



## WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

Writers are told to “write what you know,” and that’s one reason I began writing about luck several years ago. I became interested in the subject in part because chance events have figured so prominently in my own life.

Perhaps the most extreme example occurred on a chilly November Saturday morning in 2007, when I was playing tennis at an indoor facility with my longtime friend and collaborator, the Cornell psychologist Tom Gilovich. He later told me that as we sat between games early in the second set, I complained of feeling nauseated. The next thing he knew, I was lying motionless on the court.

When he kneeled to investigate, he discovered that I wasn’t breathing and had no pulse. He yelled out for someone to call 911, then flipped me onto my back and started pounding on my chest—something he’d seen many times in movies but had never been trained to do. He says that after what seemed like forever, he got a cough out of me. Shortly after that an ambulance showed up.

Since ambulances are dispatched from the other side of town, more than five miles away, how did this one arrive so quickly?

By happenstance, about half an hour before I collapsed, two ambulances had been dispatched to two separate auto accidents that had occurred close to the tennis center. Since the injuries involved in one of them weren't serious, one of the drivers was able to peel off and travel just a few hundred yards to get to me. The EMTs put the paddles on me, then rushed me to our local hospital. There I was loaded onto a helicopter and flown to a larger hospital in Pennsylvania, where they put me on ice overnight.

Doctors later told me that I'd suffered an episode of sudden cardiac death. They said that 98 percent of those who experience such episodes don't survive them and that most of the few who do are left with significant cognitive and other impairments. And for three days after the event, my family tells me, I spoke nonstop gibberish from my hospital bed. But by day four I was discharged with a clear head. Two weeks later, after having passed the first cardiac stress test my doctors could schedule, I was playing tennis with Tom again.

If an extra ambulance hadn't happened to be nearby, I would not have survived. Some friends have suggested that I was the beneficiary of divine intervention, and I have no quarrel with those who see things that way. But that's never been a comfortable view for me. I believe I'm alive today because of pure dumb luck.

Not all chance events lead to favorable outcomes, of course. Mike Edwards is no longer alive simply because chance frowned on him. He was the cellist in the original group that became the Electric Light Orchestra, the British pop band. He was driving on a rural road in England in 2010 when a thirteen-hundred-pound bale of hay rolled down a steep hillside and landed on top of his van, crushing him to death. He hadn't broken any laws that day. By all accounts, he was a well-liked, decent, and peaceful man. That his life was snuffed out by a runaway bale of hay was just bad luck, pure and simple.

Most people have no difficulty embracing the view that I'm lucky to have survived and that Edwards was unlucky to have perished. But in other domains, randomness often plays out in far more subtle ways, causing many of those same people to resist explanations that invoke luck. In particular, many seem uncomfortable with the possibility that success in the marketplace depends to any significant extent on luck.

A few years back I wrote a newspaper column describing how seemingly minor chance events figure much more prominently in life trajectories than most people realize.<sup>1</sup> It was the first in a series of pieces I wrote that have gradually evolved into this book. I was surprised by the intense negative commentary the column generated, most of it from people who insisted that success is explained almost entirely by talent and effort. Those qualities are indeed highly important. But because the contests that mete out society's biggest prizes are so bitterly competitive, talent and effort alone are rarely enough to ensure victory. In almost every case, a substantial measure of luck is also necessary.

A few days after the column appeared, I was invited to appear on a Fox Business News show hosted by Stuart Varney, a man deeply skeptical about the importance of luck. Ever the optimist, I agreed, hoping that he and his viewers might find food for thought in the evidence I would describe.

Wrong. From start to finish during the segment, Varney was in high dudgeon.<sup>2</sup> "Professor, wait a minute, do you know how insulting that was when I read that? I came to America with nothing thirty-five years ago. I've made something of myself, I think, with nothing but talent, hard work and risk taking. And you're going to write in the *New York Times* that this is luck?"

I tried to explain that that had not in fact been my message—that I'd written that although success is extremely difficult to achieve without talent and hard work, there are nonetheless many highly talented and hardworking people who never achieve

any significant material success. But Varney's anger persisted. Spittle collecting at the corners of his mouth, he shouted, "You're saying that the American dream isn't really the American dream, it's not really there!" I tried to explain that I wasn't saying any such thing.

Varney: "Am I lucky being who I am and where I am?"

Me: "Yes! And so am I!"

Varney: "That's outrageous! Do you know what risk is involved coming to America with absolutely nothing? Do you know what risk is involved trying to work for a major American network with a British accent? A total foreigner? Do you know what risk is implied for this level of success?"

