

BEHAVING BADLY

The Neurology of Acting Like an Asshole



By Dan Weintraub, 2021

Dedication

To the assholes of the
world, who made this book
so fucking easy to write. I
love you all.

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INTRODUCTION



We all have the propensity to behave like assholes. Not one of us is immune. But with just a little awareness surrounding how our neuro-physiology impacts our choices and actions, and with the will to do better by those around us, perhaps we could attenuate our assholiness just a tad.

Hi I'm Dan, and I'm an asshole. (I couldn't resist)

This is the third tiny book I've written in the past two months. COVID-19 isolation and desperation have stoked the creative juices (or perhaps more accurately, I'm bored out of my fucking gourd). Also, if I'm being completely frank, I am in month number four after a relationship break-up and staying busy seems to help me feel more regulated and passes the at times excruciating march forward. My son and I are snowed-in on a mountain top in rural Vermont, there are only so many Star Trek episodes one can watch, and, well, this seems like as good a moment as any to pen the next great piece of literature.

To the reader: This book may come across as crass and insincere. In the ten chapters that follow, I'm going to give a lot of groups of people, well, a whole

lot of shit. I'm not actually attempting to levy some kind of high-handed moral critique on my fellow humans in this screed, though at times I will not be able to resist a jab or two. I'm really just trying to make a point about neurophysiology, about the impact of our blindness to the power and impact of neurophysiology; I'm just doing so without the usual deferential and politically correct self-censorship.

The truth is, I have lots of compassion for us. Life can be a shitstorm, and our neurology can really do a number on us if we're not paying attention. That said, we humans tend to do some really fucked up shit to each other, and to ourselves. If, as you read this book, you find that some of what I write resonates, you're just going to have to come to process that in your own way.

Some of you (which is really funny to say, because there is every possibility that only eleven people will ever read this book) will perhaps feel offended by what I say here, or by the ways in which I say it. Some of you may think, "what a self-righteous prick." That's cool. Some of you may read my words and think, "Wow, that break up must have been really bad." And some of you, if you're open to my message, may glean a tiny bit of insight from this piece.

OK, so here's my argument, in a metaphorical nutshell: we often behave badly because we're not aware of the power that our neurophysiology holds; we're not aware of the fact that we get feelings and sensations in our bodies, and in an effort to get rid of those sensations, or in an effort to pursue *more* of those sensations, we can do some really fucked up shit. While I am not positing that we are utterly powerless to our neurophysiology, what I *am* saying is that a lot of bad behavior can be traced to the off-lining of our prefrontal cortices and instead to a misguided attempt to manage our out-of-balance neurological ecosystems. So, while my intention is not to judge, if you find yourself nodding at any of the ten examples I provide herein, you're probably behaving like an asshole; you're probably acting in ways that you have justified and rationalized, that you may believe are entirely fine and defensible and reasonable (social narratives are powerful things) -- but in reality you may be hurting lots of people along the way.

That's what assholes do, by the way.

Just to be clear, I'm not clean in all of this. I have acted like an asshole repeatedly during my lifetime. I write this book from a place of experience, so far be it for me to judge. I'm simply pointing out that you may want to hit the pause button sometimes,

to look inward and reflect upon your shit, to not always look for ways for your mind to defend your actions and choices, and to learn to deal with the reality that you're going to have a dysregulated nervous system from time to time; that you're going to feel sad and uncomfortable and anxious and lost and agitated and all kinds of words, and maybe sitting still or shutting the hell up would be a better choice than acting like an asshole.

An aside: at the end of this book I may reread what I've written and come to the conclusion that it's just one giant 50-page projection. That would be hilarious. We shall see.

Final thought: My brother in law, in the work that he does on human development and investigation, identifies a construct he refers to as the *box of self*. In this sphere, the concept of the asshole is to some degree entirely subjective. And indeed, if in fact someone is behaving like (as society might say) an asshole, but that behavior is working for the individual in question, and if he does not tarry himself with social narratives regarding assholedom and the like, then perhaps such behavior is entirely defensible and in fact quite reasonable (in both a prefrontal cortical *and* behavioral sense). Again, it's up to you to decide.

In other words, one person's asshole may be another's divinity.

It's worth mentioning this sense of relativity because while my overriding thesis is that blindness and ignorance to our own neurology is the leading cause of assholery, perhaps the tweaking of our neuro-physiology is at times more important than adhering to a normative story. Or more to the point: perhaps at times acting like an asshole is better than feeling like shit.

Final *final* thought:, if you would prefer a less caustic rendering of some of this analysis, I suggest reading my book entitled *20 Brief Observations About The Brain And Nervous System*. If you're up for a bit more of a punk rocker's ride, read on. Anyway, thanks for taking the time to read this thing. And now, on with the show.

CHAPTER ONE: VIOLENT POLITICAL PROTESTERS



I am a leftist. What I mean is, the *values* to which I subscribe are left-leaning values. I'm pro-choice, anti-Capitalist, anti-imperialist, equity-minded. These are values that I hold because they reflect the values of my communities of origin, as well as the values of the people I want to hang out with and who I want to like me. Sometimes it's hard for me (it used to be damn near impossible) to relate to folks who don't share my values. I created the narrative, as a young man, that *not* holding liberal-left values was a sign of self-centeredness, of ignorance. I have changed my tune on this front. I am 58 years old, and I have met lots of people whose movement through the world conflicts with such a monolithic story. For example, I know many ultra-conservative men and women who would unhesitatingly give you the shirt off of their backs, who never ever think twice before lending a helping hand; and I know a shit-ton of liberals who claim that their yoga appointment always comes first.

But this chapter is not really about ideology (though it seemed like a good way to start). Instead, this chapter is about political activists,

both left and right, who commit acts of violence: physical violence, violence to property, even emotional violence through the untempered expression of their rage.

