

The Black Swan: A Meditation on “Experience”

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Even though my interest in politics is high and it has been an unusually interesting political year, my injury has given me the time to watch too much, wa-a-ay too much political coverage on TV. If I give you a big wink in the middle of the sermon or say “you betcha,” you’ll know it may be time to take me away.

One thing most of you have noticed, even if you have been watching TV in more sensible doses, is that “experience” has come up quite a lot in presidential politics this year: do certain of the candidates have enough experience, do they have the right kind of experience, and does it really matter anyway? So I have been meditating a lot on experience.

In some sense, none of the candidates for president has any experience at all. None of them has ever been president of the United States. On the other hand, all of them have lots of life experience—ranging from Sarah Palin’s 44 years of experience to John McCain’s 72 years.

In the primaries and in this general election, candidates have cited things as various as being a member of the PTA, being a senator, being a community organizer, being a state legislator, being a mayor, being a businessman, being a governor, being a member of the cabinet, being a first lady, being a fighter pilot, even living near Russia as “experience” that might qualify them for the presidency. Several candidates have tried to simultaneously make the argument that while they have experience, they are “outsiders” untainted by that experience. This may be, in part, because the voters often, in this year in particular, are suspicious of those with a lot of political experience but still want a steady hand on the tiller.

A different kind of experience has been talked about or written about but not exactly labeled as experience. However, I suspect that for many voters it may be at least as important as the formal job qualifications of the candidates—the life experiences that shape their worldview. These are huge. The two presidential candidates are more than a generation apart. This gap has profoundly shaped their worldviews. Since I am almost exactly halfway in between the candidates in age, I notice the differences between them profoundly.

Senator McCain came of age in 1957, Senator Obama in 1982. Interestingly, neither was much involved in the culture wars of 1967-1974—McCain was in Vietnam, a 30-something prisoner of war, and Obama was a kid in Indonesia and Hawaii. But the question for voters is the meaning of this difference. Is it an advantage to have a leader who has a longer first-hand historical perspective or is it better to have a leader whose worldview was shaped in times closer to the ones in which we now live? We all tend to be caught in between. I tend to think of my parents’ generation as old fashioned and my kids’ generation as lacking historical perspective. Of the four candidates, I personally identify the most with Senator Biden. Not surprisingly, he is closest to me in age. Of course age is only a part of the difference in experiences that shape the candidates’ worldviews: one man was brought up with some privilege in a peripatetic, white, military family and attended 20 different schools before high school graduation. The other man, who is biracial, had an African father, an Indonesian stepfather, was brought up mostly by his European

American mother and grandparents, and grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii.

Some people think that McCain's military family and fighter-pilot career is a plus; others fear that it may make him too likely to see the world in militaristic terms. Some people feel that Obama's multicultural family and experience will be an asset to him in a multicultural country and smaller world; others fear that he will not be sufficiently understanding of people like them. You may remember that way back in January there was a concern that Obama was not Black enough—meaning that he was raised in a white family in multicultural Hawaii and had little experience of the racial divisions and slights more typically found in the mainland states. So these and many other things have got me meditating on experience: how do the experiences we have had shape how we will meet the future?

It is, in many ways, an unanswerable question. A good question for meditation, but not one that is easy to answer. Some of the things that have had a huge impact on us in the past thirty years have been the unforeseen: the Internet and personal computers, AIDS, 9/11, and now, the financial crisis—just to name a few.

One of the problems of using experience to predict the future is that it can help us only to the extent that tomorrow's experience is pretty close to yesterday's. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, in his book *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, describes how for centuries Europeans assumed that all swans were white. No one had ever seen a swan that wasn't white, thus experienced proved them correct—until they sailed to Australia and encountered a new variety of swan that was black. Taleb and others use “the black swan” as a metaphor for the problem of using experience as our guide. Experience helps us continue doing what has been done and thinking what has been thought, and helps us meet the problems that we have encountered before. This works pretty well in a world where things don't change radically. But, says Taleb, that is not the world we live in. Huge changes occur that the past cannot predict. Luck and randomness play a bigger role in life than we think. Even when, looking back, something may seem to have been predictable, writings that predate such an event or discovery show little evidence that it was. Even when it seems that someone has predicted an unexpected event, closer examination shows it to have been a case of a thousand monkeys typing and accidentally writing something profound.

