

Are We any Nicer?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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I don't think we choose our personalities; mine, at least, seems afflicted with an enduring awareness of the tragic side, the darkness visible in our human story. Among my first drawings as a kid were hills covered with crosses honouring the war dead. In my high school days, a girlfriend dumped me because, in her words, "Steven, you're just too serious!" The kind of poetry I read confirmed the grim conclusions I was drawing from encyclopedias and history; poetry with lines like these:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/...
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.* (from WB Yeats, "The Second Coming")

And the fiction, the stories? Well, Sam tells Frodo in *Lord of the Rings*:

"I know. It's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. It's like the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad happened?"

Those were the stories, the histories, the poems I thought "really mattered," because I believed they were *really* true of us, and "how could the end be happy...when so much bad happened?"

(The Kits High AP English reading list!—serious literature?—violent, dark, grim: *Ethan Frome*, *Animal Farm 1984*, *Lord of the Flies*, etc.)

On the face of it—I would think that the answer to the question of this sermon: "Are We Any Nicer?" given that it seems our world is still awash in murders, wars, brutality and violence would obviously be: "No," and I wouldn't blame anyone else here if you thought the same thing.

Many of us have lived through or been acutely aware of World War, the Cold War, genocides, post-colonial warfare, neo-imperial wars and invasions in East and Central Asia, ongoing spasms of terrorism—you know the litany, and it's not very uplifting. As well, human nature, in the sense of our cognitive and emotional inventory, has been constant across the 10,000 years of recorded human history. People in every society share the basic features of anatomy and have all the human faculties of language, reasoning, and intuitive psychology. We have all been and are prey to the inner demons of predation, dominance, and revenge that arise from sexual jealousy, fear, anger, and disgust—there is no innate, qualitative difference in these things between human populations now, nor between us and our remote human ancestors. (Steven Pinker, *The Angels of Our Better Nature...*, pp. 612-3. hereafter Pinker)

The pronouncements of public intellectuals and politicians confirm this grim—what they would call “realistic”—outlook, and join the chorus of NO to the question: “Are we Any Nicer?” William Pfaff, an expert on international politics and philosophy, wrote in a recent article: “I am not myself aware that human character and conduct today display any general improvement over that recorded in the historical past....Comparable things, *or worse*, continue to happen in our times. That men and women are morally improved from what they were at the beginning of recorded history has yet to be demonstrated. Pfaff, “How Much ‘Progress’ Have We Made?” *NY Review of Books*, November 24, 2011, 71) The political scientist Stanley Hoffman said that he has been discouraged from teaching his course on international relations because after the end of the cold war, one heard “about nothing but terrorism, suicide bombing, displaced people, and genocides.” (Pinker, 295) A *New York Times* editor wrote in 2007: “It did not take long [after 1989] for the gyre to wobble back onto its dependably blood-soaked course, pushed along by fresh gusts of ideological violence and absolutism.” The pessimism is bipartisan: in 2007 the conservative writer Norman Podhoretz published a book called *World War IV* (on “the long struggle against Islamofascism”),

while the liberal columnist Frank Rich wrote that the world is “a more dangerous place than ever.” (Pinker 295-6) And the daily newspaper, radio, and television?: wall-to-wall sensationalist, anecdote-driven atrocities, mayhem and hardness-of-heart of very kind and description, day-in-and-out. Our minds tend to estimate that something may happen to us based on how readily we can recall examples; and if the is media bombarding us with scenes of carnage and stories of kidnapping—that’s what gets burned into our memories. How do we respond—with a climate of fear where there are more private security personnel in the US than cops, and children we don’t dare to let go outside to play without close supervision.

You ever wonder why there may be an epidemic of extreme emotional and mental distress going on out there/in here?; why so many sensitive people are described as suffering from a mental “illness”?

We can come away from all of this profoundly wary, shaken, depressed, overloaded, fatalistic and cynical—maybe we are just bloody killer apes with violence in our genes. If the world is “a more dangerous place than ever,” that “comparable things, *or worse*, continue to happen”—that is, if the rates of violence are the same or *have increased*, maybe “the world we made has contaminated us, perhaps irretrievably?” (Pinker, xxi) It’s a crucial question with profound consequences, depending on how it’s answered.

