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The Attractiveness of Gloom

Science. Dr. Noitall, you are the world's greatest expert on doom and gloom, the grandson of Cassandra, the promulgator of the new version of Murphy's Law, "Things are worse than they possibly can be," and the retroactive predictor of every major earthquake, war, depression, flood, fire, and superbowl loss experienced in the United States in the last 50 years.

Noitall. A vast understatement of my true worth.

Science. How do you do so well in predicting retroactively all those disasters?

Noitall. The retroactive prediction is infallible. Once an event has occurred, it is quite clear that it was inevitable and was caused by the incompetence or villainy of those who should have averted it.

Science. It must be quite difficult to discover who the incompetents and villains are.

Noitall. That is quite easy. It is always one's opponents, whoever they may be. Because a careful analysis takes much time and energy, evolution has provided *Homo sapiens* with an unconditioned reflex that automatically blames the people one has despised all along. Labor blames capital, capital blames labor, the natives blame the immigrants, the immigrants blame the establishment, the rich blame the poor, and the poor blame the rich.

Science. But aren't there real troubles that make the prospects for the future very grim?

Noitall. Of course. There is genuine fear of unemployment, fear of cancer, fear of crime, and fear of materialism. But compared to 30 or 40 years ago, the standard of living has gone up, life expectancy has gone up, crime has gone down, and there is a diminution of keeping up with the Joneses. Thus we doom-and-gloomers require more ingenuity to keep pessimism flourishing, but in general we count on expectations always increasing more rapidly than productivity.

Science. But is it not true that jobs in industries are going from more developed to less developed countries and that the United States, Germany, and Australia, among others, are in recessions?

Noitall. Of course, that is exactly what anyone would have expected. The developed countries prided themselves on bringing the advantages of civilization to the formerly deprived. The latter of course have learned very well, so now they can produce the same goods at far lower wage rates and without the limitation of golden parachutes for executives who have failed disastrously. The developed countries expected that their pupils would be grateful consumers, but instead they have become efficient competitors.

Science. But what about this fear of materialism if what is really wanted is a return to the old affluence?

Noitall. The worry is that even if we return to our former affluence, we should not feel happy because there are so many homeless, so many hungry Russians and decimated rain forests. The people who say they want more money now are apparently not going to be happy keeping it because there are so many more deserving people who need it even more.

Science. Is there any possible redeeming social value to gloom and doom?

Noitall. Yes, indeed. Complacency is the enemy of progress and unhappiness is a prerequisite for change. It is time the countries of the developed world realize that they cannot coast on past successes but must rededicate themselves to the inventiveness and hard work that bring increasing standards of living.

Science. Won't that eliminate gloom and doom?

Noitall. Of course not. Some people enjoy gloom. Bad news sells newspapers. Gloom sells secondhand cars and helps divorce lawyers and bankruptcy brokers. The "outs" in corporations and politics can bash the "ins," and beneath the crocodile tears there is the subtle belief of the more wealthy or the more healthy that they deserve their good fortune.

Science. Because life expectancy is constantly going up, and we may well cure cancer and heart disease in the near future, doesn't all else matter little if we are increasingly healthy?

Noitall. That just illustrates the distorted view of history of you optimists. I can already see the panic that will spread through the population when they read about the epidemic of deaths through natural causes.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.