

Harry Creber

Lanna International School Thailand

Age: 17 years old.

We live in sheltered serenity, floating calmly in a seemingly endless sea of opportunity as we sail towards a fabled island of treasure and lifelong luxury. In this civilised modern world, it seems to be taken for granted that every step we as a species take will be forward. That we are ever progressing, evolving and adapting to our surroundings, that every scientific breakthrough leads to a cascade of good that showers upon those who suffer most in our world. Whether it's treating HIV, AIDs or malaria, reaching Mars or releasing the new iPhone, we've come to assume that every milestone is an achievement to be lauded and praised for being brilliant. Rarely do we think critically of our achievements and what there is to truly be gained from them, choosing instead to clap and carry on. We think that eventually we will transform our own world into a utopia through science and technology where we all live happily ever after and have nothing to fear. We blindly follow the winds and currents that propel us forward, hoping to be led to such a utopian treasure island, unaware of the true nature of our achievements. We seem to forget that the word 'utopia' is Greek for 'nowhere'.

Let me begin with Africa. The cradle of civilisation, supposedly where the original 'Garden of Eden' was located. Studies of migration patterns have revealed that all humans, regardless of ethnicity and nationality, have roots that stretch all the way to Central Africa. Yet now the continent is far from idyllic. Wracked by civil war, disease and famine, the African continent serves as a grim reminder of the darker aspects of human nature. From child soldiers in the Congo to the abandonment of Ebola sufferers in Guinea and Sierra Leone, the land is rife with tragic suffering as the barriers between man and beast break down and a cataclysm of cruelty is released.

Despite this, not all is lost. In the years since 2001, malaria and tuberculosis have been treated through charity foundations, government initiatives and UN aid. Thanks to this, both illnesses are no longer ranked amongst the top killers in Africa and worldwide. This has been a proud triumph of human science over terribly

debilitating diseases, of which we have many individuals to thank for their compassion and their endless efforts to make our world a better place. Though this progress has come at a cost. As life has improved for our brethren in the 'Garden of Eden', so too have their chances of dying from strokes and heart disease as a result of obesity, high cholesterol, alcoholism and smoking. How ironic that the things we eat and drink kill us more than a winged, plague bearing and bloodsucking parasite. Such is the nature of human development. Through the introduction of the deadly delights of 'western civilisation', the Big Mac is now responsible for more deaths than the mosquito.

The modern western teenager is a pioneer, journeying into a digital age filled with perils and trepidations. Like their wagon trail forerunners, the land they venture into is unknown and unmapped, slithering with the poisonous snakes of temptation and treacherous mountain passes. The journey into a digital adult life is not one of smooth transition, but one of hardship. Still, this hardship cannot match the cruelty suffered by the four-year-olds in the Congo who mine cobalt for our smartphones, as American high school students sip chai lattes in their hip cafes.

In no other age have our youth had access to such a world of information at their fingertips, yet not know anything at all. With such simple gestures as a flick or a swipe, we open ourselves up to an encyclopaedic plethora of banked information, compiled over centuries and centuries of hard work by scientists, philosophers and artists. It is as if none of our youth need care about growing up and making something of themselves, as it's all already been done for them. As if by magic, we are able to show strangers and loved ones thousands of miles away exactly what we are doing, and even talk, share ideas or laugh with them. Through this, we are able to bond and forge friendships in a way that was never before believed to be possible, as if it were something from a science fiction story. Or we can use it as a medium to shout and scream at people we disagree with, as the Twitter and Facebook comment battlegrounds have shown.

This seemingly innocent technology not only brings lives together, but destroys them. Every day we see people snapchatting, instagramming and messaging their friends, sharing their days with everyone to come and view as if it were a human zoo or a walk-in theatre, inviting all to come and ogle at their days.

Through watching the lives of others pass us by, we begin to feel a sense of pain and jealousy, realising that our own lives simply aren't satisfactory. As we watch Kyle or Becky from the year above partying and having fun in all of their Instagram photos, our lives are suddenly rendered meaningless. With this seed of doubt planted, the social media wound begins to fester and boil, before it becomes septic. Finally, it kills us as we end it all in the hopes that we might have a better life next time. This is no exaggeration, and as much as I use metaphor and simile to make it more interesting to read, this happens on a daily basis. Suicide rates are skyrocketing, and though it may seem that the individuals are jumping off the cliff, it is their phones that push them. We've reached a stage in technological development where we no longer need to kill ourselves; our phones can do it for us instead.

I realise now that this essay has taken an extremely bleak (some would say morbid) turn, considering the topic of this very competition is 'Moving Forward'. So far, it has lacked much of the positive and optimistic outlook on life and human achievement that you might expect from an essay on this topic. In my defence, I feel it is important that we as a species come to understand that progress does not always mean going forward. In a game of chess, it is sometimes wiser to stay put or turn around completely than it is to charge headlong into disaster and ruin. I suppose this works as an analogy for mankind, as we constantly strive for progress and to fulfil our dream of utopia. Humanity prides itself on learning from its mistakes, perhaps it is time that we learn from our achievements.