Why (and How) Things Happen

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The first observers simply tried to figure out what was happening. On the morning of 11 September 2001 at 8:19 A.M., flight attendant Betty Ong called American Airlines Southeastern Reservations Office in Cary, North Carolina. She phoned from American flight 11, which had left Boston for Los Angeles at 8 A.M. In North Carolina, Ong reached Nydia Gonzalez. Ong told Gonzalez that hijackers had taken over their flight, had stabbed two other flight attendants, had killed at least one passenger, and had sprayed her and others with a substance that made their eyes burn and gave them trouble breathing.

At 8:27, Gonzalez relayed Ong's call to Craig Marquis, duty manager at American Airlines' operations center in Forth Worth, Texas. About the same time, air traffic controllers reported that the flight had made a sharp turn south near Albany, New York.

> "They're going to New York!" Mr. Marquis remembers shouting out. "Call Newark and JFK and tell them to expect a hijacking," he ordered, assuming the hijackers would land the plane. "In my wildest dreams, I was not thinking the plane was going to run into a building," Mr. Marquis says.

Veteran operations officer Marquis reasonably mapped the hijacking of Flight 11 into vivid previous episodes during which captors had demanded money, asylum, or release of political prisoners. They had grabbed the plane, he supposed, to hold the aircraft, its crew, and its passengers hostage for concessions. Continuing her whispered chronicle of events aboard the aircraft, at 8:38 Betty Ong reported that the plane was descending. Her call cut off abruptly at 8:44.

The hijackers of Flight 11 soon proved Craig Marcus' reasons wrong. A few minutes later Bryan Gumbel was broadcasting for CBS News from Manhattan. He had just heard that an unidentified plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. Gumbel spoke to an eyewitness, Theresa Renaud, who was watching the World Trade Center from her apartment at Eighth Avenue and Sixteenth Street, about two miles north of the Center. "Approximately ten minutes ago," reported Renaud,

> there was a major explosion from about the 80th floor -- looks like it's affected probably four to eight floors. Major flames are coming out of the north side and also the east side of the building. It was a very loud explosion, followed by flames, and it looks like the building is still on fire on the inside.

> Oh, there's another one—another plane just hit. [gasps; yelling] Oh, my God! Another plane has just hit—it hit another building, flew right into the middle of it. My God, it's right in the middle of the building.

> **Gumbel:** This one into Tower 2?

Renaud: Yes, yes, right in the middle of the building . . . That was definitely . . . on purpose.

Gumbel: Why do you say that was definitely on purpose?

Renaud: Because it just flew straight into it.

When commandeered commercial aircraft crashed into New York's World Trade Center, Washington's Pentagon, and a Pennsylvania field that September morning, people across the world began asking for reasons why. Why had someone perpetrated this vicious violence? Why had they targeted the United States? Why hadn't American authorities prevented the assault? Observers quickly shifted from simply making sense of what was happening to seeking reasons for the disaster. Direct participants faced the double challenge of finding reasons both for the terrible episode as a whole and for the specific incidents they had suffered or witnessed. News reports crossing the Atlantic suggest that similar feverish searching for reasons occurred here after the recent London bombings.

High officials rushed to the disaster scene and sought reasons for what they found. Siren sounding and lights flashing, New York City Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik and two of his men drove over close to the buildings, where they saw people leaping to their deaths from the North Tower. Soon Mayor Rudolph Giuliani joined Kerik. The mayor called the White House, learning that another aircraft had hit the Pentagon and that (with President Bush in Florida) the presidential staff was evacuating the White House. In the course of a widely praised press conference later the same day, Giuliani placed reasons for the attacks in context:

> I believe that the people in New York City can demonstrate our resolve and our support for all of the people that were viciously attacked today by going about their lives and showing everyone that vicious, cowardly terrorists can't stop us from being a free country and a place that functions. And we'll do everything we can to make that point.

The reasons – vicious, cowardly terrorists who sought to destroy the functioning of a free country – dictated the proper reaction, calm determination.

In his address to Congress nine days after the devastating attacks of 9/11, U.S. President George W. Bush elaborated on Giuliani's reasons by identifying the culprits and associating them with villains across the world. "Our war on terror," declared Bush, "begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."

