

The Progress Paradox

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Article:

Does money bring happiness? Most people agree with the old saying that it does not, and yet you often hear them add, “but it doesn’t hurt either.” Is this really true?

Economic data indicate that we are vastly richer than our ancestors. And yet survey data indicate that these dramatic gains in material wealth have not been accompanied by gains in happiness and feelings of well-being. By many measures, we feel worse off than our grandparents did.

Many of us feel that the world is getting poorer, less healthful, and less safe even though the data indicate otherwise. We feel stress, anxiety, and depression. We want more than we have, even though what we have was once attainable only by the very rich. Why has this happened, and what can be done?

This is the subject of a very readable new book, “The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse,” by Gregg Easterbrook, who writes for *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and other magazines. Among his previous books are “Tuesday Morning Quarterback” and “A Moment on the Earth.”

Easterbrook begins by outlining the many ways in which the lives of average Americans are better than our ancestors’. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 23 percent of all households have incomes above \$75,000, the lower bound of the upper middle class. Easterbrook notes that the 63 million people in these upper-income households are more than the entire population of the U.S. in 1890. Back then, less than one percent of all households had the material wealth equivalent to what nearly a quarter of all households have today.

The prices of many products are much lower than in the past. For all the complaining we do about gasoline prices, gas costs less in inflation-adjusted terms than it did in 1920. In the 1950s, it took a half-hour’s worth of wages for the typical American to buy a McDonald’s cheeseburger; now it takes about three minutes’ worth.

Product quality has improved, which implies that these price and income gains actually understate the improvement in our material well-being. Households have shrunk, so the higher household incomes are spread among fewer people. Gasoline is cleaner and burns more efficiently than decades ago. Automobiles and household appliances are full of standard equipment that used to be high-end options.

Easterbrook imagines bringing his great-great-grandparents back to life in modern America. They would be dazzled by the array of choices and benefits available to us, in our personal lives (we marry for love), in food (we can eat fresh strawberries even in March), and in health (life expectancies are higher, infant mortality rates lower). Crime has fallen, environmental pollution has been reduced, and women and minorities have personal freedoms imagined in the past but never realized.

The lives of average and rich Americans are converging. Leisure was once the province of the rich, but now it is increasingly available to everyone. The rich were once much healthier, longer-lived, and even taller than everyone else; now income-class differences in these outcomes are small.

Eating at restaurants used to be the height of luxury but is now a commonplace. Easterbrook points to “the modern, historically unprecedented fact that today the *typical* person has the economic means to pay someone else to prepare his or her meal.”

At times, Easterbrook comes off as a cheerleader for modern society, but perhaps that’s appropriate. We appear to have great difficulty appreciating our lives and our world. “Americans and Europeans have ever more of everything except happiness,” he writes.

In 1950, about 60 percent of Americans described themselves as “happy,” and that proportion has remained roughly constant since then. All of our material gains have failed to budge that number. And the proportion of those reporting that they are “very happy” has fallen, while the proportion of those who report being unhappy or depressed has risen.

Why is this happening? Here are a few of the theories Easterbrook discusses:

- The revolution of satisfied expectations: People assess their well-being based on their prospects for an improved life style. Our grandparents were poorer than we are, but they expected their lives to improve soon, and that led them to feel pretty good. Today, we have so much that we find it hard to expect much further improvement, and that unnerves us.
- The blurring of needs and wants: Psychologists have found that happiness does indeed improve with income, but only up to a point. For income gains above the level at which basic needs are met, “money decouples from happiness and the two cease to have anything to do with each other.” For the typical American, most serious needs have indeed been met. Think now: when was the last time you were seriously hungry? (Dieting doesn’t count!) Unfortunately, “once focused on wants our thoughts can never be at peace, because wants can never be satisfied.”
- Collapse anxiety: No matter how good things are now, we fear that they cannot be sustained into the future, and hence we fear that a collapse must be imminent.
- The tyranny of the small picture: Easterbrook writes, “Solving one problem often creates another; the new problem is noted and fretted about while the original, being solved, is forgotten... Instead of the big picture we often see the small picture, aware only of the lesser negative within the greater positive.” For example, the amazing improvements in drugs and health care over the decades have allowed people to live longer and thereby complain about such details as insurance coverage for prescription drugs.

