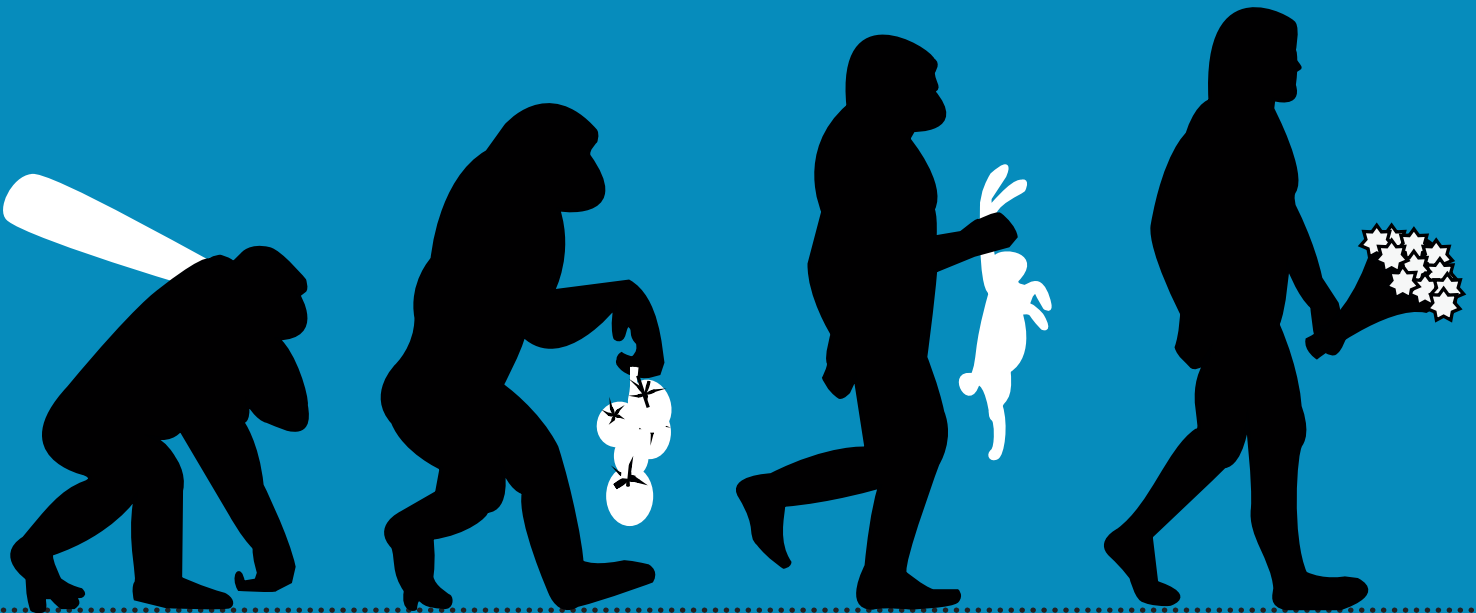


FROM HOMO SAPIENS TO HOMO SOSPITAS

[Sospitas (Latin): safety, health, welfare]

By Professor Sidney Dekker

I passed by a kindergarten playground recently. On the sandy patch, in the broken-up shade of a Jacaranda tree, a clump of four- to six-year olds was milling about. They were doing what small children do: some digging and playing, some jumping, running, some throwing sand at others – all the time emitting their typical shrieks and cries.



Draped around the sandy patch, there was something disturbing. Kindergarten teachers were keeping guard. But they were not just like the silent sentries that lurk in a corner, quiet and statue-like. Or like my kindergarten teachers a long time ago, who sat in their own little huddle far removed from the kiddie noise, having a gossip and a smoke.

No, these teachers were right at the edge of the action, forming what looked like a riot police cordon. I counted four, five of them: all standing with grand, military authority, legs apart, with their arms outstretched so that their hands reached out toward the next teacher

in the cordon. All were intensely focused on the children in front of them, monitoring and inspecting their every move, and stepping in immediately at the slightest sign of trouble or transgression. Believe me that the kid throwing the sand didn't get to do that twice.

This was the kids' human safety net.

