

Mindlessness Fuels Tyranny



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It's no surprise that Dr. Anthony Fauci, with a vested interest in perpetuating the current Covid-19 narrative, has called the [Great Barrington Declaration](#) "nonsense and very dangerous." Just as angry and closed-minded are the social media reactions from some ordinary people.

We will lose many lives, they warn, if we give credence to the Declaration. The fearful are sure only they, not the signers of the Declaration, care about the lives of others.

As [Don Boudreaux writes](#), "Much of humanity today appears to perversely enjoy being duped into the irrational fear that any one of us, regardless of age or health, is at the mercy of a brutal beast categorically more lethal than is any other danger that we've ever confronted."

Those reacting against the Declaration seem to be stuck in time, living in March 2020 when ignorance of the virus's virulence was peaking. There is so much more we now know about Covid-19, yet the fearful will not consider new information or alternative theories.

The Covid-19 Context Has Changed

In Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's parable *The Little Prince*, the prince meets a lamplighter who is continuously lighting and putting out the streetlamp.

The prince asks, "Why have you just put out your lamp?" The lamplighter replies, "These are the instructions," and then, "he lighted his lamp again."

A few more rounds of lighting and putting out the lamp go on. "I do not understand," said the puzzled prince.

"'There is nothing to understand,' said the lamplighter. 'Instructions are instructions.'"

Then the lamplighter explained his dilemma to the prince. Once, he had a "reasonable" job lighting the lamp in the morning and putting it out in the evening. but then the planet "turned more rapidly and the orders have not changed."

As the length of the day changed, the context of a lamplighter's job changed, yet the lamplighter's instructions did not.

Famed Harvard psychology professor Ellen Langer, in her book *Mindfulness* writes, "A context is a premature cognitive commitment, a mindset." We think we know, and we miss a lot. Langer continues, "Context depends on who we are today, who we were yesterday, and from which view we see things."

If we see the world as something to be controlled by big government, it was natural to applaud the March lockdowns.

Initially, many of those skeptical of big government solutions were also frightened by Covid-19, and then a new context emerged. We know now that Covid-19 death rates are much lower than feared and policies placing Covid-19 patients in nursing homes fueled many deaths. We now know that lockdowns are "overly blunt and costly." We know now "that children infrequently

transmit Covid-19 to each other or to adults.” We know now that we successfully reacted differently to past pandemics.

We know now, as Matt Ridley writes, “the virus spreading among younger people, mostly without hitting the vulnerable, is creating immunity that will eventually slow the epidemic.” Ridley continues,

“If you cannot extinguish an epidemic at the start, the best strategy is for the healthy to get infected first. Lockdowns ensure that the vulnerable and the healthy both get infected with similar probability. School closures, concluded a recent paper in the *British Medical Journal*, can paradoxically lead to more deaths by prioritising the protection of the least vulnerable.”

Then, why did so many governments adopt the same destructive policies about Covid-19? Why are those same governments refusing to adjust? Fear drives herding behavior, Jeffrey Tucker points out, and leads to political leaders copying each other’s “ignorance and stupor.” Politicians “don’t want to be seen as reversing course on the most catastrophic policies in modern history.”

But enough about politicians who behave like the lamplighter and won’t change even when the context has. A more important question to consider is why won’t your well-meaning neighbor, family member, or colleague consider new information?

Understanding Mindlessness

Mindfulness training is fashionable in personal development. Mindfulness “is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally,” says Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn.

If mindfulness is being present to reality, what is mindlessness?

Mindlessness is filtering reality through mental biases. Mindlessness is attending to the transitory noisy thoughts in your head without pausing for a reality check.

Langer writes, “When mindless, people treat information as though it were context-free – true regardless of circumstances.” To advocate policy towards Covid-19 based on changing circumstances is not to deny the reality of the virus; instead it allows for a more nuanced and responsible response.

Here is a simple test to self-assess mindlessness. When you are certain your anger is righteous, your anxiety is being generated from the world, or a one-size policy fits all, you may have gone mindless.

In a state of mindlessness, one does not take responsibility. Trump is at fault for Covid-19 deaths. Your partner is at fault for your low mood. The other driver is at fault for your anger.

Take the scenario of a driver who is cut off in highway traffic. Anger swells. His heart races. Mindlessly the driver floors his accelerator. He tailgates the offending driver.

In an instant, the angry driver sees what he is doing. He remembers a time he was distracted and accidentally cut off someone. He wonders what distracted the driver he is following.

As the context changes from how dare you cut me off, to a realization of a shared humanity, normalcy returns. Before angry thoughts were placed in a broader context there seemed to be just one option, anger leading to a road-rage conflict. The angry driver had been certain his feelings were caused by the behavior of the other driver, but then he mindfully changed his perspective.

Langer observes that in the grip of mindlessness, "One important way in which we limit our options is to attribute all our troubles to a single cause." Langer continues:

"Such mindless attributions narratively limit the range of solutions we might seek. In research on divorce... people who blame the failure of their marriages on their ex-spouses suffer longer than those people who see many possible explanations for their situation.

