

## We're constantly fooling ourselves — and that's (mostly) okay

By **Katie Hafner**

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Every day we tell many small untruths, lies uttered by mutual consent that keep societal interactions civil. We say “How are you today?” when we don’t really care to know, or “That was a lovely dinner” when the meal tasted terrible. Parents reproach their children for failing to supply a polite answer instead of the real one.

Then there are the lies we tell ourselves. Researchers have found that patients with an optimistic outlook in the face of a terminal medical prognosis will outlive those with a realistic sense of their disease.

“If you think of benevolent deception and optimistic self-deception not as vice and weakness, but as adaptive responses to difficult circumstances,” Shankar Vedantam writes in his powerful new book, [“Useful Delusions: The Power and Paradox of the Self-Deceiving Brain,”](#) “it is not hard to imagine that many of us — confronted by immense pain — might choose the hope of lies over the despair of truth.”

“Useful Delusions” is co-written by science writer Bill Mesler but presented in Vedantam’s voice. There’s something about the latter’s spoken voice that’s both soothing and authoritative. It could be his cadence and pitch. It could be that he sounds like the world’s nicest guy. Whatever it is, when Vedantam tells stories on his podcast and radio show, “Hidden Brain,” even when he’s imparting highly disturbing truths about human behavior, he’s a joy to listen to.

It would seem difficult to duplicate that effect with the written word, but he manages to do just that. He explains the phenomenon of deceit in general, and self-deception in particular, with the same plain language and gentle authority that his listeners have come to rely on.

An intriguing area of self-deception involves the relationship between what we pay for something and how we judge it. Wine is a famous example. Researchers have found that when cheap wine is put in expensive bottles, even connoisseurs can't tell the difference. However, an experiment at the California Institute of Technology added brain imaging, which showed that when volunteers tasted \$10 wine from a bottle they were told cost \$90, a part of their brains lit up more than when they tasted the same wine and were told it was from a \$10 bottle, indicating heightened pleasure from a belief in the higher cost.

Vedantam, a self-described wine ignoramus, says this raises a disturbing question for him: "We might think that connoisseurs who pay premium prices for wine are suckers, but if these people derive more pleasure because they paid more, are they being cheated — or getting their money's worth?" As Vendantam explains, people apply a heuristic, or mental shortcut, to many of their choices and assumptions: for example, accepting the rule of thumb that things that cost more must be better.

The second part of the book is devoted to a story that illuminates the deep human need for companionship. In 1988, Donald Lowry and his assistant, Pamala St. Charles, were convicted of bilking thousands of men around the United States out of millions of dollars with false stories of a garden paradise called Chonda-Za, inhabited by love angels.

Over a period of several years, Lowry and St. Charles sent the men photographs and ardent love letters purporting to be from women who called themselves Angel Susan, say, or Angel Vanessa. Lowry hired models to pose for the photos. Some 31,000 men paid a membership fee to join Lowry's Church of Love and provided monetary Love Offerings to the nonexistent angels for their nonexistent needs — garden seeds, winter coats, car repairs and sewing machines. Lowry spent 10 years in prison.

The Church of Love story has already been told multiple times, including by Vedantam himself. In "Useful Delusions," Vedantam focuses on the fact that many of the men didn't consider themselves victims; some even testified for the defense. Indeed, many of the members participated willingly in the rose-scented dream, knowing it wasn't real.

But many others believed so fervently in the angels' existence, they traveled to Hillsdale, Ill. — where the letters from the angels were postmarked — only to be told that there was no such place as Chonda-Za or the Church of Love.

Joseph Enriquez, a lonely man in his 30s in Dalhart, Tex., fell in love with Pamala St. Charles, the only woman who actually existed. Yet it was Lowry who wrote the letters from Pamala to Joseph. In them, she called him "darling," and the letters were peppered with fantasies: "I . . . kissed you gently on the lips," said one; and "This is the way it will be forever, Joseph."

So deeply did Joseph come to believe in Pamala's love that after years of letter writing, he finally traveled to Illinois — at Pamala's invitation, bizarrely enough — to celebrate her birthday. He arrived to discover that he was one of many

The propensity on the part of these men — and much of humankind, for that matter — to incline toward the light is no surprise. Many of the men got caught up in the Church of Love fantasy to ease their loneliness, to believe that there was someone out there for them. And it worked. “If self-deception is *functional*, then it will endure,” Vedantam writes, insightfully. “Life, like evolution and natural selection, ultimately doesn’t care about what’s true. *It cares about what works.*”

The book’s third section looks at consensual delusions on a grand scale. Through the ages, stories and myths have propelled mass movements and revolutions, and fueled what researchers call “sacred causes.” Stories about wrongs that need to be redressed give people the feeling they are devoting their lives to something larger than themselves.

Adolf Hitler’s original myth — that all Jews were evil — became foundational for the rise of Nazi Germany. In the end, it was so strong it blinded Hitler and the entire Nazi leadership to their country’s military plight: When military leaders made entreaties for resources, Hitler and his top officials insisted that those precious resources be used instead to continue exterminating the Jews.

Speaking of individual delusions that carry over to the masses, it would be interesting to hear what Vedantam has learned about the millions of people who came to believe that the 2020 presidential election was stolen, that it was possible to overturn the results by storming the U.S. Capitol and that President Donald Trump would be marching down Pennsylvania Avenue along with the rest of the deluded mob. Let’s hope for a “Hidden Brain” episode soon about what was going on in people’s heads on Jan. 6.

## Useful Delusions

### **The Power and Paradox of the Self-Deceiving Brain**

By Shankar Vedantam and Bill Mesler

Norton.

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