As World Trade Center observers searched for reasons, they followed an extremely general human routine. We might even define human beings as reason giving animals.

While by some definitions other primates employ language, tools, and even culture, only humans start young offering and demanding reasons, then continue through life looking for reasons why.

Reasons provide organized answers to the question "Why does (did, should) X do Y?" X can be you as you tell me why you arrived late for our rendezvous, me as I explain my winning of the lottery, or the hijackers who piloted aircraft into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. X need not be a person or people; X can be God, evil spirits, Islam, communism, or just plain Them. X sometimes means individuals, groups, organizations, categories, forces, or invisible entities. X produces Y.

The World Trade Center disaster provoked reason giving at multiple levels, including:

- Why did the hijackers seize the aircraft and crash them into the towers?

- Why did the buildings burst into flames and collapse?

- (In the case of a participant) why did I behave as I did? Why did *we* (whatever the we) behave as we did?

- (In the cases of participants and observers) why did other people (considered as individuals or as groups) behave as they did?

- What causes terrorism?

- What causes violence in general?

Seriously proposed reasons for 9/11 include Al-Qaeda fanaticism, misguided American foreign policy, peculiar characteristics of Middle Eastern regimes, collapse of a previously stable (if dangerous) world order, and more. All those themes sound quite familiar to me. Most of my own professional work involves sorting out reasons for political processes at a broad scale: why revolutions occur, what causes democratization and de-democratization, why terrorism takes its many forms, and so on. Instead of sorting out such broad political questions, however, my talk this evening concentrates on the social process of giving reasons at the person-to-person scale. Reason giving turns out to be momentous at this scale as well.

Giving of reasons connects people with each other even when observers might find the reasons flimsy, contrived, or fantastic. In uncertain situations such as the World Trade Center attacks, most people first adapt reasons for what is happening from models they have already learned through interaction with other people. Available models vary dramatically from group to group, situation to situation, and relation to relation. Regardless of their content, however, reasons provide rationales for behaving one way

or another and shared accounts of what is happening. They also make statements about relations between the people giving and receiving those reasons.

Whether accidental witnesses or public officials, people do not give themselves and others reasons because of some universal craving for truth or coherence. They often settle for reasons that are superficial, contradictory, dishonest, or – at least from an observer's viewpoint – far-fetched. Whatever else they are doing when they give reasons, people are clearly negotiating their social lives. They are saying something about relations between themselves and those who hear their reasons. Giver and receiver are confirming, negotiating, or repairing their proper connection.

Commonly given reasons fall into four overlapping categories.

1. *conventions:* conventionally accepted reasons for dereliction, deviation, distinction, or good fortune: my train was late, your turn finally came, she has breeding, he's just a lucky guy, and so on

2. *stories:* explanatory narratives incorporating cause-effect accounts of unfamiliar phenomena or of exceptional events such as the Trade Center catastrophe, but also such as betrayal by a friend, winning a big prize, or meeting a schoolmate at Egypt's Pyramids twenty years after graduation

3. *codes* governing actions such as legal judgments, religious penance, medical practice, or awarding of medals

4. *technical accounts* of the Ys in the first three: how a structural engineer, a dermatologist, or an orthopedic surgeon might explain fire damage inflicted by the 9/11 attacks

Each of the four ways of giving reasons has distinctive properties. Each of them varies in content depending on social relations between giver and receiver. Each of them, among other consequences, exerts effects on those social relations, confirming an existing relation, repairing that relation, claiming a new relation, or denying a relational claim. But the four sorts of reason giving differ significantly in form and content. Each can be valid in a way that the others cannot.

Conventions involve no pretense of providing adequate causal accounts. If I start explaining in detail why I spilled my coffee on your newspaper – how I had a bad night's sleep, have been worrying about my job, recently developed a tremor it is hard to control – you may well become impatient. "Oops, I'm such a klutz!" may suffice, especially if I offer to get you a fresh newspaper. Conventions vary enormously according to the social circumstances; given an identical dereliction, deviation, or good fortune, for example, a reason that satisfies a seatmate on the bus will usually not

placate one's spouse. Conventions claim, confirm, repair, or deny social relations. They therefore differ greatly depending on the social relations currently in play.

