

JMU HONORS COLLEGE

Fall 2020

A GUIDE TO **FACTFULNESS**

BY HANS ROSLING,
WITH OLA ROLSLING AND
ANNA ROSLING RÖNNLUND

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- **How do We View the World, and Why?**
- **Factfulness Reflections**
- **Factfulness in Your First Year**
- **“I am Madison’s Legacy,” from the JMU Center for Civic Engagement**
- **Factfulness Save the Date**
- **Questions?**
- **Notes**

“I’m a very serious ‘possibilist.’ That’s something I made up. It means someone who neither hopes without reason, nor fears without reason, someone who constantly resists the overdramatic worldview. As a possibilist, I see all this progress, and it fills me with conviction and hope that further progress is possible. This is not optimistic. It is having a clear and reasonable idea about how things are. It is having a worldview that is constructive and useful.”

- Hans Rosling

As a JMU Honors student, the path you are embarking upon is one that will equip you with the tools to tackle the world’s “wicked problems,” those that have no easy answers, are tough to describe, and have innumerable causes. In fact, the wicked problems that have gripped headlines for the past few months – the fight against racial injustice and the COVID-10 global pandemic, among others – are currently impacting your lives and will continue to shape the contours of your college experience.

The first step in being solution-minded is to cut through the noise and identify the facts that matter. That’s why we chose *Factfulness*. We must think clearly about the world in order to change the world. We encourage you to supplement your *Factfulness* journey by following [Gapminder](#) on social media.

**“Are you excited? You should be.”
- Hans Rosling, *Factfulness*, p. 33**

“Factfulness, like a healthy diet and regular exercise, can and should become part of your daily life.”
– *Factfulness*, p. 16



How do We View the World, and Why?

There are two main ideas conveyed in *Factfulness*:

- Most of us have an *overdramatic* worldview that causes us to perceive the world as more frightening, dangerous and hopeless than it really is. Not only is the overdramatic worldview incorrect, it also causes a great deal of stress in our daily lives.
- Through practice, by accessing data and using simple strategies, we can cultivate a *fact-based worldview* to replace our overdramatic misconceptions. With a fact-based worldview we will make wiser decisions, be more aware of real dangers and possibilities, and reduce stress.

The reasons why we are able to be so wrong about the world are related to how our brains function. We are equipped with certain instincts that cause us to jump to conclusions and identify non-existent dangers.

Factfulness presents readers with ten instincts:

1. **The Gap Instinct:** makes us divide things into two groups which are often competing

and/or diametrically opposed in their characteristics.

2. **The Negativity Instinct:** makes us take more notice of the bad than the good.
3. **The Straight Line Instinct:** makes us assume that lines in graphs are straight.
4. **The Fear Instinct:** makes us focus our attention on dramatic dangers and overlook those things that pose greater risks.
5. **The Size Instinct:** makes us misjudge the proportions or sizes of certain things.
6. **The Generalization Instinct:** makes us generalize and/or clump together unlike and unrelated things.
7. **The Destiny Instinct:** gives us the impression that innate qualities determine the fate of people and institutions.
8. **The Single Perspective Instinct:** attracts us to simple explanations and solutions.
9. **The Blame Instinct:** makes us search for a culprit when something bad happens and a hero when something good happens.
10. **The Urgency Instinct:** gives us a sense of urgency that we must act immediately while simultaneously undermining our ability to take long-term risk seriously.

Factfulness Reflections

In this section, there are a variety of reflection questions for you to read and consider as you digest the information presented in *Factfulness*. You will have ample opportunities during the fall semester to share your thoughts.

Factfulness is a concept which describes a better way to use data and information to improve our understanding of the world.

- *When you first saw the title of the book, how did you interpret the term “factfulness?” What mental associations did you initially make for the term?*

For many years, Hans Rosling travelled around the world giving lectures. At his lectures he posed questions to the audience in order to test their knowledge about the world. Most of the thousands of people who answered his questions gave incorrect answers.

- *Did you answer these questions for yourself? How did you do on the quiz at the beginning of the book? Which questions were most surprising to you, and why?*
- *What is the potential danger of so many people having an incorrect understanding of the world?*
- *Why is it important to have a fact-based worldview?*

Each chapter highlighted a different trap that we fall into when we are not careful with our data, which Rosling describes as 10 “instincts.”

- *Which of the instincts most resonated with you?*
- *How have you seen these instincts play out when you describe the world around you?*

Rosling’s data proves two main things. First, “Every group of people I ask thinks the world is

more frightening, more violent, and more hopeless – in short, more dramatic – than it really is. And second, “Though the world faces huge challenges, we have made tremendous progress.” The research is summarized in Rosling’s subtitle: *Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*.