Similarly, alcoholics who see the cause of their problem as purely genetic seem to give up the control that could help their recovery."

Importantly, "When we have a single-minded explanation, we typically don't pay attention to information that runs counter to it." We claim our goal is to save lives, but then ignore the hundreds of millions that are pushed into dire poverty and starvation by the Covid-19 policies we advocate. We claim we are more empathetic than others and ignore millions who have lost their businesses and careers.

Why We Want to Be Mindless

Many don't want to hear theories and facts counter to the conventional narrative.

Why don't they want to know? New information would change the context of their personal choices. If they knew, they would have to take responsibility for health decisions for not only themselves but for others. Should I take a Covid-19 vaccine? Should my children? Should I get on an airplane and visit an aging parent? The decisions are endless, and there is no one sure answer.

In her book *Counterclockwise*, Langer writes,

“When faced with a diagnosis and the medical options for a treatment, the patient is caught in a very difficult dilemma. The impulse to surrender our future treatment wholly to the professional hands of medical practitioners is understandable. Leaving the doctors to make all the choices relieves the existential fear of being responsible for a decision that could in the end hurt us. But not to be involved may hurt us more.”

Responsibility and freedom go hand in hand. Life is risky and scary. Some would rather not be free. Better to pretend Dr. Fauci and other media-anointed “experts” know best. If something goes wrong, the experts are to blame.

Importantly, those who want to turn over responsibility to experts often deny the freedom of others to choose. When others make different decisions and stay healthy, they are reminded they have a choice. Since they don't want to know they have a choice, they will insist that government violently force you to follow their way. And to justify their support for coercive actions, they will mindlessly dehumanize those who don't follow the instructions.

Covid-19 policy decisions are impacting the Orthodox Jewish community in NYC. Recently, the governor of New York, [Andrew Cuomo, claimed](#) the fear of his constituents is driving his policy decisions:

“This is not a highly nuanced, sophisticated response. This is a fear-driven response. You know, this is not a policy being written by a scalpel. This is a policy being cut by a hatchet. It's just very blunt. I didn't propose this. It was proposed by the mayor in the city. I am trying to sharpen it and make it better. But it's out of fear. People see the numbers going up — ‘Close everything! Close everything!’”

Cuomo has a history of [dodging responsibility for his decisions](#), but his claim that he can't adopt a nuanced approach because of fear of New Yorkers has some truth. Tyranny is fed by fear. Fear is fed by a mindless refusal to adopt to changing circumstances.

From Mindlessness to Mindfulness

In her book *The Power of Mindful Learning*, Langer points out how to go beyond living mindlessly on autopilot:

“A mindful approach to any activity has three characteristics: the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective. Mindlessness, in contrast, is characterized by an entrapment in old categories; by automatic behavior that precludes attending to new signals; and by action that operates from a single perspective. Being mindless, colloquially speaking, is like being on automatic pilot.”

Schools, Langer observes, “teach us to be mindless” by teaching “us to seek or accept information as if it were absolute and independent of human creation.”

Resisting the temptation, Langer advises to move quickly from problem to solution by mindlessly drawing on preconstructed categories. The more relevance we give to our preexisting thinking, the less mindful are our actions:

“Rather than moving directly from problem to solution, a person in a mindful state remains open to several ways of viewing the situation. This flexibility allows us to draw on newly available information rather than to rely exclusively on preconstructed categories that tend to overdetermine our behavior. In other words, we have to maintain what some have called intelligent ignorance to make the best of any situation.”

One of the main authors of the Great Barrington Declaration is Harvard's Martin Kulldorff. Dr. Kulldorff [sees beyond either-or categories](#). He doesn't favor doing nothing or general lockdowns. Instead, he says developing a policy of “focused protection” will “drastically reduce mortality.”

“Preconstructed categories” mislead people every day. Over the months, more tests have been administered. Positive Covid-19 test results are reported as cases, even when the individual is not ill. [Daniel Greenfield writes](#), “The daily coronavirus reports have become the equivalent of Soviet harvest reports. They

sound impressive, mean absolutely nothing and are the pet obsession of a bureaucracy that... has no understanding of the problem.”

This fall on college campuses across the country, students and faculty are being tested frequently. As of October 5, 2020, [of 70,000 positive test results](#) on 50 college campuses, there have been three hospitalizations and no deaths. Yet for those with a “premature cognitive commitment” towards evaluating case numbers, rising cases set off alarm and increase fear.

The Great Barrington Declaration demonstrates a willingness to consider new information and broaden the context for setting policy. Those who want to sell us centralized “hatchet” solutions prefer a public lulled to mindlessness by one narrative. The mindless will follow instructions. If many people continue to look towards one perspective only, without broadening the context, the natural consequence is that experts and politicians on “automatic pilot” will lead us further down [the road to tyranny](#).



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