

Fear and Loathing in Days of Plague

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That night, I'd been playing Sam Cooke's "A Change Gonna Come" on my old acoustic guitar, listening for the best key best to carry laments to the pandemic dead. The sadness too hard to handle, so sipped away at a child's juice glass of whiskey, another. Too early for sleep, I'd started to clear my phone for a fresh start on the morrow and found a voicemail from Yolanda Smith: *Please call me as soon as you can—late tonight is fine.* Yolanda had never called me. We don't speak a lick. Now her husband David and I go back over 60 years, brothers of different mothers and fathers, but linked souls all the same. I called. She picked up right quick.

"David's in the ICU, Covid-19. I took him to the hospital, his foot swollen tight. We thought gout. Got there and he couldn't catch a breath. Right into the ICU."

"Is he on a ventilator?"

"Yes," she said.

David, a big Black brotherman, saved my ass many a time, and maybe I helped him out of a jam once or twice. His medical history—too many problems, here, there, everywhere. My heartrate spiked as Yolanda's panic burst, spilled information, posed unanswerable questions. Brother into a Cleveland hospital that night of June 8, I got lost in reveries of floating over his ICU bed, knowing the sing-song of monitors, the dance of the ICU team at bedside, hoped hard a sharp doc-nurse crew could pull him through. Uncertainty in my soul expanded across the 2,000 miles between Brother Man in Cleveland and me struck dumb in Tucson.

We'd been working on a memoir of our days—"Confessions of Two Colored Boys Gone

Old.” Just to leave something of us, some trail our children and grandchildren might one day trace. Since Charlottesville, we’d tried to tease out some small truth about origins of divisiveness, incivility, and uncivility in America. Surprised in 2015 by some folks jawing about the end of racism, even as bunches of people of color knew better. Now five years later the US still a segregated, regionally apartheid country floundering within perfect storms of pernicious racism, classism, oppression of women, and backlashes against the variety of lovely gender identities beyond cis-male and cis-female.

David has been “Brother” since the day we met in ‘63. He and I early on fell into our own tender jive way of talking—still jibber-jabber in that talkity-talk after all these years. Sure, we can talk to most anybody, across castes, ease into and through different levels of folks’ experiences and knowledge. Our tender jive a kind of authentic voice for us, so me and him together keep to our own jive talk—twins from different mothers. He frequently lived with my family. His Mama and Daddy Smith welcomed me with open arms whenever I stayed in their home. Brother the second of eight children of the same African American mother and father, I’m the oldest of nine siblings but my family a more complicated ethnocultural and genotype-phenotype mix of sibling-parent relationships.

I called my people the Hillbilly-Nigger-Japs. The five oldest siblings are children of our hillbilly Momma and the man all nine of us called Pops. Momma—light-skinned, blue-eyed—self-identified as a tough West Virginia hillbilly. In the early 2000s, genealogical research and DNA testing of our family would tell a different story. Her father was a light-skinned coal miner, but descended from a Black indentured servant in the American colonies, who, when released from indenture, fought in the Revolutionary War against the British, then settled in the area where Morgantown became a West Virginia city. Pops a Nisei man born in Chicago to Issei

immigrants—Obāsan (Grandma) and Ojiisan (Grandpa) Tashiro couldn't become citizens until the 1950s, but built a good life in Chicago, then in Cincinnati—Ojiisan a professor of physiological chemistry at the University of Cincinnati Medical College. I'm the oldest of the five sibs born to Momma and Pops—two sisters, three brothers, each dancing in a shade of peanut beige, some looking more Asian than others.

Two lovely light-skinned sisters are the sixth and seventh children, born of the woman we all called Momma and a White man with whom she had a long-time affair. The two youngest siblings are beautiful dark-skinned fellows, each from different biological parent pairs. Each a child of an African American father and a White mother, and we were so lucky to welcome them into the family, one in '65 and the other in '71. The youngest of us all—Mathew, hung himself when he got lost in the struggle of a Queer, AIDS-infected African-American man with addiction problems—*self-lynched* to escape an American nightmare.

Brother fell easy into our Tashiro crew and the Smith children held me tight. We always believed the Smiths and Tashiros were a pretty sweet mix of folks, intriguing in their diversity of self-identification and political proclivities. Yet, in the 1960s both our families lived in Batavia, Ohio, within the divisiveness of America as conflicts among disparate groups waxed and waned in intensity and degree of violence. His parents forced into suffocating *Negro* niches for Black folks in Batavia. My Momma and Pops an *interracial couple*—and until 1967 antimiscegenation laws in many states labelled people like our light-skinned, *assumed White* Momma and our yellow-peril Jap Pops as criminals or at the very least treated their marriage as anathema.

