

Good News, the Bad News is Wrong

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Bulletin Quotes:

A headline from last week:

-SEVEN REASONS TO WORRY AS YOUR KIDS HEAD BACK TO SCHOOL

-“Americans are suckers for BAD news.” --multiple unknowns

-“The contest between agreeable fancy and disagreeable fact is unequal. Americans are suckers for good news.” --Adlai Stevenson.

But then Mr. Stevenson lost his elections. Possibly because he got behind the times.

OPENING WORDS:

Which side will buttered toast land on if dropped?

Pessimists say buttered side down. Empiricists say buttered side up. So they tested.

Buttered toast, threw it up in the air, and it landed – buttered side up.

Empiricists say, “See?”

Pessimists say, “We buttered the wrong side of the toast.”

Rationally anticipating the future is extremely important to society in general and UU’s in particular. Since the next life or afterlife plays less of a part in UU thinking, how we spend our time in attempts to do our part to improve the future is **a very important decision** as many of us UU’s believe it’s our only chance, our only time through this world. To work toward a better future, we want to be working on the right things. And,

as we think about, and possibly worry about, our own personal future, we are fully aware of how those thoughts and worries can impact our happiness.

The progressive-oriented Pew Research Center reports, with rather amazing results, a 2006 study wherein some respondents described themselves as “very happy”. Among those who felt they were very happy, 47 percent also labeled themselves as conservatives while only 28 percent of the self-designated “very happy” claimed to be liberals. UU’s are certainly theological liberals, mostly social liberals, and a mix of liberal and conservative when it comes to economics, politics, and other such criteria people use to categorize themselves. I presume most of us would like to be able to categorize ourselves as “very happy” and not always believe that -- we buttered the wrong side of the toast.

MAIN TALK:

Dr. I.L. Graves, sometimes known affectionately as “our Larry”... The sometimes applies to his alternative names not to how he is known as he is always known affectionately. Larry loaned me a book, *The Biography of a Germ*, by a cohort of his in the area of microbiology, Arno Kalen. Kalen’s Lyme disease science was intriguing, but so was his observations, his perspective on society, and his philosophy. Here’s a quote from Arno Kalen in response to his temptation to feed the media bad news by predicting yet another certain catastrophic pandemic:

At this point one can only speculate what lies ahead for (Lyme disease) and for us. I approach the task with misgivings for people wiser than I have made such speculations

and sounded very foolish soon afterward. Part of the reason is temporal provincialism, our difficulty imagining times unlike our own. Also, our vision of the future, as of the past, reflects not only evidence but fears and longings. Perhaps that is why so many prophets foretell utopia or dystopia, heaven or hell on earth, though so much of life really consists of anticlimaxes and muddle. Now, having invoked the future and excused myself in advance for getting it wrong, I must make my own guesses...

Despite evidence that this (catastrophic infection) is quite possible, I am cautiously optimistic. My attitude probably reflects in part a lifetime of listening to reremiads – some right and some quite mistaken. In my childhood in the '40's and '50's, some scientific experts warned of an impending Malthusian disaster. The World, they said, could never feed many more than its then two billion people, yet its population was soaring. Besides, they added, in twenty years the earth would run out of oil. We were all destined to freeze (in a coming ice age) and starve in the dark, if nuclear disaster did not kill us first. In the following decades we often heard that we were fated to choke on our wastes and see the last poisoned songbird fall from the last irradiated bough. Now we are told that our planet is becoming a foul greenhouse where Manhattan will sink into the sea and tropical parasites ravage Minneapolis.

Yet so far we have survived some our worst possibilities. New technology and occasional good sense have eased some of the problems...Most of today's six billion people are longer-lived, better fed and more prosperous than their grandparents were. Their very

existence shows that we often fail to anticipate the good as well as the poisonous fruits of our labor.

All of us can recall great and small reports of bad news covering a range of societal threats from minor to mega-perils facing our country, the world, and humankind. One saying is that we good people love bad news. Another, from the media perspective, is that “Bad news sells.” People are worriers, and some combine their worry skills with such a thirst, such an addiction, for bad news that they literally worry themselves sick. Others, if not physically sick, are significantly distracted to the point of impeding their ability to achieve their full potential. Pathological fear takes a dramatic toll on our psyches and on our wallets. Analysts report that we waste tens of billions of dollars and person-hours every year on largely mythical hazards.

This morning I would like to share with you the good news. The good news is that the bad news is wrong. Now I didn’t hear a big sigh of relief nor did I see a whole bunch of wide smiles. That leads me to believe I need to make a case for that statement.

Here’s why you can have confidence that the good news is that the bad news is wrong:

1. Bad news promoters historically have been wrong.
2. Bad news is front page stuff whereas its subsequent wrongness is hushed, relegated to the second or third section, if reported at all.
3. Bad news is manufactured and manipulative.

