

Who do you trust?

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I am educated in the science of successional ecology, or what happens within a system when something changes. The change can be external or internal. The change can be sudden or slow. A very simple example is what happens to a patch of prairie when a tree grows there. As the tree grows and develops a canopy, the light levels around it are lessened due to the shade. As the shade increases, the plants that grew in the open prairie disappear. When the tree drops its leaves, the nutrient levels in the soil changes. Birds that may have once nested on the ground are replaced by those that nest in the branches of the tree. Even the insect population changes. If the leaf litter is heavy enough, mushrooms will spring up during the rains. The result is that in this one small area, the ecology has changed completely and dramatically.

As an ecologist, I also learned that certain animal behaviours can affect systems. The results can be minor or, in some cases, every bit as dramatic as that seen in the example of the tree in the prairie. In the example of a grass-eating fish, should the preferred grass become scarce, the fish changes its behaviour and grazes on lesser grasses. Some grasses are less well rooted, and the fish takes the roots as well as the leafy parts. Over time, the grasses disappear altogether. The lake is filled with unused nutrients and these promote the growth of algae. The change is complete and irreversible because the algae then shade the bottom of the lake so that new grasses don't have enough light to repopulate it.

Changes such as these also occur in societies. During the course of my career, there are two behavioural changes in our American society that are cause for concern. The first may have begun during the time when we, as children, were taught to fear nuclear war, hiding under our desks and watching the Cuban Missile Crisis unfold. That fear was soon replaced by fear of the Hong Kong Flu, followed shortly by the multiple fears listed in Silent Spring. By the time Aids became a global concern, we were becoming accustomed to fear, but the level of fear kept increasing. During the past two years we have been afraid of everything from a global pandemic to a coin shortage.

If we compare these fears to those held by the pilgrims and pioneers, we see a very different pattern. The first Europeans to come to America abandoned well-established, if intolerable, societies, leaving relatives and many of their belongings behind. They embarked on a three-month trip in a sailing ship with essentially no idea of where they would land. Once there, they had much to fear. There was no health care. There were no jobs unless they created them. They had to build their own homes. But history does not record much actual fear. Instead, it records how these people dealt with their fears and uncertainties. One must, in the name of understanding the changes, ask why.

The second behavioural shift that I have witnessed during my lifetime is one that begins with casual conversation. As a youngster, I often heard people discussing the politics of the day. Jumping ahead, I now hear people arguing the politics of the day. The difference, or change, is in the shift from an intellectual discussion to an often irrational and often belligerent argument. That change precipitated another: avoidance. I estimate that there are more people who simply avoid these discussions to the point of not listening to or watching the news, nor reading the paper.

Taking these two changes together, we now have a population that is underinformed at best, over-zealous, argumentative, and that looks to the government for protection from their fears. Fears of being poor as a senior citizen have been abated by social security. Fear of not being able to afford home insurance have been abated, here in Florida, by a government run insurance company. The list is long and tedious.

And that observation is the key to understanding the question that was asked about how the pioneers dealt with their fears, which truthfully were much better founded than what we fear today. The pioneers, for the most part, had fears, but they weren't paralyzing. The belief in a deity and an afterlife allowed them to reason, rightly or wrongly, that if God didn't save them here on earth, the rewards in heaven would far outweigh the trials on earth.

Mathew wrote, *"Not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent."* Whether or not you subscribe to that belief is irrelevant. What is important is that this is how the pioneers felt and how they dealt with the situation. Today, the inattentiveness of the population to politics has led to a corrupt government and a huge number of government programs designed to protect us from our own failure. Morals and codes of conduct provided by a system of belief in a deity have been replaced by ever increasing volumes of laws and regulations.

And so, it might seem that our society, like the tree in the prairie, has shifted undeniably and irrevocably. God, however, still has a few aces to play. People, those who believe anyway, trust in God. No one trusts the government. The hole card is that the government can't provide an afterlife filled with joy and happiness.

The bottom line is faith. Where is faith better placed? In government or in God?

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