

Rational Hope

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The new year is a time for looking ahead and for looking back. It's a time of assessment, of reevaluation. This January is the beginning of a new year and of a new decade. It's a time for evaluating the year and the decade just past, the first decade of a new century and of a new millennium: So far, are the 2000s better than the 1900s? Many people would say, No.

For many Unitarian Universalist-type people who base their morality more on compassion than on so-called merit; who feel that might does not make right; who feel that acceptance and equality are better than exclusionism and elitism; who feel that statesmen are better than politicians; who believe in caretaking stewardship of the earth's resources; who believe that war should be exceptional and rare—for these UU-type people, the past year, the past decade, and even the past century may have been frustrating; disappointing.

Many of us feel that fundamentalists, corporate greed, and militarism have permanently wounded the Enlightenment Project of spreading the fruits of reason. There is often a tone of bewildered hopelessness in our conversations—a sense that somehow the progress of the Enlightenment is being eroded. A few years ago my then-20-something son told me that some of his liberal peers had disgustedly dropped-out from efforts to improve society and intended rather to devote themselves to improving just their own lives. I've even heard people from his generation say they don't want to bring children into this world because things are bad and are going to become worse. They sense a failure of Reason to lead people away from superstitious fundamentalism, away from narrow clannish self-interest, away from us-vs.-them projections of evil onto strangers, and a failure to bring people toward the light of knowledge and expanding empathy.

Progressive-type thinkers weren't always so pessimistic. During the European Enlightenment of the 1700s, humanist intellectuals were very optimistic. By the 1700s in Europe, science was showing religious myths to be wrong or unnecessary to explain the world. Political philosophy was spreading the idea that people should govern themselves, and that they should be free to pursue their own happiness and fulfillment. Enlightenment thinkers wrote excitedly about the immanent reign of Reason with a capital "R."

In many ways, the 1800s seemed to confirm those optimistic predictions. The Industrial Revolution spread the benefits of technology based first on the steam engine and then on electricity. The tyranny of kings waned in the West as democracy spread. Equality and human rights progressed, most extraordinarily with the historically new worldwide end of legal slavery, but also with the first national congress on the topic of equal rights for women. In the 1800s progress was being made in rationalizing the religious sphere, too. The US constitution established the first government in history with official separation of church and state. The Unitarian Church officially endorsed non-supernatural religious beliefs; and many Christians became more interested in the social gospel of emulating Jesus in good works, rather than obsessing about the literal truth of the Bible. Laws restricting child labor, and restricting work hours were among the results of that social gospel of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Indeed, events in the 1800s seemed to confirm the Enlightenment optimism about endless progress in the improvement of humankind. There was even great hope that the reign of Reason would end senseless wars, at least among the most enlightened nations. The Chicago world fair of 1893 was intended to be an international celebration of 400 years of rational progress around the world.

All this optimism came crashing down during the 20th century. With World War 1, the world's most scientifically and philosophically advanced nations engaged in the irrational slaughter of millions of their people. Suddenly it was terribly clear that human reason could just as easily—perhaps more easily—produce violent nationalism and the machine gun, instead of peace and prosperity.

Further events of the 20th century validated this pessimistic outlook: Hitler, Stalin, Hiroshima, the nuclear arms race, Mutually Assured Destruction, Vietnam, the final defeat of the Marxist egalitarian dream by unbridled capitalism, the worldwide rise of religious fundamentalism, and in our current century, 9/11 and the wars of its aftermath; and of course the right-wing, fundamentalist power in US government that began in 2000. For many people, the progressive political shift in 2008 was disappointingly short and ineffective. Now, the Enlightenment optimism of Voltaire and his colleagues about the improvement of humanity easily seems naïve, and humans' capacity for evil easily seems more powerful than our capacity for good.

So, how could any thoughtful Unitarian Universalist—or any other type of rational Social Progressive—remain optimistic about the future? Well, let's see.

According to the 2009/2010 Human Security Report Project, over the past 50 years the worldwide number of wars is down dramatically. The total number of conflicts has declined by almost half since the cold war ended 30 years

ago. The average number of deaths per conflict has also declined dramatically. Even after 9-11, from 2002 through 2005, the number of armed conflicts being waged around the world shrank another 15%, and estimated battle-deaths declined by almost 40%. Conflict numbers dropped overall by more than 40% from 1992 to 2003. High-intensity conflicts—those that result in 1,000 or more battle deaths a year—declined even more steeply and for a longer period, falling by 78 percent between 1988 and 2008.

