“Texas Sharpshooters and Hitting the Side of a Barn”

INTRODUCTION

The Texas Sharpshooter fallacy is named for an anecdote about a bragging Texan who practiced his mediocre marksmanship at his barn, then drew a bullseye around the area where most of the shots hit.

The fallacy addresses the propensity of people to see meaningful patterns where none exist.

The so-called Bermuda Triangle is a famous example—the area in the triangle between Bermuda, Puerto Rico, and south Florida. Countless articles, movies, and television programs have addressed mysteries disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle.

But an examination of the evidence shows that the various reported wrecks and disappearances are no greater there than anywhere else with a similar volume of air and water traffic.

By marking off a triangle and studying what happens inside it, people have created a pattern that doesn’t actually exist.

In the case of Texas Sharpshooter fallacy, differences in data get ignored, but similarities are stressed.

Don’t people who have illegally entered the US continue their illegal ways and commit crimes? Well . . . the numbers say they don’t.

The human mind is a pattern-recognizing machine, but it also is a pattern-*creating* machine.

The challenge is to recognize our brain’s propensity to create patterns and watch out for fallacious conclusions, whether we are making them ourselves or some conspiracy theorist is making them for us.

Whether all is lost or not depends upon you not being lost.

ONE

Ever the amateur historian, I must admit that I got the last US presidential election cycle completely wrong. History didn't reveal much about what was occurring. It was the essence of that overused word "unprecedented."

Partly based on my recent failures in prediction, I've been thinking about another aspect of history, what's long been called the Great Man Theory. It was the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle who named Great Man Theory when he wrote, "The history of the world is but the biography of great men."

Needless to say, there have long been cults around leaders. Poems, histories, oral tradition—the praise of one leader or another appears to be as old as humanity itself, and the fact that the leaders praised are mostly male points out the distortions of patriarchy.

But is the theory even true? The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, who had experienced the chaos of war as a young man, was incredulous concerning the Great Man Theory and decided to dismantle it by looking at the age of Napoleon. Tolstoy wrote his super-long novel *War and Peace* in part to disprove the theory by showing just how complex and confused the invasion of Russia by the French army had been. Tolstoy stuffed his novel with nearly 600 characters.

Tolstoy's message is clear: Napoleon didn't do it all.

One example Tolstoy used was the Battle of Borodino, fought in 1812 during the French invasion of Russia. A quarter of a million soldiers fought in the battle and seventy-thousand of them were casualties. The French army won the day but was so depleted and exhausted that pursuit of the retreating Russians was impossible.

This fact meant that the Russian army remained intact and therefore the Russians did not surrender, though they did retreat from and burn Moscow. This led to disaster for the French army in a devastating retreat during a Russian winter.

Tolstoy wrote,

> . . . it was not Napoleon who directed the course of the battle, for none of his orders were executed and during the battle he did not know what was going on before him. So the way in which these people killed one another was not decided by Napoleon's will but occurred independently of him, in accord with the will of hundreds of thousands of people who took part in the common action. It only seemed to Napoleon that it all took place by his will . . .

The decisive battle for the fate of Russia; the decisive battle for the fate of the French empire, and no one was in charge.

History drew the bullseye later.

Would there have been a Second World War without an Adolf Hitler? Think of the list of "great" leaders from that time period: Tojo in Japan; Chiang Kai-Shek and Mao in China; Mussolini, Tito, Franco, Stalin, de Gaulle, Churchill, Roosevelt . . . . Did so many great leaders really emerge during the horror of the Second World War . . . or did the *need* for leaders *to be great* create the atmosphere in which they were assumed to be great by the people? Without the war, would most of them be forgotten bureaucrats today?

In a similar vein, we ask successful CEOs—people who make a lot of money, who get asked to fill Cabinet positions—"how did you get so successful?" "What's your secret?"

But did they create the success, or did the success create them?

We look at the person, clustering a pattern of their behaviors that appear to have led to success, but do we compare them to the *un*successful, where we might perhaps find a very similar pattern?

Did Trump create the Age of Trump or did the age create Trump?

The difference matters.

TWO

If there's one thing that most people think of when they hear the word "Unitarian," it's something about thinking a lot. That's still the cliche. Reason. It's an old cliche, but reason has been the defining characteristic of Unitarianism.

Reason was the wedge issue among Congregationalist ministers in the eighteenth century. Unitarians just couldn't square the concept of the Trinity with logic. The dogma didn't make sense; they weren't about to take something on faith alone; and so they rejected the age-old concept of the Trinity.

Later, in the nineteenth century, miracles came under fire: how could miracles happen in the material world as we understand it? Many Unitarians rejected miracles.

And on it went. Textual criticism proved that the bible wasn't infallible. And, in the early twentieth century, some Unitarian ministers, such as John Dietrich, began to wonder if the Western notion of God made logical sense.

Soon, the entire idea of what religion means came in for questioning.

All along the way, there have been congregations of people who have required that what they profess square as well as possible with the known facts. As the old saying goes, we Unitarians don't leave our brains at the church door.

In this way Unitarianism and Humanism are countercultural. American culture has always been irrational, running off into witch-hunts and crazes and religious revivals. We live in a nation of feeling; of emotion. A nation in which, if you feel it, it must be true.

