

History:

---

## MANKIND'S BETTER MOMENTS

In her prize-winning *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (1978), historian Barbara Tuchman focused on a "violent, bewildered, suffering, and disintegrating age." She went on to see a few parallels with our own troubled times. But we should not be blinded by our present predicaments; every age has its ups and downs, as she explains in this essay adapted from the National Endowment for the Humanities' Jefferson Lecture, which she delivered in Washington, D.C., last spring.

*by Barbara W. Tuchman*

For a change from prevailing pessimism, I should like to recall for you some of the positive and even admirable capacities of the human race. We hear very little of them lately. Ours is not a time of self-esteem or self-confidence as was, for instance, the 19th century, whose self-esteem may be seen oozing from its portraits. Victorians, especially the men, pictured themselves as erect, noble, and splendidly handsome. Our self-image looks more like Woody Allen or a character from Samuel Beckett. Amid a mass of world-wide troubles and a poor record for the 20th century, we see our species—with cause—as functioning very badly, as blunderers when not knaves, as violent, ignoble, corrupt, inept, incapable of mastering the forces that threaten us, weakly subject to our worst instincts; in short, decadent.

The catalogue is familiar and valid, but it is growing tiresome. A study of history reminds one that mankind has its ups and downs and during the ups has accomplished many brave and beautiful things, exerted stupendous endeavors, explored and conquered oceans and wilderness, achieved marvels of beauty in the creative arts and marvels of science and social progress, loved liberty with a passion that throughout history led men to fight and die for it over and over again, pursued knowledge, exercised reason, enjoyed laughter and pleasures,

---

played games with zest, shown courage, heroism, altruism, honor, and decency, experienced love, known comfort, contentment, and occasionally happiness. All these qualities have been part of human experience, and if they have not had as important notice as the negatives nor exerted as wide and persistent an influence as the evils we do, they nevertheless deserve attention, for they are currently all but forgotten.

### Great Endeavors

Among the great endeavors, we have in our own time carried men to the moon and brought them back safely—surely one of the most remarkable achievements in history. Some may disapprove of the effort as unproductive, as too costly, and a wrong choice of priorities in relation to greater needs, all of which may be true but does not, as I see it, diminish the achievement.

If you look carefully, all positives have a negative underside, sometimes more, sometimes less, and not all admirable endeavors have admirable motives. Some have sad consequences. Although most signs presently point from bad to worse, human capacities are probably what they have always been. If primitive man could discover how to transform grain into bread, and reeds growing by the river bank into baskets, if his successors could invent the wheel, harness the insubstantial air to turn a two-ton millstone, transform sheep's wool, flax, and worm's cocoons into fabric, we, I imagine, will find a way to manage the energy problem.

Consider how the Dutch accomplished the miracle of making land out of the sea. By progressive enclosure of the Zuyder Zee over the last 60 years, they have added half a million acres to their country, enlarging its area by 8 percent and providing homes, farms, and towns for close to a quarter of a million people. The will to do the impossible, the spirit of Can-Do that overtakes our species now and then was never more manifest than in this earth-altering act by the smallest of the major European nations. . . .

Great endeavor requires vision and some kind of compelling impulse, not necessarily practical as in the case of the Dutch,

---

*Barbara W. Tuchman, 68, was born in New York City and holds a B.A. from Radcliffe (1933). A two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize (1963, 1972), she is the author of The Guns of August (1962), Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911–45 (1971), and other books. A longer version of this essay, copyright © 1980 by Barbara W. Tuchman, appeared in The American Scholar.*



*This detail from a  
15th-century painting  
depicts the rebuilding of  
the west front of St.  
Denis Church, near  
Paris.*

*Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.*

but something less definable, more exalted, as in the case of the Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages. The architectural explosion that produced this multitude of soaring vaults—arched, ribbed, pierced with jeweled light, studded with thousands of figures of the stone-carvers' art—represents in size, splendor, and numbers one of the great, permanent artistic achievements of human hands. What accounts for it? Not religious fervor alone. . . .

