

We are so fortunate to live in Canada

by MARK PAVILONS

There are many uplifting, even corny sentiments that float around the Internet every day. Some involve cats.

Some are funny, some are serious. Most are stupid. But sometimes you come across some real gems that make you think.

My wife sent me one recently and it points to some very fundamental reasons that we North Americans are so lucky and blessed.

If you can read my words each week in the newspaper, you're lucky. Not simply because you get to enjoy my pearls of wisdom but because you can read at all. Roughly 17% of the world's population remains illiterate. A rough calculation indicates that 1.2 billion of our fellow humans can't read or write.

For those who really enjoy picking up the newspaper or grabbing a book and finding your favourite chair, you will know how sad this is. Fortunately, we are making inroads and numbers continue to improve, but not without tremendous efforts on the part of literacy groups and volunteers worldwide.

When you got out of bed this morning and perhaps felt a spring in your step, consider yourself lucky. Today, roughly 153,424 people will die. That's just over 100 people per minute!

There are many reasons for this, of course. Here in North America the main causes of death are heart disease and stroke; cancer; unintentional injuries and respiratory disease. Some are preventable and some are linked to our lifestyle.

In less developed parts of the world, deaths are attributed to TB, diarrhoeal diseases caused by malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, and road injuries. In some places, a lot of people travel by boat and ferry, just to get from place to place. Overloaded, unsafe and unregulated ships often sink, killing hundreds. The animal that kills the most people annually? The hippo.

There are literally millions living in less than normal conditions in refugee camps across the world. While they survive, they are much more susceptible to disease and illness, and may never find a real 'home' again.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that about 815 million people of the 7.6 billion people in the world, or 10.7%, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in 2016. Almost all the hungry people live in lower-middle-income countries. There are 11 million people undernourished in developed countries, including ours.

The top reasons to worry in less developed nations range from war and terrorism to lack of proper drinking water.

Every day we hear of suicide bombers taking lives in various public locations. Can you image fearing for your life just making a trip to the market? Have you ever turned on the tap and received nothing? Can you even imagine flicking the switch and having no lights?

Have you been unjustly imprisoned or beaten for being in a public demonstration lately? Well, you're lucky. People are assaulted and wrong imprisoned every day without due process.

If you have money in your wallet, some spare change and even a few bucks in the bank, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

Funny, I never thought of myself as wealthy, in any way. Here, we have very different challenges and fears. Our fears centre around uncertainty, the economy, mortgage rates, car repairs, the cost of gas at the pumps and the cost of post-secondary studies. When you

put it in perspective, those are the worries of the rich.

The people my daughter Lexie worked with in Rwanda were lucky to go to school at all. In many countries they charge a nominal fee to attend school, but most average citizens can't afford it. It's a dream for many just to send their kids to elementary school for a few years.

Lexie can really put things in perspective for anyone. She stayed in a traditional dung hut in Kenya and has been to the bateys in the Dominican Republic. She knows how hard people work just to put food on the table in Guatemala and Matelot, Trinidad.

And these people are among the 'lucky' ones, when you consider that 75% of the world's population don't have enough food, clothes or a roof over their heads.

Yes, food and shelter are what we consider basic necessities in Canada. And yet, these are not cheap, either.

The astronomical house prices in the GTA have put owning a home out of reach for many.

While 'experts' cite market demand, something is off when average homes hover around the \$1-million mark. My children may never be able to afford a home of their own. And what of their children?

Again, I'm considered one of the lucky ones, since we have a home, food, a refrigerator, clothes, and a way to get to work that doesn't involve dodging hippos. I even own a wallet, although it's stuffed with more receipts than cash.

It's funny, you know, that we are so very comfortable and don't even think of others very often. Our kids are masters at modern technology and despite the mountains of information available on the Internet, few teens or 20-somethings seem overly concerned about infant mortality, world hunger, child labour and TB.

No, their worries centre around data plans, where to eat out, piercings, running shoes, and live streaming.

As part of morning announcements in school, or opening comments at civic events, perhaps we should all take a moment to thank our lucky stars we are safe here in Canada.