

The Best of Times, The Worst of Times
Keeping Hope and Making Progress Today
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
August 6, 2017

The title of my sermon is not meant to suggest that how we cope with today's realities is only a matter of perspective, that it is a cup-half-full/cup-half-empty matter of opinion. Today there are some very negative and some very positive things happening, and it's easy to lose sight of one if we're only focusing on the other. If we just see the negative, we can become angry, overwhelmed, lose hope, and give up. If we just see the positive, we're in denial, maybe delusional, and certainly irresponsible. If we just see positive, we're part of the problem, but if we just see the negative we have no reason to be part of the solution. To change our world for the better we must first believe better is possible, and to believe better is possible we need hope, and to have hope we need to recognize the good things happening.

So, let's begin with a *via negative*. Let us "dare the dark," as theologian Matthew Fox says and enter the alchemical cauldron, where it becomes possible for its dark, chaotic, hellish contents to be transformed into nourishment. For today our entire planet is experiencing a *dark night of the soul*, the worst of which stems from the rise of authoritarian regimes around the world, global inequality, and global warming. According to an article in the Chicago Tribune earlier this year, based on research from the Human Rights Foundation, "the citizens of 94 countries suffer under non-democratic regimes, meaning that 3.97 billion people are currently controlled by tyrants, absolute monarchs, military juntas or competitive authoritarians. That's 53 percent of the world's population. Statistically, then, authoritarianism is one of the largest—if not the largest—challenges facing humanity."¹ The op-ed, written by Garry Kasparov and Thor Halvorssen, one of whom was, respectively, "beaten, blacklisted and exiled by the Kremlin,"² and the other who witnessed "his mother shot by Venezuelan security forces,"³ goes on to point out the two authoritarian dictators ruling their countries, "Putin and Maduro have co-conspirators in all parts of the world, fellow would-be tyrants who are dismantling the free press, jailing opponents, manipulating elections and committing a host of human rights violations."⁴

We don't have time to mention all the authoritarian leaders now in charge of more than half the world, but you know the key players, Turkish President Erdogan, who has closed media outlets, thousands of schools, fired more than 120,000 government workers, and locked up nearly 50 thousand he's accused of conspiring against him. Kim Jong Un, whose totalitarian government publicly executes North Korean citizens on a whim, imprisons thousands in concentration camps, intentionally starves others to death, and enjoys threatening the world with his growing nuclear weapons capabilities. Russia's Vladimir Putin has worked to crush

¹ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-authoritarians-dictators-putin-russia-china-20170213-story.html>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

any dissent in his own country, recently used his military to take over another—Crimea—and apparently doesn't mind interfering with the free elections in other countries, including our own. Philippine President Duterte, in addition competing to with Donald Trump for position of most vulgar authoritarian ever, has, during just one year in office, been responsible for the extrajudicial murder of thousands of citizens in his unrelenting drug war, proudly likened himself to Hitler by promising to kill 3-million more, has encouraged his soldiers to rape women, has bragged about personally murdering suspected criminals—oh, and has been welcomed into the White House and told what a great job.

There are other authoritarian leaders just as notorious as these, but most have stayed out of the limelight and are even normalized as legitimate leaders on the world stage, like Chinese President Xi, King Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, and, until recent years, even Bashar al-Assad in Syria, even though their countries have some of the worst human rights records on Earth. And, of course, here in our own country, we've somehow managed to install a President who during his first months in office dropped the most powerful bomb since Hiroshima and Nagasaki on a whim, and just this week encouraged our nation's police to treat suspects with brutality, and threatens to fire or does fire anyone who gets in his way. Worse than his behavior, however, is that of our GOP lawmakers in charge refuse to even investigate the unconstitutional use of his position for personal financial gain, and his possible collusion with the Russians to steal the election. When the lawmakers themselves won't enforce the law when doing so threatens their own power, including refusing to hold hearings for a President's Supreme Court nominee for more than a year, then changing the rules overnight to install their own, we are under an authoritarian regime that is above the law and feels free to make up the rules as it goes along.

