NEITHER LIBERTY NOR SAFETY: THE IMPACT OF FEAR ON INDIVIDUALS, INSTITUTIONS, AND SOCIETIES, PART I

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ABSTRACT *This is the first in a series of four papers looking at the ways that minds and bodies of individuals are affected by severe stress and using that to develop a deeper understanding of what happens to stressed individuals who come together to form stressed organizations, and the impact of this stress on organizational leaders. The series will also explore the parallel process that occurs when traumatized individuals and stressed organizations come together to form stressed societies. Part I focuses on the basic human stress response, also known as 'fight-flight-freeze', as a starting point for understanding the impact of acute trauma and repetitive stress on individuals, organizations, and nations.*

Key words: trauma, PTSD, organizational stress, parallel process, leadership, disaster

> They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety. (Benjamin Franklin, *Historical Review of Pennsylvania,* 1759)

INTRODUCTION: TRAUMA LEAVES SCARS

'America will never be the same again.' This phrase, repeated many times subsequent to 11 September 2001, captures the essence of a traumatic experience – a profound shifting of meaning and world view that is permanent. Trauma shatters basic assumptions and in the unstable period immediately after such an event, individual, organizational and national decisions may be made that alter destinies and fortunes (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Assumptions are an implicit part of our cultural milieu. From childhood on we are systematically fed assumptions about other people that are based on a specific paradigm for understanding human behaviour as well as human deviance from appropriate social standards. Notions like 'original sin', 'spare the rod, spoil the child', 'an eye for an eye' all unquestioningly support the notion of basic evil resident within the heart of a human being – an evil that must be expunged, eliminated, exterminated. Exposure to trauma can easily reinforce the notion of the split between 'good' and 'evil'. On the other hand, exposure to traumatic experience can shatter the illusion of a world easily divided between identifiable polar opposites. Such shattering can lead to

'It is generally agreed that September 11, 2001, changed the course of history, but we must ask ourselves why that should be so. How could a single event, even if it involved three thousand civilian casualties, have such a far-reaching effect? The answer lies not so much in the event itself but in the way the United States, under the leadership of President George W. Bush, responded to it.' (Soros, 2003, 2)

the evolution of far more complex explanations for the forces that motivate damaged – and damaging – human beings (Tedeschi et al., 1998). The tragedy of the World Trade Center attack presented the US with an opportunity to significantly increase our understanding of the complex global forces impacting on us all. Unfortunately, the official explanations oversimplified what is probably the most complicated situation the US has ever faced by dividing the world neatly, but unrealistically, into 'good' and 'evil'. The overly simplistic explanations that are regularly fed to the American public fail to take into account perhaps the most important determining factor in human experience – the presence throughout human history of exposure to overwhelming, repetitive, multigenerational traumatic experiences and the potentially negative impact of those experiences on decision making, problem solving and conflict resolution. Unfortunately, the negative impact of exposure to trauma can severely impair individual and organizational skills necessary for the exercise of democratic processes. In the impossible, illusory search for absolute security we lose liberty while actually becoming less safe.

Even among those whose expertise lies on the frontiers between 'normal' and 'abnormal' human function, a full recognition of the impact of exposure to trauma has been slow in coming for a number of reasons. The influence of Freudian thought over the mental health professions has often been cited – particularly Freud's turn away from his original seduction theory of pathology toward a view of fantasized rape and seduction (Masson, 1984). The movement away from psychodynamic explanations of human behavioural problems and toward biological and genetic explanations has also been proposed to explain the disinclination to see trauma as a major etiological factor in the production of pathological syndromes (Bloom, 1997; Luhrmann, 2000). In the US this has been accompanied by a clinical reluctance to encourage the use of probing analyses of problems because of the lack of reimbursement secondary to managed care combined with great economic and social pressures to use drugs, not psychotherapy. Other analyses have focused on the recurrent tendency throughout history to discover and then forget the impact of trauma. According to these explanations, the cycle of remembering is always connected to a social movement and the forgetting begins when the movement itself loses momentum (Herman, 1992).

Other barriers exist to recognizing the impact of trauma. The reality of traumatic amnesia in individual trauma survivors has

repeatedly left us with a cultural amnesia – a gap in the societal narrative that could fully round out the reality of those traumatic events. Usually this social amnesia is particularly great when the trauma has occurred to an oppressed or marginalized social group – women, children, minorities. The reluctance of victims to dredge up memories of a past trauma and thereby become triggered into states resembling the initial horrors has been paired with a social reluctance on the part of witnesses to listen to those stories and to bear witness to the terrors of the past accompanied by an unwillingness on the part of those in power to take responsibility for the perpetration of acts of violence or the failure to protect citizens from those acts (Coates et al., 1979). Importantly, the course of development transiting from traumatic event through post-traumatic reactions to symptomatic behaviours can span decades and travel through a variety of intervening variables each of which can negatively or positively impact on the ultimate course. As a result it has been easy for both survivors and witnesses to lose the thread of cause and effect relationships and this always serves the interests of the perpetrators who are rarely held accountable for their acts.

By the time an individual actually shows up in a psychologist's office, or under the care of an inpatient psychiatrist, in the criminal justice system, or under a surgeon's knife, the line connecting past events with present problems has been crossed over multiple times, forgotten, erased, or denied. As the simultaneously existing worlds of psychological knowledge and political action are rarely integrated and are therefore unable to inform each other, psychological knowledge rarely serves to inform the real-time workings of any political system. As a result, the original traumatic events of the past are masked by the seemingly diverse individual physical, psychological, political, economic and sociological manifestations in the present.

