

*A society cannot evolve,
no matter how much freedom is guaranteed,
when the citizenry is more focused on one another
than on their own beliefs and values.*

Chapter Two

❖ A SOCIETY IN REGRESSION

At first glance, medieval Europe and contemporary America seem worlds apart. Our awareness in every field of knowledge is broader, our technology in every aspect of life from healing to war is far superior, our methods of communication and manufacturing are more proficient, our political and religious institutions are more sophisticated, the richness of our artistic expression is increasingly more varied, the complexity of our problems as well as of our solutions is infinitely more intricate. In fact, from the perspective of our more highly evolved technological state, the very term “medieval” has become a metaphor for ignorance and superstition.

However, describing families, institutions, and societies in categories of data, method, structure, and production while omitting the crucial variables of a society’s emotional processes can obscure as much as it can inform. The technological differences between late-fifteenth-century medieval Europe and late-twentieth-century America are obviously great, but there are also some curious similarities between the anxious emotional processes of these two vastly different civilizations, five hundred years apart, that help highlight the factors that are toxic to leadership in our time.

Particularly striking are the similarity of forces that have been disruptive to the emotional balance of these two civilizations, and the symptomatic effects of such disruption. For example, there are forces to be found in both periods that are destructive of relationships and that are, by nature, anxiety-inducing. Each age comes at the end of a benchmark century. Each age has been destabilized by the breakdown of institutions around which society organized itself for centuries, and which may have been binding its anxiety, with feudalism and the papacy on the one hand, segregation and political chauvinism on the other. Both periods of time are characterized by radical power shifts in traditional alliances. In each age, a “global economy” makes many of the old, reliable rules irrelevant or inoperative. And whether your hero is Johann Gutenberg or Steve Jobs, a radical new technology for the transmission of information intensifies the connections of society’s members.

But if there are similarities between the disruptive forces that might unleash anxiety throughout a society, there are also some curious similarities in the regressive symptoms that

can result when such anxiety becomes chronic. Each age is marked by population drifts toward more concentration. Each epoch is characterized by a rising tide of purification: the Inquisition or “political correctness.” Each period is scarred by a rampant plague: Black Death or AIDS. Each society is characterized by increasing polarization, rigidity of belief, clouded vision, and an inability to change direction. There is cynical pessimism about the future, despite the tremendous potential offered by new technology and social change. What both periods have in common is what I shall call a tendency toward societal regression.

Regressive processes are pervasive throughout American civilization today in families, in institutions, and in society at large.

Whereas medieval Europe’s lack of cohesion eventually enabled individuals to separate themselves from its regressive emotional climate, precisely because our technologically advanced society constantly keeps us in often-simultaneous touch with one another it may be more difficult today not to become caught up in the surrounding systemic anxiety. Ironically, the very advances in technology that mark our era tend to intensify the “herding instinct” characteristic of an anxious society. This kind of enmeshment inhibits further the kind of individuation that is the essential precondition for bold leadership and imaginative thinking. As I shall demonstrate below, these regressive processes are pervasive throughout American civilization today in families, in institutions, and in society at large. In fact, it is the automatic and reciprocal feedback among these three emotional fields that makes society’s anxiety systemic.

My thesis here is that the climate of contemporary America has become so chronically anxious that our society has gone into an emotional regression that is toxic to well-defined leadership. This regression, despite the plethora of self-help literature and the many well-intentioned human rights movements, is characterized principally by a devaluing and denigration of the well-differentiated self. It has lowered people’s pain thresholds, with the result that comfort is valued over the rewards of facing challenge, symptoms come in fads, and cures go in and out of style like clothing fashions.

Perhaps most important, however, is this: in contrast to the Renaissance spirit of adventure that was excited by encounter with novelty, American civilization’s emotional regression has perverted the *élan* of risk-taking discovery and pioneering that originally led to the foundations of our nation. As a result, its fundamental character has instead been shaped into an illusive and often compulsive search for safety and certainty. This is occurring equally in parenting, medicine, and management. The anxiety is so deep within the emotional processes of our nation that it is almost as though a neurosis has become nationalized.

Our society has gone into an emotional regression that is toxic to well-defined leadership.

I will begin by describing the nature of an emotional regression and showing how in any society, no matter how advanced its state of technology, chronic anxiety can induce an approach to life that is counter-evolutionary: one does not need dictators in order to create a totalitarian (that is, totalistic) society. Then, employing five characteristics of chronically

anxious families, I will illustrate how those same characteristics are manifest throughout the greater American family today. I will demonstrate their regressive effects on our thinking about and the functioning, formation, and expression of leadership, among parents and presidents. Those five characteristics are:

- ◆ 1. *Reactivity*: the vicious cycle of intense reactions of each member to events and to one another
- ◆ 2. *Herding*: a process through which the forces for togetherness triumph over the forces for individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature members
- ◆ 3. *Blame displacement*: an emotional state in which family members focus on forces that have victimized them rather than taking responsibility for their own being and destiny
- ◆ 4. *A quick-fix mentality*: a low threshold for pain that constantly seeks symptom relief rather than fundamental change
- ◆ 5. *Lack of well-differentiated leadership*: a failure of nerve that both stems from and contributes to the first four To reorient oneself away from a focus on technology toward a focus on emotional process requires that, like Columbus, we think in ways that not only are different from traditional routes but that also sometimes go in the opposite direction. This chapter will thus also serve as prelude to the three that follow, which describe the “equators” we have to cross in our time: the “learned” fallacies or emotional barriers that keep an Old World orientation in place and cause both family and institutional leaders to regress rather than venture in new directions.

Chief among the evolutionary principles of life that have been basic to the development of our species are the following:

- ◆ self-regulation of instinctual drive;
- ◆ adaptation to strength rather than weakness;
- ◆ a growth-producing response to challenge;
- ◆ allowing time for maturing processes to evolve; and
- ◆ the preservation of individuality and integrity.

Societal regression is about the perversion of progress into a counter-evolutionary mode. By the term *regression* I mean to convey something far more profound than a mere loss of progress. In a societal regression, these evolutionary principles of life become distorted, perverted, or actually reversed.

Emotional regression, therefore, is more of a “going down” than a “going back”; it is devolution rather than evolution. It has to do with a lowering of maturity, rather than a reduction in the gross national product. One needs to view societal regression in three dimensions, not two. At the same time that a society is “pro-gressing” technologically it can be “re-gressing” emotionally.

What follows will not be a description of society as a “dysfunctional family.” Families can be quite functional and still be operating in a mode that is emotionally regressed, if not outright psychotic. The focus on symptoms such as drinking, abuse, conflict, and divorce distracts from the possibility that a family can be totally absent of those symptoms and still live in a distorted reality that is ultimately more destructive. People can function quite well in the midst of a full-blown psychosis while a garden-variety neurosis can put them to bed for weeks.

When a society (or any institution) is in a state of emotional regression, it will put its technological advances to the service of its regression, so that the more it advances on one level the more it regresses on another. Furthermore, a civilization’s major technological advances can become perverted into a force for irresponsibility if not immorality, as in modern warfare. The very same distortion can occur far more subtly in a state of peace with regard to advances in science, management, parenting, healing, education, research, or even the most well-meaning efforts to form community.

A civilization’s major technological advances can become perverted into a force for irresponsibility.

The ultimate irony of societal regression, however, is that eventually it co-opts the very institutions that train and support the leaders who could pull a society out of its devolution. It does this by concentrating their focus on *data* and *technique* rather than on emotional process and the leader’s own self. These always go hand-in-hand. One result is erosion of the individuation necessary for well-defined leadership to arise or express itself. Another result is that parents and presidents then fail to recognize that in the shaping of any institution, emotional processes are more powerful than the nature of its structure or makeup. This widespread misperception is more than a failure to observe, however. The focus on data and technique is itself a characteristic of emotional regression: namely, avoidance or denial of the fact that it is happening.

❖ BOWEN FAMILY THEORY

The concept of an emotionally regressed society was first developed in the mid-twentieth century by Dr. Murray Bowen of Georgetown Medical School. One of the seminal thinkers in what was then the relatively new field of family therapy, he had begun to apply his observations of deeply disturbed families to society itself. What enabled him to make this transition was that, for Bowen, family therapy was not simply some new technique for “fixing” families. It was, rather, a radically different way of understanding the universal emotional processes found everywhere: in families, institutions, nations, and civilizations. In making this conceptual leap, like Columbus, he went in a direction that was opposite to most thinking in his time. Rather than trying to understand families in terms of their cultural, class, or ethnic distinctions or how they differed from other kinds of human institutions, Bowen focused instead on the underlying natural systems principles that all families share, even

though they might express those universal principles in different cultural garb.

The most critical issue in understanding human institutions is how well they are able to handle the natural tension between individuality and togetherness.

