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2018 Was The Best Year In History!

THE world is, as everyone knows, going to hell, but there's still the nervous thrill of waiting to see precisely which dark force will take us down. Will the economy collapse first, the ice sheets melt first, or chaos and war envelop us first?

So here's my antidote to that gloom: Let me try to make the case that 2018 was actually the best year in human history.

Each day on average, about another 295,000 people around the world gained access to electricity for the first time, according to Max Roser of Oxford University and his Our World in Data website. Every day, another 305,000 were able to access clean drinking water for the first time. And each day an additional 620,000 people were able to get online for the first time.

Never before has such a large portion of humanity been literate, enjoyed a middle-class cushion, lived such long lives, had access to family planning or been confident that their children would survive. Let's hit pause on our fears and frustrations and share a nanosecond of celebration at this backdrop of progress.

On a dirt road in rural Angola a few years ago, I met a woman named Delfina Fernandes who had lost 10 children, out of 15; she had endured perhaps the greatest blow any parent can, and she had suffered it 10 times.

Yet such child deaths are becoming far less common. Only about 4 percent of children worldwide now die by the age of 5. That's still horrifying, but it's down from 19 percent in 1960 and 7 percent in 2003.

Indeed, children today in Mexico or Brazil are less likely to die by the age of 5 than American children were as recently as 1970.

The big news that won't make a headline and won't appear on television is that 15,000 children died around the world in the last 24 hours. But in the 1990s, it was 30,000 kids dying each day.

Perhaps it seems Pollyannish or tasteless to trumpet progress at a time when there is so much butchery, misrule and threat hanging over us. But I cover the butchery and misrule every other day of the year, and I do this annual column

Once again, the world's population was living longer and better than ever before.

about progress to try to place those tragedies in perspective.

One reason for this column is that journalism is supposed to inform people about the world, and it turns out that most Americans (and citizens of other countries, too) are spectacularly misinformed.

For example, nine out of 10 Americans say in polls that global poverty is worsening or staying the same, when in fact the most important trend in the world is arguably a huge reduction in poverty. Until about the 1950s, a majority of humans had always lived in "extreme poverty," defined as less than about \$2 a person per day. When I was a university student in the early 1980s, 44 percent of the world's population lived in extreme poverty.

Now, fewer than 10 percent of the world's population lives in extreme poverty, as adjusted for inflation.

Likewise, Americans estimate that 35 percent of the world's children have been vaccinated. In fact, 86 percent of all 1-year-olds have been vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis.

"Everyone seems to get the world devastatingly wrong," Dr. Hans Rosling, a brilliant scholar of international health, wrote in "Factfulness," published in 2018, after his death. "Every group of people I ask thinks the world is more frightening, more violent and more hopeless — in short, more dramatic — than it really is."

I suspect that this misperception reflects in part how we in journalism cover news. We cover wars, massacres and famines but are less focused on progress.

In the last year, I've covered atrocities against the Rohingya in Myanmar, starvation in Yemen, climate change in Bangladesh, refugees and child marriage at home, and some of the world's worst poverty, in Central African Republic. All those stories deserve more attention, not less. But I never wrote columns or newsletters about three nations that registered astounding progress against authoritarianism and poor governance in 2018, Armenia, Ethiopia and Malaysia.

It is of course true that there are huge challenges ahead. The gains against global poverty and disease seem to be slowing, and climate change is an enormous threat to poor nations in particular. And the United States is an outlier, where life expectancy is falling, not rising as in most of the world.

So there's plenty to fret about. But a failure to acknowledge global progress can leave people feeling hopeless and ready to give up. In fact, the gains should show us what is possible and spur greater efforts to improve opportunity worldwide.

Every other day of the year, go ahead and gnash your teeth about President Trump or Nancy Pelosi, but take a break today (remember, just for a nanosecond!) to recognize that arguably the most important thing in the world now is not Trumpian bombast. Rather, it may be the way the world's poorest and most desperate inhabitants are enjoying improved literacy and well-being, leading to a day when no mom will again lose 10 children.

Ross Douthat is off today.