Today, many forms of inequality seem just as overwhelming. The most recent United Nations data, which includes all 196 countries and territories in the world, indicates, though some are doing better than others, there is no place on Earth where women are treated equally to or are better off than men. The latest Gender Inequality Index, or GII, measuring the "richness of human life," rather than the "richness of the economy," suggests women round the world are behind in the areas of lifespan, education, income, political participation, equal rights, security, and living in a healthy environment.⁵ Although the U.S. ranks number 10 out of nearly 200 hundred countries, and its GII has been very slowly improving since 1990, in recent years our partisan Supreme Court has ruled it legal for Corporations to decide what health coverage is appropriate for women to have, and that it's okay not to include contraception if it goes against the religious sentiments of their owners. Although more millennial women have college degrees than men these days, they still have higher poverty rates, and by the time the average working woman in our country reaches age 59, she will have earned more than \$800,000 less than the average man, all according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research.⁶

⁵ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII>

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ariel-smilowitz/for-us-women-inequality-takes-many-forms_b_7064348.html

Although different nations have historically used different excuses to justify discriminating against certain segments of their populations, including gender, caste, class, and religion, it has long been race in the U.S. And today, more than 50 years past the Civil Rights Movement, as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva says, “blacks and most racial minorities lag behind whites in terms of income, wealth, occupational and health status, educational attainment, and other relevant social indicators.”⁷ In recent years, thanks to the advent of cellphone cameras and dash cameras, we’ve begun to witness the sort of deadly encounters between the police and unarmed black men that has been systemic for generations, not just the occasional missteps of a few bad apples. Just this week we learned the Baltimore Police Department is now preparing to dismiss 55 cases after video evidence was released showing police officers planting drugs in suspects’ vehicles. And the NAACP just issued its first ever travel advisory warning minorities to use extreme caution while traveling through Missouri after its Governor signed what it’s calling a new Jim Crow law that makes it more difficult for victims of bias to prove they were discriminated against. Also this week, a leaked document revealed Attorney General Jeff Sessions’ Justice Department intends to sue some colleges and universities for using Affirmative Action, even as Trump himself announced support for a bill that would cut the number of legal immigrants allowed into this country in half, allowing only English speakers with advanced degrees and proven job skills. And given his recent announcement about banning Transgender members from the military, it’s clear discrimination against the GBLTQ community continues in our nation at the highest level.

Then, of course, there’s income inequality. Just a few weeks ago it was widely reported that five men (down from six last year) Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Jeff Bezos, Amancio Ortega, and Carlos Slim, who, together, are worth more than 400 billion dollars, have more wealth than half the people on Earth. To comprehend a billion, I always like to point out that a billion seconds ago Ronald Reagan was still President. Such economic disparity can no longer allow anyone to reasonably conclude global capitalism is democratic or just. Here in the U.S., the bottom 90 percent earn an average of \$34 thousand a year, while the top 1 percent earn almost \$1.4 million, and the top 1/10th of a percent earn close to \$7 million a year. The average worker with a 401k retirement plan currently has a balance of about \$18k, compared to the 100 top CEOs in the country with more than \$14.7 billion set aside to live out their golden years. During the past billion seconds, give or take a few hundred million seconds, the wages of the top 1 percent has grown 293 percent, almost tripling, while the wages for the bottom 90 percent, almost everyone else in the country, have remained the same since 1979.⁸

Our final decent into the abyss of our anxiety and despair brings us to what may be the worst threat to our existence humanity has ever known—global warming. According to the NASA website, which, for some reason Trump hasn’t interfered with like he has the Energy Department, 16 of the hottest years on record have all occurred since 2001, with the past three, including 2016, being the hottest of them all. 25 days ago, NASA also reported warm

⁷ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Lynne Rienner Publisher, Boulder, CO, 2001, p. 1.

