

When a Cloud is Simply a Cloud Ben Nelson Jr.

Most everyone has at one time or the other, taken the opportunity to lay on their back in the grass, gaze up at the clouds and pick out the hidden shapes and patterns. Okay, it's been a while for me too, but my point is that this type of pattern recognition comes naturally to us. We are capable of sorting through vast amounts of information and coming up with extremely complex conclusions or solutions and sometimes... we're even right! Yet, this talent often leads us astray, because one of the tools that make it possible is our imagination.

This juggling act between our cognitive skills and our imagination is at the heart of every good decision, and every bad one. Unfortunately, an active imagination can make it easy to mentally go the extra mile and create an unnecessarily complex theory when, all things being equal, the simplest explanation is generally the right one and is sitting there patiently, waiting to be discovered. Accepting this basic tenant of logic (see Occam's Razor) is more often than not extremely difficult for most of us to accept, because of the third side of our thought process, our emotions.

When we have an emotional investment in an issue, and we usually do, whether it's a political philosophy, a long held prejudice, or attachment to a particular College Football team, the unconscious temptation to construct a conclusion that perfectly matches our preconceived notions can be too much to resist. The resulting conspiracy theory or bogus explanation of how something has occurred, or can be solved, can lead us to a chain of erroneous conclusions and bad decisions.

We don't seem to have any trouble recognizing this very human trait in others, just in ourselves. It is difficult to accept that we sometimes select information that fits our favored conclusion and if we make decisions as a community based on this formula, the problem is often magnified and can have continued negative unintended consequences. It is the prize that keeps on giving. Fear, mistrust, rumor and false information can snowball and cause a community to react to circumstances that simply do not exist, problems that aren't there, and cause them to make decisions that ironically fulfill their worst fears.

By applying a little healthy skepticism regarding our own decision making process, checking our preconceived notions at the door, giving someone else the consideration that we would want, or simply walking in the other persons shoes, we can be confident that our decisions are more likely to be fair, rational and just. I know it's a scary world out there and not everything is always as it seems... but most of the time, a cloud is simply a cloud.