

We know that bad or alarming news sells. What is the impact of that on us? We lose perspective. It seems really bad out there. It drives up anxiety. It's the terrible feeling that things are not going to work out okay.

Has anybody here had anxiety lately? When we have anxiety, the part of our brains that evolved to sense danger is activated- and that makes us look for danger. Or just general sucky-ness. It's like we have a pair of glasses on that brightens up bad stuff and dims the good. So that even when we are presented with positive information, there's a risk that the goodness will bounce right by us without us seeing it.

But life has both. The world has both. And this sermon, has pretty much only the good. If you've been feeling anxious, or if something hard is going on in your life, I offer you this message as a kind of bouquet. A bouquet of lovely headlines and stories.

Does anyone here follow Good News Network? It was launched in 1997 after its founder noticed these facts: In the 1990's homicide rates in the U.S. plummeted by 42 percent, and yet at the same time, television news coverage of murders surged more than 700%. That was reported by the Center for Media and Public Affairs. The Good News Network's website quotes the journalist Norman Cousins who said: "If news is not really news unless it is bad news, it may be difficult to claim we are an informed nation." I'm to start with some headlines from there. Listen to these:¹

"UK Boy Has Brain Implant Fitted to Control Epilepsy Seizures in World First"

"US Crime Rate Drops to 'Historic' Lows With Murders, Rapes, and Robbery Plunging, New Statistics Show."

"First of its Kind Medical School in Cherokee Nation Graduates First Class of Doctors."

At this medical school Native elders participate in the medical curriculum to teach about traditional healing practices. 46 students graduated.

"91-Year-old Surprises Tiny Fire Department with \$500,000 For Updating Their Archaic Equipment"

"\$25.00 'Bacteria Batteries' Allow Farmers to Power Sensing Equipment with Soil."

That's a story about batteries that absorb power through bioelectrochemical processes that occur within soil microbes. The power can then be used to run sensing equipment to help farmers get better yields from their crops.

"There's Now a Fast Charging EV Station for Every 5 Gas Stations in California."

“US Puts Solar Panels on Old Nuclear Weapons Sites for Powering 70,000 Homes”

“First High-Speed Rail Line in US Breaks Ground: Brightline Vegas to LA at 200 mph to Save Thousands in Emissions.” The trains will be all electric. It’s expected to be completed in four years, and to replace 700 million vehicle miles.

“World’s Largest Wildlife Crossing is Going Up So Animals Can Walk Safely Over 8 Lanes of L.A. Traffic”

“Millions of Birds Now Migrating Safely Through Darkened Texas Cities After Successful Lights Out Campaign” Texas is in the middle of the most important migratory pathway for birds moving up and down the Americas—nearly 2 billion birds, or 1 out of 3 in the US, will pass over Texas during their spring and autumn migrations. The campaign was started two years ago by the Audubon society- and it has been successful. Skyscrapers as well as residential buildings now turn off their exterior lights at night. In TEXAS.

“Number of Fish on US Overfishing List Reaches All-Time Low—Led by Mackerel and Snapper.” “According to a recent federal report, the US seafood industry has never been more sustainable, with the fewest overharvested fish stocks ever recorded... 94% of fish stocks in the US oceanic and gulf waters are not being overfished, according to the report, an all-time high after the number climbed slightly from last year.”

Here's one of my favorites: **“100,000 Salmon Spill Off a Truck in Oregon—and Most Land in a Creek and Survive.”** The truck that was transporting them to a hatchery tipped over on a slippery corner, 102,000 salmon were tossed over an embankment, and most of them rode that waterslide right down into a Lookingglass Creek, the waterway which connects with the hatchery they were traveling to.

And: **“South Sudan’s Epic Effort to Protect the World’s Little-Known Largest Mammal Migration.”** I’m going to read you that story by Andy Corbly, written on Thursday:

[Click here for the story text: <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/south-sudans-epic-effort-to-protect-the-worlds-little-known-largest-mammal-migration/>]

That’s all I have from the Good News Network, but here's another piece of very good news in the world: **The Global Decline of Extreme Poverty.**

Despite a slight uptick during COVID, extreme poverty has been reduced all over the globe. The rate of extreme poverty in the world in 1990 was 37.9%. Just thirty-four years later, it has dropped to 9%. That’s according to the World Bank.ⁱⁱ In 2000, United Nations member states pledged to cut extreme poverty worldwide. Countries invested in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. They gave money to many of the poorest people. The World Bank estimates that social safety nets are responsible for 36% of the global reduction in extreme poverty. In other words, humans took better care of each other. All over the globe.

It isn't perfect. But it isn't over, either. The extreme poverty rate is again trending downward. And it seems obvious that if we can solve extreme poverty, we can address less extreme- but still harmful- poverty, too. Poverty is a solvable problem. We've been working on it all over the world and we've made amazing progress that is worth celebrating.