From this “reversed” perspective, the most critical issues in understanding human institutions are not their customs, rituals, and ceremonies but rather how well families or other institutions are able to handle the natural tension between individuality and togetherness, their ability to maintain their integrity during crisis, and their capacity to produce well-differentiated leadership. While families and other institutions obviously differ in these regards, from this vantage point the key variables in that difference have less to do with their respective cultural traditions or sociological niche than with the way their members are connected emotionally, as well as how they have handled crises in the past. One cannot say, after all, that the families of any given ethnicity or even class are more mature than those of another background. It is rather the multigenerational emotional process, transmitted from generation to generation uniquely by each family, that puts aspects of its cultural or ethnic background to its own emotional service.

By going in this direction, Bowen was able to observe new horizons, in particular the ways in which the principles found universally in family life also manifest themselves in the emotional processes of other institutions as well as in society itself. Drawing on observations from his pioneering research at the National Institutes of Mental Health, as well as a professional lifetime of working with severely impaired families, Bowen was struck by similarities between what he had been observing with increasing frequency in American society everywhere and what he had been used to seeing in chronically anxious families of various backgrounds—especially those with acting-out children.

Extrapolating from his broad experience, he went on to develop the idea that, as with individual families, the anxiety curve of an entire civilization also goes through periods when it rises or falls. And, as with individual families, Bowen suggested, an entire society could lose its ability to cope with change when certain factors occur simultaneously:

- ◆ Anxiety escalates as society is overwhelmed by the quantity and speed of change.
- ◆ The institutions or individuals (whether scapegoat or symptomatic) that traditionally absorb or bind off society’s anxiety are no longer available to absorb it.

In family life the major destabilizing changes are birth and death, marriage and divorce, geographical relocation, retirement, and a significant relational, health, economic, or legal crisis. Physical or “mental” symptoms surface in any given nuclear family (irrespective of cultural background) within six months of these two factors, reaching critical thresholds somewhere within that family’s extended relational field.

An example from society is the treatment of Jews in medieval Europe, where they were alternately driven out and allowed to reenter. This vacillation has been attributed to their economic importance as moneylenders in an incipient capitalist economy where it was un-Christian to lend money at interest. By keeping Jews in a pariah position (the so-called

identified patient position in family therapy thinking), medieval Europe was able to bind off its anxiety by focusing on the alienated group. It was the rise in anxiety that occurred after Jews were no longer available to absorb this anxiety that induced nations to allow them back. This notion of anxiety-binding also suggests that when nations go from discrimination to extermination or ethnic cleansing, they can be unwittingly upsetting their own emotional balance to such an extent that one result of success at “ethnic cleansing” would be more internal polarizations and internecine struggles.

When both of these factors occur at the same time, suggested Bowen, the societal leaders (including parents) lose their capacity to lead and the relationship system of that society, irrespective of culture or era, begins to exhibit the same patterns of thinking and relating that one tends to find in families with severely impaired members or in those in which the fabric of coherence has begun to disintegrate. Principally, that regression would show up in a lessened capacity of a society’s “family” members to operate on the basis of principle; their response to challenge would become narrow and lose its resiliency and their overall imaginative capacity would become stuck. To use the metaphors of the previous chapter, the “family’s” orbit would become circumscribed as it feared mistakes; it would fail to expose itself to serendipity; and, in its unwillingness to risk, it would live in a distorted reality. “Family” members, therefore, would soon find themselves on a treadmill of efforts to get free. They would be unable to obtain the distance that could shift their orientation and become polarized on anxiety-driven issues.

❖ THE SPECTER OF CHRONIC ANXIETY

The kind of anxiety Bowen was referring to is not what is usually meant by therapists or psychologists who are diagnosing individuals nor the existential “angst” of philosophers—the anxiety that is a byproduct of being mortal, the fact that we are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Nor is it the anxiety that is meant by political commentators who refer to our era as “an age of anxiety,” pointing to economic worries or fears of violence or nuclear holocaust—although it might include such fears.

Chronic anxiety is systemic; it is deeper and more embracing than community nervousness. Rather than something that resides within the psyche of each one, it is something that can envelop, if not actually connect, people. It is a regressive emotional process that is quite different from the more familiar, acute anxiety we experience over specific concerns. Its expression is not dependent on time or events, even though specific happenings could seem to trigger it, and it has a way of reinforcing its own momentum. Chronic anxiety might be compared to the volatile atmosphere of a room filled with gas fumes. Any sparking incident could set off a conflagration, yet rather than trying to disperse the fumes people blame the person who struck the match.

The issues over which chronically anxious systems become concerned, therefore, are more likely to be the *focus* of their anxiety rather than its cause. This is why, for example, counselors, educators, and consultants who offer technical solutions for how to manage whatever brought the family in—conflict, money, parents, children, aging, sex—will rarely

succeed in changing that family in any fundamental way. The anxiety that drives the problem simply switches to another focus. Assuming that what a family is worried about is what is “causing” its anxiety is tantamount to blaming a blown-away tree or house for attracting the tornado that uprooted it.

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As with the families they are trying to help, “change artists” often confuse cause with effect. In fact, there is reason to believe that the very effort to offer quick-fix technical solutions, rather than encouraging the client family to become engaged in the much slower and more painful process of modifying its anxious emotional processes, is itself evidence that the consultant has become caught up in his or her client’s anxiety. And that, in turn, says something about the importance of the *being* of the consultant, no matter how superior his or her eloquence, knowledge, or method.

As long as the focus is on technique, the being of the consultant is irrelevant. It is only when the focus is on emotional process that the consultant’s presence can be considered an important variable—which is perhaps why focus on technique is so seductive. Clients can rarely rise above the maturity level of their helpers, however.

All the same would be true, of course, regarding the failure of consultants to change governmental, business, non-profit, religious, or medical institutions. Administrative, technical, and managerial solutions (such as centralizing, decentralizing, recentralizing, deconstructing, downsizing, right-sizing, or otherwise reengineering) may often alleviate the symptoms of an organization. But they rarely modify the malignant chronic anxiety that could have been part of that institution’s “corporate culture” for generations, and that, if left unmodified, will resurface periodically in different shapes and forms. Malignant conditions are rarely cured by “new blood” or radical surgery. It becomes all the more difficult to keep this principle in mind while focusing on the microcosm of a given institution within society when the macrocosm of society is itself in a state of emotional regression.

The issues upon which a chronically anxious civilization concentrates are less the cause of its anxiety than its focus.

Extending this way of thinking to society at large, the issues upon which a chronically anxious civilization concentrates are also less the cause of its anxiety than its focus. When families get fixed on their symptoms—abuse, alcoholism, delinquency, marital conflict, or chronic physical illness—rather than on the emotional processes that keep those symptoms chronic, they will recycle their problems perpetually no matter what technical changes they make, how much advice they receive from experts, or how hard they try to understand their symptoms.

The same is the case when an entire society stays focused on the acute symptoms of its chronic anxiety—violence, drugs, crime, ethnic and gender polarization, economic factors such as inflation and unemployment, bureaucratic obstruction, an entangling tax code, and so on—rather than on the emotional processes that promote those symptoms and keep them

chronic. In that case, the society will continue to recycle its problems, no matter how much legislation it passes, how it redistributes its resources, how many agencies it creates or dismantles, how many forms it finds for reinventing itself, or how many wars it engages in as a way of binding that anxiety off.

The process feeds back upon itself. The more chronic anxiety becomes systemic in any “family,” the more likely that relationship system is to stay oriented toward its symptoms, or the more likely it is to engage in “foreign” entanglements—wars and international crises for nations; intense struggles at neighborhood swimming pools, religious institutions, or school boards for families—as a way to avoid facing the emotional processes that are driving that “family” to become symptomatic.

There is no way out of a chronic condition unless one is willing to go through an acute, temporarily more painful, phase.

This distinction between acute and chronic anxiety has major ramifications for the functioning and being of leaders. There is no way out of a chronic condition unless one is willing to go through an acute, temporarily more painful, phase. This is another universal principle of emotional process that transcends the social science construction of reality. Whether we are considering a toothache, a tumor, a relational bind, a technical problem, crime, or the economy, most individuals and most social systems, irrespective of their culture, gender, or ethnic background, will “naturally” choose or revert to chronic conditions of bearable pain rather than face the temporarily more intense anguish of acute conditions that are the gateway to becoming free. But what is also universally true is that chronic conditions, precisely because they are more bearable, also tend to be more withering over time.

❖ CHARACTERISTICS OF CHRONICALLY ANXIOUS FAMILIES

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, there are five interlocking characteristics of chronically anxious families, with regressive parallels in the greater American family of today. Each is regressive because it subverts a major principle of the way life on this planet has survived and evolved, as shown below.