- *Did either of these truths surprise you?*
- *How has your thinking shifted regarding some of the major global challenges we face?*

Because of the pervasiveness of the 10 instincts and the overly dramatic worldview, many business leaders, politicians and change makers have skewed ideas about global issues.

- *How might our “un-factful” understanding of global issues be impacting our policy, business decisions, and strategic plans? And, what can we do to change this?*

We hope that *Factfulness* sparks in you both optimism and a sense of agency to change your own worldview.

- *What is one change you are going to make – in research, thought, the way you speak, or the way you perceive the world – after reading this book?*
- *What steps will you take to cultivate a more factful worldview?*

Factfulness in Your First Year

In addition to reading *Factfulness*, you will have opportunities to practice cultivating your factful worldview during your first year at JMU. You will discuss *Factfulness* in your HON 100 class, and there will be optional Honors programs developed for you to plug into conversations about Rosling’s identified instincts and how to overcome them. We look forward to hearing your thoughts!



Contextualizing *Factfulness* at JMU

At JMU, we define civic engagement as advancing the legacy of James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, by preparing individuals to be active and responsible participants in a representative democracy dedicated to the common good.

The legacy of James Madison is complex. Perhaps this tension is timeliest for us to consider: Madison was the vanguard of national liberty while he enslaved men, women and children in bondage at his home, Montpelier. In his biography of James Madison, author Richard Brookhiser notes on page 250, “Politics can be low, sometimes sordid. Much of that has to be endured, because that is the way men are. ‘If men were angels,’ as Madison wrote, ‘no government would be necessary.’ But some of the shortcomings of politics may be capable of improvement. **So say why and do better.**”

Given our call to civic engagement as members of the JMU community, how do we reconcile Madison’s legacy as an enslaver with his triumphs of American constitutionalism and politics? How might a fact-based worldview help us evaluate Madison? How will factfulness help us to say why and do better?

“I Am Madison’s Legacy”

From the JMU Center for Civic Engagement

“I am Madison’s Legacy” is a set of six affirmative statements inspired by knowledge, skills, and dispositions associated with the historic James Madison. In presenting him as a political role model, we recognize that he exhibited many traits desperately needed today. At the same time, we refuse to idealize him; he had numerous flaws and foibles, and his legacy, like our nation’s, is mixed. We admit to a candid world that we, the people of the United States, are still evolving, still striving toward that perfect union. Looking ahead, we ask, what can each person do to secure the great nation he imagined?



I am Madison’s legacy
I learn from and with others.
I foster collaboration.
I embrace complexity.
I value pragmatism.
I advance the public good.
I lead.
I learn from and with others...
So that we can draw on our different strengths
and overcome our weaknesses.



“The best service that can be rendered to a Country, next to that of giving it liberty, is in diffusing the mental improvement equally essential to the preservation, and the enjoyment of the blessing.” – James Madison to Littleton Dennis Teackle, March 29, 1826

I learn from and with others...

So that narrow ideas and biases can be enlightened by the insights of different perspectives.

Many years after the Constitution was framed, Madison recalled that most of the delegates had changed their minds on important questions over the course of the deliberations, and most would be “ready to admit this change as the enlightening effect of the discussions.” – From “General Remarks on Convention,” not dated.

By seeking to advance my own understanding of the subject, as well as the understanding of others.

“A tree of useful knowledge planted in every neighborhood, would help to make a paradise, as that of forbidden use occasioned the loss of one.” – James Madison to Jesse Torrey Jr., January 30, 1822.

I foster collaboration...

By listening actively and respectfully to all perspectives.

“It is worthy of our consideration, that those who prepared the [Constitution], found difficulties not to be described, in its formation – mutual deference and concession were absolutely necessary. Had they been inflexibly tenacious of their individual opinions, they would never have occurred.” – James Madison in the Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 24, 1788.

By building trust to achieve consensus.

During the ratification debates, Madison appealed to the near unanimity of the Framers of the Constitution as proof that all of the delegates were either “satisfactorily accommodated” by the compromises of the Constitution, “or were induced to accede to it by a deep conviction of the necessity of sacrificing private opinions and partial interests to the public good.” – Federalist No. 37

By valuing our ideas more than my ideas.

When one of Madison’s correspondents referred to him as “The writer of the Constitution,” he objected that he could “have no claim” to the title. The Constitution “was no, like the fabled Goddess of Wisdom, the offspring of a single brain. It ought to be regarded as the work of many heads and many hands.” – James Madison to William Cogswell, March 10, 1834.