Explanations of the extraordinary burst that produced the cathedrals are several. Art historians will tell you that it was the invention of the ribbed vault, permitting subdivision, independence of parts, replacement of solid walls by columns, multiplication of windows, and all the extrapolations that followed. But this does not explain the energies that took hold of and developed the rib. Religious historians say these were the product of an age of faith that believed that with God's favor anything was possible. In fact, it was not a period of untroubled faith but of heresies and Inquisition. Rather, one can only say that conditions were right. Social order under monarchy and the towns was replacing the anarchy of the barons, so that existence was no longer merely a struggle to stay alive but allowed a surplus of goods and energies and greater opportunity for mutual effort. Banking and commerce were producing capital, roads making possible wheeled transport, universities nourishing ideas and communication. It was one of history's high tides, an age of vigor, confidence, and forces converging to quicken the blood.

---

Even when the general tide was low, a particular group of doers could emerge in exploits that still inspire awe. Shrouded in the mists of the 8th century, long before the cathedrals, Viking seamanship was a wonder of daring, stamina, and skill. Pushing relentlessly outward in open boats, they sailed southward around Spain to North Africa and Arabia, north to the top of the world, west across uncharted seas to American coasts. They hauled their boats overland from the Baltic to make their way down Russian rivers to the Black Sea. Why? We do not know what engine drove them, only that it was part of the human endowment.

### Man at Play

What of the founding of our own country? We take the Mayflower for granted, yet think of the boldness, the enterprise, the determined independence, the sheer grit it took to leave the known and set out across the sea for the unknown where no houses or food, no stores, no cleared land, no crops or livestock, none of the equipment of settlement or organized living awaited. . . .

Happily, man has a capacity for pleasure too, and, in contriving ways to entertain and amuse himself, has created brilliance and delight. Pageants, carnivals, festivals, fireworks, music, dancing and drama, parties and picnics, sports and games, the comic spirit and its gift of laughter, all the range of enjoyment from grand ceremonial to the quiet solitude of a day's fishing, has helped to balance the world's infelicity. *Homo ludens*, man at play, is surely as significant a figure as man at war or at work. In human activity, the invention of the ball may be said to rank with the invention of the wheel. Imagine America without baseball, Europe without soccer, England without cricket, the Italians without boccie, China without ping-pong, and tennis for no one. Even stern John Calvin, the exemplar of Puritan denial, was once discovered playing bowls on Sunday, and in 1611 an English supply ship arriving at Jamestown found the starving colonists suppressing their misery in the same game. Cornhuskings, log-rollings, barn-raisings, horse races, wrestling and boxing matches have engaged America as, somewhat more passively, the armchair watching of football and basketball does today.

Play was invented for diversion, exertion, and escape from routine cares. In colonial New York, sleighing parties preceded by fiddlers on horseback drove out to country inns, where, according to a participant, "we danced, sang, romped, ate and

---

drank and kicked away care from morning to night." John Audubon, present at a barbecue and dance on the Kentucky frontier, wrote, "Every countenance beamed with joy, every heart leaped with gladness . . . care and sorrow were flung to the winds. . . ."

It was a case of men and women engaged in the art of enjoyment, a function common to all times, although one would hardly know it from today's image of ourselves as wretched creatures forever agonizing over petty squalors of sex and alcohol as if we had no other recourse or destiny.

The greatest recourse and mankind's most enduring achievement is art. At its best, it reveals the nobility that coexists in human nature along with flaws and evils, and the beauty and truth it can perceive. Whether in music or architecture, literature, painting, or sculpture, art opens our eyes and ears and feelings to something beyond ourselves, something we cannot experience without the artist's vision and the genius of his craft.

### Art and Progress

The placing of Greek temples like the Temple of Poseidon on the promontory at Sunium, outlined against the piercing blue of the Aegean Sea, Poseidon's home; the majesty of Michaelangelo's sculptured figures in stone; Shakespeare's command of language and knowledge of the human soul; the intricate order of Bach, the enchantment of Mozart; the purity of Chinese monochrome pottery, with the lovely names—celadon, oxblood, peach blossom, clair de lune; the exuberance of Tiepolo's ceilings where, without the picture frames to limit movement, a whole world in exquisitely beautiful colors lives and moves in the sky; the prose and poetry of all the writers from Homer to Cervantes to Jane Austen, and John Keats to Dostoyevsky and Chekhov—who made all these things? We—our species—did. The range is too vast and various to do justice to it in this space, but the random samples I have mentioned, and all the rest they suggest, are sufficient reason to honor mankind.