The last 20 years have seen the birth of a new way of understanding human behavioural pathology from a complex biopsychosocial and existential viewpoint that we call 'trauma theory'. Trauma theory establishes a more coherent and complex chain of cause and effect for human behaviour and places people – and political systems – back into the context of individual and group experience. The field itself has arisen out of advocacy and a global movement toward guarantees of basic human rights (Bloom, 2000b).

Trauma theory makes it clear that political and social policy decisions are intimately connected to people's experience of – and exposure to – traumatic experience. The impact of combat on Vietnam veterans cannot be separated from the political furore associated with that conflict. Violence against women and children can only be addressed through a discourse centring on patriarchal power and the abuse of that power. Urban violence and the impact of epidemic substance abuse cannot be divorced from the historical, social, economic and political factors that promote increasing economic and social inequity. The rise of a vicious dictator cannot be separated from the interaction between his own individual psychopathology rooted in a destructive childhood and the post-traumatic dynamics of the society within which he is embedded. Terrorists do not spring up out of the dirt – their destructive acts are forged within the furnace of their own personal turmoil and the multigenerational heat of societal hatred. The actions

of even democratic political leaders cannot be divided from the effects of severe stress on them and on the people they govern.

Unfortunately, neither traditional mental health practice nor political discourse in America offers guidelines for how the individual should comprehend or negotiate the boundary between the personal and the political. Nor is there a coherent framework for explaining how political, social and economic decisions contribute to individual pathology. Individual motivation alone is difficult to comprehend. Understanding the complex motivations behind the actions of political leaders or entire social movements is fraught with intellectual landmines.

Moving from the microworld of the individual to the macroworld of politics and society is always slippery and broaching a discussion between these various frames of reference is so treacherous that those who dare traverse the landscape do so at some peril, at least to their reputations. It is always possible to fall into the trap of what Soros has described as a 'fertile fallacy' – starting with a valid idea and finding it useful, then extending it to areas to which it no longer applies (Soros, 2003). But desperate times call for desperate measures and the average citizen needs some coherent and recognizable way of understanding the baffling world we find ourselves in today. Failing to recognize that, as human beings, we are still profoundly affected by our evolutionary roots, including our powerful group responses, puts us at the mercy of unconscious forces that can be exceedingly destructive. Leaders and the people they lead may be guided – or driven – by rational self-interest, by economic considerations, by greed and the other deadly sins. But irrational forces also drive individual and group behaviour. The study of traumatic stress has expanded our understanding of those unconscious forces within the individual and may also help shed some much needed light onto the political stage as well.

In this series of papers we will look at the ways that minds and bodies of individuals are affected by severe stress and use that as a way of developing a deeper understanding of what happens to stressed individuals who come together and form stressed organizations and how, in a parallel process, stressed organizations come together to form stressed societies. Leaders always stand at the interface between these levels of social organization, representing simultaneously, their own development as individuals and the needs, both conscious and unconscious – of the group or groups they represent. Under conditions of great stress, the behaviour of leaders will be greatly determined by the impact of stressful conditions on themselves and the people they govern. Likewise, crisis provides an opportunity for leaders to actively manipulate the emotions and behaviour of the group to help them carry forth their own agendas.

Part I will focus on the basic human stress response, also known as 'fight-flight-freeze', as a starting point for understanding the impact of stress on individuals, organizations, and nations. In Part II, we will begin exploring the more extended impact of severe, chronic, and repetitive exposure to stress on the functioning of the emotional system, and the ways in which human beings tend to adapt to adversity and thus come to normalize highly abnormal behaviour. Part III looks at the simultaneous loss of memory and words for experience that often accompanies trauma and helps to propel the automatic

repetition of the past and also concentrates on the impact of exposure to trauma on human attachment schemas and the ways that disrupted attachment can lead to addictions, disrupted relationships between individuals and among groups, and the tendency to use authority abusively. Part IV wraps up the series with a focus on how the complex adaptation to overwhelming stress can produce immense anxiety that must be defended against and is frequently accompanied by high levels of angst, alienation, and anomie as reflected in individual and group behaviour.

Behaviour in individuals and groups is always multidetermined, so this explanatory system is not meant to offer the one and only explanation for complex social outcomes. Instead it is written in the spirit of exploration and heartfelt belief that unless we can become aware of our own natural, biologically determined reactions to overwhelming stress we will not be able to prevent the re-enactment of a traumatic past leading to a downward spiral of deterioration rather than transformation. And we will not be able to adequately defend democracy's most cherished beliefs and values from extremist leaders.

After the events of 11 September 2001 it became increasingly difficult for anyone in the US to challenge or question decisions that were being made at the highest levels of government. In earlier times, when kings, rather than presidents, brooked no criticism, only the court fool was allowed to put into words the sentiments of the common man and express the unconscious or less-than-fully conscious attitudes and desires of the group. Similarly, comedians, satirists and cartoonists have been among the first and at times the only critics of post-September 11 US policy (Franken, 2003; Hightower, 2003; Ivins, 2003; Moore, 2003). As we know from trauma studies, much of the important emotional content of trauma is encoded in non-verbal form as image, sensations, and symbols and the non-verbal form of expression often conveys ideas more fully than words ever can. The political cartoons illustrating these articles are those of Clay Bennett, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist of the *Christian Science Monitor,* who deserves appreciation for the use of his art. The accompanying commentaries inserted to illustrate many of the points made in these papers were culled from various sources, most published in response to events that have occurred in the US subsequent to the World Trade Center disaster.