⁸ <https://inequality.org/facts/income-inequality/>

weather events in the arctic are happening more often and lasting longer. 4 months ago, the agency reported the extent of sea ice in both the Arctic and Antarctic reached another record breaking low, almost 800,000 fewer square miles than in 2010, “the equivalent of having lost a chunk of sea ice larger than Mexico.”⁹ Two weeks ago, as you probably heard, an ice shelf three times the size of London, with twice as much volume as Lake Erie, broke free of Antarctica. As of mid-July, California has had more than 3200 fires burn over 113,000 acres, Death Valley reached 127 degrees, just seven degrees short of the hottest temperature ever recorded on Earth. This past week, several heat records were broken from Oregon to Seattle, and would have been broken here in Spokane too were it not for the smoke in the air keeping temperatures down a little—whoopee for us! Melting glaciers also mean the oceans are warming and acidifying, bleaching the coral reefs and already causing sea levels to rise near coastal cities everywhere, as well as leading to extreme weather events for us all.

So that’s the negative part, the overwhelming part, the part that makes us sick and feel we might as well just give up. But that’s not why we considered all of this today, to stay in the gloom, but to realize reality, to feel the urgency, to commit to doing our part to making our world more just and sustainable. But, again, to make such a commitment, we first need to feel confident what we do can make a difference, that what we do can bring an end to tyranny everywhere, finally bring an end to racial inequality in our own nation and to inequality around the world, and to combat, even begin to reverse global warming.

To begin, last week I made the case the communities of the world, the less than 200 countries and territories, are inevitably moving toward one world community. In doing so, I outline several reasons I believe this is so. Firstly, some historians tell us the Age of Nations is a relatively recent and modern phenomenon that may end when it becomes obsolete. Secondly, scholars generally agree nations emerged in response to perceived threats from outsiders, but as the people of all nations increase their interactions through the World Wide Web and other communications technologies, developing a global culture in the process, and have no choice but share in one economy, care for one environment, and strengthen international laws, the demands for global equality, and justice, and human rights must follow. Thirdly, historians like Yuval Harari, and philosophers like Peter Singer, among others, say this inevitability is already happening, that, as Harari says, it’s “crystal clear that history is moving relentlessly towards unity.”¹⁰

This doesn’t mean an end of Nations, any more than becoming one country meant an end to individual States in the U.S., or the formation of the European Union meant an end to individual nations there. What it does mean is our global community, of which we are all citizens, whether we recognize it or not, will increasingly erect new structures to help organize and govern our supranational reality. I personally don’t believe our supranational community is a coming reality, but that it already exists, though our old paradigm hasn’t caught up with the new reality yet, so we still don’t usually talk in these terms. The rise of authoritarian regimes, furthermore, the desire of many to bail out of the European Union, or

⁹ <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2017/sea-ice-extent-sinks-to-record-lows-at-both-poles>

¹⁰ Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version), loc. 2562.

of voters in the Philippines electing a despot who promised to cut all ties with the U.S., and voters here in the U.S. electing an authoritarian bully like Trump who promised to put America's interests first, and to build a wall to keep out criminals and rapists, reflect an intuitive fear-based reaction to what we all sense is happening, the people of the Earth are becoming one, blurring the lines of our imaginary borders.

For me, at least, this new and inevitable reality is reason for hope. For when, as individuals we're able to transcend national identity toward a larger identity as members of the global, human community, we will have no further need of tyrants to protect of from outsiders, because there won't be any outsiders. It won't end all conflict, but hopefully identifying as one global community, as one people, will keep us from dropping bombs on each other the same way being a national community keeps individual States from going to war (at least since 1865).

Perhaps we've even seen a bit of a shift just this past week here in our own country as Republicans finally began curtailing Trump's authoritarian abuses, by both passing sanctions against Russia for interfering with our election, and putting procedures in place to prevent him from firing the Attorney General or Special Counsel Robert Mueller while legislators are away. And if that doesn't give you hope, consider this, both the House and Senate will be on break for the next 33 days! That's more than a month they can't make any disastrous decisions. More importantly, they leave without having been able to repeal the Affordable Care Act, or much else on their agenda for that matter. They've even agreed to come together with Democrats and begin working to improve some of the problems with the ACA rather than continuing their attempts to get rid of it.

