

THE POWERLESS AND VACCINE HESITANCY

BY

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There are many perspectives on the vaccine hesitant. Maybe it's merely a manifestation of general ambiguity anxiety and resistance to change.

As a toddler, my nephew chose to stop peeing. His parents begged, coaxed, and bribed him to pee. They threatened. To no avail. Eventually they went to the hospital, where the threat was realized by an inserted urinary catheter. This anecdote affords at least two lessons: 1. He never did it again so (dis)incentives work; they just have to be the right ones. 2. Given that he *could* physically do it but *chose* not to pee, his likely "reason" was to exert control over *something*. Other children throw tantrums or hold their breath when unimpressed and powerless.

People generally prefer their *stable* world—even if it's not great. What a bad situation lacks in desirability it makes up for with predictability. Change anxiety is largely a product of ambiguity, which is, by definition, the absence of predictability. We appreciate, "the devil we know."

People rally all manner of excuse to support the desire and choice to resist change. Some will be sensible arguments, built on solid premises and logic. Others have

demonstrably false premises, disprovable facts, and dubious logic. Moreover, even the allegedly independent-minded rely on social proof ("if everybody else is doing it...").

Getting a *person* to change is hard. With *people*, the challenge is greater because everyone's tolerance of ambiguity, timing, incentive sensitivity, and circumstance is different.

What about those unvaccinated against COVID19?

My guess is many "vaccine hesitant" have nothing against the vaccine *per se*. Anybody aware of, who benefitted from the polio, smallpox, rubella, typhoid, hepatitis, and other vaccines is probably not truly opposed to vaccines. And, frankly, the likelihood of this large a Damascan conversion to vaccine opposition is questionable.

The COVID19-triggered change is an imposition on the comfortable, predictable way of life we enjoyed in November 2019. It has upended where and how we work, how our children are attended to during work hours (i.e., schooled), where we can go, what we can do, who we can be with, what we can buy, how robust our economy, the price of... everything, and so much more. It has arguably affected every aspect of human life on planet earth: for those who contract the virus and for those who do not. And both its end and its nature remain persistently on the just-out-of-reach horizon. Such is the nature of a pandemic.

Worse is that COVID19 and its impact are ambiguous. We don't know really where it came from. We don't know why (or why now). What we do know is the result of trial and error: experts tested guesses under live fire. More often than not, the guesses were wrong and we all back-tracked to set aside what we'd just started doing for something new. This uncertainty has prevailed for nearly two years.

Politicians and public health officials, obviously trying to both assuage ambiguity anxiety and effect action to preserve limited resources—PPE (masks) in 2020, rapid tests in 2021, and so on—probably did as much harm as help. But that’s another story.

The media report we’re weary of pandemic impositions. True. Still, I suspect many of those steadfastly opposed to vaccination—with absolutely no sensible empirical, logical, social, or economic support—don’t care because it’s not about the vaccine. It’s not even weariness. It’s anxiety and anger. Not anxiety about vaccine risk; anxiety about the pandemic and the changes forced upon us.

Fear and anger are powerful, complex emotions. Fear (anxiety on steroids) is ultimately more powerful, but superficial anxiety can lead to anger, which is more accessible for action. Anxiety over COVID19’s impact leads to a sense of powerlessness and on to anger. That anger is channeled into controllable action: accept vaccination (or not), wear a mask (or not), and so on. (Who does the controlling is another matter.) Nonsense (misinformation and conspiracy) supports superficial anger until a greater fear supplants the original anxiety. We have all seen real and proximate fear of death reverse anti-vax/anti-mask positions.

This generalized anxiety may be only a small part of a historically pampered First World realizing—again—we are all as ants on the ground or dust in the wind. All we build up and everything we rely on can simply go away for no apparent reason, without discrimination, and without us being able to alter it.

This explanation applies broadly. Political fragmentation, Trumpism, and climate change come to mind. The January 6 insurrection was a manifestation. And just wait for the (still coming and much larger) real climate change backlash.

When the world is not unfolding as you expect and want, you can accept the uncertainty and start changing—until you find new certainty. Or you can just stop peeing. It won't help. But you may feel a small sense of control.

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