

The Tipping Point
How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference
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Introduction

2.

The Tipping Point is the biography of an idea, and the idea is very simple. It is that the best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or, for that matter, the transformation of unknown books into bestsellers, or the rise of teenage smoking, or the phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of the other mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do.

Little changes have a big effect.

Changes happen in a hurry.

These three characteristics – one, contagiousness; two, the fact that little causes can have big effects; and three, that change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment – are the same three principles that define how measles moves through a grade-school classroom or the flu attacks every winter. Of the three, the third trait – the idea that epidemics can rise or fall in one dramatic moment – is the most important, because it is the principle that makes sense of the first two and that permits the greatest insight into why modern change happens the way it does. The name given to that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once is the Tipping Point.

3.

The second of the principles of epidemics – that little changes can somehow have big effects – is also a fairly radical notion. We are, as humans, heavily socialized to make a kind of rough approximation between cause and effect. If we want to communicate a strong emotion, if we want to convince someone that, say, we love them, we realize that we need to speak passionately and forthrightly. If we want to break bad news to someone, we lower our voices and choose our words carefully. We are trained to think that what goes into any transaction or relationship or system must be directly related, in intensity and dimension, to what comes out. Consider, for example, the following puzzle. I give you a large piece of paper, and I ask you to fold it over once, and then take that folded paper and fold it over again, and then again, and again, until you have refolded the original paper 50 times. How tall do you think the final stack is going to be? In answer to that question, most people will fold the sheet in their mind's eye, and guess that the pile would be as thick as a phone book or, if they're really courageous, they say that it would be as tall as a refrigerator. But the real answer is that the height of the stack would approximate the distance to the sun. And if you folded it over one more time, the stack would be as high as the distance to the sun and back. This is an example of what in

mathematics is called a geometric progression. Epidemics are another example of geometric progression: when a virus spreads through a population, it doubles and doubles again, until it has (figuratively) grown from a single sheet of paper all the way to the sun in fifty steps. To appreciate the power of epidemics, we have to abandon this expectation about proportionality. We need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that sometimes big changes follow from small events, and that sometimes these changes can happen very quickly.

Why is it that some ideas or behaviors or products start epidemics and others don't? And what can we do to deliberately start and control positive epidemics of our own?

Chapter One

The Three Rules of Epidemics

Epidemics are a function of the people who transmit infectious agents, the infectious agent itself, and the environment in which the infectious agent is operating. These three agents of change I call the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context.

1.

Social epidemics work in exactly the same way. They are also driven by the efforts of a handful of exceptional people. It's things like how sociable they are, or how energetic or knowledgeable of influential among their peers.

2.

This idea of the importance of stickiness in tipping has enormous implications for the way we regard social epidemics as well. We tend to spend a lot of time thinking about how to make messages more contagious – how to reach as many people as possible with our products or ideas. But the hard part of communication is often figuring out how to make sure a message doesn't go in one ear and out the other. Stickiness means that a message makes an impact. You can't get it out of your head. It sticks in your memory. When Winston filter-tip cigarettes were introduced in the spring of 1954, for example, the company came up with the slogan "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." At the time, the ungrammatical and somehow provocative use of "like" instead of "as" created a minor sensation. It was the kind of phrase that people talked about, like the famous Wendy's tag line from 1984 "Where's the beef?"

The Stickiness Factor says that there are specific ways of making a contagious message memorable; there are relatively simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information that can make a big difference in how much of an impact it makes.

3.

When people are in a group, in other words, responsibility for acting is diffused. They assume that someone else will make the call, or they assume that because no one else is acting, the apparent problem – the seizure-like sounds from the other room, the smoke from the door – isn't really a problem.

The key to getting people to change their behavior, in other words, to care about their neighbor in distress, sometimes lies with the smallest details of their immediate situation. The Power of Context says that human beings are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they may seem.

4.

The three rules of the Tipping Point – the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, the Power of Context – offer a way of making sense of epidemics. They provide us with direction for how to go about reaching a Tipping Point.

Chapter Two The Law of the Few Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen

Not all word-of-mouth epidemics are sensations. But it is safe to say that word of mouth is – even in this age of mass communications and multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns – still the most important form of human communication. In how many cases was your decision about where to spend your money heavily influenced by the recommendation of a friend? There are plenty of advertising executives who think that precisely because of the sheer ubiquity of the marketing efforts these days, word-of-mouth appeals have become the only kind of persuasion that most of us respond to anymore.