Something in me would hate to be a kid today. I grew up in the Seventies. As many of you might remember, that was an age in which parenting was an exercise in benign neglect, in well-meaning abandonment, in leaving kids alone to be self-sufficient. On days off from school, you might

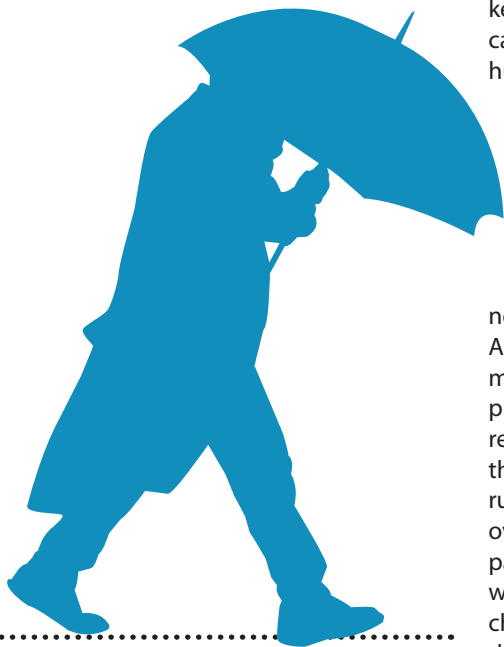
get booted out of the house in the morning, told not to show up until it was time for dinner, and if you didn't show up in time for dinner, then pretty much the only consequence was that you got no dinner. You made plans on the fly. You got in trouble, you got bullied, beaten up, and you figured it out, sometimes with the help of older brothers or bigger friends.

To be sure, it is not that I live in the fantasy and idealised memory of a fictional and glorified past. I am not cheerleading things as they were. Compare our aviation community from the Seventies with what we have today. It is vastly safer now. Work, in

general, has never been as safe as it is today.

But at what cost? What has been the price? And who has often ended up paying that price?

Think of Tom Wolfe's epic book *The Right Stuff* from 1979 (which many of us today are taught to believe to be exactly the *Wrong Stuff* when it comes to aviation safety). In it, Wolfe details the bravado, courage and heroism of the first Americans to enter space, tracing them back to their WWII fighter pilot years and their test pilot years in their efforts to break the sound barrier. Chuck Yeager



takes center stage. Of all his 'right stuff' features, his ability to survive, succeed and thrive without 'safety nets' must be the most renowned. His eyesight, for example, was legendary. Chuck was able to accurately pick out enemy aircraft from huge distances, way ahead of his fellow pilots and, indeed, way before the enemy saw him. Imagine Chuck flying around with a safety net with pretty colours and perky alerting sounds that would precisely identify for him what to hit and what not to hit. What would that have done to his pluckiness, his resilience, his skills, his peer status?

Again, I am not cheerleading for the past. I don't think we should go

back to relying on the 'right stuff.' If anything, relying on it killed a whole lot of people. And there is more. The immense progress we have made in building safety nets, of all kinds, is testimony to the inventiveness and ingenuity of humanity. Our prowess in programming is too, as is our development of micro-technologies that make calculations and decisions a lot faster than we ourselves can. And our eagerness to develop safety nets says something beautiful about who we are, what we care for, what we want to protect.

But back to the kindergarten. The teachers were eager to construct a safety net. At first sight, they were keen to protect the children in their care, to make sure they didn't get hurt, that they weren't bullied, beaten up, ignored or thrown sand at. The safety net was there for the kids.

Or was it?

Think about it this way. Perhaps the teachers had created the safety net for themselves, for the teachers. And perhaps it was there for their managers. Perhaps what they were protecting was the leadership, the reputation and the bottom line of their kindergarten, and the company running it. Protecting it against the over-eager, lawsuit-ready, over-parenting, hyper-concerned parents whose little precious defenceless children got a face full of sand one day.

We seem to have evolved a stage further: from homo sapiens - the wise, sensible, judicious human - to homo sospitas: a human obsessed with safety, security, health, welfare and the limitation of liability.

I wonder about those children. With a safety net like that, how are they ever going to learn to be wise, sensible, judicious? I wonder what the sources are going to be in their upbringing of resilience, of autonomy, independence, self-determination, self-sufficiency. With safety nets that are really intended to protect other people, but that might well stand in the way of who they, the children, need to become.

We could ask a similar question of our safety nets. Who are they protecting? Whose safety are they really looking out for? Whose liability are they really managing?

I am not talking about the 'alarm problem' or the 'false alarm problem' or the issues of 'data overload' or contradicting indications from different safety nets per se. All of those have been described extensively in the human factors literature, and are intuitively known to every controller in the world. No, what I am talking about is our elephant in the room: the controller who one day might stand accused of not responding or responding 'wrongly' to the indications, clues or exhortations of one of the many safety nets. Never mind the many times that the very same safety net generated indications, clues and indications that could, or should, be ignored in order to get the job done, and get it done safely. Except that one time. The people and the organisation and the regulator that all helped provide the safety net can say: "Look, we gave you everything you needed to do the right thing and still you didn't. You made the wrong decision." This is where we might get a glimpse of who wins and who loses, independent of any commitment to a just culture. This is where, I believe, we might discover who benefits and who might sometimes, paradoxically, suffer from the existence of a safety net. ❏



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