

Patterns and Conspiracies

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Humans are pattern-seeking, pattern-recognizing, and pattern-creating animals. This is to say that, in our need for meaning within an orderly universe, we seek, recognize, and (if necessary) create patterns — groups of seemingly unrelated phenomena that are, to our minds, not random assemblages of stuff, but instead, coherent presences, signatures that reveal design and content.

I don't want to make too much of the psychological or philosophical dimensions of meaning in my assertions about patterns. Those are secondary to the primary physicality of our sensitivity to patterns. Evolutionary biology says that these traits were selected by virtue of their success in passing on human genes to succeeding generations. Nonetheless, meaning holds a significant place in the narrative of this commentary.

In the modern world, with its hyper-complexity, figuring out why something happened and what we should do about it collectively is often effectively impossible. The sequence of events — what led to what led to what — is often invisible, so removed from our vision that we cannot possibly understand how or why a given experience occurred. This ignorance then conditions our response.

Case in point: Last week, I reached for my iPhone to call someone, a friend whose phone number is already in my Favorites. Having put on my trusty wired earpiece, I swiped up for face recognition to get past the iPhone's lock screen, then pressed the phone receiver symbol followed by the Favorites icon. Then I pressed the person's name in the list to activate the call. I waited a second or two, but nothing happened. No phone ringing sound in my earpiece. I was taken aback. I tried tapping my friend's name again. Still nothing.

Looking at the iPhone screen, I noticed that there were no bars in the upper right corner. Hmm. Then I noticed that the network indicator in the upper left corner was blank. That's weird. I pressed SETTINGS, then CELLULAR, and discovered that my phone was no longer connected to the Verizon LTE 4G network that my MVNO carrier, U.S. Mobile, uses. What the fuck? Numerous thoughts flashed through my mind: Had I not paid the monthly bill and been dumped by U.S. Mobile? Of course not, it's on auto-pay and wasn't due anyway. I ran through ten different scenarios, including the FBI and CIA. I even went online with my laptop and opened a chat with a U.S. Mobile customer service

rep, no doubt someone in a call center halfway around the world, probably in India or Malaysia.

To make a long story short, before the chat started I thought to try turning the iPhone off and on. So, I powered it down, then restarted. Voilà! Like magic, I was back in business, connected again to the cell towers.

As an aggravation, this experience was minor and short-lived. Plus, I was able to fix the problem on my own, with no outside help. Still, a nagging question remained: *What happened to cause the problem in the first place? Why did my iPhone lose its connection to the cell network?* The hard fact is that I will never know. Perhaps someone, somewhere knows the answer, but I don't and won't.

If you lived as a farmer-homesteader on the South Dakota prairie in 1850 and your plow broke, you fixed it. You had to. There was no Home Depot to drive to or go online to order a replacement blade or a new plow. Humans throughout history have needed complete suites of basic survival skills and often much more specialized sets of skills to stay alive. If people didn't develop those skills, they could find themselves in big trouble. These days, the percentages of people with that kind of competence are seriously reduced. Relatively few of us have much in the way of survival skills. We don't produce what we need — we buy it. And when things break, don't work, or go wrong, we couldn't fix them if our lives depended on it and have to rely on someone else to put things right again.

Beyond externals such as phones, plows, or even something as major as a viral pandemic, there are more personal, interior realms — bodies, thoughts, feelings. Bodies go haywire. We get sick, and we may not understand what happened. What did we do or not do that caused or contributed to illness and suffering? Sometimes we have a sense of that, but often we just don't know.

Life is chock full of mysteries. Stuff happens — both around us and within us — and we don't know why. This leads us back to patterns. Who's pulling the strings on all these mysteries? In his 1985 novel *Galápagos*, Kurt Vonnegut theorized that much of our human trouble (probably most) was caused by our big brains. Cows don't wonder why things happen as they do. Almost no other animals do. Whales and dolphins might, but even that isn't certain. All we know for sure is that humans do wonder about why stuff happens. Our need for coherence drives us to come up with some basis for understanding what led to what and why. And it doesn't really matter if the answers we come up with are true and accurate or false and fictional, as long as we can see some pattern in the events — within them, under them, around them, beyond them, or somehow connected to them. Seeing a pattern is not the only element in this, but it's a key element.