Why is it that some ideas and trends and messages “tip” and others don’t?

The answer is that the success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts. Revere’s news tipped and Dawes’s didn’t because of the differences between the two men. This is the Law of the Few, which I briefly outlined in the previous chapter. This chapter is about the people critical to social epidemics and what makes someone like Paul Revere different from someone like William Dawes. These kinds of people are all around us. Yet we often fail to give them proper credit for the role they play in our lives. I call them Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen.

1.

In the late 1960’s, the psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted an experiment to find an answer to what is known as the small-world problem. The problem is this: how are human beings connected? Do we all belong to separate worlds, operating simultaneously but autonomously, so that the links between any two people, anywhere in the world, are few and distant? Or are we all bound up together in a grand, interlocking web? In a way, Milgram was asking the very same kind of question that began this chapter, namely, how does an idea or a trend or a piece of news – the British are coming! – travel through a population?

Milgram’s idea was to test this question with a chain letter. He got the names of 160 people who lived in Omaha, Nebraska, and mailed each of them a packet. In the packet was the name and address of a stockbroker who worked in Boston and lived in Sharon, Massachusetts. Each person was instructed to write his or her name on the packet and send it on to a friend or acquaintance who he or she thought would get the packet

closer to the stockbroker. If you lived in Omaha and had a cousin outside of Boston, for example, you might send it to him, on the grounds that – even if your cousin did not himself know the stockbroker – he would be a lot more likely to be able to get to the stockbroker in two or three or four steps. The idea was that when the packet finally arrived at the stockbroker's house, Milgram could look at the list of all those whose hands it went through to get there and establish how closely connected someone chosen at random from one part of the country was to another person in another part of the country. Milgram found that most of the letters reached the stockbroker in five or six steps. This experiment is where we get the concept of six degrees of separation.

Most of us don't have particularly broad and diverse groups of friends. In general, people chose friends of similar age and race. But if the friend lived down the hall, then age and race became a lot less important. Proximity overpowered similarity. Another study, done on students at the University of Utah, found that if you ask someone why he is friendly with someone else, he'll say it is because he and his friend share similar attitudes. But if you actually quiz the two of them on their attitudes, you'll find out that what they actually share is similar activities. We're friends with the people we do things with, as much as we are with the people we resemble. We don't seek out friends, in other words. We associate with the people who occupy the same small, physical spaces that we do.

Six degrees of separation doesn't mean that everyone is linked to everyone else in just six steps. It means that a very small number of people are linked to everyone else in a few steps, and the rest of us are linked to the world through those special few.

These people who link us up with the world, who introduce us to our social circles – these people on whom we rely more heavily than we *realize* – are Connectors, people with a special gift for bringing the world together.

2.

What makes someone a Connector? The first – and most obvious – criterion is that Connectors know lots of people. They are the kinds of people who know everyone.

Sprinkled among every walk of life, in other words, are a handful of people with a truly extraordinary knack of making friends and acquaintances. They are Connectors.

Roger Horchow is a successful businessman from Dallas. Horchow founded the Horchow Collection, a high-end mail order merchandise company. I went to see him in Manhattan. When I gave Horchow the list of names from the Manhattan directory, he went through the list very quickly, muttering names under his breath as his pencil skimmed the page. He scored 98. I suspect that had I given him another 10 minutes to think, he would have scored even higher.

Why did Horchow do so well? It was that he didn't think of his people collection as a business strategy. He just thought of it as something he did. It was who he was. Horchow has an instinctive and natural gift for making social connections. He's not aggressive about it. He's not one of those overly social, back-slapping types for whom the process of acquiring acquaintances is obvious and self-serving. He's more an observer, with the dry, knowing manner of someone who likes to remain a little bit on the outside. He simply likes people, in a genuine and powerful way, and he finds the patterns

of acquaintanceship and interaction in which people arrange themselves to be endlessly fascinating.

Horchow collects people the same way others collect stamps. He keeps on his computer a roster of 1,600 names and addresses, and on each entry is a note describing the circumstances under which he met the person.

Most of us shy away from this kind of cultivation of acquaintances. We have our circle of friends, to whom we are devoted. Acquaintances we keep at arm's length.

3.

In the case of Connectors, their ability to span many different worlds is a function of something intrinsic to their personality, some combination of curiosity, self-confidence, sociability, and energy.