And on it went, for more than six excruciating minutes. It was only in my taxi leaving the studio that I realized all the easy rejoinders I'd failed to deliver. Varney came to America with nothing? Nonsense! I'd read the night before that he has a degree from the London School of Economics, which has always been a formidable credential in the American labor market.

Handicapped by a British accent? Oh, please! Americans *love* British accents! The British geologist Frank H. T. Rhodes became Cornell University's president shortly after I started teaching here in the 1970s. A friend once told me that Rhodes's Oxbridge accent was much stronger during his later years at Cornell than when he'd first arrived in the United States decades earlier. Certain other accents are socially disadvantageous, of course, and linguists have discovered that those tend to decay over time. But not the British accent.

Varney took risks! If I hadn't realized it on my own during my cab ride from the studio, the implication of that remark would have been hammered home to me by several e-mail messages I received later that day from friends. Taking a risk means that a successful outcome isn't certain. So if Varney took risks and was

successful, he was lucky by definition! Too bad I didn't have the wit to point that out during our conversation on the air.

I've often wished I had the talent for thinking on my feet displayed by the protagonists in the novels of Elmore Leonard, long my favorite fiction author. Shortly after he died in 2013, NPR's Terry Gross aired excerpts from two of her earlier interviews with him.<sup>3</sup> At one point she mentioned the uncanny verbal dexterity of his characters. In real life, she asked, can Leonard himself match their ability to deliver such snappy comeback lines?

He demurred: "Oh no ... never ..." It's different in writing, he explained: "... you end the scene with a line, the perfect line ... you have months to think about it."

Gross pressed him, wanting to know whether he mulled over his own conversations after the fact, trying to come up with clever replies he wished he'd thought of. And without missing a beat, Leonard offered this:

"Well, in real life, I'm sitting on a bench in Aspen, 4:00 in the afternoon, dead tired, I've come down the mountain, and a woman skis down, twenty-five, thirty years younger than I am, puts one boot up on the bench and says, 'I don't know what's more satisfying, taking off my boots or ...' and then she used an expression for sleeping with somebody."

Gross: "And you said ... ??"

Leonard: "And I said, 'huh,' ... 'er,' ... 'ehh' ... and that was probably fifteen years ago," adding that he'd been trying ever since that day, without success, to come up with even a decent comeback line, never mind a snappy one.

It's hard to imagine a more pitch-perfect response to Gross's query. Did they rehearse that exchange? It didn't sound like it, and if not, it suggests that Leonard was actually pretty good at thinking on his feet. It's a talent I often lack. Most of the time, as in my conversation with Stuart Varney, the cost has been only

some fleeting embarrassment. But occasionally it's been painful, and on one occasion, I was lucky to escape with my life.

I was windsurfing on Cayuga Lake on an extremely gusty afternoon, winds ranging from dead calm to more than forty miles an hour. To make it easier to hold the mast and sail upright in heavy wind, many windsurfers use a harness, which is just a life jacket with a hook in front that attaches to a loop of rope tied to the boom. (This apparatus lets the windsurfer's body weight do much of the work, relieving fatigue in the hands and arms.) After a brief lull, an especially strong gust blew through, catapulting me over the boom and sail. The next thing I knew, I was submerged under the sail, dazed but still conscious. As my head cleared, my first impulse was to release the hook from the rope so I could swim out from under the sail. But since my body had done several twists before hitting the water, the rope was wrapped too tightly around the hook for me to break free.

So I went to plan B, which was to push up hard on the sail above me, hoping to create some airspace between it and the lake surface. No progress with that, either, so I tried again to get the hook free from the rope. Again, no progress.

In full panic by this time and desperate for air, I made another futile attempt at the sail, then tried once more to disengage the hook. Again, failure. Hope fading, I tried the sail one more time. And that last effort produced a glorious sucking sound as air rushed up beneath it. I rose to the surface and breathed deeply for a few moments.

Once I calmed down, I saw what I should have seen right away: It wasn't necessary to free the hook from the rope. Simply by unzipping my life vest and removing it, I could have swum out from under the submerged sail. That's of course what I did, in the end. But not before almost drowning. Survival is sometimes just a matter of pure dumb luck, and I was clearly luck's beneficiary that day.

Stuart Varney and many others insist that people who amass great fortunes are invariably talented, hardworking, and socially productive. That's a bit of an overstatement—think of lip-synching boy bands, or derivatives traders who got spectacularly rich before bringing the world economy to its knees. Yet it's clear that most of the biggest winners in the marketplace are both extremely talented and hardworking. On this point, Varney is largely correct.

