



By Margaret Evans, Editor

My husband and I were watching a news report from Ukraine the other night, and I said to him, "Having lived here in my American bubble all my life, this stuff seems almost unreal to me. It's like I'm watching a movie."

Americans of my generation have had it so good for so long – all our lives, really – that many of us can barely fathom the unrest happening in so many parts of the world. (I always think "unrest" is kind of a namby-pamby word for uprisings and coups and revolutions and such, but it seems to be the thing to say among the smart set. Y'all know I have aspirations . . . )

It's not that we Americans don't have our challenges. Certainly not! We grapple. We struggle. We worry about the perils of the four-hour erection . . . about whether or not to use Botox . . . about who should pay for our birth control pills. We fret about other people's "hate" – never our own – and how best to sanction those whose thoughts don't meet our standards. We are too high-minded to resort to physical violence; perish the thought! Shaming and shunning are our weapons of choice. But we make a lot of laws, too.

We have heated debates about the things people may or may not smoke. Should marijuana be legal? For what purposes? And should we allow e-cigarettes in restaurants? To address gun violence, we create "zero tolerance" policies at our elementary schools, suspending little boys for making finger-guns and saying "pow." (In hindsight, I went to grammar school with a whole pack of juvenile delinquents. It's amazing most of them grew up to be respected professionals and family men, considering their appalling playground behavior. Cops and Robbers... Cowboys and Indians... It's a wonder I survived.)

A recently-passed law has made taking "upskirt photos" illegal in Massachusetts. When Jeff and I heard that on the news, his response was: "What? That wasn't already illegal?" Mine was,

"What? We have to make a law against that?"

What is wrong with a culture where basic good manners have to be codified into law? This is not a rhetorical question. I honestly don't know the answer. Maybe it's just a sign of our progress? We've taken care of the Big Issues and now we're just fine tuning?

John Adams reportedly said the following: "I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain."

I've always loved that quote, with its optimistic assumption that in this free, democratic society, the pursuit of knowledge would render us better and better all the time – that each generation would grow less violent and power-hungry, while increasing in sensitivity and refinement.

I'm not certain we've lived up to that great founding father's vision. Or maybe we have . . . but he just didn't spin it out far enough. What comes after the study of painting, poetry and music? Where did Adams see us going from those lofty heights? Is it possible to become *too* sensitive?

*Too* refined? Or maybe we've reached the pinnacle of refinement, and we're now sliding back in the opposite direction. There's a simple law of physics that says, "What goes up must come down." There's also an historical truth that's hard to deny – that every great civilization ultimately collapses.

I don't mean to get all dark and broody on you. I'm really just musing here . . . just brain doodling. (Or noodling, as it were.) These are the kind of things I ponder in my spare time, when I'm surfing the Internet or watching TV instead of studying statuary, tapestry and porcelain.

Did you see the Oscars last week? This year, for the first time ever, I had this weird, semi-sinister feeling about the broadcast, which I typically enjoy very much. As I watched the preshow – the celebrities swanning about in their finery, being interviewed by lesser celebrities also swanning about in finery, the scene kept reminding me vaguely of something out of *The Hunger Games*

. It felt a bit like The Capitol on that red carpet. The shiny, surgically-enhanced faces, the lithe, fat-free bodies, the elaborate coiffures, flamboyant jewelry, gleaming white smiles. Is it possible to be

*too*

beautiful? To the point that you're not? (See the "too sensitive and too refined" question, above.) I probably shouldn't be writing about it at all, as it was merely a feeling – I've had little time to flesh it out intellectually – and it passed, as feelings tend to. But for a brief flash, the idea wafted through my mind that there was something not-quite-right about watching this scene unfold, knowing what was unfolding in places like Syria, Ukraine and Venezuela.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not one of those dour scolds who thinks if something bad is happening somewhere in the world, nobody anywhere should have any fun, ever again. I believe fun – and frivolity – are essential, even in dark times. Maybe *especially* in dark times.

And yet. I'm growing ever more sensitive to my American bubble – to the way in which it both protects me and isolates me. I've not had the opportunity to travel much outside the US, and even when I have, it's been for short pleasure trips. I have friends here in Beaufort who hail from other countries – places where "unrest" is, or has been, a way of life – and there is a seriousness about them, a depth and knowingness, that I admire and do not possess. I know they look at me and see a woman who grew up in a land of plenty. . . who slept safe and sound in her bed at night and spent her days worrying about little more than what jeans to wear, what boy to like, or how to ace that next English test. The heartbreak of braces, the trauma of a bad prom date. I can only imagine what they must think of me.

My adult life has not been as easy as my childhood – maybe adult lives never are? – but compared to so many in the world, my life here in the bubble is charmed. I have a roof over my head, food to eat, a family to love and work that challenges me. Compared to so many in the world, I'm a freakin' fairy princess.

And I've lost track of my point . . . if I ever had one. If I did, I suppose it was this: I'm grateful for my good American life, but I want and need to get out of my bubble. Not so much literally – though more travel would be nice, it's not in the cards for me right now – but figuratively. I need to know more, pay closer attention, gain a better understanding of life outside the bubble. I don't want to watch a newscast from a war-torn country and feel like I'm watching a movie. It makes me ashamed.

The American bubble is a powerful thing. It protects and defends . . . but it also isolates and desensitizes. It doesn't have to be that way. In this hyper-connected age, the bubble is more transparent than ever . . . like any good bubble should be. It's up to me to open my eyes and take a harder look.

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