4. Bad news has lasting power in our memories long after facts have proven otherwise.
5. Bad news is easy to report and frequently hard to rebut.

I've dropped the caveats such as "usually", "almost always", for simplicity and we are not talking this morning about Aunt May's sickness-type issues where the bad news may be truly bad.

The larger picture future is a betting game, playing the odds. The data supporting each of these statements is boring and I've bored you enough with data in previous talks.

Anecdotes are far from proof, but they are more entertaining. So let's enjoy some examples to sharpen these statements:

The first statement is one of history. Contrary to what your broker or mutual fund might say, past performance is among the best predictors of future results. Just ask any investor who buys the high-flying fund of the previous year, a strategy that back tests over decades with impressive results.

Remember the gypsy moth infestation of a decade or two ago that the experts predicted would deforest all of New England? Here's a quote from an authoritative magazine, "After spending over a million dollars in trying to exterminate the gypsy moth, the State of Massachusetts has given up the struggle." That was in November, 1904. The more recent threat was not new as millions of years of movement of species about the earth and

infestation cycles continue. The good news is that, in spite of the predictions of the 80's, there are more leaves on the trees of New England now than a century ago.

Around this same time, early 20th century, Kalen records that a cry went up that immigrant prostitutes tainted WASP clients with syphilis; those stricken Johns became traders to their race by passing the disease to their wives and making them sterile, and by siring congenital idiots with saber shins and notched teeth. Syphilitic sterility, the experts said, was lowering the Anglo-Saxon birth rate, while lesser breeds multiplied like rodents. Every aspect of public and private life seemed vulnerable. The *New York Times*, among other sources of edification and anxiety, warned that Americans might now be traveling at their peril in trolleys, trains, and ships steered by syphilitic lunatics. The good news is that the lunatic driving your NY city cab is likely crazy for reasons other than syphilis.

Closer to the present, [After more than six years of fighting] "...the *New York Times* announced...that the (Russian-Afghan) war was, in effect, over with the "Guerrillas Divided; At Risk of Being Conquered." Dan Rather hosted a CBS special report concluding that all was lost, and henceforth no reporter would be able to go in." [Within a few months the Afghans successfully forced the Russians out.] -- George Crile *Charlie Wilson's War*

We happened to be in the Yellowstone area this summer during the 20th anniversary of the 1988 fires that burned 35% of the park. The local papers were full of memories of

what was being told the nation by the “experts” in the national media. In the Billings (MT) Gazette, Bob Eskey, local environmentalist and reporter, recalled that just outside his room at the Three Bears Lodge at West Yellowstone, a CNN reporter and his “expert” were broadcasting live that the ash from the fires burning in Yellowstone National park was falling on them as they spoke. It was snow. Eskey says, “I wanted to go out and tackle the guy. He sensationalized an already sensational story.” More importantly, those “experts,” stated that the area may be a meadow for decades. And the fire just had to deal death to many of the park’s large game. Today, spring-green lodgepole pine trees up to 15 feet high are in vigorous re-growth, reacting to a natural occurrence, fire, necessary to keep the forests healthy. And the large animals that number about 35,000 in the park? Of those 35,000, the fire that burned a third of the 2.2 million acres killed 246 elk, nine bison, four mule deer, two moose, and no bears. They just moved out of the way as they have for millennia. The good news is that, historically, the bad news is wrong.

Bad news is front page stuff. Richard Shermer offers: We are fed numbers daily that we cannot comprehend about threats to our security we cannot tolerate. Better safe than sorry, right? Not necessarily. Irrational fear leads to incomprehensible waste on unrealistic hazards like road rage, on prison cells occupied by people who pose little or no danger to others, on programs designed to protect young people from dangers that few of them ever face, and much else. Of all the institutions feeding our fears, the media takes center stage for sensationalism (“if it bleeds, it leads”). The biggest problem here is the law of large numbers, where million-to-one odds happen 300 times a day in America,

and of those the most sensational two or three make the evening news, especially if captured on video. Stay tuned—film at eleven!

Steve Salerno in *Journalist Bites Reality*, a catchy title, offers headline alternatives:

- The current employment rate is 95%
- Out of 300 million Americans, roughly 299,999,954 were not murdered today
- This year 12,775,000 commercial flights traversed our skies without incident
- The vast majority of college students that got drunk last weekend did not rape anyone, or kill themselves or anyone else in a DUI or hazing incident. On Monday, they got up and went to class, bleary-eyed but otherwise OK.

