



HUFFPOST PERSONAL

My Gentle, Intelligent Brother Is Now A Conspiracy Theorist And His Beliefs Are Shocking

"While other family members refuse to engage, I'm triggered into a primordial rage by the videos he texts me 'because he loves me and wants to help me wake up before it's too late.'"

By Sue Muncaster

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The author (center) with her little brother (in the green coat) and the rest of their family in 1969. COURTESY OF SUE MUNCASTER

My brother is a modern conspiracy theorist.

He calls himself an “Evolutionary Linguist-Spiritual Warrior Fighting for Human Free Will on Earth” on his TikTok account, which has 12,500 followers. He uses hashtags like #zombe #apocolypse #weare #freedom and #1111. The latter, as far as I can tell from doing a little Googling, is a symbol that often represents interconnectedness and synchronicity, and that inspires individuals to attempt to manifest their intentions and take action to turn their visions into reality. On the surface, this sounds sedate, even inspiring — especially as we come out of COVID isolation. None of us seem to want to “go back to normal” because normal didn’t serve us.

Last April, my sister-in-law texted me to warn me that my brother was heading, unannounced, to my doorstep in Idaho, where I care for our elderly father. I knew he believed “everyone on the planet who received the vaccine will be dead in a few years,” but I had no idea of the depth of his fantastical beliefs.

Our evening together started with him mansplaining why cryptocurrencies are our only hope and how he had the idea for [Amazon](#) before Jeff Bezos did and how he would be the richest man in the world if not for some bad breaks along the way. Although he wasn’t physically at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., he referred to the Jan. 6 rioters as “we.”



I've come to warn you that over the next two weeks, a lot of shit is going to come out about what's been going on for the past 50 years, 100 years, 4,000 years. It is going to shock you to your core. All the conspiracy theories — everyone you ever heard from politics to Big Oil to wars in Afghanistan to Biden not being president — this pulls it all together.” At this point, I excused myself to go to the restroom, turned on the Voice Memos app on my iPhone, and tucked it in my back pocket in case he divulged any plans for violence, which, thankfully, he did not. The following is a transcribed summary of the main points he “knows with certainty” that “the media won't tell us about.”

“The banking system here in the U.S. has already collapsed,” he told me. “They are just trying to figure out how to tell everyone. We, as a race of human beings, for 4,000 years going back to the Sumerians, have been used as food by the elites. It's about to come to an end. They got rid of the race that was using us as cattle. They drove them out of all these tunnels — there's a tunnel from Washington, D.C., to LA that takes half an hour on a bullet train. There's a whole fucking society that lives underground. In Australia, there's [a tunnel] all the way around the continent and it's being used for human trafficking and organ harvesting and basically using human beings like cattle. JFK found out about it 50 years ago, and it's taken 50 years to drive them out. And it's now over. The Catholic Church, the military industrial complex and Wall Street have fucked us for the last 200 years.”

While I agree with the last sentence, for the past eight months, I've tried to make sense of how my little brother — who I think of as highly intelligent, gentle and conscientious — has come to embrace the rest of what he told me and make it his life's mission to spread it. It's incredibly challenging to continue interacting with him, and I've found myself wondering if I even should.



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In the process of studying his ideas and trying to keep an open mind and heart, I've questioned every one of my own beliefs. I've tried to determine how big of a threat these conspiracy theories are and where we — as friends, family, communities and society — should focus our efforts on combating them. To write my brother's (and my neighbors' and country people's) many conspiracies off as unworthy of taking the time to study is a tempting way out. But to not at least try to understand is likely a fatal mistake.

As a Libra, I pride myself on finding balance. As a local politician, I'm committed to listening to a variety of perspectives and seeking common ground in pursuit of the best solutions. Dealing with my brother has challenged the core principles of compassion, inaction and harmony I hold dear as a student of Taoism and Tibetan Buddhism. While other family members refuse to engage, I'm triggered into a primordial rage by the videos he texts me “because he loves me and wants to help me wake up before it's too late.” Inevitably, these videos are taken off the internet before I have time to watch them a second time. I often find myself texting messages to him that I'd never text to another family member, friend or neighbor. It's not unlike lashing out at a toddler for their mischief and, when you snap out of it, you are overcome with shame and sadness for what you've said.



indeed our nation, I recognize now that I turned to my intellect to gather facts and scientific evidence to help me better understand this situation. In doing so, I've lost my balance between intellect and my core values of affection and kindness. My older sister, upon reading a draft of this story, said I was acting like a "Viking warrior queen" trying to "annihilate the enemy with words" and therefore exacerbating division. She suggested I turn the mirror on myself and consider the idea that I am the stupid one, the downtrodden, the toddler — that we are all toddlers learning to walk, run, dance, and who am I to be critical?

