

The oil spill, the mapmaker heuristic, and me

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It's easy right now to think that the world is coming undone. The BP oil company has singlehandedly devastated the Louisiana coast. Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano continues to blacken our skies and ground our jets. Terrorists are planting bombs in Times Square. Lacrosse stars are killing other lacrosse stars. Who could blame us for asking: What's the world coming to?

In times like these, I turn to the mapmaker heuristic. That's just a clever name for the brain's deep-wired sense of psychological distance. The way we see events in our world depends a lot on how near or far away they are—actually and emotionally. That's why it's much more upsetting to have a 747 crash in our own neighborhood—right around the corner on Rodman Street—than in, say, Liverpool, England. This is an example of the mapmaker heuristic distorting our thinking. It tricks us into feeling that 300 people perishing on Rodman Street is more important and sad than 300 people perishing in Liverpool.

We are capable of talking ourselves out of such misguided heuristic thinking, but it does take effort. We are also capable of using hard-wired heuristic habits to our advantage. Consider the BP oil spill, for example. TV has brought that ecological disaster right into our living rooms, 24-7 if we allow it. That gooey muck is close, and we feel for all those shrimpers and other watermen and Katrina survivors. But try to view the Gulf coast from a different perspective, a much more distant one—say from the Hubble Space Station. The oil spill doesn't go away, but you see it from afar, as one event among thousands of events taking place on the planet. Some of the events are bad—some really really bad—but a lot of other events are benign, some even celebratory. Kids are graduating from college and patients are surviving cancer and families are living in warm, well-lighted homes. I'm not saying we shouldn't have empathy for Gulf coasters; we should. But getting some distance and perspective on bad events helps us defuse their emotional power in a helpful way.

The mapmaker heuristic also entwines our emotions and our sense of time. Say you are reading a history book, a history of prehistoric America, and you read a passage about a dramatic climatic event that did severe damage to the Gulf coast. It won't be more than a couple sentences, because it's not all that important in the scheme of things—and you're unlikely to shed a tear over it. Or here's an exercise for your heuristic brain: imagine writing a history of the southern U.S. a couple hundred years from now: How many sentences will you devote to the BP oil spill?

I'm anticipating some indignant reaction to this, and indeed there is risk in “de-biasing” our heuristic thinking in this way. Aren't we just tricking our minds into Pollyanna-like optimism? Sticking our heuristic heads in the sand when we should be using our anger to inspire action? There is some truth to this, but it's also true that we can be too close to events; and when we are too close—geographically, historically, emotionally—our judgments and decisions become pure emotion. Pure emotion does not make for reasoned judgment. Each of us has a mapmaker heuristic at work in our mind. Why not channel its power to achieve a balance of emotion and deliberation when we contemplate our world?

For more insights into the heuristic mind, Wray Herbert's new book, *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*, which will be published by Crown in September.