Even some *well-meaning* relatives and close family friends of Momma and Pops hinted we children would forever be *tainted* as coloreds, mulattos, yellow niggers, chinks, gooks, Japs, jigaboos. When Pops had been stationed at an Air Force base on the Florida Panhandle in '54-

'55, there were but three half-and-half children and he took me and my brother Mark into the *Colored* bathrooms. Light-skinned Momma sneaked our peanut-butter beige sister Vicki into the *White* bathrooms.

All of the Smiths and Tashiros experienced overt and systemic racism: being jostled; walked off the sidewalk; followed in stores but not offered service or assistance; hammered by ethnic slurs—of course, we were called what we were (are); pickaxed by that mean kind of stink-eye from wary strangers; more dangerous encounters—rocks thrown, jammed down onto the hard, hard ground, herded and hassled by White police; looking down the exit end of gun barrels. Too many times, one the other of us walked headlong into cul-de-sacs of bloody beat-downs. You feel me?

Brother and me don't feel unique among people of color in America who have lived within the pernicious dislocations of racism a long-long time. We all tired of stupid-shit ramblings of people speaking in tongues of entrenched and vicious stereotypes. We both just done with the nagging fears and being ambushed by emotional and physical slams.

I rewrote Cooke's "Change Gonna Come" so the words mapped closer to Brother's and my memories of boyhood in Batavia, Ohio. I sang it every night in hope Brother Man's big mind might roam round places we loved. Listen for my wailing out of Tucson, Brother. Don't be leaving me here alone.

"I was born near a river, running by a little town,

Just like the river, been running all 'round."

#

A week before Brother nestled into an ICU bed, we'd been jawing on the phone. He told me he'd stopped at a drugstore for sundries and found two skanky White boys hassling an older Asian

woman. They were spitting anathemas, racial slurs, crazed conspiracy theories about Asians causing the Chinese Flu in *Amerika*. I could see the scene unfold as Brother told me how he'd flashed on Obāsan Tashiro, stepped in, and drove off those fools in a flurry of much back and forth. Going on 73, but still a force to be reckoned with, Brother never could cotton racist shit.

We'd reminisced on Obāsan, a petite woman, quiet and loving, who took us in during summer '68. We helped her take care of her cottage in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, got jobs in Woods Hole working long days. Most nights we searched out pickup basketball games around the Cape. Won most, but some teams had played against colored boys, some not. One night, we come up against a team of south Boston White boys—whipped them up and down. One even offered what he thought a compliment. "You're right *White niggers*."

Brother all a flash heat. We Colored boys in White-land. I stepped between the two, said, "Now, you right there, right on, man. Just so you know I'm a *yellow nigger* and we whipped your asses in basketball—but that's all we got for you tonight." Brother laughed his rage away as we booked on out of there.

Now, Covid-19 whupping Brother bad in a Cleveland hospital ICU. Between calls with Yolanda, I worked on our *Confessions of Two Colored Boys*, cataloging research we'd collected. I summarized articles, wrote letters to Brother, *willed* him to live but shivered in the fear his time had come.

June 10, 2020

My Brother,

Remember me telling you about the Tai Po wetmarket across the street from where I lived in Hong Kong. Well now, I found a bunch of articles on Chinese wetmarkets, especially the open market in Wuhan. Lot of talk about Wuhan as the

possible epicenter for what the World Health Organization now calls Covid-19 disease. And a lot of this and that about naming conventions—the virus causing novel corona virus disease designated SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2). But my point—most Americans don't really know diddly-squat about taxonomies of viruses or about what *wetmarkets* look like, smell like. Even supporters of American farmers markets seldom know the importance of wetmarkets' roles in food chain supply, economics, and community structures within Mainland Chinese cities and Hong Kong.

One article even had a picture of that Tai Po wetmarket where I 'd shopped—a wondrous place of fresh vegetables, grains, fruits, fresh meat and fish (animals recently slaughtered in the market or live ones you could select and have slaughtered). Also aisles of diverse goods—clothes, wall hangings, candies, pens and pencils, embroidery. I spent many hours wandering the Tai Po wetmarket.

But the bad news—*samo-samo* ugly side. Posted comments on many wetmarket articles offered little but harsh words, from disgust to xenophobia to racism. Familiar? That free-wheeling pontification on Chinese wetmarkets but another bitter taste of the divisiveness, incivility, uncivility here, there, everywhere. Why you think you had to brush back those skinny skanks jamming the Asian lady—might they been reading and posting comments to the wetmarket articles, and perhaps triggered to action by President Sponge-brain Tentpants and cronies yapping on the Chinese Flu, the Asian Flu.

