

“Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“Be it resolved: humankind’s best days lie ahead.”

That was the assertion being contested at last month’s Munk Debate on the question of human progress.

Are our best days behind us, or are they to be found in a brighter future?

The answer, of course, is impossible to know for certain.

Only time will tell whether the optimists or the pessimists or the realists somewhere in between, got it right.

And as Bob reminded me, science-minded as he is, the question really all depends on what span of time we’re talking.

After all, we’re sitting on a planet that will, in 6 billion years or so, burn out in a blaze of glory with the sun.

Still, how we answer this question about our best days gives shape to our lives, and determines whether we look to the days and years to come with hope or with dread, with eager anticipation, complete resignation, or, perhaps, just deep, deep ambivalence.

The night of the debate at Roy Thomson Hall, 71% of those in attendance believed, at least on their way into the hall, that our best days are yet to come.

Following the lively debate, the audience hadn’t moved all that much.

But by the end of the evening,

73% believed humankind's best days lie ahead, a very modest gain of 2%.

Persuasion, as it turns out, is a hard art. . .

Speaking on the Pro Side, Stephen Pinker and Matt Ridley did a very good job of charting the progress humanity has made across the centuries, and particularly in recent decades.

Pinker, whose recent book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* argues we humans are moving toward a world with less violence not more, listed ten measures by which our progress can be seen.

He said, the “quantitative data on indicators of human well-being are all pointing in a very consistent, powerful, positive direction— [on every]thing from longevity to health to prosperity to peace to democracy.

He's encouraged by these signs of human progress, and adds that, “It's just a brute fact that we don't throw virgins into volcanoes any more. [And that we no longer] ...execute people for shoplifting a cabbage.”

For him, things are really looking up, and there's much to celebrate in the knowledge that violence has steadily “declined over long stretches of time, and [that] today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species' existence.”

Next up in the debate, Matt Ridley described himself as a “rational optimist” and confronted our human penchant for nostalgia for a distant, golden past.

He pointed out that there's a “strange asymmetry— [in that] we're very biased in our memories of the past and we're very biased in our assessment of the future.”

We usually get it wrong on both counts, he says.

Surveys show we tend to think the past was better than it actually was, and we tend to see a future more daunting than it's likely to turn out.

He rails against the media for skewing our perceptions of reality,

noting wryly that we never hear about the thousands of airplanes that take off each day, only about the ones that crash on occasion.

Speaking on the Con side of the debate were Malcolm Gladwell and Alain de Botton.

They took the other side to task for overlooking the increasing complexity of the human enterprise, and the many critical things that could and that very often do go horribly wrong.

Gladwell, in particular, felt that one can't "classify a phenomenon as a success unless [it can be established] that its long-term benefits will outweigh the long-term risks it generates and the damage it wreaks."

As an example, he pointed to "the dramatic reduction in the rate of poverty in China and India over the past 40 years [as] an unquestionably favourable outcome," while at the same time noting that, "the industrialization that allowed it to occur has poisoned th[ose] countries' air, soil, and water with consequences that will unfold [for] generations."

He went on to argue that we live in a world with unforeseen challenges we can scarcely comprehend, let alone easily manage or solve or overcome.

Seeing the earth and human life as a complex system, he cautioned his optimistic opponents against too readily dismissing the potential for a catastrophe of unexpected or unintended consequences, lifting up environmental devastation or nuclear war or a virus running rampant as prime possibilities.

From there, Alain de Botton then took things down a notch, advising at several points that we must not ignore the dimmer side of our nature.

Speaking of the human race as a whole, he called us all "profoundly flawed creature[s]" who will have to become "less violent, more forgiving, and more educable"

if there is to be any basis for hope in our future.

You can imagine why Mssr. de Botton was not the most popular speaker on the stage that night.

Calling everyone profoundly flawed creatures is not, it turns out, the way to win friends and influence people—or, it would seem, to tip the scales in the debate.

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Our theme this month invites us to consider what it means to be a people of wonder.

As a noun, wonder speaks of our ability to marvel at things, to bask in beauty, to feel awe, to be astonished.

As a verb, wonder speaks to our capacity for curiosity, to an openness to investigate, to explore, to think, to reason, and to doubt.

As the holidays get underway around here in the coming weeks, we'll talk plenty about wonder as a noun.

But this morning, I want us to spend time with wonder as a verb.

Because we need more wonder by both definitions in this magnificent, enchanting, troubled, and troubling world of ours.

A world that surely leaves us all, at times, completely “bewitched, bothered, and bewildered.”

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I have had a both heavy and hopeful heart, like many of you, I suspect, as I've taken in the news of these recent weeks.

I have felt buoyed up by the reconciling tone taken by the new government, and I'm still optimistic that something useful will come out of the climate conference in Paris.

