Why Things are Better than Ever

And Why We Still Don't Realize It

By

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In 2012 I read a book that changed my life. It changed my life because it permanently altered my mindset and dramatically changed the way I see the world. The book is *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think*, by Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler. *Abundance* is mostly about how the exponential advance of technology is making our lives and the world better than ever. But it also talks about why most of us don't realize it, why we are naturally pessimistic and can't easily recognize all the positive things happening today and that have been increasingly happening for the past several centuries. That's the part that has had such a transformative impact on my mindset, the understanding that our human biology and neurology have evolved to see the world as dangerous, even when it isn't.

This tendency, little doubt, once helped our ancient ancestors, including our pre-human ancestors, to survive the many threats in their environments, especially predation by other animals. But consider going to a garage sale and finding a magnificent 85-inch flatscreen television being sold for just ten dollars. It looks perfectly fine and is fairly new.

"Does it work," you ask the seller.

"Yes, it has a magnificent picture," she responds. But it seems too good to be true. There's got to be a catch. "Then why is it only ten dollars," you ask.

"To be honest," the proprietor says, "We left it on during our extended vacation and when we got back it would only play one channel, the same channel it had been stuck on for weeks."

It doesn't seem like much of a deal after all, but out of curiosity you ask, "What channel that?"

"Fox news," the seller replies.

If you mostly watch Fox News (as I understand a lot of people do), it's still not a bad deal, but most people, even some of the most conservative, wouldn't want an 85-inch television that only plays one channel taking up space in their homes. This is what reading *Abundance* helped me realize, that I have a brain that's evolved to only play one channel, the danger channel. This isn't to say there aren't real and serious challenges and threats in the world, only that there are a lot of good things happening too, including addressing those matters. But we don't easily recognize this because our brains have evolved to tune into negative news.

Today I want to help us switch to the Abundance channel that shows the positive and hopeful things that are also happening in the world. *Abundance* refers to a world in which our planet is healthy and there is far more than enough of everything for everyone. "Abundance is about creating a world of possibility," Diamandis and Kotler say, "a world where everyone's days are spent dreaming and doing, not scrapping and scraping."[1]

Before I continue, please take a moment to connect with how this makes you feel. Do you feel dubious because you've been watching the negative news channel and heard that overpopulation and over-consumption already requires nearly two planets the size of Earth to sustain us? Do you feel angry because such thinking further excuses us from making the dramatic changes in lifestyle that we must to begin living sustainably and to save our planet? Are you thinking, "There he goes again, our sweet but extremely naïve minister talking about a future that is never going to happen and would take eons to occur even if it does"?

Yet, Diamandis and Kotler predict that, "Within a generation, we will be able to provide goods and services, once reserved for the wealthy few, to any and all who need them. Or desire them. Abundance for all is actually within our grasp."[2] A great example is the story of aluminum, the most abundant metal on Earth, even more so than iron. Yet, for most of human history it was impossible to access, which made it the rarest and most valuable of all metals. Napolean had a set of aluminum utensils reserved for only his most important guests. Everyone else had to settle for gold forks and knives. When the Washington Monument was erected in 1848, it was capped with an expensive 9-inch, 100-ounce pyramid made of solid aluminum. Just a few years later, in 1886, a couple of chemists discovered they could use a process called electrolysis to easily extract this once precious metal. "Thus, taking aluminum from rarity to abundance virtually overnight," writes philanthropist and entrepreneur Naveen Jain. "Today we throw away aluminum cans. You can't pay people to recycle them."[3]

Aluminum remains incredibly useful, but's it not as necessary for our lives as clean energy and fresh water are, both of which are scarce these days. The scarcity mindset says let's conserve what we can, even if it means nobody will have enough, and some people will have less than others, and even fewer people will have the power to decide who gets what. But the Abundance mindset says there's plenty of green energy and clean water for all our needs; we just have to figure out better ways to access them. Every hour, for example, there's more solar energy hitting the Earth than we use in an entire year. Like aluminum, we just need to find better and cheaper ways to harness it. Just this past week was a good sign this is happening. It was widely reported that U.S. power plant emissions were down by 4.5 percent, partly due to warmer climate, and partly because of our shift away from coal to natural gas and renewables. In 2023, renewables generated more power than coal.

