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That We Will Embrace the Reality of Progress

I am optimistic about the only thing—by definition—that we can be optimistic about: the future. When I tally up the plus and minuses at work in the world, I see progress. Tomorrow looks like it will be better than today. Not just progress for me, but for everyone on the planet in aggregate and on average.

No sane person can ignore the heaps of ills on this planet. The ills of the environment, of inequality, of war and poverty and ignorance, and the ills of body and soul of many billion inhabitants are inescapable. Nor can any rational person ignore the steady stream of *new* ills that are bred by our inventions and activities, including ills generated by our well-intentioned attempts to heal old ills. The steady destruction of good things and people seems relentless. And it is.

But the steady stream of good things is relentless as well. Who can argue with the goodness of antibiotics—even though they are over-prescribed? Electricity? Woven cloth? Radio? The list of desirable things is endless. While they all have their downsides, we acknowledge the goodness of these inventions by purchasing them in bulk. And to remedy currently perceived ills, we keep creating new good things.

Some of these new solutions are often worse than the problems they were supposed to solve, but it is my observation that on average and over time, the new solutions slightly outweigh the new problems. As Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi once said, "There is more good than evil in the world—but not by much." Unexpectedly "not much" is all that is needed when you have the power of compound interest at work—which is what culture is. The world needs to be only 1% (or even one-tenth of 1 %) better day in and day out to accumulate civilization. As long as we create 1% more than we destroy each year, we have progress. This delta is so small that it is almost imperceptible, particularly in the face of the 49% of death and destruction that is in our face. Yet this tiny, slim, and shy differential generates progress.

But is there really even 1% betterment? I think the only evidence we have of this is people's behavior. When we watch what people do, we see they inevitably, unwaveringly head towards more choices, more options, and the increased possibilities offered by the future.

No one I know has yet found a way to live in the future. Maybe someday we'll invent inexpensive time machines and we can vacation a hundred years into the future. Right now if we want to live in "tomorrow"—that place which is just a little better than today—the best we can do is to live in the most forward-looking city on earth. Cities are where the future happens. It is where there are increased choices and possibilities. Everyday one million people move from the countryside into cities. This journey is less a trip in space as in time. These migrants are really moving hundreds of years forward in time; relocating from medieval villages into 21st century sprawling urban areas. The ills of these slums are very visible and don't stop the arrivals. They are coming—as we all do—for the slightly increased number of freedoms and options they didn't have in their past. This is the very same reason we are living where and the way we do—to have 1% more choices.

Moving back into the past has never been easier. Citizens in developing countries can merely walk back to their villages, where they can live with age-old traditions, and limited choices. If they are eager enough, they can live without modern technology at all. Citizens in the developed world can buy a plane ticket and in less than one day can be settled in a hamlet in Nepal or Mali. If you care to

relinquish the options of the present and adopt the limited choices of the past you can live there the rest of your life. Indeed you can choose your time period. If you believe the peak of existence was reached in Neolithic times you can camp out in a clearing in the Amazon; if you suspect the golden age was in the 1890s, you can find a farm among the Amish. We have the incredible opportunity to head into the past, but it is amazing how few people really want to live there. Except for a few rare individuals, no one does. Rather, everywhere in the world, at all historical periods, in all cultures, people have stampeded by the billions into the future of "of slightly more options" as fast as they can.

Why? Because the future is slightly better than the past. And tomorrow will be slightly better than today. And while everyone's actions confirm the essential reality of progress, progress is not something we have been willing to admit to in public. I am optimistic that in the coming years we'll embrace the reality of progress.