Reflections on the Past Year, 2022

At the University of Minnesota, Associate Dean of Social Sciences Howard Lavine had mulled over events of the previous year and concluded 2022 could have been worse. In his essay "All the Bad Things that Were Supposed to Happen in 2022—But Didn't," he writes, "Although we might not feel like partying like it's 1999, the sky didn't fall."[1] Although Lavine paints a picture he found is "improving," he nevertheless wonders, "Why do we have such a hard time putting things in perspective?"[2] Lavine is not naïve about how dire conditions are. He is aware of the dark shadows still cast by "the attempt by Trump and some supporters to overturn the 2020 presidential vote, a deadly pandemic, and inflation that's wrecking family budgets."[3] He also acknowledges warnings that unfortunately have been true: "more school shootings, more devastation from climate change, more ethno-racial hate."[4] But Lavine is also seeking a "psychologically deeper reason and he finds it in "negativity bias or affective asymmetry."[5] He writes, "Relative to positive information, negative information carries more weight. … [It] moves us more strongly to act; and leads to greater learning."[6] It is difficult to disagree with Lavine that negative information carries more weight when I recall the most common excuse given for airing the toxic political ads we saw before the 2022 midterms and again in 2024: "Negative ads work!" It is also difficult, but not impossible, to disagree that what is negative moves us more to act. Fear is said to be the second most powerful emotion, and I think fears of looming dangers often incite us to act–the fears that precede and loom up inside of us can lead to negative consequences, such as hatred for fear of the unknown, or indifference as a kind of security blanket used to withdraw from social interactions. Those who fear losing support from Trump's seemingly blind followers have already ceded authority to his bid for more power. Yes, Russia's invasion did lead the amazing Ukrainian people to resist and defend their country. Fear of losing their homeland was manifested in these people's desperate and resilient courage.

On the other hand, despite timely and dire weather warnings over the 2022 holidays, one third of Americans ignored those warnings and went ahead with travel plans. In 2022, the State Department issued a record 22 million passports.[7] Fear of the weather failed to deter people who wanted to travel to be with families and friends for the holidays. Where I very much disagree with Lavine is that this negative bias "leads to greater learning."[8] After all, wasn't it Einstein who called it insane to repeat the same action again and again and then expect a different result? Human history offers fatally convincing evidence that war begets only more war. Reporting on journalists for Radio Free Europe, Bill Whittaker speaks truth to military power, calling out war for what it is: "humanity's ultimate folly."[9] That doesn't sound to me like any kind of wise insight or "greater learning." If anything, human nature shows itself to be a constant, to remain the same and repeat familiar responses. Pete Seeger's folk song "Where have all the flowers gone?" asks the question of humankind's return to war again and again, given each generation of the young who seek love, get caught up in wider conflicts, and then witness what wars destroy.[10] We might ask, "Why do we not learn?" Evolutionary psychology is a theory assuming genetic legacy of the "fight or flight" response," and for which there is, indeed, substantial evidence that those "more attuned to threats and dangers in the environment were genetically favored by natural selection."[11] While I agree with Lavine that this genetic legacy can be found in animals and humans can learn strategies from it, I differ in that human beings are further imbued with a spirit that accounts for human conscience, i.e., we are gifted with an ability to discern right from wrong. There's good reason Mark Twain wryly assigns humans to the bottom of an evolutionary scale.[12] After all, despite what distinguishes us from animals, humans frequently fail to use those innate, superior insights. The failure might be accounted for with at least two reasons. Accounting for "natural" selection assumes personification of nature, and what are called "natural" selections sound much too similar to the preferences of those who hold power in a culture–just as history is most often written by those who prevail in the latest war.

