

A Little Paranoia Goes a Long Way (or does it?)

Written by Jack Sparacino
Tuesday, 21 March 2017 12:53



"My husband gave me a necklace. It's fake. I requested fake. Maybe I'm paranoid, but in this day and age, I don't want something around my neck that's worth more than my head." – Rita Rudner

"Success breeds complacency. Complacency breeds failure. Only the paranoid survive." – Andy Grove

We all know people who are at least a little paranoid at times. I'm not talking about clinical manifestations like paranoid personality disorder (think Joseph Stalin or Saddam) or paranoid schizophrenia (Hitler, for example), just your garden variety unfounded fears and worries. Rita Rudner is a comedian, but business icon Grove had a point, too. When I was in graduate school, many of us acted as if the right blend of nervous tension and compulsiveness was probably a good thing. There were just too many roadblocks in our paths, the work too difficult, to take much of anything for granted. So we worried. And worried.

Retirees are stereotypically thought of as beyond all that folderol. 'Hey, you don't need to work anymore, what's the big deal about taking it easy every day?' Well, most people also realize that getting older has its own threats and problems and they don't necessarily dismiss themselves very easily. Financial worries can persist for life along with concerns about one's health, family, the weather, politics, you name it.

The weather was nice last week, I'd just returned home from walking our fearless Yorkies, and

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grabbed the mail on the way into the house. Amidst the usual deck of catalogues, bills and fluff was a letter from the U.S. government. 'Hey, what can they possibly want? I didn't do anything. Haven't even filed our taxes yet!' Further inspection revealed that the letter was from the Network Distribution Center (NDC) in Greensboro, NC. Opening it, I found a mangled portion of a package I'd sent to Connecticut. There was a form for me to complete and mail to the Atlanta Mail Recovery Center regarding an "item found at the Greensboro NDC Rewrap Room."

This country has federal rewrap rooms? Huh. My pulse returning to normal, I went on to read: "Dear Customer, An empty wrapper with your address was found in the mail and is believed to have been separated from a parcel during handling." Rough translation: 'one of our automated mail sorters got hungry and ate your poor package and this scrap with your name and address is all we can find right now. Hope there was nothing valuable in this package since its contents are now buried in a gigantic mountain of stuff from all over the place and No Worries Joe, our 85-year old Rewrap Director, is on extended leave.'

Well, it was only a couple of books I was trying to send to my brother but it could have been a lot worse. Just like everything else in life. But here's the trick, can I somehow process this event so that my heart stays in my chest the next time the government sends me something I didn't ask for? Fat chance, but I'm working on it.

Do you have friends who are almost always fretting about, well, just about everything? You know the type. Soon after leaving for a long planned marvelous vacation, he or she starts worrying about everything in sight or, better yet, out of sight. Did I turn off the water? Tell the post office to hold our mail? Alert neighbors we were going away? Leave a few lights on? Close all the windows and lock the doors? Feed the goldfish?

A little worrying, even a little paranoia, goes a very long way. Show me a highly successful person and I'll show you someone who takes nothing for granted, double or even triple checks every calculation, sweats the details. Not the sort of person you *necessarily* want to relax over a drink with but sure as heck the kind of person you want for an accountant, attorney, physician, termite control guy, your child's minder.

Yeah, I know, we're starting to border on clinical conditions here. After all, one of the criteria for paranoid personality disorder is hypersensitivity, frequently scanning the world for signs of danger or threat and (all too often) ignoring or underappreciating other, e.g., contrary, evidence. 'No, Doris (or Horace), you're not the least bit unattractive or awkward. People tell me all the

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time how beautiful/handsome/cool you are and wish some of it would rub off on them.' For some poor folks, there may seem to be nothing to quiet them down, ease their fears, get them to..... relaaaaaaaaaaaaaax.

Ah, enter modern medicine. And astronomy. Fear not, fearful one, help is on the way! (Well, maybe not in your case, Doris/Horace, you're too weird... wait, just kidding!)

Beginning with medicine. There is a class of drugs known as benzodiazepines, sedatives that are useful in calming one down. They increase the efficiency of GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), the major inhibitory neurotransmitter. Benzodiazepines are useful in treating a wide range of anxiety disorders including panic attacks, insomnia and alcohol withdrawal. Brand names include Xanax, Valium, Ativan, and Librium. Unsurprisingly, they are NOT meant to be used with alcohol, which of course people have used for eons to self-medicate when under stress.

Of course there's stress, *stress* and then there's **STRESS**. When Nazi Germany invaded Russia in 1941,

"... The Russians had lost about two thirds of their industrial facilities. The 1,500 that had survived were ordered—in the Soviet government's most important wartime edict—to pack up and move thousands of miles eastward, out of reach of German panzers [tanks] and Luftwaffe bombers. The enormous undertaking was comparable to moving all the industries of Pittsburgh and Detroit to California, and it was supposed to be accomplished in six months...

For the workers, the journey was a nightmare. Since most passenger trains had been consigned to military traffic, the civilians traveled on freight cars, with as many as 50 people crammed into a boxcar too small to accommodate half that number comfortably. 'At night it was so crowded,' recalled one worker, 'people took turns sleeping, often atop one another.' Even the best facilities were primitive: perhaps a wood burning stove in the corner of the car and a hole chopped in the floor for a latrine." (**WWII**, Time-Life Books History of the Second World War, 1989)

Had benzodiazepines been available back then (they were some twenty years away), it is hard to imagine how much would have been necessary to help offset the incalculable misery.

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Turning to astronomy, scientists have been reporting excitedly on the Trappist-1 system and its planets which not only may well sustain life but are “only” 39 light-years away within a galaxy that spans more than 100,000 light years. Why, it’s just around the corner, Trekkies! For all of us, though, there is potential comfort in knowing that our tiny span on life-crammed Earth can be placed into a nearly incalculable if not unimaginably vast context. It certainly helps put my little letter from the Post Office in perspective. I’m not particularly religious, not yet, but discoveries like Trappist-1 are getting me ever closer. Cosmic Xanax anyone?

A lot closer to home and all its worries and anxieties, we’ve got music. The blues have a special appeal for many, especially when times look difficult. There’s a wonderful young guitarist, Joe Bonamassa, cut right from B.B. King’s legacy. He wrote a song, “This Train,” with James House. To quote a few lines,

□□□□□□□□□□ *My baby don't cry for no one*

□□□□□□□□□□ *My baby she is tough as nails*

□□□□□□□□□□ *My baby likes to walk alone now*

□□□□□□□□□□ *My baby likes to ride the rail.*

Name your panic button, y’all. Prescriptions, scripture, astronomy, how about friends and family. Trains?

What a menu. What a world. It’s enough to make you a little paranoid—when you’re not feeling tough as nails – and just maybe that’s a good thing.