

PROLOGUE

Secret Hitler

I was in the kitchen making dinner when Alexa started talking to me. I had not asked it anything. I was standing over the stove, occupied with the ordinary business of preparing a meal, when the familiar disembodied voice announced an advertisement for a game I might like to purchase.

The game was called *Secret Hitler*.

I stopped what I was doing, overwhelmed by a feeling that was part shock and part dread.

Secret Hitler?

Admittedly, my reaction was partly generational. I was born in 1948, only three years after the end of a war that had left much of Europe in ruins and revealed the systematic murder of six million Jews simply because they were Jews, along with millions of other victims.¹ Hitler was not ancient history when I was growing up. Nor were the people who enabled him, followed him, and carried out his policies. The adults around me had lived through that war. Some had fought in it. Some had lost people they loved. Photographs of the concentration camps were recent, and the Holocaust belonged not to some distant barbaric age but to the supposedly civilized modern world into which I had just been born.

At the same time, children like me were being taught to “duck and cover” beneath our school desks because another human invention, the atomic bomb, had given us the capacity to destroy one another on a scale no previous generation had confronted. I grew up, in other words, surrounded by evidence of two apparently contradictory truths about human beings. We were capable of extraordinary ingenuity. We were also capable of using that ingenuity to do terrible things to one another.

And now, almost eighty years later, a device sitting on my kitchen counter was suggesting, without my asking, that I might enjoy playing a game called *Secret Hitler*.

Naturally, I wanted to know what it was.

The game turned out to be much more interesting than its deliberately provocative title suggested. Players are secretly divided into Liberals and Fascists. The Liberals are the majority, but they do not know who to trust. The Fascists possess more information and can use deception strategically. Governments are elected. Policies are enacted. As fascist policies accumulate, additional powers become available. Eventually Hitler can win not because he marches into government at the head of an invading army, but because enough political groundwork has been laid for him to be elected Chancellor.²

There it was, reduced to a game played around a table: one of the questions that has haunted modern history.

If the majority has the numbers, why isn't that enough? How does a minority organized around deception and domination acquire power over everyone else?

The game stayed with me for another reason. Researchers had begun using a framework based on *Secret Hitler* to study artificial intelligence, testing large language models for reasoning, persuasion, social deduction, and deception.³ The purpose was not to teach machines to become fascists. The researchers were trying to understand how increasingly capable artificial systems might deceive human beings or one another and how such deception could be detected.

But the irony was almost unbearable. We had become technologically sophisticated enough to create machines whose capacity for strategic deception now had to be scientifically measured, while remaining astonishingly vulnerable to strategic deception by members of our own species.

Something about that pushed me over an edge.

Over the Edge

Perhaps you have had this happen. Nothing fundamentally new occurs, and yet some apparently small event breaks through a barrier you did not even realize you had erected. Suddenly all the things you have been watching, thinking about, worrying over, explaining away, or trying to absorb reorganize themselves around a different, pressing question, carrying with them an enormous backlog of emotion too negative, too complicated, and perhaps too frightening to name.

For months I had been watching events in my own country with a growing mixture of alarm, anger, disbelief, and helplessness. Every day seemed to bring another assault on something I had assumed was relatively secure: public institutions, scientific expertise, programs intended to protect children and vulnerable people, environmental safeguards, civil rights, the rule of law, the legitimacy of journalism, the expectation that public officials would usually tell the truth, and the idea that government has obligations extending beyond the accumulation and protection of excessive wealth. People were being publicly humiliated and demonized. Cruelty was increasingly displayed as strength. Conduct that would once have been disqualifying was defended, normalized, or simply buried beneath the next outrage.

And it was all coming at us so fast that it became almost impossible to process. One event displaced the one before it. Another insult, another threat, another violation arrived before there had been time to understand the last one. I could feel my own capacity to respond beginning to shut down. Whatever the intention, the effect was unmistakable. I was going numb.

And when we are numb, we do not act.

I found myself thinking something I suspect many people have thought in one form or another:

What the hell has happened to us?

That question felt different from the political questions filling the news. I was not primarily asking how one election had been won, why one political party had changed, or what was wrong with one particular leader. I was asking a question that had followed me, without my fully recognizing it, through most of my professional life.

How do human beings become organized around things that hurt us?

I am a psychiatrist. I have spent more than fifty years trying to understand what adversity, violence, betrayal, loss, and trauma do to people. Much of my work began with individuals, but it did not stay there for very long. People live inside families, schools, workplaces, hospitals, communities, economies, cultures, and governments, and what happens in those systems enters human beings just as surely as human beings shape the systems they inhabit. Every one of those spaces also has a history—a history shaped not only by the people living there now but by generations that came before them.

Over the years I learned far more than I ever wanted to know about the terrible things human beings do to one another. I also learned something that became increasingly difficult to live with: much of the suffering I was treating was preventable.