Violent political protesters often behave like assholes.

So to be totally clear, I am pointing the finger here *just* as much at the leftist protesters who smash windows and destroy property in the name of social justice as I am at the deluded sots (bless their confused hearts) who stormed the Capitol building last month. In my topology, the two groups are profoundly interconnected in terms of neurological predisposition; and while they may exist on entirely different ideological planets, their actions speak to similar neuro-physiological internal experiences.

Here's a question.

What is going on in the brains, in the minds and the nervous systems, of these extremists? Well, here's an excerpt from my own wild ride with extremism (and yes, I get that this line of thinking has the potential to be laden with projection -- it is certainly true that everyone's internal experience is unique. But I am going to argue that neurological hijacking often exists at the center of increasing political violence, and that rationalization and

justification make the fulfilling of the neurological prophesy easier.) From my Op-Ed: *“...I became an extremist because I was in distress. On both occasions, my life had become unmanageable. A college graduate without direction, a young professional without a career. I was adrift: was scared and confused, ashamed and defeated. And the feelings that these states of being precipitated were unbearable. In the parlance of the neuro-informed, my nervous system was entirely dysregulated. I was quite literally experiencing an unrelenting and crippling dearth of the feel-good neurotransmitters and hormones and an overflow of the edgier stuff. The resulting experience was physically painful and emotionally overwhelming. Enter extremism. It was a godsend. It gave me purpose, and meaning. The certitude I felt, the communities I became integrally connected to, changed my neurophysiology. I felt good again. I had a future. My nervous system was no longer jangly. I was quite literally saved...”*

Violent protesters are quite often simply fulfilling a neurophysiological need -- the need for hits of adrenaline and endorphins and dopamine to name but a few -- through their collective externalized acts of self-righteous outrage. These individuals have become adroit at employing the mind's proclivity to justify and rationalize, to interpret

data in a flawed manner, as a way to defend their actions. But the reality is, they are quite often simply fulfilling a biophysiological imperative when they hit the streets, furiously chanting their political slogans and shouting down contradictory viewpoints (Seriously, what is the *neurological* difference between “Hey Hey, Ho Ho, Racism has got to go!” and “Stop the Steal!!”??).

These self-proclaimed (meaning-making, ideological and values-oriented) champions for the causes of justice and freedom (both left and right use those same words: *justice and freedom*) have found a way to feel good. It feels good to be certain. It feels good to be part of a mob (not meant as a pejorative). It feels good to *know* you’re right and to be surrounded by others who know you’re right, and together to fuck shit up in defense of your righteous cause.

What assholes.

So, a quick pause: I am willing to wager that some of you reading this are feeling a little outraged at my apparent dismissiveness of the validity and primacy of your beliefs and values. That’s intriguing fodder for investigation, right? My guess is that for you the world of values and beliefs forms a core of your identity, and that my argument above seems to reek of political apathy and white

male privilege. My point in fact does have *nothing* to do with ideology. What I am interested in investigating are the ways in which our potential servitude to our own neurology, in concert with our mind's ability to justify pretty much anything in defense of our quest for feeling OK internally, contributes to our collective and individual assholery. And again, lest you think me a judgemental fuckwhistle, I'm not an innocent here. I have been the angry protester, the dude with the spray paint can at anti-CIA rallies, the loud mouth with the bullhorn at Anti-Apartheid actions. My values align with these actions. But the truth is that my actions, my choices, were at times (unconsciously and subsequently rationalized by my self-preserving and self-promoting mind) guided more by the neuro-physiological need to reach internal homeostasis, to feel OK, to feel internally in synch, then they were by some ideological and politically *strategic* imperative.

Yep. I have behaved like *such* an asshole, so many times.

The asshole spectrum is pretty fluid. (That sounded weird and gross.) I would argue that the militia dudes who show up at state capitol buildings with guns, and the rioters at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, are a bit further along on that asshole spectrum than say the protesters who

scream at passersby. But I would *also* argue that the Black Lives Matter protesters who smash windows and throw rocks and bottles at the police are also fairly advanced on the asshole scale.

Temperature check: what's interesting to me is that many of you who are reading this are right now, at this very moment, perhaps retreating to the realm of the ideological. If you hold left wing values, if you believe that the scourge of institutional and systemic racism needs to be exposed and confronted (in the streets if need be), then there is a good chance that your brain is filtering my words in a reified and habitual way; that your mind (historically prone to certain interpretations and justifications) is developing and entertaining various opinions about my politics, that you are experiencing sensations in your body that you might identify as anger or outrage or some other meaning-making vocabulary term, and that your prefrontal cortex is on the verge of shutting down. In other words, I have triggered the fuck out of you and you can no longer hear what I'm saying.

I find that fascinating, because the *truth* is that the same neurophysiological events, the same sensations in the body, the same mind-based rationalization and flawed interpretation, happens with the rightwing folks as well. *Exactly the same.*

And in both cases -- right *and* left -- the neurological hijack engenders in these individuals the unchallenged permission, the neurological invitation, to behave poorly -- to be an asshole.

Look, am I saying that all violence, all resistance to oppression, is “bad”? No I’m not. That would be dogmatism on my part and I’m trying to steer clear of such. Also, I’m an upper middle class white guy with a fuck-ton of privilege. I get that. And I get that there are times when people are going to employ violence in a manner that is *not* neurophysiologically fulfilling. But there are endless examples of the kind of violent protest to which I am referring, and there are tens of thousands, maybe millions, of activists out there who behave like assholes because their neurologies, their brains and nervous systems, tell them it’s acceptable.

Assholes are everywhere. And it makes total sense that these people would *behave* like assholes. But along the way, people get hurt, people suffer, and these assholes don’t seem to give a fuck about that. Maybe if they -- if we all -- paid a bit more attention to the power and wily natures of our neurophysiology, of our internal quest for feeling OK, we could move away from assholedom and move more toward something a tad more generous and humane.