Taleb's thesis, which is quite convincing, is that while a great percentage of day-to-day experience may be predictable, the most consequential events in history and science tend to be unpredictable.

Another problem with experience is that people can learn very different things from going through the same experience. Every time our country's leaders consider going to war, some will cite Neville Chamberlain and Hitler as a reason to go ahead: “Look what comes from appeasement!” they will say. Yet many WWII veterans, horrified by what they had seen and mindful of the terrible potential of the atomic bomb, left the service with a strong commitment to peace, support for the United Nations, and a search for solving international problems nonviolently. Some people who are treated badly as children grow up to treat their children as they were treated; others learn how important it is to treat their children with love. We love narratives, we remember narratives, but they don't predict the future.

Indeed, one question we all ask about experience is what did you learn from it?

My Dad tells a story of a man who went to talk with his child's teacher about some of the issues the child was having in the classroom. The teacher, unwilling to engage, said to the parent, "Young man, I have 40 years of experience!" The exasperated parent said to the teacher, "It looks to me as if you may have had one year of experience 40 times!" That is not to pick on teachers. Plenty of professionals make the mistake of thinking the same thing that worked in one instance will work in another.

That is always a question about experience: does it inform us or does it keep us stuck in a rut? How many of us have been in a situation where we said, "We tried it before and it didn't work!"? How many of us have been blocked by someone else saying that? A single trial of an idea doesn't predict that it will never work. Actually, experience has taught me that—an idea that works in one church doesn't necessarily work in another church or even in the same church at a different time, and something that doesn't work on a first try may be very successful at a different time or in a different place or with different people. Ask an actor. You can do the same play every night and one night get uproarious laughter at a line and the next night hardly a peep.

Or what about the story of Fat Tony the gambler and Professor Bob the mathematician? Each was told that a coin, which was equally likely to come up heads or tails, was tossed 99 times and came up heads. What is the likelihood, they were asked, that on the next toss the coin would come up heads? "Fifty-fifty," said Professor Bob. "Nah," said Fat Tony, "it will come up heads. Whoever told you that a coin comes up heads 99 times in a row isn't loaded, he's a liar." Professor Bob had to admit that, statistically speaking, Fat Tony was right—even though he thought outside the box to predict the future. Those of us who are learned underestimate real world experience.

Another problem is that we give too much weight to a single experience. Think of 9/11. It was an unpredictable event. It only happened once. It killed 3,000 people. It was a shocking and terrible event. Still, if you look at the trillion and a half dollars spent in response to that experience—two wars, airport security, Guantanamo, and so on—you would be hard pressed to argue that we couldn't have used that money to save far more lives than anything we have done with it so far. We can't know what would have happened if we did something different, but with the money we are spending we know we could have saved more than 3,000 lives a year every year since, not to mention all the soldiers and civilians whose lives would have been spared in war. Moreover, wily terrorists are probably not going to try the same scenario twice! Indeed, it is statistically probable more people were killed because they generalized from the 9/11 experience and traveled by car (a much more dangerous form of travel) instead of by plane after the attack occurred than were killed in the attack itself.

In our personal lives we often generalize from one or two experiences. We base our attitudes towards people we meet on very minimal information. Sometimes we even base our attitudes towards them on previous experiences with other people. Someone reminds us of a former boss we disliked, and we have to work hard to overcome that in order to take them as they are. Someone reminds us of a beloved relative, and we start out with a much more positive attitude towards them. If we depend too much on those initial experiences, we can miss out.

When we were both single, a friend and I used to share dating stories. One date in particular she had been very much looking forward to, but the next week she told me that it had been a total disaster. Most of the evening she had spent listening to her date's experiences as an accountant. "It was the most boring evening of my life!" She swore that was the last date! However, she not only ended up marrying the guy, but they are still happy together fifteen years later! And she wasn't wrong about him on that date. The guy is not a sparkling raconteur. For her, her further experiences with him revealed other qualities that made up for boring—other areas in which he did sparkle.

Our experiences are often shaped by ideology. We distort or ignore information and experiences. I read of an interesting experiment in which a brain scan revealed that people with strongly held political beliefs literally did not hear information that contradicted their belief. They heard a broadcast with information that challenged a cherished belief, and it literally did not register in the brain scan.