But what about the many talented and hardworking people who never achieve much material success? I often think of Birkhaman Rai, the young hill tribesman from Bhutan who was my cook long ago when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in a small village in Nepal. To this day, he remains perhaps the most enterprising and talented person I've ever met. He could thatch a roof and repair an alarm clock. A skilled cook, he could also resole shoes. He could plaster a wall, after having made the plaster himself from cow dung, mud, and other free ingredients. He could butcher a goat. He could bargain tough with local merchants without alienating them.

Though he'd never been taught to read and write, there was almost no practical task in that environment that he couldn't perform to a high standard. Even so, the meager salary I was able to pay him was almost certainly the high point of his life's earnings trajectory. If he'd grown up in the United States or some other rich country, he would have been far more prosperous, perhaps even spectacularly successful. As the economist Branko Milanovic has estimated, roughly half of the variance in incomes across persons worldwide is explained by only two factors: country of residence and the income distribution within that country.<sup>4</sup> As Napoleon Bonaparte once observed, "Ability is of little account without opportunity."

But if talent and hard work don't guarantee material success, I hope we can all agree that success is much more likely for

people with talents that are highly valued by others, and also for those with the ability and inclination to focus intently and work tirelessly. But where do those personal qualities come from? We don't know, precisely, other than to say that they spring from some combination of genes and the environment (although recent work by biologists suggests that there may be important random influences here as well).<sup>5</sup>

In some unknown proportion, genetic and environmental factors largely explain whether someone gets up in the morning feeling eager to begin work. If you're such a person, which much of the time I am not, you're fortunate. Similarly, your genes and your environment largely determine how smart you are. If you're smart, you're more likely to perform well at the tasks rewarded most lavishly by society, so there, too, you're lucky. As the economist Alan Krueger has noted, the correlation between parents' income and their children's income in the United States is a remarkably high 0.5—about the same as the correlation between parents' height and their children's height.<sup>6</sup> So if you want to be smart and highly energetic, the most important single step you could take is to choose the right parents. But if you have such qualities, on what theory would it make sense for you to claim moral credit for them? You didn't choose your parents, nor did you have much control over the environment in which you were raised. You were just lucky.

Many people don't like to work hard and also have limited endowments of cognitive abilities and other traits that are highly valued in the marketplace. In the competitive environments most of us inhabit, those people are unlucky.

In short, even if talent and hard work alone were enough to ensure material success—which they are not—luck would remain an essential part of the story. People with a lot of talent and an inclination to work hard are extremely fortunate.

But luck's role in explaining differences in personal attributes is not my focus here. Instead, I want to describe what researchers have learned in recent years about the influence of external chance events and environmental factors on important individual life outcomes—influences that occur independently of people's virtues or flaws.

Having cheated death on at least two occasions obviously does not, by itself, make me an authority on luck. But it has instilled in me a keen interest in the subject and has stimulated me to learn much more about it than I otherwise would have. My personal experiences with chance events in the labor market have also spurred me to learn more about how such events shape career trajectories.

The influence of even seemingly minor random events is often profound. Is the *Mona Lisa* special? Is Kim Kardashian? They're both famous, but sometimes things are famous just for being famous. Although we often try to explain their success by scrutinizing their objective qualities, they are in fact often no more special than many of their less renowned counterparts.

Ahead I'll describe how success often results from positive feedback loops that amplify tiny initial variations into enormous differences in final outcomes. I'll also describe several individual case histories illustrating how even the most spectacular success stories could easily have unfolded very differently.

Chance events have always mattered, of course, but in some respects they've grown more important in recent decades. One reason for that has been the spread and intensification of what the economist Philip Cook and I have called winner-take-all markets.<sup>7</sup> These markets often arise when technology enables the most gifted performers in an arena to extend their reach. Tax advice, for example, was once a quintessentially local undertaking. The best accountants in a town served the biggest

clients, the next-best served the next biggest, and so on. But the development of user-friendly tax software transformed this market into one in which the most able practitioners can serve almost everyone.

Scores of competing tax programs battled for supremacy in the early years. But once reviewers reached consensus on which ones were best, rival programs became redundant, because it was possible to reproduce copies of the best programs at essentially zero cost. In the end, Intuit's *Turbo Tax* captured almost the entire market. Its developers profited enormously, even as those whose programs were almost as good were being forced out of business. In such markets, the quality difference between best and second best is often barely perceptible, but the corresponding difference in rewards can be enormous.