4.

Sociologist Mark Granovetter found that of those personal connections, the majority were “weak ties.”

Granovetter argues that it is because when it comes to finding out about new jobs – or, for that matter, new information, or new ideas – “weak ties” are always more important than strong ties. Your friends, after all, occupy the same world that you do. They might work with you, or live near you, and go to the same churches, schools, or parties. How much then, would they know that you wouldn't know? Your acquaintances, on the other hand, by definition occupy a very different world than you. They are much more likely to know something that you don't. Acquaintances, in short, represent a source of social power, and the more acquaintances you have the more powerful you are. Connectors like Lois Weisberg and Roger Horchow – who are masters of the weak tie – are extraordinarily powerful. We rely on them to give us access to opportunities and worlds to which we don't belong.

It's also the case that the closer an idea or a product comes to a Connector, the more power and opportunity it has as well.

5.

Here, then, is the explanation for why Paul Revere's midnight ride started a word-of-mouth epidemic and William Dawe's ride did not. Paul Revere was the Roger Horchow or the Lois Weisberg of his day. He was a Connector. He was, for example, gregarious and intensely social.

6.

It's possible that Connectors learn about new information by an entirely random process, that because they know so many people they get access to new things wherever they pop up. If you look closely at social epidemics, however, it becomes clear that just as there are people we rely upon to connect us to other people, there are also people we rely upon to connect us with new information. There are people specialists, and there are information specialists.

The word *Maven* comes from the Yiddish, and it means one who accumulates knowledge. In recent years, economists have spent a great deal of time studying Mavens,

for the obvious reason that if marketplaces depend on information, the people with the most information must be the most important.

The critical thing about Mavens, though, is that they aren't passive collectors of information. It isn't just that they are obsessed with how to get the best deal on a can of coffee. What sets them apart is that once they figure out how to get that deal, they want to tell you about it too. "A Maven is a person who has information on a lot of different products or prices or places. This person likes to initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests."

Price says that well over half of Americans know a Maven, or someone close to the Maven's description.

8.

What sets Mavens apart, though, is not so much what they know but how they pass it along. The fact that Mavens want to help, for no other reason than because they like to help, turns out to be an awfully effective way of getting someone's attention.

9.

The one thing that a Maven is not is a persuader. Alpert's motivation is to educate and to help. He's not the kind of person who wants to twist your arm. To be a Maven is to be a teacher. But it is also, even more emphatically, to be a student. Mavens are really information brokers, sharing and trading what they know. For a social epidemic to start, though, some people are actually going to have to be persuaded to do something.

In a social epidemic, Mavens are data banks. They provide the message. Connectors are social glue: they spread it. But there is also a select group of people – Salesmen – with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing, and they are as critical to the tipping of word-of-mouth epidemics as the other two groups. Who are these Sales men? And what makes them so good at what they do?

Great salesmen have a natural exuberance.

Tom Gau is a financial planner in Torrance, California. His firm – Kavesh and Gau – is the biggest in southern California and one of the top financial planning firms in the country.

"I love my clients, okay? I'll bend over backwards for them," Gau said. "I call my clients my family. I tell my clients, I've got two families. I've got my wife and my kids and I've got you." Gaul talks quickly, but in fits and starts. He's always revving up and gearing down. "I love helping people. I love people. It's called a relationship."

"I'm probably the most optimistic person you could ever imagine," says Gau.

10.

There are very important clues as to what makes someone like Tom Gau – or, for that matter, any of the Salesmen in our lives – so effective. The first is that little things can, apparently, make as much of a difference as big things.

The second implication is that non-verbal cues are as or more important than verbal cues.

The third – and perhaps most important –implication is that persuasion often works in ways that we do not appreciate. It's not that smiles and nods are subliminal messages. They are straightforward and on the surface.

11.

What I felt with Gau was that I was being seduced, not in the sexual sense, of course, but in a global way, that our conversation was being conducted on his terms, not mine. I felt I was becoming synchronized with him. “Skilled musicians know this, and good speakers,” says Joseph Cappella, who teaches at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. “They know when the crowds are with them, literally in synchrony with them, in movements and nods and stillness in moments of attention.” It is a strange thing to admit, because I didn't want to be drawn in. I was on guard against it. But the essence of Salesmen is that, on some level, they cannot be resisted. “Tom can build a level of trust and rapport in five to ten minutes that most people will take half an hour to do, “Moine says of Gau.