CHARACTERISTIC	EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS SUBVERTED
1. Reactivity	Self-regulation of instinctual drive
2. Herding	Adaptation toward strength
3. Blame Displacement	A growth-producing response to challenge
4. A Quick-Fix Mentality	Allowing time for processes to mature
5. Failure of Nerve in Leadership	All of the above

All five characteristics contribute to one another, although the fifth, lack of leadership, may be the link among them all. The first four share two factors in common that always tend to compromise effective leadership: denial of emotional process and a devaluing of the individuality that is necessary for summoning “nerve.” Conversely, as I will demonstrate later, well-differentiated leadership tends to diminish the intensity of all four. All families will at times exhibit these characteristics when their anxiety reaches certain thresholds, and probably no family or institution is more than 70 percent free of them over an extended period of time. But there are some families that are only free of those characteristics 30 percent of the time, and even that number may be too high. I suggest that America’s leadership difficulties are due to the fact that at this point in the history of the greater American family we are closer to the 30 percent than the 70 percent. Similarly, many of the events that are used to illustrate the chronic anxiety in contemporary American society have occurred in other eras. It is not the specific illustrations but their volume, their intensity, and their interconnections that single out our time.

According to E. O. Wilson, author of *Sociobiology*, the three essential characteristics for an enduring society—whether it consists of ants or humans—are *cooperation*, *cohesiveness*, and *altruism*. In civilized human societies these characteristics have been made possible by the development of our ability to regulate our instincts rather than let them drive us automatically. Under conditions of chronic anxiety, however, that capacity is eroded—and with it go cooperation, cohesiveness, and altruism.

1. Reactivity

The most blatant characteristic of chronically anxious families is the vicious cycle of intense *reactivity* of each member to events and to one another. It is as though the family were contained in a “feeling plasma,” with everyone’s nervous system constantly bombarded by the emissions of everyone else’s. This state is not to be confused with “emotionality”: dogged passivity can also be a reactive response.

Responses in a chronically anxious family can be framed and phrased quite rationally and with impeccable logic and charm, but it is as though they were driven by forces that had totally bypassed the cortex, and they tend to be triggered by outside stimuli rather than from within. For example, members of chronically anxious families will be quick to interrupt one another, if not to jump in and complete one another’s sentences, and they are constantly taking and making things “personal.” Communication is marked more by diagnostic or labeling “you” positions rather than by self-defining “I” statements. Rather than saying, “This is what I believe,” “Here is how I perceive it,” “This is what I will do,” family members stay focused on the other: “You’re just like your mother,” “You’re a control freak,” “You’re insensitive, unfeeling, irrational, missing the point, or just don’t get it.” The family is thus easily “heated up” as feelings are confused with opinions. Those inclined to become hysterical and those inclined to be passive-aggressive will both find their tendencies promoted.

Highly reactive families are a panic in search of a trigger.

Family members, therefore, are easily brought to loggerheads over the most inconsequential issues. The more aggressive members are in a perpetually argumentative stance, and the more passive are in a constant state of flinch. Attempts by any one member to express a well-defined stand calmly will be disrupted before he or she has reached a semicolon. In such families anxiety circuits become superconductive; there is little resistance within the system to its surges. Highly reactive families are a panic in search of a trigger. And the quickest trigger is any issue that involves a child. In fact, many chronically anxious families can be described as “child-focused.”

The fact that it is difficult for any one member of a chronically anxious family to remain calm enough to think out a well-defined position perpetuates the momentum. The very calmness of one member often creates more reactivity in the other members, as they perceive calmness to be lack of concern and confuse reactivity with passion. Members of highly reactive families, therefore, wind up constantly focused on the latest, most immediate crisis, and they remain almost totally incapable of gaining the distance that would enable them to see the emotional processes in which they are engulfed. The emotionally regressed family will stay fixed on its symptoms, and family thinking processes will become stuck on the content of specific issues rather than on the emotional processes that are driving those matters to become “issues.” The systemic anxiety thus locks everyone into a pessimistic focus on the pathology within the family, and it becomes almost impossible for such systems to reorient themselves to a focus on their inherent strengths.

Systemic anxiety locks everyone into a pessimistic focus on the pathology within the family.

What also contributes to this loss of perspective is the disappearance of *playfulness*, an attribute that originally evolved with mammals and which is an ingredient in both intimacy and the ability to maintain distance. You can, after all, play with your pet cat, horse, or dog, but it is absolutely impossible to develop a playful relationship with a reptile, whether it is your pet salamander (no matter how cute), or your pet turtle, snake, or alligator. They are deadly serious (that is, purposive) creatures.

Chronically anxious families (including institutions and whole societies) tend to mimic the reptilian response: Lacking the capacity to be playful, their perspective is narrow. Lacking perspective, their repertoire of responses is thin. Neither apology nor forgiveness is within their ken. When they try to work things out, their meetings wind up as brain-stem-storming sessions. Indeed, in any family or organization, seriousness is so commonly an attribute of the most anxious (read “difficult”) members that they can quite appropriately be considered to be functioning out of a reptilian regression. Broadening the perspective, the relationship between anxiety and seriousness is so predictable that the absence of playfulness in any institution is almost always a clue to the degree of its emotional regression.

In an atmosphere where everything is dire, a vicious cycle develops, as a loss of playfulness destroys perspective. When that circular process reaches unbearable thresholds, the chronically anxious family will not be able to contain its reactivity within its own boundaries, and some members will begin transmitting the family’s intensity beyond the family (acting out violently, combatively, or sexually) into a broad range of society’s other

institutions, such as church choirs, synagogue religious schools, traffic, PTA meetings, a condominium association, or any office or place of business.

But the most damaging effect of intense reactivity in any family is on its capacity to produce or support a leader. As the capacity of any member to achieve self-regulation or distance disintegrates, so does the ability, or desire, to lead. Reactivity, therefore, eventually makes chronically anxious families leaderless, either because it prevents potential leaders from emerging in the first place or because it wears leaders down by sabotaging their initiatives and resolve with constant automatic responses.

In the greater American family we call society, all of the same attributes of reactivity are rife today: the automatic response, the pessimistic focus on pathology rather than strength, the intrusiveness into the boundaries of others, the loss of playfulness, the wearing down of leaders.

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As with any chronically anxious family, there is in American society today an intense quickness to interfere in another's self-expression, to overreact to any perceived hurt, to take all disagreement too seriously, and to brand the opposition with ad hominem personal epithets (chauvinist, ethnocentric, homophobic, and so on). As in personal families, this hardens hearts and leaves little room for forgiveness or balanced accommodation. The following example shows how our communities adapt themselves to the least mature and most dependent person.

While turning a corner, a woman driver clips the edge of a stopped car and continues to drive away in front of several bystanders. The driver of the hit car, a young teenager, runs after the hit-and-run car, catches up to it at the next stop sign, reaches in and takes the driver's keys, saying, "We are calling the police." But when she says to him, "*You hit my car,*" he realizes how crazy she is, gives her back the keys, and starts to drive off, while she stands in front of his car waving madly in an effort to prevent him from moving. He swerves around her, however, and leaves, but notices in his rearview mirror that she is sitting in the middle of the street beating her breast. Two months later, he is arraigned by police for hitting her in the jaw when he reached in and took the keys. At the trial, the judge says he never saw so many witnesses come forth voluntarily, and he scolds the woman for making such mischief.

Why did it get that far? Relentlessly, she had gone to the police, week after week, talking to the person who decides if a charge should be honored and sent on to trial. This officer of the court finally gave in against his better judgment and let it go to trial just to be rid of her, even though that decision wound up costing the young driver thousands of dollars in attorney fees and lost work time.

The leaders of the greater American family are almost completely incapable of gaining the distance necessary for objectivity.

With chronic social anxiety, the major regressive effect on leaders is the same as in families. They remain in a reactive stance themselves, led by each emerging crisis rather than being able to take a proactive stance that develops out of an objective perspective or principle. Being constantly engaged in the chronically anxious reactive climate, the leaders of the greater American family are almost completely incapable of gaining the distance necessary for objectivity. The constant engagement also prevents leaders from being able to take the necessary time out to become clear about their own vision and prepare new initiatives. Ultimately, even the desire to lead is eroded.

Almost everywhere I have traveled, whether the leaders are at the state level or the local level, whether their bailiwick is finance or education, the complaint is always the same: “I am constantly barraged by competing activist groups whether I do, or do not, take a stand, and no matter what stand I take. Efforts to establish reasonable discussion of the issues are a waste, and efforts to mold a working consensus are impossible. Something is going on that is more than the right to dissent. There are always some disaffected people out there that just won’t let go. I thought I could make a difference, but there’s no way to get a handle on the damn thing.”

This kind of statement was made to me by both a school official in a small community and the governor of a very large state, on different sides of the Mississippi. Both, after years of dedicated public service, decided not to fight for reelection when their term was up.

