

Why ARE Good Things Happening?

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There are a lot of good movies being produced these days, and one of them is *The Martian* starring Matt Damon and a host of other well-cast actors. For those of you who aren't familiar with the movie, briefly, it takes place in the year 2035 – a future that seems like a realistic extension of the present because it's not full of sci-fi mind-expanding scenarios and fantastical creatures.

It's about a NASA team working on Mars when a violent storm forces an emergency launch back to their orbiting space ship, but one of the team members, Mark Watney, gets left behind because they think he's dead. Once NASA figures out Watney is still alive, everyone has to figure out how to keep him alive for four years until the next mission can get to Mars. One of my favorite scenes in the movie is after the first supply rocket explodes, NASA is at a loss on what to do next and that's when the head of the Chinese Space Agency asks his colleague about their top-secret rocket. They agree if they don't offer it to the Americans, the stranded astronaut will die. The best line at the end of this scene is when the head of the Chinese program says, 'Let's keep this between the scientists for now.' For me, this line is an example from the entertainment world which feeds into my hypothesis that good things actually *are* happening – but which aren't necessarily the headlines in the daily news cycle.

So what is it about this particular movie that captured my imagination? Probably, it's because it makes being smart cool – not just scientifically smart, but also human-being smart. The moral of the story points to the fundamental aspects of what is inspiring and worthy about striving to be a good person: like being unapologetically smart – which in this instance includes doing the math in service of technology and creativity. The characters in this story apply the logic and precision of math in the

service of problem-solving, and it all adds up to a courageous realism. The character, Mark Watney puts it this way, “You can either give up and probably die, or you can get to work.”

There is another underlying theme which took a while for me to discern, but it’s one of the reasons I experience this story as being about a realistic future growing out of a realistic now. As an old-school feminist, for me, this subtle theme is revealed through the lens of gender because the Commander of the mission and the computer/technology specialist are women.

In the old days, being a woman was equated with pure emotion and lack of rational cognitive capacity. How many of us grew up hearing sports coaches telling the boys on the team, “Attention ladies -- Don’t be a sissy.” Even to this day, there is a segment of American society who believes that to be a girl means you are inherently predisposed to have your heart rule over your head, and the ultimate fulfillment in life is to have babies. Of course, the feminist argument is that being a stay-at-home wife and mother should be one among many informed-choices a young woman gets to make.

And so it is, we are half-way through the second generation of female children who have not been burdened with a false choice of ‘being an old-maid or going to college to get an MRS. Degree.’ It hasn’t taken very long for everyone to understand the human brain is capable of the most awesome functions – no matter which gendered body it lives in!

A real-world example of this positive change comes from Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s 2016 memoir in which she writes about her husband, Marty, who was an unusual man for the 1950’s; not only was he not threatened by Ruth’s intelligence, but he actively encouraged and took pride in her academic and professional pursuits. As Ruth explained,

... he was the first guy ever interested in me because of what was in my head... He’s so secure about himself, he never regarded me as any kind of threat to his ego. On the contrary, he took

great pride in being married to someone he considered very able.... He had enormous confidence in my ability ...

And so, this movie's unconscious message about the relationship between rationality and emotion as holistic and mutually-edifying is important because, unlike my mother and grandmothers' generations, finally, the unquestioned take-away is that individual and collective decision-making is exponentially better because, as the Her Honor Judge Ginsberg said, some decisions should not have been nor continue to be made on the basis of sex – and I would add, like commanding a mission to Mars.

In the reading we heard earlier when talking about the lessons her scientist-mother taught her, Kamala Harris wrote, “You have to be willing to test your hypothesis and find out if your solution works, based on metrics and data.” In the world of medical science, I'm not sure if citing popular movies is analogous, but in the world of social science, I think it's legit to analyze influences such as movies, cable television, music, video games, and You Tube when we look for examples of good things happening to and within our communities.

Another source of examples which I turn to while looking for support of my hypothesis that good things actually *are* happening – but aren't necessarily the headlines in the daily news cycle, comes from America's valuing of and investment in education. Do you know some of the most influential and progressive innovations in the evolution of America's institutions of public education came from some 19th Century New England Unitarians? The most well-known being Bronson Alcott.

On September 22, 1834, Alcott opened a school of about 30 students, mostly from wealthy families. It was named the [Temple School](#) because classes were held at the [Masonic Temple](#) on Tremont Street in Boston. His assistant was [Elizabeth Palmer Peabody](#), later replaced

by [Margaret Fuller](#). [Mary Peabody Mann](#) served as a French instructor for a time. The school was briefly famous, and then infamous, because of Alcott's original methods.*

Before 1830, writing (except in higher education) equated to rote drills in the rules of grammar, spelling, vocabulary, penmanship and transcription of adult texts. However ... progressive reformers such as Alcott ... began to advocate writing about subjects from students' personal experiences.

... Alcott's plan was to develop self-instruction on the basis of self-analysis, with an emphasis on conversation and questioning rather than lecturing and drill ...

Alongside writing and reading, he gave lessons in "spiritual culture", which included interpretation of the [Gospels](#)... He even went so far as to decorate his schoolroom with visual elements he thought would inspire learning: paintings, books, comfortable furniture, and busts or portraits of [Plato](#), [Socrates](#), [Jesus](#), and William Ellery Channing

Alcott's ideas as an educator were controversial ... Even so, his ideas helped to found one of the first adult education centers in America, and provided the foundation for future generations of liberal education. Many of Alcott's educational principles are still used in classrooms today, including "teach by encouragement", art, music, acting exercises, learning through experience, risk-taking in the classroom, tolerance in schools, physical education/recess, and early childhood education.