Only the charismatic person could infect the other people in the room with his or her emotions.

Is this what Gau did to me? The thing that strikes me most about my encounter with him was his voice. He had the range of an opera singer. At times, he would sound stern. At times, he would drawl, lazily and easily. At other times, he would chuckle as he spoke, making his words sing with laughter. In each of those modes his face would light up accordingly, moving, easily and deftly, from one state to another. There was no ambiguity in his presentation. Everything, was written on his face.

12.

The American Revolution began on a cold spring morning, with a word-of-mouth epidemic that spread from a little stable boy to all of New England, relying along the way on a small number of very special people: a few Salesmen and a man with the particular genius of both a Maven and a Connector.

Chapter Three **The Stickiness Factor** **Sesame Street, Blue's Clues, and the Educational Virus**

1.

The Law of the Few, which I talked about in the previous chapter, says that one critical factor in epidemics is the nature of the messenger. A pair of shoes or a warning or an infection or a new movie can become highly contagious and tip simply by being associated with a particular kind of person. But in all those examples, I took it as given that the message itself was something that could be passed on.

But the content of the message matters too. And the specific quality that a message needs to be successful is the quality of “stickiness.” Is the message memorable? Is it so memorable, in fact, that it can create change, that it can spur someone to action?

(application – how do I do it?)

Fear experiments were conducted by the social psychologist Howard Levanthal in the 1960s. Levanthal wanted to see if he could persuade a group of college seniors at Yale University to get a tetanus shot. He divided them up into several groups, and gave all of them a seven-page booklet explaining the dangers of tetanus, the importance of inoculation, and the fact that the university was offering free tetanus shots at the campus health center to all interested students.

The results were, in part, quite predictable. When they were given a questionnaire later, all the students appeared to be well educated about the dangers of tetanus. But those who were given the high-fear booklet were more convinced of the dangers of tetanus and were more likely to say that they intended to get inoculated. All of those differences evaporated, however, when Levanthal looked at how many of the students actually went and got a shot. For some reason, the students had forgotten everything they had learned about tetanus, and the lessons they had been told weren't translating into action.

The Stickiness Factor suggests something quite different. It suggests that the problem probably wasn't with the overall conception of the message at all, and that maybe all the campaign needed was a little gold box. Sure enough, when Levanthal redid the experiment, one small change was sufficient to tip the vaccination rate up to 28 percent. It was simply including a map of the campus, with the university health building circled and the times that shots were available clearly listed.

There are two interesting results of this study. The first is that of the 28 percent who got inoculated, an equal number were from the high-fear and the low-fear group. Whatever extra persuasive muscle was found in the high-fear booklet was clearly irrelevant. The students knew, without seeing gory pictures, what the dangers of tetanus were, and what they ought to be doing. The second interesting thing is that, of course, as seniors they must have already known where the health center was, and doubtless had visited it several times already. It is doubtful that any of them would ever actually have used the map. In other words, what the tetanus intervention needed in order to tip was not an avalanche of new or additional information. What it needed was a subtle but significant change in presentation. **The students needed to know how to fit the tetanus stuff into their lives.** Once the advice became practical and personal, it became memorable.

Much of what we are told or read or watch, we simply don't remember. The information age has created a stickiness problem.

2.

With television kids don't watch when they are stimulated and look away when they are bored. They watch when they understand and look away when they are confused.

The head of research for *Sesame Street* in the early years was a psychologist from Oregon, Ed Palmer, whose specialty was the use of television as a teaching tool.

He forced the producers to simplify dialogue and abandon certain techniques they had taken from adult television. "We found to our surprise that our preschool audience didn't like it when the adult cast got into a contentious discussion," he remembers. "They didn't like it when two or three people would be talking at once. That's the producers' natural instinct, to hype a scene by creating confusion. It's supposed to tell you that this is

exciting. The fact is that our kids turned away from that kind of situation. Instead of picking up on the signal that something exciting is going on, they picked up on the signal that something confusing is going on. And they'd lose interest."

3.

"I think the most significant format feature in a commercial is that it's about one thing," said Same Gibbon, one of the earliest *Sesame Street* producers. "It's about selling one idea."

4.

The second thing that *Blue's Clues* took from *Sesame Street* was the idea of repetition.