Loves ya, Brother.

See you soon, JZee

#

Another day gone by—Yolanda called with bad to the bone news. Brother's kidneys failing, no urine, the docs wanted to insert a line into his right femoral artery and connect him to a dialysis

machine, but complications—a clotting syndrome going on. So, they pushed in clot busters and blood thinners, needed to wait until there was minimal risk of clots clogging the dialysis filter. I put on my nurse’s cap, talked Yolanda through myriad details of what the docs hoped for, what we hoped for.

Yet another day passed in uncertainty, but early evening Yolanda called—dialysis in place, fluid balances settling, waste clearance a happening thing. Had to occupy my mind, so I analyzed the news feeds from March through May, typing a note to Brother about growing awareness of disproportionate deaths among people of color and flash negativity smacking Asians. I’d studied healthcare disparities since 1998—now Covid-19 highlighting but some of the outcomes from such disparities. Took a break to meditate at a small Buddhist altar in my home, put pictures of Brother, Matthew, Ojiisan, and Obāsan in a bowl of dried flowers on the altar, and settled my mind a bit. Then back to work—opened the main folder for *Two Colored Boys on One Drive* and created a sub-folder for all my notes and letters to Brother. Named it “Get Well Soon.”

Hear me singing as you wander through your coma’s world.

“It’s been real hard living when I’m afraid you’ll die,

‘Cause I don’t know what’ll happen if you pass by.

It’s been a long, a long time coming...”

#

The stock market shimmies into dry heaves, vomits, gorges, vomits. Worldwide, news feeds become dominated by information many people probably won’t understand: multivariate statistical models projecting possible numbers of death from Covid-19; what viruses actually are; spotty reports on possible SARS CoV-2 mutations; rehashing the Spanish Flu pandemic but with

nods to the bubonic plagues that ravaged populations around the world; rambling about other types of virus outbreaks—AIDS, SARS, MERS, H5N1 [Avian Flu, with three subtypes], H1N1 [Swine Flu, with three subtypes], Ebola, Zika. Just a year prior, I'd taught all of this and that in an undergraduate pre-nursing pathophysiology class. Now I fret on ignorance of what I don't know.

Yolanda called to ask a medical question. She'd had some trouble communicating with docs and nurses about changing the femoral arterial line for dialysis to the left leg—docs wanted to reduce chances of infection at the right-leg site. She thought they brushed her back. I walked her through a set of questions docs and nurses might respond to without getting uppity, all focused on Brother's prior surgery for aneurism repairs. We settled on a strategy to query his Covid-19 ICU team, just some basic but thought-provoking questions related to Brother's complete medical records and if the Covid-19 team knew where those aneurism repairs had been made a few years back in his left thigh. We practiced the questions—I played good doc, bad doc.

I've known good and bad docs and nurses. At times, I've just wanted to slap some cold fools, though that's always maladaptive. And in these times, so many healthcare providers plumb wore down by the influx of Covid-19 patients and stress. Yet still a true-true that some haven't developed the skills to talk to grieving folks already kicked hard by the worry of not being able to sit by a loved one dying right quick. Sad to say, some docs just don't really know how to relate to the various fears quite a number of us colored folks live with day in day out.

June 12, 2020

My Brother Man,

Thinking on you many times a day, every day. Lots of other *plagues* breaking out: confusing information, misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories.

Remember the last time you visited Tucson? We'd struggled through research on how enormous amounts of information inundate everybody's body. Well, I been messing with ideas about how all the info might trigger availability bias, negativity bias, and both explicit and implicit biases. God damn—remember all those articles. When you last visited, we'd sat at the computer sorting research papers and our notes into different folders for each bias. You'd said, "So many biases, so little time." I'd fetched a bottle of Jack Daniels and two small sipping cups I'd bought in Hong Kong.

Then we fell into jibber-jabberwocky—how does availability bias emerge as individuals assign likelihood of an event (good or bad) based on how easily that event comes to mind. You started laughing like all get out, playing with the idea of how easy an event comes to mind whenever the salience or frequency of that event is high. Of course, you dragged out our first hot flashes—the Debbies, walked me through how the more often we think on something the more likely that something comes to mind because frequent events and especially salient events are more likely to instantiate into memory.

