

From the Pastors Desk

A Reason for Hope

Our world is becoming far less violent and a safer place for people to live.

I know this is a surprising statement for most people to hear, but it is true. Steven Pinker in his recent book “The Better Angels of Our Nature” explains with extensive research why it is true and why it only *appears* to be more violent.

Our cognitive faculties predispose us to believe that we live in violent times, especially when they are stoked by media that follow the watchword “If it bleeds, it leads.” The human mind tends to estimate the probability of an event from the ease with which it can recall examples, and scenes of carnage are more likely to be beamed into our homes and burned into our memories than footage of people dying of old age. No matter how small the percentage of violent deaths may be, in absolute numbers there will always be enough of them to fill the evening news, so people’s impressions of violence will be disconnected from the actual proportions. (Steven Pinker, “The Better Angels of our nature”, p. xxii)

He goes on to state that no one has ever recruited activists to a cause by announcing that things are getting better; and large numbers of our intellectual culture is reluctant to admit that there is much of anything good about civilization, culture and western society.

Perhaps the main cause of the illusion of ever-present violence springs from one of the forces that drove violence down in the first place. The decline of violent behavior has been paralleled by a decline in attitudes that tolerate or glorify violence, and often the attitudes are in the lead. By the standards of mass atrocities of human history, the lethal injection of a murderer in Texas, or an occasional hate crime in which a member of an ethnic minority is intimidated by hooligans, is pretty mild stuff. But from a contemporary vantage point, we see them as signs of how low our behavior can sink, not how high our standards have risen. (Ibid.)

Pinker points out six historical developments that indicate humanity’s retreat from violence. The first took place over millennia when society transitioned from the anarchy of hunting and gathering to the first agriculture civilizations about 5000 years ago. With that change came an estimated fivefold decrease in the rates of violent death.

The second transition occurred between the late Middle Ages and the 20th century. During this time, European countries saw a ten-fold to fifty-fold decline in the rate of homicide when feudal territories were consolidated into larger kingdoms with centralized authority, which provided an infrastructure for commerce and policing. This trend has been referred to as the Civilizing Process. Prior to this process, the odds of experiencing a violent death were quite high because, rather than governmental authorities punishing evil-doers, one clan or tribe would seek revenge on another by raiding and attempting to exterminate them.

The third transition occurred over centuries and began during the Age of Reason and European Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, although it has parallels earlier and elsewhere in the world. This era saw the first organized movements to abolish socially sanctioned forms of violence like despotism, slavery, dueling, torture, superstitious killing, sadistic punishment and cruelty to animals. Sadly, modern societies like our own can, in times of anxiety, can slip back into this primitive behavior such as what we saw in recent times with water-boarding and other forms of torture. Thankfully, more civilized members of our society have rightly condemn this behavior.

It is worth noting that recent wars in the Middle East were primarily influence by clan and tribal societies operating in Pinker's first and second stages of development that have yet to take steps into the modern era. Hopefully over time, education and commerce will help to bring them along.

On the other hand, we in modern societies need to cast a critical eye on elements of our own culture where hyper-individualism is hindering the common good. Our generation is witnessing the advent of a plutocracy where we are finding ourselves governed by the wealthy or their surrogates with policies that foster an ever-widening gap between the rich and the middle class / poor. Although our society is less violent, a plutocracy has its own kind of oppression.

The fourth major transition took place after the end of World War II. Pinker states, *the two-thirds of a century since then have been witness to a historically unprecedented development: the great powers, and developed states in general, have stopped waging war on one another. Historians have called this blessed state of affairs the Long Peace.* (Ibid. p. xxiv)

Pinker states that the fifth trend may be hard for news readers to believe: *Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, organized conflicts of all kinds — civil wars, genocides, repression by autocratic governments, and terrorist attacks — have declined throughout the world.* (Ibid.) He goes on to back this up with graphs and statistics. (see chapter six)

He indicates that his final trend was inaugurated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 where we saw *a growing revulsion against aggression on smaller scales, including violence against ethnic minorities, women, children, homosexuals, and animals. These spin-offs from the concept of human rights — civil rights, women's rights, children's rights, gay rights, and animal rights — were asserted in a cascade of movements from the late 1950s to the present day.* (Ibid.) Pinker calls this the "Rights Revolution".

The remainder of his book makes extensive use of graphs and statistics to prove his point that violence has dramatically declined in the history of humanity. This flies in the face of the prevailing belief that the world is becoming more violent. In addition to our religious reasons for hope, trends such as we see in books like "The Better Angels of Our Nature" gives us other reasons to be optimistic.

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