EVOLUTION'S LEGACY – THE HUMAN STRESS RESPONSE

It is impossible fully to understand human behaviour, and the response to trauma, without grasping key insights about the ways in which we continue to be influenced by our evolutionary past. Human existence is indeed tragic, as De Unamuno put it, because we evolved in a natural environment in which we were prey for hundreds of generations before we became predators – an environment that no longer exists. The traits and abilities that guaranteed the survival of the human species in the evolutionary past now threaten our continued individual and collective survival in the present (De Unamuno, 1954; Ehrenreich, 1997).

Fight-flight-freeze

Unlike other mammals, we come into the world ill prepared to do battle with the natural enemies that surrounded us in our evolutionary past. Helpless for a prolonged

period after birth, bearing fragile bodies that lack substantial protection, we have few natural defences. Like all mammals, we are equipped to respond to emergencies with what is called the 'fight-flight-freeze' reaction, also known as the 'human stress response' (Bloom, 2003b). The stress response is a total body-mind mobilization of resources. Powerful neurochemicals flood our brain and body, including epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol, serotonin, dopamine, endogenous opiates, and endogenous benzodiazepines. Sugars are mobilized from liver and muscle, respiratory rate is increased, as are heart rate and blood pressure, and the immune system is activated. Our attention becomes riveted on the potential threat and our capacity for reasoning and exercising judgement is negatively impacted by the rising anxiety and fear. Taking action appears to be the only solution to this extraordinary experience of tension, so we are compelled to act on our impulses, which often guide us to defend ourselves aggressively rather than to run away (Bloom, 2003c).

More closely resembling our animal ancestors, we become less attentive to words and far more focused on threat-related signals in the environment – all of the non-verbal content of communication. As fear rises, we may lose language functions altogether, possibly mediated by the effect of rising levels of cortisol on the language centres of the brain. Without language, we can take in vital information only in non-verbal form – through our physical, emotional, and sensory experiences. As the level of arousal increases, 'dissociation' – the loss of integrated function of memory, sensation, perception and identity – may be triggered as an adaptive response to this hyperaroused state, physiologically buffering the central nervous system and the body by lowering heart rate and reducing anxiety and pain. This internal state of 'freeze' temporarily helps to reduce the overwhelming nature of the stress response and allows us to stay calm and function rather than experience emotions that are more than we can bear.

Each episode of danger connects to every other episode of danger in our minds, so that the more danger we are exposed to, the more sensitive we are to danger. With each experience of fight-flight-freeze, our mind forms a network of connections that is triggered with every new threatening experience. If people are exposed to danger repeatedly, their bodies become unusually sensitive so that even minor threats can trigger this sequence of physical, emotional, and cognitive responses. We can do nothing to control this reaction – it is a biological, built-in response, a protective device that only goes wrong if we are exposed to too much danger and too little protection.

Although the fight-flight-freeze state of physiological hyperarousal serves a vital survival purpose in times of danger, when hyperarousal stops being a state and turns into a trait human beings lose their capacity to accurately assess and predict danger leading to avoidance and re-enactment instead of adaptation and survival (Perry and Pate, 1994). Prolonged hyperarousal can have disastrous physical effects as our biological systems become progressively exhausted. Our need to rescue ourselves from this untenable physiological state means that we will do anything, use any device, to calm ourselves down. If we cannot get relief from our fellow humans, we will turn to any substance or behaviour that does bring relief.

Childhood exposure to trauma, particularly repetitive exposure to interpersonal

violence like sexual abuse, has even more dire consequences than when an adult experiences a traumatic event for the first time. Children's brains are still forming. The release of powerful neurohormones, particularly during critical and sensitive moments in development, is thought to have such a profound impact on the developing brain that the brain may organize itself around the traumatic event. Traumatized children are known to develop persistent physiological hyperarousal and hyperactivity with increased muscle tone, low grade increases in temperature, an increased startle response, profound sleep disturbances, affect regulation problems, anxiety, and abnormalities in cardiovascular regulation all related to a use-dependent organization of brain stem nuclei involved in the stress response apparatus (Perry, 2001). We are only beginning to understand how the effects of chronic stress set the stage for long-term physical as well as emotional and social problems (Felitti et al., 1998).

When overly stressed, human beings cannot think clearly, nor can we consider the long-range consequences of behaviour. It is impossible to weigh all of the possible options before making a decision or to take the time to obtain all the necessary information that goes into making good decisions. Decisions tend to be based on impulse and on an experienced need to self-protect. As a consequence, such decisions are inflexible, oversimplified, extremist, directed towards action, and often very poorly constructed (Janis, 1982). After prolonged exposure to stress, the brain can 'reset' itself and when this occurs, people experience a state of *chronic hyperarousal.* In this state, they may perceive danger everywhere, even when there is no real danger, because their body is signalling the arousal response automatically. As a result, their ability to think clearly and rationally can be chronically and erratically impaired.

This state of extreme hyperarousal serves a protective function during the emergency, preparing us to respond automatically and aggressively to any perceived threat, preferentially steering us toward action and away from the time-consuming effort of thought and language. However, prolonged hyperarousal leaves us physically and emotionally exhausted, burdened with hair-trigger tempers, irritability, and a tendency to perpetuate violence.

