

## Becoming a Realistic Optimist

I find myself in quite an uncomfortable position, this late in life, because I am generally still optimistic. And not just about myself, and my own personal pursuit of happiness, but about the whole human race, and its future. I am, I must say on my behalf, not giddily optimistic about the human race. I am more observant than that. But I still have often wondered how I got to this point, getting within reach of 70 as I am, and still being even somewhat optimistic, with so many observable facts tilting most observers in the other direction.

This state of affairs is particularly galling because one of my favorite writers, Mark Twain, once observed, in his Notebooks so that he wouldn't get stoned, that "The man who is a pessimist before 48 knows too much; if he is an optimist after it, he knows too little."

Taken at face value, I would have to conclude that I know too little. And that may very well be the case. I personally don't think so, but of course everyone else can come to whatever conclusion they deem justified about that. Fortunately for me, others' opinions don't ever force themselves on my thinking. I think that is a wonderful thing about thinking. Don't you?

The main reason, I think, that my optimism has survived even partially intact after nearly 70 years of human life is that I was also endowed at birth, or soon thereafter, with a heavy dose of realism to temper, adjust, modify and make palatable my optimism. I know this is true because my first vivid memory from my childhood, which I have been able to remember from the day it happened, and haven't yet arrived at the point of forgetting it, makes it clear that I was demanding realism at a very young age.

I was just about 18 months old, it was late summer, and our whole family was at a picnic at a large rural park outside my hometown of Kenosha, Wisconsin. I say whole family in a temporary sense. At that time I was the baby in the family, and I had two older brothers and an older sister. And parents, of course. That was our whole family. But another sister was born just about two months after this picnic, and, in time, the seven of us were joined by three more sisters and four more brothers. So I use "whole family" lightly — and quite temporarily.

This huge park was special to the even-more-extended Hammond family because my grandfather, as a County Commissioner, had helped arrange for its creation in the 1920s. And in the 1960s my father, as Mayor of Kenosha, arranged for the University of Wisconsin to plant its Parkside campus on land carved from Petrifying Springs, as that huge rural park is still called. Whether it has any springs at all, and whether they petrify anything, I don't know. But I don't think so.

Anyway, I do remember that on that late summer day in 1954 I was very proud of my running skills. I had recently learned to run and no doubt had been showered with praise by my parents. So I was running around on a lawn at Pets, as we all called that park — though probably not me just yet — and I can still picture that lawn in my mind, seen from the perspective of an 18-month-old, whose old-fashioned pinned diapers swished around as I ran — which is one reason (besides my little sister still being non-existent) that I know this memory is from 1954.

As I was running my father came up to me and I stopped to talk to him. To challenge him, actually, to a race. Another piece of evidence that this was 1954 was that my father was still thin. He was 39 years old that summer, and as most male Hammonds have done, he started putting on weight the year he turned 40. But he was thin at the time of our race. A race that I was winning. He was almost neck and neck with me, he could keep up, but I was always in the lead.

Then I started to get suspicious. I insisted that he wasn't "trying his best" (something he had probably already started indoctrinating me about, as I watched him do that with my younger siblings later). He insisted that he was trying. I insisted again that he must try harder, must give it his best shot. And then he did. He ran so fast I couldn't believe it. He took a few huge strides and disappeared from view. So I sat down on my cushioned tush on that deep green lawn and cried. Because I knew right then, in that moment, that my parents had lied to me about my running skills — that reality was not what I had thought it was. I did not regret that I had demanded honesty of my father. But I was more than a little shocked at how my suspicion had been just the tip of the iceberg of the discrepancy between my belief in my extraordinary running skills and reality.

Reality took another bite out of my optimism about three years later. My older brother Louis had somehow earned a nickel, and so I accompanied him to a nearby Rexall store to watch him spend it. There was a traffic-light intersection we had to cross to get to the store, but that was already old hat to my 6-year-old brother and me. This was 1957, after all, and the baby boom was in full progress, so no parents helicoptered. Engendering self-reliance was in full swing.

After much deliberation, which you think would have driven the store owners crazy back then, but maybe they had nothing else to entertain them, Louis finally settled on a bag of M&Ms. We took it outside, and then waited at the traffic light for it to change to green. That's when Louis got an idea. He particularly loved the rare red M&Ms, and was also fond of the green ones, so maybe the traffic light had given him this idea. He quickly proceeded to sit down on the sidewalk and pour out all the M&Ms, and then sort them by color. He was the kind of person who always saves the best for last. He is still like that. So he sorted the M&Ms, with the dark brown ones the most numerous, but also least liked, then the tan ones, and so on. There was only one red one, and two green ones, and those he set out at the top of the pyramid he had created on the sidewalk.

