



JIM AND THE GHOST.

Illustration by E. W. Kemble, 1885

Projections, Sanity, and Delusions

To evolve is human. If you don't evolve intentionally, you evolve accidentally.

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“If you could kick the person in the pants responsible for most of your trouble, you wouldn't sit for a month.” — Theodore Roosevelt

A Late Response

Last year I wrote to authors of books on dreams and dreaming asking for a brief review or comment on my soon-to-be-published book *Dreaming Yourself Into Being*. I got a few good endorsements and included them in the book.

Two days ago one of the people to whom I wrote finally responded saying,

“I am so. sorry I have so much mail and no Assistant. I am years behind. Have we ever met?”

That was all they said. This was a strange response not only because it was 9 months late but because it didn't say anything. It seemed to stop in the middle of a thought.

I responded with a comment about how to keep up with email, how to avoid spam, encouragement to read my book, and an invitation to collaborate on any topic of mutual interest. With regard to the question of whether we'd met I responded:

“Certainly not. I don't bother fraternizing with 'colleagues' since virtually no colleagues have anything to offer. If I have something worth saying, then I publish it.”

This is true.

A Strange Response

I was surprised to get the following response:

“Did you mean to be so rude and dismissive of the writer you are asking to take the time and the care to read your book?”

This was all they said.

You may have had similar experiences of miscommunication. In the past I would have ascribed such perceived offense as a coincidence of misdirection. It is always possible that someone will take personal offense when you make a judgment or critical statement, but insightful people who don't know each other rarely make negative assumptions on first contact.

I have previously encountered people who take offense or feel threatened when in unfamiliar circumstances. These have all been schizo-affective clients with cognitive, emotional, or perceptual difficulties. Paranoid behavior is related to this condition.

As a therapist, I have been able to improve my clients' behaviors by making them aware that their feelings of threat, fear, injury, or injustice are related to their own prejudices, inappropriate responses, and delusions. The least improvement is in clients who cannot see the role they play in the impressions they form, or those who are simply blind to anything but their own preconceptions.

I have learned to be cautious with new clients, especially if they have a history of confrontation. Conflict almost always requires two people, which means you play a role in creating it. There is always a reason or rationale behind the feeling of injury or offense, but your response is under your control.

In this case, I was surprised because the respondent chose to read my comment as confrontational despite the invitational tone in the rest of my letter. I was confused by the accusation of offensive intent. Having dealt with many oppositional people, I have learned that misunderstandings are best clarified rather than accepted, placated, or avoided.

An Attempt at Explanation

In response I wrote:

“I don’t fraternize, so I don’t meet people. One reads what one sees in one’s mind, rarely what’s on the page. That’s a rule that applies to perception generally. It’s not that I dislike people, it’s that they rarely present themselves in a challenging way. Thanks for your challenging question, why did you bother to ask it?”

This response was intended both to clarify and to set a boundary. I do not accept misunderstandings, I work to clarify them. In this case, I was struck by the question of why this person applied my criticism to themselves, defining themselves as a colleague when we had no relationship. This was the kind of response I would give a therapy client.

Not long after I sent my response I thought, “Why am I responding to this person as I would to a client when they’re not a client? Am I really interested in their response?” I quickly decided that I was not interested in their response. I am already familiar with paranoid delusions and this person is not offering to pay me to deal with theirs.

Cause and Effect

You are responsible for what you cause but not what you trigger. The issues you cause are issues you either cause intentionally, or should be aware you’re causing as a direct consequence of what you do or say.

The issues you trigger are associated with the issues you cause but may not be logically related to them. Triggered issues are reasonably related but not based on commonly or even uncommonly accepted reasons. Triggered issues cannot be accurately predicted. In most cases they cannot be predicted at all.

We prefer a reasonable world, where “reason” means *our* reasons. As that cannot be assured, we fall back to a logical world, where our logic is based on expected actions and agreed consequences.

There are two problems with this kind of predictable world. First, it’s unstable and second, it doesn’t evolve. It’s unstable because it’s the unexpected things and disagreeable actions that dominate our landscape. Abnormal behaviors are more disruptive than the “normal” behaviors are rewarding.

Things only change when we encounter novelty, and novelty only occurs when we look for it intentionally or collide with it by accident. When intentional, we have a measure of control, at least insofar as we know what we’re getting into. But this kind of novelty is conservative at best. It is more often defensive or revanchist, meaning that it is an attempt to recover what we’ve lost.

Unexpected novelty is both more disruptive and more creative, “for better or worse,” as the saying goes. Naturally, we aim for what’s better but, as a consequence of what’s unpredictable, our ability to navigate the outcome depends on our skill in managing the territory. This takes us back to considering what we’re causing and what we’re triggering.

We would like to be the cause of positive things that we follow to positive ends. These are things we can predict, are within our skill set, and which we've seen before. But we expand our skill set by encountering the unpredictable, testing our understanding, and expanding our insights.

As much as we might resist and deny it, we only grow through difficulty and challenge. We might reserve the word "trigger" for the unexpected responses we get from people, but there is greater truth in recognizing that "triggering" applies to causing anything we did not foresee. In fact, you can judge whether or not you're learning anything by the amount of unforeseen events you encounter. In short, if you want to evolve, aim to trigger things.

If you'd like to clarify your boundaries and cross them more easily,

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Nigger

In Ruth Franklin's (2026) great analysis of Mark Twain's "*Huckleberry Finn*" she notes that *Huck Finn* is considered *the* quintessential work of American literature. While it has been taught for almost 150 years, the anger and confusion over the topic of racism has not abated. In fact, the topic is now so divisive that, in many schools, the book cannot be read at all.