Technology has been creating similar winner-take-all markets in other domains, including law, medicine, sports, journalism, retail, manufacturing, even academia. In these and many other arenas, new methods of production and communication have amplified the effect of chance events, greatly magnifying the gaps between winners and losers. It's one thing to say that someone who works 1 percent harder than others or is 1 percent more talented deserves 1 percent more income. But the importance of chance looms much larger when such small performance differences translate into thousands-fold differences in earnings.

The spread of winner-take-all markets has amplified the importance of chance in a second way. In almost all cases, the prodigious rewards that accrue to a handful of winners in these markets attract enormous numbers of contestants. And the more contestants there are, the more luck matters.

Consider a contest that is completely meritocratic in the sense of being settled on the basis of objective performance alone, and suppose that 98 percent of each contestant's perfor-

mance is accounted for by talent and effort, only 2 percent by luck. Given these weights, it's clear that no one could win without being both highly talented and hardworking. But less obvious, perhaps, is that the winner is also likely to have been among the luckiest of all contestants. Luck matters so much in contests like these because winning requires that almost everything go right. There will inevitably be many contestants close to the top of the talent and effort scale, and at least some of them are bound to have been lucky as well. So even when luck has only a minor influence on performance, the most talented and hardworking of all contestants will usually be outdone by a rival who is almost as talented and hardworking but also considerably luckier. As we'll see, if we simulated the outcome of this specific contest a thousand times, only a small minority of winners would have higher combined skill and effort levels than all other contestants.

Why do so many of us downplay luck in the face of compelling evidence of its importance? The tendency may owe in part to the fact that by emphasizing talent and hard work to the exclusion of other factors, successful people reinforce their claim to the money they've earned. But I'll also consider a second possibility, which is that denying the importance of luck may actually help people surmount the many obstacles that litter almost every path to success.

Perhaps the most important such obstacle is that most of us find it harder to summon effort when the resulting rewards are either delayed or uncertain. Narratives that stress luck's importance call attention to the fact that not even the most diligent current efforts can guarantee future success and by so doing may encourage some to sit back and hope for the best.

Another interesting quirk of human nature suggests a second way in which false beliefs may help people summon effort. Surveys reveal that many more than half of us believe ourselves

to be in the top half of any given talent distribution, implying correspondingly unrealistic optimism about our prospects of winning any contest we enter. More realistic beliefs could thus discourage effort by leading many to conclude that their odds of success were lower than they thought.

In short, people who believe that success depends only on talent and effort and have an exaggerated sense of how talented they are may find it easier to muster the kinds of effort necessary for success. If so, those false beliefs may be perversely adaptive.

But underestimating the importance of external forces in individual success stories may also entail significant costs. It may, for example, encourage people to compete in arenas in which they have no realistic prospect of succeeding. More troubling, it also appears to make successful people more reluctant to underwrite the investments necessary to sustain environments that support material success.

As Warren Buffett once said, “Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.” Echoing Buffett’s thought, Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren reminded audiences during her 2012 campaign that Americans are truly fortunate to have been born in a wealthy country with highly developed legal, educational, and other infrastructure. As she put it,

There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. You built a factory out there, good for you. . . . You moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police and firefighters that the rest of us paid for. . . . You built a factory and it turned into a great idea, God bless—keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is that you take part of that and pay it forward for the next kid who comes along.<sup>8</sup>

The YouTube video of her remarks that day quickly went viral, with many commentators bitterly denouncing her failure to recognize that most successful entrepreneurs had made it essentially on their own.

On reflection, however, it's difficult to dispute Senator Warren's claim that being born in a good environment is an enormous stroke of good fortune.<sup>9</sup> More important, it is the one form of good luck over which societies have any significant degree of control.

But that control requires high levels of investment, which many societies have lately been reluctant to support.

Proposals to increase public investment fall largely on deaf ears these days, because people see no politically realistic way to raise the necessary money. But coming up with the resources we need would be far easier than most people realize. My most compelling motivation for writing this book has in fact been my belief that we've failed to take advantage of what I'll call the mother of all possible lucky breaks: By adopting a simple change in tax policy, we could alter our spending patterns in ways that would eliminate many trillions of dollars of waste each year. A better understanding of the connection between success and luck would help us seize this opportunity.

That such an opportunity continues to exist is a direct consequence of our failure to appreciate how profoundly our choices are shaped by frames of reference. How big, for example, should a house be? How much should a wedding cost? Orthodox economic theories assume, preposterously, that our answers are completely context-free. Yet all available evidence indicates that people find it impossible even to think about such questions without a suitable frame of reference.

