

Our Future Work

A Sermon Delivered on September 22, 2019
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

“Progress is the realization of Utopias.”

-- Oscar Wilde

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Call to Worship: by Libbie Stoddard

We have come into this room of hope
where our hearts and minds are opened to the future.

We have come into this room of justice
where we set aside our fear to name freely every oppression.

We have come into this room of love
where we know that no lives are insignificant.

We have come into this room of song
where we unite our voices
in the somber and the beautiful melodies of life.

[We have come together to worship.]

Meditation: by Elizabeth Tarbox, a piece entitled “Expect Life!”

Do not live too far in the past or the future. Live now.

In each moment expect a miracle: ten kinds of birds at the feeder, and the tracks of a fox
in the snow.

Pick up a magnifying glass and scrutinize that crocus. See the pollen at the center of the
daffodil, life's dust, death-defying life. Be astonished at the flower, arrested by its beauty.

Run [bare foot] through the garden early in the morning and hope the wild geese fly by.

Get silly and laugh loudly with your grandchildren or your grandparents. Refuse to leave
the dead behind, but bring their memory to all your chores and games and corners of
quiet, warm tears.

Know always that joy and sorrow are woven together; one cannot be without the other. If
you love, know that sometimes your love will bring you tears; if you grieve, know it is
because at some time you were willing to love.

Do not be afraid to die today. But expect life!

First Reading: by the historian Yuval Noah Harari, from his book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, from the chapter on “work.” (p. 19)

We have no idea what the job market will look like in 2050. It is generally agreed that
machine learning and robotics will change almost every line of work, from producing

yogurt to teaching yoga. However, there are conflicting views about the nature of the change and its imminence. Some believe that within a mere decade or two, billions of people will become economically redundant. Others maintain that even in the long run automation will keep generating new jobs and prosperity for all.

So are we on the verge of a terrifying upheaval, or are such forecasts yet another example of ill-founded Luddite hysteria? It is hard to say. Fears that automation will create massive unemployment go back to the nineteenth century, and so far they have never materialized. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, for every job lost to a machine at least one new job was created, and the average standard of living has increased dramatically. Yet there are good reasons to think that this time is different...

Second Reading: a Hassidic tale, as retold by Jack Kornfield (*Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, by Feldman & Kornfield, p. 391)

A young man who had just completed his spiritual training and was eagerly intent on becoming a teacher moved to a new town. He tried to teach but no one came. The only spiritual interest in the town were the many followers of a wise and well-know rabbi. Frustrated, the young teacher devised a plan to embarrass the old master and gain students for himself. He captured a small bird and one day went to where the master was seated surrounded by many disciples.

Holding the small bird in his hand he spoke directly to the master. "If you are so wise, tell me now is this bird in my hand alive or is it dead?" His plan was this: If the master said the bird was dead he would open his hand, the bird would fly away, the master would be wrong, and students would come to him. If the master said the bird was alive, he would quickly crush the bird in his hand and open it and say, "See, the bird is dead." Again the master would be wrong and the young teacher would gain students.

He sat poised in front of the master demanding an answer. "Tell me, if you are so wise, is this bird alive or is it dead?" The master looked back at him with great compassion and answered quite simply, "Really, my friend, it is up to you."

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I confess, I can identify with Chicken Little, the barnyard bird in the children's story, who runs around in a panic shouting: "The sky is falling, the sky is falling!" That's how I sometimes feel, especially after my morning ritual of reading the New York Times, after skimming headlines about the latest national emergencies and looming threats.

This week's global climate protests are a case in point. Around the world this Friday about four million mostly young people took to the streets demanding political action to address the current climate crisis. 100,000 in Berlin, 100,000 in Melbourne, 100,000 in

London, and an estimated 250,000 in New York City. Tens of thousands of young people in Manila, Kampala and Rio de Janeiro. Their message was clear: our future is at risk and we must act now.

In the story of Chicken Little, the bird is mistaken. The sky is fine. It was just an acorn that fell on his head. That's one version of the folktale that's several centuries old, with variations told all around the world.

I remember another version I heard when I was child, by the author and cartoonist James Thurber. He writes:

“Once upon a time a little red hen was picking up stones and worms and seeds in the barnyard when something fell on her head. “The heavens are falling down!” she shouted, and she began to run, still shouting, “The heavens are falling down!” All the hens that she met and all the roosters and turkeys and ducks laughed at her, smugly, the way you laugh at one who is terrified when you aren't. “What did you say?” they chortled. “The heavens are falling down!” cried the little red hen. Finally a very pompous rooster said to her, “Don't be silly my dear, it was only a pea that fell on your head.” And he laughed and laughed and everybody else except the little red hen laughed. Then suddenly with an awful roar great chunks of crystallized cloud and huge blocks of icy blue sky began to drop on everybody from above... for the heavens actually *were* falling down.

Moral: It wouldn't surprise me a bit if they did.”

This is the cartoon Thurber drew to go along with the story.

It's interesting to consider Thurber's fable was first published in February of 1939. In September of that year Hitler invaded Poland, and the Second World War began. ...And the heavens did fall down.



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We have good reason to be concerned about the future. There is so much work that needs to be done, to avert disaster and protect our planet – for the sake of our children and children's children.

But what kind of work can we do? Work itself seems uncertain and at risk. Given advances in robotics and information technology, 50% of American jobs may soon be obsolete, Bob (our Worship Associate this morning) tells us. But, of course, we don't know for sure.

