Poignancy and loyalty: The 'midnight ride' effect

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With the country on the verge of civil war, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a patriotic poem about Paul Revere, a little-known Massachusetts silversmith and minor hero of the Revolutionary War. "Paul Revere's Ride" played fast and loose with the facts of the now famous 1775 events, but the narrative had the psychological effect the author intended. It got Americans wondering how history might have turned out differently without that heroic act—and how the country might never have come to exist. By focusing on the nation's precarious origins, the poem bolstered nationalism at a time when it was sorely needed.

"What if" thinking is always a bit tricky. Too much focus on "what might have been" can mire us in regrets and feelings of powerlessness or keep us from savoring our good fortunes. But is it possible that a bit of such thinking might save us from complacency about our circumstances? Some scientists are beginning to think that imagining an alternative reality might have ironic and tonic effects, and indeed might be a practical tool for strengthening commitment to country, workplace and relationships.

Northwestern University psychological scientist Hal Ersner-Hershfield and his colleagues were interested in the "near loss" experience. When we feel we are losing something—that time is becoming scarce, for example—the bittersweet mix of happy and sad emotions can reinforce our appreciation of what we have. The scientists wondered if the same phenomenon might occur if we imagined that something never came to exist in the first place. Here's how they tested the idea in the lab.

The researchers had a group of American volunteers write "alternative universe" essays—stories about how the key events and players in early American history might have been completely different—no Paul Revere, no George Washington or Valley Forge, no signature by John Hancock. Others simply wrote down a brief history of the country's origins—the version familiar to every American child. Then the scientists used a standard test to measure all the volunteers' political attitudes, including patriotism.

Those who had reflected on an alternative history of the U.S. scored significantly higher on patriotism. That was clear, but the simple experiment raised a lot of questions. How did "what if" thinking bolster nationalism? What was the chain of cognitive events in between? They suspected that poignancy was the mediator, and ran another experiment to see. In this one, they had volunteers reimagine not their homeland but their company—to think of all the possible reasons why the company might not be the company it is today. Others simply wrote about the company's history. The scientists measured several traits of the volunteers: in addition to their commitment to the organization, they measured feelings of poignancy on leaving the company, and also their vision of the company's future success.

Again, those who had reflected on what might have been were more committed to the company than those who merely recited history. As reported in the online version of the journal *Psychological Science*, these workers also had higher hopes for the company's continued success into the future. But most important, it appeared that it was indeed a strong sense of poignancy—that strange mix of happiness and

sadness in the same moment—that linked "what if" thinking with company loyalty. They also discovered—in a slightly different version of the study—that these "what if" thinkers felt their connection with the company was "meant to be"—inevitable, a matter of fate.

These findings have practical implications for organizations. To increase worker loyalty, the scientists say, an organization should simply tell its corporate story in a way that emphasizes its precarious origins. This strategy might benefit the organization more than the worker, however: "What if" reflections could produce too rosy a view of the present and future, causing loyalists to stay too long on a sinking ship.