Finally, as the following story illustrates, the reactivity that is characteristic of emotionally regressed America today can induce a “dis-courag-ing” failure of nerve among society’s most individualistic leaders.

A prominent attorney, known for his passionate defense of justice and his courage in defending unpopular sides, disagreed strongly with a newspaper story that argued for nullifying the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech when it came to politically incorrect stands on pornography. The article, written in a provocative style, also slurred, backhandedly with pointed ad hominem arguments, those who disagreed with the author’s views, questioning their loyalty to democracy.

Driving to his office the next morning, the attorney, who had a long history of civil rights defenses going all the way back to the days of McCarthy, mentally composed a letter to the editor showing how his own longstanding commitment to the right of free speech had increased rather than decreased after he had defended a client on similar issues. But then, after further consideration, he never went through with the letter, saying to himself, “Who needs all those phone calls?” Yet he had never flinched when it came to the red-baiters who accused him of treason.

2. *The Herd Instinct*

Since the emergence of the earliest self-reproducing life forms, a critical principle of evolution has been that as new forms develop, life evolves in the direction of its strengths by preserving a balance between togetherness and individuality. The herding instinct in a chronically anxious family upsets that balance, however, by encouraging the force for togetherness to smother the force for individuality. It does so by reversing the direction of adaptation toward strength, and it winds up organizing its existence around the least mature,

the most dependent, or the most dysfunctional members of the “colony.”

A major byproduct of the reactivity in chronically anxious families is the dominance of the forces for “togetherness.” The more automatic the responses in any relationship system become, and the less time-lapse there is between reactions, the more likely it is that everyone will be emotionally fused with everyone else. This emotional herding reinforces many of the factors mentioned above regarding the loss of space and distance. When chronic anxiety reaches systemic proportions, the desire for good feelings rather than progress will on its own promote togetherness over individuality.

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The “togetherness” that forms under such circumstances is undifferentiated. It is more a stuck-togetherness, similar to the kind of oneness that is characteristic of cults. The chronically anxious, herding family almost seems to develop a “self ” of its own to which everyone is expected to adapt. As its regression deepens, it will turn the togetherness principle into the supreme goal that rules every member and transcends all other values. In the herding family, dissent is discouraged, feelings are more important than ideas, peace will be valued over progress, comfort over novelty, and cloistered virtues over adventure. Problems are formulated in rigid either/or, black-and-white, all-or-nothing categories. In this cult-like atmosphere, members of the family will tend to pressure both outsiders and “their own” to adapt to the centrality of its togetherness principle. This behavior is always short-sighted, since it promotes contrariness, conflicts of will, and perversity. In fact, the constant pressure of various members on one another to adapt, whether through threats or charm, is often characteristic of the families with the most severe physical and emotional problems.

In the herding family, dissent is discouraged, feelings are more important than ideas, peace will be valued over progress, comfort over novelty, and cloistered virtues over adventure.

The alternative, however, is not to promote compromise and consensus but to develop the kind of self-differentiation in each member that will increase their toleration of every other member’s differentiation. The chronically anxious family’s all-or-nothing attitude makes the family more likely to split and increases the possibility that alienated members will cut off one another. While this alienation may seem to go against the desire for togetherness, it has a selective effect that preserves the homogeneity of the herd, for only those who are willing to surrender their self to the family’s self will be comfortable in the homogenized togetherness. And where the family does not break up, the intense, locked-in polarization between members can also be understood as another kind of emotional fusion. Perhaps the major goal of family counselors ought to be to help people separate so that they do not have to “separate.”

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The overall effect of herding is circular: if reactivity causes people to herd, then herding increases the conditions for reactivity. To the extent that members of an emotionally fused family become caught up in one another, the process inhibits the individuation of its members. This loss of self in turn lessens the capacity of any one member to gain the distance and perspective that are needed to maintain self-regulation, thus diminishing further the imaginative capacity of anyone to even see things differently from the rest of the “herd,” all the more so when the herd is in a reactive stampede.

The herding effect, therefore, militates even further against the kind of genuine self-definition that is a sine qua non for well-defined leadership. In addition, the overall atmosphere of conflict seduces leaders into thinking that the way to bring change is by exerting their will upon the family rather than by modifying its resistance through the nature of their own being and presence.

But the most important ramification of the herding phenomenon for leadership is its counter-evolutionary effect. In order to be “inclusive,” the herding family will wind up adopting an appeasement strategy toward its most troublesome members while sabotaging those with the most strength to stand up to the troublemakers. The chronically anxious, herding family will be far more willing to risk losing its leadership than to lose those who disturb their togetherness with their immature responses. Always striving for consensus, it will react against any threat to its togetherness by those who stand on principle rather than good feelings. The herding instinct will move an emotionally regressed family to a position where it endeavors to accommodate the disruptions of the immature and of those who think in terms of their rights rather than their responsibilities. Rather than support those who stand tall and take on the most disturbed members, the herding family will adapt to the symptom-bearer (alcoholic, delinquent, substance abuser, gambler, hot-tempered one) and undercut anyone who attempts to define himself or herself against the forces of togetherness. They often characterize that person as “cruel,” “heartless,” “insensitive,” “unfeeling,” “uncooperative,” “selfish,” and “cold.”

Always striving for consensus, a chronically anxious family will react against any threat to its togetherness by those who stand on principle rather than good feelings.

Actually, this tendency to adapt to immaturity and to sabotage strength is so often characteristic of chronically anxious systems that a good rule of thumb for leaders who are trying to pull any institution out of its regression is that when people start calling them names there is a good chance they are going in the right direction. Carried to its ultimate extreme, the herding instinct of the chronically anxious family will eventually lead that family to organize itself around the symptomatic member rather than around its (potential) leader. The symptomatic member will then become the axis around which the family’s entire life revolves, the “squeaky wheel” perpetually getting the “grease.”

The major effect of this system on leadership is that it hinders, if not cripples, the capacity to be decisive. The word *decisive* comes from the Latin root *cedere*, “to cut.” When one makes a decision, one is making choices, which includes the choice of being willing to give something up. When families are in a herding mode, however, the fusion in the togetherness

force inhibits the capacity and the willingness to conceptualize solutions in such terms. The resulting indecisiveness of leaders is also reinforced by the herding force's erosion of self. Most of the decisions we make in life turn out to be right or wrong not because we were prescient about the future—which, after all, does not exist yet—but because of what we do after we make the decision. And the less confidence leaders have in their ability to stand alone after they make a decision, the less likely they are to make one.

The herding instinct in chronically anxious America has the same effect of furthering adaptation to the least mature, to those who are most unwilling to take responsibility for their own emotional being and destiny. Its influence on leaders is several-fold. It discourages them from expressing “politically incorrect” opinions and encourages them to play it safe generally; it undermines excellence by encouraging society to organize around its most dysfunctional elements; it forces leaders to engage in countless arguments that are dilatory; and it makes it more difficult for leaders to be clear, much less decisive. Leaders in chronically anxious America today—whether they are black or white, Jewish or Christian, liberal or conservative, young or old, male or female—tend to adapt to the most incessantly demanding members of their following.

The effects show up in language usage, in the administration of justice, in education and welfare policy, in divorce settlements, in the emphasis those who specialize in conflict resolution put on compromise, in the conduct of public meetings, and even in the world of sports. And in some institutions the togetherness forces put such a premium on inclusivity that those who do not agree with making it the overriding principle of the organization are isolated or rejected, thus creating Orwellian “Animal Farms” in which diversity is eliminated in the name of diversity.

One of the most extraordinary examples of adaptation to immaturity in contemporary American society today is how the word *abusive* has replaced the words *nasty* and *objectionable*. The latter two words suggest that a person has done something distasteful, always a matter of judgment. But the use of the word *abusive* suggests, instead, that the person who heard or read the objectionable, nasty, or even offensive remark was somehow victimized by dint of the word entering their mind. This confusion of being “hurt” with being damaged makes it seem as though the feelings of the listener or reader were not their own responsibility, or as though they had been helplessly violated by another person's opinion. If our bodies responded that way to “insults,” we would not make it very far past birth.

The confusion of being “hurt” with being damaged makes it seem as though the feelings of the listener or reader were not their own responsibility.

The use of *abusive* rather than *objectionable* has enabled those who do not want to take responsibility for their own efforts to tyrannize others, especially leaders, with their “sensitivity.” The desire to be “inoffensive” has resulted in more than one news medium producing long lists of words, few of which are really nasty, that reporters should avoid using for fear of “hurting” someone. Obviously there are some words that are downright impolite if not always hostile and disparaging, but making everyone sensitive to the sensitivities of others plays into the hands of those who feel powerless. And the notion that one can change

attitudes by changing the way people express themselves is highly questionable. As I shall elaborate in [chapter 4](#), often the shoe is actually on the other foot. It has been my impression that at any gathering, whether it be public or private, those who are quickest to inject words like *sensitivity*, *empathy*, *consensus*, *trust*, *confidentiality*, and *togetherness* into their arguments have perverted these humanitarian words into power tools to get others to adapt to them.