Under such circumstances, then, how did the human species survive, and even more impressively, eventually prevail over beasts far larger, aggressive, and well-defended than us? We survived largely through three impressive adaptations – bigger and more integrated brains, social bonding and the development of language. But ironically, each one of these progressive adaptations has left us more vulnerable to the effects of trauma.

Impressive adaptations

With our bigger, more highly integrated brains we learned how to outsmart less intelligent predators. The enlarging capacity of our memory equipment meant that we could retain increasingly large bodies of information while enabling us to integrate our past experience with our present experience, and thus learn from the past. This progressive mental integration necessitated hundreds, even thousands, of associations to any event, and the more dangerous the event, the more likely that we would make a multitude of interconnected associations.

There was a price to be paid, however, for these enlarging brains. In order for the human female to remain standing upright,

the female pelvis could only expand within certain circumscribed limits. The result of these two combined factors was the birth of a newborn human utterly unable to protect itself, forced to remain dependent and helpless longer than any other species. This primal and universal experience with helplessness would forever leave human beings struggling for control in a universe constantly evading our control. Defences against re-experiencing a sense of helplessness and vulnerability provide the underlying, unchallenged, often rationalized motivation for individual and political action.

Given this extended period of infantile helplessness, Nature's challenge was to find a mechanism that would bind caregivers and offspring together longer than any other species – for decades instead of weeks. As a result, we are born with a number of innate emotions that are also part of our mammalian heritage and that produce patterned and predictable responses in all of our organs, including our brain. So vital to our survival was this system of emotional engagement that, although we experience emotional states as psychic phenomena, they are actually physical events that trigger dramatic responses in our major organs. Fear is most striking in its capacity to alter physical and cognitive states and produce permanent alterations in the network of associations that contribute to our personality (LeDoux et al., 1991). To avoid fear and regain a sense of security we will sacrifice qualities that, under less fearful circumstances, may serve as the undergirding of our belief systems.

Under severe stress, if our powerful emotional responses, particularly our responses to anything that generate fear, are not buffered by others through social contact and physical touch, our central nervous system is left exposed to unrelenting overstimulation. This reaction can do long-lasting harm to our bodies as well as our psyches. To protect against such danger, human beings developed a network of attachment relationships, living in extended kinship groups throughout most of our evolutionary developmental period.

'The United States faces grave dangers in the aftermath of the attacks of September 2001, and the aggressive efforts of the government to seize new powers and to curb traditional liberties cannot be dismissed as cynical or frivolous. Some alteration in our understanding of rights is appropriate and necessary in dangerous times, as even the most ardent civil libertarians tend to admit. But the history of civil liberties in times of emergency suggests that governments seldom react to crises carefully or judiciously . . . Citizens naturally react to great crises viscerally and often vent their fears in the form of demands for unconscionable actions. It is government's role to see beyond the understandably passionate feelings of the public and frame a reasoned response to the dangers we face . . .' (Brinkley, 2003, 45–6).

Our capacity to manage overwhelming emotional states is shaped by our experience with early childhood attachments and is maintained throughout life by our attachment relationships. This development of extended social networks increased the likelihood that vulnerable offspring would be protected and in combination with our expanding intelligence, made hunting and food gathering far more successful. Human beings could accomplish much more in groups than any one individual could on his or her own.

Part of the evolved response to stress that built on our capacity for attachment was a strong inclination to gather together in groups whenever threatened. Social bonding is triggered by threat. Under threat human beings will more closely bond together with their identified group, close ranks, and prepare for defence of the group. This 'circle-the-wagons' strategy is much older than wagons, with vulnerable women and children on the inside of the tribal circle and physically stronger males on the outside aggressively defending territory.

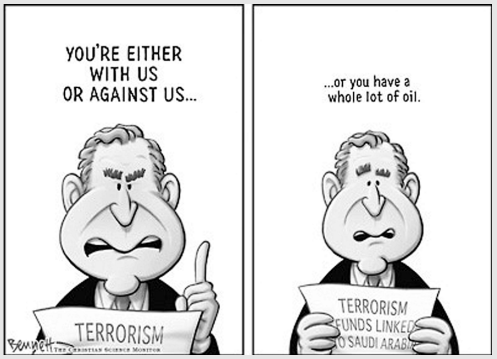
A leader rapidly emerges within such a group, a complex process that is an interaction between the individual characteristics of the leader, the needs of the group, and the contextual demands of the moment. Under such conditions, the vast majority of human beings become more suggestible to the influence of a persuasive, strong, assertive and apparently confident leader who promises the best defence of the group, thereby containing the overwhelming anxiety of every member of the group. In this state it is difficult for the members of a stressed group to discern the difference between a confident, intelligent leader and an arrogant blowhard. Decisions are made quickly, often autonomously, by the leader with relatively little input and the input that he receives is likely to be significantly coloured by the pressure everyone feels to conform to standards of group cohesion and unanimity. As stress increases, the leader is compelled to take action to reduce the threat while the followers simultaneously become more obedient to the leader in order to insure coordinated group effort.