We might also see the strongest as fittest for survival because we admire the development of their abilities, i.e., a Tom Brady or Serena Williams, and/or because what is "strong-er" implies an ability–if not entitlement–to *put down* or "win over and above" what is not as strong or as good as what the fittest do. Human beings are only too pleased to accept a scientific theory that props up this bias by providing a supporting rationale, whether to buoy even more intense competition, to justify excessive greed in aggrandizing riches, or….to account for any number of frequent discriminations against seemingly less strong, less powerful groups of people Yet, at the end of his essay, Lavine acknowledges warnings that remain *unaccounted* for: "more school shootings, more devastation from climate change, more ethno-racial hate."[13] It could be argued that each of these conditions depends upon assuming the "strongest" in society are "naturally" selected often by means of the loudest voices: Second Amendment absolutists, multi-trillion dollar gas and energy corporations, and supremacists–white or otherwise. This last is important because it is not only some members of the white race who have become radicalized. In almost every culture it seems one group has a need to put down another group, even when that "other" is a part of their own group. I have long questioned the reason for this, and I think Lavine's essay offers at least one answer. Putting others down, whether by force, hatred, or any other means of discrimination, justifies itself by taking for granted the theory of survival of the fittest, by applying what is found in the animal kingdom to human beings—which allows us to conveniently ignore that which differentiates humans from animals. It also ignores certain behaviors in the animal kingdom that are more gentle and seemingly more peaceful than what humans demonstrate at their worst. Thus, human beings often determine what is "fittest" when they see themselves above other human beings, either by ruthlessly competing to be top dog, and/or simply assuming power over others. A second reason I disagree with Lavine that any negative bias in support of survival of the fittest does NOT lead to "greater learning" is that the moral conscience of humans is in direct contradiction with the strongman's argument of animal-like survival of the fittest, so that human beings often fail to heed that conscience.

Survival of the fittest provides easy outs, a pre-existing rationale for doing whatever we want, regardless of the effects our actions have on others. Therefore, it might just as well be moral *weakness* that accounts for "affective asymmetry" as well as the difficulty Lavine observes about putting things in perspective. It may simply be easier to go along with the negative. After all, and as Lavine is aware, the culture is constantly selling and seducing us to go along with what is easier and/or entertains us. Technology will even provide algorithms that prompt thinking by lulling us into a kind of mental cruise control. I do not think human nature changes inherently. Clearly, we are drawn to Zelensky's incredible courage and admire the spirit of Ukraine that refuses to submit. The resolute fight for freedom and refusal to surrender resonates with many Americans who may see ourselves in a similar way.[14] But then what Zelensky stands for becomes …suggestive of "our generation's Churchill," a prominent war figure, which reminds us that war begets…more war.[15] So we are back to what we do not learn from history. If and when humans change, it is because individuals choose to use moral conscience to counter the easier, "survival of the fittest" paradigm that applies to animals and is so often also advanced to set fire to our fears. Rather than put others down, we can sacrifice something of our own good either to elevate the situation of someone else or for a greater good—which actions are often not recognized at the time decisions are made because it may not be popular to do so and because sometimes their effects are only felt over the long term. Despite being outnumbered and overrun, the Capitol Police and Washington Police displayed heroic courage and chose duty and loyalty to the country above individual physical and mental injuries, standing their ground to fend off insurrectionists on January 6, 2021. When newly elected, a president called for "finding light in darkness," and needing "every American to do your part."[16] During the reign of a vicious pandemic, First Responders, courageous, and largely unsung, also chose sustained sacrifice to put the nation's common humanity above themselves. Firefighters and electricians worked not only in their own states, but also traveled to neighboring states to help above and beyond self-interests in subduing raging flames and power outages. Significantly, ordinary citizens disregarded stronger and far more powerful odds to respond with help for those in need after Hurricane Ian, the blizzard in Buffalo, New York, and endless, other natural disasters we have faced these past years.