Few behavioral scientists would deny that our surroundings shape what we feel we need. But the profound implications of that simple fact have largely escaped the attention of economists

and have not yet been fully grasped by behavioral scientists in other disciplines. If those implications are any clearer to me, it's only because having lived for two years in one of the world's poorest countries led me to focus so intently on these "framing effects" during the ensuing decades.

Sticking with my write-what-you-know theme, the most striking lesson of my experience in Nepal was that despite the dramatically lower material living standards there, my experience of day-to-day life was astonishingly similar to what I'd been used to. When I write, for example, that the same two-room house with no plumbing or electricity that seemed completely satisfactory to me there would seem shamefully inadequate in any American middle-class neighborhood, I'm merely writing what I know.

I don't mean to romanticize poverty. Many good things happen when a country's income grows, not least among them that people's children are much less likely to die before reaching adulthood. Air and water get cleaner, schools get better, roads get safer. My point is only that the standards that define "adequate" in many domains of consumption are highly elastic. When everyone spends less, those standards adjust accordingly.

Wealthy Americans have been building bigger mansions simply because they've received most of the country's recent income gains. Yet there's no evidence that, beyond a certain point, bigger houses make people any happier. Once houses reach a certain size, further across-the-board increases in square-footage merely shift the frame of reference that defines adequate. Similarly, the fact that the average American wedding now costs more than \$30,000,<sup>10</sup> almost three times as much as in 1980, doesn't appear to have made today's marrying couples any happier. According to one recent study, however, it appears to have made them more likely to divorce.<sup>11</sup> The economists Andrew Francis and Hugo Mialon estimated, for example, that couples

who spent more than \$20,000 on their weddings were more than 12 percent more likely to divorce during any given year than were those who spent between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

Framing effects have spawned waste in a second way by creating a powerful bias in favor of private consumption over public investment. The basic idea is captured in a simple example involving cars and highways.

Everyone agrees that cars would be of little use without roads and that roads would be of little use without cars. What's harder is to identify the best mix of the two categories. It's fairly easy, however, to see that the current mix in the United States is far from optimal, at least from the perspective of wealthy drivers. Consider this thought experiment: Which experience would a wealthy car enthusiast prefer: driving a Porsche 911 Turbo (purchase price, \$150,000) on smooth, well-maintained highways, or driving a Ferrari F12 Berlinetta (purchase price, \$333,000) on roads riddled with foot-deep potholes?

It's an easy question. Although some car buffs might quibble, I'll assume for the sake of argument that the Ferrari would be judged the better car if both could be driven on good roads.



Porsche 911 Turbo, \$150,000.



Ferrari F12 Berlinetta, \$333,000.

But it wouldn't be much better, since the \$150,000 Porsche already has most of the design features that affect performance significantly. The economist's law of diminishing returns operates here with a vengeance. Beyond a certain point, it reminds us, the cost of achieving additional quality improvements rises very steeply. So if the Ferrari enjoys an edge, it's at most a tiny one. How, then, could anyone argue with a straight face that it would be more pleasing to drive the Ferrari on pothole-ridden roads than to drive the Porsche on well-maintained ones?

Yet, among the superwealthy, the actual quality mix of cars and highways in the United States more closely resembles Ferraris on potholes than Porsches on smooth asphalt. That's puzzling, since the latter combination could be achieved at much lower total expense. This distortion occurs because what happens when any one person spends less on a car is very different from what happens when everyone spends less. In the former case, the buyer feels deprived. But when everyone spends less, the relevant frame of reference shifts, leaving drivers just as satisfied as before.

Paradoxically, then, many societies are lucky precisely because their current consumption patterns are so wasteful. It's lucky to be wasteful because the mere existence of waste always implies opportunities to make everyone better off.

In economic terms, a situation is wasteful if it would be possible to rearrange things so that some people could better achieve their goals without requiring anyone else to settle for less. How could any rational person oppose doing something like that?

In principle, at least, there should be no political goal more easily achieved than agreeing on proposals to eliminate waste. This is a simple point, really, yet the central idea behind it is apparently not widely understood. Economists often use the expression "economic pie" to describe the total value of all re-

sources available for pursuing our goals, so any step that reduces waste would be said to make the economic pie larger.

And simple geometry tells us that when a pie grows larger, it must be possible to divide it so that each person gets a larger slice than before. But that's just another way of saying that eliminating waste can always enable people to pursue their goals more fully. The rich can do better, and so can the poor. Conservatives can do better, and so can liberals. Blacks can do better, and so can whites.