Next topic: Artificial Intelligence

I realize this phrase may not immediately conjure the good feelings of Good News Network headlines. There have been too many not so good headlines about the fears associated with AI- and I'm not saying we shouldn't be concerned. However, the fact remains that AI is here, right? AI is here. As with every technology, the way AI is applied in our world is and will be a reflection of us. AI is made up of the things we humans know, say, record, etc. However, unlike humans, AI is able to process it all at once, or at least so quickly it seems like all at once, and to compare quantities of information that are too vast for human minds or normal computers. AI is a reflection of us. That means we will have to contend with and reign in humankind's worst impulses. But also, we will see incredible new expressions of our best impulses. Here are some examples of good things AI is or will soon be doing.

Traffic safety. I have to mention one bit of bad news here- currently 1.35 million people are killed in traffic accidents around the world each year. The good news is that AI can greatly reduce that. AI will enable better collection and analysis of crash data, enhanced road infrastructure, more efficient post-crash responses. It can be used to anticipate, detect, and respond to risky situations faster than a human brain. It can be used to analyze and curb risky behavior. According to the UN, the number of deaths is expected to drop by as much as 50% by 2030. That's just six years from now.

Health care. AI is going to help with diagnostics by analyzing images and patterns more accurately than humans can currently do. It's going to improve early disease detection and treatment planning. AI-powered systems can also streamline administrative tasks, allowing healthcare professionals to focus more on patient care. AI algorithms will be able to analyze vast datasets and provide tailored treatments based on individual genetic and health profiles. And individuals can look forward to having a personal AI health assistant, that will help them know how to manage chronic illness or deal with symptoms that might be worrying them.

Last year, a couple of different people I know had heart palpitations that felt really scary. A nurse on an advice line encouraged one of them to go to the ER. At the ER, they spent 8 hours—from 9pm to 5am- most of which were waiting, without food or sleep, for the results of a scan and other diagnostics to come back from their various labs. With AI assisted healthcare, the scan will be able to be read immediately and considered alongside any other tests in the context of the patient's overall health profile. That's good news.

Education: AI is going to be able to adapt educational content to individual learning styles and paces. AI tutoring systems will be able to provide immediate feedback and support, helping students grasp complex concepts more effectively. And, AI-powered translation

tools can break down language barriers, expanding access to educational resources to people in every country.

Speaking of speaking: **Animal speech.** AI is helping us understand animal languages. I know that makes it sound like I've fallen into a weird corner of the internet while researching this sermon. But I promise, it's true. I mentioned this last year in another sermon - you might remember. Scientists are already using some of the same technology that gives us speech recognition for voice to text and translation apps. The same machine learning can analyze the patterns in animal sounds, breaking it down into smaller and more distinct parts than our human ears can detect. Using algorithms, this technology has already been able to tell one animal from another, and to distinguish different dialects of animal speech within the same species.

This kind of research is taking place at multiple universities and labs in multiple countries. It has been applied to rodents, fruit bats, lemurs, whales, pigs, crows, and chickens. Researchers are especially interested in the syntax and semantics of whale communication. There is a big article about it in the current issue of Harvard Magazine.ⁱⁱⁱ It's available for free online. The first word scientists decoded from Sperm whales' speech is a distinct series of cracks, rattles, and clicks that means "dive." And—get this—they are already beginning to use machines to talk back to the whales. To generate new whale speech that is not just pre-recorded but sounds real. It raises the possibility of being able to communicate with whales in their own language.

There are things in history that seem impossible until they happen. And later, when we look back, it seems like they were inevitable. We are living in a rapidly transforming world, full of possibilities. Remember that, you know? When things seem impossible. When you are afraid or when the world seems too heavy. We aren't done yet. And we have so much good potential in us, along with the bad. Maybe someday we will believe that peace and justice were inevitable. We already know that war and injustice is unsustainable. It could be that we are closer than we think. I don't know. But it could be. Let's go ahead and live as though we are. Let's have enough hope that we can be part of making it.

I'm going to close with a poem. It was written by a human. AI may eventually write some nice sounding poems, but they will never be like the ones we humans write: spoken from the heart, from a place of experience, from the power and fragility of being human. AI will never be able to speak as one human to another, like this:

"In Any Event" by Dorianne Laux.^{iv} [Click here for poem text:
<https://gwarlingo.com/2021/dorianne-laux/>]

ⁱ Sourced from GoodNewsNetwork.org on June 29, 2024

ⁱⁱ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/march-2024-global-poverty-update-from-the-world-bank--first-esti>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/harvard-researchers-language-of-whales>

^{iv} From the anthology *How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude and Hope*, ed. James Crewes.