You offered the Debs as a good example of availability bias, and we sat their giggling, slipped back into times of a whole lot-of-lot talking going on about those gals—the good, the bad. Bouncing those memories, we glimpsed availability bias in the United States—most people overestimate the importance of good and bad memories that frequently flash through their minds.

Then we'd turned to negativity bias—how people dread negative events or losses more than they look forward to positive events or gains, and how individuals are more likely to pick at, pick at perceived problems and setbacks than enjoy a moment of good fortune. I'd asked you how often you'd been disheartened by criticism than heartened by praise.

"JZee Man, what you talking about—you know the true-true, " you said, and

poured us another round of Jack.

But remember how we fretted on implicit biases, biases we're not conscious we carry. We'd played with models of how such biases have insidious, slip-slide ways of shaping the patterns of a person's decisions as well as setting filters for types of information folks receive and analyze. We studied on papers documenting physicians' implicit (or unconscious) biases. I got to fretting on whether Yolanda picked up on something in discussions of switching the arterial line to the dialysis machine. All said and done, implicit biases influence the nature of encounters with *others*.

I'd asked, "Brother, how the fuck do we come to know what we don't know?"

"Well, we been wrong about this or that. Now and again, we been wrong," you'd said. "Sometimes, we picked up a surprise truth—wrong about this, right about that. All said and done, I'm sure we made shit-loads of mistakes about people, places, ideas."

As you rest in a coma's dream world, are you thinking on the this and that and how to know what we don't know?

Love ya, Brother.

See you soon, JZee

#

Brother fighting death's big-ugly, I deflected my fears by combing through our folders of research, focusing on the plagues of confusing information, misinformation, and disinformation about how the pandemic spread to leave people dead in heaps. There, there I found startling amounts of available and frequently repeated negative information. The scary part—we all have implicit biases but don't know how such biases shape what we believe to be true-true. Even with enormous amounts of information available within sources we attend to, implicit biases narrow our search for information and slant the types of analyses we use to interpret the information.

Sadly, too often we're *not* prone to ask and ask and ask, "Why might this information be wrong?"

I'm singing to you now—listen up.

*"We go down to mainstreet, walk around town,
Always somebody gonna say, Boy don't be hanging round.
A long time coming..."*

#

Brother still on the ventilator June 13 as Arizona's governor begins *reopening* the state. Already, too many maskless people bursting out of sheltering in place to walk, spit, cough, sneeze around Tucson because they feel enforced masking is against their constitutional rights and the pandemic just a hoax. I studied Arizona's weekly averages of number of cases, increases in hospitalizations across the state, then studied other states' lag-time between spikes in hospitalizations and spikes in numbers dying. Scary out there.

For my Covid-19 exercise, I ventured out to restock my 6-week emergency supplies. In a supermarket where most were masked, an unmasked man didn't plant his face in his elbow as he coughed on the produce shelves, hacking right on the scallions I'd intended to buy. He may not be infected, but may be a Covid-19 asymptomatic carrier, maybe but a day away from admission to an ICU. I'd just finished a Contact Tracing course sponsored by Johns Hopkins University and to calm my rage imagined how to map this man's and my contacts after we'd both left the supermarket.

But flash rage always a hard slap—how do I calm down my own fool self and say something not too threatening to the man, sit within Buddhist *absence of separate* self, just offer

a gentle nudge in my best, non-threatening voice (if I ever had one). But thinking on ideas for a compassionate reprimand morphed into crazed daydreams.

“Please, you fucking fool, cover your mouth when you cough, sneeze, laugh so hard spittle, droplets, and aerosols come at me like flying monkeys out of somebody’s ass in America’s Wizard of Oz nightmare.”

Buddha wagged his finger at me.

Scarecrow whispered, “If I only had a brain.”

If I only had a brain, I should damn well be able to figure out how to discover a bit about what I don’t know. Trouble is, what’s likely to be true—are there any facts left in America? Yes—Brother’s still in a Cleveland ICU. That’s a true-true.

Wait, the earth is flat and he may be on the underside. Where might the Cleveland ICU be on a flat earth? Are both sides of a flat earth populated with landforms and people and birds and bees and ICUs? Are the two sides of a flat earth mirror-image worlds? Could two Brothers be in an ICU, one on each side of a flat earth?

Conspiracy theories like spiraling rickettsia inflame my brain. What have I come to, Brother Man.

Hear me now.

“We all just people, so I ask a man,

Say now won't you help me please?

But he winds up knockin' me

Down on my knees.

