UPDATING YOUR ANCIENT PAST

There are (at least) two major qualities from our ancient past that cause us considerable trouble.

Taking conscious control of them and training and updating ourselves for our *present* environment can make a big difference in our quality of life.

One of these is our attraction to high calorie foods. Starvation and famine were dire threats for our hunter gatherer forebears. Finding enough food was always the mission - and discovering a trove of high calorie foods was generally a cause for celebration and feasting.

When our ancestors came across the wilderness equivalent of a bakery, the best option for their survival was to eat as much as they possibly could.

So today, when high-calorie/low-nutrition snacks are everywhere and inexpensive, our inner hunter gatherer leads us to want to eat as much as *we* can.

That our rate of obesity and corresponding health hazards such as heart disease and diabetes are through the roof is one consequence of our incredible prosperity.

This is not some moral failing or lack of character; we're doing what our successful forebears selected for us. What worked well for our ancestors is killing us today.

Our challenge is to adapt to our abundance by consciously and purposefully resetting our habits from hunter-gatherer auto-pilot eating, and toward deliberate habits that include knowledge of how our current meals will affect our future health and well-being.

The other leftover from our ancient past is our strong bias toward negativity.

For our hunter-gatherer forebears, their natural inclination when assessing their environment was to be pessimistic and vigilant. They scanned for danger in a way that kept every one of our ancestors from being eaten, poisoned, murdered, drowned, crushed… or otherwise mortally damaged.

Those that didn't do this… are not our ancestors.

Those cheery optimists of the distant past who weren't sufficiently on guard, continuously looking for whatever could go wrong… they may have had a very nice time for a short while, but they weren't likely to survive for long.

This negative bias served us well for millennia, but in our much more peaceful, complex, and abundant world today, we're better served by understanding this bias, and adapting to the new environment in which most of us, most of the time, now live.

The concrete consequence of this negative bias is that, as Roy Baumeister and John Tierney point out in their book, *The Power of Bad*, negative experiences are about four times as strong for us as positive ones.

An easy way to experience this is with two simple questions posed by Amos Tversky to Steven Pinker:

> "How much better can you imagine yourself feeling right now? How much worse can you imagine yourself feeling?"
>
> "How many things could happen to you today that would leave you much better off? How many things could leave you much worse off?"

We can all imagine a few good things, but the bad things are endless – accidents, illness, bad news, asteroids hitting the earth… and just about anything you might see on television or read about in the news.

This negative bias includes the mistaken idea that the world is getting worse.

In his book, *Enlightenment Now*, Steven Pinker removes the ambiguity about what progress is:

> "Most people agree that life is better than death. Health is better than sickness. Sustenance is better than hunger. Abundance is better than poverty. Peace is better than war. Safety is better than danger. Freedom is better than tyranny. Equal rights are better than bigotry and discrimination. Literacy is better than illiteracy. Knowledge is better than ignorance. Intelligence is better than dull-wittedness. Happiness is better than misery. Opportunities to enjoy family, friends, culture and nature are better than drudgery and monotony.
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> "All of these things can be measured. If they have increased over time, that is progress…

And he points out which direction we have been going in relation to these things:

> "…And here's the shocker: *The world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being*. Here's a second shocker: *Almost no one knows about it*."

I can hear the rebuttals to this now, because I've heard them endlessly, from otherwise brilliant, well-informed people.

But facts are facts, and the fact is that right now, with all the genuine troubles that humanity still faces, there has *never* been a more peaceful, healthy, abundant, literate, hopeful time to be alive on this earth. Yes, even with all those things you're thinking about that are in the news today.

And yet…

We have within us a powerful vigilance for danger and woe, compliments of our ancestors. There's a place for this, of course. There is, after all, still plenty of danger and woe in the world.

But there is also a hazardous downside to weighing the negative so strongly: We over-react to bad news or negative events, and that over-reaction can create trouble that's much greater than our more primitive programming can perceive.

In aiming for safety from the seemingly endless awfulness of the world, we limit our choices, stifle

our creativity, and avoid leaning into opportunities for greater flourishing in today's world. We shrink from opportunities, and so live much smaller, less productive, and less happy lives.

The antidote is not, like Pollyanna, to pretend that everything's fine all the time; any more than the antidote to the seduction of fatty, sweet foods is to live on a rigid diet of gruel.

Our challenge is to bring our conscious awareness to this tendency. To know that when we allow our minds to entertain every horrible possibility, that these are *thoughts*, and not the reality we're living in at the moment.

The antidote to our negativity bias is to purposefully balance it with a hefty dose of *reality*, by focusing often on what and whom we have to be grateful for. Specifically:

- At the end of each day, think of three good things that happened that day.
- From time to time think fondly of someone who has been a blessing to your life, and why.
- Every day, look purposefully for the things you appreciate, the things you love about your loved ones, the qualities you enjoy about your work, the beauty and delight of where you live.

Every bad thing in a day needs to be purposefully countered by four good things. Make that your goal, and you will greatly improve your own grounding in reality; and therefore your flourishing, effectiveness, and joy in life.

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