

The State of the World

First-Answer the questions on this web page.

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Read:

Why I Love the Circus

I love the circus. I love to watch a juggler throwing screaming chain saws in the air, or a tightrope walker performing ten flips in a row. I love the spectacle and the sense of amazement and delight at witnessing the seemingly impossible.

When I was a child my dream was to become a circus artist. My parents' dream, though, was for me to get the good education they never had. So I ended up studying medicine.

One afternoon at medical school, in an otherwise dry lecture about the way the throat worked, our professor explained, "If something is stuck, the passage can be straightened by pushing the chin bone forward." To illustrate, he showed an X-ray of a sword swallower in action.



I had a flash of inspiration. My dream was not over! A few weeks earlier, when studying reflexes, I had discovered that of all my classmates, I could push my fingers farthest down my throat without gagging. At the time, I had not been too proud: I didn't think it was an important skill. But now I understood its value, and instantly my childhood dream sprang back to life. I decided to become a sword swallower.

My initial attempts weren't encouraging. I didn't own a sword so used a fishing rod instead, but no matter how many times I stood in front of the bathroom mirror and tried, I'd get as far as an inch and it would get stuck. Eventually, for a second time, I gave up on my dream.

Three years later I was a trainee doctor on a real medical ward. One of my first patients was an old man with a persistent cough. I would always ask what my patients did for a living, in case it was relevant, and it turned out he used to swallow swords. Imagine my surprise when this patient turned out to be the very same sword swallower from the X-ray! And imagine this, when I told him all about my attempts with the fishing rod. "Young doctor," he said, "don't you know the throat is flat? You can only slide flat things down there. That is why we use a sword."

That night after work I found a soup ladle with a straight flat handle and immediately resumed my practice. Soon I could slide the handle all the way down my throat. I was excited, but being a soup ladle shaft swallower was not my dream. The next day, I put an ad in the local paper and soon I had acquired what I needed: a Swedish army bayonet from 1809. As I successfully slid it down my throat, I felt both deeply proud of my achievement and smug that I had found such a great way to recycle weapons.

Sword swallowing has always shown that the seemingly impossible can be possible, and inspired humans to think beyond the obvious. Occasionally I demonstrate this ancient Indian art at the end of one of my lectures on global development. I step up onto a table and rip off my professorial checked shirt to reveal a black vest top decorated with a gold sequined lightning bolt. I call for complete silence, and to the swirling beat of a snare drum I slowly slide the army bayonet down my throat. I stretch out my arms. The audience goes wild.

QUIZ-----

Scientists, Chimpanzees, and You

How did you do? Did you get a lot wrong? Did you feel like you were doing a lot of guessing? If so, let me say two things to comfort you.

First, when you have finished this book, you will do much better. Not because I will have made you sit down and memorize a string of global statistics. (I am a global health professor, but I'm not crazy.) You'll do better because I will have shared with you a set of simple thinking tools. These will help you get the big picture right, and improve your sense of how the world works, without you having to learn all the details.

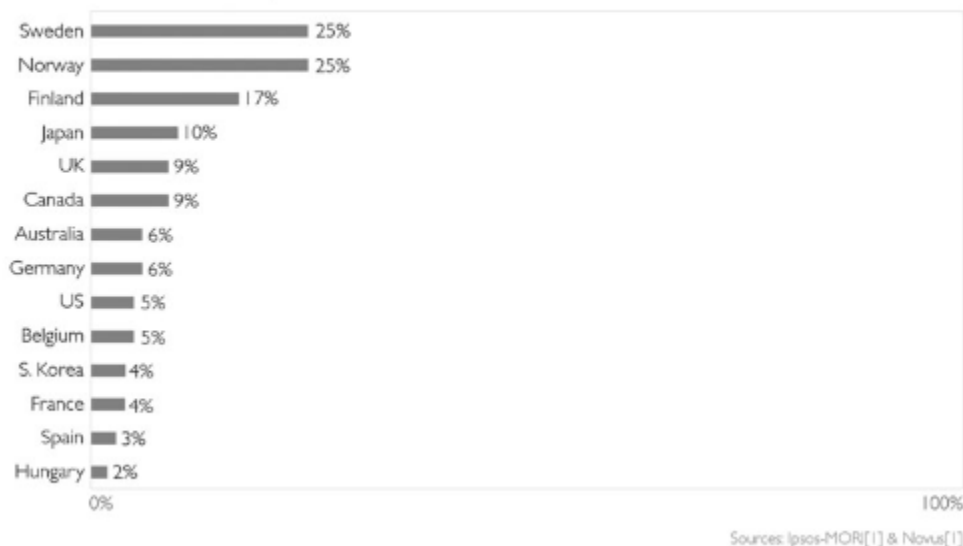
And second: if you did badly on this test, you are in very good company.

Over the past decades I have posed hundreds of fact questions like these, about poverty and wealth, population growth, births, deaths, education, health, gender, violence, energy, and the environment—basic global patterns and trends—to thousands of people across the world. The tests are not complicated and there are no trick questions. I am careful only to use facts that are well documented and not disputed. Yet most people do extremely badly.

