

### Ten Reasons to Be Thankful

Tired of doom-and-gloom headlines? Here are ten reasons to be grateful for the times we live in.

Source: John Tierney, *Readers Digest*

1. Show evidence of a close reading.
2. Highlight confusion
3. Write a one-page reflection in your WN

Count your blessings, we're told, but it's just not in our nature. We'd rather count our problems. Our species survived by reacting instantly to threats, and the ancient humans who stopped to smell the roses made easier targets for predators.

Today, the predators are mostly gone, but we're still so primed to pay attention to bad news that we tend to ignore what's going well. As soon as we solve one problem, we take the progress for granted and find a new cause for alarm. Every now and again it doesn't hurt to take stock of just how good we have it. Start counting:

1. **Free time.** As much as we complain about being busy, the typical American has more free time than ever—more than five hours per day, according to time surveys by the U.S. Census Bureau and researchers at the University of Maryland and Penn State. That's a gain of nearly an hour since 1965 and a gain of about four hours since the 19th century. In Victorian England, when life expectancy was only about 50, workers put in 60-hour weeks, from age ten until they died.

If you feel too busy, it's probably only because you're doing so many other things than work. Over the course of a lifetime, you typically spend no more than 20 percent of your waking hours on the job, and experts say there'll be even more free time in the future as life expectancy keeps increasing and work hours keep shrinking. By 2050 in the industrialized world, others project, the average workweek will be just 27 hours.

2. **Peace.** Wars and terrorist attacks will always make headlines, but it's remarkable how many of the world's 6.7 billion people now live in peace. In recent decades, despite the growth in population, the number of war casualties around the world has declined, according to the Human Security Report Project from Canada's Simon Fraser University. And despite a new fear of terrorism following 9/11, terrorist casualties have been declining in recent years.

In some earlier generations, a quarter of the male population died violent deaths. Over the past century, even counting the world wars, a person's chance of dying from war or violent civil strife was less than 2 percent, according to John Mueller, a professor of political science at Ohio State University. That means that the scourge of war is now comparable to the statistical risk of driving a car in the United States.

3. **A roomier American dream.** While some people are struggling to keep their homes, the vast majority of Americans still have plenty to be thankful for when they walk through the front door. In 1950 the typical new American house had one floor with 1,000 square feet, two bedrooms, and one bathroom—and even that bungalow was beyond many people's means. Nearly half of Americans didn't own their homes, and more than a third of homes lacked complete plumbing facilities.

Today, more than two thirds of Americans own their homes, and the typical new house has two floors, at least three bedrooms, two and a half baths, and more than 2,200 square feet of space for the family.

4. **The reader's revolution.** In 1970 barely half the people in the world were literate, and many of them could afford only a few books. Middle-class people needed installment plans to afford an encyclopedia. Local libraries offered a limited selection of books; new titles went on sale in bookstores but soon disappeared unless they were bestsellers.

Today, more than 80 percent of the world's people can read, and 22 percent have access to the greatest library in history. The Web provides classic books and reference works like Wikipedia free of charge, and the online network of booksellers means that no book ever really goes out of print. Whatever it is, old or new, someone somewhere will sell it to you, often at a bargain price.

5. **The horn of plenty.** The royal dinners at Versailles might have had glitzier place settings, but Louis XVI would gaze enviously at the food in a middle-class home or restaurant

today: kiwifruits from New Zealand, South African peppers, Thai pineapples, Italian gelato. He'd be amazed, too, at the way we take fresh produce, fish, and meat for granted in every season.

The king's subjects, of course, would be even more envious. France was one of the world's richest countries in the late 18th century, but the average Frenchman consumed less than 2,000 calories per day-about the same level as people in the world's poorest countries consumed in the middle of the 20th century. Today, the typical person in a poor country consumes 2,700 calories daily, a nutritional improvement made possible by farmers growing more food at lower cost.

While the occasional food shortage or price spike grabs our attention, the long-range trend is what really matters. While incomes have risen since 1950, the inflation-adjusted price of food has declined by 75 percent, according to the World Resources Institute. So it represents a smaller and smaller portion of our paychecks.

Food is so plentiful that in many countries, the old concerns about hunger have been replaced by worries about obesity.

6. **More wilderness.** Once you travel beyond the sprawling exurbs of America, you'll find plenty of open space and peaceful forests. Many of the prairies and woodlands cleared by settlers have returned now that the land is no longer needed for agriculture.

In recent decades, America has gained 70 million acres of wilderness, which is more than all the land currently occupied by cities, suburbs, and exurbs, according to Peter Huber, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute. And more people than ever can get to that wilderness because of a technology that we now routinely curse.

7. **The modern automobile.** Granted, cars emit greenhouse gases and create maddening traffic jams, but consider what else they do. Compared with the models on the road in 1970, today's cars burn less gasoline per mile and emit 98 percent fewer pollutants. That's why, despite the doubling of the number of cars, there's much less smog in the air.

The basic sedan today offers more creature comforts and safety than the luxury cars of old. The fatality rate has declined sharply, and cars have become so reliable that it's rare to come upon that once-routine sight on the shoulder of the road: a driver forlornly staring under the hood.

8. **The platinum age of television.** Forget the so-called golden age of TV. Shows from the '50s look positively primitive compared with *Mad Men*, *30 Rock*, or *The Amazing Race*. When a few networks had to appeal to the lowest common denominator, television really was a wasteland-just as Hollywood so often churns out mediocrity when it's aiming for box office blockbusters.

With hundreds of channels today, TV producers don't have to please everyone, so they can appeal to niche audiences with quirky programs: sophisticated dramas, edgy comedies, and documentaries that aren't just educational but riveting. When children are happily learning about Mayan engineering on the History Channel or quasars on the Discovery Channel, that box is no longer the boob tube.

9. **Retreat from Armageddon.** During the Cold War, the United States and the former Soviet Union had about 50,000 nuclear warheads aimed at each other. Since then, they've agreed to get rid of 90 percent of them, and tens of thousands of those weapons have already been eliminated. As Gregg Easterbrook observes in his book *The Progress Paradox*, "Historians will view nuclear arms reduction as such an incredible accomplishment that it will seem bizarre in retrospect so little attention was paid while it was happening."

10. **Memories.** The gift of longer life has usually been accompanied by the loss of memories, but we'll be luckier than our grandparents. Besides the new memory-improvement drugs being developed, we've got digital photos and videos and e-mails to recall our best personal moments and the Web to instantly help us remember who sang that song or which year the blizzard hit.

In the past, only nobles could hire scribes to write their histories and artists to depict their deeds. Today, we all have records of our lives to pass on to our descendants, to comfort us as we age, and to remind us, every now and then, to count our blessings.

Possible topics for your WN:

- What are 10 things you are thankful for?
- Pick one thing you are thankful for and reflect in depth.
- Do you think the media has a tendency to focus on the negative? If that is true, why?