Exceptional events and unfamiliar phenomena, however, call up different reasons why; they call up *stories*. People experiencing an egregious failure, a signal victory, a spectacular faux pas, a shared tragedy, or mysterious sounds in the night do not settle for "It was just the breaks." They, too, try to match reasons to the circumstances and social relations at hand, but now the reasons take on weight. Similarly, major life transitions such as marriage, divorce, or the death of a parent call for weightier accounts than conventions provide. In general, reasons for exceptional events complement explanations with at least hints of justification or condemnation: the company gave me a bigger bonus than you because I worked harder and sold more computers. Implied claims concerning the quality, intensity, durability, and propriety of relations between givers and receivers far exceed the claims tied to conventions.

Stories matter greatly for social life because of three distinctive characteristics. First, they rework and simplify social processes so that the processes become available for the telling; X did Y to Z conveys a memorable image of what happened. Second, they include strong imputations of responsibility, and thus lend themselves to moral evaluations: I get the credit, he gets the blame, they did us dirt. This second feature makes stories enormously valuable for evaluation after the fact, and helps account for people's changing stories of events in which they behaved less than heroically. Third, stories belong to the relationships at hand, and therefore vary from one relationship to another; a television interviewer gets a different story of a lost football game from the one that players tell each other.

Stories truncate cause-effect connections. They typically identify a limited number of actors whose mental states and actions cause everything that happens within a delimited time and space. The actors sometimes include supernatural beings and mysterious forces – for example, in witchcraft as an explanation of misfortune – but the actors' dispositions and actions explain what happened. As a consequence, stories inevitably minimize or ignore the causal roles of errors, unanticipated consequences, indirect effects, incremental effects, simultaneous effects, feedback effects, and environmental effects. They conform to dominant modes of story telling. In fact, most of the early reason giving for 9/11 took the form of stories.

In contrast to stories, *coded reasons* need not bear much explanatory weight so long as they conform to the available rules. (When I served the U.S. Navy as a rule-wielding supply and disbursing officer, veteran Chief Petty Officer Edward McGroarty, who helped train me on the job, used to joke, "There's no reason for it: it's just policy!") Religious prescriptions, law codes, and prestigious systems of honors overflow with reasons, but those reasons describe how what happened conforms to the code at hand rather than what actually caused the outcome. Third parties such as judges, priests, and awards committees figure extensively in the giving of reasons according to codes.

Finally, *technical accounts* vary enormously with regard to internal structure and content, but they have in common the claim to identify reliable connections of cause and effect. Structural engineers center their cause-effect connections in mechanical principles, physicians in the dynamics of organisms, and economists in market-driven processes. Although engineers, physicians, and economists sometimes spend great energy in justifying their expertise when under attack, earnestly demonstrating that they reached their conclusions by widely accepted professional procedures, on the whole they center their reason giving on putative causes and effects. Whole professions and organized bodies of professional knowledge stand behind them.

After half a century in the business of explaining political processes, especially various forms of collective violence, I naturally have my own technical accounts of terrorist attacks to sell, as well as my own evaluations of other people's technical accounts. Here, however, I want to shift our attention to an adjacent question: assuming that we social scientists actually have something valid and useful to say about social processes, how do we get them across to dubious audiences that have no training in social science, yet are quite committed to the reasons they give for their own and other people's behavior?

When crises occur, governments often answer the question by appointing credentialed panels on the model of a British Royal Commission to promulgate the best available specialist explanations or prescriptions. Four years after the Warren Commission reported its findings on John F. Kennedy's assassination, for example, President Lyndon Johnson appointed another commission. He charged the new commission with responding to the ghetto rebellions, rising violent crime rates, raucous demonstrations of the 1960s, and the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, as well as the widespread concern that America in general was becoming more violent. The so-called Eisenhower Commission faced an even more daunting task than the Warren Commission. It enlisted help from more than two hundred scholars in law, criminology, history, and the social sciences. I did my small bit by contributing an essay comparing American and European patterns of collective violence.