You might be wondering about germs at this point. I suspect my mother figured that it was impossible to even begin to control germs at all, with so many children running around the house, so we may have been deficient in our training. In any case, Louis allowed me to share some of the unwanted colors and so we began eating them off the sidewalk, savoring in our imaginations how much better the more colorful ones to come would be.

At that point reality, in the form of a ten-year-old neighbor, stepped in. Literally. He saw his opportunity and with great relish stomped all over the M&Ms still on the ground — especially the rare red and green ones. Those he demolished so thoroughly that even we did not try to scrape their remains off the sidewalk and eat them.

This actually, though, was not that traumatic an experience. Memorable, yes, but we had not exactly been brought up in a "safe space" that attended to our delicate feelings. What had struck me deeply was the particular kind of glee etched on our neighbor's face. Another older neighbor boy had once shown us how cool it was to catch spiders and pull their legs off one at a time. What made the M&Ms experience so memorable was that I now had recognized the

pattern — that the delight of others didn't always equally delight you, but could actually make you feel quite uncomfortable.

My mother and father were strict Catholic parents. They spanked us starting at a very young age, and got angry sometimes too. But I had never seen that particular kind of delight on their faces — cruel pleasure. Which is probably one reason why I had such an enjoyable childhood.

But my childhood did not last as long as others'. That, though, was not my parents' fault. It was my oldest brother Gene's. When he turned 12, in 1959, he got a Sunday morning paper route. And he immediately enlisted Louis, then 8, and me, 6½, as his assistants. Gene was keen on being the best paperboy ever, so we got up at 3:00 a.m. to deliver about 50 two-pound Sunday morning newspapers. Gene bought a big basket for his bike, but the problem was, with 100 pounds of newspapers stuffed into that basket, the bike's kickstand just couldn't hold the bike up. So Louis and I ran along behind Gene on his bike, and when he stopped to deliver a paper, Louis and I ran up to the bike and held it up until Gene returned and took off again, with us running after him. For this service Louis and I each received a penny every Sunday.

And no, Gene did not become a slave trader when he grew up. He's a professor.

One Sunday morning, a few months later, at about 3:30 a.m., we had reached the midpoint of Gene's paper route. There was only one delivery a block away from the local bakery, so Gene would set the paper bags down on the ground, and ride away with just that one paper while Louis and I waited outside the bakery for him to return. We didn't get to have any donuts, though, even though the baker was already there making them, because, for one, even back then a donut cost more than a penny, and for two, the bakery wasn't quite open for business yet. So we just inhaled our treat.

As we were inhaling, a police car drove by. We waved, having learned from our father, by then the Mayor of Kenosha, that the police were there to help us. The police waved back at us — and then stopped their car, and backed up. One policeman rolled down the window, using a crank no doubt, and said, "Boys, what are you doing up so late?"

Louis answered by pointing to the paper bags lying by the telephone pole, and then up the street where Gene could barely be seen under the dim street lamps delivering that paper. "We're helping our brother deliver his newspapers."

"Oh really?" the policeman who was driving leaned over to say. "And how much does he pay you to help him?"

"A penny each Sunday!"

The policemen both laughed very loudly, and then drove away, leaving us to our fates.

This provided an entertaining story when the rest of the family woke up later that Sunday morning. Our mother was horrified that the police might have recognized us as the Mayor's kids and would soon be spreading that story far and wide. My father just laughed, and said it would be great if they did, because if the whole town found out the Mayor was relying on his very young sons to supplement his salary, which was the princely sum of \$12,000 per year, then perhaps the aldermen might raise it.

This was the first time my father's amusement at my mother's fears seeped into my awareness so vividly, and I thought right away of the Chicken Little story I had read many times. It became clear to me right then that fear was probably an overstimulated emotion. This realism restored some of my optimism.

That Winter the nuns who taught us at St. Mark's Elementary School began preparing us for our First Communions by teaching us all about sin, both of the venial and the mortal variety,

so that we could go to confession in preparation for our First Communion. Among the many truths we were told, one was that we should not be easy on ourselves, that everyone is a sinner, and almost all are prolific sinners. One nun told us that even saints sin at least once every day.