'After terrorists attacked New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, liberal Democrats on Capitol Hill eagerly lined up with conservative Republicans to pledge their support for the President's war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. No one mentioned the hesitancy of George W. Bush's initial response to the terror strikes. No one said or did anything that might hint at dissension in a time of national crisis . . . "We want America to speak with one voice tonight and we want enemies and the whole world and all of our citizens to know that America speaks tonight with one voice", explained Richard Gephardt, the House Democratic leader. Without knowing any specifics of Bush's plan for military action, Gephardt pledged, "We have faith in him and his colleagues in the executive branch to do this in the right way."' (Conason, 2003, 190)

'By repeatedly insisting that only he has the tools and the determination to fend off terrorism in the post-September 11 era, Bush has cultivated feelings of crisis, pessimism, anxiety and a loss of control throughout the nation. He has instilled a sense of dependency in Americans–and found a place in their minds and hearts as the repository of strength, action and control. The electorate passively and often subconsciously relies on his authority and power to act on their behalf.' (Brooks, 2003)

However, individual and group conflict and competitive strivings are always a threat to rapid, unified action. Therefore, efforts must be made to minimize the normal tensions, conflicts and aggressive behaviours that inevitably arise in any group. The result is the need of any group, but particularly a stressed group, to find an external enemy upon which the group can project all its own negative emotions and desires in service of group cohesion. The greater the consistency between this psychosocial need and actual events, the easier it becomes to define friend and foe. The greater the perceived differences between 'us' and 'them', the greater the ease in labelling the enemy and doing whatever it takes to defend 'us'.

Even the development of human moral reasoning and our desire for justice can be recognized in early evolutionary development. Social relationships are built on the logic of reciprocity, or 'tit-for-tat', probably the basis of all cooperative relationships (Axelrod, 1984). Studies of primates have demonstrated the prevalence of reciprocal relationships and the ability to detect cheating. Out of betrayed reciprocal relationships comes the natural desire for retaliation or revenge. As the primatologist De Waal has pointed out, 'it is safe to assume that the actions of our ancestors were guided by gratitude, obligation, retribution, and indignation long before they developed enough language capacity for moral discourse' (De Waal, 1996). Out of this innate desire for revenge



'Nine days after the attacks of 9/11, President Bush declared, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists".' (Hirsh, 2002, 18)

'Bush's foreign policy corresponds to the world as he sees it. It's a view driven by a moral clarity that pits the forces of good against the forces of evil.' (Newhouse, 2003, 16)

comes our need to achieve satisfaction for injury and eventually our uniquely human system of laws designed in part to contain and channel vengeance (Bloom, 2001).

The development of language was a profound leap forward for the human species. The spoken and later the written word enabled us to share information so that something learned by one individual could be easily and rapidly dispersed among the entire group. Through language, learning could be transmitted not only over space, but over time, so that the knowledge of one generation could be passed on to another, and another, and another. Language permitted us to develop ever more sophisticated means for cheating and for detecting – and punishing – cheaters. As our memory system became increasingly complex, we developed two integrated forms of memory, one based on words, the other on non-verbal experience derived from our bodies and our senses. As human development advanced, we became progressively more word dependent, ultimately basing our sense of reality, our sense of time, and even our sense of self on our word-based intelligence and memory, often minimizing or even excluding the importance of non-verbal intelligence, relegated to the largely disrespected sphere of 'intuition'. But that non-verbal intelligence has stayed with us and is still displayed through the powerful human inclination to engage in the arts. Creative expression in all of its forms clearly has survival value because it is found in every culture ever known to exist, is highly valued, and a great deal of time and energy go into its production – all necessary qualifications to judge an ability as an evolutionary survival achievement (Dissanayake, 1988). The arts appear to provide us with a built-in method for brain integration. Through creative expression we are able to express our emotions, our body sensations, our non-verbal experience and make it accessible to our verbal intelligence while sharing it with other people (Bloom, 2003a).

As emotions, intelligence, relational capacity, language and memory became more fully integrated and as we could compare contemporary experience with the wisdom of the previous generations while anticipating the future, we became desperately aware of our own mortality, a realization so overpowering and awesome that it demanded the creation of meaning systems that could serve to buffer our vulnerable central nervous system against the terror inspired by the mystery of death (Becker, 1973). Mythologies, religion, philosophy all reflect this meaning-making necessity.

The tragedy is that human beings are no longer particularly well suited to the environments we have created for ourselves, environments within which our most dangerous enemies are frequently members of our own families, while the institutions we have created to sustain and protect us often turn out to be the engines of our own destruction. The tragedy of this magnificent evolutionary success for the individual emerges most fully when a human being is repeatedly traumatized, particularly when that exposure begins in childhood. Under such conditions, these evolutionary mechanisms that are so adapted to human survival become dangerous threats and impediments to further growth. The tragedy emerges in social systems when groups of individuals develop a group identity – family, tribe, organization or nation – and then are threatened by internal or external forces, thus arousing the conditions that lead to family wars, tribal wars, civil wars, and international wars.