Someone—often many—step up and pick up the pieces! The doctors, nurses, and aides seeing suicides and other deaths on a regular basis have to draw deeply on their own humanity and professional dedication to keep themselves from succumbing to discouragement. Volunteer groups like Doctors without Borders, the White Helmets, Red Crescent, and Red Cross sacrifice their own security because the needs of others are put ahead of their own. This is "love much greater than evolution requires."[17] All members of the January 6 committee, Rusty Bowers and other state officials risked having to cede political power in order to discern a truth regarding the Capitol insurrection because they believed in standing up for "principles we are sworn to protect."[18] Russia'a Vladimir Putin may regard himself as more powerful than Ivan Navalney, but Navalney, even dead, remains a towering figure of one who believed that protesting corrupt power will lead to freedom. The Afghan evacuation so impressed seasoned war reporter Sam Kiley because he recognized bonds of our common humanity that held despite the abandonment of some–whether those bonds represent the ongoing fight of veteran organizations' to ensure the United States keeps its moral obligation to our Afghan and Iraqi interpreters[18] or a father's desperate act of handing over barbed wire his baby girl to a military stranger.[19] In a break from its habitual gridlock, Congress passed some bipartisan legislation in 2022 to put the work of the nation ahead of one or the other party insisting on their way or no way. Although it was ignored, former NC Judge and senate candidate Cherie Beasley's called for senators to avoid investing in stocks so as to be "working for you, not themselves."[20] The current administration has succeeded in reuniting 600 of the more than 5,000 children separated from parents under the previous administration's zero tolerance policy. Another thousand are said still to be separated, but no longer housed in government shelters. They are with relatives, friends, or child welfare. Advocates argue close to four thousand remain separated, but many across age groups and political divides can find joy in this small accomplishment. Lee Gelernt of the ACLU is working to unite over 500 of the refugee children who remain separated from their families.[21] Reverend Barber, many women's groups, and many interfaith groups continue to seek to unite us across categories such as race, ethnicity, age, and gender–in order to form an intersegmental base from which to address the broader needs of those who are poor and neglected, but also who often have much in common with people in other categories.

Pope Francis tells young economists, entrepreneurs, and researchers from around the world "*happiness that is not shared is incomplete*."[22] The pope seeks to promote *"an economy of peace and not of war, an economy that opposes proliferation of arms,…where care replaces rejection and indifference…that leaves no one behind,."*[23] Groups come together to support community gardens… transitioning from agricultural cultures to more urban communities, then "pay forward" surplus to food banks and others in need. World Central Kitchen was there to provide help not only to Ukraine, but also in Maui, along with Lee Ann Wong, a local chef, both helping to feed thousands daily. Their love, kindness, and care for one another manifests to the world the spirit of *aloha*.[24]All residents are family to each other, not only in times of crisis. These responses remind me of a story on Jeffrey Brown's PBS Canvas series about Drew Lanham, an ornithologist who grew up in the Jim Crow South on a farm in rural South Carolina and now teaches wildlife science and conservation. Lanham discusses focusing on one bird at a time, minutely, and using binoculars, to scrutinize it close up.[25] But Lanham observes that when we zoom out, we also notice the bird's habitat, the wetlands and swamp in South Carolina's Congaree National Park. The bird we observed is still there, but the view has expanded so that we notice more, including the reach of human history and the impact made by different peoples who have inhabited the landscape–even the bird-watcher himself at a given moment in time.[26] Lanham says for someone like himself, "a Black person…who is often overlooked and dismissed in this society, to find common ground, I think, for me, is part of life's mission," and he makes a call to all of us "to leave places like this better than we found them."[27] Doing so means thinking outside of one's self and one's "natural selection."[28] Brown summarizes: "You're going to have to take your binoculars down, and you're going to have to see a broader vision and a broader world."[29] Lanham feels "That is all conservation is."[30]He states that leaving the earth "better than you found it means you have to have some degree of care and love for people you don't even know."[31] Broader vision and a more expansive landscape includes more of those human bonds that connect, embrace and enrich all of us–our common, albeit flawed, humanity.