Here is a series of vignettes, each of which metaphorizes the adaptation to immaturity rather than to strength that has become so widespread throughout the “greater American family.”



One day, after I had spent a full day in court, I asked a small group of judges about a repeated pattern that appalled me. I noticed a variety of people brought before the bar on various charges from disturbing the peace to traffic violations. In each case, after the judge made his decision, the citizens, whether they were professional persons, someone engaged in business, or a garden-variety mother and housewife, generally accepted the verdict without argument.

But almost every time irresponsible, flaky, often drug-addicted drifters (most of whom were there for the second or third time because they did not follow the judge’s decree the first time) received a new decree, they tried to bargain with the judge, complaining helplessly that it was unfair and that they didn’t think they would be able to follow such a stringent order.

Every one of these irresponsible people seemed to dip into the same storehouse of explanations for why they had not followed the judge’s order the first time. Each one came across compliant and repentant, but they all also focused on their rights rather than their responsibilities. What astounded me most, however, was that the judge on the bench constantly was willing to engage in the bargaining! When I mentioned this incident to the judges they sighed, rolled their eyes, and talked about how helpless they felt to bring about a change in a community that would not back up “harsh” treatment.



A very large community organization situated near the ghetto of a metropolitan area was known for giving free food to the “poverty stricken” and homeless in the community. The director, who had been there for several years and had not seen much evidence that this charity furthered responsibility, suggested a change: that a list of work projects be drawn up that the community needed, and that all those who came for meals should be told that they would have to sign up for one of the projects before they could receive a free meal. The negative reaction of some members of his board to the proposal was so severe that he almost had to leave in order to prevent the opposition from leaving and forming a new (rival) organization.



A group of clergy came to me from one of the major religious denominations and said, “We

are about to start a project that will raise fifty million dollars for our five hundred most troubled ministers. How would you spend it?" I responded, "Why would you put the fifty million into your five hundred most troubled? You will advance your denomination and our society far more if you put it into your five hundred best." They answered, "But we could never raise the money for that."



A woman, age thirty-two, who had twice left her husband because of his controlling ways but who returned each time because of his promises to change, finally took her three children and left. The man, age thirty-four, who had been used to getting his way, could not deal with her differentiation. At first, seemingly in a panic, he called everyone who knew her, literally anywhere in the world, and urged them to talk her into coming back. When she was adamant about not returning, he cut off her funds completely. Next, he began to sabotage her at work by calling and leaving false messages. He hired the most notoriously vicious lawyer he could find. He stopped payments on their house after borrowing heavily against it and saddled her with half the debt. He locked her out of the house, kept the kids' toys, and stored their furniture where she could not find it. He sold her wedding gifts. He kept telling lies to their children about their mother's reputation. He tried to have her declared an unfit mother and ran up thousands of dollars in psychological consultation bills for their children, which he also never paid.

Despite the fact that everyone involved was clearly on her side, the husband continued to flout the courts, the banks, and whoever else in society was in a position to "bring the law down" on him. Instead of doing just that, they all kept pressuring her to go half-way every time he made a new demand. The response of their children's therapist captured it all. When asked why she had not made a stronger report to the court about the father's unfitness to be a father and his obstruction of the mother-child relationship, she expressed what everyone else had evidently also felt: "Frankly, I don't want to have to deal with him."



One wintry afternoon in a large Midwestern metropolis, I gave a presentation before an audience of several hundred people entitled "Lessons from the Holocaust for Survival Today." Throughout my talk I focused on the strengths of those who had survived and I tried to show how weak leadership could create a totalitarian society as quickly as autocratic leadership. The subversion of democracy, I suggested, could come about not only from the abrogation of civil liberties but also from a failure of nerve among its leaders to stand up to uncompromising factions that wanted everyone else to adapt to them.

After the intermission, a panel representing various institutions in the community assembled to respond to questions, and people began to form lines at several microphones scattered throughout the audience. At one point, someone asked the panel a question concerning the difficulty he was experiencing in applying his artistic talents to the subject matter of the Holocaust. When it came my turn to respond, I said that the problem might be

that he was trying to use his art in a utilitarian way, to send a message, and that this attitude tends to make artists more prosaic. Perhaps things would go better, I added, if he did not focus on a pointed message, but just let his soul express itself, and let the medium of his artistry be the message. Returning to my major theme of the day, I added that this was a problem with some feminist and other politically purposed art today, in that it was more concerned to make a statement than to let the artist's imagination flower individually.

As soon as I had expressed my point of view, a woman in the front row literally ran up to one of the audience microphones and, squeezing in front of the line of people that was waiting patiently to ask their questions, grabbed the microphone herself and exclaimed that she just could not sit still and listen to this abuse of women. She justified her subversion of the democratic process with her zeal and then made an impassioned attack on chauvinism. This then engaged all the members of the panel for the next fifteen minutes on a subject that was irrelevant to the day. Moreover, what happened was an example of precisely what I had been talking about, as they reactively tried to soothe her and in the process let her reactivity steal the agenda.

The reason for this sidetracking was not due to my comment nor the woman's retort, however. The regression came about because the moderator (that is, the leader) of the panel was a "nice guy" (a former minister and president of a local educational institution) who did not have the temerity to set limits on this person's invasiveness. He was more concerned to assuage her hurt feelings, to right her perceived slight, and to keep good feelings going in the community. By letting her speak and guiding the panel in a discussion of her remarks, he thereby adapted the entire community to her demands rather than "keep her in line." He might have said, "Madam, I can see that this is a very important subject to you, but we have set up a protocol for how this afternoon is to proceed, and if you will kindly wait your turn, I can promise you that you will have the opportunity to state your views." Or, he might have even said, "Madam, not only are you impolite, but it is you who are being *abusive*: of the audience, of the speaker, and of those members of your community who are waiting behind you."



A football coach offers a contrasting view on adaptation to strength. Appalled at the coddling of complaining athletes, this coach exclaimed, "When I coach, if receivers complain that the quarterback throws the ball too hard, I don't go to the quarterback and tell him to let up. I tell him to throw it as hard as he can, and I then tell the receivers they had better hang on to his passes if they want to hang on to the team. If those who cover punts complain that the punter kicks it too far, I don't go to the punter and tell him not to kick it so far. I tell the punter to kick it as far as he can, and I'll try to find players who can get down the field and cover his kicks. And if blockers say that they have trouble keeping up with a running back because he's too fast or too slippery, I don't get on the running back and tell him to go slower; I tell him to do his thing as best as he is able, and I get on his blockers to keep up with his agility."

What would it take to get CEOs, parents, judges, therapists, and those who specialize in conflict resolution to establish a similar pattern of adaptation?

3. Blame Displacement

One of the major advances in modern medicine has been the effort to stamp out disease not by trying to eliminate all the disease agents in the environment, but by enabling the body to limit a toxic agent's invasiveness. This immunological approach to disease is in line with what has worked for life from the beginning, for the toxicity of an environment is only one variable in survival. Another often more determining factor is the response of the endangered organism or species. The chronically anxious family, however, seems to be devoid of an immune response. It will not draw on its own resources, but will remain focused on what it perceives to be the outside agent.

Chronically anxious families encourage blame rather than ownership. This is a natural by-product of the erosion of the well-differentiated self that results from a herding attitude. The capacity to take responsibility for one's own being and destiny requires integrity, which in this context means not only honesty but being "put together well."

The projection process of casting blame outward rather than taking responsibility for one's own condition shows up with regard to both other family members and other institutions and forces. Within the family, members will take turns accusing one another of controlling them, hurting them, causing them to fail, being an obstacle to their own life goals, or even dropping something in the kitchen. The blaming attitude also feeds into the previously mentioned reactivity that spawns accusatory, binding, "you" statements ("Why did you have to embarrass me again last night with your drinking?") rather than responsible "I" positions of self-definition ("I have decided that you have the right to make a fool of yourself. But from now on, I am going in my own car"). Ad hominem retorts that displace the problem onto another's personality are almost always an indication not only of the anxiety of the person expressing them but also of their helplessness, if not emptiness.

Another favorite way that chronically anxious families avoid responsibility is to bind off their anxiety by coalescing around "dis-placement issues." If it is an internal displacement, the issue might be money, sex, an in-law, an ex-spouse, an illness, or a troublesome child. If it is an external displacement, it might be an institution to which the family belongs or a professional person from whom they have desperately been seeking assurance or magical solutions. Displacement distracts family members from more painful matters that would focus them on themselves or their own relationships. And the effect on the object of displacement is that it then becomes extremely difficult to be objective about the nature and extent of its real problems, since so much added anxiety has been grafted onto it.