We see this with religious beliefs, of course. I remember the story of an apocalyptic cult that was predicting the end of the world at a particular date. When the date came and went and the world was still here, you might have expected faith to waiver. It didn't. Almost all the believers accepted the explanations that their calculations had been a little off, and they affixed a new date for the end of the world—a date in the more distant future.

On the other side of the equation, my agnostic husband, David, tells the story of an atheistic college professor of his. The professor frequently railed in class against religion. One day he was ranting away and he said loudly to the class, "If God exists, I want him to give me a sign right now and show me!" At that very moment, all the windows of the classroom blew open, and the wind blew all the papers on the teacher's desk swirling to the floor. The class broke out in amazed applause. The teacher, though momentarily speechless, did not become a believer.

Often we give experiences more weight than they deserve. Sometimes we dismiss them because our minds are closed. Obviously there are skills, important skills, that come from experience. You want your airline pilot, your surgeon, your bus driver to have some skill sets that only come with learning and experience. And yet, I'm standing on one foot here because an experienced surgeon in Sacramento thought that he knew so much about knee surgery in general that he failed to listen and get the proper information necessary to do surgery on a knee that was different than any other he had seen before.

It is also true that people with many years of experience never get as good as others with very few years. Skill sets needed in many jobs change. The best church administrator I've worked with couldn't do the job now. She retired the year her church started using computers.

And certainly some of the most profound changes in life come from experiences that do get through the preset ideologies of the brain and cause us to revise our view of the world. When we tell our life story, those key events will form the center.

How does all this relate to us as spiritual, religious people? For some, religion is a set of beliefs.

For others it is a culture, learned through many years of practice. For others, personal experience is the key. Oftentimes these things blend. Still, when I think of major religious figures, a mystical experience or a conversion experience or an experience of enlightenment is a key part of their story. Paul had his vision on the road to Damascus. Buddha attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree. Augustine heard the voice of the child calling him on conversion.

In America, the Puritans, rather like the evangelicals of today, required a conversion experience for full membership in the church. Martin Luther King Jr. had an experience of God that helped him continue his work after his home was bombed. In Unitarian history, it was transcendentalists who particularly emphasized experience. In Emerson's famous Divinity School Address he roundly criticizes a fellow minister who doesn't speak as though he had ever lived. For him, religion was about experience passed through the fire of thought. Thoreau developed a theological worldview arising from his experience in nature. Margaret Fuller had a mystical experience about which she said that she came to a profound acceptance of the universe.

I suspect that it may be surprising and disconcerting for some of us to reflect that the Unitarian emphasis on experience as a basis for our religion has a lot in common with the very different faith traditions like the Pentecostals, who also emphasize experience. It just happens that experience for them is usually of a different nature.

Although as UUs we say we are open minded, too often we dismiss the religious experience of others that doesn't fit with our own. Some UUs are so dogmatic in their naturalistic worldview that they create an atmosphere in which other UUs who have experiences that don't fit that worldview feel they must go elsewhere. Over the years it has grieved me to see our churches lose many wonderful members and potential members because we have sometimes created an atmosphere that affirmed only one worldview.

It is a human temptation to insist that my experience trumps your experience and like the blind men touching the elephant fall to arguing with each other. Like many of you, I have hired enough people to know that the best resume, the most extensive, doesn't necessarily make for the best employee. Both the best and the worst people I have hired had excellent resumes. Yet some who had limited experience did far better than those who had a lot—as long as they had some of the basic skills that the job required. Their ability to learn, their flexibility, their personality, their work ethic, their creativity, and just being a good fit for the time and the place meant that they did a better job than someone else with a better resume. When we look at our experience and experiences, it is not so much what we have done as it is how our experiences have shaped us to be ready for the uncertain future that may best determine our success.

So too in religion. It is not having the right beliefs or even the correct truths that is most important. It is not what religious experiences you have had that is most important. What is important is whether our religious experiences and values help us meet life, whether they help us live our lives with decency and integrity, whether they inspire us to go beyond ourselves for the well-being of all, whether they help us live through the difficult times of life and face death with human dignity. I have seen hundreds of different religions meet that test for some, and the same religions fail it for others. So meditate on your own experiences—have you used them to create a personal religion or a spiritual life that meets the test for you?