If we have, as I think, lost beauty and elegance in the modern world, we have gained much, through science and technology and democratic pressures, in the material well-being of the masses. The change in the lives of, and society's attitude toward, the working class marks the great divide between the modern world and the old regime.

From the French Revolution through the brutal labor wars of the 19th and 20th centuries, the change was earned mainly by

force against fierce and often vicious opposition. While this was a harsh process, it developed and activated a social conscience hardly operative before. Slavery, beggary, unaided misery and want have, on the whole, been eliminated in the developed nations of the West. That much is a credit in the human record even if the world is uglier as a result of adapting to mass values. History generally arranges these things so that gain is balanced by loss, perhaps in order to make the gods jealous. . . .

Although the Enlightenment may have overestimated the power of reason to guide human conduct, it nevertheless opened to men and women a more humane view of their fellow passengers. Slowly the harshest habits gave way to reform—in treatment of the insane, reduction of death penalties, mitigation of the fierce laws against debtors and poachers, and in the passionately fought cause for abolition of the slave trade.

The humanitarian movement was not charity, which always carries an overtone of being done in the donor's interest, but a more disinterested benevolence-altruism, that is to say, motivated by conscience. It was personified in William Wilberforce who, in the later 18th century, stirred the great rebellion of the English conscience against the trade in human beings. His eloquence, charm of character, and influence over devoted followers could have carried him to the Prime Minister's seat if personal power had been his goal, but he channeled his life



Fotomas, England.

British and American abolitionists cut down the tree of slavery—from a pamphlet of the Anti-Slavery Society, founded in America in 1775.

---

instead toward a goal for mankind. He instigated, energized, inspired a movement whose members held meetings, organized petitions, collected information on the horrors of the middle passage, showered pamphlets on the public, gathered Nonconformist middle-class sentiment into a swelling tide that "melted," in Trevelyan's phrase, "the hard prudence of statesmen."

### Summoning Courage

Abolition of the slave trade under the British flag was won in 1807, against, it must be said, American resistance. The British Navy was used to enforce the ban by searches on the high seas and regular patrols of the African coast. When Portugal and Spain were persuaded to join in the prohibition, they were paid a compensation of £300,000 and £400,000, respectively, by the British taxpayer. Violations and smuggling continued, convincing the abolitionists that in order to stop the trade, slavery itself had to be abolished. Agitation resumed. By degrees over the next quarter century, compensation reduced the opposition of the West Indian slave-owners and their allies in England until emancipation of all slaves in the British Empire was enacted in 1833. The total cost to the British taxpayer was reckoned at £20 million.

Through recent unpleasant experiences, we have learned to expect ambition, greed, or corruption to reveal itself behind every public act, but, as we have just seen, it is not invariably so. Human beings do possess better impulses, and occasionally act upon them, even in the 20th century. Occupied Denmark, during World War II, outraged by Nazi orders for deportation of its Jewish fellow-citizens, summoned the courage of defiance and transformed itself into a united underground railway to smuggle virtually all 8,000 Danish Jews out to Sweden. Far away and unconnected, a village in southern France, Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, devoted itself to rescuing Jews and other victims of the Nazis at the risk of the inhabitants' own lives and freedom. "Saving lives became a hobby of the people of Le Chambon," said one of them. The larger record of the time was admittedly collaboration, passive or active. We cannot reckon on the better impulses predominating in the world; only that they will always appear.

The strongest of these in history, summoner of the best in men, has been zeal for liberty. Time after time, in some spot somewhere in the globe, people have risen in what Swinburne called the "divine right of insurrection"—to overthrow despots,

---

*"O, Sir, doubt not but that  
angling is an art"—from  
The Compleat Angler (1653).*



repel alien conquerors, achieve independence, and so it will be until the day power ceases to corrupt—not a near expectation.

The ancient Jews rose three times against alien rulers, beginning with the revolt of the Maccabees against the effort of Antiochus to outlaw observance of the Jewish faith. . . . In the next century, the uprising of zealots against Roman rule was fanatically and hopelessly pursued through famine, sieges, the fall of Jerusalem, and destruction of the Temple, until a last stand of less than a thousand on the rock of Masada ended in a group suicide in preference to surrender. After 60 years as an occupied province, Judea rose again under Simeon Bar Koziba, who regained Jerusalem for a brief moment of Jewish control but could not withstand the arms of Hadrian. The rebellion was crushed, but the zeal of self-hood, smoldering in exile through 18 centuries, was to revive and regain its home in our time.

