

NORMALCY BIAS AND DISASTERS

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“The average American: Nothing that bad has ever happened to America before, therefore nothing will. In fact, we are above every other country. We are so powerful via our dollar and military that we can't ever really be defeated. So don't tell me anything to the contrary (no matter how much factual information you provide) because I won't believe it...in fact, I won't even listen.”

-Guest 62318
Lunaticoputpost.com

Recently I received an article by mathematician and economist Eric Weinstein entitled Kayfabe. Weinstein suggests that “The sophisticated scientific concept with the greatest potential to enhance human understanding may be argued to come not from the halls of academe, but rather from the unlikely research environment of professional wrestling.”

Long ago the promoters of professional wrestling realized that real wrestling would seriously injure if not kill the participants so they developed the illusion of wrestling. Nonetheless, today's wrestlers are athletes and still get injured. But, it is not wrestling, it is show business.

Kayfabe is defined as “The portrayal of events within the industry as real; the portrayal of professional wrestling and the accompanying storylines as not staged or worked.”

For Weinstein, “What makes Kayfabe remarkable is that it gives us potentially the most complete example of the general process by which a wide class of important endeavors transition from failed reality to successful fakery.”

What is real, what is not real, what is assumed and what did not happen are all great illusions of magicians, artists, and those looking to rip you off. Advertisers, marketing consultants, politicians and sales representatives are no stranger to the concept of deception, playing on emotion and using sleight of hand.

Remember the scene in the 1939 classic “Wizard of Oz” when Dorothy and her triumphant entourage return to the wizard with the witch's broom as Toto disrupts his charade? “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain,” the wizard yells as flame and smoke fill the room terrorizing the heroes of the Land of Oz.

The 1987 film “Tin Men” told a story about two rival aluminum siding salesmen who practiced various tricks of the trade to close a sale. Their best trick was the five dollar scam that involved

dropping a five dollar bill on the floor when the potential buyer was not looking only to recover it and offer it back under the presumption that it was his in the first place. It built trust between the salesman and the pending victim.

Aluminum siding, driveway and roof repairs and unnecessary vehicle service are just a few of the running scams that capture millions of people a year. Sophisticated people are not immune. Most any day you choose you can read about investment, real estate and banking scams as well as embezzlement and fraud.

The basic law of common sense remains the same: If it is too good to be true, it is. Do we see the five dollar scams in our day to day lives? Remember, nothing is free and someone has to pay.

Most of the scams and misinformation in today's world would not work if it were not for the fact that humans have short memories and poor situational awareness. Most people are not paying any attention whatsoever to what is going on around them. The noise level, lack of candor in our society only compounds the problem. Who can you believe anymore?

On the other hand, how much do people want to know? In my past article *We Are Broke*, I referred to the movie "A Few Good Men". Colonel Jessep, played by Jack Nicholson, yells across the courtroom "You can't handle the truth!" Indeed we can't. Denial is the status of the day.

This brings us to the concept of Normalcy Bias, or, "It can't happen to me." Normalcy Bias is the premise that in general people do not think something bad will happen to them. This attitude exists even when there is profound and overwhelming evidence to the contrary such as a war, wind-driven wildfire or not making enough money to cover your expenses.

Put another way, we have become profoundly proficient at lying to ourselves. We have become too comfortable and as a result complacent. We tell ourselves nothing has happened so nothing will happen – thus Normalcy Bias.

You may recall my article *It Can't Happen to Me* where I reported the adventures of Ventura resident and school teacher Judy Dobbins. She learned about Normalcy Bias first hand as an American Red Cross shelter volunteer in New Jersey following Hurricane Sandy.

Despite the advance warnings from the weather service and emergency managers throughout the east coast, thousands of people failed to evacuate. Judy said that most of the storm victims she interacted with were unprepared for the hurricane, failed to evacuate when ordered to do so and were woefully unprepared for shelter life. The obvious question is why?

From Dobbins perspective, the prevailing attitude of evacuees was “This just couldn’t happen...they refused to evacuate. It doesn’t happen to me. This does not happen in New Jersey.” Needless to say, it can, it will and it did.

Blogger John Wesley Smith recently addressed the issue in his article *A Psychologist Talks About Normalcy Bias and Situational Awareness (Why Don’t People Prep?)*. He refers to Normalcy Bias “as analysis paralysis, incredulity response or the ostrich effect.”

Most people fail to engage, are not paying attention to what is occurring around them or are just too apathetic. Regardless, history is stuffed with evidence of what happens to those who fail to take heed of what is occurring around them. Yet others just refuse to accept the truth.

Do you see Kayfabe in any of this discussion? Tell people what they want to hear or confirm what they already think and everything will be all right. If that doesn’t work, confuse them. This certainly appears to be the modus operandi of the day.

Despite the long history of wildfires on the Santa Barbara South Coast many residents still ignore preparation and fail to leave when advised to do so by experienced people who do know what is happening or could happen.

One would think the Gap Fire would have scared folks into reality having come so soon behind the Zaca Fire that threatened the entire city. Yet, the Tea and Jesusita Fires came shortly after with devastating results.

One does not have to look at weather, fire and earthquakes as the only potential disasters that we tend to ignore. For example, the January 2012 report from the United States Senate Committee on Finance, State and Local Government, *Defined Benefit Pension Plans: The Pension Debt Crisis that Threatens America* by ranking member Senator Orrin Hatch should be required reading by everyone, particularly if you are a public employee.

In accounting, the numbers don’t lie, people do and Hatch’s report should give all of us pause, but it hasn’t. Keep in mind that this is not a classified document or otherwise restricted. It is on the Internet for all to see. Imagine what is not available to the public.

Former president Harry Truman once said, “The only thing new in this world is the history you don’t know” and history has no shortages of examples of economic disasters. The current events in Europe have impacted millions of people. Here in the United States significant municipal bankruptcies have already commenced.

Not everyone is on a destructive path of over-spending and committing to obligations they cannot possibly keep. Clearly, there are state and local governments who are on firm footing.

Nonetheless, who would have thought such large cities as Detroit, San Bernardino and Stockton could go bankrupt?

Have you become a victim to Normalcy Bias? Are you one who assume everything is fine and nothing adverse will happen to you or 'it can't happen to me'? Are you one who hopes that anything bad will just go away? Are you ignoring the world around you because it is so negative, violent or depressing, thinking that if you don't know it doesn't matter? Do you assume that someone will be there to take care of you in your hour of need? These are uncomfortable yet serious questions that we must all ask ourselves because ignoring reality is not a solution.