And, at the same time, I'm heartsick at the devastation

wrought by the string of horrific attacks
on innocent people in cities around the globe.

And at the Islamophobia that has fueled acts of retribution—
not least in the burning of the mosque in Peterborough,
verbal assaults toward Muslims in our own city,
and in calls to turn away refugees in desperate need of safety.

“Be it resolved: humankind’s best days lie ahead.”

I wonder. At times like this, I truly wonder.

And I wish that more people the world over would join in.
Because it seems we’re suffering from a severe shortage of wondering.

Because too many people lack a critical curiosity,
a willingness to engage across differences,
and a capacity to honour their doubts as much as their convictions.

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As I sit with all of this, I am struck by what a powerful force fear can be.

I am struck by how it can build up walls, how it can narrow the mind,
how it can compel people to live out of their smallest selves.

More than anything, I’m struck by the degree
to which I, too, can fall prey to its insidious influence.

Perhaps you’re much the same.

On this day, as we wonder about the state of our world,
as we bring to mind prisoners of conscience,
as we lift up those whose rights are denied,
as we remember those lives shattered by hatred—
from the barrage of misogyny in Montreal to the countless cities
touched by similar violence both before and since—
we can’t overestimate the role of fear
and the power it has to stifle wonder, to shut down dialogue,
and drive a wedge of suspicion and loathing between people.

In the wake of violence, we often say we don't know what to think.
We struggle to make sense of what seemingly makes no sense.

And, yet, fear is so often the obvious clue that we so easily miss
in our effort to understand just what went wrong.

Cycles of fear have long fueled
the seemingly endless cycles of human violence.

Scared people often do horrible, harmful things to contend with their fears.
They hurt others, who in turn hurt others, who in turn hurt others.

“Be it resolved: humankind's best days lie ahead.”

Only, that is, if we break these cycles of fear and violence.
Only if we turn away from harm,
and turn toward peace and understanding.

Needless to say, it's not easy to do.
It requires overriding our fight or flight instinct.
It requires resisting the urge to recoil and push the world away.
It requires a commitment to wonder at what other way might be possible.

A recent survey showed that people who believe that
our way of life will end within a century
also endorsed the following statement:
“the world's future looks grim,
so we have to focus on looking after ourselves and those we love.”

That, I believe, is the forceful sound of fear.

And, if we look carefully, we can see it at work
in so many of the stories of people who have resorted to violence
to combat the threats they felt themselves to be under—
whether real and rational, or not.

There are, I know, many who dismiss this line of thinking,
who see it as a misguided effort to rationalize appalling, violent behaviour.

Who see it as a useless apologetic for those who do harm.

But, what I find misguided, is our society's continuing resistance to recognize that violence almost always comes from somewhere.

Seeing that does not mean justifying violence,
but it does hold the potential to help us understand it,
and just maybe be more successful than we've recently been in stopping it.

Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion states:
"For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

I believe this law also applies to much of, if not all, human activity.

I'm sad to say that I believe the frequent attacks
by extremists around the globe are our "new normal."

As shocking as each new news account may be,
the news isn't particularly surprising anymore.

Not in a world where people are under great stress
to contend with the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

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In the late 19th century, what we know as fundamentalism was born.
And it was born just down the road in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

For several years in the 1880's and 1890's,
leading conservative clergy from across North America
gathered there for large Bible studies that lasted days.

Finding themselves at odds with the emerging modern age,
grappling with the theories of Darwin
and the critical analysis and open questioning of Biblical texts,
those gathered eventually asserted the fundamentals of their faith—
things like belief in the virgin birth and the physical resurrection.

They called it the Niagara Creed.

Those who believed as they did took on the title of Fundamentalists.

"For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

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Our world is full of people struggling to make sense
of a world that is often hard to understand.

For many, reassurance is found in returning to fundamentals.
There is a harkening to a golden age, and a hope for its return.

I believe this happens across the political and religious spectrum.
Unitarians and progressives can be, at times,
as fundamentalist as the best of them.

The danger of too tight an embrace of fundamentals, though,
is that it's so often done with such rigidity, with such inflexibility,
that the compromises that make life possible in diverse situations
become difficult or downright impossible.

The deeper concern, of course, is when fundamentalism devolves
into forms of extremism so pronounced that rigidity gives rise
to complete resistance to anyone who thinks or behaves differently.

From there, hate of the other too often takes hold,
and to the dangerous effect we now so often witness.

Which is why we need a world with more wondering.

Why we need critical and compassionate engagement
with those who see the world differently than we do.

Why we need to listen for the fears that unravel the fabric of life.

Why we need to build bridges of understanding and peace.

And why we need to affirm in thought, word, and deed,
that humankind's best days can still lie ahead.

May we live to make it so.

Amen.