Nowhere is this way of thinking more reinforced than in the case of religion. Yet it's not that Unitarians don't "do what the Spirit says do," as the song goes; it's just that we know that "Spirit" is a construct of the human mind to explain a particular set of emotions.

All along the way, Unitarians have agreed with Vaclav Havel:

> Whether all is really lost
> or not depends entirely on
> whether or not I am lost.

As inheritors of this tradition of reason, we UUs and Humanists must say this plainly: There are no alternative facts, and there are no alternative truths.

There are no alternative facts. There are alternative *theories* when we don't know the facts. There are alternative ways of looking at interpreting the facts. But there are no alternative facts.

I say this as someone who is not scientifically trained. I'm a poet. But I know that artists must live with facts just like everyone else. Frankly, I don't want to fly in a plane designed by poets!

The word "fact" derives from the Latin word *factum*, meaning a deed. Something that's been done.

"Truth," on the other hand, is something that's solid. The word derives from Old English and goes back to the word *dru*—it meant "tree." Something very solid. (It's where the word *druid* comes from.)

A fact is something that has been done, and a truth is something solid that you can point to. A subjective feeling can't be that. None of us gets to draw the bull's eye after we've done the shooting.

Facts and truths are tangible and communal.

The word “theory,” on the other hand, derives from Greek, *theoria*, and that means speculation—as in spectacle—something you look at but you don’t necessarily know what you’re looking at. (In science “theory” is defined a bit differently.)

But one thing you have to be sure about is if you’re looking at the work of a sharpshooter or the work of someone who has managed to hit the side of a barn and filled in the blanks later.

Only reason can tell the difference.

One way to look at it is that you can feel a fact, but you can’t feel a fact into non-existence. To take a simple example, say you run over a squirrel when you’re out driving. You can feel the fact—you really, really wish you hadn’t killed that squirrel. But no matter how much regret you feel, you can’t un-kill the squirrel. The fact remains that the squirrel is dead.

This is what many people can’t understand about creation science—it may hurt that there isn’t a reasoning god who made the earth and all its animals. But no matter how much that hurts, it doesn’t unmake the fact that the living things on this planet evolved.

THREE

Yes, but what can we do to change our age of post-truth? Isn’t the horse is out of the barn at this point? We live in a post-fact nation.

One thing we can do is stand up for reason, critical thinking, and those poor little facts and truths. We can take on the difficult task of changing the way our neighbors think. We can take on the historic role of Unitarians and not be lost. Now, as always, the most radical thing a human being can do is think.

How do we change an age? First, change itself illustrates the answer. There are two models for how people change from one way of thinking to another. The common one is:

see
feel
change

That’s the easy way. You see a fact; you feel it; you change. It’s easy and it works. It’s “thinking fast.” It’s intuitive. Everybody does it.

But the problem is this sort of change implies two things: First, what if someone sees it on TV? Is it real?

Secondly, what if the person never sees what needs to the changed; and so the person never feels what needs to be changed.

Injustice? If you don't see it, you don't feel it, so you don't have any interest in changing it.

Racism? If you don't see it, you don't feel it, so you don't have any interest in changing it.

Poverty. War. Climate change. The list goes on. If I live in certain communities and watch certain media, I see certain things and don't see others.

Seeing and feeling go only so far.

Here's an example: the reason it took so long to ban the poisonous substance DDT is that people could literally eat the stuff and not die. Not immediately, anyway. DDT had a cumulative effect. There was no way to see, feel, and change. It took reason.

Asbestos is another good example.

That's why reason is important—it saves us from the see, feel, change cycle. The way reason works is different:

analyze
think
change

That's "thinking slow." That's thinking that people can do together.

CONCLUSION

Do great people make their time, or do times create opportunities for certain types of people? I don't know. It's probably a little of both. But I think I know why Tolstoy resisted the "great man theory."

Tolstoy believed that the individual decisions at the Battle of Bordino added up to a great slaughter, but each individual could have made another sort of decision . . .

Tolstoy is insisting that individual conscience can make a difference in turning a wholesale evil into a collective good. The answer is not individual-ism but individual conscience. An reasoning individual who is not lost. Who is not chasing after the fads and icons of the age.

Sure, I know: reason can punch a hole in Tolstoy's thinking. But that's the beauty of reason: ideas can go crowd surfing. Squee!

Tolstoy felt adamant on the point because he found hope there; hope that the mass of individuals that make up human history will someday, by collective action, make humanity more humane. A pacifist himself, Tolstoy hoped that individual conscience could aggregate into peace for humanity.

Not individual-ism but individual conscience.

It's a subtle difference, but it's an important difference. Tolstoy wrote this about the American President Abraham Lincoln:

> He was bigger than his country—bigger than all the presidents together. Why? Because he loved his enemies as himself and because he was a universal individualist who wanted to see himself in the world—not the world in himself.

Tolstoy is saying that Lincoln was not "a great man but a universal individual . . . because he understood himself as part of a larger whole. As Vaclav Havel put it:

> I suddenly discover,
> to my surprise, that
> I am neither the only one,
> nor the first,
> nor the most important one
> to have set out
> upon that road.

Tolstoy saw in Lincoln an individual who was not lost. An individual who knew the difference between a fact and an opinion. An individual who didn't create patterns where there are none. An individual who knew the power of individual conscience—and the power of a group of people together who refuse to be fooled, and who refuse to be lost.

That is what *this* age calls us to do.