Displacement distracts family members from more painful matters that would focus them on themselves or their own relationships.

The chronically anxious family is caught in the following bind: The same avoidance of looking inward that leads members to cast blame outside the family also prevents family members from looking inward for the support of their own natural resources. The focus is constantly on pathology rather than strength. In addition, the family's search for certainty often results in too much emotional dependency on an outside resource, resulting in unrealistic expectations that lead family members to feeling "let down." Accusations of

malpractice are often a breach-of-promise suit, and the chronically anxious family will constantly “snooker” the helpful helper into making an unrealistic promise.

Litigiousness and violence are twin symptoms of regressed families.

In this sense, litigiousness and violence are twin symptoms of regressed families. In fact, litigiousness may have become a middle-class form of violence, having in common with it the effect of displacing the anxiety, the reactivity, the problems, and the irresponsibility of the family onto other systems often all too willing to absorb it.

The parents of a five-year-old girl were having trouble keeping their daughter in her own bed at night. She screamed “uncontrollably” when left alone and constantly disturbed her parents’ sleep by insinuating herself between them. After sending their child to a therapist, they concluded that the “cause” of their daughter’s fears was a “horror” movie (*Poltergeist*) shown at a Halloween party by a day-care center to which they had been sending her.

After the child had visited the therapist for three months, they proceeded to sue the day-care center, even though the parents of all the children had been notified and asked for permission slips in advance. The day-care center, the only one in town, was led by a woman known for her principles, and she did not take this “lying down.” She mobilized her colleagues, her friends, and her associates, splitting the community in half. Eventually, she ran out of money defending herself and finally left the town bereft of her talents or a day-care center. The parents eventually spent thousands more on their daughter’s therapy, never going themselves. But then it came out that the wife had been having an affair all along. The parents now began accusing one another of being the cause of their daughter’s problems, and they soon became involved in a very messy divorce— focused on child custody, of course.

If one allows a sand pile to build up, grain by grain, at some point one more grain will cause an avalanche.

What chronically anxious families are largely incapable of seeing is that trauma is often, and perhaps usually, less the result of the impacting agent than of the family’s own evolving emotional processes. A fairly new way of thinking in contemporary physics, which has been termed “self-organized criticality,” has significant application for conceptualizing responsibility in family life. Basically, the idea is that when an outside force triggers dysfunction or disintegration within a system, the degree of disruption, the consequent symptomatology, or the resulting regression is not proportional to the strength of the impacting agent. The extent of the damage is rather the consequence of the way the system had been organizing itself to that point. For example, if one allows a sand pile to build up, grain by grain, at some point one more grain will cause an avalanche. But the origin of the avalanche, its speed, and its disruptive effect on the pile are not “caused” by the additional grain. It is not a case of one more straw on the camel’s back. The influence that might be projected onto the outside agent belongs to the system’s processes of self-organization.

When the thinking associated with self-organizing criticality is applied to families, it leads to the notion that much of what has been labeled “post-traumatic stress” is not simply the

result of an event but has much to do with the way the family, or the person, had been developing before the event as well as with the way it responds to the shocking experience afterwards. If, for example, one takes a sampling of ten children, age ten, who are abused, or any ten adults who suddenly lose their jobs, the resulting long-range effects of the incident on the family and on the “victim” will only partially be due to the conditions of the event itself. A major, often determining, variable in the ultimate outcome of that victim’s health (physical or emotional) will be the family’s response, which is directly connected to the way it had been organizing itself and always includes the way it was being led. This way of thinking may even be extended to battlefield hospitals, hospital emergency rooms, and maybe even complications after surgery and the side-effects of medication.

This is how the self of any human being grows—by broadening the repertoire of its responses.

Every crisis has its own context, but there is one universal: a chronically anxious family will focus on the outside agent rather than on its own response. This in turn furthers the family’s regression by reinforcing all of the factors mentioned earlier, particularly the focus on pathology rather than strength, the adaptation to immaturity, the tendency to take things in a way that precludes apology and forgiveness, and the narrowing of a family’s repertoire of responses. To the extent that families deal with crisis by focusing on the impacting agent or condition, they will remain stuck. More mature families that focus primarily on their own response to a trauma generally heal faster. They sometimes even grow—that is, evolve—to a higher capacity for dealing with trauma as a result of their encounter with challenge. As I will elaborate in the following chapters, this is precisely how the immune system (and the self of any human being) “grows”—by broadening the repertoire of its responses.

Well-defined leaders, of course, are not to be found in displacing, blaming families, and not only because they might have to take a lot of flack. By the nature of the case, families that can produce well-defined leaders are not given to engaging in such childishness. Indeed, the concept of leadership, as I have been defining it, is totally incompatible with displacing blame. What is needed is pre-traumatic stress leadership.

All the characteristics of blame displacement we find in families are also prevalent throughout the greater American family today: focus on the other, disregard of personal resources, personal attacks on the opposition, a desperate quest for certainty, and a variety of pet (that is, favorite) displacement issues. Perhaps the outstanding example of blame displacement in chronically anxious America is what has come to be called *anti-incumbency*, the tendency of voters to reject whoever is in office almost irrespective of their party affiliation. This flailing at the political winds amounts to a collective irresponsibility on the part of voters seeking magical, quick-fix answers to a complex range of the problems of existence. Instead of focusing on their own response to the challenges of change, these voters find fault in their political stars. And it is not just a political phenomenon; it is occurring with regard to coaches, educators, CEOs, and clergy, not to mention marriage partners and parents.

Anti-incumbency is a reactive response to the voter's own inner emptiness, personal frustration, general unhappiness, loss of hope, and feelings of helplessness.

To be sure, the critical importance of leadership for the health of an organization justifies the action of members of any institution to replace poorly defined leaders. But anti-incumbency is not that sort of rational search. It is more a reactive response to the voter's own inner emptiness, personal frustration, general unhappiness, loss of hope, and feelings of helplessness. Anti-incumbency is akin to a malpractice suit. Its roots have a lot in common with the failed promise that is the natural manure of litigiousness.

Supporting this atmosphere is the proliferation of revisionist history that focuses on the clay feet of yesterday's heroes, from Columbus to Pasteur to Freud to Churchill. This "Monday morning quarterbacking" when the "game" is already over is both a symptom of the anti-leadership phenomenon and contributes to it, by focusing on pathology rather than on strength, and on unverifiable motivation rather than on the solid reality of deeds.

The displacement of blame on leaders may be even more salient in churches and synagogues than in the political arena. Over the last ten to fifteen years I have witnessed a tremendous increase in the collective reactivity of religious congregations to their ministers, irrespective of gender or belief. As America's emotional regression has deepened, the clergy of every denomination have been increasingly thrust into a panicky national game of musical chairs, as each minister leaves one disappointed congregation only to be eagerly snatched up by another in the false hope that this new one will be better than the last. The former minister, in the meantime, has now found a new opportunity to be a displacement focus for a congregation that had become disaffected with its previous minister, who is presently about to take the place of the first, the anxiety still unabated and the focused issues still unresolved.

The displacement of blame on leaders may be even more salient in churches and synagogues than in the political arena.

Indeed, the skyrocketing divorce rate also can be seen as an effect of the national tendency to displace blame. While it has plateaued in recent years, at one point it almost seemed to indicate a nation of quitters, and this includes both marriage partners and their counselors. What has led me to this conclusion is the number of people I have counseled years after a divorce who, in retrospect, might have saved their marriages had they understood how "to hang in there" in a less reactive manner. Many quit because the other partner did not seem motivated; others left because they did not have the stamina to see it through. Many others ended the marriage because their counselors' nerve failed them. These are counselors whose own chronic anxiety prevented them from enduring an unresolved or highly conflictual situation, thus impelling them to fix things or force a solution rather than bringing a non-anxious, and perhaps challenging, presence to the counseling session.

Divorce can also be seen as an effect of the national tendency to displace blame.

Contrary to popular thinking, it does not require two people working on a marriage to

change it. Rarely are both partners equally motivated. But changing a marriage fundamentally does require that someone function as a leader in the sense in which I have been using that term. Where one partner can be taught to regulate his or her own reactivity, the other will often begin to imitate that behavior, and adaptation can ultimately be reversed. But for this shift to occur a critical point of departure must be reached: the more motivated partner must also be able to stop shifting blame to the other and to look more at his or her own input. This does not mean that they should look more at their own faults, but rather at how they have been compounding the situation. It requires changing the criterion from “Who has the problem?” to “Who has the motivation to focus on strength, not weakness, and on leadership, not pathology?”

The media are far more likely to report the details of a person who has been victimized by events than one who has overcome obstacles.

