A WORLD GONE…SANE?

Maybe Earth isn't quite as cracked up as it's cracked up to be.

EVERYTHING'S COMING UP ROSES

"We are living in the most peaceful moment of our species' time on Earth," according to Harvard University psychologist Steven Pinker. Using models based on modern hunter-gatherer societies, Pinker theorizes that if we all lived like our pre-agrarian tribal ancestors, death rates from violence would be around 2,000 percent higher. During the 20th century alone (which included two world wars), instead of the 100 million lives lost due to conflict, the number would have been closer to two billion. In short, people just aren't killing each other the way they used to.

The rate of state-based conflicts (wars) worldwide has declined since the end of World War II and has dropped 40 percent since 1992. On February 15, 2003, in 800 cities around the world, 20 million people protested against the impending invasion of Iraq. Although the protests didn't stop the war, *Guinness World Records* lists it as "the largest anti-war demonstration in history."

On a smaller scale, says Pinker, cruelty-as-entertainment is almost gone. Our ancestors flocked to see convicted criminals hanged, beheaded, or burned at the stake. The Romans routinely threw Christians to the lions before thousands of cheering spectators. But public executions rarely occur today, and when they do, they're condemned by the world community.

NEW AGE THINKING

So when did humanity start evolving into a softer, gentler race? Pinker points to the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th century. One of the by-products of the newfound reasoning in which superstition gave way to science was that people began to develop more empathy for each other. In today's "Age of Information," it's easier than ever before to know about people on the other side of the world, which also leads to increased empathy. Western-style democracies, which rely on cooperation rather than conflict, have also contributed significantly to the sharp decline in violence. There were 20 democratic governments worldwide in 1946; in 2005 there were 88.

The 1-inch-long vampire moth feeds on the blood of elephants.

EVEN MORE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

According to the Millennium Project, an international think tank, there could be even more reason to be hopeful about the future:

• Thanks in large part to emerging technologies, global literacy rates are way up and are expected to rise. In 1970, just 63 percent of people over the age of 15 were literate, compared to 82 percent today. One billion people now have access to information technology and that number is expected to rise, too.

• Population growth, which is currently putting a strain on the world's resources, will begin declining by 2050. By 2100, there will be one billion fewer people than there are today. The alternative forms of energy that are starting to be implemented on a wide scale should provide more than enough power for them to thrive.

LOOK ON THE SUNNY SIDE

So if the world is actually becoming safer, smarter, and nicer, what accounts for all the gloom and doom on the news? "Better reporting," says Pinker. He calls it a *cognitive illusion*: "The easier it is for us to recall specific instances of something, the higher the probability we will assign to it." In other words, when we see violence and political discord all over television, we assume it's happening *everywhere*. To combat it, says Pinker, adopt a glass-half-full attitude: "We tend to view things by how low our behavior can sink as opposed to how high our standards have risen."

So maybe all the crazy stuff in this book is the exception, not the norm. But to be honest, we hope the world doesn't go *completely* sane—because it just wouldn't be as much fun to write about.

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PERHAPS YOU SHOULD DISREGARD THE ABOVE

In 2007 a 21-year-old Seattle woman was arrested for assaulting a man in a karaoke bar after his rendition of Coldplay's "Yellow." A witness reported that the woman shouted, "Not that song, I hate that song," before telling the victim that his "singing sucked" and then running up and punching him twice in the face. After she was arrested, the woman head-butted a police officer several times before she was finally subdued and handcuffed.

After Japan's biggest bank heist ($5.4 million), the bank got a thank-you note from the robbers.