

Better than we think

July 15, 2018

Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship of Athens

Dan:

Good morning! Kate and I are excited to be asked to provide summer filler for UUFA. Today we hope to be uplifting and actually we think we have such a message! As is our custom, we will give our message IN STEREO. It has to do with health - and in particular our spiritual health. There are many aspects of our health that we have some control over and some we do not. Aspects we do have some control over are our eating, sleeping, exercising, meditating, singing and loving.

Kate:

The aspects that we do not have control over include genes, parents, accidents, and state of the world. The first couple of ones we can imagine overcoming but the state of the world - how much poverty, war, violence, illness there is in the world can be a weight on our shoulders that makes it feel impossible to be truly happy when so much suffering is occurring.

Dan:

But what if there is more good news than we realize in the world? Since most of us UUs do not put our trust in an afterlife that makes things all better nor believe the earth is just a loss leader, a backdrop to heavenly perfection, it matters to us what is happening here on earth.

For our uplifting message, we are taking our inspiration from Steven Pinker and his recent book, Enlightenment Now. The information in this book for us was like standing under a waterfall of refreshing news. We will be quoting extensively from his book since it is hard to word it better than he does.

Kate:

By "Enlightenment," Pinker means the 18th-century philosophical movement of Voltaire and Kant, rather than the Buddhist idea of enlightenment. This 1700 Enlightenment is a really big deal. The Israeli historian Yuval Harari lists the big 3 events, that has really changed the course of humankind: language, agriculture and the Enlightenment. It is also known as the Age of Reason and was the liberation of European thinking. Enlightenment thinkers declared that instead of being bound by the teachings of the Church, that people could find the truth for themselves, by the use of reason. Dare to know!

This is very much like our fourth UU principle, the "free and responsible search for meaning." In fact, reliance on science and reason instead of religious doctrine is a core UU principle. Today's talk is very much like an old-school Unitarian sermon that you could have heard in this Fellowship 50 years ago.

Dan:

Pinker writes “The era was a cornucopia of ideas, some of them contradictory, but four themes tie them together: reason, science, humanism, and progress.”

“To the Enlightenment thinkers, the escape from ignorance and superstition showed how mistaken our conventional wisdom could be, and how the methods of science—skepticism, fallibilism, open debate, and empirical testing—are a paradigm of how to achieve reliable knowledge.”

“The Enlightenment principle that we can apply reason to enhance human flourishing may seem obvious, trite, old-fashioned. But it is not. Today, more than ever, the ideals of reason, science, humanism, and progress need a wholehearted defense.”

Kate:

Although religious organizations have and do supply charity, food, medicine and so forth the really big contributors to human welfare and abundant life have come through reason and science. Many of these are so ordinary now that we don't sing their praises, for instance germ theory, washing of hands, clean water, penicillin and the Haber-Bosch process which manufactures nitrogen fertilizer from the air and made possible the feeding of our billions of people Haber and Bosch were not driven by a burning desire to feed the world; they just had a chemical problem to solve. But they arguably enhanced human flourishing far more than a Mother Theresa though Haber and Bosch are personally less inspiring. Progress comes through ordinary flawed human beings.

Dan:

Hence Pinker says “We take Enlightenment gifts for granted: in more and more countries - newborns who will live more than eight decades (at the turn of the 19th century the average lifespan was 29 years), markets overflowing with food, clean water that appears with a flick of a finger and waste that disappears with another, pills that erase a painful infection, daughters who can walk the streets in safety, and critics of the powerful who are not jailed or shot. Today we celebrate humanity's progress through endeavors based on reason and humanism.

Kate:

But what has happened to our belief in progress? Pinker blames a host of writers from all different directions: religionists, Romantics, Marxists, and environmentalists.

He says “The ideals of the Enlightenment are products of human reason, but they always struggle with other strands of human nature: loyalty to tribe, deference to authority, magical thinking and the blaming of misfortune on evildoers.

Dan:

But Pinker says “The Enlightenment has *worked*—perhaps the greatest story seldom told. And because this triumph is so unsung, the underlying ideals of reason, science, and humanism are unappreciated as well. These ideals are treated by many of today’s intellectuals with indifference, skepticism, and sometimes contempt.

“The Enlightenment thinkers were all too aware of our irrational passions and foibles. The deliberate application of reason was necessary precisely because our common habits of thought are not particularly reasonable. They saw a need for a “science of man” so that we could make rational decisions about morality. This is a key element of humanism.”

Kate:

“The thinkers of the Age of Reason saw this urgent need for a secular foundation for morality, because they were haunted by a historical memory of centuries of religious carnage: the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch hunts, and the European wars of religion. It is individuals - men, women, and children, not groups such as tribe, race, nation—who are *sentient*, who feel pleasure and pain, fulfillment and anguish.” Very much like our first UU principle, the worth and dignity of every human being. In fact, the founders of UUFA first considered calling this the Athens Humanist Society, before they eventually decided to affiliate with the Unitarian-Universalists.

Dan:

So back to Pinker:

“A humanistic sensibility impelled the Enlightenment thinkers to condemn not just religious violence but also the secular cruelties of their age, including slavery, despotism, executions for frivolous offenses, and sadistic punishments such as flogging, amputation, disembowelment, breaking on the wheel, and burning at the stake.

Which brings us to another Enlightenment ideal - peace. War is no longer “thought of as a divine punishment to be endured or a glorious contest to be won and celebrated, but as a practical problem to be mitigated and someday solved.”