Our historical, principled, prophetic witness has said a resolute “NO” to this gloomy question; this all-too-widely embraced conventional assumption. In his 1853 sermon on "Justice and the Conscience," the radical Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker declared the following, words that were to be repeated over a hundred years later by Martin Luther King Jr.:

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

What Parker divined by prophetic conscience—that long arc bending toward justice—the Canadian-born psychologist Steven Pinker has attempted to confirm with the methods of science. He’s done it by drawing on an array of recent research in cognitive studies, intellectual and social history, population dynamics, political philosophy, statistical analysis, and forensic anthropology. Parker was a 19th century minister, who honestly said he couldn’t calculate the curve, the figure...by the experience of sight.” Well, Pinker’s picked up where Parker left off.

In his recent book *Angels of Our Better Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and its Causes*, Pinker challenges one of our deepest, but unexamined assumptions—that current and recent times have been the most violent in human history. Instead, he asserts that “our era is less violent, less cruel and more peaceful than any previous period in human existence.” “Violence has been in decline for long stretches of time,” he claims,...”The decline has not been steady...and is not guaranteed to continue [to be sure]. But it is a persistent historical development, visible on scales from millennia to years.” The decline in violence can be seen “in the family, in neighborhoods, between tribes and between states. People living now are less likely to meet a violent death, or to suffer from violence or cruelty at the hands of others, than people living in any previous century.” (Peter Singer, “Is Violence History?” *NY Times*, Oct.6, 2011; Naughton, “Steven Pinker: fighting talk from the prophet of peace,” *Guardian*, Oct 15, 2011)

This may seem an incredible, hallucinatory assertion to make; he assumes that many of his readers will be skeptical of this claim; I certainly was. But then in one compelling chapter after another he brings forth an amazing story, backed up with a mountain of evidence showing, with a very few and temporary exceptions, how violence of all types and kinds has been in decline in order to make his case.

Very briefly, this is how the story goes: he starts with what you could call the hidden history of violence: *hidden*: that is, a look at how we have a tendency, because of our own

discontents with the contemporary world, to pull a nostalgic curtain between us and the past and then project upon that curtain what we think was the case: people living in harmony with nature, a time of faith and family, of enjoying small town or village intimacy, and community solidarity—a simpler time, without the cacophony, stress, the muggings, the materialism, the terrorist attacks, and the environmental degradation of the present.

This, he claims, may be the “biggest delusion of all.” (p. 693) Forensic archaeologists have proved that native peoples “had rates of death from warfare that were far greater than our world wars.” For all the dangers we face today, we learn from recent history and experience that we no longer have to fear being abducted into slavery, or suffer divinely mandated genocide, or torture and death on the cross or rack for holding unpopular beliefs. Our chance of being murdered is less than one tenth, and in some countries, one-fiftieth, of what it would have been if we had lived 500 years ago. Past centuries were times “in which a seven-year old could be hanged for stealing a petticoat” and a witch drowned or burned at the stake. What’s common moral sense in our times: that slavery, war, and torture are wrong “would have been seen as saccharine sentimentality”; our “notion of universal human rights” would have been incoherent and incomprehensible to those in the past. (p 694)

Pinker claims that rates of violence declined and that ideas about rights arose due to several reasons. And here we move from the hidden history of violence to the story of its decline. The first reason, spreading out over the 15th and 16th centuries, is the consolidation of the power of the state and the effects of the widening influence of commerce above pre-state and feudal economies and loyalties. Hunter gatherer, early horticultural and feudal societies were sites for death and mayhem that would be incomprehensible to us today. The state monopoly on

the legitimate use of force brought about a reduction of the rates of the kind of violence that were endemic, and common to pre-state cultures and peoples.

An additional reason for a further overall decline in violence is what he calls the humanitarian revolution—that period in the 17th and 18th centuries—where a crucial change took place. People began to look negatively at forms of violence that previously had been taken for granted: slavery, torture, despotism, dueling and extreme forms of punishment. Voices even began to be raised against cruelty to animals.

What happened is that people began to put themselves in the position of someone very different from themselves; people like Sebastian Castellio—after whom one of the rooms in Hewett Hall is named—a religious humanist who put himself in the shoes of the condemned Unitarian heretic Michael Servetus, and penned the first and most important treatises on tolerance ever written. He and those who followed, like Charles Dickens whose 200th birthday took place two weeks ago, began to expand the sphere of our moral concern: a vantage point from which we see that our interests are similar to, and from the point of the universe, or a universal, benevolent deity, do not matter more than the interests of others. Here reason pointed us to a different kind of morality—one where we prefer human flourishing in this life to death and the so-called just deserts in a world to come. We understand that we live in a world in which others can make a difference to whether we live well or die miserably. And that difference matters. That they should not hurt us, and in doing so we too commit ourselves to the idea and practice that we should not hurt them.