This may seem minor, and too little too late, but we have to account for the exponential growth of technology. In 1890, for example, just four years after electrolysis extraction was discovered, the first aluminum smelter produced 40 tons of aluminum. Five years later, it was producing 450 tons, more than a 1000-percent increase. The use of renewables may be getting off to a slow start, but it's going to dominate energy production a lot sooner than most can imagine.

It's the same with water. We live on a planet that's 70-percent water. The problem is that more than 97 percent of it is salt water. But "What if," Diamandis and Kotler ask, "in the same way that electrolysis easily transformed bauxite into aluminum, a new technology could desalinate just a minute fraction of our oceans?"[4] Desalination technology has already advanced a lot in recent years, but, perhaps, the most promising tech is using graphene filters, which are a million times thinner than paper, to get the job done. I won't go into the science of how graphene works, but a side benefit is that this relatively recently discovered material is created from a single element, carbon—the stuff that's causing global warming. So, let's kill two birds with stone by using technology to sequester the unwanted abundance of carbon in our atmosphere, then use it to make enough fresh water for all our needs and then some.

These are just a couple of examples of how we can consider many of the challenges before us through a mindset of abundance instead of scarcity. Notice I say "challenges" and not "problems." That's also something I learned from Peter Diamandis. Problems are what we face when we're stuck on the fear and negativity and hopelessness channel. Courage, positivity, and possibility are what we gain when we tune in to the Abundance mindset.

Switching to the Abundance mindset requires us to become aware of some other cognitive biases that keep us stuck on that other channel. This is why Diamandis and Kotler begin their book by citing the work of Nobel Prize winning economist and psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, most known for his bestselling book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, that talks a lot about the biases that cause us to make rash and, often, bad decisions. They start by pointing out that we most often have to make decisions on the fly, without knowing all the facts. So, we all adopt certain patterns or shortcuts in our thinking that Kahneman refers to as "heuristics." Unfortunately, these shortcuts can often lead us to false conclusions and bad decisions.

One of the most common is what *Abundance* calls "the illusion of validity," which its authors define as "a tendency for people to view their own beliefs as reality," even if they aren't based on much or any reliable evidence. So, if our brains and bodies are wired to be on the lookout for danger, then we are more likely to predict doom and mistrust others than to agree with someone who tells us things are generally getting better—getting better mostly because there are lots of good people in the world working to make them better.

The tendency to predict negative outcomes, to think negatively about the future, is a byproduct of our neurology which includes the amygdala, "the almond shaped sliver of the temporal lobe responsible for primal emotions like rage, hate, and fear." Diamandis and Kotler say, "It's our early warning system, an organ always on high alert, whose job is to find anything in our environment that could threaten us."[5] This means the emotion of fear has its own special place in our brains which is "Anxious under normal conditions," they say,

"[and] once stimulated, the amygdala becomes hypervigilant."[6] This coincides with Evolutionary Psychology's Evolutionary Threat Assessment Systems theory (ETAS) that I often bring up; the theory that "the most important question faced everyday by all animals, including humans, is whether their immediate environment is dangerous or not."[7] This means, we are neurologically and psychologically evolved to be afraid of the future and of the unknown. One way to cope with this uncertainty is the "illusion of validity," that feeling that we are right even when we don't have good reasons for thinking so. This also means, even if the amygdala is relaxed and we're not feeling anxious, that we still aren't likely to catch much of the good news happening because we're simply not neurologically wired to do so.

Abundance also talks about the confirmation bias, "[the] tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions—but it can often limit our ability to take in new data and change old opinions,"[8] and the negativity bias, "the tendency to give more weight to negative information and experiences than positive ones."[9] It doesn't help that mainstream news tends to focus on negative stories, probable for the same reasons we do as individuals, because the news media also reflects the biases of our ancient neurology and psychology.

In his book, *Enlightenment Now*, cognitive psychologist and Harvard professor Steven Pinker writes, "Media scholars who tally news stories of different kinds, or present editors with a menu of possible stories and see which they pick and how they display them, have confirmed that the gatekeepers prefer negative to positive coverage."[10] He also points out that, "The consequences of negative news are themselves negative. Far from being better informed, heavy newswatchers can become miscalibrated."[11] This is so because the news causes us to think things are bad and getting worse even when the evidence proves the opposite.