This truth caused me a serious difficulty the second time I went to confession. The first time I had plenty to confess to, but the second time, just a week later, during which I had been trying my darndest not to sin, created a philosophical quandary for me.

As I knelt there reviewing my sins for the week, I was stuck. Because I could only come up with six. I had cheated at cards with my siblings four times, and I had lied twice. But no matter how hard I thought about it, I could not come up with another sin. Of course, these were all venial sins, not mortal ones — which are fatal to the soul. But nevertheless I did not want to appear to the priest to be insufferably proud about having beaten the saints at their own game. So I finally came up with a solution: I would confess to having cheated at cards four times, and having lied three times. That gave me exactly 7 sins — one for every day of the week. The third lie was telling the priest that I had lied three times. When I had really only lied twice.

So I camouflaged my extreme saintliness. But clearly insufficiently. The next year I was recruited to become an altar boy. Gradually that built up my realism about all things religious until I developed a robust optimism that I was going to be able to thread my way through the mass of religious rules and win the getting to go to heaven game.

My Grandma won that game in 1961, when I was 8, and my father's siblings took pity on him, because at this point our whole family included 9 children — and we were all living in a 1,000-square-foot three-bedroom home. With one bathroom. They let my father buy the family home, with five bedrooms and three bathrooms, for what my grandfather had paid for it in 1925: \$15,000.

When we moved into Grandma's house, my two older brothers shared one bedroom, my three sisters another, the two baby boys shared the tiny bedroom next to my parents', and I shared the second smallest bedroom with my 3½-year-old brother. I was also assigned the job of caring for him. My mother was a great delegator. She always assigned herself the two youngest children. So as each new brother or sister joined us, she had to reassign the then current three-year-old to someone else — it was always to an older sibling.

I was delighted with these new, spacious arrangements until I realized that my little brother's night diaper was not effective. Lying on a threadbare sheet laid over a plastic mattress protector was not ideal, since my brother's pee pooled in the depression we made as we slept. After praying for more patience did not work, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I swapped that brother out for the next one in line, who was by then 2½. Within a few weeks I figured out he was no more reliable than the now 4-year-old. So I swapped him out for the baby, who immediately made it clear that that was an even bigger mistake.

That night my realism took another bite out of my optimism — I realized I was probably headed in the wrong direction. So I took the 4-year-old back. He was clearly closer to the goal than the others, so I only needed to endure to get over the finish line. In the meantime, I refused to let him have a drink of water before he went to sleep.

Perhaps that is why he became fascinated with an abundance of water. In the Spring of 1963 I was helping my oldest brother Gene clean up after dinner. Our parents had headed out to some political event, and, at 15, Gene was in charge. I was carrying clean dishes back to the cupboards when I noticed water flowing down into the pantry through the ceiling. I pointed this out to Gene, who immediately sent me up the backstairs to investigate. The carpet was soaking wet just outside the bathroom, so I opened the bathroom door and was astounded to see that

water was a few inches deep throughout the bathroom. My three younger brothers, then 5½, 4 and 2, had stopped up the sink, the bathtub and the toilet, and had water flowing up and over all of them in an attempt to “make a swimming pool”.

Just after I had extracted this explanation, Gene ran in, very angry, demanding to know who was responsible. The five-year-old and the four-year-old immediately pointed at the two-year-old and shouted “He did it!” Gene grabbed the toilet plunger and whacked the two-year-old on his cushioned tush as the older boys ran out the door behind him and down the stairs. They were soon far away from home.

As I was watching all this unfold, with wet feet, I was thinking how much easier it is to believe a lie when you are angry and looking for a quick fix explanation. That realistic appraisal helped me remain optimistic while getting a grip on just how pervasive lying is.

I must confess, though, that in spite of my realism I continued to miss lies coming right at me for decades afterwards, and I still do occasionally, though now that I anticipate the vast majority of what I am told is at least somewhat suspect, I am not fooled quite as often. But I have noticed that when I am emotionally vulnerable, it is still much easier to fool me.

That certainly happened when I was a late joiner of my high school’s freshman basketball team. I had gotten considerably taller and better in the late Fall of 1967, and so asked if I could join. Dispensation was made, but I was just a bench warmer for the rest of the season. At one of our last away games, hoping to be of some use to the team, I started cheering on the varsity vigorously, as we had few fans to watch us at our away games. Near the end of the game, which our varsity won against a rival Milwaukee team, one of my fellow freshman teammates started getting everyone all riled up, because that rival had dissed us so badly when we had shown up to play. He pointed to a large poster taped to the wall above the bleachers on the other side of the basketball court, which said something inane like “Lance the Lancers”, and showed a lance knocking a Lancer off his horse. Since we were the Lancers, we took this insult personally.

