

It Gets Better

Looking at the world today, it reminds me of the 1970 hit "Ball of Confusion" by the Temptations, Look back at the world in 1970. Two million people had starved to death in the Biafran conflict. The US completed its 500th nuclear test in Nevada while the USSR was testing nuclear devices at the rate of one every three days. Bombs were going off every day in the United Kingdom as the Irish conflict was in full swing. President Nixon ordered the bombing of Cambodia. The Chicago Seven went on trial. Many US cities were still smoldering after the riots less than two years before. Four students lay dead at Kent State University in Ohio. And the Temptations aptly sang about the current events....

Well, the only person talking about love thy brother is the preacher

And it seems nobody's interested in learning but the teacher

1 Segregation, determination, demonstration, integration

Aggravation, humiliation, obligation to my nation

Ball of confusion

Oh yeah, that's what the world is today

And they end with what sounds like a desperate plea to the heavens..

So, round and around and around we go
Where the world's headed, said nobody knows
Oh, great Googamooga
Can't you hear me talking to you?

Many of us then were alive back then. And the world seemed to be a place where you lived with six minutes warning time before a nuclear holocaust ended the time of humanity on the planet.

And looking at the world today, it evokes the old French aphorism plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose - The more things change, the more they remain the same.

And to add to that, we're not as nimble as we used to be. We wake up and wish there could be some magic WD-40 to put in our joints. And then we try to dress for church and realize we may have grown a size overnight. And finally, we're headed for church and can't remember where we put our keys.

Our parents have passed. Our friends are going one by one. The heads of state of North Korea and the United States are in a contest trying to outdo each other on who can be the most insulting, more crass, more disrespectful.... All while shiny ICBMs are ready to launch behind them. Our legal institutions are under attack. Freedom of the Press is under attack. Xenophobia, racism, misogyny and nativism are actually goals of an

executive branch gone awry. Our old allies are aghast. Adversarial countries are moving in as our international leadership is gutted....

It seems like a world gone mad.

But it gets better.

Seven years ago, the gay activist, author and media personality Dan Savage and his husband, Terry Miller, began a campaign to try to stem the rising tide of suicides among LGBT adolescents and young men. Around 85-90 percent of LGBT youth are harassed or bullied due to the way that their Creator brought them to the earth. Their suicide rate is 3 times higher than the rest of our young population. The self-inflicted carnage was caused by the institutional and pervasive homophobia prevalent in the social makeup of American society, compounded by governmental and even religious persecution of LGBT youth.

The purpose of the It Gets Better campaign was to show our folks that there was a better end to the trials and tribulations of bullying and violence. That with concerted action and building up conscience and enhancing institutions, there is a better life ahead. And it does get better. Today, the It Gets Better campaign has expanded to 50 thousand videos and as well, over 50 million views and as if the number 50 was magic, it has expanded to 50

countries. It has made the problem of LGBT bullying visible to the world and made a solution a part of the social compact. As a result, the number of Gay-Straight Alliances in schools have doubled. Countless companies, from General Motors, Best Buy and Ford to the avant-garde techies such as CISCO, Sony Pictures and Microsoft have lent their assistance. President Barack Obama created a video for the drive.

The message was that we can indeed change the world. And perhaps even more importantly, that despite the setbacks, history marches ahead in a line towards progress and a better life.

Like a baby growing into a full person, the linear trajectory of history has forward and backward steps. Like a baby, we learn by falling. Sometimes we forget what we were supposed to learn and we fall again. But the thrust is forward. The thrust is positive.

As living organisms, the systemic axioms affecting a child growing up apply to all of us in families, communities, countries and the generality of human existence.

We tend to look at the falls. But we often disregard the times we stand up, shake, and continue learning. The positivity and optimism of life around us is overcome by the pain and suffering of the personal and societal falls,

but we overlook the inexorable progress of ourselves and humanity.

Let's look at it in perspective. We tend to submerge ourselves in the lugubrium of the dwindling number of elephants. But we forget to realize that neither the Giant Panda nor the Florida Manatee are in the endangered species list anymore. And about the elephants, China just announced that it is phasing out elephant ivory traffic starting this year. And that's significant considering that China is the number one ivory trafficking country in the world.

Likewise, we submerge in pessimism about the environment and the US's abandonment of the Paris Agreement. But the Ocean Cleanup project has a very achievable goal of getting rid of over 40% of the ocean's plastic.

Polio has been eradicated. So has smallpox. So have measles from the Americas. The longest civil war in existence, in Colombia, a visceral conflict that's been going on since 1948 and which has taken the lives of five million people, and one about which I have first hand knowledge in my four-year posting in that wonderful country, has come to an end. The Cubans have developed a vaccine against lung cancer. The Canadians developed an Ebola vaccine.

Think about this. In 1900, out of each 1,000 births in the US, ten mothers would die, and almost 100 babies would die before the first year of life. Today, maternal death at childbirth is statistically insignificant and child mortality has been reduced by 97%

Just this week, Mexico created North America's largest ocean reserve, 57,000 square miles of protection against irreplaceable species of sharks, sea turtles and rays, and in addition, 56 aquatic species unique to North America.

Think of the judicial savagery of a century ago. People were legally tortured in almost every place on earth. In many places, executions were public holidays, carried with pain, suffering and vengeance in mind. Today, out of 195 countries on the planet, only 55 retain the death penalty in law and practice - unfortunately the US is still a practitioner along with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Just 100 years ago, women were not allowed to vote in most countries. Today, only the Vatican and a few others still holds the practice. Even Saudi Arabia's despotic government has allowed women to vote in local elections.

Yes, we have a lot of reason to complain about governments, judicial systems, transportation, quality of life irritants, aches and pains of aging, and pollution. But in every facet of life, the inexorable trend is forward

progress and a better life for each and every person on the planet.

