

The Glass Half Full  
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We have had an ugly year, one in which we suffered a dreadful pandemic, a wobbling economy, and the daily offence of watching our president, a man we should be able to trust, do nothing but lie, falsify history, and pander to our worst behaviors.

If we do not put all of these spectacles in historic perspective, we could well be depressed. But history in perspective can save us from despair. Just consider the two-part final exam question I once asked my college students: a) If you could choose any period in history that you would like to live, why, when, and where would it be? b) If you were not able to select your social class or gender at such a period, would you still choose it?

My students got it. Not one of them would take a chance on living in any earlier time without being male and upper class. We are, in spite of everything, living in the best of times, certainly in this place (Western civilization) and across social and gender identities. Even the poorest among us in the US and Europe have more amenities and possibilities of improvement than at any prior time.

Travel to India, particularly to rural villages or cities bursting at the seams, to see what the past looked like. The rich are very rich indeed, and the very poor still die in the streets or along highways. Yet even in India, the fruits of modern Western society are providing more people lives with better futures. Western civilization (promoted by the United States throughout the 20th century) has lifted more people out of poverty and has bettered rule by law throughout the world. We are the beneficiaries of our Founding Fathers, flesh and blood men of property and education, who envisioned an entirely new society with the possibility of continual improvements. They knew their own times were not perfect. But they had managed to devise a country with a united front, compelled to compromise on an ugly issue that would otherwise split them: slavery.

The founders who were not slave owners wanted to outlaw this horrible institution from the start. Those who owned slaves, a system that they did not invent but inherited, were embarrassed by it, but could only hope that in the future, the system would end. They compromised: not letting the South benefit from slave numbers to have more seats in Congress than they might have. The 2/3 compromise is ridiculous, but enable us to be one, not two, countries.

John Adams' learned wife, Abigail, urged her husband and the founders to "remember the ladies." The ladies were not remembered until 1920, when they finally won their right to vote. Women still struggle to enjoy equal citizenship in some ways even today, such as control over their bodies, but none of us would change places with our grandmothers.

In recent years, we have been enlightened about dark issues in our history that have been hitherto downplayed. We are a country of immigrants (with the exception of the Native American nations who migrated here earlier, and the Black slaves who were involuntary immigrants).

Our immigrant history generally began out of dark necessity: famines and civil conflicts brought many here, as did stark hunger (southern Italy) and persecution (three bouts) for Jews. After building our railways, Chinese workers were fired, hunted down, and murdered, and deprived of immigration rights.

Today, we are in the process of correcting the holes in our historic accounts of who we are. More of us know the horrible history of the failed reconstruction after the end of legal slavery. We know the continuing systemic racial bias that has dogged Black communities, bad relationships with the police, bad schools, neighborhoods, food deserts, uncontrolled firearms, and now the pandemic.

But that glass is more than half full. American society is benefiting from Black success stories. Judges, Representatives, actors, scientists, and even the Presidency are proof of that progress. The same for all Asian immigrants, as well as for women, in the ranks of power.

Our better angels are alive and well. Vote.

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That? Contact her at [Lfarhat102@aol.com](mailto:Lfarhat102@aol.com) or [www.globalthink.net](http://www.globalthink.net).