

Anxiety and the War of the Worlds

Dr. David Russ

On the eve of Halloween, October 30th, 1938, H. G. Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds* was broadcast on radio as a simulated series of news bulletins. The normal ways of differentiating truth from fiction like commercial breaks were deliberately suspended to give this dramatized extra-terrestrial invasion a greater sense of reality.

Although most people never imagined that a Martian invasion was anything but science fiction, it nevertheless created confusion about whether this was actually happening and was plausible enough to cause many people to react in terror. These were news bulletins. No one had ever faked the news before this. News bulletins might be mistaken but they are not intentional fiction, right? They were broadcasting a crowd that gathered around the meteorite, right?

Using the radio program as an analogy, Anxiety can also seem like an invader. It can just drop out of the sky and seem like something unreal, something that seems so improbable you never gave it any thought. Usually we have the sense that our thoughts and emotions operate according to expected and familiar rules. There is a fundamental, albeit imperfect, correspondence between what is inside of us with the world outside us. We direct our own thoughts, command our bodies. Then, from out of nowhere, anxiety demolishes any sense of mental cause and effect. It binds us, captivates, dominates us. How did this happen to me? Our bodies seem no longer under our control but are now puppets of a new invader -- fear.

Consider the following parallels between this event and the nature of anxiety.

The radio show jumped from one event to the next making it hard to get one's bearings. Anxiety seems to jump from one thing to the other as well, multiplying concerns before you can take the time to analyze what is real and what is imagined. When you solve one worry, it can create another. When the fight or flight response is activated, your brain will go looking for danger. That is really helpful, except when the whole thing is a false alarm.

Events that were actually unrelated seemed to support the invasion. In Concrete, Washington simultaneously with the broadcast, when the Martians were invading towns there was actually a loud explosion and the town of 1,000 was plunged into darkness causing some to flee to the hills. It was actually an electrical sub-station short-circuiting. People having anxiety reactions wrongly create a cause and effect when none actually exists. Unrelated things are taken as proof! If you are afraid of being rejected then someone being distracted rather than attentive can look like certain proof of your fear but it is actually irrelevant.

The program was broadcast during a time of general tension. World War II was building steam. The symptoms of anxiety disorders are not so different from regular worry and anxiety, except that the volume is turned way up. Anxiety disorders are built on stress, whether biological or psychological.

It was completely unlike anything ever broadcast before. There was no precedent. Something outlandish can be persuasive if it has the form of something reliable (i.e., news broadcast) and comes as a surprise. The initial intense reaction that sets up further anxiety depends on surprise. The powerful urge to prevent this again paradoxically makes it more likely. Usually the fight or flight response is reliable. If it isn't clear it is a false alarm then it can get traction psychologically.

The play referred to actual places, like Grover's Mill, New Jersey, making it seem more plausible. Anxiety will grab some things that are real as evidence that the whole thing is possible. This is a subtle distortion. Sort of like the guy who says he is an expert marksman. He shoots the side of a barn and then draws a bull's-eye around where the bullet struck, then says, "See, I have proof!" There are holes in the barn. You can see them. But the "expert marksman" interpretation is a complete fiction.

Perception/Interpretation is often unreliable but is much worse in situations of stress, ambiguity and uncertainty. My clients report that if for some reason the physical feeling of fear (stress) is absent they are not persuaded by the fear-provoking thoughts anything like when they feel anxious.

The nervous system is quite capable of creating similar enough experiences to add false but seemingly reliable support. One listener reported being emotionally distraught and felt a choking sensation from the imaginary gas. One of the symptoms of the fight or flight response is tightness in the throat-running from danger is a bad time to eat...so it gets shut down by your nervous system.

I bet hardly anyone actually believed the Martian invasion with certainty. But who wants to be the knucklehead who doubted and gets vaporized? Anxiety and worry don't require 100% certainty, just the possibility. It is based on "what if??!!"

Back to 1938. What would happen if after accepting this unlikely situation, you heard it was all just really well done fiction? The announcer says, "We hope you have been enjoying our fictional broadcast of The War of the Worlds" followed by a Carter's Little Liver Pills commercial. It might take you a little while to change your belief that it is not real. What if the announcer is being controlled by the Martians or it is a cover up by the government? But when you truly realize it is all just made up and not real the fear would rapidly dissipate. It is just a bunch of actors on the 20th floor, 485 Madison Avenue, New York, NY. The nerve of those...whatevers.

When you realize that your anxiety is a masterful fiction and your fear is a false alarm then you can get free of it. This is, of course, not so easy. However, if people would actually believe this then many types of anxiety could be cured in one session.

Dr. David Russ is a licensed psychologist in private practice in North Carolina. For the last two years, Dr. Russ and Chris McCarthy (PhD candidate), have been developing an innovative treatment program for anxious kids. In seeking help for his own child, Dr. Russ discovered there were almost no media-based resources that specifically spoke to children about anxiety and how to overcome it in an age-appropriate way. The passion and love for their own kids and patients led to the creation of "Turnaround". The professionally produced audio program is based on the science of cognitive-behavioral therapy which has shown conclusive results in successfully treating anxiety. They have added a unique innovation. The science is combined with kid captivating fun, creativity and age-appropriate explanation! A group of kids go on a journey meeting all kinds of curious characters. The steps to overcome anxiety are embedded throughout this fun adventure. It is done with professional actors, artwork and production to keep any child engaged and helped. Information is available at www.myanxiouschild.com