Even if a new problem doesn’t arise, we tend to forget the solution to the old problem. For example, having a home with central air conditioning is so common now that it doesn’t much affect our feelings of well-being. But fifty years ago such a home was a big deal to most people, who would have been conscious of how happy it made them.

- A preference for bad news: In order to attract donations, fund-raisers for advocacy-focused non-profits (for the environment, the poor, or civil liberties) have an incentive to paint a negative picture of the current situation. Elite opinion-makers such as consultants and college professors prefer bad news to good because their public roles are diminished when everything’s hunky-dorey. Politicians cultivate bad news in order to motivate voters. And of course the news media thrive on bad news, from the if-it-bleeds-it-leads mentality of local news outlets to the national media’s obsession with “crises.”

Easterbrook gives a delicious example involving the NBC affiliate in Washington, D.C.: “During a week of snowstorms [it] changed its weather-reporting segment logo from ‘WeatherCenter’ to ‘StormCenter.’”

Now the logo always says ‘StormCenter.’ It can be a bright sunny day and the weatherman will stand in front of an ominous insignia that reads ‘StormCenter. ’”

- Evolutionary psychology: Although we have free will, evolutionary psychology argues that certain traits and behaviors are handed down to us genetically and hence are more likely to be observed in us even now. The male preference for multiple sex partners and the female preference for one committed partner are given as examples of this.

So has evolutionary psychology programmed us to be fearful and unhappy? Perhaps our primordial tendency to be on high alert for our lives and our tribe, so important for our survival as we evolved, has been transferred to the less significant risks we face in the modern world, such as household bacteria and playground equipment. Easterbrook writes that this ingrained instinct is “a defense mechanism to prevent complacency, but one whose side effect is making it hard to appreciate the moment.”

Fortunately, there is another psychology that can suggest avenues for how to escape the progress paradox. The emerging field of “positive psychology” emphasizes what makes us functional instead of dysfunctional. Psychologists have learned that cultivating our connections with others, forgiving those who wrong us, and being grateful for what we have can confer great benefits, on us *and* on our communities.

Easterbrook doesn’t pretend that nothing is wrong in the world. Life has improved dramatically, but some changes have been mixed bags, such as our emphasis on the automobile and suburban sprawl. And he hates the government policies that have encouraged the SUV to dominate our streetscapes. Of course there are larger problems to be tackled, such as terrorism, global warming, poverty, and the challenges facing developing countries. But Easterbrook argues that in order to address these problems in a strong and confident manner, we need to develop a better and more constructive understanding of our world now and how we got here.

There are no easy solutions, because the roots of the progress paradox are so intimately wrapped up in human psychology. But it’s clear that Easterbrook prefers that we deal with the paradox in a communitarian fashion and in the spirit of positive psychology. We should act to improve the lives of others, even if it means reducing our own incomes. He mentions particularly the poor, both in this country and in developing countries around the world, who are still with us in spite of overall material gains. Our high incomes haven’t much helped our well-being, while helping others makes most people feel better about themselves and more connected with the world in which they live.

Another approach is to find ways to appreciate the world around us. One psychologist quoted in the book has found that “the disabled and chronically ill report a slightly higher sense of well-being than the population at large, perhaps because they have a heightened appreciation of the value of their own lives.” He has also found that “for most people, the sense of well-being increases with age,” and as we all know all too well, increasing age means fewer days for us to enjoy.

This is one of the most important lessons we can learn from “The Progress Paradox.” Here’s what a rabbi said centuries ago, as quoted in Pirke Avot, a collection of Jewish proverbs: “Who is considered rich? One who is happy with what he has.” May we all acquire such riches in the new year.