Twain uses the word "nigger" to trigger the reader. The word appears over 200 times and mostly in an apparently benign way, from the mouth of Huck Finn, a 13-year-old child who doesn't know what it really means. The whole book, which takes place in the antebellum South, is narrated from Huck's perspective.

At the same time, the real protagonist is Huck Finn's compatriot, the adult Black slave Jim. We never see the world from Jim's eyes, but he is the fulcrum of the story. He is the point of it all. The word "nigger" skewers us to this point, which is the ceaseless triggering of the conflict between of good and evil.

Separating the Good from the Bad

I just returned from a 2-week trip to New York state. As this trip involved a lot of moving between uncertain destinations, I rented a car we could sleep in. I looked for people who would host us parking overnight on their property.

I was directed to a woman named Camilla who only used this one name. This is not her actual name. She only used one name as a rebuke to the patriarchy: she would not adopt a male family name either through marriage or lineage. Clearly, she was edging for a fight on this subject as she made it an issue for anyone who addressed her.

Camilla and I spent our first meeting discussing patriarchy and politics and we found much to agree on. She offered us the free use of her outdoor cabin tent, located in a beautiful but wild, remote field and

which she previously rented for US\$250 a night. Our sharing was successful, the offer was generous, and the largely abandoned tent was filled with mold and black wasps.

It takes a lot of effort to behave both unusually and responsibly. The two are almost contradictions. Camilla wanted to be both without being careful, and this is typically what happens. Needless to say, we stayed somewhere else.

People Needing Therapy Create Therapeutic Situations

Following the insight that I didn't want to engage with my accusatory correspondent, I mentally crafted another response. This was something I might send to a prospective client. The response I imagined went like this:

“Your perception of being attacked is not normal and I suspect it is something you've felt before in other circumstances. I strongly suggest that you take this opportunity to speak with someone who can help you explore other ways our conversation can be interpreted.”

I did not send this comment but the response was true and verbalizing it was useful. However, I do not entangle myself in therapeutic conversations with people who are not therapy clients. Such discussions create responsibility of the kind that I get paid for, and this person was not asking for such a role and would be unlikely to accept it.

In fact, short of being engaged as this person's therapist, I will not communicate with them further. Even if they should respond positively—especially if they respond positively as that would show them to be even more unstable—I will not respond to them at all.

Has This Happened to You?

I'm a high-risk person. I'm attracted to what's unpredictable and out of reach. I'm attracted to what I imagine which I want to make real.

I am writing this piece because a surprisingly high number of the people I encounter are mentally unstable. Their mental disabilities are rarely visible on the surface, but they are not far below the surface. As soon as you begin speaking about deeper topics—especially topics that involve judgment, emotion, or conflict—you can trigger unexpected responses.

I am responsible for the people I encounter and for my disappointment with them. I am also responsible for having met some inspiring people and having been inspired by them. I would not have as rich a life if I had chosen a single or a normal path. I regret not being able to make real all that I have imagined, but I don't see these things offered otherwise.

Some of the people I encounter are unbalanced, a few are dangerous, and even fewer are inspiring. In the territory of the unusual, few people succeed. If you're attracted to this territory, then it is essential that you be realistic. If you are not well grounded and you do not have a backup plan, then you run a real risk of losing your mind.

I take my own advice. I work at both remaining grounded while also triggering the unexpected. The drawback of being grounded is that it tends to be boring. You have to develop a taste for tranquility and a faith that your patience and hard work will pay off.

Are the Benefits Worth It?

The drawbacks of triggering people are obvious as what's hidden is usually socially inappropriate: anger, fear, paranoia, projection, and a lack of self-control. The benefits are hard to see as they present you with views into areas you do not understand and do not yet know how to navigate. As with any risky activity, and as is the rule in rock climbing, you need to keep three points of contact while reaching into the unknown.

The benefits of triggering situations are subtle but, if you can avoid injury, they are enduring. You learn new things and, hopefully, you learn new ways to prevail under adversity. These benefits may not appeal to you, but they are survival skills. Whether or not you need survival skills depends on the conditions you expect to encounter.

I delayed returning to theoretical physics for 45 years, but now that I have I am redefining reality. It doesn't matter whether I'm right or wrong, what matters is that I'm exploring new territory and making sense. I am still waiting to build the intimate relationships I imagine.

In a group call with search and rescue responders, one participant recounted their experience with psychedelics in the Peruvian jungle. The primary skills they learned were humility, patience, and faith. These are an interesting combination of tools for the exploration of the inconceivable, the supernatural, and the insane.

As a therapist, I encourage the more active approach of commitment, honesty, and responsibility. The difference is that when exploring, you do not know and should not preconceive your experience. In contrast, when you engage in counseling and therapy, you're aiming to integrate or acquire new resources for known ends.

Making Plans and Taking Chances

You must take a more active role when you are integrating new skills. In contrast, you must take a more reactive role when exploring new territory. Commitment, honesty, and responsibility are still essential tools for inner work, but exploration is largely outer work, and in outer work you make your plans and take your chances.

Most of us prefer comfort and stability. I appreciate comfort but I find stability to be boring. Human nature presents tolerance on a spectrum ranging from tranquility to anxiety. Some of us are more tolerant than others. I believe more creative people are less boredom-tolerant, while less creative people are more likely to tolerate boredom.

This applies similarly to people who are more adventurous and inventive, but perhaps I am being too general. If you had the choice between skydiving and a sauna, which would you choose?

References

Franklin, R. (2026 Aug. 24). "It's One of Our Greatest and Most Controversial Novels. How Should It Be Taught?" *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/24/magazine/huckleberry-finn-teachers-students-schools.html>