CHAPTER TWO: SPORTS FANS



Of all of the assholes on the planet, sports fans are right up there near the top of the list. As but one of infinite examples, the depth of assholery demonstrated by hard core soccer fans and hooligans is stunning. Go to YouTube and search for *football hooligan fights* and you will be entertained for hours (if violence is your thing). On a more serious and somber note, go to YouTube and type in *Hillsborough Disaster* and your stomach will turn. But here's something you might not expect. Regardless of the level of assholing that exists within the ranks of the hooligans -- and it's a high bar of assholage -- I would assert that the level of assholiness expressed by soccer moms and hockey dads is arguably worse than that of the aforementioned *bovver boys*. Let me explain.

Soccer hooligans make no bones about their intentions. While they may lack a certain awareness surrounding the neurological determinism that exists at the heart of their tribal endeavors, they are purposefully and consciously seeking an adrenaline rush (in addition to other biochemical events) through the exercise of violence. They *want* to pick a fight with the opposing team's fans, and with the police, because

that's what provides them with the internal experience that they seek. There are other more subtle forces at work as well -- all centered around physiology. For example, the body releases certain endogenous opioid peptides, as well as serotonin and dopamine, in response to pain; and getting punched in the head is painful. (Notice the word *opioid*. Enough said.) Also, the intensity of the moments leading up to the brawls bring about a noradrenaline (norepinephrine) release, as noradrenaline is the *focus* hormone. So, the soccer hooligan is really doing his best to summon the internal, biological power of neurotransmitters and hormones that bring him (they are not all men, but mostly so) to a neuro-physiological state of relative homeostasis.

In other words, it feels good to fuck shit up.

What a bunch of assholes. They don't seem to give a fuck about all of the families who can't go to games for fear that their kids will witness such violence; or worse, they don't seem to care about all of the kids who *do* go to the games and get to see the hooligans at their level best.

Oh ya. And then of course there's the fact that people die during these brawls. Ass. Holes.

But the soccer moms and hockey dads are worse.

Soccer moms and hockey dads arrive at their childrens' games under the pretence of being supportive, happy, well-adjusted and self-aware individuals. They smile and laugh, chit-chatting with the other moms and dads in the minutes leading up to the game. Their kids, lulled into false senses that maybe today mom and dad will just enjoy watching them and won't make a scene, warm up for the game with laughter and joy. But on cue and as usual, once the game starts, the soccer moms and hockey dads morph into total fucking assholes. They scream, they pace, they threaten, they fight...they lose their fucking minds. Their kids of course wince and pretend to be entirely disaffiliated from the insane spectacle in which their loving caregivers are engaged.

Mom and dad, you are behaving like assholes.

So, what's going on? Well, from a purely neurophysiological perspective, mom and dad are experiencing a quite normal neurological response to both the competitive arena and to the protective instincts surrounding the vulnerability of their kids. Adrenaline and cortisol are the primary culprits in this internal drama, but not solely. Mom and dad are hijacked. Their ability to reason, to employ sound judgement, is impaired. All understandable. But, it doesn't let them off the hook entirely. Regardless of the fact that mom and

dad have gone off of the neurological rails, they still have the *choice* to not obey their dysregulated internal systems. They could still refrain from behaving badly, from acting like assholes. But...and this is critical...their minds (and the collective consciousness of the parental fan base) have created several narratives that grant permission for such behavior. That's why they all sit together -- so they can act like assholes and have their assholery both defended and reflected by their fellow parents.

The point I am trying to make here is that while the neuro-physiological experiences of mom and dad sports fan are completely normal and natural, the choice to believe in the veracity of everything they are feeling -- and beyond that, the decision to *act* upon those feelings -- is when they pass through the gates of reason and into the mystical realm of the asshole emerald city.

Sports are indeed quite fascinating. Going to a college football game with 100,000 other fucking maniacs is kind of a controlled setting in which behaving like an asshole is not only sanctioned, it is encouraged. There is nothing inherently wrong with such. The overwhelming majority of fanatics use the arena as a place to tweak their internal experiences -- to yell and scream and feel the rush of adrenaline and waves of dopamine-induced

euphoria and cortisol-enhanced intensity and stress; a large container in which acting like an asshole is the norm. But where's the line between run-of-the-mill and predictable assholery, and beyond-the-pale fucking assholery? How many fans use the environment as a way to express such violent sentiments, such hatred and venom, that their trip down asshole lane becomes more akin to a descent into asshole purgatory. And how many people within their spheres of contact are impacted negatively by their assholiness (In other words, once the game ends the propensity for assholedom does not simply dissipate. It has a distinguishable half-life that at times carries over to brawls in the parking lots and to abusive behavior in the home. Fucking-A-assholes for sure.)?

The fact remains that human beings are, to a large extent, the products of our cumulative life experiences and of our unique neurological and biochemical make-ups. We are all going to experience life and events in a distinct way. And, because we are all looking to reach some kind of physiological homeostasis -- to *feel* OK -- we are all going to interpret data uniquely; we are going to allow our minds to believe in truths that we unconsciously sense as serving us well, because that is what we do. But the critical next step in this calculus -- the asshole step, if you will -- is that of *acting* upon such shit.

Look, if it serves you well (internally, neurophysiologically) to hate the New York Yankees, then for god's sake hate the fuckers. No harm, no foul. If the tweak to your nervous system is enjoyable, whatever. But if you hate the New York Yankees, and if you pick a fight with a Yankees fan at the next table in the restaurant, then you're a total fucking asshole.