A long time coming... ””

#

A bunch of scattered thoughts coalesced on June 14. Some stick in the muck of that hard question, *How do I come to know what I don't know?* Maybe, just start with thinking about how an individual can overcome availability, negativity, and implicit biases, as she-he-they engages in careful scrutiny and analysis of their rational and experiential-emotional responses to information. A starting point might be how information streams douse us from many sources—family, friends, colleagues, elected officials, our favored television shows, social media preferences, news feeds, but also inputs from school, churches, sororities and fraternities. Within such diverse information, how much of the information has been based on careful analysis and fact-checking? *Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!*

Flash memory—I searched our files for information related to research we'd found about how folks fall into fear of death when they think even a little bit about their own death or death of a loved one. Much of the research on fear of death and its impacts had been summarized in the works of Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg. They published beaucoup d'research but also analyzed a large literature base of papers related to the theoretical and practical elements of fear of death and what such fear does to people. Their arguments were summarized within two very well-received books: *In the Wake of 9/11—The Psychology of Terror* (2003, the American Psychological Association) and *On the Role of Death in Life* (2015, Random House).

What had intrigued me most about their research was a model of how fear of death appears to make a person's worldview more rigid—racists become more racist; subgroups of political parties become narrower and sometimes more rigid in their perspectives or ideologies; liberal thinking folks fight harder to promote and sustain liberal attitudes and policies. How might fear of death inculcate divisiveness and in-un-civility among diverse peoples? I pulled those two books and a pile of research papers, then revisited factors that shape an individual's fear of death in days of Covid-19, playing with ideas about how availability, negativity, and implicit biases might prime fear of death?

I went back to Brother's and my struggle with why so many people argued the end of racism had arrived during President Obama's years in office. Of course, racism and other forms of divisiveness and in-un-civility blossomed in the grotesque garden of Trump's presidency. Yet as colored men in America our lived experience had been a pervasive sense of racism since we were kids from the '50s through to present day.

Sure now, there'd been waxing and waning of in-your-face violence against and obvious racist suppression of people of color, yet a consistency in levels of systemic racism. So, we'd spent a lot of time wondering what factors shaped such waxing and waning of divisiveness and in-un-civility even as systemic racism has held relatively steady and persisted within long-entrenched laws and condoned social practices.

Now, now George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, only a very few on the too-long list of past and recent Black folks killed and what many Black folks have faced and feared, and why colored folks have "the talk" with their children. My Brother, let us sit a spell. Breathe in, then breathe out. Deep and slow. Calm and ease. Smile and release. Presence and peace. Oh Buddha, I open to absence of separate self.

Now, now in the days of Covid-19, divisiveness, incivility, and uncivility have become increasingly apparent to everyone—though many of us have lived through this happening before). What if fear of death increased because of the constancy and volume of news about the number of sick and dying related to infection by the SARS CoV-2 virus *or* the existential threats perceived through the partisan lens of liberals and conservatives *or* public health ordinances seeming like a direct assault on constitutional rights *or* the ubiquity of peaceful protests *or* the violent rampaging of thugs of any ilk *or* the backlash of white supremacists, Proud Boys, and QAnon folks *or* armed confrontations between Patriot Prayer and Antifa members—both sides bringing guns to stand against *lawlessness*. But what happens when we replace the “*or*” with “*and*”? Well now, we can name groups of folks who seek out and settle into fundamentally different camps that often stand in direct and sometimes violent opposition to each other. How might the humongous amounts of written, spoken, and visual information we’re exposed to, and may not understand or view through a particular biased lens, result in priming fear of death?

When President Obama was elected, we laughed in joy and cried for those already lost and beaten down. Free, free at last, but no—that was not to be. Of course, racism and other forms of divisiveness and in-un-civility have been the lived experiences of people of color in America since 1619. Certainly, there has been a waxing and waning of awareness of racism (less sense of change among people of color), but little systemic change *has emerged and persisted* since we were kids from the 1950s into present day.

And, think for a moment about the waxing-waning of violence and protests—just look at the long list and origins of what some would call *race-related* riots in the United States. Think about what triggered the riots and how folks were killed in these riots. Contrast those riots to

protests against the Vietnam War, which had lots of White people involved. Despite variations in intensity, we could trace our lived experience of racism during every single year of our lives.

So, we'd spent a lot of time pondering factors shaping oscillations in the intensity and levels of violence in the divisiveness, incivility, and uncivility. However, we also kept asking what factors inhibited the American public as a collective from embracing and embedding into law the systemic changes we imagined would come to fruition after the civil rights surges of the 1960s and into the early 1970s. Many have written about this very issue, but none have really provided a unified theory of the psychology of systemic racism's (and other *-isms*) persistence coupled to a clear explanation of waxing-waning of violence between opposing groups.

