

A PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY

From Moses to Bin Laden, these six words, “follow me to the promised land” have been of incredible importance in shaping human history. Whether these exact words or their psychological equivalent, they appear over and over whenever a powerful leader asks his followers to accept his leadership and without question do as he commands.

At times it has been for the good, such as Roosevelt leading his people out of the depression and through World War II; but at times for evil, such as Hitler leading his people on a mad course of world domination and genocide. They both said, “follow me to the promised land,” and people did by the millions.

Psychologically, these words must appeal to our most primal nature and vulnerabilities. They turn us into “true believers,” an abandonment of our human ability for reason and logical thought and create a fog of emotional devotion that blinds us to the truth (see Dictionary: *identification*).

An examination of why these words have such a powerful influence tells us something profound about ourselves, a tool which we can then apply to alert us when we begin to fall under their siren song in the future. The best place to start is where the saying began, with religion.

Perhaps the strongest and most long-lasting relationship in most people’s lives is with God. We try to do as He says and we show Him our devotion. We do so because He promises us that He will look after our fate, both here on earth as well as our immortal souls in the afterlife. Our devotion to God is “follow me to the promised land.” So it was that Moses attracted the Jews around him and led them out of bondage to the Promised Land.

To their followers, cults serve the same emotional function as religion. A charismatic most often male preaches to people that he has special knowledge, oftentimes just as for Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed, through receiving communications from God. Through their allegiance to him, he will lead his followers to a better life. As demonstrated by the recent cult history of the Branch Davidians, the Reverend Jim Jones in Guyana, or the Hale Bopp comet cult, the flock will follow even though it may be to their death.

Similar to our devotion to real or imagined religious leaders is our at times blind allegiance to political leaders. Lenin promised his people a better future through the teachings of Karl Marx. Mao led millions by offering the Chinese peasants a promised land of communist prosperity.

All these leaders, both religious, cult, and political were charismatic men who claimed some special knowledge given to them by God or a similarly revered person, and promised people a better tomorrow.

In addition to understanding the characteristics of leaders who evoke unquestioning devotion, we must also consider the psychology of their followers. In each case mentioned above, and countless others throughout human history, the leaders had a message that appealed to a fundamental *anxiety* of their followers. God, over our fate here on earth as well as the afterlife, Roosevelt, economics and a World War, Hitler, Germany's humiliation in World War I, Lenin and Mao, the starvation of the peasants, and cult leaders, the *anxieties* of lost souls looking for something in which to believe. Each one a charismatic leader with a message that appealed to the *anxieties* of a significant enough group of people to form a following.

Humans follow the Hitlers and Bin Ladens of the world to the Promised Land even though it involves suspending rational thought as they commit acts of unspeakable horrors. Surely this tells us that the process whereby we give our unquestioning loyalty to a strong and charismatic leader with a message that appeals to our fundamental *anxieties* must have its origins at the central core of the human mind.

We can find a similar loyalty, one that provides protection and is necessary for their survival, in the relationships of subservient chimps to the leader of their pack, their supreme being, known in behavior science circles as their dominant male. We share 98.5% percent of our DNA with chimps, our nearest animal ancestors, so similarities between their behavior and ours should not be surprising.

Yes, our willingness to follow a strong powerful leader, even at times to our own detriment, is a pattern of behavior as old as humankind itself. It is a part of our genetic make-up since for our nearest animal ancestors and for our own earliest human ancestors, to live under the protection of a dominant male, aka warlord or chief, meant survival. To not do so meant your species would find itself in the boneyard of extinct species now seen only in museums.

We humans must be constantly aware of this vulnerability. Whether it is an infomercial offering a magic elixir for our *anxieties* about growing old or a politician offering solutions to our *anxieties* about immigration, it is our responsibility to ask ourselves a fundamental question. When we have decisions to make about which path to follow in our lives, whether in business or relationships, we must constantly question our own perceptions and attitudes for this undue influence. Are we focusing on what is good for us in the long-term or are we falling under the beguiling spell of a message that

appeals to our *anxieties*, our emotional needs? Is our decision based upon a logical analysis of the facts, or is a potential mate's drink every night before dinner "to relax after work" and then "just a little nightcap" a forewarning of cleverly disguised alcoholism? Is this investment opportunity's objectively outsized return too good to be true or is our need for the dream of wealth blinding us to its outsized risks that must exist as surely as night follows day in order to match its promise of outsized return?

Another tool in our toolkit for self-awareness and understanding of why we at times think and act the way that we do that turns out to bring trouble into our lives. Am I thinking with my heart or my head?