



The Enlightenment



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Wonderful Things

To paraphrase the couplet in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses* entitled *Happy Thought*:

*The world is so full of such wonderful things,
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.*

Yes indeed! The world is full of wonderful and amazing things, both natural and human-made. Natural wonders include magnificent waterfalls, glorious mountains, deep canyons, tropical rain forests, colourful flowers, and an abundance of all kinds of flora and fauna existing all over the world. These things we often take for granted without reflecting on just how fortunate we all are to be able to observe and appreciate these wonderful features of nature. And there is also the wonder of the 7.4 billion-year-old universe itself, consisting of billions of galaxies, stars, and planets, including our own tiny speck of a planet in the enormous cosmos. Here on earth, we have to be especially in awe of the process of evolution that after close to 4 billion years, has brought about through natural selection, the remarkable animal known as *Homo sapiens*. A creature with the ability to think, to discover, to learn, to imagine, to speak intelligently, to invent, to write, to create fine literature, art and music, to dream, and to love.

Just think about it! The sperm of a male unites with the egg of a female in her womb, and after nine months of gestation, a new human being possessing the innate characteristics mentioned above is born. Think about it again! Just what kinds of life forces were going on in the womb to differentiate between forming a heart, lungs, a digestive tract, arms, legs, eyes, etc., and above all, a remarkable human brain? What an amazing creature evolution has wrought! If there was ever a miracle, this has to be it. Surely this amazing miracle should cause one to ponder and conclude that human life is indeed a most precious commodity, and that it should never be destroyed by another human being. Whether by murder or by engaging in war or by any other cause. Think about it again! Truly the greatest of natural wonders.

Now on to the human-made wonders. Almost everyone has heard of the seven wonders of the ancient world, but very few people can name them all. For the record they are: The Great Pyramid of Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus (Turkey), the Colossus of Rhodes, and the Lighthouse at Alexandria, Egypt. Before moving on to the seven wonders of the modern world, it is worth pointing out that all the ancient

structures are, or were, situated in the eastern Mediterranean area. Why were they there, and nowhere **else in the world?** The answer is contained in Jared Diamond's book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. The reason is that the fertile crescent and surrounding area is where the Agricultural Revolution began and flourished, allowing part of the population to be released from food production, hence enabling them to devote time to other things like constructing monuments. But this is a subject for a future *Enlightenment*.

The list of the seven wonders of the modern world keeps changing as new impressive structures are erected. A list compiled in 2013 lists the following: The Channel Tunnel, the Empire State Building, the Three Gorges Dam in China, the Burj Khalifa sky scraper in Dubai, the Panama Canal, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Canton Tower. A 2018 list contains much older structures: Manchu Picchu in Peru, the Chichen Itza Pyramid complex in Mexico, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal in India, the Colosseum in Rome, Petra in Jordan, and Christ the Redeemer Statue in Rio de Janeiro. All of these remarkable structures deserve mention in any list of human-made achievements, but there are many more human achievements to talk about, particularly in regard to developments that have occurred in the last 200 years.

The first achievement I want to mention is the advancements that have been made in medical science. I am able to write these words at the age of 88 because medical scientists invented the prostate specific antigen (PSA) blood test in the 1980s. This test enabled my urologist to detect the early stages of prostate cancer in 1994, remove the gland, and grant me many more years of enjoyable life. And there have been many, many other discoveries and advances that have resulted in life expectancies being at least double what they were just a few centuries ago. There is still a ways to go, but the progress has been remarkable.

Next, being a graduate from the Ontario Agricultural College in 1953, I want to put in a plug for advancements in agriculture. Along with air and water, humans (and other living things) cannot exist without an adequate supply of essential nutrients that must be supplied by foodstuffs, mostly produced on farms. Thus, farmers are really the most important people on earth, because without them, many would starve. In hunter/gatherer times, every able-bodied person in every family was most likely involved in the acquisition of food. After the Agricultural Revolution, and the advancement of urban civilizations, fewer people worked on farms, although a sizable percentage of the population still labored there. Things began to change, however, with the invention of farm machinery in the 1800s, accompanied by the advent of improved agricultural practices through research at agricultural colleges. In 1820 in the U.S., 72% of the work force lived on farms. By 1850 the number had fallen to 64%, by 1920 it was 30%, by 1933 it was 25%. It has continued to fall since that time and today only 2% of the U.S. work force lives on farms. What a striking achievement! Most people, however, when shopping for groceries at the supermarket seldom think about where their food comes from and may not appreciate the hard-working farmers who today are skilled business people subject to the whims of weather and commodity prices. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude for what they continue to provide, and when next sitting at the dinner table with your family, **don't** thank God for what you are about to receive. Why? Because this supernatural being probably does not exist (See below). Instead of thanking God, thank the farmers.