Sure, now in the days of Covid-19, the admixture of divisiveness and in-un-civility has become increasingly apparent to many people. Could the amounts and types of information we're exposed to prime fear of death in ways that exacerbate distancing of groups with opposing views of the world. And, what if fear of death went a long way to explaining our country's current divisiveness but also the waxing-waning of the explosive riots Brother and I have been trying to describe?

Maybe, we need to talk the *shit* of the *shit*. Now we been looking high and low for factors shaping divisiveness and incivility, but we never have looked at what divided the two of us once of a while. Could any two fools have been closer than Brother and me? So, what could explain how we fell out now and again. If we looking for some unified field theory of divisiveness and in-un-civility, wouldn't it have to explain how we stood divided in different groups a time or two. I searched my old-man's fading memory, and that there's a problem in itself, but I come up with angry times that distanced us. If we ever see each other again, I got to get Brother to tell me

the conflicts between us that he remembers and cross-check the ones I think I remember. Some true-true bound to float free.

One distancing: Brother stills carries a gun, but I gave up on guns (the first time) in my late twenties. Now that separated us a little. He drove from Williamsport, Pennsylvania, to visit me in Syracuse, '76 I reckon. I with my second wife S and my girls young bitty-bits, and Brother pulls up in a big black Lincoln Continental. But he wanted to bring his gun into the house, his big-ass 44-magnum Clint Eastwood cannon. But by that time I was trying to find Buddha and I'd given up guns and worried about my ever-curious, young babies fussing with that piece. And we got heated on that. Now, I start with this example because we smoothed all that fuss over right quick, but I've chewed on that moment many a time. I wished he and I could've talked about the confusion in my head. On one side, I had no doubt that gun might protect him, and he probably needed more protection than I did—even living on the rough side of Syracuse with my little ones.

And years later, I took up guns again, thinking I could better protect my children, though I surely put them in more danger. Then I gave up guns yet another time. But a month before Brother went into the hospital, I'd been perseverating on guns once again because the FBI had been playing with categorizing violent white supremacists and militias as domestic terrorists. We hadn't talked guns in a goodly while and I'd called to ask if he knew much about the Mossberg tactical 20-gauge pump. Of course, we so close in so many ways Brother had the 12-gauge model of that piece, just for home defense and traveling through rough country in his truck.

Now see, this example is simple because we disagreed, came back together, disagreed, came on back together—each time the difference twixt his and my individual sense of things shaped by how afraid we were of something. We stood divided, even as close as we'd always

been. Even so, the break in our closeness was driven by our fear of our own death or family members' deaths. And that fear emerged from our respective senses of what was happening around us (social upheavals shaping availability and negativity biases, explicit and implicit biases about carrying weapons).

A more serious distancing: Brother and my conflicts about SNCC and the Black Panthers pushed us apart for a spell. We hadn't seen one the other for many a month when Brother visited me and my first wife C in Cambridge, summer '71. My Conscientious Objector status had been turned down in summer '70 and I'd refused induction into the American War in Vietnam. While waiting for the Department of Justice to decide about sending my case to trial, I'd left college to set up my own two-year service to the country. Most of those two years I spent at Boston City Hospital screening children for lead poisoning, my job measuring blood lead levels in children—the majority African-American. Brother was finishing up at Central State, still recovering from a bad car accident but starting to play ball again. Well, SNCC and the Panthers came up. I'd become a devotee of SNCC but was curious where Brother was headed with the Panthers.

He'd told me about a meeting where the speaker urged the crowd to get ready, to get ready to fight and kill white people. And Brother said he puzzled on that—how could he go into my family's house and kill my light-skinned Momma and light-skinned sisters Toni and Andrea. In fact, he wondered if Pops and the other peanut-butter beige half-and-half Japs would have to be killed too. The two Black brothers would be safe.

Well, that set me off. I muffled the explosion yet struggled—“What the fuck you talking about, even thinking about killing people who loved you and you loved.” Neither of us knew at the time that Momma was a descendant of a Black indentured servant in the Colonies before the revolution against England. But some Panthers, at least some Panthers in some sections, had an

issue with color—what is *Black* and how dark-skinned do you need to be to be *Black*—a split Brother and I both struggled with quite a while.