I suppose annihilation by words is better than the alternative, but to her point, I've agonized over how to write about my experience without violating the core Buddhist commitments to "do no harm" and "take care of one another." On one hand, I'm deeply worried and want to rescue him; on the other hand, I want to laugh it off; and on a third (if I had one), I want to slam the door in his face. When my brain and heart feel scrambled like this, I want to throw up my hands and not write anything out of fear that I'll further fuel our national crisis over truth and division.

But then I see a video of a health care worker in an overrun hospital begging for people to get vaccinated. I rewatch the violence that took place on Jan. 6. I celebrate Hanukkah with my brother-in-law, whose father, at 7 years old, was one of 10,000 children on the Kindertransport, a train from Germany to England, without his parents in search of a safe refuge before the start of World War II. And if I've learned anything in the past 20 years as a conscientious parent, it's that not addressing possible issues by hiding family secrets can be traumatic and lead to the most dangerous consequences. It's these incontrovertible "truths" that compel me to stand up and speak out now and attempt to use intelligence to cultivate wisdom while



use it to create change.

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In a [2010 New York Times op-ed](#), Roger Cohen said of the “paltry harvest of captive minds” that “such minds resort to conspiracy theory because it is the ultimate refuge of the powerless. If you cannot change your own life, it must be that some greater force controls the world.” This quote has held up throughout my exploration, as has a basic concept drawn from “[The 15 Commitments of Conscious Leadership](#)” by Jim Dethmer, Diana Chapman and Kaley Warner Klemp, who believe humans have three core needs — approval, security and control — and when a human being’s needs for approval and security are inadequate, control is their last resort.

The concept of a “paltry harvest” points to leaders who spread conspiracy theories to the “captive minds” of their followers. [Frank Yeomans](#), a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Cornell



narcissist personality describes someone who takes pleasure in both self-aggrandizement and the destruction of others. He argued that people like Hitler and Jim Jones appeal to masses of people who feel powerless, deprived and downtrodden. These leaders weaponize hope and faith and vilify “the other” as the definable person or group to blame for their problems. Hitler believed that the bigger the lie, the more people would embrace it. Yeoman believes former President Donald Trump fits this personality profile, terrifying half of us but emboldening the other half.

Conspiracies lend themselves to nationalism and racism when a definable person or group is targeted for blame. Philosopher [Aldous Huxley](#) once said, “One of the great attractions of patriotism — it fulfills our worst wishes. In the person of our nation, we are able, vicariously, to bully and cheat. Bully and cheat, what’s more, with a feeling that we are profoundly virtuous.”

The middlemen in the spread of conspiracy theories are the individuals, politicians, corporations and media celebrities who benefit from their proximity to the malignant narcissist by taking the most radical and outrageous stances. They will excuse, justify and look past the despicable actions of the malignant narcissist to retain their money, power and status as well as the approval, security and control that comes with all of that.

One example of this is the National Rifle Association. In an [interview](#) about his new book, “Gunfight: My Battle Against the Industry that Radicalized America,” former industry insider Ryan Busse spoke about the rise in sales of automatic weapons. “After [Columbine](#), [the NRA] stumbled upon this idea that fear and conspiracy and hatred of the other could be used to drive and win political races, as well as drive record sales of unhealthy firearms,” he said. After Sept. 11, Busse said, “Everything that happened was spun in some fearful,



political pressure cooker where untinged ideas were spread to keep Americans at a boiling point. Busse said that before his enlightenment, he was “naive and thoughtless” and compared himself “to a young kid who signed up for war without knowing what war was really about.”

In psychology and cognitive science, the simplicity principle posits that the mind tends to regress to simplicity when contemplating the messy complexities of life. In order to make sense of what is happening around us, we rely on survival tactics to help us feel in control of the hand we’ve been dealt and of the world around us and our place in it. As one tactic, our brains see patterns where none actually exist. What might start as a story of good versus evil shared among friends — that a nefarious cabal is secretly plotting against humanity — soon begins to feel like top-secret knowledge arrived through critical thinking, particularly when groups are suffering from loss, weakness or disunity. A powerful actor behind the chaos can be much easier to accept than the idea that we’re responsible for our own circumstances, that there are many complex factors at work in any system or culture, or that shit just happens.

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It’s essential to recognize there may be some bit of truth in many conspiracy theories, and it’s these flickers of reality that can keep the flames alive. I believe the seeds of many conspiracies related to vaccine resistance can be traced back to the erroneous study by



1998, promoting a nonexistent connection between autism and the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine. Wakefield's work [was later retracted](#), and his medical license was revoked. He's become known as the "the doctor who fooled the world" and turbocharged the anti-vaccine movement. My brother believes the rise in autism is the fault of the pharmaceutical industry, and the fact that both the paper and Wakefield's medical license were later retracted is just "proof" to my brother that the pharmaceutical industry was corrupt — not the report itself.

In the episode "[When You Need It To Be True](#)" of the podcast "Hidden Brain," host Shankar Vedantam says the theory of cognitive dissonance (attributable to psychologist [Leon Festinger](#) in 1957) explains "the strange alchemy in our minds that makes it possible for us to live happily in an upside-down world and believe that everyone else is wrong." In other words, human beings will go to extraordinary lengths in search of internal psychological consistency to function mentally when faced with opposing ideas.