When thinking about positive advancements made in the last 200 years, science and technology almost immediately come to mind. The progress has been mind-boggling. Inventors, engineers, and technologists have taken the fruits of science and changed the way we live. We have witnessed the end of the age of steam, experienced the many attributes of electricity, enjoyed driving motor cars, flown in airplanes, listened to radios and watched TV, communicated by telephones, both analog and digital, as well as by email, and the list goes on. What wonderful progress we have witnessed.

Today as I sit in my home with all the creature comforts I could possibly desire, I reflect on all the changes I have witnessed over the past 88 years, and I would like to be able to agree with two lines in English poet Robert Browning's *Songs from Pippa Passes* published in 1841.

*God's in his heaven,
All's right with the world!*

Oh! If only this were true. If there was indeed an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God somewhere in the universe answering prayer and controlling events on earth in such a manner as to ensure that every human being is free of want while living in a peaceful world, **wouldn't this be** so wonderful? But since we are far from such a utopian existence, the theodicy argument comes into play. Why does this all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God allow so much misery in the world? The obvious conclusion: this supposed God does not likely exist. We are most likely on our own and unfortunately *all's not right with the world!* There are many many things that are wrong. Things that are not so wonderful.

Not So Wonderful Things

These are times like no other. Despite all the good and wonderful things mentioned above, today's times are perhaps best described as uncharted and uncertain, and I am reminded of four lines from W. B. Yeats poem *The Second Coming* written in 1919.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

So where does one begin because there are so many things not right in our world. We are living in turbulent and uncertain times. Inequality is increasing, most likely contributing to the rise of populism throughout the world. Religious conflicts are still with us. Global warming is becoming more and more evident. Nuclear arsenals are not being reduced fast enough. Democracy is being threatened. Is democracy and capitalism the best political system for the future, at least in the Western world? And although this may not be a bad thing, the Digital Revolution is upon us. Robots and Artificial Intelligence will continue to change the way we live, most likely at an accelerating rate.

Can humanity cope successfully **with today's problems and** adapt to these changes? Will workers be able to acquire the new job skills needed for obtaining employment? Will the greedy 1% change their ways and agree to pay more taxes in order to provide social safety nets? Should government-sponsored guaranteed annual income be considered as an aid to reducing poverty? Will political opponents cooperate to govern in the best interest of all citizens, not just the influential rich that finance their election campaigns? Will a prosperous thriving middle-class be a part of the future or will inequality with haves and have-nots be the norm? Will wars ever cease or will cyber and drone wars replace war as we have known it in the past? Will **religions eventually disappear? Will China become a successful secular country and eventually the world's superpower? Will the Chinese people ever have freedom of speech?**

Posing these questions demonstrates just how challenging the future will be. Can workable practical solutions be found? **To me it seems evident that many of today's problems are a result of a shortage of** competent global leaders, particularly in the United States and Russia, but elsewhere as well. And it seems equally evident that unless skilled competent leaders concerned with the well-being of all citizens – along with the prosperity and freedoms of their country – come forward, the future could be bleak. All this gives me great concern because I am worried about the future of my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren. I would like them to be able to grow up in the kind of Canada I was privileged to live in, with the same kind of opportunities I had.

I realize that we cannot go back to **the simpler so called "Golden Years" of 1945 to 1975** when I was working and raising a family, but can we learn something from this time when real incomes kept rising and most people were better off than their parents who had lived through two world wars and the Great Depression? What were the basic conditions that prevailed in this 30-year period?

Immediately after 1945 the world was recovering from an exhausting war and rebuilding was in progress. The rebuilding resulted in low unemployment and a sizable middle class began to develop. Tax rates for the wealthy were higher than they are now, allowing for the financing of social safety nets including free health care (except in the U.S.). Banks and financiers provided loans to enterprises that provided employment, growth, and profits that were used to provide more employment, growth, and profits that could be taxed progressively. The result: inequality was low. Wealth was not concentrated in the 1%, but was spread more evenly. Democracy and capitalism seemed to be working with the well-being of each citizen in mind. In 1967 **Canada joyously celebrated 100 years of progress with the spectacular Expo '67 in Montreal. All seemed to** be right with the world. At least in Canada and some other places as well.

So, what can we learn? It is the economy! It is a prosperous economy that creates conditions of optimum **equality where the rich don't get** excessively richer and the poor **don't get** poorer but become better off. Another important condition: government regulations must keep banks from engaging in risky investments causing them to fail. In the 2008 financial crisis, Canadian banking regulations saved Canadians from the disasters that befell countries where regulations had been relaxed.

Since we are not now recovering from a world war, and since so much has changed in so many ways since 1945, will it ever be possible to again have an economy where everyone, not just the 1%, can share in the nation's wealth? It is not that everyone should have the same, it is that everyone should have enough to be able to live with adequate food, clothing, and shelter and be usefully employed. Unfortunately though, with increasing inequality we seem to be heading backwards rather than forward as dissatisfaction is causing a shift to populism.