Now that too passed, but what did Brother feel that day? I felt rage, betrayal, knew I'd been right to connect more with SNCC than the Panthers or folks aligned with the Nation of Islam. But that divisiveness slapped me so hard. I still loved him, even though the hurt took a long-long time healing. I sometimes still feel the ache of the wound after all these years. And what was that chasm that opened between us that day, what was it if not the fear of our own death or the death of our families. Even though Brother knew where my family stood on racism, we were excluded from some Panthers' ideals.

He stood with a different group. The Panthers provided real protection for him and his blood family. I understand all that. And SNCC provided a nonviolent set of principles that valued him and me too as well as my family, his family—all of us within the odd amalgam of American ethnocultural groups. But I believed SNCC folks would make *good trouble*, stand shoulder to shoulder to protect us, yet many SNCC members were opposed to using weapons to protect either Brother or me or themselves. Brother and I were separated by our own fears of annihilation and the annihilation of loved ones. We stood, at least for a while, in different camps—one armed and one not. Each of us shaped by what we attended to—our own availability and negativity biases (SNCC or Panthers), our explicit and implicit biases about *family*.

I wondered if Brother remembered that divisiveness between us? What the fuck—two real Soul Brothers at odds, but our various disagreements and hard lines waxed and waned, in some ways, like how the intensity of overt and violent racism oscillated in America. Now, now I'm leaning toward the idea that complex interactions of availability, negativity, and both explicit and implicit biases shape our individual fear of death and potentiate divisiveness and incivility

against those *different* from us. I do wish I'd found in that conflictual time some kind of sensible dialogue with Brother, could tell him about my hurt and fear instead of stuffing it all down. And now, I doubt I'll ever be able to tell him face-to-face.

Please, Brother Man, come on back.

June 16, 2020

My Dearest Brother Man,

Grab your academic cap—some ideas to consider when you come home. And you damn well better come on home.

Huge amounts of information inundate all of us and may induce availability and negativity biases. Explicit but also implicit biases shape the sources of information we access and value. The myriad information streams we access become the active subliminal or consciously perceived agents that potentiate (or prime) fear of death and create or reinforce our own walls separating us from *others*. Individuals are more likely to hold tight to information matching their worldview. What if we study how availability, negativity, and implicit biases prime conscious and unconscious processes in each individual, especially those evoking fear of death.

We'll definitely need to sit a spell and sip some whiskey to tumble through these ideas. But before I dive into all the talky-talk, I've got to tell you about a Black man who created the recipe for the original Jack Daniels? And here we'd been drinking Jack and never even knew about that brother's genius—his name was Nathan "Nearest" Green, went by the moniker Uncle Nearest. Now recently, an African American woman opened a distillery based on Uncle Nearest's recipes and distillation techniques. Of course, I right-quick got us a bottle of Uncle Nearest 1856 Premium Whiskey. All stashed away and ready to sip through our first reunion after you step clear of that fucking coma and a

final med check to be sure you can sip a bit. My Brother, remember—I'll always have Uncle Nearest's best whiskey waiting for you.

But for the moment, think on this: individuals are inundated by their preferred news feeds or sources of information. Most people stick to preferred sources, and for many a decade those sources have been fraught with information reinforcing both availability and negativity biases as well as challenging or confirming a person's implicit biases.

Now, suppose information flows challenge an individual's self-esteem and provoke anxieties resulting from thinking about death and dying—like death by Covid-19 or death by people diametrically opposed to *others'* way thinking and being. Like death by *POLICE* if you're an *OTHER*. Like death at the hands of folks opposed to *BLACK LIVES MATTER*. Like individuals exposed to an event that makes them think about their own death and begin to engage in more rigorous defense of their own worldview. You with me, Brother Man?

In these months of pandemic, we've been under constant barrages of information, information that triggers availability and negativity biases as well as implicit biases. What's the terror management research say—that minor reminders of death trigger our thinking about our own or our loved ones' deaths. The images and news coverage have a plethora of both minor and major reminders likely to shift folks sense of mortality into fear of death and increased defense of their worldview.

Rigorous defense of a worldview may lead folks to engage in prejudice or aggression against those they consider *OTHER*, but become more open to regard and affection for those they consider *SAME*. These ways of thinking and acting become processes of striving for improved self-esteem. If a particular group membership enhances a person's self-esteem and perceived safety, her-his-their worldview can be reestablished in ways that reduce accessibility to fear of death—a process consistent

with the terror management theory of Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg. Again, we'll go through this shit in more detail when I see you next—and you must come on back so you can challenge me hard on every point.