Same with you, mom and dad. If you think the referee in the soccer game that little Billy is playing in is a *homer*, a biased official who hates your team and is calling the game against you out of spite, and if feeling that way makes you feel good, whatever. That's your internal deal, your neuro-physiology, and hopefully your choice. Of course, if you actually *believe* this to be the case without challenging such assumptions you're already a bit of an asshole. And, if you *act* on these feelings and cause a scene, or call the referee assignor, or pick a fight with the other team's parents, you are an unabashed asshole of high office, and you should just stay home and pick your nose rather than go to these games.

You are fucking shit up for everyone else, which of course is what assholes do.

So anyway, here's my thinking: stop acting like an asshole just because it's your way to change your

biochemistry. Stop punishing others in your unconscious quest to feel good. Stop behaving badly.

Oh, and mom and dad...stop going to your kids' soccer and hockey games if you can't leave the asshole in the car.

CHAPTER THREE: MEGA CHURCH PASTORS, AND THE PEOPLE WHO FOLLOW THEM



Oh dear, this one is easy.

OK, well maybe not entirely. I must be willing to accept that mega-church pastors -- The Benny Hinns of the world -- actually *believe* in what they say and do. (And this of course is a whole nother book, one about neuroplasticity and literally *training* your brain, through action and thought repetition, to arrive at a place of certitude regarding something about which there can be no certainty -- the existence of god, for example.) But for the sake of this book, these dudes are some supreme assholes. And, in congruence with my thesis herein, their followers are acting like assholes as well (Maybe more like simple asses rather than like all out assholes, if we're parsing words).

By way of summary and for the sake of brevity: mega church pastors pray on lonely, troubled, lost, vulnerable and distressed individuals (actually, they pray on the dysregulated nervous systems of these folks, because that's how it works. It's one of the reasons that cults are so damned seductive, and

why most cult members are people who enter into cultdom when they are in significant crisis.). Mega-church pastors get rich on the tragic histories and unbalanced biochemistries of the world's most vulnerable people (I suppose one could argue that so do therapists, but maybe that's for another time as well).

These guys are serious assholes. And actually, it's kind of boring stuff. I mean, these guys are assholes and there's not too much of a gray area, is there? While they might say that they are providing a great service to lost souls, giving them faith and hope when they perhaps have none (translation: helping people tweak their physiology and thus helping them move closer to homeostasis), the fact that they make promises that are unabashed untruths and rationalize their exploitations as a way to expand their fleets of luxury automobiles -- assholes.

To be frank and however, I am more interested in their followers. And I am particularly interested in the *actions* of the people who follow these assclowns, and how *those* actions impact the acolyte's friends and relatives.

Here's my thinking. When mom or dad fall under the spell of one of these master manipulators, they (mom or dad) inevitably submit their children to

all manner of asshole behaviors: they berate children for “unholy” actions, they demand that their offspring adhere to the same neurological prodding because they assume that what’s good for them must be good for their progeny, they act abusively toward those who challenge the narrative of the mega-church (including for example such terrible abuses as telling the young, the children they claim to love, that they will go to hell for loving people of the same sex). The list of their assholeries is endless. They have unwittingly undertaken a so-called spiritual journey as a way to feel better on the inside, and they have obtusely accepted the doctrines of the church as truth (also called *faith*, and while we know that faith is a great tonic for the dysregulated central nervous system, it can be abused). Worst of all, in a blind attempt to justify *their* choices, they willingly and without conscience fuck with the nervous systems and souls of others.

Total. Fucking. Assholes.

Look, I get that this is complicated shit. I get that god and faith and church and parenthood all combine in ways that can be super duper nuanced. But the reality remains: when people undertake actions based upon beliefs that have been manifested through their own changes in neurophysiology, they are running the risk of acting like

assholes. And in the case of faith and religion (because one of the tenets of evangelical religion is *saving* others through urging them to convert, lest bad things happen), the assholes tend to rise to the top.

Oh, and Benny Hinn is an asshole. There. I said it.

CHAPTER FOUR: JUST RAGE-A-HOLICS IN GENERAL



I mean...this book could fucking write itself.

Anger is the most abused, and the most ardently defended, of all neurological states of being. And I would offer that rage-a-holics are the gold standard of unmitigated, complete and total asshole behavior in our human theater. They are generally speaking *unself-reflective* and neurologically immature loose cannons who give zero fucks about the impact that their anger, their rage, their violence, has on others. But that said and in deference to subtlety and nuance, let's dig in a bit more deeply.

Here's an important question: what constitutes the line between righteous anger and self-serving anger? And, perhaps even more complexly, where is the line between expressions of anger that are *not* asshole and use of anger (unconscious and justified by the mind) in an asshole manner?

These are nuanced questions, to be sure. My argument is this: rage-a-holics justify and give voice to their feelings of anger; they believe them to be just, they adhere to the rationalizations that

give them legitimacy, and they seek out compatriots who reflect and echo and congratulate them for their so-deemed understandable rage. They do this because their journey toward neurophysiological homeostasis is one in which the biochemical responses to anger (adrenalin, noradrenaline, etc.) make them feel good. In other words, they use their anger to get what *they* need neurologically.

This is some dangerous asshole territory.

Neurologically speaking, when we feel threatened (and that can of course take myriad forms, both verifiable and perceived) we experience changes to our biochemistry. Our prefrontal cortices go offline, our amygdala sends signals to our hypothalamus, which in turn activates our sympathetic nervous system responses and thus precipitates the release and flooding of our systems with hormones aimed at saving us from danger. On a most basic level, this is why when we hear a loud and unexpected noise in our homes, our very first response is often, “*What the fuck was that?!?!?*” The adrenal response brings on a rush of, well, *anger*.

But here’s the thing. When we obey the feeling and actually yell *what the fuck was that*, we are acting like an asshole. Or, when we get cut off in traffic

and we flip off the cutter-offer and scream at him or her, we are acting like an asshole. We are bowing to the *feeling* of anger, to the sensation in our body, and we are taking out the feeling on another human being.

Assholeland my friends.

