

Chapter 33

The Brain Adapts

“The brain is a wonderful organ. It starts working the moment you get up in the morning and does not stop until you get to work.” —Robert Frost

August 21—Aboard Flight 132 to Athens, Greece, Seat 16G. When we’re seated in an aircraft, why is it that a sharp tilting of the plane, typical of many turns, is not uncomfortable or disturbing? The same degree of tilt, if we were sitting at home, would be traumatic. How is this possible? Does the human body somehow desensitize itself to angle of orientation when we’re flying?

During this flight, I stumbled onto something that fascinated me regarding the way the brain behaves when we fly. Most of our world is perpendicular, where surfaces meet at right angles. The way we respond when this norm is violated sheds light on one of the mysteries of the human brain. It also suggests that “mind over matter” is more than just a cliché.

While this topic may strike you as mundane and insignificant, the implications regarding the way we react to changing circumstances such as stress, joy, and fatigue, may be significant.

The brain does more than just process information that is available. It also formulates assumptions and fills in information that may not be present. It is routine procedure for the brain to recognize a pattern and then extrapolate or project future data based on that pattern. For instance, if you observe a car traveling from left to right in front of you at thirty miles per hour, then close your eyes momentarily, your brain will assume that upon reopening the eyes, the vehicle will be X number of meters to the right of the point where you last saw it. If we hear a person quickly reciting the pattern 2,4,6,10,12,14,18,20, our brain will may assume that the person also said “8” and “16” (or intended to). At the very least, it will often notice the omission. But depending on the speed and clarity of observation in both of these examples, the brain may operate as if the missing information were present.

Chapter 32

Paris: September 11, 2001

“The ultimate value of life depends upon awareness and the power of contemplation rather than upon mere survival.” - Aristotle

At first, the arrivals area at Charles de Gaulle Airport looked just as it had on previous visits. As I arrived from Athens, the weather was warm and sunny, a pleasant-looking afternoon, and as always, I found the calm chimes and voices of the public address system somewhat soothing. The subdued lighting only added to this sensation. Strangely, there weren't nearly as many people rushing around as I expected, but then, prior to this morning, I hadn't been in an airport in four weeks. Maybe I was just out of touch.

In Athens, I'd managed to catch a flight earlier than planned, so I was now arriving more than five hours sooner than expected. My plan was to be in Paris for just two short days, so getting settled in before dinner, instead of around midnight, would give me more time to spend with Elisabeth and her boyfriend.

My vacation in Greece had been absolutely wonderful. For years I'd dreamed of taking a full month off from work and just disappearing to a remote location. Finally I'd made it happen and had relaxed like never before. I'd been away since mid-August and yet, like all good things, this vacation was coming to an end too soon. Now I had just one stop to make before returning to the United States and I was really looking forward to it.

The flight from Athens had been pretty uneventful. An attractive woman had caught my eye in the Athens airport, and we were on the same flight, but I hadn't had a chance to approach her during the flight. When we landed in Paris, she disappeared.

This brief stopover in Paris was to be an occasion of many “firsts”: my first time seeing Elisabeth in over a year, her first time living in her native France in over twenty years, my first time visiting her in Paris, and my first time meeting her boyfriend. I was truly excited. What better way to finish up the perfect vacation?

After claiming my luggage, I continued my normal routine, buying a ticket for the Air

France bus to Gare Montparnasse and then a phone card, and then heading to a phone booth to call Elisabeth. I knew she'd be ecstatic to see me so early. But when she answered the phone, there was something very wrong in her voice. She didn't sound at all enthusiastic. Her voice was filled with tension and alarm.

The day was Tuesday, September 11, 2001, and the worst terrorist attacks in US history had just taken place.

She asked, "Haven't you heard?" My bewilderment turned to complete disbelief, then to shock, then horror, then anger as she tried to explain to me what little was known about the morning's events in New York City and Washington, DC. I don't really remember hearing most of what she said.

"After the first crash, we thought it was an accident, and it was unclear whether it was a small aircraft. But now..."

"They're saying there may have been three, maybe four hijacked aircraft involved."

"Why would someone do this? And who?"

The last words I recall hearing were:

"The World Trade Towers no longer exist. All I can see is a cloud of smoke."