Question three, for example, is about the trend in extreme poverty. Over the past twenty years, the proportion of the global population living in extreme poverty has halved. This is absolutely revolutionary. I consider it to be the most important change that has happened in the world in my lifetime. It is also a pretty basic fact to know about life on Earth. But people do not know it. On average only 7 percent—less than one in ten!—get it right.

FACT QUESTION 3 RESULTS: percentage who answered correctly.

In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has ... ?
(Correct answer: almost halved.)



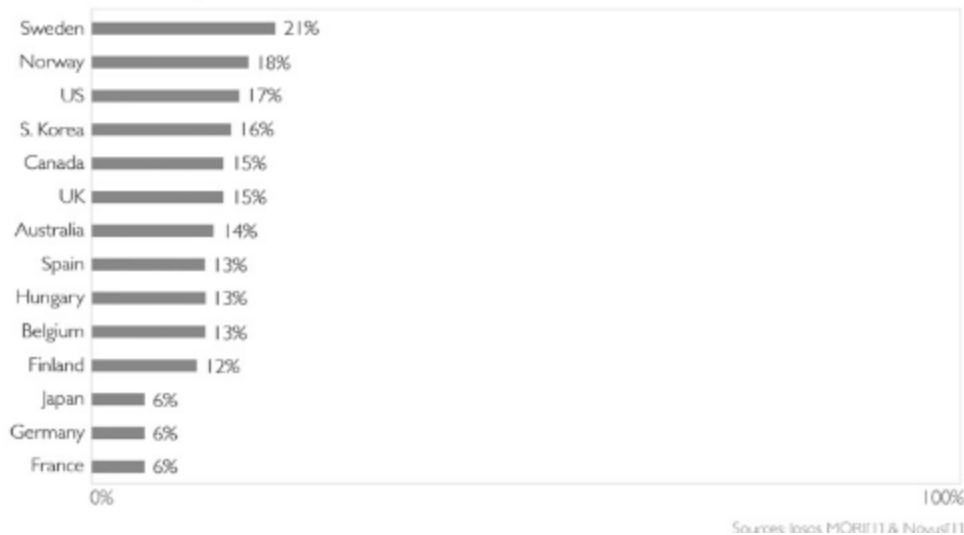
(Yes, I have been talking a lot about the decline of global poverty in the Swedish media.)

The Democrats and Republicans in the United States often claim that their opponents don't know the facts. If they measured their own knowledge instead of pointing at each other, maybe everyone could become more humble. When we polled in the United States, only 5 percent picked the right answer. The other 95 percent, regardless of their voting preference, believed either that the extreme poverty rate had not changed over the last 20 years, or, worse, that it had actually doubled—which is literally the opposite of what has actually happened.

Let's take another example: question nine, about vaccination. Almost all children are vaccinated in the world today. This is amazing. It means that almost all human beings alive today have some access to basic modern health care. But most people do not know this. On average just 13 percent of people get the answer right.

FACT QUESTION 9 RESULTS: percentage who answered correctly.

How many of the world's one-year-old children today have been vaccinated against some disease?
(Correct answer: 80%)



Eighty-six percent of people get the final question about climate change right. In all the rich countries where we have tested public knowledge in online polls, most people know that climate experts are predicting warmer weather. In just a few decades, scientific findings have gone from the lab to the public. That is a big public-awareness success story.

Climate change apart though, it is the same story of massive ignorance (by which I do not mean stupidity, or anything intentional, but simply the lack of correct knowledge) for all twelve of the other questions. In 2017 we asked nearly 12,000 people in 14 countries to answer our questions. They scored on average just two correct answers out of the first 12. No one got full marks, and just one person (in Sweden) got 11 out of 12. A stunning 15 percent scored zero.

Perhaps you think that better-educated people would do better? Or people who are more interested in the issues? I certainly thought that once, but I was wrong. I have tested audiences from all around the world and from all walks of life: medical students, teachers, university lecturers, eminent scientists, investment bankers, executives in multinational companies, journalists, activists, and even senior political decision makers. These are highly educated people who take an interest in the world. But most of them—a stunning majority of them—get most of the answers wrong. Some of these groups even score worse than the general public; some of the most appalling results came from a group of Nobel laureates and medical researchers. It is not a question of intelligence. Everyone seems to get the world devastatingly wrong.

Not only devastatingly wrong, but systematically wrong. By which I mean that these test results are not random. They are worse than random: they are worse than the results I would get if the people answering my questions had no knowledge at all.

Imagine I decide to head down to the zoo to test out my questions on the chimpanzees. Imagine I take with me huge armfuls of bananas, each marked either A, B, or C, and throw them into the chimpanzee enclosure. Then I stand outside the enclosure, read out each question in a loud, clear

voice, and note down, as each chimpanzee's "answer," the letter on the banana she next chooses to eat.

If I did this (and I wouldn't ever actually do this, but just imagine), the chimps, by picking randomly, would do consistently better than the well-educated but deluded human beings who take my tests. Through pure luck, the troop of chimps would score 33 percent on each three-answer question, or four out of the first 12 on the whole test. Remember that the humans I have tested get on average just two out of 12 on the same test.

What's more, the chimps' errors would be equally shared between the two wrong answers, whereas the human errors all tend to be in one direction. Every group of people I ask thinks the world is more frightening, more violent, and more hopeless—in short, more dramatic—than it really is.

Now, go to this form, and answer the two questions.

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