'George Orwell in 1984 wrote of the necessity of constant war against the Other to forge a false unity among the proles: "War had been literally continuous, though strictly speaking it had not always been the same war . . . The enemy of the moment always represented absolute evil."' (Hedges, 2002, 10)

Arousal and riveted attention in an organizational context

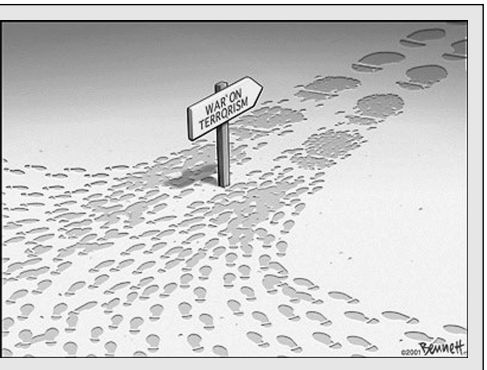
Organizations and institutions must respond to threats in order to survive. At present, many organizations and the institutions that support them are under stress due to momentous global technological, economic, and social changes, all exacerbated by the constant threat presented by various forms of terrorism. Regardless of the particular crisis, like an individual, every organization goes into a current crisis with strengths and vulnerabilities and a history of previous responses to stress and crisis.

Organizations under stress can manifest traits similar to stressed individuals. As anyone knows who has worked in a setting facing some kind of threat, everyone's attention becomes riveted on the latest

'Currently, President George W Bush – a self-described "compassionate conservative" who vowed to pursue a "humble" foreign policy – presides over a vastly expanded national security state that bears little resemblance to the government he took control of less than three years ago. The man who claimed he would modernize and transform the military while spending less than his rival Al Gore has initiated the largest military spending increase since the Reagan era. And lest you think that this change of plans was necessitated by the changed circumstances brought on by the September 11 terror attacks, please take note that only about 25% of the funds budgeted for the military since Bush took office have anything to do with fighting terrorism – three-quarters of the funds are allocated to carry out plans that were already on the books long before the Al Qaeda attacks. What the terror attacks did do was create a climate in Washington where no member of Congress dared question any defense.' (Hartung, 2003)

rumour and no work is done. Human beings are 'hard-wired' for social interaction, so a threat to our social group can be experienced as a dangerous threat to our individual survival and can evoke powerful responses. An organizational crisis will be sensed by everyone in the sphere of influence of the organization almost instantaneously regardless of how strenuously leaders attempt to contain the spread of information. Emotional contagion – without cognitive input – occurs within one-twentieth of a second and although employees of an organization may not know what the problem is, they will indeed know that there is a problem (Hatfield et al., 1994). Tension literally fills the air. Within minutes or hours of a particularly disturbing piece of gossip, news, or crisis, everyone in an organization will be in an alarm state with all that accompanies it, including compromised thought processes.

At present, most organizations and institutions in our society are relatively hierarchical rather than democratic but under stress this characteristic is greatly accentuated. When danger is real and present, effective leaders take charge and give commands that are obeyed by obedient followers, thus harnessing and directing the combined power of many individuals in service of group survival. Long-standing interpersonal conflicts seem to evaporate and everyone pulls together toward the common goal of group survival, producing an exhilarating and even intoxicating state of unity, oneness and a willingness to sacrifice one's own wellbeing for the sake of the group. This is a survival strategy ensuring that in a state of crisis decisions can be made quickly and efficiently thus better ensuring survival of the group, even while individuals may be sacrificed.



'This is why the substitution of rhetoric for thought, always a temptation in a national crisis, must be resisted by officials and citizens alike. It is hard for ordinary citizens to know what is actually happening in Washington in a time of such great trouble; for all we know, serious and difficult thought may be taking place there. But the talk that we are hearing from politicians, bureaucrats, and commentators has so far tended to reduce the complex problems now facing us to issues of unity, security, normality, and retaliation.' (Berry, 2003, 39)

All of these measures may be extremely effective during an acute state of crisis. However, potential dangers lie ahead when an organizational atmosphere becomes one of repetitive crisis, with little opportunity for recuperation before another crisis manifests. The chronic nature of a stressed atmosphere tends to produce a generalized increased level of tension, irritability, short tempers and even abusive behaviour. The urgency to act in order to relieve this tension compromises decision making because we are unable to weigh and balance multiple options, arrive at compromises, and consider long-term consequences of our actions under stress. Decision-making in such

‘In a last-minute exercise of brute force, the Republican House leadership jettisoned an antiterrorism bill that raised far fewer civil liberties concerns and that had been unanimously approved by the House Judiciary Committeee, and replaced it with the 342-page USA PATRIOT Act. Congress passed this legislation with breathtaking speed at a moment when it was exiled from its anthrax-contaminated offices and the nations was on edge from Attorney General John Ashcroft’s predictions of more terrorist attacks.’ (Chang, 2003)

organizations tends to deteriorate with increased numbers of poor and impulsive decisions, compromised problem-solving mechanisms, and overly rigid and dichotomous thinking and behaviour. Interpersonal conflicts that were suppressed during the initial crisis return, often with a vengeance, but conflict resolution mechanisms, if ever in place, deteriorate under stress.

Problem solving is also compromised because under these conditions we are likely to turn to leaders who urge action and in this condition of tension virtually any action will do to alleviate the immediate need to respond. Supervisors and bosses may become increasingly autocratic and dogmatic, trying to appear calm and assured in front of their employees while narrowing their circle of input to a very small group of trusted associates. As the boss becomes more threatened, sensing the insecurity of his decisions and his position, these small groups of associates feel increasingly pressured to conform to whatever the boss wants. In this process, judgment and diversity of opinion are sacrificed in service of group cohesion and as this occurs, the quality of decision making becomes compromised, an insidious process that has been termed ‘groupthink’.