Then I noticed the troops and dogs patrolling the airport for the first time. Had I just not seen them or had they suddenly dropped from the sky? I turned to find two lightly armed, vested, helmeted soldiers, along with a beautiful German shepherd, staring at me not so casually. They were approaching me, not urgently, but making clear eye contact with me, so I hung up the phone, no longer in a daze. As they calmly asked about my point of origin, destination, and purpose of visit while examining my passport, it took me a moment to realize that the airport was apparently in a state of siege. I asked no questions and they said nothing else to me, other than to direct me toward the correct exit.

The French, having been forced to address terrorism on a regular basis in recent decades, were wasting no time in taking the necessary precautions quickly and decisively.

The time was approximately five o'clock in the evening in Paris, eleven o'clock in the morning, New York time. Just over two hours earlier, 4,873 aircraft had been in the skies above the United States, just prior to the 9:40 a.m. order shutting down US airspace. At 9:59 and 10:28 respectively, after suffering direct hits from two hijacked aircraft, the South and North Towers of the World Trade Center had lost their battle with gravity and collapsed. A third hijacked aircraft severely damaged the Pentagon.

My hometown and my country were under attack, something we hadn't experienced since 1941...and I was four thousand miles away.

In the mid-1970s, I had watched the Twin Towers go up, as I worked a short distance away at One New York Plaza. My coworkers and I used to walk to the Towers to buy blondies for dessert at lunchtime. I vividly remember Philippe Petite, the French tightrope walker, walking across a steel cable stretched between the two towers, 417 meters above ground, for forty-five minutes, in 1974.

And now these same towers had been reduced to a pile of twisted steel and dust...a solemn burial ground for nearly three thousand innocent people.

The bus to downtown Paris was filled with people of various nationalities who had been scheduled to fly to the United States. Now some were headed to hotels and some were just stranded and had no idea where they were going or what they'd do when they got there.

Elisabeth and her boyfriend were glued to the TV when I arrived. They were in shock, but not enough to prevent them from expressing their solidarity with the United States. They made this quite clear.

On the next morning, Wednesday, September 12, there were troops, not local police but seemingly combat-ready units, armed with automatic weapons and light armored vehicles, positioned on street corners. I had never seen so many military personnel in a civilian center before in my life, anywhere in the world. Little did I know that this would soon become a familiar sight back home. As this book goes to print more than twelve years later, armed troops still stand watch at New York City's Penn Station, for instance.

And we barely notice them anymore.

So for the first time ever, I found myself being searched and questioned after simply buying a newspaper at a street corner newsstand. I had been stopped and searched many times before, for a variety of good and bad reasons, but on this occasion, everyone who bought a newspaper at this location was stopped and searched.

And so the routine began. Each morning I'd go to the same newsstand and each morning I was searched, along with all the others. The troops came to recognize me and greeted me by name after a few days. Frankly, only one word describes how I felt as a result...*safe!* These troops were thorough, efficient, and actually polite. "Please turn around, sir...Your pockets, sir...Please don't approach the dog, sir. He's not a pet...Have a good day, sir." I wasn't accustomed to the mix of cordiality and fingers on a trigger. They watched me closely, a dark foreigner speaking less than great French, staying with friends in a residential neighborhood, instead of in a tourist hotel. Yes, in their eyes, I appeared suspicious and I knew it.

When I couldn't stand to watch the endless, repetitive news reports on TV anymore, I left the apartment and just began walking. I had nowhere to go and no schedule, so, armed with a good street map, I just walked...and walked...and walked; to the bookstores, the bakeries, the Montparnasse Tower, the Luxembourg Gardens, then back to the Seine River.

On September 13, I needed to visit the American Express office to pick up a replacement card, as the magnetic stripe on mine was no longer functioning. Of all the days to visit an AMEX office, I couldn't have picked a worse time in history. There, in the midst of a high-security alert, I found barricades and armed troops surrounding the building. Inside, I found a mob of Americans standing around, huddled together, whining and complaining about our dilemma. Grouped together, supposedly seeking comfort in numbers, most failed to realize that gathering at such an obvious target was the worst possible thing to do.

In my previous life, during travel with IBM, we were repeatedly warned to avoid likely targets such as major tourist attractions, American hotels, airlines, etc., whenever

traveling outside the United States. This was just common sense. But when I asked folks in line at the AMEX office why they were lingering in a building that could only be an obvious target, they answered, “We feel safe here, surrounded by other Americans.”

On the way “home” from the AMEX office, I became spatially disoriented (aka “lost”). As I approached a large building surrounded by troops, I decided to ask the troops for directions. I walked toward what appeared to be the officer in charge, but a sergeant stepped in my path to stop me. As he did so, the dogs came to attention and began growling at me. When I explained that I needed directions, the lieutenant approached me and ordered the dogs to stand down.