We scholars who participated counted it a victory that the commissioners did not adopt a stern law-and-order line. Instead, they recommended opening up opportunities for minorities and youth, giving young people more political voice, and using financial gains from ending the Vietnam War to increase American welfare benefits. They reasoned that inequality and stifled opportunity caused violence, individual and collective.

Commissions continue. On Monday 31 March 2003, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States held its first public hearing at the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Customs House in Manhattan, New York, not far from the leveled site of the World Trade Center. At that hearing, commission members, Governor George Pataki of New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City, the city's Police Commissioner

Raymond Kelly, multiple survivors of the 9/11 attacks in New York and elsewhere, representatives of the victims, and academic experts on terrorism all testified. Testimony at the first hearing approached the vicious violence of 11 September from many different angles. When it came to giving reasons for 9/11, some witnesses offered conventions, some codes, some stories, some technical accounts, and some more than one kind of reason.

In the well-staged drama of commission hearings, we see very general processes unfolding. We watch participants not only giving and receiving reasons, but also negotiating their relations as they do so. The topics of terror and governmental responsibility raise the stakes of contests over reasons, and therefore allow us to see what happens when people care seriously about the consequences of giving one reason or another.

We began with people seeking reasons for the devastating attacks of 9/11. Few of the first-round reason givers, as we saw, offered technical accounts. At the time, most people who were immediately involved gave reasons in the form of stories, while others who stood at greater distances chose among stories, conventions, and codes. In their simplest versions, the three ran something like this:

story: terrorists did it, but lax officials let them do it

convention: modern life is dangerous

code: because we have freedom to defend, we must combat terror

It took longer for specialists to construct their technical accounts. Those accounts ranged across many different questions, especially how airplane crashes brought down supposedly unshakable buildings, what went wrong with American intelligence, why these particular attackers attacked and, more generally, why terrorist attacks occur at all.

Public officials who spoke before the commission mostly told stories. So did survivors who testified at the hearing. People asking the "Why?" of death, destruction, or disappearance often press for stories in which some person, entity, or force will bear moral responsibility for a devastating action. Indeed, the 9/11 commission came into being partly because of public pressure for stories. As the government slowly and reluctantly began inquiries into how it might have prevented 9/11, demands for convincing stories inevitably arose.

A group of New Jersey women widowed by the attack on the World Trade Center began pressing public officials for an inquiry. They got advice from veterans of the earlier campaign for an inquiry into the bombing of Pan American flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988. They played a major part in forcing the commission's public hearings

on the government's own preparation – or lack of it – for terrorist attacks before 9/11. The women explained their involvement to a *New York Times* reporter:

> Three of them were married to men who worked for Cantor Fitzgerald, but the women were strangers until after the attacks. Ms. Breitweiser, 33, and Ms. Casazza, 43, voted for Mr. Bush in 2000. Ms. Van Auken, 49, and Ms. Kleinberg, 42, voted for Al Gore. All insist they had no political agenda, then or now.
>
> But they had a burning question. "We simply wanted to know why our husbands were killed," Ms. Breitweiser said, "why they went to work one day and didn't come back."

Clearly, for them an acceptable answer would not take the form, "terrorism happens." When Mindy Kleinberg testified before the 9/11 commission she had helped create, she made her position clear:

> Is it luck that aberrant stock trades were not monitored? Is it luck when 15 visas are awarded based on incomplete forms? Is it luck when Airline Security screenings allow hijackers to board planes with box cutters and pepper spray? Is it luck when Emergency FAA and NORAD protocols are not followed? Is it luck when a national emergency is not reported to top government officials on a timely basis?
>
> To me luck is something that happens once. When you have this repeated pattern of broken protocols, broken laws, broken communication, one cannot still call it luck.
>
> If at some point we don't look to hold the individuals accountable for not doing their jobs properly then how can we ever expect terrorists not to get lucky again?

The question called for a story that would assign political and moral responsibility for the catastrophe. After the 9/11 commission issued its report in 2004, Kristen Breitweiser echoed Mindy Kleinberg's call. "Three thousand people were killed on 9/11," she complained in a September 2004 interview, "and no one has been held accountable." By the presidential elections of November 2004, 9/11 survivors including the New Jersey widows had formed a pressure group called the Family Steering Committee that was publicly criticizing the Bush administration for failing to support the commission's recommendations. Their story had gone political.

