

Letter to Lucy

Dear Lucy:

I think it's safe to say that almost every sane person in the world deplors the assassination attempts that have taken place in the United States and in other countries in late years, whether or not successful. Of course, all Americans have recently seen the disturbing and pitiful attempt on the life of the President perpetrated by a young man who suffers from an inadequate self-image, who identified with fictional characters in a motion picture, and who had sexual longings for the young woman in the movie.

His is a sick mind, is it not? It seems to me that's an easy dismissal of the problem, for now there has occurred the arrest of another young men who also planned an assassination attempt and who also professes a "love" for the young actress who attracted John Hinckley, Jr.

A classic demonstration in psychology courses shows how easy it is to warp the minds of presumably rational people. Picture a psychology classroom in high school or college. The professor says he wishes to demonstrate to the class the effects of odors on groups of people. But first, he wants to demonstrate how odors travel through a room.

He closes all doors and windows and asks all the students to reduce rapid movements which would stir up random air currents. Indicating a glass-stoppered bottle on his desk, and with stop-watch in hand, he explains he proposes to uncork the bottle, start the stop-watch, and, as the odor slowly permeates the classroom, he wants each student to raise his or her hand as the odor is perceived. He will then check off the location on the seating chart before him and note the time. He tells the class that those students seated near him may, if the odor becomes offensive, leave the room.

Donning surgical mask and goggles, he uncorks the bottle, holds his head aside, and starts the stop-watch. Soon hands begin to rise. The professor notes the seat number and time. More hands go into the air. A student appears to become ill and, retching, rushes for the door.

Surprisingly, some students sitting within a few yards of the open bottle have not yet raised their hands. At this point, the professor stops the experiment, corks the bottle, takes off his mask, and opens the windows. He then announces that the bottle contains water and that the experiment is designed to demonstrate the power of suggestion.

This experiment has been conducted many times with identical results. And what does it prove? Certainly it shows that a large percentage of the population is very suggestible. It explains mob violence and the influence of certain unorthodox religious sects over adherents.

Take a step backward to put this in perspective. Peel another layer off the onion. Ask yourself why, from an evolutionary point of view, in man's development as strained through the sieve of survival of the fittest, sustaining or even multiplying his survival over tens of thousands of years, these traits of suggestibility and self-delusion persist.

These are the very traits which motivated the attempt on the President's life. This young fool, along with his more-recently arrested counterpart, identified with fictional characters they saw in a movie. They sat in a theatre and watched an image projected on a screen; it appeared "real" to them. The young actress, portrayed as a prostitute, became the object of their sexual phantasies! They became completely divorced from reality. Consider "Jonestown"-- that sickening demonstration of mass suicide.

Why should this trait persist over thousands of years of evolution? One would think it would have been bred out of the human race long ago by natural selection. But, obviously, it hasn't been. Obviously, it helps to be a little bit crazy. If it didn't, there simply wouldn't be as many freaks around.

Looking at it objectively, it appears that in the struggle for human existence, the capacity to approach a problem involving large numbers of competing humans who are easily influenced and suggestible, and who will thrust aside rational behavior in favor of an irrational and frequently self-destructive response, contributes to human survival.

Consider war. Consider religious wars. Consider irrational behavior in Northern Ireland. Consider the bloody squabbles among Semitic tribes in Palestine. Consider the "red menace." I can clearly remember when the "Bad Guys" were the Germans, the Italians, and the Japanese. Switching suggestible people on or off is easy! And necessary to rulers, leaders, and authority figures of all kinds.

It seems irrational behavior may have its place. It's hard to argue with the obvious in nature. Maybe we should be sure that John Hinckley, Jr., makes a contribution to the sperm bank before he is totally isolated from society. He really may have something of value to offer! Human survival may be at stake!

If we disagree with this analysis, and if we wish to limit the frequency of these "aberrant" symptoms of behavior, where should we start?

The place to start is among those institutionalized organizations which encourage irrational behavior. Those are the ones that bend their energies toward establishing the credibility of fantasy. To list a few: Disney World, sports, television, movies, PEOPLE Magazine, consumer credit, federal reserve notes (dollar bills), political bodies from the top down, and even religious organizations.

Karl Marx wrote, "Religion is the opiate of the people." If he were writing today, he would probably expand his list to include sports, television, movies, radio, and political punditry. Thomas Huxley wrote, "Irrationally held truths may be more harmful than reasoned errors."

From Longfellow,

"...the divine insanity of noble minds
that never falters nor abates,
but labors and endures and waits,
till all that it foresees it finds,
or, what it cannot find, creates..."

Aristotle wrote, "No excellent soul is exempt from a mixture of madness." Horace said, "I teach that all men are mad." From Nietzsche: "Insanity in individuals is something rare-- but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule." And from Taine: "Insanity is not a distinct and separate empire; our ordinary life borders upon it, and we cross the frontier in some part of our nature."

Can all these great minds have been wrong? Call it insanity, call it madness, call it irrationality, call it suggestibility. Call it what you will, but know it's been part and parcel of mankind since the species evolved. Recognizing and accepting the fact helps to make life bearable.

Love,
OLIVER