As humans, we are born within an optimistic framework. We're naturally curious. We seek love. We seek affection. We seek the best for ourselves and those who are near and dear to us. And we rebel at that which puts us down. We challenge dogma. We call it part of growing up; we also look at adulthood as the era when we accept that same dogma and eventually even become part of the establishment we battled as young people. Or is it that we eventually lose the will to fight and forcibly put aside our optimistic nature as the pressures of the workaday world weigh upon us?

Optimism is part of Humanism. And Humanism is a central theme in Unitarian Universalism. The rise of Unitarian thought coincided with the rise of unswerving optimism about the progress of humanity and as well, the perfectibility of the human condition. The transition from the dark pessimism of Calvinism to the optimism of Unitarianism was one of the great feats of the Puritans. It took just a hundred years - almost exactly, from William Bradford's accession as the Governor General of Plymouth Colony and the implantation of the Puritan Church in this new land, to William Ellery Channing's Baltimore Sermon, giving way to the great schism that generated the Unitarian faith and placing the Unitarian banner across the New England greens. And these

parishes heralded the inherent worth and dignity of each human being.

No, I'm not depraved. No, I'm not destined to sin. Yes, if there is creator who made me, she or he is perfect and if a Creator is perfect, then he does not make imperfect things or things that cannot achieve its greatest purpose. We are good.

As Unitarians we have rejected the darkness of Calvinism. The gloomy hypothesis of the depravity of man has given way to a fresh look at humanity as an integral part of the evolutionary process. We don't need to repent for metaphoric sins of four thousand years ago. Our creator - if we choose to believe in one - has brought us to the earth to be part of the amazing world. The meaning of our lives is the meaning we create for ourselves. We gather each Sunday and we bring our joys and sorrows, gifts and needs, to the altar of humanity. We do that and we celebrate the lives we share together in communion with each other. What could be a more optimistic practice? Our consideration that compassion, justice and equity in human relations is key to our worth as individuals.

Part of our existence on this life is our personal creation of, and living through, virtue. Virtue, in the same manner as justice, freedom and community, existed before we created religions institutions. And in the same way, virtue will outlive religious constructs. We don't need revealed

truth or virtue because we created it for ourselves. It is a part of our humanity. We are perfectible in a state of nature and we can indeed find our own truths.

Curtis Reese, a notable Unitarian minister in Des Moines, Iowa in the 1920s, addressed the Harvard Divinity School with this caveat “Historically the basic content of religious liberalism is spiritual freedom”.

And that’s where the incredible forwardness of Unitarianism found its humanistic soul sister of Universalism. The idea that we are all, everyone of us, saved through our condition as human beings. And the idea that our perfectibility can indeed be reached through personal and community action. An upbeat statement about life and problem solving that extends into our mystical forays. And we can indeed act on those truths and problem solving using the values and the principles of Unitarian Universalism. It is hard to conceive of a God who made people just to damn them to hell. If there was a God and he did that, then he’d be a pernicious and pathological God.

The concerted action of UUs throughout the world in respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part is also very much a part of our ethics and agenda. As Derek McAuley, Chief Officer of the British General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches stated at the Copenhagen Climate conference

in 2009, which preceded the Paris Agreement, "Unitarians and Free Christians have consistently argued that the principle of environmental sustainability should be the basis for economic and social policy and that the present patterns of trade and consumption are detrimental to the interests of the world's poorest countries. World leaders at the Copenhagen inter-governmental summit must take a lead in helping emerging countries cut carbon emissions as well as introducing measures to reduce their own emissions."

Our Unitarian faith is a call to action. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, is not only one of our core principles but also values which are shared and which form a historical continuum of positive action to make the world a better place. Unitarians were steadfast abolitionists when it was not "cool" to be an abolitionist. They were peace-seekers when it wasn't cool to be an abolitionist. The Hiroshima paintings at All Souls Unitarian in Washington DC were a present from a Hiroshima school which received a significant donation of financial and material assistance after the atomic bomb. Unitarians were anti-segregationists when it wasn't cool to be one. For years, it was one UU lawyer who practiced on civil rights cases in Mississippi. UUs were supporters of a woman's right to own her own body and have suffered attacks on their institution and persons such as the shooting in Knoxville TN nine years ago.

Our Seven Principles in our Unitarian faith are therefore not only optimistic in nature but they embody the call to action and betterment of our human condition. It is on our nature and it is a historical imperative

It gets better. We make it better. Because we are better as a community. There are ups and downs. There are falls and bumps. There have been major stumbles such as WWII, famine, dictators, and what we are witnessing in our own country. But the inexorable trajectory is upwards. Our small community may seem the size of a proton in the universe. And perhaps it is. But a proton intertwined along with other atoms making a part of a diverse world DNA where our combined intellect and inherent goodness as human beings have pointed the earth and its trajectory in a forward manner.

I've decided to close this missive with some amazing words from a retired UU Minister in the First Parish at Norwell Massachusetts, Rachel Tedesco, back in February 1999....

*May the words and the spirit of the humanists inspire us to see the possible;
to imagine a world where all human beings are seen as part of one human family;
to imagine a world where we bring reason and intelligence, love and compassion to bear on all human problems;*

to imagine a world where all children are raised to be altruistic and caring as well as self-respecting and self-sufficient, strong and healthy, imaginative and creative;
to imagine a world where no one is oppressed and where everyone has the freedom to make meaningful choices for themselves, to realize their potentials and to live full and satisfying lives;
to imagine a world where we apply our reason and skills to protect the natural environment, the great interdependent web of which we are a part;
and to imagine a world where we as the human race strive together to build a peaceful and prosperous world.