The focus on pathology rather than strength throughout our society is itself a form of displacement, since it protects us from the far more difficult task of personal accountability. The media, after all, are far more likely to report the details of a person who has been victimized by events than one who has overcome obstacles. For example, one evening a news channel showed an electrical engineering PhD in California pumping gasoline. A recession that had overwhelmed Silicon Valley had cost him his job, and this white-male-over-thirty had to sell his house, keep his kids from going to camp that summer, and send his oldest child to a state school rather than to the private institution upon which she had set her heart. The message was that his plight metaphorized the hardships of many who had been “victimized” by the sudden downturn in the local economy. But the reason he was reduced to pumping gas was not that he had lost his job; it was that, unlike more resourceful others whose stories did not seem “newsworthy,” he did not have the “nerve” to leave California.

Almost simultaneously, another channel’s news program was interviewing a mother of about age thirty who, with her three young children huddled next to her, described helplessly how she had no place to go because she was being victimized by her landlord. The background for that story was that landlords who had received low-interest loans many years previously if they agreed to rent controls now found it was worth paying higher interest rates in order to get higher rents. But the landlord in this particular case had not suddenly kicked everyone out. He had both mailed and posted clearly his intention, and had given all his tenants several months’ warning. What had this mother been doing all those months? This kind of blame displacement has reached truly creative proportions. A list of culprits could include games like “Dungeons and Dragons,” candy bars with too high a sugar content (the “Twinkie defense”), passive smoking, anything that gives off rays, and of course violence on television.

The immune response is always about self, strength, and integrity.

Television, in fact, is a good example of how displacement works to avoid dealing with personal resources. The most pernicious violence on television is actually in the story line—

how the simplistic concept of human struggles “does violence” to the nature of life. The most insidious message that children—and adults—get from the average television program is the notion that motivation is singular, that all questions have answers, that justice always triumphs, that love conquers all, that life is unambiguous, and that there will always be a *deus ex machina* “in the wings” waiting to rush in. This view of existence is a far more dangerous addiction for a regressed society than escape into vicarious violence. Thus the worry of parents that violent television shows will affect their children adversely is the epitome of a chronically anxious society focusing on outside forces rather than inner strength. Parents cannot possibly hope to insulate their children against all the pathogenic forces and ideas in the environment. That way of thinking has to lead to unending cycles of anxiety. Where does it end? But they can “inoculate,” so to speak, their children against those noxious forces by the maturity they instill in them through their own well-differentiated leadership. The immune response is always about self, strength, and integrity.

The focus on safety has become so omnipresent that there is real danger we will come to believe that safety is the most important value in life.

The issues most vulnerable to becoming displacements are, first of all, anything related to safety: product safety, traffic safety, bicycle safety, motorboat safety, jet-ski safety, workplace safety, nutritional safety, nuclear power station safety, toxic waste safety, and so on and so on. This focus on safety has become so omnipresent in our chronically anxious civilization that there is real danger we will come to believe that safety is the most important value in life. It is certainly important as a modifier of other initiatives, but if a society is to evolve, or if leaders are to arise, then safety can never be allowed to become more important than adventure. We are on our way to becoming a nation of “skimmers,” living off the risks of previous generations and constantly taking from the top without adding significantly to its essence. Everything we enjoy as part of our advanced civilization, including the discovery, exploration, and development of our country, came about because previous generations made adventure more important than safety.

4. The Quick-Fix Mentality

Life processes evolve by taking their time. It took half a billion years for the first self-replicating life-forms, almost three billion more for the first multicellular organisms, still another half a billion for the rise of hominids, and another half a million until the appearance of our species, *Homo sapiens*. Growth, whether of a flower or of a baby, follows similar laws to this day, and growth, meaning *maturation*, evolves in the same way. There is no gene for maturity. But the chronically anxious family thinks it can modify life with technique.

The chronically anxious family thinks it can modify life with technique.

The chronically anxious family is impatient. The same escapist thinking that leads it to the displacement of blame also leads it to assume that problems can be fixed in a linear way. The

quick-fix mentality is the other side of the coin of displacement. Both are a flight from challenge, simplistic in their conception of life, and outwardly focused. Both avoid dealing with emotional process and devalue the self. And ultimately, both depreciate the integrity of the leader. All the characteristics of the chronically anxious family that have been mentioned previously come together to create the quick-fix mentality. What points them in the same direction is that regressed families have a very low threshold for pain. In fact, the amount of chronic anxiety in a family is inversely proportional to its capacity for enduring pain. What makes the chronically anxious family's anxiety chronic is not its pain, but the way it deals with its pain. In fact, the root of the word *anxiety* means pain, as in *angina*, *anger*, *anguish*, or *angst*.

Since anxiety is not something one wills away except by numbing drugs or stuck-together relationships, chronically anxious families will seek out those professionals who promise the most comfort, not those who offer the most opportunities for maturation. They will seek those professionals who help them avoid or reduce their pain as quickly as possible, not those who would encourage them to endure their pain in order to move steadfastly toward higher goals. The quick-fix attitude, therefore, will affect their choice of physicians, therapists, ministers, and politicians, as they are drawn to the snake oil of quick-fix elixirs that masquerade as technical solutions.

The quick-fix mentality provides the ideal atmosphere for the proliferation of demagoguery and quacks.

Focused always on symptom relief rather than on fundamental change in the emotional processes that underlie their symptoms, the chronically anxious family will constantly seek saviors, then pressure the expert—whether medical, educational, therapeutic, legal, or political—for magical solutions. When engaged in therapy, such families only ask “how to” questions, constantly searching for techniques to manage conflict, manage money, manage sex, manage illness, manage children, manage teenagers, manage parents, manage in-laws. The quick-fix mentality therefore provides the ideal atmosphere for the proliferation of demagoguery and quacks, since it wants more than speed; it wants certainty. This search for easy answers drives the family to catch professionals up in an endless game of reassurance for problems that cannot be changed except by interventions that focus on their own emotional being, a game that circles back to their tendency to sue for malpractice, itself often a quick-fix solution for unresolved emotional processes.

This orientation to life is materialistic to the core. Even when a chronically anxious family is a pillar of its church or synagogue, its orientation to life is never really spiritual. It is the low threshold for pain, however, that is in many ways the key to the family members' regression, inhibiting both the ability to grow from experience and the responses that help other family members mature. The degree of pain we are experiencing at any time almost always includes two variables: (1) the stimulus “causing” the discomfort and (2) the threshold for tolerance (that is, the capacity to overcome or perhaps reduce the sensation itself). It can sometimes be difficult to discern, when our pain has decreased or increased, whether what has changed is the stimulus or our threshold. But what is clear about pain

universally is this: To the extent that we are motivated to get on with life, we seem to be able to tolerate more pain; in other words, our threshold seems to increase. Conversely, to the extent that we are unmotivated to get out of our chair, our threshold seems to go down.

This connection between pain and motivation also has a relational slant and plays a role in the herding adaptation to immaturity. Raising our own threshold for the pain another is experiencing can often motivate the other to take more responsibility for his or her life. There is even the possibility that the challenge of having to deal with their pain will, in the most natural way, make their own threshold rise as well. By the same token, to the extent that our threshold for another's pain is too low, perhaps because we are unable to distinguish theirs from our own, their threshold for their own pain is likely to go down as well, and with it their own motivation for maturing. This is precisely what I was referring to above when I said that many marriages break up because their counselors cannot tolerate the couple's pain.

An illustration of the connection between pain and motivation comes from one highly aggressive CEO who told the following story about himself:

I used to be an avid stamp collector, and once every ten years there is a huge international exhibition. Unfortunately, as the decennial event approached this time, I injured my knee and was limping around painfully on crutches with my leg in a cast up to my hip and my armpits burning from the upward push of my supports. But I wasn't going to let this once-in-a-decade opportunity go by. I therefore managed to travel one hundred fifty miles by train, hobble my way in and out of cabs at both ends, wait in the vestibule of this huge armory for half an hour closely pressed to thousands of others in a herd "mooing" to be let in, let the stampede carry me through as the doors finally opened, crutched around for two hours. I was having the time of my life, hardly noticing that my arms or my legs were sore. I then returned that evening in a state of utterly satisfied exhaustion.

The next evening, however, my wife asked me to take out the garbage, and I cried foul. "Can't you see how difficult it is for me to get around? I had a miserable day at the office. My armpits are killing me; I can't stand the awkward position of my leg. I really need some rest. How can you be so insensitive? Sometimes I think you don't appreciate how really painful this whole situation is."

An illustration of the relational side of pain, of the incapacity to tolerate pain in others, comes from the principal of a school in which one teacher's classroom was constantly out of control. No matter what practical advice or moral support she gave the teacher, the story was always the same. The teacher never seemed to be able to sustain the kinds of stands that regulated her children's behavior. Then one Christmas the teacher had a party at her home. When the principal arrived, she could not help noticing all the tables in the house had protective padding on their corners. Their youngest had started to walk and his head was just getting up to the level of the tables. Fearing that he would injure himself on one of the corners, she had protected him from that danger—which was fine as long as they did not take him to anyone else's home.