Escalating control measures are used to repress any dissent that is felt to be dangerous to the unity of what has become focused organizational purpose, seemingly

‘Bush and his supporters often silence opposition and dissent by encoding in their arguments a worldview that implies that even to challenge Bush’s ideas is immoral and damaging to the social order, and even to the survival of the nation and of Western civilization.’

connected to survival threats. This encourages a narrowing of input from the world outside the organization. It also encourages the development of split-off and rivalrous dissenting subgroups within the organization who may passive-aggressively or openly subvert organizational goals. As group cohesion begins to wane, leaders may experience the relaxing of control measures as a threat to organizational purpose and safety. They may therefore attempt to mobilize increasing projection onto the designated external enemy who serves a useful purpose in activating increased group cohesion while actively suppressing dissent internally. But the suppression of the dissenting minority voice has negative consequences. As dissent is silenced, vital information flow is impeded. As a result the quality of problem analysis and decision making deteriorates further. If this cycle is not stopped and the organization allowed opportunity to recuperate, the result may be an organization that becomes as rigid, repetitious and ultimately destructive and even suicidal as do so many chronically stressed individuals.

Arousal and riveted attention in a sociopolitical context

A biologically based understanding of human behaviour has broad implications for national and international leadership. The need to address repetitive crises is of global concern since every crisis presents us with complex dilemmas. Yet under conditions of national stress the quality of thought processes is likely to deteriorate to dichotomous thinking, breaking the world down into those who are friends and therefore 'good', and those who are foes and therefore 'evil'. Unable to engage in complex decision making, governmental problem solving becomes compromised making it more likely that we will turn to leaders who appear strong, decisive, and who urge immediate action.

In a time of national tension virtually any action will do to alleviate the immediate pressure to respond. Under conditions of stress we are more likely to be swayed by the influence of a group we are identified with and pressures for conformity increase at the moment when we are most desperately in

'At home, the freemasonry of the hard right remains very intimidating, its style blending powerful conviction with self-righteousness. It conveys a sense of knowing best where the country's interests lie and refusing to bend on [its] first principles. Its partisans know who they are. Some have a messianic sense of right and wrongs. Ends, they think, justify means. They see only black and white, none of the shades of gray that infuse most issues. Americans too, come in shades of gray but like to see issues portrayed in black and white and in short, clear, declarative sentences.' (Newhouse, 2003, 19)

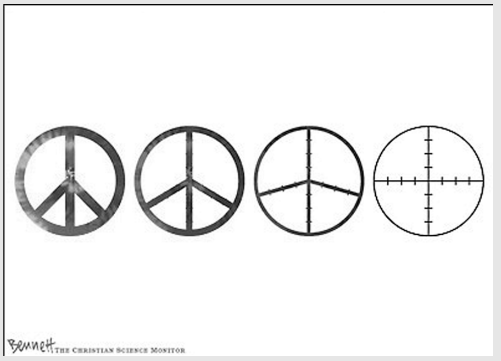
'The visionary theory should be seen for what it is – a doctrine of preventive war. Bush himself stated it clearly in a speech at West Point in June 2002: "We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge." "Anticipatory self-defense" is a phrase that Rumsfeld has used. The notion of regime change is the other side of the coin.' (Newhouse, 2003, 12)

need of diverse opinions. This leads to an increase in territoriality and aggression that is satisfying in the long run but is likely to compound existing problems.

This entire process tends to increase the sense of danger and insecurity on the part of everyone within the country and as leaders focus exclusively on physical security we may sacrifice other forms of safety and wellbeing in order to achieve an elusive sense of physical security that remains threatened.

These are conditions likely to lead to the rise of dictators, the demonization of dissenting groups, the loss of human rights, a rise of terrorism, and of course, the ultimate stress response – war. This negative change is usually not sudden, but instead manifests as a gradual and insidious transformation of normative values that become radicalized. In the process, even a people committed to civil liberties may endorse rapid changes that result in the widespread loss of rights, liberty and freedom in order to restore the illusion of safety secured only through a continuing escalation of hostility, aggression and defence.

'Linguists call this device the lost performative. The speaker purposely leaves out the authority behind far-reaching statements in order to pass off controversial viewpoints as the absolute truth. When Bush says "Our cause is just," he purposely leaves out the "according to whom?" Saying "I think the war is just" or "Donald Rumsfeld thinks the war is just" is much different from asserting "Our cause is just." The underlying message from the authoritarian leader is, Do exactly as I say, or catastrophe follows. Overgeneralization and false generalization are powerful vehicles for such a leader.' (Brooks, 2003)



'Before conflicts begin, the first people silenced – often with violence – are not the nationalist leaders of the opposing ethnic or religious group, who are useful in that they serve to dump gasoline on the evolving conflict. Those voices within the ethnic group or the nation that question the state's lust and need for war are targeted. These dissidents are the most dangerous. They give us an alternative language, one that refuses to define the other as "barbarian" or "evil", one that recognizes the humanity of the enemy, one that does not condone violence as a form of communication. Such voices are rarely heeded. And until we learn once again to speak in our own voice and reject that handed to us by the state in times of war, we flirt with our own destruction.' (Hedges, 2002, 15–16)

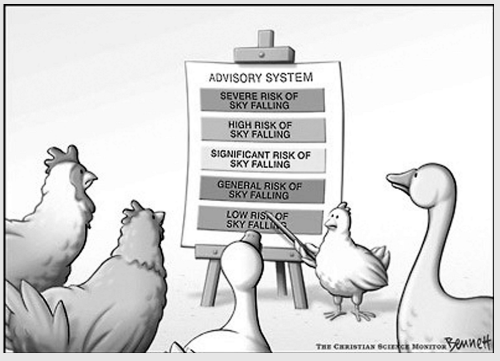
IMPLICATIONS FOR RESPONSE: AROUSAL AND RIVETED ATTENTION

There is little we can do about this evolutionary survival schema. When we are threatened we will respond in certain predictable ways. It is imperative, therefore, that we develop methods for identifying and managing this response more constructively. As a part of treatment we teach clients to be aware of how their body and mind respond to stress and teach them methods for calming themselves down so they can think more clearly and effectively. Three guidelines take precedence here:

- reduce threat;
- increase safety;
- induce calm.