The Human Security report found that not only are wars between nations down, but so are internal civil conflicts, as well as other forms of political violence. In 2008, the incidence of organized violence against civilians was the lowest since 1989, when this data began being collected. A study by the US Naval Academy found that genocide and other campaigns of mass violence against civilians dropped by 90% between 1989 and 2005.

Since 2003, the number of conflicts is up one-fourth, but the trend in number of battle deaths continues downward, because the conflicts since 2003 tend to be with small arms and are skirmishes, not major battles.

The researchers attributed the reduction of battle deaths to worldwide increases in economic well-being, to better UN peacekeeping efforts, and to the increase in the number of democratic nations. Democracies tend not to go to war against each other. Greater economic interdependence between nations is also a reason for reduced wars.

Most importantly, the researchers believe that a strengthening sense of an international community is changing world thinking on when warfare is acceptable; there is a growing “norm of war averseness” worldwide. And according to the International Crisis Group in Washington, “The increasing weight of world opinion and action is having an impact on leaders and warlords who in another era would have felt no constraints on war-making.”

Democratic countries, besides almost never going to war against each other, virtually never allow famines to occur within their borders, and democracies tend to lead in respecting and expanding human rights. So how is democracy doing around the world?

In the year 1900 just 12% of the world’s people lived in democracies. By the year 2000 that number had increased to 63%—now almost two-thirds of people on Earth live in a democracy. Although the past couple of years have seen reductions in freedom in a few countries (like Russian and China), according to the monitoring association Freedom House, just in the last 25 years the percent of countries considered “free” or “partly free” has increased by 25%.

As we would expect, with increasing democracy comes reduced famine and poverty. Extreme economic poverty is defined as living on the inflation-adjusted equivalent of less than \$1 per day. The proportion of the developing world’s population living in extreme poverty fell by 25% during the 1990s, according to World Bank data, and that proportion has continued to fall according to gapminder.org.

And according to data from the International Labor Organization, worldwide extreme poverty among workers (the most common form of poverty in third-world countries) fell by more than half over the past 25 years. Extreme poverty among workers fell by 10% just from 2000 to 2005. All regions on Earth, except some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, have seen a reduction in extreme poverty since 1980.

Average life expectancy in both the richest and the poorest countries has about doubled over the past 200 years, and it continues to increase in every country on earth. Child mortality before age five years has dropped dramatically world-wide since the 1920s, and child mortality continues to decline in every country on earth.

One key finding is that the higher a country’s per capita income, the less violent is that country. And with one or two exceptions, the per capita income of all nations has been rising for many decades. In the U.S. for example, the murder rate per 100,000 people, which peaked in 1974, has been declining steadily for the past 20 years. [gapminder.org]

World-wide rates of literacy have increased by at least 20% since 1980, and literacy rates continue to increase in every country on earth.

Another important area of progress is human rights. In 1948, the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, *for the first time in history*, officially obligated the nations of the world to provide their citizens with basic human rights. This was a non-binding declaration, but it is of great historical importance. The UN is generally considered the “collective conscience of the world,” and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is its official position. That declaration suggests that the “center of gravity” of human moral development has taken a major step forward.

In 1966 the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was agreed upon as a binding treaty to respect basic human rights among 160 nations. Compliance with the treaty is monitored and reported, and individuals can file complaints to the UN about violations.

Between 1948 and 2002, additional liberal-progressive UN declarations were agreed upon by the nations of the world on the subjects of genocide, torture, racial discrimination, discrimination against women, the rights of children, and in 2002, the International Criminal Court was created to hold leaders accountable for gross violations of human rights.

Now, we all know that compliance with these declarations varies tremendously, and the US has not even accepted some of them. But it is significant that these declarations and treaties exist at all. They indicate worldwide progress in the accepted standards of respect for human dignity and worth. As the *New Republic* magazine said in a review of the book *Inventing Human Rights*, “Human rights are not triumphant, to be sure; but the idea is holding its own. It is more and more a central element in foreign policy and international affairs and even military strategy. We may be living in a very cruel world, but there is a growing conscience, at least officially and culturally, about its cruelty.”

