

Unrealistic Expectations

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Some of us — and I fear that I'm probably among this group — seem to suffer from unrealistically high expectations about the sanity, grace, and wisdom that human beings can achieve collectively. Apparently we believe that civilization should be doing much better than it is, since our reaction to the actual state of affairs in the Big World is often disappointment, disillusionment, and angry frustration. We may retain a certain dogged idealism, holding out fond hopes for the maturation of our species, or we may devolve into curmudgeons, succumbing to pessimism. Even if we don't sink into bitterness, we may succumb to depression or despair.

I recognize both elements in myself: the cockeyed optimism of high ideals and expectations, and the painful disillusionments of the "real" world. One might think that at 68 years old, I'd be mature enough (or smart enough, or wise enough) to avoid either of those risky attitudes, but I guess not. I still struggle with both, moving from one to the other and back.

The question I ask myself (and the question I'm raising in this commentary) is: Why are my expectations so high for human beings? Where did those high expectations come from, and are they justified in the face of so much evidence to the contrary? It's one thing to have ideals to which we aspire for ourselves and the world, but how do we avoid disappointment when reality — either personal or collective — fails to live up to our visions of how things might, could or (in the ideas of our minds and yearning of our hearts) *should* be?

When a pride of lions congregates near a waterhole on the African veldt, they do so for obvious reasons. The waterhole provides water to drink, and it's the "restaurant" that gives them easier access to food. As carnivores and predators, that means other animals. Do lions get together into committees to consider the "health and balance" of their waterhole ecosystem? Do they carefully monitor how many gazelles, zebras, and wildebeests they kill and eat? No. Lions hunt when they're hungry. Should their food supply diminish, or if the waterhole dries up, they'll move on, looking for greener pastures.

Despite our big brains and sophisticated neocortexes (that allow human beings such "advanced" abilities as rational cognition and language), we are not all that different from lions or any other of the higher vertebrates or primates. Like

them, we are driven by desires and needs that are deeply programmed into our hard-wiring. While “human nature” may be more complex than the “instincts” that underpin much animal behavior, the increased complexity carries the cost of greater paradox. Sure, we appear to be more conscious than other animals, but that appearance is often an illusion. Even when we are “conscious,” our seeming sentience is frequently akin to the thin layer of icing on a big cake — tasty and sweet, of course, but only a condiment to enhance the basic substance of the cake.

In short, we humans aren’t half as conscious or capable as we presume. The illusion that we are leads to arrogance and hubris.

Consider nuclear power. One promise of the nuclear age that began in 1945 was the possibility of building and using fission reactors to produce power without the downsides of burning fossil fuels. We’d built nuclear bombs that worked. Why couldn’t we build nuclear reactors for peaceful purposes? A worthy goal and high ideal, right? The plan was simple: All we need to do to make electricity is boil water to power steam turbines. So, carefully controlled fission reactions would produce the heat to convert water into steam. Simple. Elegant. What could go wrong?

Throughout the 1950s, those in power enthusiastically jumped on the nuclear bandwagon, and fission reactors were built around the world. What to do with the radioactive by-products (spent fuel rods) wasn’t clear, but surely we’d figure that out in due course. The public was assured by authorities, of course, that our engineering and construction skills were so fail-safe that nuclear reactors would not suffer “incidents” (i.e., disasters — meltdowns, explosions, China syndrome, etc.) that could release catastrophic amounts of radioactivity with a half-life measured in tens of thousands of years. According to the nuclear lobby, people could sleep soundly in their beds, secure in the knowledge that nuclear accidents would *never* occur. How did that work out?

Not well. Since 1952, 33 serious incidents have occurred at nuclear reactor sites. The three worst and most well-known are Three-Mile Island in the U.S. in 1979, Chernobyl in the Ukraine (USSR) in 1986, and Fukushima in Japan in 2011. Fukushima is an ongoing catastrophe and is still spewing deadly radiation into the atmosphere, with even more dire consequences possible (and perhaps likely).

The point here is that those who believed in the infallibility of human beings were not only wrong, but dead wrong. It’s not as if the terrible risks of nuclear fission were not well-known. They were. But people in power, as well as those who stood to make a profit, presumed human mastery over reality to be total and absolute.

Youthful enthusiasm is particularly vulnerable to unrealistic expectations. Looking back to my own 20s and 30s, I vividly remember the “spiritual food movements” of the 1960s through 1980s, such as veganism and Macrobiotics. (Those have largely given way to newer movements like Paleo.) Also, I recall being told by various friends and acquaintances that they fully believed they would live to be 120 because of their philosophy, lifestyle, and healthy diet. Some of those people are already dead, while the rest appear to be subject to all the normal ravages of aging in seniorhood. To some extent, youthful idealism and belief in absolutist promises is predictable, perhaps even inevitable, and aging itself exerts the corrective of disillusionment. Obviously, this varies from individual to individual. Some people become more practical and measured in their enthusiasms; others continue their quest for perfection, moving from one failed system to another.

Whatever we think about youthful idealism, perhaps it behooves those of us who are older to lower our expectations.

But what if our unrealistically high expectations are not a mistaken attitude, but rather a hard-wired genetic trait? An analogy might be helpful here.

Human sensory systems are dominated by vision. Various other animals have more highly developed and acute senses of smell, hearing, and even touch, but humans are near the top of the heap in vision. Among the most interesting facts about how the human brain constructs the experience of vision is an artificially heightened sense of contrast, especially at edges — the boundaries between planes. It’s as if the contrast and brightness are turned up wherever two different fields of vision meet. This means that if a person is walking along a cliff, the edge of the cliff is visually emphasized, giving a built-in warning to step carefully and not fall off the cliff.

That genetic trait for artificially-enhanced vision turned out to have survival value. Human beings with that hard-wiring were less likely to walk off the edges of cliffs. Thus, they had a better chance of survival, which meant passing on their genes. Now, every human has that genetic code.

What if, during the salad days of homo sapiens’ biological development, genetically hard-wired high expectations in early human beings increased their chances of survival and passing on genes? Science has established that such traits as temperamental optimism and pessimism are, at least to some extent, genetically pre-determined. So, it’s not too much of a stretch to assume that unrealistically high expectations may also have genetic markers that can be activated by various environmental triggers. Perhaps even our bravado and arrogance may be at least partially hard-wired. To me at least, that’s disturbing, since it implies that exaggerated beliefs in our own competence, and even faith in our presumed infallibility — traits that may have helped us early on — are now operating against our continued well-being and survival.

Without question, humans are an inventive and ingenious species. But building a better mouse trap (or a five-mile-long particle accelerator) is not the issue. My own unrealistic expectations are not about the obvious, material products of industry and commerce, nor even with the wonders of science (although many of those can and sometimes do carry harmful repercussions for our physical and psychological health — cleverness and ingenuity clearly operate independently of wisdom, ethics, and morality).

What I care about in this commentary are the societies we create, our formal relations with each other within our own country, and our collective interactions with other societies internationally around the world. Those are the arenas about which I struggle with what I now regard as unrealistically high expectations.

If I knew how to lower my expectations, I would. And I intend to try. So far, however, I haven't found an effective way to do so.