Some patterns are inherent. They are obvious, meaningful, and relevant. Other apparent patterns are not. They're just assemblages of stuff that look to us like a pattern, but aren't. Humans have a tough time distinguishing the difference

between those two — real patterns and apparent patterns. And if we can't see any pattern at all, our brains will work overtime to create one, even if that requires fudging the data or lying to ourselves about what we see.

One way or another, though, human beings will come up with some pattern that "explains" to us what's happening and why. We seem to need that in some very essential way.

Humans are also overly fond of the dubious idea and seriously questionable assumption that damn near everything that happens was caused intentionally by someone. The fact that a given occurrence may have been an unintentional outcome or an unwanted by-product of other events doesn't satisfy us. We want to know: *Who did this?* And so, we come up with conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories presume that someone (although more often a cabal of conspirators rather than a single person) who wants to remain hidden is operating from behind the scenes, setting up nefarious chains of events that lead to a nasty but wholly intentional outcome that benefits the conspirators but harms others.

Some conspiracy theories are completely true. Others are partially true. Many are not true at all, but even the conspiracy theories that are utterly whacko-batshit-crazy (and there are many of those) tend to contain at least some elements of truth, even if only a sliver, that influence the narrative, however bizarre that narrative ends up.

The problem, of course, is that we're not very good at distinguishing the real conspiracies from the fake ones. I think it's probably safe to say that we're not good at this at all. In fact, we're lousy at it. Once we've gone down the rabbit hole with a given conspiracy theory and started to believe it, whether or not it's true matters very little. Even if a particular conspiracy theory is accurate and correct, most of us have no power to neutralize or correct whatever went wrong. All we have is resentment, fear, and sometimes hatred for those we imagine to have been responsible, and thus to blame.

The result (one among many) is that the world — in particular, America — has become a more dangerous place, where madness has spread throughout the culture like a toxic pyroclastic cloud from a volcanic eruption (that material, a mix of hot gas and volcanic ash, is called *tephra*, by the way). This is most apparent in the techno-realm of virtual, on-line experience dominated by the screens of the various devices — our smart phones, tablets, notebooks, desktops, and flat-screen televisions — that we use to access a never-ending stream of audio and video "content" to which so many of us have become addicted.

Henry David Thoreau, the 19th-century American Transcendentalist who wrote the book *Walden*, promoted a simple life connected to the natural world. Were

Thoreau alive today, I'm pretty sure he wouldn't approve of our dependence on screens. Hell, it's hard to imagine that he would be a fan of virtual reality in any technological form.

What I'm coming around to suggesting here is a little disturbing even to me. It's that the quest for meaning, so often linked to inner spirituality and a thoughtful, examined life, just might have some downsides worth considering. The downside I'm thinking about in this commentary is illusory, self-deceptive meanings arrived at through incorrect recognition of patterns that tends to occur in either or both of two ways: First, by seeing an existing pattern but misinterpreting its implications, and second, by believing that a pattern exists where none actually does.

I see both of these "mistakes" running rampant through the current American population like wildfire, or, to use an equally scary metaphor, like a viral pandemic. Too many of us have apparently lost our minds. We seem to believe with shocking certainty that fictions are real. Well, they're not, and no amount of social media "Likes," "Re-Tweets," or "Views" will make them true. Being popular and celebrated with millions of followers won't either. The same applies to authoritative and institutional narratives about most everything. We can't tell what's true and what's not. Meaning based on lies and falsehoods is just plain bad for us and bad for the world.

I understand that ignorance is unpleasant for humans. Uncertainty and ambivalence are uncomfortable. We want to know, or feel that we know, what's happening and why. Too often, though, our need for clear meaning pushes us to embrace and believe stuff that is probably not true. Sometimes, what we believe is downright crazy, outrageous, and gonzo.

Perhaps a wiser and more mature strategy would be to allow meaning to come to us in its own time and its own ways, rather than our aggressively searching for it, then clinging too tightly to whatever we think we've found.

Lord knows, mistaking illusion for reality and fictions for truths is not just a recent phenomenon or a new problem, but both errors in judgment have reached a level of mass infection that threatens our future.

Once again, as is so often the case with my commentaries, I've called attention to a negative condition for which I don't have a solution. I wish I did, but I don't. Perhaps someone smarter and wiser than I can come up with something that will help get us back on track. Right now, though, the restoration of our sanity appears to be nowhere in sight and definitely not close at hand. Looks to me like things will have to fall apart or break down much more severely before we'll have even the chance to rebuild society and civilization in a healthier way.