

Finally, it's 2017

Looking forward to the new year I can't help looking forward to the next decade. A year is too short a time. Looking at a year is like looking at a day or a month: one sad event might cast a shadow over an otherwise sunny day. Looking at a year you can't see the forest for the trees.

Taking the world decade by decade, each one has been better (or for a pessimist, slightly less bad) than the last. Systematic statistics tell us that wars and violence are on the decline. Syria and Ukraine are awful, but Iraq and Darfur were terrible, and Bosnia and Rwanda even worse. Terrorism may be on the rise but murder rates are way down. Sexual violence has always been widespread but it is increasingly condemned criminalized, and prosecuted.

On the brighter side of life the internet really is fulfilling its long-anticipated potential to connect people. A decade ago most people had zero Facebook friends. Now they have hundreds. They may not be the same as in-person friends but they are people we connect to. Millions have rediscovered long-lost friends and lovers via Facebook, and there is no evidence that people have fewer "real" friends as a result.

A few decades ago art museums used to be musty places that schoolchildren were forced to visit. Now you have to book weeks in advance to see a major exhibit and struggle through crowds to see popular paintings. That may sound inconvenient, but it shows that art (like music and drama and dance) is becoming a bigger part of people's lives. Art is now ubiquitous in hip cafes — as are quality coffee and baked goods. That's all new.

What gives me hope is looking at the big picture; long-term trends; the forest, not the trees. Life, both public and private, is plagued by horrific suffering. But decade by decade the horrors are getting rarer and the pleasures are expanding. There will always be setbacks, and we should

never be complacent about progress. But on the whole the trend is clear. For most people in most places in the world, life is getting better, not worse.

Whatever your politics, your personality, or your religion, it makes sense to look a little farther into the future than just the next year. Forget about 2016. Are the things you truly value in life more secure now than they were ten or twenty years ago? If so, they are likely to be even more secure in the future. And that's cause for hope for well beyond 2017.

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