In *Moonshots: Creating a World of Abundance*, Naveen Jain succinctly explains what the evidence really says:

> The number of people living in poverty has never been lower. There are far more democracies in the world. Literacy has reached an all-time high. Higher food production and lower costs have put a massive dent in world hunger. Infant mortality rates have plummeted. We're on an accelerated path to electric cars and far less consumption of fossil fuels. Sanitation standards, life expectancy, air quality—it's all improving.[12]

Concise as he is, Jain isn't the only one making this point. Pinker says, "The case has been made in beautifully written books, some by Nobel laureates, which flaunt the news in their titles—*Progress, The Progress Paradox, Infinite Progress, The Infinite Resource, The Rational Optimist, The Case for Rational Optimism, Utopia for Realists, Mass Flourishing, Abundance, The Improving State of the World, Getting Better, The End of Doom, The Moral Arc, The Big Ratchet, The Great Escape, The Great Surge, The Great Convergence.*"[13] There's also a couple

of websites he recommends; "Max Roser's *Our World in Data*, Marian Tupy's *HumanProgress*, and Hans Rosling's *Gapminder*."[14] Interestingly, Pinker points out none of the books he mentions "was recognized with a major prize, but over the period in which they appeared, Pulitzers in nonfiction were given to four books on genocide, three on terrorism, two on cancer, two on racism, and one on extinction."

So, we really have to work hard to look past our fear-based biases, as well as beyond the most readily available information, to broaden our understanding of what's really happening in the world. *Abundance* and *The Rational Optimist* are favorites of mine: their data may be getting old, but the positive trends they point to are continuing. Pinker's *Enlightenment Now* is also excellent, in my opinion, and was published more recently in 2018. Hans Rosling's bestselling 2018 book, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World—and Why Things are Better Than You Think*, is packed full of data. In it he says, "Factfullness, like a healthy diet and regular exercise, can and should become part of your daily life. Start to practice it, and you will be able to replace your overdramatic worldview with a worldview based on facts … You will make better decisions, stay alert to real dangers and possibilities, and avoid being constantly stressed about the wrong things."[15]

Rosling's book has a lot of data, indicating that bad things, like legal slavery, oil spills, expensive solar panels, HIV infections, children dying, battle deaths, capital punishment, leaded gasoline, plane crash deaths, disaster deaths, smallpox, ozone depletion, child labor, nuclear arms, smoke particles, hunger, and poverty have all dramatically decreased during the past 200 years or less. At the same time, good things have been increasing around the globe, like women's right to vote, science, literacy, protected nature, harvest yields, democracy, child cancer survival, monitored species, mobile phone accessibility, Internet access, girls in school, electricity coverage, clean water, and immunization.

When we think linearly, which is the way we naturally see the world, we may focus on the short-term setbacks rather than all the long-term progress that's happening, none of which negates the grand challenges we must continue to face and address. But the point is that we are facing them, and we are improving, even if we don't know it. Rational optimism isn't merely about seeing the positive progress in the world, but about believing we can continue to make positive progress. It's about having good reasons and the motivation to roll up our sleeves and get to work because we know we are and can continue making a difference. The people who are making a difference in the world are the people who believe they can. They are optimistic people. They are confident. They have hope. And there are a lot more of them than you might think because there is a lot more progress happening than most of us recognize.

Few of us would buy a TV that's stuck on one channel. So why settle for a mind that is? Life's too short to spend it deceiving ourselves, and the world needs us to be better thinkers so we can work together to continue making a better world.

[1] Diamandis, Peter and Kotler, Steven, *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think*, Free Press, New York, NY, 2012, p.13.

[2] Ibid., p. 9.

[3] Jain, Naveen; Schroeter, John; Branson, Sir Richard. Moonshots: Creating a World of Abundance (p. 109). John August Media, LLC. Kindle Edition.

[4] Diamandis and Kotler, ibid., p. 6.

[5] Ibid., p. 32.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Flannelly, Kevin J., and Galek, Kathleen, *Religion, Evolution, and Mental Health: Attachment Theory and ETAS Theory,* **Journal of Religion and Health** (2010) 49-337-350, Published online, March 17, 2009, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, 2009, p. 340.

[8] Diamandis and Kotler, ibid., p. 30.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Pinker, Steven. Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress (p. 42). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Jain, ibid.

[13] Pinker, ibid., p. 52.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Rosling, Hans, *Factfulness*, Flatiron Books, New York, NY, 2018, p. 16.