As the game neared its climax, my teammate started shouting that we should rip that poster down. And as the final buzzer sealed our win, the freshmen team poured off the benches and onto the court, and then up the bleachers to the offending poster to rip it down.

At least that is what I thought was happening. I was the first one to the poster, and the first one to rip it. And then I heard an adult shouting angrily and turned around to see I was the only one up there. And in mighty big trouble too. My best friend on the team quickly shouted up to me, “Come on, Jim, let’s get on the bus.” I will never forget his kindness in lying about my name.

We skee-daddled out of there, and onto the bus, but I was shunned by one and all. Especially by the boy who had egged us all on. And as I sat there, fully aware that my attempted basketball career was now over, I thought about that boy, and the look on his face when he glanced over at me on the bus. There was a smidgen of guilt, but mostly the same cruel pleasure I had by then seen so many times before. And I compared his lie to rile up his teammates to my friend’s lie about my name to help get me out of trouble, and I realized that lying is not a sin at all. It is the motive for lying which is. And I thought of my second confession, and laughed. Silently. I was just barely smart enough then to not make things any worse than they already were.

That recognition was pivotal to my quickly developing a very non-Catholic attitude towards lying. I realized that when you want to believe, it is easy to be fooled by a lie. That when you are emotionally vulnerable, it is easy to be fooled by a lie. That when you have been

trained to obey, it is easy to be fooled by a lie. Which meant to me, it is almost always easy to be fooled by a lie.

I decided to try to avoid that, to become unerringly realistic so that I could avoid that. And I soon discovered that to avoid being fooled by your own lies about yourself is the hardest of all. Still, I was soon quite optimistic that my realism would prevent me from being fooled by lies so easily ever again.

I have Presidents Johnson and Nixon to thank for the alacrity with which I then expanded my new understanding of lying into the political realm. They were especially helpful because, in spite of all the rhetoric on both sides about the evil of the other side during the late 1960s, it seemed obvious that almost everyone involved was relatively oblivious to the fact that the most profound lies being told were the ones designed to fool themselves about their own positions.

That made it clear that if I was going to become even more realistic, I would have to see the world from another's perspective — in fact, from as many other perspectives as I could imagine. Because to get to the realistic reality I was seeking, I would have to analyze life from as many lying-to-oneseif's viewpoints as I could muster in the pursuit of (and in questioning whether there even was) an objective reality, a common playground, that we were all experiencing in this rather inaccurate way.

While I was in college this pursuit led to an interest in Indian philosophy, and I became adept enough at that, for that time and place, to begin giving local lectures about it. One evening I had two conflicting events, and I asked a librarian I knew, with similar interests, to take my place at one event for the first half hour. I arrived even later than expected, and she was already into the Q&A portion of her presentation, so I just sat down and listened.

A PhD student I knew asked her a question shortly after I arrived. It was an involved question about our emotions, and I had an interesting idea about how to answer him. I was 20 then — just barely old enough to hold my tongue and let my substitute carry on. She gave him a meandering answer that signified nothing — to me. And he seemed lost in thought after she spoke, so I figured he was trying to be polite by not following up on his unanswered question.

When her presentation was all done, I walked up to that student and asked him whether she had answered his question, using that as a polite door through which I could walk with a cogent and concise answer. He paused for half a second, and then said, "She sure did. That's the best answer I've ever had to that question, and I've asked it dozens of times."

I kept my composure, and told him I was very glad to hear that. Then, before saying good night, I let my substitute know how much he had appreciated her answer. After that, I wandered off into the night to wonder at the inexplicability of such occurrences. There was a good question, and a non-answer, and an emotional bull's-eye which almost no one could put their finger on, including the student who had asked the question. But something about what she had said, or how she had said it, had gotten through to him in exactly the way effective teachers are always aiming to achieve.