The commission's experts, as expected, concentrated on accessible versions of technical accounts. With due simplification for a commission consisting not of specialists but of public figures, Swedish-born Magnus Ranstorp, international relations lecturer at Scotland's St. Andrews University, presented a technical account of terror. Ranstorp's

account of terror initially divided causes into proximate and longer-term. His proximate causes centered on the current organization and capabilities of Al Qaeda and other terrorist networks. His longer-term causes consisted of changes at a global scale that facilitated terrorist activity. Later, Ranstorp enumerated a third, even more basic, level of causation: "root causes" of terrorism. They included unresolved ethnic and nationalist aspirations, poverty, and youth unemployment. But he focused his recommendations on ways of monitoring, blocking, and dismantling terrorist networks. He concentrated on countering the proximate and intermediate causes of terrorism.

Social scientists who built general technical accounts of terrorism divided their attention among the three levels of Ranstorp's analysis: proximate causes in the form of organization and tactics of terrorist networks; longer-term causes centered on the facilitation of terror as a political strategy; root causes such as generators of grievances and discontent. My own small contributions to the public discussion concentrated on longer-term causes, but argued strenuously against the ideas that most people who employ terror resemble al-Qaeda's conspirators and that most or all terrorist acts spring from the same causes.

Expert testimony before the 9/11 commission suggests a powerful lesson for technical specialists: instead of making specialists out of your audience members, translate your message into a form they will already grasp.

That isn't always easy. People who draw their reasons from complex codes or technical accounts must choose between two alternatives: educating their audiences in the relevant bodies of thought or pushing their expositions toward popular discourse: toward conventions or stories, depending on whether the reasons involved concern propriety or cause-effect explanation. Physicians, lawyers, theologians, and other specialists who must deal regularly with members of the general public usually become skilled in converting codes and technical accounts into less forbidding forms of reason giving.

Of course, high authorities such as a Supreme Court or a group of Nobel-winning nuclear physicists can announce their findings and leave the conversion to other people. Despite intermittent challenges, most westerners have come to accept the claims of high courts and nuclear physicists to superior knowledge, at least within those specialists' domains. Some bodies of specialized knowledge, furthermore, have acquired enough prestige and urgency that schools teach students their codes and technical accounts. Although natural scientists and mathematicians deplore the general population's ignorance of their specialties, at least schools make an effort to teach students the fundamentals. Pity the linguists, anthropologists, and economists whose special forms of reason giving most students don't encounter unless they go to college!

Here is one solution for specialists who lack the commanding presence of high authorities: rework your teachings as superior stories. Like everyday stories, superior

stories simplify their causes and effects. They maintain unity of time and place, deal with a limited number of actors and actions, as they concentrate on how those actions cause other actions. They omit or minimize errors, unanticipated consequences, indirect effects, incremental effects, simultaneous effects, feedback effects, and environmental effects. But within their limited frames they *get the actors, actions, causes, and effects right.* By the standards of a relevant and credible technical account, they simplify radically, but everything they say is true. Superior stories make at least a portion of the truth accessible to non-specialists.

Social scientists face a distinctive problem when it comes to getting their arguments and findings across. The social sciences carry on a complex courtship with stories, conventions, and codes. They claim to describe and explain the same social processes that non-specialists habitually treat by means of conventions and stories. Hence a bundle of problems for social scientists: they are commonly proposing explanations of the very same behaviors and outcomes for which people learn early in life to give accounts in the modes of conventions, stories, and codes.

Social scientists' very evidence often consists of reasons that people give for their actions. Yet social scientific explanations frequently contradict conventions, widely available stories, and/or prevailing codes for actions. Worse yet, social scientists' proposed explanations often involve cause-effect accounts of why people give the reasons they do. As researchers, authors, teachers, and participants in public discussion social scientists therefore find themselves causing offense and cultivating disbelief. In any case, they rarely reach general audiences with their technical accounts.