In this episode, Verdantam tells two stories. One is about a group of people from the 1950s called The Seekers who quit their jobs, distanced themselves from their loved ones and drastically changed their lifestyles, believing they were the chosen ones who would be saved from worldwide destruction by UFOs. The second is a modern-day account of a lonely divorcee duped by an online scammer who promised her the love and acceptance she was craving, even though the deceit was obvious to her friends. The moral of both stories is that oftentimes, we want something to be true so badly that we make it true, even if it means turning our lives inside out and destroying our families before accepting information we don't want to hear.



and dangerous modern conspiracy theories are, I found this [boggling figure from Statista](#) that's more frightening than comforting: In the third quarter of 2021, 1.8 billion fake accounts were deleted from Facebook, up from 1.3 billion fake accounts in the corresponding quarter in 2020. It's no big news that a person can find "proof" of virtually anything on the internet to bolster what they believe, and the isolation brought on by the pandemic over the last two years has given many people ample time to dig deep and try to make sense of the world. While I watch from afar in disbelief, hoping my brother will see the light, he seems to just double down on hoping I'm the one who will eventually see the light, even after every time his latest predicted zombie apocalypse doesn't come to pass.

So do we, as a society, spend our energy silencing the malignant narcissists and the spread of disinformation/misinformation by the middlemen? These days, this only seems to give them more power. Or do we instead address the deep societal issues that provide fertile ground for conspiracy theories? One can argue that security, approval and control can really only come from within, but that's a long leap when faced with the uncertain chaos of modern life and epidemics of depression, anxiety, substance use, political division, isolation, systemic inequalities and incessant consumerism fed by the dead-end promises of an antiquated American dream. If (according to a crass comment I came across) conspiracy theories are for "losers," can we aspire to a society where there are fewer losers?

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which is how so many supersmart people can seem to ignore what is going on.’”

Although we no longer operate on the same foundation of “facts,” my brother and I did find a grain of common ground when he correctly stated in a recent text that we both want the same thing: “to take the country back from the ground up.” When I sent him a draft of this essay, he was unwavering in his belief that free speech is our most treasured right and graciously gave me his blessing. [My brother] assured me he will be sharing this piece with his TikTok followers as soon as it’s published because it “really explains what many of us cannot understand, which is how so many supersmart people can seem to ignore what is going on.”

I know that every person’s perceptions are some blend of objective and personal interpretations of reality. No matter how smart or well-read a person is, none of us see the world as it really is. Every time I speak to my brother (or anyone else I disagree with), I remind myself that our views are shaped — and contaminated — by our egocentric perspectives. As we emerge from the pandemic, continue to socialize online, and gather with family and friends, virtually no one is exempt from having those they love end up believing they’re being brainwashed by “the other.” So I suppose my New Year’s resolution is to relentlessly examine my own beliefs and make a continued commitment to being civil and curious and having an open mind. Only with grace and a quest for understanding can we nourish the most basic human needs for approval and security within our families and communities.



through her platform [Teton Strong](#), she explores the intentional mental, physical, social and spiritual practices and rich experiences that bring us alive and are characteristic of a values-driven outdoor lifestyle. Just last week she dipped her toes into local politics when she joined the Victor city council as a councilmember. You can find her on [Facebook](#) and [Medium](#).

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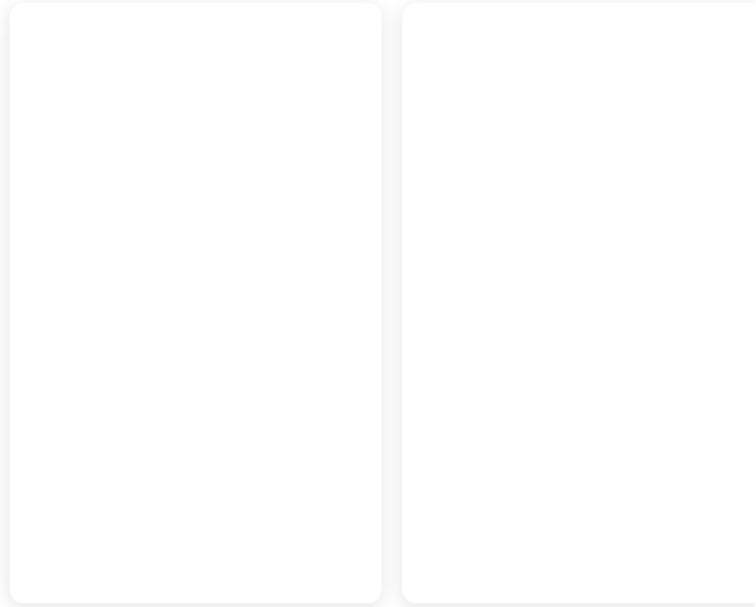
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Sue Muncaster
Guest Writer

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