Dr. D. L. Ray, biologist, former chair of the Atomic Energy Commission, past Governor of Washington, and long time member of the zoology faculty at the University of Washington, writes, “The history of science is replete with episodes where cases of dubious veracity were publicized as irreproachable truths...It may be irrational, but even in science, those who make the first and often sensational claim get much wider attention and are credited with more credibility than those who come later with the calm facts.” She continues with an example of a widely believed factoid: acid rain is caused by sulfur dioxide from coal-burning industry. In truth, all rain is acidic, with the unusual exception of that falling downwind of dusty alkaline flats. The acidic lakes that caused such an activist furor were determined to have been essentially always acidic wholly from natural causes. Further, abundant western coal comes into coal-fired plants cleaner than eastern coal emissions leaves the plants after billions of dollars spent on emotionally mandated

sulfur scrubbers. Just a switch to western coal could have saved billions. We all agree that reducing emissions is a good thing, but, as Dr. D. Fred Singer of the National Advisory Committee on Oceans and Atmosphere puts it, ill-considered action got ahead of the science, “a multibillion dollar solution to a multimillion dollar problem.” Today, one hears very little about acid rain. The good news is that the front page bad news was wrong.

Bad news manufacture and manipulation may peak around election times. It seems politicians love to have you listen to the bad news and hope you either don't or can't check. If it doesn't sound right, chances are it isn't. An old example: the Soviets are ahead of us in missiles—protecting intelligence sources and methods was more important than correcting the political rhetoric. Today is no different. One side says Federal spending on health and education is way down since 2000 and we aren't talking to our enemies while the other side says...(dot, dot, dot) whatever the manipulation of the hour dictates. Sound unlikely? Think the good news is the bad news is wrong. Federal spending on health / human services and education is up 67 % and 92 % over 2000 and we are continually talking to our enemies through various channels.

And one more from the N.Y. Times: A recent review of basketball coaches compared to ten years ago revealed that the percentage of black coaches had progressed from less than 10% to over 30%. Now that's good news. However, in reporting the study, the Times headlined that black coaches on the average, changed jobs more frequently than their white counterparts, implying the numbers foretold discrimination. The high demand for

black coaches driving job change was ignored. The good news is the good news is there, it's just manipulated to look like bad news.

We have lasting memories of bad news. Everyone knows crime is an epidemic problem in America that worsens by the year (just consider the school and mall shootings, the business misdeeds revealed under the ex-attorney General Spitzer, etc., etc.). The end of the world is nigh as some religions preach. How does our memory of all those crime trends check with the FBI's findings and reports? We are in the midst of the longest decline in crime rates since the bureau began collecting data in 1930? Bad news believers are more fearful than they have ever been at the same time that things have never been so safe. Drug use down 50% compared to the 1980's yet "the majority of adults rank drug abuse as the greatest (future) danger to America's youth." Ditto the economy where the unemployment rate continues to hover in the 5% range, last seen more than a quarter century back. Yet pundits twist this good news into bad and warn of imminent economic disaster. In the last hundred years alone modern medicine and social hygiene practices and technologies have nearly doubled our life span and improved our health immeasurably, but if you tally up the reported statistics, out of 300 million Americans, 570 million of us are seriously ill! Government grows in response to bad news.

We remember well that the media, activists, and politicians continue to report the nation's rising number of poor citizens. The good news is the portion of our population that is poor continues to plummet. And the even better news is that the census reports

half those classified as poor own their own spacious homes (with our poor having per person space larger than the average European's) , three quarters of our poor have air conditioning and video players, virtually all have TV's and a third have two or more cars. The good news is that we have the richest poor in the world.

The perpetrator of bad news has a leg up as he or she can be the unchallenged initiator of the bad news with a receptive media always looking for a new sensational scare. Bad news sells. The truth seekers, triggered by the suspicious bad news, must first initiate research, confirm the good news, and then get the attention of the good-news-adverse media to make the good news known--all within the attention span of the general public. Good news doesn't sell. Thus all too frequently the general public is left with the memory of the bad news and only the avid readers of the more meticulous journals learn the good news that the bad news was wrong.

Tom Barnett in his *The Pentagon's New Map*, struggles with this problem in his area of expertise. The problem is that the media and their attached analysts, experts, and other talking heads offer the bad news that the post-Cold War world environment is one of unremitting "chaos" and "perpetual war." He bristles that the general public seems susceptible to this line without asking themselves key reality check questions.

First Reality Check: If the world was full of chaos and perpetual war, then wouldn't the global economy be hurting at some level? According to the World Bank, the global economy has grown 35 % since 1990. Wouldn't there be an increase in

poverty? The Global poverty rate has decreased 20 % in that period. The world is trading and investing far more overseas than it did at the end of the Cold War.

Second Reality Check: Certainly we can trace a greater number of conflicts around the world since 1990. Right? Wrong. The general magnitude of global armed conflict decreased over 50% since peaking in the mid 1980's falling... to the lowest level since the end of the 1950's. [Each conflict now makes the worldwide internet.]