That realization gradually pushed me from psychiatry toward public health. Psychiatry had taught me to ask what had happened to a particular person and how that experience had changed them. Public health forced me to ask a larger question:

How does harm spread?

We are accustomed to thinking about contagion in relation to infectious disease. One person carries something that can affect another; exposure alters risk; patterns of transmission can be traced through families, communities, and populations; and prevention depends upon interrupting those pathways before illness has spread widely.

Human violence and destructive behavior are not contagious in the microbiological sense, but they can spread through populations in disturbingly similar ways. Violence witnessed can become violence learned. Fear travels through families. Humiliation can generate retaliation. Children absorb what power looks like from the people and institutions around them. Adults bring adaptations formed in one setting into the next. Organizations transmit norms about what may be said, who must be obeyed, whose suffering matters, and what kinds of behavior will be rewarded or punished. Communities shaped by chronic violence or deprivation can pass the consequences forward, not because anyone deliberately chooses to do so, but because one generation's adaptations become part of the developmental environment of the next.

None of this is destiny. Exposure changes risk; it does not dictate outcome. Human beings can interrupt transmission, repair injury, learn different ways of relating, and create environments that support different developmental possibilities. But once I began seeing adversity this way, it became impossible

to think of trauma only as something residing inside an individual patient. Some forms of suffering move through relationships and systems. They propagate.

And that changes the question of prevention. If we wait until the traumatized child becomes the traumatized adult, until violence has occurred, until an organization has become toxic, until a community has fractured, or until an entire population has been injured, we have arrived terribly late. Treatment matters enormously, but prevention asks more than *What happened?* It asks: *How did this spread? Where were the points at which transmission might have been interrupted? And why did we fail to stop it before the damage multiplied?*

The Pandemic

After COVID-19, none of us should have difficulty understanding what contagion means. We watched a previously unknown virus move through human networks until virtually no part of the world remained untouched. We watched hospitals overflow, families become separated, health-care workers become exhausted, schools close, ordinary rituals of illness and death disappear, and millions of human beings die. The World Health Organization later estimated that during 2020 and 2021 alone the pandemic was associated with approximately 14.9 million excess deaths worldwide⁴.

And then something happened that continues to trouble me.

We moved on.

Of course, individuals did not simply move on. Millions of families could not. People were grieving parents, spouses, children, friends, colleagues, patients, and neighbors. Many survivors remained ill. Health-care workers carried memories of conditions no one should have been expected to endure. Children and young people had lived through profound disruption during important developmental years.

But at the level of our public life, there was surprisingly little collective reckoning commensurate with what had happened. There was no sustained national mourning adequate to the magnitude of the loss, no durable shared account of the catastrophe that could hold both the suffering and what we needed to learn from it.

Instead, the pandemic itself became politically contested. The reality of the danger, the meaning of the deaths, the legitimacy of public-health measures, the reliability of scientific expertise, and even what counted as evidence became caught up in struggles over identity and allegiance. Alongside the virus, fear spread. So did misinformation, conspiracy, blame, distrust, and anger.

The biological contagion was accompanied by social contagion.

And then came another familiar human adaptation: the desire to get back to normal.

I understand that desire. After prolonged threat, people want ordinary life again. But there is a difference between recovery and forgetting. A traumatized

person who cannot bear to remember what happened does not thereby become free of its effects. Neither does a society. What is not processed does not simply disappear. It can remain embedded in expectations, distrust, behavior, institutions, relationships, and the stories people tell about what happened.

I have come to believe that we greatly underestimate how vulnerable the unprocessed experience of COVID left us. A population that has lived through years of fear, isolation, uncertainty, death, economic disruption, conflicting information, political hostility, and profound distrust does not simply return to its previous emotional state when an emergency declaration ends. People were tired. Many were angry. Many no longer knew who to trust. Some became convinced that authorities had lied to them; others watched in disbelief as well-established facts were treated as matters of political preference. Loss went insufficiently mourned. Anger found targets. Social bonds frayed.

Those conditions matter. Frightened, exhausted, distrustful populations are easier to divide. They are more vulnerable to certainty, scapegoating, simplistic explanations, conspiracy, and leaders who promise to restore order by telling them who to blame.

I do not mean that COVID caused what came afterward, any more than trauma mechanically determines what an individual will become. I mean something more developmental and, I think, more important:

The pandemic changed the conditions into which subsequent events arrived.

Public forgetting has consequences⁵. If a society cannot remember a catastrophe accurately enough to learn from it, then experience does not become protection. The deaths may be counted somewhere, yet cease to function as social memory. Millions of human lives can disappear behind statistics while public life proceeds almost as if the catastrophe had never occurred.

That possibility is especially striking to me because I had seen a very different response to epidemic disease as a child.

