“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear...” ~ H.P. Lovecraft

Our interest for self-preservation needs no introduction or explanation. Without mankind’s propensity and efficiency for self-preservation, we would be yet one more fossil set for some future intelligent species to chip their shovels upon.

Yet, like so many aspects of life, too much of a good thing becomes a bad thing. When we become slaves to a self-preservation instinct, we miss out on the beautiful vastness and diversity that composes the entirety of our world. Not to mention we get stuck in constant emergency response mode and never move into the realm of unimpeded potential.

This instinct alone would not be nearly so detrimental to the forward progress of our species if there were not those who would gladly exploit it for personal gain. Sadly, this is not the case. In fact, it seems like a play against our self-preservation tendency is buried in the very core of just about every institution we find. The education system, prison system, financial system, religion, and even many traditional family structures have found ways of exploiting fear to the benefit of the system and detriment to the individual. The U.S. Military thrives on the notion that there are “terrorists” lurking around every corner. Politicians have convinced us that they are the final bastion of our well-being and that without our beloved representative republic, we would careen
into the abyss. Or worse, Anarchy.

And the biggest perpetrator of all is the omnipresent mass media which serves as a larger-than-life, real-time conduit for nationwide fear mongering. Now primarily in the hands of six oligarchical corporations, finding fair and balanced reporting of current events is becoming increasingly difficult. It is important to understand that this is nothing more than an extension of our human self-preservation instinct on the corporate level. Corporations are beholden to their investors to put profit as chief amongst its priorities. And maximized profits require maximized viewing by a maximized audience.

Media’s hunger to appeal to the immediacy of an emotional response makes sense given their need for viewership. But there is something much more sinister just beneath the skin of this issue. The seeming fondness of corporate and governmental structures to promote those things which elicit a response of fear has a built-in converse response: it elevates the harbinger of bad news to the “protector” status. Whether leading us to the safe haven of the local police force, the military or government, this parlor trick plays to the self-preservation instinct that promotes affiliations in which our survival probabilities are perceived to be highest.

Compounding the problem is our brain’s predisposition to emergency response. When encountering fear-inducing information, our natural tendency is to firstly ensure we are out of the realm of threat. Only after we become satisfied that this is the case, can we call to question the legitimacy of the threat. That is, it is against our instinct to critically analyze data that we perceive as threatening to our survival. When presented with an endless sequence of threatening scenarios, we seldom have time to revisit the individual threats after the fact to verify the validity and specifics.

For evidence of this, one need look no further than the Iraq war, initiated on false pretenses and now widely demonstrated as unfounded [2]. And still the memory of Saddam Hussein remains one of the most predominant specters of recent American memory. Critical analysis of the facts now that the dust has settled would place responsibility for the more than 4,000 American casualties [3] much closer to home.

The cumulative effect of this play against our survival instinct results in a pessimistic populous scared of our neighbors, on an emotional razor’s edge and too distracted to realize the abundant good that surrounds us. Given enough reinforcement, we become so disempowered that we cling to any sense of security. We relish the common and become creatures of habit. We learn to love the system that can clearly be demonstrated as the cause of most of the problems we fear and rely upon it as the champion of our safety.

Modern psychology has a name for this condition: Stockholm Syndrome. Like many of the more recent psychological conditions, definitions vary from source to source. Nurturingpotential.net describes Stockholm Syndrome [4] as:

“a psychological state in which the victims of a kidnapping, or persons detained against their free will, develop an emotional attachment, a bond of interdependence with their captors. This is enhanced when the captive is placed in a life-threatening situation and is then spared. The relief that results from the removal of the threat generates intense feelings of gratitude
which, combined with the fear, makes the victim reluctant subsequently to cooperate with those seeking to prosecute the oppressor.

There are a number of points worth noting in this description.

First, the concept of interdependence. Not only do we commonly fail to see the oppressive nature presented by the current socioeconomic system that causes many of the wrongs in the world today, we actually rely on that very same system to be a means to an end. Structural Classism [5] is a fancy way of saying the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and that this societal fact is a direct cause of the core economic operating structure of the United States. And yet the American Dream remains—the notion that, despite this fatal structural flaw, with enough elbow grease and ingenuity we can leap the class gap and become a member of the elusive elite.

Second, the emotional roller coaster of near catastrophe situations from which we are “spared” on a near daily basis. A good recent example was the "Fiscal Cliff" fiasco [6] at the turn of the year: government created an artificial problem and then applaud itself for “solving” the problem after a two week terror spree of flare-shooting and doom-saying by mass media.

Third, the tendency to view those working against the oppressor as harmful to the state of one’s own well-being even though it’s not explicitly evident. A number of groups from Wikileaks to Anonymous to the Muslim Brotherhood have been publicly demonized and are recognized by many as harmful to the well-being of Americans, despite the fact that these organizations, if left to their own devices, would be little real cause for concern.

There are a number of parallels between the current state of American mindset and a clinical diagnosis of Stockholm Syndrome. What varies is the treatment.

No antidepressant on the market will divorce us from the love affair we’ve established with a political system that doesn’t represent its constituencies, corporations that would sell us out in a heartbeat if it was profitable to do so, or a mass media that keeps us ever on the defensive and tuned in for the next story.

This is where the real, long-term harm comes to the detriment of future generations. When these entities profit off our primitive survival reflexes, they are inadvertently preventing the further evolution of the species. When we are constantly on the fence between fight or flight, we are perpetually stuck in the now, with little energy left to design a better future. If more focus were put on reporting the truth of today—that we are safer than ever [7] and have the means for an equitable and truly sustainable society—perhaps we would come out of hiding and join together to solve some of the big problems that have been keeping us from taking the next step in our evolutionary process: a step towards abundance and peace.

The sad reality is that, until the collective conscience becomes able to temper the effects of the self-preservation instinct, that guttural, fear-based response system is going to continue to be exploited for profit. We must begin to see the system for what it truly is: a captor whose interest has little to do with the best interests of the greater population and everything to do with using our mental reflexes against us for better returns. We must divorce ourselves from the abusive marriages with those who would have us falsely believe they are acting to safeguard our tomorrow.

Fortunately, the means of minimizing the propaganda we subject ourselves to has never been
more available. We are the controllers of our information intake. Turn off the mainstream media and tune into the ever increasing presence of alternative media sources and the return of true investigative journalism. Become a part of the rising voice of the unheard by joining local justice, truth, and sustainability movements in your area. Use the Internet as the boundless source of data that it is and research the facts. And above all else, teach your children the powers of critical thinking and do not let them fall prey to the fear-based mechanism of mind control. Give them the tools they need to recognize the signs of politically-motivated psychological manipulation and give them the weapons required to secure their own liberation.

It has never been more important to the future of humanity to wake up to the game being played against us and get ahead of our reflexive instincts to progress the species. It will take a conscious effort to bypass our hereditary hard wiring, but, should we prevail, a new era of freedom is waiting, just beyond these chains.

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