What chronically anxious families require, of course, is a leader who does not give in to their demands. Should such a leader somehow arise, these families will be relentless in

undercutting his or her resolve, and outside the family circle they will continually try to adapt other systems and professionals to their needs. And this is the link to the quick-fix mentality in the “greater American family.” Once again, the principle stated above applies: People rarely can rise above the level of the maturity of their leaders or mentors. In every major area of American civilization today, leaders and mentors are adapting to this demand for quick fixes, technical solutions for problems that actually have to do with emotional processes. This mentality spares no part of American civilization. It manifests itself equally in healing, in politics, in people’s belief systems, in management, in personal relationships, and of course in dealing with anxiety. It can be observed in the increasing popularity of brief, solution-oriented therapy and in the effort to discover a gene for everything that is not “normal.” As with personal families, the desire for a quick fix throughout the greater American family evidences a search for certainty, a penchant for easy answers, an avoidance of the struggles that go into growth, and an unwillingness to accept the short-term acute pain that one must experience in order to reduce chronic anxiety.

People rarely can rise above the level of the maturity of their leaders or mentors.

The effect on leaders of this widespread demand for a quick fix is that it turns them from professionals into hacks. For as long as leaders cater to the demand that they fix things quickly rather than encourage, promote, or even force those in their system to deal with their own emotional being, then these leaders—be they parents or presidents—also miss out on challenging opportunities to grow. The difference between a professional and a hack is not in degree or training. Both may do what they do with polish; but the hack is not transformed by his experience.

To paraphrase one of my own characters from *Friedman’s Fables*, Cassandra the Greek prophetess, discussing denial in an anxious society:

The quest for certainty has produced a fascination with reducing everything to its basic components; everything must have an answer. Only the poets are unafraid of ambiguity; everyone else goes to experts. It is true that in my day we sought oracles, but today people still want the oracular, whether from their therapist, physician, minister, or politician. The helping professions have been turned into certain-tizers. At least at Delphi they had the good sense not to be too specific.

5. *Poorly Differentiated Leadership*

The four major characteristics of chronically anxious families all conspire to produce the fifth, the lack of well-differentiated leadership—although to the extent that the fifth applies, it also promotes the first four. This effect is uniform across the board for all “parents and presidents” irrespective of their personality profile, their cultural background, or their place in society. The major regressive effects on leadership of chronic anxiety in both personal families and in the greater American family are these:

- ◆ Leaders lack the distance to think out their vision clearly.

- ◆ Leaders are led hither and yon by crisis after crisis.
- ◆ Leaders are reluctant to take well-defined stands, if they have any convictions at all.
- ◆ Leaders are selected who lack the maturity and sense of self to deal with sabotage.

These are in stark contrast to the major principles of leadership mentioned earlier that were characteristic of the great Renaissance explorers:

- ◆ the capacity to separate oneself from surrounding emotional processes;
- ◆ the capacity to obtain clarity about one's principles and vision;
- ◆ the willingness to be exposed and to be vulnerable;
- ◆ persistence in the face of inertial resistance; and
- ◆ self-regulation in the face of reactive sabotage.

Chronically anxious families will always lack well-differentiated leadership. I have never seen an exception to this rule. After many years of working with troubled families from a vast variety of cultures and backgrounds, I have found that the single most important factor distinguishing those families that became hopelessly stuck or that disintegrated into crisis from those that recovered was the presence of a well-defined leader. And again, by leader I do not mean someone who tells others what to do, but someone who can maintain the kind of non-anxious, well-principled presence I have been describing.

What is always absent from chronically anxious, regressed families is a member who can get himself or herself outside of its reactive, herding, blaming, quick-fix processes sufficiently to take stands. It has to be someone who is not so much in need of approval that being called "cruel," "cold," "unfeeling," "uncooperative," "insensitive," "selfish," "strong-willed," or "hard-headed" immediately subverts their individuality. I believe that the universality of this principle lies in the fact that it is not some abstraction or guideline from a manual, but it is the way life works. It is a principle of all natural systems. All forms of social organization require leadership, whether one is considering herds, flocks, swarms, pods, packs, or schools. It is this natural systems basis that makes it an evolutionary principle; for this reason, when chronic anxiety in any family works to regress this principle, the effect is counter-evolutionary.

On the following pages are three tables that show the reciprocal relationship between regressed societies and poorly differentiated leadership. [Table 1](#) sums up the characteristics of chronically anxious families and American civilization that I have been describing and lists their effects on leadership.

[Table 2](#) lists the regressive characteristics of thinking and relating that all leaders have to contend with in any chronically anxious relationship system.

[Table 3](#) displays the overall connection between chronic anxiety, the perversion of evolutionary principles, and its regressive effects on both society and leadership.

Table 1
 CHARACTERISTICS OF CHRONIC ANXIETY
 IN FAMILIES AND AMERICAN CIVILIZATION,
 AND THEIR MAJOR EFFECTS ON LEADERSHIP

CHARACTERISTICS OF
 CHRONICALLY ANXIOUS
 FAMILIES

MANIFESTATIONS IN
 CHRONICALLY ANXIOUS
 AMERICA

1. Reactivity

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ automatic responses ◆ boundary erosion ◆ exaggeration of extremes ◆ loss of resiliency (playfulness) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ uproars over perceived slights ◆ bureaucratic entanglements ◆ <i>ad hominem</i> retorts ◆ disruption, interference, and censorship of opposition |
|---|---|

Effect on Leadership: Leaders become less imaginative, are eventually worn down, and resign or “go through the motions.”

2. Herding

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ togetherness as supreme value ◆ totalism in thinking and relating ◆ wills conflict, polarization, and cut-offs ◆ organizes around dysfunction ◆ adapts to immaturity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ uncompromising special interests ◆ courts lose base in principles ◆ funding for weakness, not strength ◆ politically correct language ◆ dignifying of immaturity (sexual acting-out) |
|--|--|

Effect on Leadership: Leaders become indecisive because, tyrannized by sensibilities, they function to soothe rather than challenge and to seek peace rather than progress.

3. Blame Displacement

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ loss of integrity and accountability ◆ fault projected outside ◆ quickness to blame (sue) ◆ cynical pessimism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ anti-incumbency ◆ litigiousness and violence ◆ rising divorce rate ◆ national displacement issues |
|--|--|

- ◆ focus on safety rather than adventure
- ◆ carcinogens, abuse, environment

Effect on Leadership: The least mature are selected while those with the greatest integrity, precisely those who have the best capacity to pull a society out of a regression, do not even seek office.

4. Quick-Fix Mentality

- ◆ low pain threshold
- ◆ simple answers
- ◆ vulnerability to snake-oil fads
- ◆ quest for certainty
- ◆ drug culture
- ◆ fundamentalism and reductionism
- ◆ proliferation of data
- ◆ emphasis on technique

Effect on Leadership: Leaders are not challenged to grow.

Table 2
REGRESSIVE CHARACTERISTICS
OF THINKING AND RELATING TO BE FOUND IN ALL CHRONICALLY ANXIOUS
RELATIONSHIP SYSTEMS

THINKING CHARACTERISTICS	RELATIONSHIP CHARACTERISTICS
◆ polarized and totalistic (black-and-white, either/or, all-or-nothing)	◆ with us or against us polarizations
◆ reactive rather than stemming from principle	◆ members homogenized or cut off
◆ reductionist	◆ adapts to the most immature member
◆ given to <i>ad hominem</i> reasoning	◆ organizes around the dysfunctional
◆ oriented toward pathology, not strength	◆ sabotages differentiation
◆ focused externally rather than internally	◆ loss of integrity and individuality (self)
◆ oriented toward crisis, not opportunity	◆ oriented toward comfort, not challenge
◆ magical	◆ functions for peace over progress
◆ serious	◆ scapegoats to bind the anxiety

- ◆ no curiosity
- ◆ judges caring by getting a reaction (hurting)
- ◆ given to “group think”
- ◆ focuses on rights rather than responsibilities

TABLE 3
OVERVIEW OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHRONIC ANXIETY,
ITS PERVERSION OF EVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLES,
AND THE REGRESSIVE EFFECTS OF COUNTER-EVOLUTIONARY FORCES
ON BOTH SOCIETY AND LEADERSHIP

CHRONIC ANXIETY	PRINCIPLE PERVERTED	EFFECT ON SOCIETY	EFFECT ON LEADERS
<i>Reactivity</i>	regulation of instinct	inhibition of self-differentiation	perspective on leadership clouded
<i>Herdin</i>	adaptation to strength	organization around immaturity	indecisiveness
<i>Blaming</i>	response to challenge	disintegration	sabotage
<i>Quick-Fix Mentality</i>	maturation takes time	recycled stuckness	least mature selected