



Peter H. Wolf
Guest columnist

A good news perspective

The news is so much with us. We can easily be left with the impression that things are all bad. Much of it is apocalyptic: global warming, challenges to U.S. democracy itself, the carnage from wars and proliferating weapons, racism, drug use and overdoses, autocracies, intolerance. I've written about some of these myself and emphasized the urgency of addressing such distressing problems.

But there is good news, good circumstance, luck, progress that is also much with us. It might help to muse about some. Doing so can engender equanimity, perspective, thankfulness, hope, more progress. I mention a few upsides that come to mind, ignoring possible correlative and obvious downsides or outcomes.

I'll start with the accelerating proliferation, accumulation and availability of knowledge. I remember hearing in high school in the early 1950s that humankind (we said "mankind" in those days) had learned as much in the last hundred years as in all of history before that. It's probably still true today. And it's so available at our fingertips on the internet! We can communicate with almost

anybody in the world from a phone or desktop, and we use this capability with joy.

I went to electrical engineering school when one of my professors was participating in the development of the huge Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico. We began to realize that we see only a tiny visible sliver of the full spectrum of revealing electromagnetic radiation when we gaze at the gorgeous heavens at night; there's so much more. Since Sputnik we have progressed to space telescopes and are even able to detect planets encircling other stars.

Which leads to our incredible good fortune to inhabit this Earth — the "pale blue dot" described by Carl Sagan when inspired by Voyager 1's look back at Earth from 4 billion miles away in 1990 — the only home of anyone we've ever known or heard of. The distances in space are hard to fathom. If Earth were reduced to a one-inch blue marble, the sun would be a fiery nine-foot sphere 317 yards away; Jupiter would be a foot in diameter about a mile from the nine-foot sun; the nearest star would be 36,000 miles distant.

Yet here we are in the "Goldilocks" zone in relation to our roiling, yet comfortable, warm sun. We have water that enabled life to develop and a cycle that feeds fresh water to dry land. We have an infinite



Planet Earth, as seen during the Apollo VIII mission in December 1968. Life here can be pretty good.

variety of fellow humans, climates, seasons, topography, fruits, flowers, bugs, fish, animals. We humans are at a stage of evolution that enables us to appreciate and study these things and allows us to do so much more than merely survive. We have time to, and do, compose and enjoy music, art, literature.

To be truly mundane — but isn't it wonderful? We humans are the only species that can experience sex for pleasure and not just procreation.

It is a real accomplishment that in 75 years since Hiroshima and Nagasaki we have not annihilated other tens of thousands of people with nuclear weapons. We have eradicated smallpox and polio and are working on COVID-19.

Think of the inventions developed just in my lifetime: radar, frozen food, TV, electric washing machines, air conditioning,

dishwashers, stereo, nuclear power, transistors, psychotropic drugs, integrated microchips, microwave ovens (and popcorn!), computers, space rockets, satellites, a global positioning system, the internet, word processors, email, DNA CRISPR technology, digital and video photography, smartphones.

It is progress that governments everywhere profess, even if many do not practice, democracy and human rights. We've seen our worst president defeated after one term, not to mention his blessed silencing by social media.

Life expectancy has increased so much with medicines, vaccines, artificial joints, transplants. We often last to enjoy three generations beyond us, added to memories of two before us — an amazing six generations of family to appreciate.

It's actually a good time to be alive. There's work to be done, for sure. Hopefully, we have more steps forward than the inevitable backward ones, unavoidable tragedy among them. May our good fortune spur us to make our own contributions, remembering that enabling others to contribute to the common good is transcendence in and of itself.

Peter H. Wolf was a trial judge in Washington, D.C., for 40 years before retiring and moving to Winston-Salem.