For context, go back to that moment you protected the Asian woman in the drugstore. The theory of fear of death postulates when we think about our death or death of loved ones, we're more likely to become more rigid in our world views. People who believe Asians are at fault for Covid-19 become more rigid in negative attitudes toward Asians and may go beyond anger and prejudice to attack them (Goddamn Chinks infected us with the Kung Flu). Those who believe there is too much government power become more rigid in this belief (Let local levels of government make the decisions—we won't shelter in place in our city and I'm not wearing a fucking mask.). People who believe in conspiracy theories become more adamant in their ideas about the truth of their favorite theory (Media outlets are lying about the severity of the Covid-19 pandemic—it's just like a seasonal flu and will go away during the summer.). Those who believe a particular political party will or already has taken away their liberties become more certain of this belief and resist or rise up against the party oppressing them (Leftists want to take funding from police—who will protect us?). Folks who were antiimmigrant to begin with become more severe in their attitudes toward immigrants and begin to take actions against immigrants (Make America great again—stop immigration and lock up the illegals—they're rapists and robbers.). Those who think the disenfranchised poor should be able to take care of themselves become more inclined to withhold help from folks who have run out of money and food (I work hard to feed my kids—*everyone can and should do the same.*).

So, you know how you and I try to control our anxieties by figuring out what we don't know, always challenging the veracity of the information that comes our way, asking people wearing the mantle of pontification to show us data supporting as well as

data contradicting their ideas. If we could trust one or two, even three sources of information, we'd save ourselves several hours each day to devote to our dream of finishing *Confessions of Two Colored Boys*—how bad could that be? But we haven't yet found those pristine sources of truth. I don't hold much hope of finding them unless we slip-slide into narrowed, delusional thinking. And a final piece in my intellectual meandering: you and me studied on a broad base of research in psychology that examined types of thinking in humans, especially how people can fall into rational and experiential thinking.

Brother Man, here's the gist—we two studied researchers who argue rational thinking is a deliberative process that can be effortful, involves abstract reasoning, and requires understanding of and skills in evidence-based analysis. The rational system can be activated in situations when information flows from cognitive processing as well as direct sensory cues are not easy to sort out and require an individual to have the disposition to engage in higher order reasoning—that is, *critical thinking*.

In contrast, experiential thinking is a much more passive, emotional, and preconscious processing of information. Researchers argue the experiential system is more likely to be the default system for many people, certainly less effortful, more efficient in some circumstances, but often error-prone in complex situations requiring careful sorting, weighing, and evaluating data, but also debiasing the information a person encounters.

Suppose a person falls into mostly experiential-emotional thinking. They are more likely to be persuaded by an emotional rather than a data-driven sense of what's going on. This type of thinking opens the door to drinking the Kool-Aid of conspiracy theories, uncritical surrender to partisan positions, or susceptibility to arguments made by close friends or family trapped in mostly emotional thinking and not asking how they might know if information or an idea was *not true*.

I've been floundering within the flood of information and how so much information makes sorting out the reality of a pandemic, or any real-world situation, exceedingly difficult. Maybe we focus on how availability, negativity, and implicit biases set up an interesting quandary in any society, but especially in modern societies bombarding individuals with enormous amounts of information, much of which is sensational, not evidence-based, and often purposely politicized or biased as well as frequently negative. Many researchers argue availability and negativity biases can be overcome or minimized by anyone who has the inclination and training to engage in critical thinking. However, such training would have to include practice in engaged heuristic reasoning as well as deep self-analysis or mediated discussion of what implicit biases each of us carries. How many of us are ready for that? I'm ready. You ready?

Well, get your ass on out of that fucking hospital. We need to talk through these ideas.

You know I love ya.

Your Brother, JZee

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June 17—Brother Man at the end of ten days on a ventilator, still alive within an induced coma. The Covid-19 ICU team feels he can come off the ventilator, so try to ease him awake. But Brother thrashed into a post-anesthesia delusional wilding. The ICU team restrained him, reinduced the coma, reconnected him to the ventilator. A day later, docs eased him out of the coma again, this time Brother's wilding more subdued. Off the ventilator, Brother entered a Step-down Unit. They transferred him into a Covid-19 unit on June 24. Yolanda called me on June 26, voice all chirpy and bright. We discussed choices for placing Brother in a high-tech Rehab Hospital.

July 1—Home now. Oh Baby, we got work to do, work for all those good folks gone by.

“There been times we thought we couldn’t last long

But now I think we’ll start to carry on.

It’s been a long, long time coming

But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will.”

Here’s to you, Brother Man, to Uncle Nearest, Sam Cooke, Obāsan, the dead, dying, and those suffering within the dislocation of Covid-19 disease.

Peace be with all you all.