Another indicator of social progress in any society is the power and status of women. Studies show that the single most powerful way to reduce violence in a society is to improve the health, education, and status of its girls and women—all of which have continued to improve worldwide. The literacy rates of girls compared to boys has increased in every country tracked since 1985. Since 1990 the proportion of women in the legislatures of 16 countries has reached the benchmark of 30% or more that the UN has set as the critical mass where women can have a substantial impact on policymaking. Worldwide, in 2004 almost one in six members of legislatures was a woman. As Devaki Jain, the Indian historian of women’s rights, said, “It would seem that women are slowly gaining ground in their quest for formal power.”

From a UU perspective, progress is also being made in the area of superstitious religious beliefs. According to a 2008 *Newsweek* survey, the percentage of Americans who think faith will help answer all or most of the country’s current problems dipped to a historic low of 48 percent, down by one-fourth from 1994. And 30% of respondents described themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

Of course, I could go on too long about the benefits of recent scientific advances, medical advances, and the power of the Internet to break down global barriers to knowledge and communication, but you know all that.

Robert William Fogel, the Nobel laureate economist at the University of Chicago, has found that in the US for the past 200 years there has been a continual trend toward increasing equality and better treatment of the poor, even through conservative administrations. Fogel’s prediction, after more than 300 pages of analysis and notes, is that, “Despite the increasing complexities of social life, the profound new ethical challenges, and the potential for disaster, my predictions for the next [sixty years] include longer and healthier lives, more abundant food supplies, improved housing and environments, higher levels of education for larger numbers of people, the narrowing of both material and spiritual inequality (not only within the [U.S.] but internationally) [by spiritual inequality he means estrangement from the success-oriented culture of mainstream US society], better-paying and more flexible jobs, more time for parenting, stronger families that spend more leisure time together, lower rates of crime and corruption, and greater ethnic and racial harmony.”

Perhaps the most general sign of global improvement in the condition of human life is the Human Development Index, which combines health level, educational level, and overall living standard—and, except for Zimbabwe and the Congo—the Human Development Index has been rising for every country in the world since 1980.

Lloyd deMause is a historian of the psychologies of cultures. He directly links the improvement in the condition of humans, especially since 1700, to better-and-better parenting. He finds that, over the past hundred, or even thousands, of years on average parents have become better able to nurture their children, both physically and psychologically. That is, parents have become more attuned to, and concerned about, what the *child needs* from the parent and parents have become less focused on what the parent needs from the child—which was to “behave,” to act appreciatively toward the parent, and to not be a bother. Nowadays, parents value each child more than in the past, and are much more concerned about the child’s development to her full potential, rather than just wanting the child to become a standard conforming adult.

Better parenting results in children who, on average, are less aggressive and more compassionate—these children then become even better parents of the next generation, and so, as I would say it—the spiral of improvement toward Goodness in people slowly continues upward generation-by-generation. This spiral upward has been most notable in the developed countries in the West, but has been going on to some degree over most of the world.

So with all the good news I’ve just listed, why have Unitarian Universalists and other progressives been so pessimistic?

We’re demoralized because since 1980 the US and some other parts of the world have been in the midst of a backlash of conservative-authoritarian reaction. Ever since President Reagan, social liberals have had to fight to hold onto the progress made from Roosevelt to Carter.

It’s helpful to recognize the historical cycles of social progress. Several researchers have found that temporary conservative pauses in a society give the most conservative 25% of the population time to adjust to new, more liberal and more rational ways of life. Since the 1700s, on average in the US, these conservative pauses have lasted about 20 to 30 years each, followed by a period of 20 to 40 years of easier social progress.

But here is the key point: even during conservative backlashes, the clock of progress isn’t really turned back; it’s just slowed down. Today, the major progressive achievements of Roosevelt’s New Deal and Johnson’s Great Society

are surviving even the current far right-wing politicians. Bush's attempt to roll back Social Security failed even with a Republican-controlled congress. Gay rights are slowly progressing; creationism can't get a permanent toehold even in Kansas; and no one's considering returning to racially segregated water fountains.