The chronic hyperarousal associated with prolonged exposure to trauma and the development of post-traumatic disorders must be addressed first by focusing on the need to achieve a state of safety and calm. The definition of safety includes not just physical safety, but psychological, social, and moral safety as well. Physical safety includes stopping self-destructive behaviours, other-destructive behaviours, and putting oneself in harm's way. Psychological safety is the ability to be safe with oneself, including the capacity to know, protect, control, and discipline oneself. As anyone who has had successful psychotherapy can describe, achieving psychological safety involves the ability to examine oneself and one's patterns of interaction honestly over time. It requires taking responsibility for the mistakes of the past while honouring the successes and achievements. Social safety is the ability to be safe in groups and with other people. Moral safety involves the maintenance of a value system that does not contradict itself and is consistent with healthy human development as well as physical, psychological, and social safety (Bloom, 2000a).

An environment cannot be truly safe unless all of these levels of safety are addressed. A focus on physical safety alone



'For the distinctive feature of all the programs the administration has pushed in response to real problems is that they do little or nothing to address those problems. Problems are there to be used to pursue the vision. And a problem that won't serve that purpose, whether it's the collapse of confidence in corporate governance or the chaos in the Middle East, is treated as an annoyance to be ignored if possible, or at best addressed with purely cosmetic measures. Clearly, George W. Bush's people believe that real-world problems will solve themselves, or at least won't make the evening news, because by pure coincidence they will be pre-empted by terror alerts.' (Krugman, 2003, 255)

results in living in an armed fortress, paranoid and alienated from others. Since quality thinking under stress is almost impossible, in formulating intervention strategies every effort should be made to reduce stress whenever good decisions are sought. The growing sources of social stress inflicted on individuals and families at home, in the workplace, and in the community must be identified. Buffers that can be put into place include explanations and information to help attenuate the effects of these stressors. Increasing alarm should be minimized.

In an organization, leaders must be able and willing to identify the signs of acute and chronic stress and take deliberate steps to reverse the deteriorating cycle by opening up communication, deliberation, decision making, and conflict resolution while examining past responses and reorienting organizational goals toward a new vision. At times of crisis, people look to their leaders for guidance in how to respond. The words that leaders use signify intent to everyone else and their words will either mobilize aggressive responses and further dichotomized thought processes or their words will mobilize calm, rational thought.

Likewise, national leaders experience the extraordinary combined stress of an entire country. This makes it imperative that national leaders recognize the dangers inherent in the stress response and take deliberate steps to increase the diversity of opinions that inform decision and debate, while setting a tone of calmness, moderation and maturity for stressed citizens. In an acute crisis, leaders must be careful about the words and tone of voice they use to signify intent. Followers will look to leaders to set the tone that either mobilizes aggression and dichotomized thinking or that mobilizes calm and rational thought. Increasing alarm should be minimized because of the ways in which alarm impairs thought. Information should be provided as soon as possible. Explanations for events that are occurring serve as buffers against the alarm response. Encouraging social support also is important, since the support of other people is a powerful buffer against stress.

'No mayor, however, has ever had to react to a disaster of the magnitude of last week's and few could have done so with more forcefulness, or steadiness of purpose, than Giuliani. On the day of the attack, the Mayor spoke publicly at least half a dozen times, the last around midnight, and then he went back to the scene to speak to the rescue teams working through the night. Each time he spoke, he managed to convey at once grief and resolve, and his presence offered the kind of reassurance so disconcertingly absent in Washington, where the President was, for much of the day, missing.' (Elizabeth Kolbert, *The New Yorker,* 24 September 2001)

Leaders need support as well, for the same reasons, but support does not mean unquestioning acceptance of anything the leader says. In times of stress and crisis it is vital for leaders to have abundant access to a loyal opposition – people who will tell him or her what they think, even if it disagrees with what the leader intends. 'Groupthink' is an exceedingly dangerous phenomenon that can occur when a group is under pressure to make an important decision. When a group has caught the 'disease' of groupthink, members try so hard to agree with one another that they commit serious errors that could easily have been avoided. An assumed consensus emerges while every group member focuses on the ways they are all converging and divergent opinions are ignored. All group members share a sense of invulnerability that is conveyed by nothing except the fact that they are in it together. Every member of the group begins to believe silently that such a group of intelligent people as they are could not be mistaken. This kind of thinking leads to decisions that can spell disaster (Janis, 1972; Forsyth, 1990). The strength of democratic processes is in having a diversity of opinions, supported by a set of shared assumptions, particularly in a crisis. When diversity is present and diverse opinions are integrated, it increases the likelihood that good decisions will produce good outcomes.

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