Next up comes those who have no clue that the narratives they create in their minds (or perhaps more accurately, that their mind's create in response to their brain's flawed filtering of data) are often false and capricious, and who subsequently act out upon these angry, self-righteous narratives. Dear lord, what fucking assholes.

This is what I call the *fuck them* response, and the examples of this are many. For instance, a person walks into a room of people and perceives that these people are dismissive of him (OK, this is a projection. Fuck off.). His narrative, his story, is a fallacy. It comes from a place of history and trauma and reified neurology. In any event, instead of recognizing this as story, his body temperature rises (the adrenal response is activated) and, in a self-protective and entirely irrational moment, he says to himself, *fuck them*.

Now, in and of itself, this is not the domain of assholehood. The man in question is arguably only

injuring himself; he's also not acting out his flawed perception, his anger, upon others. But again, subtlety is key here. If the man in question decides to hate these people, and if he acts coldly and rudely toward them, he is an asshole. If the man goes home and behaves like a shithead toward his kids and partner, then he is an asshole. And if the man bad mouths these people in some other public forum, or worse still assassinates their characters, he is a raging asshole. (This by the way is what narcissists do. They destroy others in defense of their own fragility, and they accept their anger and hatred as absolute truth. Fucking assholes of regal stature.)

But lest I shy away from the most controversial element in this dynamic, I need to jump into the waters of political and ideological anger. This is the most treacherous ground in this conversation, because people who hold fast to ideologically determined anger find complete justification for their actions and behavior within the echo chambers of those who cling to similar views; and their categorical unwillingness to challenge their own actions in defense of this anger, this rage, is some fucked up shit.

Let's take the anger of anti-racism activists as an example.

People of color are angry about racism. Makes perfect sense to me. And voices of defiance and resistance and righteous anger abound in this realm (and in many similar social justice realms). And far be it from me, the upper middle class white guy, to dismiss such anger. I can have no fucking idea what it feels like to be black in a racist country. But, if and when that anger becomes a refuge, a deflection against reasonable political critiques or opposing opinions about political strategy or some other manifestation, then the anti-racism activist has the potential to behave like an asshole.

I'm Jewish. When someone who's *not* Jewish criticizes Israeli politics, I get a feeling in my body, a feeling precipitated by a neuro-physiological response to a perceived threat. (I think I must have become habituated to seeing people who are anti-Israel as anti-Semitic in my home of origin, because my dad hammered that into me; my neurology is thus literally triggered by any expressions otherwise. And the irony is, as a lefty, I think Israel's occupation of Palestine is super fucked up.) And this feeling, this rush of adrenaline among other things, *makes me feel angry*. But my anger is just an old feeling from an outdated psychic map. And if I act on it, well, I'm an asshole.

I believe that the same can be said of the anti-racism activist, or pro-choice activist, or pro-

LGBTQ activist (all of whom as a lefty I am in league with ideologically). Anti-racism activists who get a feeling in their bodies when someone appears to threaten their sense of security and identity, and anti-racism activists who subsequently act upon those feelings, and who defend such actions because righteous anger is empowering -- those people could very well be behaving like assholes.

This is dangerous territory, I admit. Calling out someone for their neurologically determined anger when they instead identify it as ideologically-driven and values based anger, is fertile ground for serious conflict. Examples of this toxic dynamic are infinite, and it's one of the reasons that makes actual dialog about social justice issues all but impossible -- for the moment that an ideologically-driven activist chooses to believe that their identity is under any kind of assault, the conversation is over. The feeling of anger that rises in their body (the fight-flight-freeze sensations created by certain neuro-physiological processes) precipitates an automatic and habituated interpretation of those sensations by the mind, and the individual in question accuses the other of racism, or sexism, or anti-semitism, etc.

Fascinatingly, this physiological response is *in part* where the construct of such things as institutional

and unconscious and systemic prejudice and bigotry comes from (*in part* is a key qualifier here, because institutional and systemic racism are real to be sure); because the body, when perceiving any kind of a threat to identity, creates and defends a narrative that justifies an angry response. (Indeed, some of you are probably reading this and feeling angry that some middle-aged white man is making such a claim.)

Anyway, I hope my point is clear. Anger, just like any physiological response to stimuli, is neither good nor bad. And there's no doubt that anger (the physiology of anger) serves a purpose that helps people survive. But anger unbounded by any sense of personal agency and responsibility, and feelings of anger in the body blindly obeyed and acted upon by the individual, are the domain of a shitload of serious assholes in our world.

Anger is an asshole's favorite drug. Just saying.

CHAPTER FIVE: POLITICIANS



Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahah
hahahahahhahahahahahahahahahahahahahahah
ah
ah
ahaha!!!!!!

CHAPTER SIX: DRAMA QUEENS AND KINGS



I define a drama queen/king as someone who is entirely addicted to the neurological impact of such things as gossip, conflict, melodrama, etc. Drama queens and kings abound (from here on in referred to as *Quings*). They are everywhere: from the teacher's lounge at the local public middle school to the dinner tables of America's suburbs to the pages of any and all social media. And, they are assholes.

But once again in deference to nuance, I suppose I need to qualify my excoriation of this incredibly populous sub-species.

So, by way of a question: Are drama addicts acting like assholes if they seek out the neurological hits of dopamine and endorphins (among other physiological outcomes of their behaviors) without actually harming anyone? What I mean is, if a bunch of drama quings are hanging out in a teacher's lounge (I spent many a lunch period in the teacher's lounge, and quickly learned that, at least for me, the toxicity quotient was way too high for my liking.), and if they are complaining about the principal and feeding off of each other's

expressions of big feelings, does that make them assholes?

