

Why I Am Hopeful

by

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Admittedly the height of the perch from which to see beyond the grim duo of wars between nations and nations between wars has to be pretty high these days. And the climb to such a view is strewn with cynics' sneers of "naiveté" and "never." But hope and despair are merely the products of chosen assumptions, and I choose the assumptions that bring us eventually to well-being with each other. My assumptions are:

1. Human beings are intelligent. We have, even in our most crazed and disconnected moments, the capacity to think clearly. We are hard-wired to *think* about things. We are not inherently obedient automatons. When we do destructive things to each other and to the planet, we do so because our assumptions are fallacious and unexamined, not because we have no means to examine and change them. Our intelligence is there, waiting to be used.
2. Human beings want good to prevail. Even at our worst, whether it is savaging our own people, impoverishing much of the world with economics of greed, or making war to prove that making war is wrong, human beings do what we do because we assume it is right. Even the most selfish leaders -- and every national government, whatever their altruistic rhetoric, operates first in their perceived self interest -- do what they do because at some level they assume it is good and right. Socrates would have inserted here: "Human beings do not do wrongdoing knowingly."

3. Humans are more connected to each other than we are estranged. At our root we want each other's well-being. If fear of our own annihilation, i.e., the assumption that we cannot ever be safe in each other's presence, overrides this inherent caring for each other, the urge to see each other safe and thriving is nevertheless still in tact within us, however deeply submerged for the moment. Crucially, it is retrievable.
4. Humans are more alike than we are different. We are not some of us monsters and the rest of us angels, We share the same inherent nature, the same giant intelligence, the same capacity to love, the same ability to find, under the right conditions, ways forward for our common good, ways forward unimagined before.

The problems arise between us not because we are doomed from some inherent differences of good and evil, but because we are assuming for the moment vastly different things. The solutions between us lie in our facing for ourselves, and understanding in each other, those different assumptions.

Before the sun went down on September 11th, 2001, I let myself wonder what I would say if anyone were to ask me what I thought the leaders of the world should do in response. Privately I knew I would answer, "Gather. Sit comfortably as equals. Then, in turn, without interruption, and with profound respect for each other's humanity, answer these questions:

1. What were we assuming that led to this atrocity?
2. What would we have to assume in order to prevent it, and anything like it, from happening ever again?
3. If we acted on these new assumptions, what would we change about the way we run our countries and the way we live together on this planet?"

And the leaders answering those questions would take as long as it took to unearth the honest answers, to trust, as they went round the group again and again, that new ideas, new co-existent philosophies and policies, were incipient in everyone's brains, waiting to be conceived and formed.

They would all the while uphold that simplest behavior: giving everyone a turn, uninterrupted; giving respectful attention to each person assuming their common humanity; going round the group systematically as many times as it took for those questions to lead to peace.

Naïve? I don't think so.

It may, however, be naïve to assume that humans cannot think well enough together to tap our mutual desires for peace and human freedom. It may well be naïve to assume that the only way to respond to mass murder in one form is to create mass murder in another. It may surely be naïve to assume that right abides only with some of us and is absent in the rest of us. Surely this assumes a very flimsy intelligence in us all. And the evidence for such measly capacity to think well is simply not substantiated. To choose those assumptions about humankind is naïve, certainly. To assume, on the other hand, a mostly unharvested richness of intelligence in each of us, even in the apparently most vicious, is rigorous and sound.

And never? I don't think so.

But under certain conditions? Definitely.

And it is exactly the discovery of those conditions that gives me hope. Human beings' ability to gather and think, to understand each other for the first time, to come up with new and truly workable ways to live together needs certain conditions in order to surface safely and start to work. Those conditions are simple, practical, and replicable across all cultures. They have been recognized intermittently in whole or in part down the ages, and used,

at our best, in many different settings and called many different things. I call them a Thinking Environment. There are ten of them. They work.

And it is because in rapidly increasing numbers human beings are finally noticing them and embracing them, giving them a chance, agreeing to the courage and the discipline they require of us, that I feel hopeful.

We have the capacity to gather; to give everyone a turn without interruption and with respectful attention, free of competition, allowed to feel, to be different, to share information truthfully, to be accepted and acknowledged, without rush, for as many rounds and for as long as it takes to answer the questions:

- What are we assuming that led to this disaster?
- What would we have to assume in order to understand each other?
- If we made those new assumptions, what ideas would we come up with to live together in peace?

When this simple but profound way of being with each other is established and respected among us, it works. Human intelligence is ignited. We solve problems. We build trust. We co-exist peacefully.

I believe that someday, maybe not so long from now, we will choose this response. And a world we cannot at this moment imagine will begin to form in our hands.