The phenomenon continues today in various forms, by Algerians, Irish, Vietnamese, and peoples of Africa and the Middle East. Seen at close quarters and more often than not manipulated by outsiders, these contemporary movements seem less pure and heroic than those polished by history's gloss—for instance, the Scots of the Middle Ages against the English, the

---

Swiss against the Hapsburgs, or the American colonists against the mother country.

I have always cherished the spirited rejoinder of one of the great colonial landowners of New York who, on being advised not to risk his property by signing the Declaration of Independence, replied "Damn the property; give me the pen!" On seeking confirmation for the purpose of this essay, I am deeply chagrined to report that the saying appears to be apocryphal. Yet not its spirit, for the signers well knew they were risking their property, not to mention their heads, by putting their names to the Declaration. . . .

### History's Lessons

So far I have considered qualities of the group rather than of the individual, except for art, which is always a product of the single spirit. Happiness, too, is a matter of individual capacity. It springs up here or there, haphazard, random, without origin or explanation. It resists study, laughs at sociology, flourishes, vanishes, reappears somewhere else. Take Izaak Walton, author of *The Compleat Angler*, that guide to contentment as well as fishing of which Charles Lamb said, "It would sweeten any man's temper at any time to read it." Although Walton lived in distracted times of Revolution and regicide, though he adhered to the losing side of the Civil War, though he lost in their infancy all seven children by his first wife and the eldest son of his second marriage, though he was twice a widower, his misfortunes could not sour an essentially buoyant nature. "He passed through turmoil," in the words of a biographer, "ever accompanied by content. . . ."

*The Compleat Angler*, published when the author was 60, glows in the sunshine of his character. In it are humor and piety, grave advice on the idiosyncracies of fish and the niceties of landing them, delight in nature and in music. Walton saw five editions reprinted in his lifetime, while innumerable later editions secured him immortality. He wrote his last work, a life of his friend Robert Sanderson, at 85, and died at 90 after being celebrated in verse by one of his circle as a "happy old man" whose life "showed how to compass true felicity." Let us think of him when we grumble.

Is anything to be learned from my survey? I raise the question only because most people *want* history to teach them lessons, which I believe it can do, although I am less sure we can use them when needed. I gathered these examples not to teach but merely to remind people in a despondent era that the good

---

in mankind operates even if the bad gets more attention. I am aware that selecting out the better moments does not result in a realistic picture. Turn them over and there is likely to be a darker side, as when Project Apollo, our journey to the moon, was authorized because its glamor could obtain subsidies for rocket and missile development that otherwise might not have been forthcoming. That is the way things are.

Whole philosophies have evolved over the question whether the human species is predominantly good or evil. I only know that it is mixed, that you cannot separate good from bad, that wisdom, courage, benevolence exist alongside knavery, greed, and stupidity; heroism and fortitude alongside vainglory, cruelty, and corruption.

It is a paradox of our time that never have so many people been so relatively well off and never has society been more troubled. Yet I suspect that humanity's virtues have not vanished, although the experiences of our century seem to suggest they are in abeyance. A century that took shape in the disillusion that followed the enormous effect and hopes of World War I, that saw revolution in Russia congeal into the same tyranny it overthrew, saw a supposedly civilized nation revert under the Nazis into organized and unparalleled savagery, saw the craven appeasement by the democracies, is understandably suspicious of human nature. A literary historian, Van Wyck Brooks, discussing the 1920s and '30s, spoke of "an eschatological despair of the world." Whereas Whitman and Emerson, he wrote, "had been impressed by the worth and good sense of the people, writers of the new time" were struck by their lusts, cupidity, and violence, and had come to dislike their fellow men. The same theme reappeared in a recent play in which a mother struggled against her two "pitilessly contemptuous" children. Her problem was that she wanted them to be happy and they did not want to be. They preferred to watch horrors on television. In essence, this is our epoch. It insists upon the flaws and corruptions, without belief in valor or virtue or the possibility of happiness. It keeps turning to look back on Sodom and Gomorrah; it has no view of the Delectable Mountains.

We must keep a balance, and I know of no better prescription than a phrase from Condorcet's eulogy on the death of Benjamin Franklin: "He pardoned the present for the sake of the future."

---