An even more startling example of alternative perspectives happened to me about six years after that one. One of my best friends from high school was getting married to a divorced woman with two daughters from her first marriage. The girls were 8 and 6. So I decided to get the girls presents too. On a trip to a Madison mall, I saw a 50-year-old woman in a wheelchair at a craft booth selling beautiful Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls, and decided that was just the ticket. So I bought one of each, and while I was paying the woman, I asked her where she lived. She was from a small Wisconsin town about an hour north of Madison. I talked to her a bit more about her craft, how she had gotten started on it, and so on, and then I praised her, saying

enthusiastically, “This must be so much more enjoyable than watching daytime soaps every day as so many people do.”

She immediately looked embarrassed and downcast, so I asked her if I had said something wrong. She shyly confessed that she really loved to watch daytime soap operas.

I wrenched my foot from my mouth, and immediately plunged into a question, as that always seems to be the best way out of such situations. “Really? How interesting! Would you mind telling me why you love to watch them so much?”

“Because they take me places I have never been,” she said quietly, “and show me people behaving as I would never behave. They stretch my horizons.”

I thanked her for telling me that, and for the dolls, and again wandered off thunderstruck at my own ignorance, my own assumptions, my own not realizing clearly that the relativity of everyone’s imagination horizon would certainly apply to daytime soaps as well as it does to everything else.

That experience put the final touches on one of my realistic, but optimistic, ideas which I use to explain the human predicament. Our imaginations’ horizons are limited by where we stand. We can only see a bit further ahead of where we are. The irony is, the more active an imagination one has, and the broader a perspective one constructs, the further one can see — and so the further away one’s imagination horizon recedes.

Recognizing this reality makes one more optimistic, because instead of being upset that you can’t keep up with your imagination of who you should be, and how you should act, you become accustomed to the idea that the further ahead you can imagine, the more progress you must be personally making — even though your imagined self seems further away from becoming reality than ever. The upsetting feeling of not being able to keep up with your imagination has a name: it’s your conscience. Another irony there — if you turn your imagination into a conscience, you are defriending your own imagination, creating multiple complications in your pursuit of happiness.

But the deepest irony of all is that the most influential religious, political and philosophical leaders who have lived among us over the millennia, who have helped build human civilization into what it is, have almost always suggested everyone else should develop a more or less severe conscience to prod them forward. This might be the biggest reason we have made so much less civilizational progress in our personalities than in our technologies.

So let’s be realistic, and step back, and ask “compared to what?” instead. What are we comparing the human race to when we lash out at it to behave better? Well, we are comparing it to our imagination of what we think the human race should be. And we are so unrealistic as to imagine that our imaginations can make those changes we desire happen, rather than recognize that the free will of each human being, and his or her emotional reactions to how they decide to go about their own personal pursuit of happiness, are what drives human civilization forward, backward or sideways.

When we do step back and make a valid comparison to what else actually exists, at least that we know about, the human race looks considerably better. There are trillions of animals on this planet, and maybe even quintillions, depending on if bacteria get counted, and each of those animals makes decisions. Simple decisions, it appears to us, but decisions nonetheless. So let us compare ourselves, our almost eight billion selves, to those trillions or more of our cultural competitors. Who would not argue, at the very least, that the approximately one trillion mammals have more interesting eating, mating and playing habits than non-mammal animals?

Watching dolphins, whales and sea lions play about is far more intriguing than watching a school of tuna, interesting though that may be. And speciesist though that may be.

We can even wax poetic about the wonderful bird cultures, and throw all 100 billion of them into the mix too. And still recognize that mammalian and bird cultures include much fewer than 1% of all the animal minds on this planet.

Since the almost eight billion mammals who are human constitute well under 1% of that 1%, we humans are the elite of the elite. It would actually be quite justified if all the other animals decided to Occupy Wall Street to protest what we elitists are doing to this planet.

You may scoff, and think there is nothing elite about the vast majority of human lives, and how they are lived. But that is your imagination thinking for you. Think of the complexity and artistic skill that goes into human eating, mating and playing habits. When compared to reality, to the other actual animal alternatives, even rats live relatively imaginative lives. Though they could certainly learn from racoons about washing up a bit more often.

It goes without saying, of course, that this kind of realism will make an optimist of anyone. But even if we just compare our current human civilization with past iterations of human civilization, we can be justly proud, and even very optimistic about where we are heading. Even though we are clearly not heading toward a time when the lion will lay down with the lamb, no matter how hungry he is, we are clearly making progress in freeing individuals from unnecessarily authoritarian strictures on their pursuit of happiness.

