

Years 11-12 Category Highly Commended

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I'm About to ask you to Believe Something Radical

Sometimes, you read a book and it changes you forever. Perhaps not in a big way, or even in a way you remember for long, but a small part of your heart has irrevocably shifted. One such book that has done this for me is Rutger Bregman's *Humankind: A Hopeful History*. Now, the point of this essay is not this book (as great as it is); but what reading it has led me to believe. This belief is simple:

People are good.

Please note, I acknowledge the complexity here. There is a mix of virtue and vice in every person and in humanity as a whole and I doubt that many would disagree. The radical part, stay with me here, is that I believe that humans will almost always choose to be good. They may be misguided, or making the wrong choice, but the intent to do good is key here. I believe this so profoundly that every study, fact, anecdote and experiment featured in *Humankind* could be totally disproven and I would think the very same thing. Like any faith, I often have reason to doubt. It felt like as soon as I decided that people were good, they decided to be spectacularly evil just to spite me. Yet, nothing has ever been enough to change my mind. It is a quite common view that humans are innately selfish. Or perhaps, that civilisation is a thin veneer hiding savageness beneath (think *Lord of the Flies*). In fact, not too long ago I thought similarly; that humans are inclined towards violence, and greed, and power. And really, why shouldn't I have? I was seven years old the first time I asked my parents why people had wars. I was only a little older when I started being afraid of men. I was twelve when I first went to Melbourne and saw homeless people freezing on the street and the hundreds of people that ignored them. I ignored them, too.

So, I understand when people don't agree with me. I wouldn't have agreed with me either. But this debate about the nature of people is far bigger than simply who is realistic and who is naive. Sure, it matters that I believe humans are ultimately kind. It matters to me, certainly. But it should matter to every single human person, because, and this is the clever bit, if we all believe that people are good...they probably will be.

We are raised to be suspicious and distrustful of people and it is drilled into us to expect the worst of humanity. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Don't trust strangers, lock your car, if you leave out a bowl of candy don't expect that anybody will take just one. Eat, or be eaten. Every man for himself. Clutch your purse, Smile! You're on camera, three layered password protections. You'd better hope that cop doesn't think you have a gun.

People's innate instincts to be prosocial are being suppressed by a culture of distrust. People are taught that selfishness is the only way to survive, when history has proven that is simply not the case. I implore you to research people's behaviour during disasters, how they actually band together when society falls apart. Question studies like 'the Stanford prison Experiment' that had to manipulate conditions to make people behave in a way that proved their point. I beg you to rethink your assumptions because by assuming that people are evil you are sealing their fate.

What matters is radical, and it is radical, faith in humanity. I have it. Do you?