the Universal Declaration of Human Rights serves as an ideal, a goal that all nations can endorse, even if their individual practices fall short of that ideal.

Signs of progress

Not long ago, as history goes, we in the western world burned heretics at the stake, tortured suspected traitors, stoned adulterers, disembowel criminals or cut them in half, and tore offenders apart with teams of horses. We don't, any more.

In that sense, we are indeed getting "better and better" – a phrase devised by French psychotherapist Émile Coué a century ago for encouraging personal self-improvement. From that perspective, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights marks a milestone in our collective self-improvement.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column, on gangland killings, was not a pleasant one. Which led Nancy Kerr to comment: "In this season of preparation for the presence of the Prince of Peace among us, I don't want to think about violence and murder. However, since you brought it up, I wonder if the adolescent yearning for acceptance and belonging and recognition [which] may lead to joining a gang and teaching the 'other' as enemy to be fought and killed, has any parallel to joining the army and learning with one's platoon how to win by killing the enemy? We expect returning soldiers to be rehabilitated and live peaceably with their families and friends. Most of them do after a period of adjustment... Whereas the five gang members are sent to a punitive penitentiary where neither 'return' nor rehabilitation exists! And their release offers no opportunity except to continue in criminal pursuits; rehabilitation is probably impossible.

"We are sorely in need of learning the way of God's Love and learning from the Prince of Peace!"

Charles Hill in Texas considered the killers I wrote about to be psychopaths: "Let's extend your discussion to the multi-billionaire who has made his money on the backs of minimum wage workers or children and adults working in

deplorable situations. The recent fire in Asia demonstrates this "my money is more important than you" mentality. How would parental or government intervention change the course of someone who is totally indifferent to the welfare of others? Especially if the payoff is something that society encourages like becoming wealthy?

"The diagnosis is psychopath. The disease is the idea that everybody out there exists to give me what I need or want. Only I exist as a person. Psychopaths exist in the business world and the religious world. They come from upper class, middle class and poverty level homes. They can be excellent and well-behaved students. They just do their destruction in a legal manner. I am not aware of a proven preventative measure or a cure."

Ralph Milton concurred, citing insights from psychiatrist Frank McNair: "There are pathological criminals who simply do not have any capacity for empathy. Among them are some victims of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. There are other unknown causes. It is a malformation of the brain of some sort -- perhaps there at birth -- perhaps there for other later reasons. It is not a mental illness. And there is no known cure. I asked him if such persons should simply be incarcerated early. He waffled and said that psychiatric medicine also did not have the tools to properly identify such people before they did something terrible."

Ralph also corrected my quotation from *The Shadow*: "The quote is: 'Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men. The Shadow knows.' Followed by an evil sort of cackle."

To continue that thread, Isabel Gibson wrote, "I wonder whether some people are just wired wrongly -- or are so far out of the normal human range for empathy that it amounts to the same thing. We acknowledge 'super tasters' in our midst - why not 'super hurters'?"

"But it's the point about making a change that strikes me most. I've said before that small-c conservatives err in thinking nothing about the human condition can be changed; small-l liberals err in thinking that it can all be fixed by next year, if we just throw enough money at it.

"Wrong and wrong, in my view. As a species, as human societies/cultures, we have come a long way since our start, and I see no evidence we can't carry on. But we are not perfectible beings -- not individually and not collectively.

"All of which is not to excuse any of us from the responsibility of doing what we can. Or, put more positively, not to discourage any of us from doing the good that lies to hand.

"And what a nice way that would be to start Advent."

Wayne Irwin connected two phrases from the column: "When we 'set our face' to living a life of 'offering a hand' (walking in the Way of Jesus) we can never know how much that impacts, in a positive way, the future. And we choose the Way of Compassion because we believe it to be the better way."

My column reminded Judith Fetter of a quotation which, she said, "I copied years ago from a mystery by Margery Allingham called, 'The Tiger in the Smoke'. This is what she said:

"'Evil, be thou my Good', that is what you have discovered. It is the only sin which cannot be forgiven, because when it has finished with you, you are not there to forgive. On your journey you certainly 'get places'. Naturally: you have no opposition. But in the process, you die. The man who is with you when you are alone is dying. Fewer things delight him every day. If you attain the world, you cannot give him anything that will please him. In the end, there will be no one with you."

"Not exactly the same as karma," Judith mused, "but worth thinking about."

Jane Bennett wrote from Port Carling, Ontario: "The human mind must, at some level, be able to understand the horrors they are participating in, but yet choose to ignore and compartmentalize them so they can live with it and think it acceptable behaviour."

Changing the seriousness of the subject, slightly, Harry Killick wrote from Penticton, "I was given, in my early teen years, two Boys' Own Annuals dated, perhaps, 1905 and 1907. I remember them as being quite large books with very thick covers and intriguing contents. I regret that these books, along with my collection of Dinky Toy cars, were lost to me when my parents sold off the contents of our home when preparing for the move from England to Canada....

"A few years ago I saw a Boy's Own Annual on a high shelf in the used book shop in Penticton When I went back a short time later it was gone."

And Eduard Hiebert, in a letter that discussed both karma and elections, asked for a favour: "For those readers who would appreciate seeing what cause-and-effect alternative steps each of our communities could take to achieve genuine democratic outcomes, and no longer to walk down the path of election outcomes that are corporate friendly and citizen unfriendly, might you include this link to [Taking back our democracy](http://www.eduardhiebert.com/ereform/v123p.htm) from where further email discussions may be continued? -- <http://www.eduardhiebert.com/ereform/v123p.htm>

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to: <http://www.hymnsight.ca>

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for using projected visuals in church.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look at this service. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,
Ralph Milton

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>

- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