To be frank, I'm not sure there's a clear cut answer to that question. On the one hand, bad mouthing others in an unconscious attempt to tweak one's own neurology seems like a pretty cut and dried case of assholery. On the other hand, if a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, is the tree (or the lumberjack) an asshole? One could easily argue that the residual impact that this gossip and bad-mouthing session can have ripples out onto those who come into the drama quings' sphere of contact -- and thus the act is that of an assemblage of assholes. But I suppose one could *also* argue that this blowing off of steam may serve some purpose in a world in which seeking some feel good neurological states can be rather elusive.

Lest we forget and become lost in the weeds of the asshole swamp (yuck), this book is about neuroscience. My thesis (if you will) is that a preponderance of assholery proceeds from a place of an often unconscious desire to tweak one's own neuro-physiology; that people become assholes not because of ideology or values, but because, in an attempt to change the way their bodies feel, in an attempt to change their neuro-physiology, they undertake actions that make them...assholes.

Back to Quings.

Here's the thing (or perhaps more aptly, here's the quing): when people engage in this kind of behavior (melodrama and gossip), and when they do so without any sense for what they are actually *doing* -- that is, behaving in ways that have the net result of altering their neuro-physiology -- and when people willfully and without conscience use others as punching bags in a self-absorbed attempt to make themselves feel good, they are assholes. And in a twist of asshole irony, *those* are the very people about whom we *should* be gossiping, as they are the fucktwaddles in this silly little drama (and then of course we could go round and round, kind of like Hegel's Dialectic of neurologically-induced assholedom).

The point I am attempting to convey in this chapter of my amazingly important literary masterpiece is that melodrama is always productive of some manner of assholiness, and that it's simply a matter of degree as to how destructive such behavior can be. And what makes it all so oddly compelling is the fact that pretty much all drama quings are simply engaging in these actions because they are unconsciously trying to alter their own neurology. *That's it*. There would be pretty much no other reason for the drama if it weren't for

the impact such actions had on an individual's internal experience.

But here's one more critical question: If engaging in melodrama and gossip and badmouthing of others actually succeeds in making someone feel better, is it in fact a good thing?

Seriously. I'm not asking this question rhetorically and then planning on blowing it out of the water. What's the difference between the actions of a drama quing and, for example, the consumption of refined sugar, or drinking a glass of wine, or yelling at the T.V. during a football game (all actions that, in and of themselves, are *not* the providence of assholes and that can in fact lead one to accessing a more pleasurable neuro-physiological state of being)? In other words, are drama quings assholes by default? (Or even more compellingly, are drama quings in fact highly enlightened beings, in that they are unconsciously employing successful tactics in their quest for neurological homeostasis?)

My overarching contention derives from the following calculus. Here are the seven asshole measures of import:

- Assholedom is nuanced
- Assholedom is contagious
- Assholedom reaches beyond the immediate

- Assholedom is predominantly the product of action, not thought
- Assholedom is self-concerned and injurious to others
- Assholedom is delusional and reflects vast expanses of unawareness
- Assholedom is blind

I'm sure I could add more contingencies to this list, but this will do for now.

So, if we employ the aforementioned asshole derivations in our analyses of the drama quing, and if we assiduously continue to examine assholedom through the lens of neuro-physiology -- as a drug of sorts, not entirely unlike an asshole-based SSRI (not a suppository, though the metaphor is fun) -- then we can deconstruct the asshole quotient of the quing to a fairly substantial degree.

To begin with, drama quings tend not to give a fuck about how their antics impact others. They may request that their co-conspirators not share their bad-mouthings with others, but once the genie is out of the bottle the fan and the shit are bound to come together. So, since quings behave in this self-serving manner, and since the data tell us that the victims of gossip and character assassination do in fact experience pain (just google cyber-bullying and suicidality), then by virtue of corollary #5

(assholedom is self-concerned and injurious to others), drama quings are assholes.

Secondly, drama quings make the choice to actively engage in the drama rather than simply keeping their criticisms and denegrations to themselves. Applying postulate #4 (*assholedom is predominantly the product of action, not thought*), drama quings are assholes.

And finally, because the gossip and the melodrama always spreads and ends up engaging an ever-widening audience (*assholedom is contagious*), drama quings are assholes.

Has the jury reached a verdict? We have your honor.

Guilty as charged. Assholes.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS



This is such a fun chapter for me to write. But before I do, a qualification.

The first part of this chapter is replete with my own apparent vitriol and disdain for this class of human being. I am entirely aware of this bitterness. *This is my own neurology on display.* The anger and resentment I feel toward school administrators is my *own* mind's way of defending myself from uncomfortable feelings -- feelings generated by a teaching career in which I often felt inadequate and under scrutiny (perhaps feelings entirely of my own creation) and feelings precipitated by my own failed career as an administrator. And so, as I embark upon this excoriation of this circle of assholes, I am completely aware of how my own neurology plays a role in this story.

OK, all caveats aside, here we go:

School administrators are a compelling lot. Most began their careers as teachers -- individuals who for the most part entered the classroom with a sense of excitement about the possibilities. But along the way administrators lost their way. They

became seduced by power, by influence, by a much bigger paycheck. And they rationalized their transition away from teaching and toward *educational leadership* (what a ginormous fucking euphemism *that* is) by explaining to themselves that this was a way to have a more profound impact upon the children and families they claim to serve. But this is not the *only* way in which school administrators act like assholes (and indeed, craving power, influence and money doesn't necessarily make one an asshole).

It gets far more sordid and seedy from here.

School administrators, regardless of political ideology and affiliation, are the selfsame oligarchs and tyrants against whom they rail in their quite often liberal political lives. On the inhale they are horrified at the socially exploitive power wielded by the CEO's of investment firms and by ruthless political lobbyists, and on the exhale they sit around in groups castigating their teachers, bad-mouthing and demeaning those they claim to lead and support, and making decisions *not* based upon sound policy and practice but instead upon bottom lines and political efficacy.

