Paranoia is Humans’ Natural State

The pandemic has reminded us about how vulnerable we are. We feel uncomfortable if someone comes too close, we sanitize doorknobs and groceries and our hands and behave as though deadly germs are lurking everywhere. With this comes a strong shot of paranoia. Apparently some Chinese believe the virus is an American plot and *vice versa*. Until the death toll argued otherwise, many Americans believed that it was just a hoax, or a political plot, or both.

Nonetheless, it is remarkable how quickly and widely precautions have been adopted, as though a switch has flipped and we all are on high alert. There are the usual naysayers and deluded rebels, of course. But, most of us understand the threat and willingly do what must be done, hoping that it is temporary and life will soon return to normal. In doing so, we are apt to overlook how remarkable, yet characteristic, what we are doing actually is. Remarkable in that it has happened so quickly and broadly. Characteristic in that our response to this threat is an amplified version of something we do every day in a world full of things that can harm us.

To understand this, let us start with the familiar notion that thinking takes place in the form of *narrative*, an evolving story we tell ourselves about what is going on. Formally, narrative is a structure in which events are ordered by time and causation. Psychologically, a narrative is how our brain presents past events as the causes of present events as the causes of future events. The challenge is that, although the past is what we know to have happened and the present what we know to be happening right now, the future is fundamentally unknowable because it has not yet happened. Fortunately, the causal nature of narrative provides a workaround. Through experience and instruction we have learned the causal relationships among multitudes of events--what events cause other events and what they cause in turn. When events occur in the present, in the context of the relevant past, this causal knowledge predicts what will happen next. Which is to say, the future portion of a narrative is causally implied by its past and present portions. This does not mean that what we expect will actually happen but, because it is the only thing like a glimpse of the future that we can have, we generally act as though it will.

Causal narrative thinking may seem inevitable because it is so familiar, but it is not. For example, we could have evolved to think probabilistically instead of causally, but causality is much simpler and more efficient and, most of the time, it does a good job. In fact, probability, as a formal mathematical theory, was only invented to describe the uncertainty we often feel about our expectations about the future. We feel this way because we know that our knowledge about causal relationships is not wholly reliable; the resulting uncertainty tells us to temper our belief that the future will be exactly what we expect it to be.

Given that narrative thinking is what evolved, and given that evolution is primarily about survival, it is reasonable to suspect that we think narratively because it provides a mechanism for anticipating danger so we can take action before damage is done. Anticipated dangers are *threats*, some of which are physical; anything that will kill us or cause us significant pain. Others are personal/social; anything that will violate our beliefs about how the world and people in it, including ourselves, should behave. Still others are potential loss of something important or possible failure of something important to happen or to be acquired. Action to combat threats involves making changes in the ongoing course of events so the future, when it arrives, it is less harmful than it otherwise would have been.

Much more could be said about narrative thinking, but let us return to the issue of pandemic, high alert, and paranoia. Every day, each of us incorporates the things we learn about the pandemic into our ongoing narrative about what is happening in the world, in our own lives, and in the lives of others. For most of us, our narrative is straightforward, if unsettling: “The pandemic started in Wuhan, China, and was spread by travelers to the rest of the world. Because it is a new virus, nobody has developed immunity so we all are threatened with illness and possible death. Authorities have recommended various safeguards to reduce our vulnerability and we are reasonably certain that they will work.” Translating this into narrative terms, past events (Wuhan, travelers) caused present events (pandemic) which implies a threatening future (illness and possible death). Action involves following recommended safeguards and sitting tight until there is a vaccine. But, even if we do this, we know that many people will become sick and many will die; there have been pandemics before and there will be more. We also know that authorities can be faulted for failure to plan and slowness to respond, but nobody is really to blame for the pandemic itself—not the Chinese, not the Americans, not those who hold political views that differ from our own.

So, why does this is reasonable, straightforward narrative fail to ease our fear? Because, down deep in our evolutionary biology, threat is the main event and fear is the gauge of how big we think that threat is. Even in normal times, we are hyper-attuned to potential danger and primed to spring into action. So, given something as big as a pandemic, we are on even higher alert than normal and even more primed to rush into action.

An unfortunate consequence of extreme readiness is that some of us satisfy our need for action by doing things that are either futile or counterproductive. In a pandemic, futile actions are things like becoming immobilized, panicking, or denying anything is wrong; obsessing to the point that one’s life, and the lives of those trapped in the same house, is totally on hold; compulsively updating news about the virus to exclusion of other interests; and so on--anything that expends effort but fails to address the threat itself. Counterproductive actions are things like insisting on helping neighbors when it puts you both at risk, defying health directives in order to feel in control of your own life, or indulging in paranoid, usually malign theories about the motives of authorities or the press.

Which raises the question, Why are some people so willing to accept weird theories about threats and their origins? Again, the answer lies in narrative. Most of what most of us know about the pandemic derives from the media rather than personal experience. Like a war half way around the world, it does not have the immediacy and compellingness that personal experience would provide. Our narratives reflect this ‘paleness’ in a paucity of detail and vague causal links. The result is uncertainty about the reliability of the predicted future and a reluctance to act on it. We are particularly hesitant in troubled times when we especially need to understand the problem and act effectively to protect ourselves.

Uncertainty is itself threatening and it drives us to look for answers that will strengthen our narrative, particularly by fleshing out its crucial events and their causal links. Most of us get our answers about the pandemic from conventional media sources, the best of which avoid sensationalism. But this restraint produces a less compelling story than would dramatic tales and bold attributions of blame, so it often fails to reduce uncertainty by much. Most people understand this, appreciate the nuance, and live with the uncertainty. Others, however, find it intolerable. They need events to be vivid and causes to be stark. And there always are sources willing to fill their need. Conspiracy theories, claims of hoaxes, and tales of deep-state machinations are the extreme examples, but, of whatever stripe, malign narratives, including radical and violent ideologies, distort the recipients’ understanding of what is going on. This, in turn, distorts their predictions about what is going to happen, which distorts their choice of actions to combat the fictitious threats they expect to encounter. Action against threats that only they can see results in behavior that everyone else regards as bizarre and menacing.

Finally, many of us seek help dealing with uncertainty and threat in troubled times. But great uncertainty prompts some more than others to seek it in the form of a savior. A savior is someone who surpasses our ability to understand what is happening, who correctly assesses looming threats, and who possesses superior ability to save us. People who feel in control of their lives do not need such intervention, except perhaps in a general way, such as the belief in a deity. People who feel that they lack control because they are uncertain about what is happening, what might happen, and what to do about it, may seek help from a deity too, but they often need something more corporeal. Many seem to need a savior who seems approachable but is not easily approached; a celebrity or a political leader-someone who seems flawless or has loveable flaws. Once a savior, that is required of followers is loyalty and faith. In return, responsibility will be lifted from their shoulders and all will be well. If the savior delivers, loyalty and faith are repaid. Even when the savior fails, followers often remain steadfast because the alternative is to reassume responsibility or search, perhaps with less optimism, for another savior.

The point is that humans are built to be hyper-alert and extremely sensitive to threat when times are difficult. It has helped our species thrive for over 200,000 years. But it can get out of hand. If this story has a moral, it is that a little paranoia is normal because it keeps us on our toes and safe from threats, but too much is a threat in and of itself.