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Danger and Risk - are they the same thing?

In the seven criteria for the development of intelligence, **“willingness to take a risk”** is rated very high. This is strangely at odds with a culture of what I call “Big Mother” which permeates much of our society and our thinking.

‘Big Mother’ describes the urge to wrap ourselves and each other in cotton wool as protection against the woes of the world. We fear loss or harm and yet have difficulty in acknowledging the naturalness of that fear in a positive way. Fear is seen as bad or weak and we need to suppress / control it – better still we can eradicate the things that make us fearful or legislate against risk. Both of these options are seriously flawed and have in many ways contributed to the development of the ‘big mother’ culture. The continuing trend towards risk aversion in individuals, families and communities ultimately disempowers each and every person.

In a strange way this risk aversion can result in failure to be capable of understanding a truly dangerous situation when we are entering one. We begin to believe we have eradicated danger as well as risk, and in this confusion can stumble unaware and unprepared into life threatening situations. The world remains a very dangerous place and we need our senses to survive in it. Avoiding risk merely blinds us to the danger and dims those senses.

I am reminded of the story of a famous Japanese warrior and general who was seen by local villagers leading a small troupe of samurai (in what they perceived to be an overly cautious or even cowardly fashion) around a body by the roadside. Inwardly they scorned his caution until a little time later a ‘brave’ samurai dismounted to investigate, rolling over the body only to be slain by a concealed sword. Stealing the horse and armour the murderer made good his escape. At this time the villagers realised the wisdom of the earlier warrior and praised his sense of danger.

When we legislate to stop young people from learning about risk taking in controlled environments, I believe we unwittingly disarm their senses and lull them into a state where danger can find them all the more easily and I see evidence of this daily in the actions of the young and the not so young.... sometimes with tragic consequences. All cultures are rich with the history of elders initiating the young to risk taking and the recognition of danger – without confusing the two.

This tradition must continue yet do we now have a generation of people who are themselves unable to distinguish between the two.

David Dangerfield