So where do we go from here? As stated above, competent ethical leaders need to come forward. If and when they do, they will have many challenges. Some challenges will be met, but can anyone cope successfully with the problem of human greed that causes inequality? And not only robber barons and financial operatives exhibit greed; leaders themselves are among the worst offenders. Dictators and oligarchs are known to have salted away huge sums of money for themselves, instead of using it for the benefit of the citizens they rule. Particularly disturbing is that foreign aid often ends up in the pockets of unethical rulers instead of ending up where it is intended. How can this be stopped?

Unfortunately, in the past it has often been events such as revolutions or wars that have brought excessive inequality to an end for a sustainable period. But can we be optimistic enough to believe that humanity will finally not have to resort to such drastic measures to reduce inequality? As has been stated many times, we are at a crossroad because we are experiencing the onset of the Digital Revolution that, through automation and artificial intelligence, is changing the job market in major ways. Can ways be found to retrain unemployed workers to fit into the new economy? This is only one of the many challenges ahead.

I know the world our great-grandchildren will grow up in will be vastly different from the world experienced by people of my generation that grew up in the 30s and 40s. We were fortunate to live in relative prosperity, in peaceful freedom, **and able to enjoy a host of “wonderful things.” Our parents coped with two world wars** and a depression in order to provide the lifestyles we have enjoyed. We have not been so selfless. Most of us raised and educated our children and paid for a house on one income. But many of our children required two incomes to do the same. And housing has become so expensive our grandchildren may never own a home. By allowing the 1% to acquire so much wealth, resulting in increasing inequality, we have let our descendants down and left them with huge national debts. Not very good management on our part! (DAH).

Reason and Beliefs About the Silver Tsunami

By Carol Matthews

What do we believe about growing old? We’re told (and tell ourselves) that we’ve worked hard all our lives and now deserve to relax and enjoy ourselves. Through the years this may have been the case, but does it still hold true? Many younger people see it differently.

When I tell my daughter that October has been declared Seniors’ Month by Nanaimo City Council, her response is, “Isn’t that a bit like Breathe in, Breathe out Day?”

“What are you trying to say?” I ask.

“Well,” she points out, **“seniors are the biggest and richest demographic these days and there are more people over 65 than under 15. Seniors were born at the best of times when there was lots of work, plenty of good jobs, mostly with pension plans and benefits. Most of you could afford to buy a house. Yet you still get reduced fares on the ferry and cheaper prices at theatres.”**

To emphasize her point, she adds, **“When is it *not* Seniors’ Month?”**

Harumph! Young people today think they know everything, so I remind my daughter that life is not a bowl of cherries for us old wrinklies. I tell her that the Revera Report on Ageism (2016) found that **63% of seniors 66 years of age and older say they’ve been treated unfairly because of their age and 21% of all Canadians say older Canadians are a burden on society!**

“Ageism is real,” I tell her.

Later that day I reflect on her words. Maybe there’s a reason for ageism. Certainly there are a lot of us! The 2016 Census reveals that there are more people over 65 than under 14. That seems wrong to me.

I recall that in the year before his death, my husband became concerned about generational inequity and wrote grim ditties about the situation:

*We’re all in the silver tsunami
We eat at the best spots in town
Those younger folk all must abhor us
They’ve no way of taking us down.*

It's true that as a demographic, we've been pretty lucky. Sure, we've worked hard and deserve some leisure time. Many of us continue to do important work in our community after our retirement, but for the most part we folk in the silver tsunami are seen to be self-indulgent pleasure-seekers.

I believe we still have much to contribute. In addition to concrete skills and knowledge, we've gathered useful experience through the years. We've lived long enough to have experienced both good luck and bad luck and have been treated unfairly. We've had great expectations that have been dashed. We've fallen in love and been wildly happy, and we've also experienced broken hearts. We've lost people we loved, and we've been scared. We've experienced the comfort of friendship, and we've had friends who betrayed us. We've placed our hopes in things that didn't come to pass. We've had many things turn out surprisingly well.

In other words, we've learned, through lengthy experience, what it is to be human. We older citizens have, through the years, learned not to judge those less fortunate than ourselves. Maybe the greatest gift we can give to the next generations is the empathy that comes from our lived experience. From being human.

I like the word human, with all its connections. Humane. Humanitarian. Humanist. I phone my daughter. "I've decided not to be a senior anymore."

"Good," she says. "How?"

"I'm going to become a human. And if I'm not a senior, then you don't have to be a junior!"

"Better and better!"

"Just a couple of humans. On a more level playing field."

Carol Matthews' short stories and reviews have appeared in literary journals such as *Room*, *The New Quarterly*, *Grain*, *Prism*, *Malahat*, and *Event*. She has published a collection of short stories and four books on non-fiction.

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