Ironically, since it has occurred due to economic pressures more than to humanitarian ones, we have relatively recently shed the myth that women can't be educated — and how much smarter are we all for having shed that nonsense? Other divides designed to keep the powerful firmly in their place in the hierarchy, whether they be religious or political affiliations, physical characteristics, or even intelligence, are also being ground down by economic pressures and by our imaginations — which have been stretched to new horizons due to our technological prowess and due to the recent recognition that making sure some in society remain powerless, in order to be exploited, is no longer an economic benefit, but actually a detriment, to the civilizations that indulge in it.

War itself has almost arrived on the same extinction list. In the meantime, large middle classes, addicted to a modicum of comfort and control over their own lives, are now willing after wars to defer consumption for decades in order to quickly rebuild what they had before. Germany and Japan after WWII are the best examples, but there are many more, and will be even more soon — if we continue to pretend that war can still be an economically efficient solution to a perceived social problem.

These are all very realistic reasons to assume, optimistically, that future human civilizations, though still recognizably human, will actually be kinder and gentler, as President George H.W. Bush liked to say. Not kumbaya-level kind, of course, but any step in that direction will make life more enjoyable, especially for those who have had the harshest time of it due to our authoritarian tendencies in the past.

This waning devotion to cultural authoritarianism goes hand-in-hand with declining hero worship. Demi-gods, conquerors, saints, kings — the winners of the authoritarian game have always been overly lauded, just as eagles, lions, tigers and bank robbers are still admired as top-of-the-line predators who bow to no rules but their own.

That is why authoritarians do not usually react well to the anarchists among us who want to cancel hero worship. But what is often missed by such reactionaries is that anarchists hate all restrictions on their lives because they have usually suffered disproportionately from the



authoritarian policies they are rebelling against. Whether rebels have good reason to rebel, or not, the advantage that authoritarians will probably always have over anarchists continues to this day, because anarchy is just a very hard thing to get organized.

Still, the current cancel culture is making many converts. Authoritarian ideas are a bit more uncomfortably resurgent than usual in our democracy, but canceling history, canceling the stories of those who contributed to incremental progress simply because they were imperfect, is just a different recipe for social disaster, yet another way our imaginations fail us. It is based on a desperate hope that by eliminating the past the effects of all the terrors that were unleashed back then will also disappear, that there will be a clean slate, and a “new man” will rise on those ashes.

It is also an inspiring hope, especially when one has been exploited, but that kind of inspiring optimism is unrelated to reality. Reality is much more like the game Chutes and Ladders. As you are nearing the goal, you have an ever-increasing chance of hitting a chute and returning to square one.

The middle ground between Authoritarianism and Anarchy is Democracy. Instead of worshipping demi-gods, or canceling every flawed over-achiever, our current democratic culture favors admiring sports stars — adepts at physical achievements who are not compared to perfection, but to previous achievers. A sports star can fail more than half the time and still be a superstar in her sport. And no one expects her to also be Secretary of the Treasury and get economic theory to work properly. Actually, very few people expect anyone to be able to do that.

It is much better to see a sports star’s flaws and hypocrisies and counterproductive acts clearly, but still admire their batting average. Because then you can say, quite optimistically, “Well, if Babe Ruth could hit so many home runs, and still be a womanizing alcoholic, maybe the rest of us have a chance after all.”

In a democracy, the definition of a valuable citizen is one who has given more to society than he has taken away. You don’t have to be the king’s favorite. You don’t have to be the richest. You don’t even have to have had a mother who loved you. No. There is a wide range of how valuable any citizen can be to his fellow citizens, and at least theoretically it is totally up to each person to decide how valuable he or she wants to be.

A trailblazer who created hard-won paths through the wilderness, which now lie beneath superhighways millions drive along comfortably every day, does not need to be worshipped. But his batting average can still be admired and remembered.

This recognition is how I sustain my realistic optimism. There are now millions of individuals who, without recourse to duty, or obedience, or any other manipulative social trick, have in the pursuit of their own self-interest, their own happiness, chosen to become valuable citizens of their cultures, chosen to give more than they take. Essentially they have said to hell with the golden rule. Instead, their guiding perspective is: be more generous to others than you would ever expect anyone to be to you.

If that approach to life keeps sinking in as democratic cultures deepen, strengthen and diversify, and millions more adopt it (mostly unconsciously), then the definition of a good citizen will keep improving. The members of our club are good examples of this trend. All are responsible members of society. None claims to be flawless (with maybe one or two unnamed exceptions). But all have made considerable contributions to the advance of human civilization. And none wants to be cancelled. Just yet.