We all want to believe that the key to making an impact on someone lies with the inherent quality of the ideas we present. But in none of these cases did anyone substantially alter the content of what they were saying. Instead, they tipped the message by tinkering, on the margin, with the presentation of their ideas, by putting the Muppet behind the *H-U-G*, by mixing big Bird with the adults, by repeating episodes and skits more than once, by having Steve pause just a second longer than normal after he asks a question. The lesson of stickiness is the same. There is a **simple** way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible.

Chapter Four

The Power of Context

(Part One)

Bernie Goetz and the Rise and Fall of New York City Crime

2.

Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur.

The lesson of the Power of Context is that we are more than just sensitive to changes in context. We're exquisitely sensitive to them. And the kinds of contextual changes that are capable of tipping an epidemic are very different than we might ordinarily suspect.

3.

Something else clearly played a role in reversing New York's crime epidemic.

The most intriguing candidate for that "something else" is called the Broken Windows theory. Broken Windows was the brainchild of the criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling. Wilson and Kelling argued that crime is the inevitable result of disorder. If a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. Soon, more windows will be broken, and the sense of anarchy will spread from the building to the street on which it faces, sending a signal that anything goes. In a city, relatively minor problems like graffiti, public disorder, and aggressive panhandling, they write, are all the equivalent of broken windows, invitations to more serious crimes:

Muggers and robbers, whether opportunistic or professional, believe they reduce their chances of being caught or even identified if they operate on streets where potential victims are already intimidated by prevailing conditions.

This is an epidemic theory of crime. It says that crime is contagious – just as a fashion trend is contagious – that it can start with a broken window and spread to an entire community. The Tipping Point in this epidemic, though, isn't a particular kind of person – a Connector like Lois Weisberg or a Maven like Mark Alpert. It's something physical like graffiti. The impetus to engage in a certain kind of behavior is not coming from a certain kind of person but from a feature of the environment.

After the election of Rudolph Giuliani as mayor of New York in 1994, William Bratton, a disciple of Broken Windows, was appointed head of the New York City Police Department, and he applied the same strategies to the city at large as he did to the Transit Authority. He instructed his officers to crack down on quality-of-life crimes. Minor, seemingly insignificant quality-of-life crimes, they said, were Tipping Points for violent crime.

Broken Windows theory and the Power of Context are one and the same. They are both based on the premise that an epidemic can be reversed, can be tipped, by tinkering with the smallest details of the immediate environment.

What do Broken Windows and the Power of Context suggest? Exactly the opposite. They say that the criminal – far from being someone who acts for fundamental, intrinsic reasons and who lives in his own world – is actually someone acutely sensitive to his environment, who is alert to all kinds of cues, and who is prompted to commit crimes based on his perception of the world around him. The Power of Context is an environmental argument. It says that behavior is a function of social context.

4.

Philip Zimbardo, a social scientist at Stanford University, isn't talking about environment, about the major external influences on all of our lives. He's not denying that how we are raised by our parents affects who we are, or that the kind of schools we went to, the friends we have, or the neighborhoods we live in affect our behavior. All of these things are undoubtedly important. Nor is he denying that our genes play a role in determining who we are. His point is simply that there are certain times and places and conditions when much of that can be swept away, that there are instances where you can take normal people from good schools and happy families and good neighborhoods and powerfully affect their behavior merely by changing the immediate details of their situation.

There is something in all of us that makes us instinctively want to explain the world around us in terms of people's essential attributes: he's a better basketball player, that person is smarter than I am.

We do this because, like vervets, we are a lot more attuned to personal cues than contextual cues.

We do reflect the influences of birth order but, as the psychologist Judith Harris points out in *The Nurture Assumption*, only around our families. When they are away from their families – in different contexts – older siblings are no more likely to be

domineering and younger siblings no more likely to be rebellious than anyone else. It's the birth order myth. It is much easier to define people just in terms of their family personality. It's a kind of shorthand. If we constantly had to qualify every assessment of those around us, how would we make sense of the world? How much harder would it be to make the thousands of decisions we are required to make about whether we like someone or love someone or trust someone or want to give someone advice? The psychologist Walter Mischel argues that the human mind has a kind of "reducing valve" that "creates and maintains the perception of continuity even in the face of perpetual observed changes in actual behavior." He writes:

When we observe a woman who seems hostile and fiercely independent some of the time but passive, dependent and feminine on the other occasions, our reducing valve usually makes us choose between the two syndromes. We decide that one pattern is in the service of the other, or that both are in the service of a third motive. She must be a really castrating lady with a façade of passivity – or perhaps she is a warm, passive-dependent woman with a surface defense of aggressiveness. But perhaps nature is bigger than our concepts and it is possible for the lady to be a hostile, fiercely independent, passive, dependent, feminine, aggressive, warm, castrating person all-in-one. Of course which of these she is at any particular moment would not be random or capricious – it would depend on who she is with, when, how, and much, much more. But each of these aspects of her self may be a quite genuine and real aspect of her total being.