I have sat at those tables. I have watched and listened as administrators have voted thumbs up or thumbs down (*literally!!*) when faced with

rehiring decisions. I have watched and listened as administrators have found fault with teachers' characters and then used those observations as fodder for a growing wave and rising tide of anger and retributive action. I have watched and listened as administrators have claimed that the institution is more important than the individuals who comprise the whole, and that sometimes you just have to make the hard choices (another euphemism for cruelty in inhumanity) in defense of their so-called beliefs.

But lest I get lost here, let's return to the issue of neuro-physiology.

I would posit the following: there's no quantifiable *neurological* difference between the ways in which administrators behave (in groups, around their tables, at their executive team meetings) and the ways in which Qanon acolytes behave. Let me explain.

School administrators are, by the very structure of the institutions they lead, isolated from the rank and file. And the rank and file, the people in the metaphorical (literal?) trenches, oftentimes feel significant antipathy toward these removed and distant decision-makers. The administrators know this. They might *say* that they don't really give a fuck -- and perhaps in moments of reasonable

rational thinking that is entirely true -- but the neurological impact of feeling isolated and attacked can be rather triggering. And so, the administrators circle the wagons. They create all manner of institutional conventions that promote further distancing from the workers, and they do so in groups (forming positive feedback loops in these echo chambers -- hence my Qanon analogy); and in those echo chambers they voice opinions (their collective mind's way of justifying their existence and station), make decisions, disparage those whom they deem less than themselves, and pass judgement upon the serially disenfranchised.

In short, they behave like total assholes.

Tell me, from a purely neuro-physiological standpoint, how is this any different from the madness of the Qanon cult? Both groups are unconsciously adhering to beliefs, engaging in practices, and organizing around supposed principles that in reality are simply tricks to change their neurology. Yes, narrative-wise, school administrators who claim belief in the sanctity of education and conspiracy theorists who think that Anderson Cooper eats babies are a bit different; but the unconscious quest for changing one's neurology, and the willingness to in an unexamined way act like a complete asshole,

makes these two groups not entirely distinct from one another.

Let's parse this out a bit more.

If we return to the asshole rubric I penned in an earlier chapter, how might such a quantification apply to the school administrator?

- Assholedom is nuanced
- Assholedom is contagious
- Assholedom reaches beyond the immediate
- Assholedom is predominantly the product of action, not thought
- Assholedom is self-concerned and injurious to others
- Assholedom is delusional and reflects vast expanses of unawareness
- Assholedom is blind

When administrators isolate themselves from the workers, their assholedom is *blind*. They make decisions based not upon careful observation and objective analyses, but more upon biases and echo chamber-enhanced group thinking. And when school administrators convince themselves of the validity of certain supposed truths -- again within the closed circles of their own brethren -- they often act out of a need for neurological shifts rather than based upon logic and rigorous analysis of data. In *this* case their assholery is *delusional and*

reflects the vast expanses of their own unawareness. Finally, when school administrators decide not to renew a contract, and they do so without providing the teacher with due process and they do so in their own haze of vitriol and echo-chamber fueled partisanship, their assholeness is *injurious to others.*

I guess the previous analyses could be offered for any group that wields unchecked authority. But, school administrators are of a different category. Schools are places that are *supposedly* guided by certain social narratives and norms. Schools claim to be places of high integrity, of truth; bastions of civility and reflections themselves of the best ideals of The Enlightenment and the Age of Humanism. But as is always the case, neuro-physiological determinism wins the day. School administrators may rationalize their actions as being in line with the high ethical standards purported to exist at the heart of a school's mission, but the reality is that school administrators are no different from the CEO's and lobbyists (and lawyers and politicians and on and on and on) whom they critique as being *less than.*

In closing...ummmm...well I guess that covers it.

Oh, and I suppose I won't be applying for any more principal jobs.

CHAPTER EIGHT: COLLEGE FOOTBALL COACHES



I chose college football coaches because they stand out in my mind as the most reprehensible of human subspecies -- though frankly there's no reason I couldn't have gone with basketball coaches as well.

College football coaches:

- Manipulate others into hurting both themselves and their opponents
- Verbally abuse their charges and call it love
- Make millions while their players live in poverty
- Know that what they do is patently exploitative but don't really give a fuck
- Lie with utter impunity to recruits and to their families
- Employ violent rage with impunity

And they do all of these things and *more* in a socially manufactured environment that justifies and rationalizes all such actions and behaviors; nay, even *lauds and celebrates* such actions, holding the practitioner on high as an example of all things moral and righteous.

I mean, there is so much asshole in all of this, that the stink is entirely enveloping. But as is usually the case with each example in this epistle, there are qualifications that I am compelled to offer.

First off, it is entirely possible that college football coaches are so deep in delusion -- that the societal narrative is so strong -- that they do not see anything they do as even approaching the realm of assholedom. This of course is part of the whole *free will* argument (Players choose to participate of their own free will, and they know what they're signing up for, so the coach should not only be held harmless for any and all assholing that take place; in fact, and based upon the aforementioned free will corollary, the coach is not in any way shape or form behaving badly.). But in my topology, delusion does not let one off of the asshole hook (sounds like a sex toy). Indeed, *delusion* is #6 in the 7 assholes rubric postulates.

Secondly, there's the whole "if they weren't playing football they'd probably be fucking off in other ways" defense, "so I'm actually serving a public good." It's amazing to me how far the human mind will go in an effort to defend oneself from facing truths about their being.

The mind (if you recall) is the interpreter, the rationalizer, the justifier, of an individual's brain-

based and neuro-physiological experiences. The mind finds ways to tell the subject in question what constitutes acceptable behavior, so that the subject in question can continue to pursue a certain neurological experience without doubt or self-recrimination. And college football coaches, if they had the balls to open themselves up to honest self-investigation, might discover that their own quests for adrenaline and endorphins --- their own journeys toward neuro-physiological homeostasis -- were in fact replete with Olympian levels of toxic assholery.