Maybe, as some jobs disappear, new jobs will be created. Maybe members of the workforce can become re-educated or re-trained. Yuval Harari (author of our first reading), however, has doubts. The cashier or textile worker, who one day loses her job

to a robot, won't simply be able to start working in a new job the next day as a cancer researcher or data analyst. And not everyone is cut out for the kind of high skill labor our future workforce needs. Thus, despite many new jobs, we may witness a decline of the working class and the rise of a new "useless class."

We might get the worst of both worlds: both an increase in unemployment and a shortage of skilled labor. Many people, Harari says, "might share the fate not of nineteenth-century wagon drivers, who switched to driving taxis, but of nineteenth-century horses, who were increasingly pushed out of the job market altogether."

* * *

Is the sky falling? Are the heavens falling down? No one knows for sure. We can't predict the future. But we can consider the past. Re-examining our past experiences can be instructive. In a nutshell, according to the Dutch historian Rutger Bregman, in the past, everything was worse.

In his book *Utopia for Realists: How We Can Build the Ideal World*, he writes: "For roughly 99% of the world's history, 99% of humanity was poor, hungry, dirty, afraid, stupid, [and sick]... But in the last 200 years, all of that has changed. In just a fraction of the time that our species has clocked on this planet, billions of us are suddenly rich, well nourished, clean, safe, smart, [and healthy]... Where 84% of the world's population still lived in extreme poverty in 1820, by [the 1980s] that percentage had dropped to 44%, and now, just a few decades later, it is under 10%."

Worldwide the poverty rate has radically declined. Our standard of living has been rising amazingly, and this includes our understanding of what it means to be poor. Bregman writes: "In the country where I live, the Netherlands, a homeless person receiving assistance today has more to spend than the average Dutch person in 1950, and four times more than people in Holland's glorious Golden Age, (the 17th and 18th century) when the country still ruled the seven seas."

If we look at the grand sweep of history, we are today living in an age of biblical prophecies come true, he says. "What would have seemed miraculous in the Middle Ages is now a fact of life: the blind restored to sight, [the lame] can walk, and the dead returned to life." All thanks to the cutting edge technology of brain implants, robotic legs, and DNA cloning. We are living in a world in which science fiction is becoming science fact.

* * *

But when it comes to the work we do, our progress has been uneven. Back in the 18th century, during the height of the Industrial Revolution, people in England – even children - worked an average of seventy hours a week. In the course of the next century, as prosperity increased, people were able to work less and less. The seventy-hour workweek, was cut back to sixty hours, then fifty hours, then forty-five. By the 1950s the

workweek was down to 40 hours. Experts in the 1950s thought that a four-day workweek was just around the corner, and that by today we would have either a twenty-two hour week, a six-month-workyear, or a standard retirement age of 38. (Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American*, p. 4)

But that's not how things turned out. In the 1980s the trend toward shorter and shorter work hours came to a stop, and actually turned around. Economic growth continued, but rather than working less, we have been working more. We are more prosperous than ever. But rather than work less, we prefer to work longer hours, in order to earn even more money, so we can buy even more stuff. In the U.S., three-quarters of the labor force is now working more than 40 hours a week.

Back in the nineteenth century, most wealthy people refused to do physical labor. Work was for peasants. If people worked a lot, that was a sign that they were poor. Today being overworked is a status symbol. And moaning and groaning about all the work we have to do is simply another way of showing how important or interesting we are.

But working more and more doesn't make us any happier. When we work long hours we are exhausted at the end of the day. Our leisure time involves more alcohol consumption, and more mindless hours in front of a screen.

People all around the world yearn for shorter workweeks. Working less leaves us the bandwidth we need to engage in more rewarding activities with family, community involvement, and real recreation. Research shows, not coincidentally, that countries with the shortest workweeks also have the largest numbers of volunteers and the most social capital.

The goal is not to abolish work, but to allow more people to engage in more meaningful work. People who have traditionally been excluded from the workforce, Bregman says – whether women, the poor, or seniors - should have opportunities to do more, not less, good work. Stable meaningful work is a crucial part of a life well-lived.

Imagine if working less than 40 hours a week were reinstated as a political goal. We could reduce the workweek step by step, trading money for time off, investing more in education, and developing a more flexible retirement system.

Bregman makes a compelling case for utopian thinking. He says, the real crisis of our time isn't that we don't have it good – we live in an age of miracles, of ancient prophesies come true. The real crisis is that we can't imagine anything better.

In this day and age we do have good reason to be fearful. But it would be an awful mistake to panic. We won't accomplish much of anything if we lose our heads, trapped in our own worst-case scenarios. Bregman says, if we cling fearfully to an outdated status quo, our fears will confine us, and blind us to the injustice and shortsightedness around us every day.

We need to step up our powers of imagination, we need to pay close attention to the world around us, and envision utopian possibilities.

No one knows what the future holds. What we do know, is that we have come a long way to arrive at the place we find ourselves today. Ancient dreams have already come true. In each moment, we should expect a miracle. We should open our eyes to see: ten kinds of birds at the feeder, the pollen of the daffodil, death-defying life.

No one knows what the future holds. What we do know, is that the dreams we hold in our minds and hearts can guide us. Our dreams can open our minds and hearts to the future.

We know we can choose to set aside our fears and challenge every oppression. We can choose to work for a world in which all people live in prosperity and peace, a world of love and justice, in which everyone is free. We can choose to join the millions who take to the streets, and demand action.

No one knows what the future holds. What we do know, is that we hold in the future in our hands, like a small bird – and whether this bird lives or dies - whether it is set free and rises up into the sky, is up to us.

May we dare to expect a miracle.
And may we choose life.

So be it. Amen.