It is my understanding Alcott is credited with starting what is now considered to be America's first kindergarten.

These days, particularly this past four years, the topic of 'being educated' has come under question. From my 21st century perspective, I think 'being educated' means more than just having a college

degree; it means first and foremost valuing learning for the sake of learning; and that means the process by which we educate ourselves is important. So for example, Barak Obama was accused of thinking he was the smartest man in the room, and so some individuals took it personally and let this perception bring out their worst self. Personally, I experienced this same type of judgement when trying to communicate with people who felt like I was lording my college education over them.

Thanks to all the disconcerting interactions over the past few years, what I've come to realize is how important the process of educating ourselves really is -- you have to be willing to test your hypothesis and find out if your solution works, based on metrics and data.

One of the first things we teach children is to do the research, and then credit their sources. In the math classroom, children are required to show their work so the teacher can see their thinking process and if there's a mistake, can teach them the corrective. So in the time when 'doing your homework, showing your work, and crediting your sources' has come under fire, I've realized that was a skill I actually did acquire and master in college.

So when I've found myself in conversations with folks who, when I asked them to cite not just their sources, but defend the veracity of them, they took it personally (in a negative way) and so too many times it got ugly – time for me to bow out of the conversation politely.

But the good thing that has come about from all this, is fact checkers. I'm thrilled to see the birth of this new, and improved, way of citing sources and checking their veracity because the process by which we educate ourselves really does matter. I like to think that being a fact checker is a 21st century expansion of good old-fashioned footnotes and bibliographies! This one very important component within the world of education, using and citing credible sources, are one of the reasons human knowledge and understanding is able to transcend geography, culture, and time.

I like the story of Bronson Alcott because it's another example of how traditions can be retired and at the same time innovation and progress can grow out of them. For Alcott, the time had come to evolve the old-school pedagogy of rote memorization, drills, and copying adult texts, by humanizing the experience of learning. Even though it's taken a minute for women to catch up, getting an education – of being a learned person, whether through life experience or college classroom or a blend of both, has always been an active ingredient in our democratic systems and processes.

And because learning is a big part of human beings' hard-wiring, I don't see the anti-intellectualism of these past four years becoming the norm. There are too many folks who aren't threatened by a good debate; who are educated and smart with or without a degree; and even though books are fast becoming old-fashioned – reading has just morphed in a fast-and furious vogue. Humans need to consume information just as much as we need food and water.

One of my favorite feel-good day dreams is when I think about how many thousands of children we have shared with each other through the school exchange programs. Even in a town of 1200 people in the eastern plains of Wyoming, there were regular exchange students whose parents sent them from countries all over the world to live with complete strangers in a strange land. At the same time, we send our children to live with complete strangers all around the world. Not only do our secondary and post-secondary schools share individual students, they exchange choirs and orchestras; performance troupes; sports teams; academic and debate teams; science campers; business clubs; and students interested in international relations.

And then there is the internet. When we lived in Lusk (that small Wyoming town of 1200), some dear friends were raising their grandson, Greg, who became an avid video gamer. One day I was visiting with his grandmother who was excited for Greg because he had made friends with several young folks through one of the video-games they all played. What was so cool was these new friends were in

Sweden and Greg had set of goal of earning enough money to fund a trip to visit them in person. Being the small town it was, it didn't take long for friends and neighbors to hire Greg for odd jobs and such, and sure enough, he went to Sweden for two weeks – an experience of a life-time, which, of course, we all made sure we got a first-hand account at the next backyard BBQ!

The internet and cell phones are two of the most exciting examples of transcendence in human history. Think about it, for as rapidly as the technology is expanding, awareness of ethics and responsibility and even morality, are part of the conversation. Never before has any human invention been so transparent and accessible by so many. And you don't have to be a genius to be part of the discussion – being a user is the only ticket you need. But along with buying and operating the gadgets, we are learning that being informed – being smart like your phone -- is also what is needed from us. Again, one of the lessons we're learning from these past four years, is that citing your sources, citing credible sources, fact-checking and being smart about all of it is, I believe, is well on its way to becoming the new standard.

As more and more people, particularly here in America, search for the lessons to be learned from these past four years, I have no qualms about placing my faith in so many of those good things which are happening, but aren't what make up the latest round of headlines. There is an excellent documentary that aired on MSNBC this past fall called "Through the Lens." It's about Pete Souza, a gifted photographer who was the official White House photographer for the eight years of Barak Obama's presidency. In this show, there an interview with Ben Rhodes, one of the behind-the-scenes smart, passionate, visionary, public servants, who captures this moment in time very well. He says, what we're seeing and experiencing is one segment of the population that is about pushing for inclusion, fairness, more opportunity, and more justice; and the other segment of the population is fighting for control.

Because our religious/spiritual community is firmly located in the first demographic, I place so much of my faith in those very behaviors, relationships, policies and organizations which actively value

inclusion, fairness, opportunity, justice – compassion and love. Just like the storm clouds which bring wind and rain, all is necessary for good things to happen – we just have to be courageous enough to make the choices which sustain the faith we place in them.