

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Lots of ways to define “the good life”

Let us pause in our discussion of current Pottstown issues and consider the reflections of an eminent world scholar on “the good life.”

Jared Diamond, 78, a graduate of Harvard and Cambridge universities, is an expert in physiology, ornithology, ecology, music, and environmental history.

One of his science books, “Guns, Germs, and Steel,” won a Pulitzer Prize in 1998 for its explanation of why Eurasian people came to dominate the world since the dawn of civilization.

But for all his sophistication, Diamond has spent many years as an anthropologist living among the natives of Papua New Guinea, the most primitive people on earth. Civilization has barely touched them because of their isolated mountain jungle habitat.

It’s easy to forget that human beings have been around for about 200,000 years, nearly all that time as hunter-gatherers.

Civilization has only evolved in the last 5,000 years. Modern industrial societies have only been around for about 200 years.

Today, people in developed countries live in permanent structures that are warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Electricity powers our appliances 24/7. We enjoy indoor plumbing. Smart phones and the Internet. We can travel anywhere we want, anytime we want, with groceries and every other kind of commodity available in abundant stores or delivered to our door.

### The Good Life?

It would appear that after thousands of years of evolution, we now enjoy the good life.

But that’s not Diamond’s conclusion.

“I do not assume that industrialized states are ‘better’ than hunter-gatherer tribes, or that the abandonment of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle for iron-based statehood represents ‘progress,’ or that it has led to an increase in human happiness,” Diamond writes.



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton

“My own impression, from having divided my life between United States cities and New Guinea villages, is that the so-called blessings of civilization are mixed.

“For example, compared with hunter-gatherers, citizens of modern industrial states enjoy better medical care, lower risk of death by homicide, and a longer life span, but receive much less social support from friendships and extended families.”

### What is progress?

In my own lifespan of 67 years, I’ve seen a lot of changes for the better: huge improvements in human rights, better health care, and a wealth of knowledge available to everyone with a computer or smart phone.

On the other hand, people are far more fearful than they used to be, thanks to the constant drumbeat of crime and violence in the media.

Too many middle class people work long hours and lead stressful lives to pay for a generous assortment of “needs” — fancy cars, dining out, electronic gadgets. They aspire to a big house on a large lot, a safe distance from the increasingly segregated poor.

Car-dominated lifestyles require a huge amount of time driving from one place to another, and result in ugly parking lots littering the landscape.

Fifty years ago, Pottstown accommodated residents of all incomes who lived in modest homes in real neighborhoods, not isolated subdivisions. Children were free to walk to school and play afterwards on their own. People were much less afraid.

So how much better off have we become?



Jared Diamond in Papua New Guinea