Obviously, we still have far to go if we're ever going to achieve social and economic equality for all. So, I won't offend the most marginalized among us by attempting to sugarcoat the reality we're still in. Surely there has been some progress over the decades in the areas of equal rights for women, racial equality, and gay rights, but it hasn't been near enough, not in our own nation, or in the global community, even as the issue of income inequality has been rapidly growing worse. My hope we shall finally surmount these miseries, however, also lies partly in my belief we are becoming one community. When governments can no longer exploit our natural fear of strangers and strange ways to rally the troops against our own neighbors, or to discriminate against those who are different to uphold the status quo, because we have finally come to see ourselves more as Earthlings, as Gaians, than as Americans, or Russians, or Chinese, or Africans, or Arabs, and so forth, then we celebrate our differences. It hasn't always ended well, and there's been an authoritarian backlash, but in recent years millions involved in global events the like the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement is evidence what I'm saying is true, that when we are exposed to each other, we realize a more egalitarian society is possible and we are moved to action.

Last November, while ill-gotten means led to the election of Trump, Washington State voters were among the latest to overwhelmingly pass an initiative requiring our state legislators to support a national constitutional amendment to get big money out of politics by reserving constitutional rights for people, not corporations. More recently, try as they might, with all the power to do so on their side, GOP leaders were, again, unable to repeal Obamacare

because, flawed as it might be, it is more than a step in the right direction, a step toward equality and justice, and it is not possible to go backward. And now, for the first time, rather than talking incremental steps, Democrats are increasingly talking about making single-payer healthcare part of their platform. And let's not forget that earlier this week Senator Cory Booker called for the nationwide legalization of marijuana. The Drug War has been the longest, costliest, deadliest, most destructive war in history, and has been the primary mechanism in support of the New Jim Crow, the era of mass incarceration that has militarized our local police forces, and led to a racist criminal justice system that grossly condemns people of color and their communities to second class status, through poverty, unemployment, political disenfranchisement, and other kinds of racism. Yet a report out early this month shows that in states like ours, where cannabis has already become legal, the number of traffic searches by police and highway patrol has plummeted to nearly half of what they were. Maybe we're finally realizing ending racism isn't about changing racist views, but about changing our racist systems.

Finally, the area where there is the most reason for hope, in my opinion, regards global warming. As threatening as the impacts of climate change have already become, we are making unexpected, rapid, and encouraging progress. For instance, when Trump announced he would pull out of what was already a minimalist response to climate change, the rest of the world got serious about the Paris Climate Agreement. Equally as important, cities all over the U.S. are defying Trump by pledging to abide by the agreement, as are some key states, including California and New York, with consumer markets so large, it will force companies and industries, including car manufacturers, to meet their greener standards. Just a few days ago, India, with one of the largest consumer markets in the world, announced it will transition to nothing but electric cars during the next thirteen years. Together, these large populations will require the entire automobile industry to make the same switch.

Even more exciting than all of this is the rapid progress we're making with renewable energy. If you haven't heard, during the past decade green energy use in California has grown from less than 1 percent to nearly 15 percent, and one day this past Spring, green energy accounted for 40 percent of its use. In Arizona, where excess solar is stored in batteries, green energy has become cheaper than natural gas, which has stunned and encouraged the energy industry. Coal is dead, natural gas is on its way out, and green energy is on the way and here to stay. Today, furthermore, there are more jobs in solar than in oil, and, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the fastest growing job in American by far, paying more than \$50,000 a year, is wind turbine technicians. The bureau also predicts that during the next decade jobs installing solar panels will far outpace all other occupations. The Green Energy revolution is not on the way, it has arrived, proving the only thing that's no longer sustainable is the lie that protecting our environment costs jobs.

So yes, these are the worst of times, and there is good reason for worry and despair. But they are also the best of times because we are on the cusp of finally breaking through the self-spun cocoon that has trapped humanity for so long in its larval state. We are on the verge of a breakthrough, and spreading our glorious wings of justice, equality, and harmony with nature as we move closer to become one community, one with our planet, and one with all that is.