



Image from the movie trailer of 'The Wretched' (2020). Produced by IFC Midnight and directed by Brett and Drew T. Pierce.

Who are your Covid-Witches?

Be warned, this next irrationality could tear our society apart.

And it has probably already started right there on the street where you live...

You might not know it, or want to admit it, but your subconscious has already started selecting your Covid-Witches. You have an instinct who they are, and deep down you are itching to lash out at them. Just like, in times of crisis, we humans always do.

Usually when we are attacked by an enemy, the enemy is tangible and is distinctly different to 'us.' This makes it a lot easier for 'us' to unite together in our mutual defence. Take World War Two for example. Our enemies were the Germans and the Japanese. This made it much easier for us to identify the 'enemy' and unite against them.

Of course this was incredibly dangerous for anyone who just so happened to look like the enemy, such as the Americans of Japanese decent who were living in the United States at the time of Pearl Harbour. Without a second thought they were rounded up and thrown in labour camps for the crime of simply looking like 'the enemy.'

By ratting out and reporting these frightened civilians to the authorities, ordinary, otherwise logical citizens felt they were 'doing their bit' for the national war effort. They were doing something tangible in the defence of the collective 'us.' Yet with the benefit of hindsight we can see that it was pure xenophobic racism. In a similar vein in the 1930's the Nazis had managed to get ordinary, caring citizens to do the same against their Jewish neighbours. We all know how that ended.

Yet history is littered with countless other examples of cruel, illogical reactions again the obviously innocent. This may seem hard to explain, but this irrationality appears to be an evolutionary instinct which we have all been pre-programmed with. This is the instinct to fight, and preferably vanquish or kill, our enemies (or whoever the authorities tell us are our enemies), before they do the same to us.

When there is a tangible and distinct enemy to fight, such as the Germans in the First and Second World Wars, the Boers in the Boer War and the Zulu at Rorke's Drift, it is very unifying. The reason is that everyone knows who is friend and who is foe and can quickly align themselves accordingly.

Things get a lot more tricky if the enemy is not tangible or distinct. For example when we are being attacked by an invisible enemy such as a virus, a plague, or even natural disasters like drought that can lead to mass starvation.

At those times of crisis our instincts kick in and we feel compelled to find and vanquish whatever tangible 'enemy' we can find to blame. Witches are always a good scapegoat as their sorcery is a great, and easy to understand, excuse for any misfortune. Plus torturing and burning anyone accused of being a witch was a great way of working out our own fears and making us feel that we were doing something – anything, to make the vexation go away.

Hence our fixation with witch-hunts.

There are many examples of how we humans go off on witch-hunts whenever we're faced with a crisis. Just think of how many witch trials there were in both the United States and Europe back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when life was cheap.

The most famous of these happened in the town of Salem back in 1692.

Many causes have been cited for the witch hysteria in Salem, but the most likely causes were the unusually cold patch the world was going through at the time, along with a good dose of jealousy and suspicion towards the neighbouring townsfolk. According to Emily Oster, "The economic hardships and slowdown of population growth could have caused widespread scapegoating which, during this period, manifested itself as persecution of so-called witches, due to the widely accepted belief that witches existed, were capable of causing physical harm to others and could control natural forces."¹

The key take-away in this is that hardships can cause scapegoating and the persecution of so-called witches.

And the 'so-called' is a very important aspect of this too. Actual proof that they were bona fide witches was not necessary at all, just as long as there was someone to blame and to focus everyone's fear and frustrations on, that was all that was important.

Having been in lockdown battling a terrifying, but intangible enemy since March 2020, everyone is feeling afraid, unsure and helpless. And with every morning's news headlines these swirling emotions are heightened. And it's not just about the Coronavirus itself. The sensationalist media dramatises the looming recession, the collapse in the oil price, the staggering unemployment, the surge in domestic violence, the criminals being set free, even the fact that your job is not 'essential,' adds to the overall sense of hopelessness and despair.

¹ 'Witchcraft, Weather and Economic Growth in Renaissance Europe' by Emily Oster published in the Journal of Economic Perspectives, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter 2004).

It is not surprising that there are times when we just want to lash out at something, anything... Yet we can't even work out our tension at the gym or in yoga class anymore. So what do we do instead?

What we've always done! We start looking for witches!

For a moment take the courage to delve deeply into the stress-induced knots burning in the pit of your stomach. Who are they telling you the witches are?

When you start to think about it there are a lot of them...

- Those irresponsible neighbours who invited people over for dinner last weekend. The murderers!
- The jogger who refuses to wear a mask. What a Trump-supporter!
- The couple down the road with the autistic child who don't want to give him another vaccine. The genocidal freaks!
- The single mother who was desperate to reopen her little boutique. The witch!!

And what do we do with witches...?



Yes.

This is not good.

Before this trusted old habit of name-calling, false-accusing, and burning of witches kicks in, maybe we should step back and think about what we are doing and why. We are turning on ourselves and attacking our own friends, neighbours and communities, just because we have an evolutionary need to turn our inward fear and insecurity into outward aggression. And this, at the exact moment in time when we most need the support, trust and unity of our local neighbourhood communities.

Step back my friends and put down the pikes.

There are NO witches!

There are just people who may look different, who may think different and who may have different beliefs. But that does not make them the enemy. It makes them interesting. We can learn from them. Because if one thing this whole Coronavirus debacle has taught us is that we didn't get it right, so we can definitely learn how to do it better next time by listening to some different points of view.

Understanding, and taming, our primal instincts in this way is a very important evolutionary bridge that we need to cross, no matter what ogres are lurking beneath it.

To do that we have to look beyond the fear, lies and misrepresentations that we are being fed, and realise that there is always two sides to every story, even the stories that terrify us and awaken our primal instinct to fight or flight. Going against our instincts like this would be hard on a normal day. But in the current environment, as we are gearing up for the most contentious election in American history, everything is not just politically polarised, but fully weaponised.

Going against our instincts this time will take a lot more effort - and courage - than usual.

It is crazy to think how they can make the simply decision of choosing to wear a face-mask a politically charged statement of party affiliation that can bring out the worst in those around you. And it is just not true that wearing a mask, or doing any of the ordinary daily things we do, is some cryptic clue as to whether we are actually 'us' or 'them.' Instead we should take the time to understand why some people think differently to us, and be open minded enough to weight both side. Then perhaps we could even be brave enough to re-evaluate our own beliefs and the information we had at the time that formed them.

Why, for example, do some people believe in hydroxychloroquine? Why don't others trust vaccines? What really is the effect of 5G electro magnetic frequencies on humans, and why won't some people, even in the face of CDC recommendations, wear a mask?

Maybe we should just ask them.

And if we do, I can guarantee you that the answer won't be "because I'm a Republican," or "because I'm a Democrat." No, it'll likely be because of their personal breathing issues, their calculated interpretation of social distancing, the research they have done on the subject or the rash their previous masks caused, all of which are perfectly acceptable to their personal situation and circumstance. And remember that their personal situation and circumstance is as important, and as valid, as yours.

If we are open-minded enough, we might begin to understand them a bit better as equally scared and confused human beings. And you never know... We might actually find our commonality and, even, make a new friend in the process.

And that, my friends, is how we defeat the witches!

Alan Brough
10th May 2020.