Character, then, isn't what we think it is or, rather, what we want it to be. It isn't a stable, easily identifiable set of closely related traits, and it only seems that way because of a glitch in the way our brains are organized. Character is more like a bundle of habits and tendencies and interests, loosely bound together and dependent, at certain times, on circumstance and context. The reason that most of us seem to have a consistent character is that most of us are really good at controlling our environment.

5.

Some years ago two Princeton University psychologists, John Darley and Daniel Batson, decided to conduct a study inspired by the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. As you may recall, that story, from the New Testament Gospel of Luke, tells of a traveler who has been beaten and robbed and left for dead by the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Both a priest and a Levite – worthy, pious men – came upon the man but did not stop, "passing by on the other side." The only man to help was a Samaritan – the member of a despised minority – who "went up to him and bound up his wounds" and took him to an inn. Darley and Batson decided to replicate that study at the Princeton Theological Seminary. This was an experiment very much in the tradition of the FAE, and it is an important demonstration of how the Power of Context has implications for the way we think about social epidemics of all kinds, not just violent crime.

Darley and Batson met with a group of seminarians, individually, and asked each one to prepare a short, extemporaneous talk on a given biblical theme, then walk over to a nearby building to present it. Along the way to the presentation, each student ran into a man slumped in an alley, head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning. The question was, who would stop and help? Darley and Batson introduced three variables into the

experiment, to make its results more meaningful. First, before the experiment even started, they gave the students a questionnaire about why they had chosen to study theology. Did they see religion as a means for personal and spiritual fulfillment? Or were they looking for a practical tool for finding meaning in everyday life? Then they varied the subject of the theme the students were asked to talk about. Some were asked to speak on the relevance of the professional clergy to the religious vocation. Others were given the parable of the Good Samaritan. Finally, the instructions given by the experimenters to each student varied as well. In some cases, as he sent the students on their way, the experimenter would look at his watch and say, “Oh, you’re late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago. We’d better get moving.” In other cases, he would say, “It will be a few minutes before they’re ready for you, but you might as well head over now.”

If you ask people to predict which seminarians played the Good Samaritan (and subsequent studies have done just this) their answers are highly consistent. They almost all say that the students who entered the ministry to help people and those reminded of the importance of compassion by having just read the parable of the Good Samaritan will be the most likely to stop. Most of us, I think, would agree with those conclusions. In fact, neither of those factors made any difference. “It is hard to think of a context in which norms concerning helping those in distress are more salient than for a person thinking about the Good Samaritan, and yet it did not significantly increase helping behavior,” Darly and Batson concluded. “Indeed, on several occasions, a seminary student going to give his talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way.” The only thing that really mattered was whether the student was in a rush. Of the group that was, 10 percent stopped to help. Of the group who knew they had a few minutes to spare, 63 percent stopped.

What this study is suggesting, in other words, is that the convictions of your heart and the actual contents of your thoughts are less important, in the end, in guiding your actions than the immediate context of your behavior. The words, “Oh, you’re late” had the effect of making someone who was ordinarily compassionate into someone who was indifferent to suffering – of turning someone, in that particular moment, into a different person. When we are trying to make an idea or attitude or product tip, we’re trying to change our audience in some small yet critical respect: we’re trying to infect them, sweep them up in our epidemic, convert them from hostility to acceptance. That can be done through the influence of special kinds of people, people of extraordinary personal connection. That’s the Law of the Few.

Chapter Five
The Power of Context
(Part Two)
The Magic Number One Hundred and Fifty

Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood, by Rebecca Wells was not yet on the bestseller lists. That wouldn’t happen until February 1998, when it would hit the charts and stay there, through 48 printings and 2.5 million copies.