Finally, college football coaches are cashing in on a game that we *know* is causing fucking brain damage to their players! *What the fuck!?!?*

ASSHOLES.

CHAPTER NINE: SOCIAL MEDIA TROLLS



Trolls tweak their own neurology by demeaning and stalking and harassing and torturing others. They experience a boost in their dopamine and serotonin levels through their sadism and through their anonymity. They make run of the mill narcissists look like saints. I cannot overstate just how evil and reprehensible these creatures are. If you are a troll on social media, you are an asshole. And in this case, I mean a true to form, hateful, asshole. You thrive on the suffering of others. It is your nourishment. You are a zombie. You are a ghoul.

CHAPTER TEN: JILTED LOVERS



I saved the best for last.

Look, it's pretty simple really. Jilted lovers are quite often in terrible pain. They are experiencing such terrible neuro-physiological dysregulation. Google "the brain in love" and you can learn a great deal about how we react, biochemically, to love and to its withdrawal.

So, here's the crux of my argument. (And, I would posit that this analysis can be applied to most asshole calculations.)

Jilted lovers are *not* assholes by default. And, jilted lovers (or simply those in pain due to the end of a relationship) are not assholes even when they *think* terrible things about their ex-lovers. Jilted lovers only cross over into assholedom when they *act* upon those feelings, and when those actions are hurtful to their former beloved.

Again, and by way of example: as you know, I am personally going through a really sad and hard break up right now. My internal experience around this feels at times overwhelming. The truth is, and the *reality* is, that my ex is a terrific person and I have nothing bad to say about her. Absolutely

nothing. And someday I believe we will be friends; but I cannot be her friend right now. It's simply too painful. And in defense of my frayed nervous system, I am choosing to think things about her that are negative and unflattering. I am choosing to *disdain* her, because I am consciously working to trick my neurology. I am literally trying to tweak my biochemical response to the break up, because in the short term the feelings -- the constancy of adrenaline and cortisol -- is too much for my body to metabolize. In a funny way, this is no different than any other practice aimed at tweaking one's nervous system: meditation, exercise, etc. I am literally engaging in a practice; I am playing a game with my mind, as a way to manage my neurophysiology.

But here's the thing: I'm not sharing any of my negative or unflattering thoughts with her! She's done absolutely nothing wrong! I'm not writing her angry emails or posting mean bullshit on social media (which I don't use anyway) as a way of acting out my own discomfort upon her.

I'm not *acting* like an asshole.

Now, were I not wide awake about the difference between my internal experience and reality, and were I someone who didn't really give a fuck about acting like an asshole, I might just as easily use my

pain as a justification for weaponizing my actions; I might be willing to hurt her in an effort to tweak my neurology, to make myself feel better. People do that shit all the time, and it is serious assholery. People feel hurt and they lash out, they scold, they denigrate, they sabotage, they actively strive to inflict pain on their ex's.

What. The. *Fuck*?

My contention is that most people have little to no awareness about how their bodies work. They experience a big feeling, and their mind provides an interpretation of said feeling, and they act in an attempt to ameliorate the feeling (to tweak their neuro-physiology in an effort to feel better). And fewer feelings are bigger than is the end of a loving relationship. The neuro-physiological disruption and dysregulation can be profoundly intense. And in a desperate attempt to right their neurological ship, people do terrible things to each other.

This is your former beloved, man! Think about *that* before you act.

CONCLUSION



As I have repeatedly stated, this is a booklet about the human brain and human neuro-physiology. It is not meant as an analysis of human morality or as a judgemental treatise on, and delineation of, the constitution of the asshole. Indeed, the whole asshole part is quite subjective and often just a projection of one's own neuro-physiological experience.

My contention -- *and this has been my primary contention and overarching thesis in all three books I have penned during the past several months* -- is that human beings are to a large extent ignorant to the machinations of their brains, minds and nervous systems. We move through our lives believing that we are exercising free will, when more often than not we are simply responding blindly to a vast array of neuro-physiological impulses. We think that we are engaged in an existential journey in which values and beliefs and ideals predominate, when in fact we are on a constant quixotic sojourn toward trying to achieve some manner of neurological homeostasis (a biochemical and bioelectrical balance that leaves us feeling...balanced.). Indeed, the gulf that exists between our feelings and our impulses, our habits

and our rationalizations, and a true understanding of how our brains and nervous systems function on a moment to moment basis is both astounding and tragic.

In the 50 or so previous pages I provided a few examples of people (groupings) who have a propensity toward assholedom. My analyses are based upon two primary variables: first, that these groupings of people are populated by an abundance of folks who lack awareness as to why they move through life and act the way they do, and secondly that the actions of these fuckbarrels often and up impacting others in a negative and at times hurtful manner. The truth of course is that, based upon my stated topology, every human being on the planet has the potential to be a total asshole. If you will recall:

- Assholedom is nuanced
- Assholedom is contagious
- Assholedom reaches beyond the immediate
- Assholedom is predominantly the product of action, not thought
- Assholedom is self-concerned and injurious to others
- Assholedom is delusional and reflects vast expanses of unawareness
- Assholedom is blind

There's nothing entirely unique about the groupings of people I have used as examples of assholery in this astounding piece of scholarship. They do, however, present for us a series of asshole archetypes, and we can apply the analyses of each as we examine other groups and individuals and observe their journeys toward assholedom.

If you take anything from this book, **and in all seriousness**, it's this:

We often hurt others because of our ignorance of our own neurology. And god dammit we don't *want* to hurt others! Life can be hard. Let's not make it harder by behaving so badly. Maybe, just maybe, we could all strive a bit more consciously to find ways to fulfill our individual neuro-physiological needs -- to balance out our brains and nervous systems -- and at the same time act lovingly toward our fellow travelers.

So until next time....goodbye, you assholes.