I grew up around children stricken by polio, some of them kept alive in what were called iron lungs but looked to me like round coffins. I can still remember the extraordinary relief and joy that swept through families when the polio vaccine became available. Suddenly there was a way to protect children from a disease that had haunted parents for years. A shot – or a sugar cube – could prepare the body to recognize a danger before the danger arrived.

Years later, when I trained as a physician, I learned how much more remarkable that protective system actually was. The immune system is not simply a weapon against disease. It is a vast, distributed system of recognition, communication, memory, restraint, and response⁶. It must constantly distinguish what threatens the body from what belongs there, decide when intervention is necessary, mobilize enough force to protect life without allowing that force itself to become destructive, and remember enough about previous threats to respond more effectively the next time.

For decades I had been thinking about trauma and the ways living systems respond to danger. I had also come to understand that human life exists simultaneously at many levels. Our psychological lives unfold within bodies, families, organizations, communities, cultures, and societies, each affecting and being affected by the others.

And now another question occurred to me.

What is our vaccine against predators?

The Susceptible System

For much of my career, I studied what happens when people and organizations adapt to chronic danger. Human beings are remarkably adaptive creatures. That capacity is one of the reasons we survive. But adaptation has a darker side.

People can adapt to conditions that should never have become normal. Families can organize themselves around violence or secrecy. Institutions can organize themselves around fear, control, silence, and self-protection. People who know something is wrong can gradually stop saying so. Rules created to protect people can become mechanisms of domination. Everyone adapts because adjustment is what allows life to continue—even when what we are adapting to should never have been accepted in the first place.

And then, because life continues, the system itself can begin to look normal.

We lose our bearings. We lower our expectations. We can be talked into tolerating things that destroy life, hope, and the future well-being of children not yet born.

That is where the question raised by *Secret Hitler* became much larger for me, because our recurring problem with predatory leaders has never been only about the predator.

After all, predators are not new. Human beings have been warning one another about them for thousands of years. Before psychology gave us terms such as psychopathy, narcissism, coercive control, or predatory aggression, we filled our stories with wolves disguised as grandmothers, charming strangers bearing gifts, cruel kings, witches, ogres, and handsome men whose promises concealed locked rooms. We have described predators in sacred texts, fairy tales, novels, plays, histories, newspapers, films, television programs, psychological studies, and endless accounts of ruined lives.

We know they exist.

So why do we keep failing to recognize them when it matters? Why do so many ordinary people become captivated by them, excuse them, enable them, obey them, benefit from them, or convince themselves that someone else will stop them? Why do institutions created precisely to constrain dangerous power so often begin accommodating it instead? Why do people who can see what is happening become frightened, isolated, exhausted, discredited, or silent? Why

can a society remember the catastrophe produced by one predator and remain vulnerable to the next?

And why do the methods look so familiar once we recognize them?

Deception. Scapegoating. Humiliation. Threat. Seduction. Loyalty tests. Attacks on shared reality. The weakening of independent institutions. The conversion of grievance into permission. The gradual transformation of what was once unacceptable into something merely controversial, then defensible, and finally ordinary.

No predator accomplishes that alone.

The predator needs a susceptible system.

That was the connection I had been missing.

For decades I had been asking what makes people, families, organizations, and communities vulnerable to the transmission of trauma and violence. Now I found myself asking the same kind of question about predatory power. What are the conditions that allow it to spread? What makes some systems capable of recognizing and containing it while others accommodate it? What happens to the people and institutions charged with protection when they themselves become frightened, confused, exhausted, silenced, or recruited into serving the danger?

What, in other words, is our *social immune system*, and why does it so often fail us?

The comparison is not exact, and it will become much more complicated as this book unfolds. Biological immune systems can fail because they respond too weakly, because they respond so aggressively that they damage the organism they are meant to protect, or because a danger arising within the body itself learns to evade, suppress, or even recruit the body's defenses⁷. Societies can fail in strangely analogous ways.

But before we can understand what a healthy social immune system might look like, we have to confront a more uncomfortable possibility.

Perhaps our recurring vulnerability to predatory power is not an accidental defect in otherwise mature societies. Perhaps it is connected to the kind of creatures we are—to the extraordinary dependence with which every human life begins, to the way our brains and capacities develop in relationship with other people, to our deep need for belonging and protection, to the uses and abuses of power we encounter from infancy onward, and to the enormous gap that has opened between what human beings have become capable of doing and our ability to govern those capacities wisely.

We have learned to split the atom, map the genome, transplant hearts, walk on the moon, connect billions of people across the planet, and construct machines that can converse with us in multiple languages. Our intellectual and technological development has been breathtaking.

And yet we remain vulnerable to one of the oldest dangers in the human story: another human being who wants too much power and is willing to use other people to get it.

So that is where I want to begin.

Not with Hitler. Not with one president, dictator, political party, ideology, or historical catastrophe.

With us.

Why are we so vulnerable to predators—and what would it take for us to become much harder for them to govern?