Third Reality Check: With this state of perpetual conflict among countries and within countries, wouldn't global military spending be increasing over time? Current spending worldwide is actually 16 % less than a couple decades ago.

So where did this myth come from? Right after the end of the Cold War, there was a six-month burst of separatist movements that dropped precipitously by the early 1990's as more and more conflicts reached political settlements. Today the total is just under two dozen worldwide, the lowest number since 1960. A small piece of bad news sticks in our memories in spite of its obsolescence.

Bad news is good business among the special interests that market movies, books, documentaries, celebrity endorsements, and various other ways to get attention. Many earn their living soliciting funds to gain that attention for one threat or another, or to seek grants and employment to research and consult on countermeasures (how to fix the bad news). Some seek political power to control others as they personally lead the charge to save the world. Bad news is good business for those special interests.

It's appropriate at this point to ask, "So what am I missing here? How do I keep all these reported threats in proportion, select the false from the true, and increase my comfort that all will be OK in the future?"

The first decision is how you prefer to live your life. If you are happy bouncing from one fear, one threat, to the next and get an adrenaline rush from believing, writing donations, supporting causes, changing your lifestyle, and the acid level in your stomach can handle the anxiety, then you need not worry about gullibility or susceptibility. A failure to support the one issue in the crowd of purported threats that may have some credibility is not a concern because you have supported them all. On the other hand, if you wish to reduce your level of worry, here are some ideas that might help:

Most important may be to have confidence in the progress of technology, economic growth, and world-wide interdependence with an eye on the big picture. Generally, the people of the world work toward better lives. Have faith in each other.

Edward O. Wilson, sometimes environmentalist author, writes: "One friend of mine loves to focus on science's bad news, its failures. An especially favorite example regarding evolution that he calls, derogatorily, just a theory, is the fraud perpetrated by the Piltdown man hoax, a missing link that wasn't. Another friend attacks scientific theory for not giving absolute answers as to the degree of human impact on global warming and, regardless of the cause, what the ever-changing climate will be in the years ahead. They say, "Just do some experiments and figure it out." They dismiss things like atomic

scientists attempts to directly measure the gyromagnetic ratio, a key building block in understanding how our world works. In fact, in a technical tour de force, those scientists trapped single electrons inside a magnetic-electric bottle and studied them for long periods of time. Their data matched the theoretical prediction to one part in a hundred billion. Together the theoretical and experimental physicists accomplished the equivalent of launching a needle due east from San Francisco and correctly calling in advance where it would strike (near Washington, D.C.) to within the width of a human hair. These particular friends of mine are good people who love to promote bad news rather than focus upon the accomplishments of others. Because of that misplaced focus, they have no concept of the capabilities of the modern technologists that can be brought (and are being brought) to determine what are genuine issues of concern and bring those capabilities to bear upon that issue.

Alvin Toffler and others report reach for perspective by observing that in the last 500 years, economic, social, and technological progress has reduced the percentages of the population killed in warfare that previously ranged as high as 35 % of the population for given state-like entities to today's one onethousandths of one percent for the U.S. in Iraq/Afghanistan and less than one half of one percent within the countries in which this current conflict is fought. Addressing technological and sociological confidence, Toffler continues, "We live at a fantastic moment of human history. Hidden behind all the fashionable gloom today are several tremendously positive and humanizing changes on the planet. The spread of the Third Wave economy has galvanized the Asia Pacific region (and) opening the possibility of rapidly raising a billion human beings out of the

pit of poverty. Massive increases in global population occurred just between 1968 and 1990, but despite doomsday forecasts, per capita food supplies in the world have actually increased faster, according to the World Food organization, and the number of chronically undernourished people has fallen 16 percent and continues in that downward trend...The digital revolution that is helping to fuel the Third Wave has within it's the potential for educating billions. And, I might add, it has been proven that with that education comes increased environmental sensitivity and decreased rates of population growth.

UU's are seekers of truth and are believers in the capabilities of people. This seeking leads us to be very careful in how we spread bad news. If you play the odds, the validity of that piece of latest bad news is most likely shaky which may lead you to remember that the good news is that the bad news is wrong. The technological forces of hundreds of thousands of our best researchers are continually supplying alternatives and solutions. The economic forces in the hands of billions, each and every one of us, will drive the inventions, the supply, and choice of the best alternatives. The sociological forces, where more and more people are free to act individually in their own interests, will provide a growing consensus of common values that will prevail. Have faith in each other. Most people of the world are moving away from, and rejecting life under, a privileged few, a few who think they know--and should decide for--and should control all. People will decide for themselves and have faith in each other. That trend is the best good news of all.