Kate:

Same could be said of poverty ... do we believe that the poor will always be with us? Pinker makes the point that the headlines everyday could boast that another 147,000 people have been brought out of severe poverty, but they don't. Instead, the news is filled with stories about war, terrorism, crime, pollution, inequality, drug abuse, and oppression.

The result is that in the late 2015, large majorities in 11 developed countries said that “the world is getting worse..” Almost everyone Dan and I talked to in preparation for this talk had major issues with embracing this idea of flourishing human progress. You all might be suspicious of us as well for being bearers of good news today.

Dan:

So how can we soundly appraise the state of the world? The answer is to **count**.”

This last phrase, ‘to count’, is at the core of Pinker’s thinking. For Pinker, the most essential Enlightenment value is dependence on reason and evidence. If we disagree with someone, but we can agree to base our conclusions on reason and verifiable evidence, then we can eventually come to agreement. And for Pinker, the most verifiable evidence is things we can measure or **count**.

Kate:

So what should we count?

“Most people agree that life is better than death. Health is better than sickness. Abundance is better than poverty. Peace is better than war. Safety is better than danger. Freedom is better than tyranny” ... and so forth.

“All these things can be measured. If they have increased over time, that is progress.” Pinker quotes statistics on hundreds of variables measured over decades on a global level.

“And here is a shocker: *The world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being.*”

Dan:

Here is a second shocker: *Almost no one knows about it.*”

“Information about human progress, though absent from major news outlets and intellectual forums, is easy enough to find. The data are not entombed in dry reports but are displayed in gorgeous websites, and in beautifully written books, some by Nobel laureates, which flaunt the news in their titles—such as *Progress* and *The Progress Paradox*”, these last two in a list of 15 that Pinker gives along with his personal favorite “50 Reasons We’re Living through the Greatest Period in World History”. “None was recognized with a major prize, but over the period in which they appeared, Pulitzers in nonfiction were given to four books on genocide, three on terrorism, two on cancer, two on racism, and one on extinction. “

Kate:

So why is the idea of human progress so hard for us to believe?

For one thing the world is nowhere near perfect. We still have - a short list in alphabetical order - Boko Haram, ICE, ISIS, Syria...

These measurements of progress are jagged lines with many ups and downs. To appreciate human progress we need to take the long view and look past who won the last election. As Michelle Obama remarked, “I wake up every morning in a house built by slaves, and I watch my daughters, two beautiful, intelligent black young women, play with their dogs on the lawn.” The election of the first African-American president was followed by

the nomination of the first woman for President by a major American party. If elected, Hillary Clinton would have joined the female presidents of the UK and Germany. And the sitting president of India is a member of the previously shunned Untouchable caste.

This gradual upward progress has taken place because of much work by many, many people. Only a teenager would believe that folded, clean laundry appears outside one's door by a miraculous process with no effort. Hence, for us UUs, the work of the justice cluster is a big source of pride, as is the number of UU's who show up at so many justice events.

Dan:

Another reason we fixate on bad news might be that our tendency to believe the worst is an evolutionary survival strategy. To pay attention to danger is much more likely to improve our chances of remaining alive. Also, we have always heard the saying that if it bleeds, it leads. News outlets have polled their readership who claim they want more positive news but sales do not bear this out. We are too addicted to horrifying news. Hearing about world progress is boring.

We also have a problem with people attributing things they don't like or agree with to fake news. People like Tim Berners Lee, the inventor of the world wide web, are seriously addressing this.

Kate:

Many of us also receive daily emails admonishing us be outraged, angry by the latest affront. The activist groups who send these messages keep us in crisis mode to get us to act and hence we tend to believe the world is going backwards. Perhaps we even feel guilty if we are not angry and outraged or worry that we will not be effective if not outraged.

Another concern is that this good news about human progress cannot be easily said about the environment nor the other creatures we share this earth with. This is the main objection our friends have raised about this message and we too have trouble here. However, as our lives becomes better, less stressed and more comfortable, our concern for the quality of the environment and our compassionate nature towards other life can flourish. There are success stories about our air and water. Rivers no longer burn in Cleveland, There are more humane laws and more environmental protections, current administration excepted - one of these downward jags in the upward trend of progress.

There is also huge concerns around global warming. A lot of work is being done here so there is every reason and hope that with continued political pressure and new technology, we will succeed. The question is will we solve the climate problem before our ecosystem collapses taking civilization with it. If we do succeed it will be because of the application of science, reason and humanism.

Dan:

We still have much to do. By celebrating human progress, we are not endorsing unjust systems nor condoning environmental destruction. But we have much to celebrate and much to be grateful for. We celebrate our UU spiritual path that embraces reason and humanism. Our spiritual path has really been reaffirmed for us after reading Pinker and we personally look at the world much more optimistically.

Perhaps President Obama summed it up best at the end of his presidency:

If you had to choose a moment in history to be born, and you did not know ahead of time who you would be—you didn't know whether you were going to be born into a wealthy family or a poor family, what country you'd be born in, whether you were going to be a man or a woman—if you had to choose blindly what moment you'd want to be born, you'd choose now." We live in the best of times, let us go forward in gratitude and do our best..

Amen!

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For our closing words we will turn once more to Steven Pinker, who has been the star of our show today:

"The story of human progress is truly heroic. It is glorious. It is uplifting. It is even, I dare say, spiritual....We will never have a perfect world, and it would be dangerous to seek one. But there is no limit to the betterments we can obtain if we continue to apply knowledge to enhance human flourishing".

