

Beware 'It's Getting Worse' Narratives

They're too easy.

I'm skeptical of any argument that says X or Y are worse than they used to be. Not because things can't get worse. I don't hold to the Whig theory of history. I'm skeptical because the 'things are getting' worse framework is always accepted and no one demands evidence.

Whenever an assumption is universally shared and never plainly stated my skeptenna goes up.

I had an interesting conversation recently about how hard it is to find amazing people of high character and intelligence (part of the reason such conversations are enjoyable is because those having them get to silently assume they are among the few and feel warm about it). I was in full agreement that great people are rare. But I didn't agree with the claim that there are fewer amazing people today than ever before.

It's too easy for it to appear that the past had a higher percentage of amazing people, and too hard to know how to find the truth.

Think about your own life. What stories are you most likely to remember and retell? The good ones. What people will you best remember? The good ones.

We look back on the past and most of the evidence that remains is about extraordinary people and events. Your daily life, on the other hand, is mostly monotony with average people. You don't read histories of the nature and causes of boring people buying and preparing ham while talking about the weather. Ninety percent of history is about one percent of who and what actually happens. No wonder it appears there were more great people.

It is possible that people of high character and intelligence are fewer. But it would require evidence, and more than a cursory review of recorded history.

The thing I'm more wary of than the accuracy of the 'things are getting worse' story is what it does if I accept it. It's a comforting notion, but comforting in the dangerous way. It lets me off the hook for lacking imagination. Since everyone parrots it, you can go along without forming a view of your own. You can ignore the challenge of optimism. You can let the world be framed for you instead of creating a frame that best helps achieve your ends.

There is some value in thinking things are getting worse. For one, it may be true, and if so it can be good to see what's coming. It also might inspire you to act heroically if you feel you're in the End Times.

But it shouldn't be uncritically accepted that things are worse than they used to be. The evidence on most issues strongly suggests the opposite, and the dangers of mental laziness outweigh the potential gains.