When they do get through, it usually happens through one of three standard approaches: making visibly effective interventions in public life (for example, opinion polling), broadcasting the logic of social science (for example, newspaper columns on economics), or infiltrating public discussion by providing valuable catchwords or arguments (for example, the idea of the Lonely Crowd that David Riesman once made famous). But on the whole social science's technical accounts stay within the academy, unheard by the general public.

Shouldn't social scientists simply emulate fields that have already found ways of communicating with lay audiences? After all, engineers, physicians, theologians, and other specialists who routinely seek their own explanations within technical accounts then often communicate with clients and lay people by reworking those accounts as stories. Converting technical accounts into stories makes it more likely that the listener will understand and accept the account.

But what if some social scientific technical accounts point to crucial cause-effect relations that don't lend themselves to story telling, because they involve incremental, environmental, reciprocal, simultaneous, or indirect effects? No one can, for example, explain how international migration streams operate without paying attention to the

subtle but powerful impact of previously existing interpersonal networks on who goes where and gets what job. Most social processes involve similar complexities. Their explanation requires full-fledged technical accounts. But social scientists often have trouble making their accounts credible.

Might deliberate campaigns to disseminate plausible superior stories work? Social scientists have had somewhat more success at infiltrating available explanatory stories than at visible effective interventions or at broadcasting the logic of social science. Some of them have, for example, publicized the argument that if whole categories of people suffer systematic disadvantages some combination of discrimination with distinctive life experiences – rather than, say, some crippling incapacity shared by all the category's members -- accounts for those disadvantages. Here social scientists enter the arena as public intellectuals rather than as designers of pedagogy. Books, the mass media, and public forums provide the crucial opportunities.

In this version of reason giving, social scientists have little choice but to recast their technical accounts as readily recognizable stories. Such stories can never encompass all the relevant cause-effect relations. They can never incorporate the full range of incremental effects, environmental effects, indirect effects, reciprocal effects, feedback effects, and unanticipated consequences. Much less can they enumerate all of the professional's crucial specifications concerning initial conditions and contingencies. But at least superior stories can get right the cause-effect relations they do include. That in itself constitutes a valuable contribution.

Let me not exaggerate the uniqueness of social scientists Philosophers, theologians, cosmologists, biologists, physicians, lawyers, and generals face similar problems when they communicate with general publics. They all mix and match among four main alternatives:

1. speak only to fellow specialists

2. educate (some members of) their audiences in their specialized codes and technical accounts

3. recast their reason giving in the form of superior stories

4. count on translators and interpreters who already speak the language to do the recasting

Speaking only to your fellow specialists is the easiest. But it runs the risk that other people will misunderstand, misrepresent, or simply ignore whatever you are doing. Educating audiences in your specialty is a wonderful enterprise if you have the power and skill to do so. Depending on translators and interpreters – science writers, popularizers, and knowledgeable amateurs – saves plenty of grief when the translators

and interpreters know their stuff. But for a wide range of specialists, writing your own superior stories has the virtue of making you think about the relevance of your daily work to humanity at large, or at least the humanity with which you make contact outside of your study, laboratory, or conference hall.

Even when it starts with technical accounts, reason giving doesn't end with writing and lecturing. Physicians and lawyers regularly have to translate their own technical accounts into stories their patients and clients can understand and act on. As they do so, they are establishing, confirming, negotiating, or repairing their relations with patients and clients. The reasons we give shape our relations with the people who receive them.

We can also read my analysis in the opposite direction. The reasons people give you reflect their approaches to relations with you. Most of the time, conventions and stories confirm relations that you already knew existed: you instantly recognize the "wrong" convention or story, which claims a relationship you prefer not to acknowledge. When someone offers you codes or technical accounts in unfamiliar idioms, you rapidly choose between two interpretations: either this person has misunderstood the relationship between you, or she is claiming superiority and demanding deference by virtue of esoteric knowledge.

If, of course, you have asked for a summary of the relevant codes and technical knowledge, you have already established the inequality of your relationship, at least for the purposes of this conversation. A clever, sympathetic interlocutor can shift the relational balance by pushing the account you have asked for toward conventions and stories. Giving reasons does a wide range of social work. That work always includes shaping the relationship between giver and receiver of reasons. I hope you find my story superior.