I told him the intersection that I was trying to reach and he said he had no idea, since he had never lived in the area. He then had one of his sergeants assist me, who proceeded to give me precise directions to my destination. In the process he also told me that I should stop by his brother-in-law’s restaurant nearby. *Ah, so very French.*

The treatment I received from the people of France was more than impressive. Friends and strangers alike treated me like I was special in Paris. At a time of great tragedy, I was certainly not special or in need, and yet everyone extended themselves to me. I will never ever forget those days, and I am forever thankful to the French for the way they made me feel safe and welcomed. I was able to make free phone calls home, whereas my US phone company billed me \$800 for calls made before the free calls. They later cut this bill in half.

Earlier in the week I had begun searching, via phone, for friends whom I believed were working in the financial district or the Pentagon during the attacks. I connected with a few, but my contact information was mostly out of date. As it turned out, in many cases, the person hadn’t worked in the area for years, while others were either on vacation that day, late for work, or otherwise occupied on September 11. In other cases, I was just calling at the wrong time, and I would not locate some individuals for weeks to come. Eventually I located nearly everyone.

On Friday, September 14, I finally had a phone conversation with my brother. Like most of us, he was confused and uncertain about the future. Like any big brother, he was also

concerned about how I was doing, so far away. I explained my situation to him and he was quite relieved.

Then he said something to me that I'll never forget. As we compared notes on the news stories and speculated about what was coming next, I asked his advice and he said, "Don't come home." He continued, "If you're safe and in good hands, with people you trust, just stay where you are. You may be safer there than we are here and no one knows what's going to happen next here."

His logic made perfect sense, of course, but hearing my brother tell me not to come home was a shock. Many times in the past, I had asked for his advice on important issues and he had usually tried not to direct, influence, or tell me specifically what to do. But this situation was different.

As a family, we had never discussed a plan of action in case of a national emergency. Knowing that one member of the family was safely removed from the situation was positive, in his eyes. The fact that I had access to news sources that offered a different perspective than the American view was also a plus that could benefit our family.

And last but not least, there was the issue of communications. On the day of the attacks, it was apparently easier for me to reach our mother in Atlanta from Paris, than it was for him to do so from Wilmington, Delaware, just nine hundred miles away. The ability to monitor our mother's sense of security, and to assure her that all would be OK, would depend on our ability to speak with her frequently. This was priority number one.

When I discussed my options and John's advice with Elisabeth and her boyfriend, they both agreed completely. Not wanting to appear insensitive, they had hesitated to tell me not to go home until I brought it up, but they felt strongly that leaving Paris, even when US airspace reopened, would be a mistake. They made it clear that I was welcome to stay with them for as long as I felt the need to stay, no matter how long that would take.

True friends rise to the occasion when things get tough and show us what they're really made of, in no uncertain terms. I will never forget their generous hospitality and their willingness to help me feel safe and secure. They allowed me to impose on their space

and their privacy. Surely, I was no fun to be around, but they never said a word of anything but encouragement and support.

During my daily walking tours, the Luxembourg Gardens became one of my favorite destinations. The sense of peacefulness and calm there was just what I needed. I'd sit for hours each day, just watching people come and go. Then one day an elderly woman, one of the regulars whom I'd seen before with a group of her friends, changed my entire day.

When she arrived to join her group that afternoon, there was no seat for her in her normal spot, as the pleasant weather had caused the park to fill up earlier than normal. She walked over to me and very politely asked if the chair next to me was taken. I responded, in my very best French, that the chair was free, and then proceeded to carry it over and place it in the semicircle with her friends. As I did so, the other ladies began kidding her about her "new black foreign boyfriend." *Ohhhh la la la*. I laughed with them, then returned to my seat.

Not a minute later, the same lady again walked over to me. As I stood up, she reached up, pressed the palm of her hand onto my chest, looked me in the eyes, and with tears rolling down her cheeks asked, "You're American aren't you?" As I confirmed, "Oui madame, je suis," she said, "We're all very sorry for what has happened to your country. We wish you the best." My New York accent had once again given me away, and before I had a chance to respond, she was gone again. No laughing now. They all looked at me with sad but encouraging smiles. A random act of kindness from total strangers. These ladies, in their seventies and eighties, I estimated, had probably seen more war, death, and destruction in their World War II experiences than I'd ever see.