Why did *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* turn into an epidemic? In retrospect, the answer seems fairly straightforward. The book itself is heartwarming and beautifully written, a compelling story of friendship and mother-daughter relationships. It spoke to people. It’s

sticky. Then there's the fact that Wells herself is an actress. But there is a third, less obvious, factor here, which has to do with the last of the principles of epidemics. The success of *Ya-Ya* is a tribute to the Power of context. More specifically, it is testimony to the power of one specific aspect of context, which is the critical role that groups play in social epidemics.

1.

Psychologists tell us much the same thing: that when people are asked to consider evidence or make decisions in a group, they come to very different conclusions than when they are asked the same questions by themselves.

Have you ever wondered, for example, how religious movements get started? Usually, we think of them as a product of highly charismatic evangelists, people like the Apostle Paul or Billy Graham or Brigham Young. But the spread of any new and contagious ideology also has a lot to do with the skillful use of group power. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, the Methodist movement became epidemic in England and North America, tipping from 10,000 to 90,000 followers in the U.S. in the space of five or six years in the 1780s. But Methodism's founder, John Wesley, was by no means the most charismatic preacher of his era. That honor belonged to George Whitfield, an orator of such power and charisma that, it was said, he once charmed a five-pound contribution out of Benjamin Franklin – who was, of course, the furthest thing from a churchgoer. Nor was Wesley a great theologian, in the tradition of, say, John Calvin or Martin Luther. His genius was organizational. Wesley would travel around England and North America delivering open-air sermons to thousands of people. But he didn't just preach. He also stayed long enough in each town to form the most enthusiastic of his converts into religious societies, which in turn he subdivided into smaller classes of a dozen or so people. Converts were required to attend weekly meetings and to adhere to a strict code of conduct. This was a group, in other words, that stood for something. Over the course of his life, Wesley traveled ceaselessly among these groups, covering as much as four thousand miles a year by horseback, reinforcing the tenets of Methodist belief

Wesley's Methodism spread like wildfire through England and America because Wesley was shuttling back and forth among hundreds and hundreds of groups, and each group was then taking his message and making it even stickier.

The lesson of John Wesley is that small, close-knit groups have the power to magnify the epidemic potential of a message or idea. If we are interested in starting an epidemic – in reaching a Tipping Point – what are the most effective kinds of groups? Is there a simple rule of thumb that distinguishes a group with real social authority from a group with little power at all? As it turns out, there is. It's called the Rule of 150, and it is a fascinating example of the strange and unexpected ways in which context affects the course of social epidemics.

2.

There is a concept in cognitive psychology called the channel capacity, which refers to the amount of space in our brain for certain kinds of information.

Once we pass a certain boundary, we become overwhelmed. What I'm describing here is an intellectual capacity – our ability to process raw information. But if you think about it, we clearly have a channel capacity for feelings as well.

Take a minute, for example, to make a list of all the people you know whose death would leave you truly devastated. Chances are you will come up with around 12 names. That, at least, is the average answer that most people give to that question. Those names make up what psychologists call our sympathy group. Why aren't groups any larger? Partly it's a question of time. If you look at the names on your sympathy list, they are probably the people whom you devote the most attention to – either on the telephone, in person, or thinking and worrying about. If your list was twice as long, if it had 30 names on it, and, as a result, you spent only half as much time with everyone on it, would you still be as close to everyone? Probably not. To be someone's best friend requires a minimum investment of time. More than that, though, it takes emotional energy. Caring about someone deeply is exhausting. At a certain point, at somewhere between 10 and 15 people, we begin to overload, just as we begin to overload when we have to distinguish between too many tones. It's a function of the way humans are constructed. As the evolutionary biologist S. L. Washburn writes:

Man evolved to feel strongly about few people, short distances, and relatively brief intervals of time; and these are still the dimensions of life that are important to him.

Perhaps the most interesting natural limit, however, is what might be called our social channel capacity. The case for a social capacity has been made, most persuasively, by the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar.

So what does correlate with brain size? The answer, Dunbar argues, is group size. If you look at any species of primate – at every variety of monkey and ape – the larger their neocortex is, the larger the average size of the groups they live with.