The current 30-year-old conservative pause is probably starting to wane. For example, recent surveys conducted by the Barna Group show that even younger "born again" Christians are more accepting of gays and lesbians and are more will to give them equal rights. If the past predicts the future, then we're due for two or three decades of less successful resistance to progressive social change.

Looking beyond the US, globally the confrontation between secular liberal societies and traditional, authoritarian cultures—such as Islamic theocracies—can make us feel despondent, too. But the symptoms of this confrontation are in large part due to the successful spread of Enlightenment ideas of freedom. It's easy for us to underestimate the magnitude of the cultural earthquake these Enlightenment ideas are causing around the world. What we see as social progress—human rights, freedom of expression, and democracy—traditional peoples can easily see as social disaster.

Worldwide, traditional authoritarian peoples are being forced to cope with the erosion of their dogmatic worldview. I'm including the 25% of Americans who are most conservative in this category. Now living within a more liberal-secular world, these traditionalists have to live with the loss of God's miracles in the scientific-material world, loss of their religion as civil law, loss of the subordination of there women, identity-threatening changes in culture's mores (such as gay rights), society's ego-deflating recognition of those outside of their group as equals, there inability to shield their children from what they see as sacrilegious ideas in the media, and the fact that in the modern world their youngest adults increasingly will choose to live with less authoritarian traditions.

These are frightening changes for a person whose worldview is authoritarian and dominated by supernatural religious beliefs. In fact, their most superstitious-authoritarian beliefs are indeed doomed to extinction via a form of natural selection in the global marketplace of ideas. Global communications and the ultimate test of what ideas work best in the world will see to that.

Many *individuals* of strong traditional belief will change only slowly and reluctantly, and some will never change. Some—like the Taliban—will violently resist social progress. However, Enlightenment ideals are like water and wind: seemingly mild and weak, yet invariably reshaping the form of even the hardest rock.

We have to face that fact that no matter how much progress we make in forming a universal humane society, reality will always be short of our ideals. We will continually take for granted the progress already made, and we will continually be distraught at the irrationality and injustices still remaining. So, we UUs and other progressives will always be dissatisfied with, and complaining about, our society. And that is as it should be.

This eternal dissatisfaction among progressives is actually a good thing. It keeps us always pushing for *more progress* in humanizing global society. But, that eternal dissatisfaction with the state of our society can become a problem when it leads to demoralization and a loss of perspective about how far the world has come in a relatively short time. Dissatisfaction is a hindrance when it leads to hopeless withdrawal from active participation in furthering the Enlightenment project; it is a hindrance when dissatisfaction leads to cynicism and the sense that we shouldn't even have children who can become enlightened adults.

I don't mean to minimize the dangers and challenges that face us. There are plenty of problems in the world, and there always will be. However, we Unitarian Universalists can take hope from Reason's accomplishments over the past 400 years and more. We can take hope from the history of human Reason in solving tough problems. We can have rational hope that we will *continue* to cope with the problems of the present and the future. We can have rational hope that the human progress of at least the past 4000 years—from the warrior morality of Homer, to the justice morality of Western law, to the compassion morality attributed first to the character Jesus and exemplified by St. Francis in the 1200s, and then by others, such as Albert Schweitzer—we can have rational hope that morality will continue to progress toward universal care and compassion and perhaps further toward Goodness that we cannot even imagine.

However, this history of progress should make us complacent or passive. *We* must be the engines of social change, because *we—you*—are that leading edge of the force of cosmic progress; that force of progress is what you are in essence, and it is the *ultimate purpose* for which you exist. Social progress happens because enlightened *individuals* develop a heightened moral awareness and then *act* on that awareness. Individuals together push for changes in the institutions of society. They push to educate others about what is right and good for all. We can never let up in that effort.

We must remain *engaged* in the Enlightenment Project. And in that eternally dissatisfied quest for improvement we can remain *rationaly hopeful* about the future. The cosmic force, whatever it is, that has for 13.5 billion years resulted in ever-increasing complexity, abilities, consciousness, morality, Beauty, Truth, and Goodness—that cosmic force will continue to prod us all in the right direction. Amen.