By compromising to meet common goals if necessary.

When the Constitutional Convention was nearly finished with its work, Madison was deeply disappointed with the result. He confessed to Jefferson that he believed the Constitution would “neither effectually answer its national object nor prevent the local mischiefs which every where excite disgusts against the state governments.”

Nonetheless, he believed it was of paramount importance that the Constitution be adopted – “if the present moment be lost it is hard to say what may be our fate” – and he worked tirelessly for ratification in spite of his personal disappointment. – Madison to Jefferson, September 6, 1787.

I embrace complexity...

By acknowledging that social and political problems are interconnected and interdependent.

When it was suggested that the Constitutional Convention should propose amendments to the old Articles of Confederation as a sort of smorgasbord, and the states could pick and choose which changes they wanted to adopt, Madison answered that this method would not work, because the changes they needed to make would be too substantial and interconnected. “In truth my ideas of a reform strike so deeply at the old Confederation, and lead to such a systematic change, that they scarcely admit of the expedient.” – James Madison to Edmund Randolph, April 6, 1787.

By seeking out evidence from diverse sources, both past and present.

Shortly after graduating from college, Madison wrote to a friend: “The principles & Modes of Government are too important to be disregarded by an inquisitive mind and I think are well worthy [of] a critical examination by all students that have health & Leisure.” – James Madison to William Bradford, December 1, 1773. In March of 1784, Madison asked Thomas Jefferson to purchase numerous books for him from Paris. In particular, he sought books that would shed light on “the several confederacies which have existed.... The operations of our own [Confederacy] must render all such lights of consequence.” The literary cargo that Jefferson sent formed the basis of one of the most important research projects in American

history: Madison’s “Notes on Ancient and Modern Confederacies.” Madison’s notes were used to evaluate America’s existing political problems, find solutions, and defend those solutions after the Constitution was drafted.

By acknowledging that our decisions are contingent on and influenced by current trends and political coalitions (factions).

This awareness can be seen in Madison’s inability to come to terms with slavery, both as an individual and as a political leader. Although he deplored slavery, he never freed any of the people he enslaved. Madison believed that pervasive white prejudice in his era prevented Whites and Black people from living together, so he favored gradual emancipation and colonization back to Africa. As the abolitionist movement grew, he worried that if disunion undid the republic, it would be enmeshed in the institution of slavery. Though a man of inexhaustible faith in the ability of self-governing people to choose the just course, by 1835 Madison “owned himself almost to be in despair” over slavery, according to Harriet Martineau. A British abolitionist who visited Montpelier, Martineau recalled that Madison “without limitation or hesitation” confirmed to her all the evils of slavery. He told her that “the whole Bible is against Negro slavery; but that the clergy do not preach this, and the people do not see it.”

By evaluating the consequences, both the advantages and the disadvantages, of multiple courses of action.

In Federalist No. 10, Madison examined the nature of factions, which he believed were the “disease” of popular government, and reviewed several possible ways to control them. Nonetheless, he recognized that some potential remedies were “worse than the disease.”

By recognizing that some questions are fraught with ambiguity.

“Questions daily occur in the course of practice, which prove the obscurity which reigns in these subjects, and which puzzle the greatest adepts in political science.” – Federalist No. 37.

I advance the public good...

By preferring the common good over my own private interests.

Madison believed that when “the great variety of interests, parties, and sects” within the United States was united within a single deliberative body, then a “majority of the whole society could seldom take place on any other principles than those of justice and the general good.” – Federalist No. 51

By recognizing my obligation to participate in civic life [public meetings, voting, petitioning, dialogues, etc.].

“To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.” – James Madison, speech in the Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 20, 1788.

By persevering to advance a just society.

“Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit.” – Federalist No. 51.

“Despotism can only exist in darkness; and there are too many lights now in the political firmament to permit it to reign anywhere as it has heretofore done almost everywhere.” – James Madison to Marquis de Lafayette, November 25, 1820.

I lead...

By acting when I see a public problem or opportunity.

Madison’ efforts on behalf of religious freedoms began with small intercessions against the prosecution of local Baptists. He went on to pen Virginia’s “Memorial and Remonstrance,” his landmark defense of religious liberty, and he ultimately ensured that he religious freedom clauses would be inserted into the First Amendment.

By working in pursuit of common goals rather than seeking credit for my own contributions.

Madison’s most important compositions – his “Memorial and Remonstrance,” the Virginia Plan, his Federalist essays and the “Virginia Resolutions” – were all written anonymously.

By reminding people about – and urging them to uphold – the governing principles on which a free society is based.