This last development has accelerated in the past fifty years, in what Pinker calls the rights revolution—the revulsion against violence and discrimination inflicted on ethnic and racial minorities, on women, children, homosexuals and animals. He does not argue that these

movements have achieved all their goals, but he does remind us how far we have come in a relatively short time from the days when lynchings were commonplace in the South; domestic violence acceptable; when interracial and same sex marriage were nearly unthinkable.

Now this is a story that may be familiar to us, one that we want to believe in and share. Yet isn't it a progressive narrative, a just-so-story, a minority report, a dream, part of that "long arc" that is difficult to see when our vision is obscured by "blood-dimmed tides"? What about the claims that the violence of the 20th century, and the first decade of the present one, prove that men and women have not morally improved, that ours is an era of "nothing but terrorism, suicide bombing, displaced people, and genocides"? In sum, that the world is "a more dangerous place than ever"?

Here, finally the numbers, the data, the statistical analyses laid out in more than 60 graphs, tables and charts in Pinker's book *really* matter. Graphs that soberly quantify and tabulate the fact that violence and prejudice—from murder rates, to battle deaths, to hate crimes, assaults, and unfavourable attitudes to racial and ethnic minorities—are in decline; and that this "may be most significant and least appreciated development in the history of our species, with implications that touch the core of our beliefs and values." (p. 694)

I'll cite just one graph as an example. (p.195) It lays out the death tolls from distant atrocities in the past, estimates what proportion of the contemporary population that toll represents and then computes what the corresponding proportion of the mid-20th century population would be. So for example, the Mongol conquests of the 13th century killed an estimated 40 million people, which corresponds to 278 million people in 20th century terms. While historical data from past centuries are far from complete, existing estimates of death tolls, when calculated as a proportion of the world's population at the time, show that at least nine

atrocities before the 20th century (that we know of) were worse, that caused more deaths than World War Two. Statistical tables like these give the lie to assertions that the 20th century was the worst one ever and that we live in an unprecedented era of violence.

This is only one of sixty graphs backed up by scrupulously careful, objective data which cumulatively tell a compelling story. And yet, I found by heart and mind in a kind of revolt, because my truths keep coming back to particular people and things, not abstract ideas and numbers, when, crucially, Pinker paused at a pivotal point in the book to make this confession:

It's not easy to see the bright side...where war continues to cause tremendous misery. The effort to...quantify the misery can seem heartless...But there is a moral imperative in getting the facts right...[Because] the discovery that fewer people are dying in wars all over the world can thwart cynicism among the compassion-fatigued....A better understanding of what drove the numbers down can steer us toward doing things that make people better off rather than congratulating ourselves on how altruistic we are. (p. 320)

In closing:

It makes a difference to know the numbers and thus to fight against the all-too human tendency to rely on memory and vivid anecdotes rather than statistics staring us in the face.

It matters that the numbers of violent crimes and murder have substantially declined in the past thirty years.

It makes a difference to know the number of states that started then stopped exploring the development of nuclear weapons and number of states who possess but have never used them.

It makes a difference to see the rates of battle deaths in state-sponsored armed conflicts in the last hundred years and growth of peacekeeping in the last sixty

It makes a difference to see what's happened to white attitudes toward interracial marriage, the approval rates of husbands slapping wives, the use of corporal punishment on children, the number of motion pictures per year in which animals were harmed, the timeline for the abolition of judicial torture and the hundred worst wars and atrocities in human history.

The difference may well be a moral one, for to write off portions of the world as irredeemable hellholes, to insist that we have not changed, that we are fallen angels, or bloody killer apes grieves the hearts and poisons the minds of our children; it feeds the power of manipulative and self-righteous religious and political demagogues; and it paralyzes us with cynicism, resignation and despair.

So, let me be contrary—today I am preaching hope not hell. And despite the fixation by media and ministers, politicians and pundits, on a selective cavalcade of gloom and mayhem—I'm telling you we have reasons to be grateful: war is declining, and humanity is becoming less violent, less racist, and less sexist—and this moral progress is accelerating. Because its journey is not guaranteed, its homecoming not assured, may we do our part, members of a moral universe, to put our heart, head and hand on that long arc and help to bend it toward justice and peace and thus be a blessing to ourselves and to generations to come.