The incentives that have created the wasteful spending patterns I'll describe are neither mysterious nor complex. Once we understand them, I will argue, it becomes a relatively simple matter to modify them.

In short, we confront a golden opportunity: A few simple policy changes would enable us to steer trillions of dollars of additional resources into desperately needed public investment without demanding painful sacrifices from anyone. On its face, that claim should strike you as preposterous. If so, you'll be surprised to see that it rests on only a few simple premises, none of which is controversial.

But that doesn't mean that implementing the required changes will be easy in practice. The opportunity we face is not one that can be seized by individuals acting alone. We must act collectively. That's a challenge because the current political climate is more sharply polarized than at any point in recent history. Proposals to restore decaying infrastructure can expect to meet stiff resistance, even from those who agree in the abstract that it must be done.

Some of that resistance springs from experiences that have led many to question the efficacy of government. Perhaps the most compellingly popular metaphor for ineffective government is the Department of Motor Vehicles, where long waits and imperious service are the stuff of legend. An Ohio blogger,

for example, offered this description of a visit to a rural DMV shortly after he'd moved to the state:

It was an old stone building, very small, with just one woman working there. I walked in, and not seeing anybody else, didn't bother with the plastic "take a number" cards and went right up to the counter. The woman glared at me and said sternly, "TAKE A NUMBER." I looked around, smiled at the absurdity, then took a number and sat down on the old wooden bench. There was nobody else in the room besides her and me. As soon as I sat down, she called out "ONE!" I said, "Hey, that's me!" and put my number back on the peg, and returned to the counter.<sup>12</sup>

Although it's no mystery that such experiences often spawn jaundiced views about government, the fact remains that no society can prosper without effective means for its citizens to act collectively. Without government, how could we defend ourselves, or enforce property rights, or curb pollution, or build and maintain the public infrastructure that makes us realize how lucky we were to be born here rather than in a desperately poor country?

Since government is unavoidable, it's surely worth thinking about ways to make it better. Some societies have demonstrably more effective governments than others, after all, and some of our own government institutions function much better than others.

The possibility of creating more effective government institutions is clearly demonstrated by the striking contrast between the DMV I dealt with when I first moved to Ithaca in the 1970s and the one that serves us today. The earlier version served up the same bureaucratic ineptitude described by the Ohio blogger, but today's version is completely different.

A few years ago, I sold my car to an out-of-town buyer who said that he was excited to complete the transaction except for the fact that doing so would necessitate a visit to his local DMV. I urged him to register the car in Ithaca, saying he'd be in for a pleasant surprise. He reluctantly agreed, and much to his astonishment, we were out the door with his plates in less than fifteen minutes. The transaction would have been even quicker if he hadn't made several errors in filling out his forms, which a cheerful clerk patiently helped him to correct.

What caused this transformation? Curious to find out, I spoke with Aurora Valenti, the Tompkins County clerk who'd been in charge of our local DMV for more than two decades before her recent retirement. When she first took office, she told me, employee morale was low, and customer complaints were both bitter and frequent.

One problem was that people had to wait in a long line to process their forms, then queue up a second time to pay their fees. Ms. Valenti solved that problem by persuading state officials in Albany to provide terminals that could handle both tasks. Consumers now wait in only a single line.

Her second major initiative was to put clerks through a heavy dose of sensitivity training, telling them, "Most customers would rather have a root canal than visit the DMV, and that's making both you and them unhappy." Her aim was to empower clerks to tell customers quickly and cheerfully that there were simply no problems they couldn't solve.

The turnaround has been dramatic, and morale among employees now seems high. When I told the clerk who helped the buyer of my car why I'd suggested coming to the Ithaca office, she blushed with pride, saying that she and her colleagues really enjoy their jobs.

Annual surveys by Transparency International, a nonprofit group based in Berlin, provide further evidence of the possibility

of good government. Those surveys consistently place the same nations—New Zealand, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries among them—atop the list of countries whose citizens think most highly of their governments. Few people in those countries view their government officials as corrupt, and most are satisfied with the quality of public services paid for by their taxes.

I stress the possibility of effective government in the hope of encouraging skeptics to keep an open mind about my claim that we could easily bequeath a much better society to our children. To accomplish that goal, the steps we need to take are not intrusive, nor do they require additional layers of bureaucracy. But we'll be unlikely to take those steps if too many people feel certain they can't work.