



## Why It's Dangerous to Believe What You Think

People who believe what they think don't learn otherwise.

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*“Memories of emotional events are stamped on running water.”*  
— Aristotle

James lives in the house next to mine. He was born with Klinefelter syndrome, a relatively common genetic condition, and it can go unnoticed. George Washington is purported to have had the condition. In James's case, Klinefelter has seriously impaired his development. While chronologically 57 years old, James is an adolescent. He looks like an adult, but thinks like someone who's 14.

We make many assumptions about people's thoughts and behaviors. I think this is the main reason age groups naturally segregate. By limiting contact, they assure the members of their groups think alike. People in different age groups don't understand each other. It's not just a difference in fashion, it's a difference in thinking.

## What you think is first what you feel

There is validity to speaking of the brain's layers, and the deeper you go, the more primitive things get. Our cerebral cortex is a thin layer on the outside of our brain, and this is where all of our human thought is said to be processed. Not that this can really be defined, but the idea is that the things that humans do are done here. That includes language, logic, and reason.

Every thought is motivated, and motivation is rarely reasonable. We find reasons for our thoughts after some needs have directed us to think, but the origin is need. Even emergencies are situations of need, and we execute a kind of thinking in emergencies, but mostly we respond by reflex.

## Emergencies create thought tunnels

*"Anxiety is dangerous, but it makes you think it's your friend."*

—Noah Baumbach

In simple situations, like emergencies, our thoughts run along behind our actions. Even when we don't have an immediate reflexive response, we have reflexive thoughts. These are usually associations we draw with previous, similar situations. Sometimes we think about the present and make calculated guesses, but usually we remember the past and make assumptions. In threatening situations most of our thinking is pessimistic, and it should be as avoiding trouble is a priority.

If there is anything that could be defined as the opposite of trauma, it would be a positive attitude in a troubled situation. I remember a long fall off a big mountain during which I kept a continuous, positive attitude and, as a result, suffered no trauma. On another occasion, I was in a particularly good mood--manically light hearted--after two days of rainy hiking through a trackless, boggy river valley. I remember it as a transcendently joyful state in what should have been a miserable adventure.

I could hardly claim logic was at work in either case, though one might argue that my reactions were useful. I suppose that if being anxious would have been helpful, then the more rational response would have been to be anxious, but in both cases there was nothing to be done other than to be positive.

## Most Thoughts Are Reflex Associations

*“Logic is necessary; since without it, you cannot even learn whether it be necessary or not.”*

— **Epictetus**

Thinking is mostly responsive. We do it for several purposes, and the primary purpose is to ensure our safety. The second purpose to which we apply ourselves is to gain benefit. But few of our thoughts result from careful analysis. One might say that few of our actions are thoughtful, but I think that gets us off the hook too easily. Most of our actions are thoughtful, they’re just not smart.

I have trouble with the word stupid. It seems like an important word that we use too casually in our efforts to avoid applying it to ourselves. By watching my neighbor James, I better understand what being stupid means.

If being smart is knowing the truth, then being stupid means believing what you think regardless of its truth. That could mean you believe what’s false, or that you don’t consider truth at all. It should be recognized that we never know the truth, and this is where being smart matters, because the smarter you are, the closer you can come to holding widely different versions of the truth in mind at the same time.

As a therapist, counselor, and coach, my skill is in thinking otherwise. Whatever you or I think, I perform the mental gymnastics to find alternatives. If I can help you find value in what might be different, then I can help you.

## We Hold People to Different Standards

We excuse the dumb actions of children on the basis of their being unaware of the consequences, and that’s largely true. On the other hand, a high-risk tolerant person will also do dumb things, but we’ll say they knew the risk they were taking, as if that somehow makes them smarter.

I think back on all the high-risk things I did in mountaineering and I think that while I may have known the risk, I didn't appreciate the consequences. The risk was I might die, but the consequence I overlooked was that my children would never be born. I have to conclude that I acted stupidly, but what were the alternatives?

Risk versus return is the usual refrain, but what if there are several widely different versions of the truth? In the case of my risk taking, the return might have been a healthier self-confidence. I believe I did achieve that, and I gained this reward without taunting fate too much. Still, I regret the degree to which I did taunt fate, and I blame my mother.

Blaming one's parents is a convenient reason available to all of us. I believe it was true in my case, and it was certainly true in James' case, but our responses have been different. I outgrew my behavior; James won't.

## Learning to Change is Not Coping With the Present

*"If anything simply cannot go wrong, it will anyway."*

— **Murphy's Fifth Law**

There is a difference between conquering and compensating and a smart person will know the difference. Many of us are not smart enough to see this in ourselves. This is the origin of addictive behavior that's alternately referred to as self-medicating or a coping strategy. In both cases, we justify it. We use the intelligence at our disposal and we make a reasoned choice. In situations of stress, trauma, and anxiety that choice may be wrong in retrospect, but it feels correct at the time.

It is not intelligence that leads us to learn better. It might be luck, the luck of seeing around a corner to which we're otherwise blind. Most of us go on repeating the same mistakes, following the same logic, and believing the same truth indefinitely.

It's almost ecological: bad situations continue to build until the environment just won't support them anymore. But then we build institutions to support our bad situations and so extend bad thinking throughout the culture and the world. The mechanisms behind this are wrong headedness, miseducation, and authority.

## Authority Never Allows True Freedom

“The day you think you know everything is the day you become obsolete.”

— **Evy Poumpouras**

I am an independent minded, free learning, anti-authoritarian, and I feel this is the smarter thing to be in the long run. In the short run there is more reward in thinking what others think, believing what others teach, and following the instructions that others give.

James would be better off if he did that as half the time he can't even remember my name. He'll call me Lionel, or Leonard. Reintroduce me to his new e-bike half a dozen times. Make a nuisance of himself when he's smoked too much pot, and wash all his clothes twice a day because he thinks he has bed bugs. While James' problems go beyond a lack of intelligence, he remains a cautionary tale.

James believes in his truth as much as you and I, it's just that we have better minds. But our minds are not that great. I try, and I'm sure you try, but there are things we don't know and can't imagine. It's the imagining part that's especially important.

## Stupid Is As Stupid Does, But Not Always

*“Do not look down on nonsense. Nonsense comes to power. Nonsense murders millions. It prospers if we are too exquisite, too intellectually respectable, to bother with it.”*

— **Leon Wieseltier**

Several people have called me stupid because I tried to do things I was not good at, but these were important attempts. Those who called me stupid did not, themselves, stretch beyond their comfort range, and as a result, their worlds were smaller than my own. They had greater skills in their domains, but I have more domains, and I endeavor to add more.

It's hard to rate what another person knows unless they tell you. Even then, the smartest people will regularly go beyond what they know in order to learn more. But there are just so many boundaries, you can't cross them all, and not all are safe to be crossed.

Seeing the edge of what you know is crucial. Seeing what you cannot see. This is why it's important to have a good imagination. This is why it's important to be creative. It's not that you need to succeed—though perhaps you do when your life depends on it—it's that you need to find

other truths. But you'll never even look for other truths if you believe what you think.

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**If you'd like to start your own exploration,  
then book a free discovery call with me:  
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