Dunbar's argument is that brains evolve, they get bigger, in order to handle the complexities of larger social groups. If you belong to a group of five people, Dunbar points out, you have to keep track of ten separate relationships: your relationships with the four others in your circle and the six other two-way relationships between the others. That's what it means to know everyone in the circle. You have to understand the personal dynamics of the group, juggle different personalities, keep people happy, manage the demands on your own time and attention, and so on. If you belong to a group of twenty people, however, there are now 190 two-way relationships to keep track of: 19 involving yourself and 171 involving the rest of the group. That's a fivefold increase in the size of the group, but a twentyfold increase in the amount of information processing needed to "know" the other members of the group. Even a relatively small increase in the size of a group, in other words, creates a significant additional social and intellectual burden.

Humans socialize in the largest groups of all primates because we are the only animals with brains large enough to handle the complexities of that social arrangement. Dunbar has actually developed an equation, which works for most primates, in which he plugs in what he calls the neocortex ratio of a particular species – the size of the neocortex relative to the size of the brain – and the equation spits out the expected maximum group size of the animal. If you plug in the neocortex ratio of *Homo sapiens*,

you get a group estimate of 147.8 – or roughly 150. “The figure of 150 seems to represent the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us. Putting it another way, it’s the number of people you would not feel embarrassed about joining uninvited for a drink if you happened to bump into them in a bar.”

Dunbar has combed through the anthropological literature and found that the number 150 pops up again and again.

But at a bigger size you have to impose complicated hierarchies and rules and regulations and formal measures to try to command loyalty and cohesion. But below 150, Dunbar argues, it is possible to achieve these same goals informally: “At this size, orders can be implemented and unruly behavior controlled on the basis of personal loyalties and direct man-to-man contacts. With larger groups, this becomes impossible.”

Then there is the example of the religious group known as the Hutterites, who for hundreds of years have lived in self-sufficient agricultural colonies in Europe and, since the early twentieth century, in North America. The Hutterites (who came from the same tradition as the Amish and the Mennonites) have a strict policy that every time a colony approaches 150, they split it in two and start a new one. “Keeping things under 150 just seems to be the best and most efficient way to manage a group of people,” Bill Gross, one of the leaders of a Hutterite colony outside Spokane told me. “When things get larger than that, people become strangers to one another.” The Hutterites, obviously, didn’t get this idea from contemporary evolutionary psychology. They’ve been following the 150 rule for centuries. At 150, the Hutterites believe, something happens - something indefinable but very real – that somehow changes the nature of community overnight. “In smaller groups people are a lot closer. They’re knit together, which is very important if you want to be effective and successful at community life,” Gross said. “If you get too large, you don’t have enough work in common. You don’t have enough things in common, and then you start to become strangers and that close-knit fellowship starts to get lost.” Gross spoke from experience. He had been in Hutterite colonies that had come near to that magic number and seen firsthand how things had changed. “What happens when you get that big is that the group starts, just on its own, to form a sort of clan.” He made a gesture with his hands, as if to demonstrate division. “You get two or three groups within the larger group. That is something you really try to prevent, and when it happens it is a good time to branch out.”

3.

We have seen, in this book, how a number of relatively minor changes in our external environment can have a dramatic effect on how we behave and who we are. Clean up graffiti and all of a sudden people who would otherwise commit crimes suddenly don’t. Tell a seminarian that he has to hurry and all of a sudden he starts to ignore bystanders in obvious distress. The Rule of 150 suggests that the size of a group is another one of those subtle contextual factors that can make a big difference. In the case of the Hutterites, people who are willing to go along with the group, who can be easily infected with the community ethos below the level of 150, somehow, suddenly – with just

the smallest change in the size of the community – become divided and alienated. Once that line, that Tipping Point, is crossed, they begin to behave very differently.

The Rule of 150 says that congregants of a rapidly expanding church, or the members of a social club, or anyone in a group activity banking on the epidemic spread of shared ideals needs to be particularly cognizant of the perils of bigness. Crossing the 150 line is a small change that can make a big difference.

Gore is the company that makes the water-resistant Gore-Tex fabric. At Gore there are no titles. If you ask people who work there for their card, it will just say their name and underneath it the word “Associate.” People don’t have bosses, they have sponsors – mentors – who watch out for their interests. There are no organization charts, no budgets, no elaborate strategic plans. Salaries are determined collectively. Headquarters for the company is a low-slung, unpretentious red brick building. The “executive” offices are small, plainly furnished rooms, along a narrow corridor. The corners of Gore buildings tend to be conference rooms or free space, so that no one can be said to have a more prestigious office.

Gore is, in short, a very unusual company with a clear and well-articulated philosophy. How did they do that? By (among other things) adhering to the Rule of 150.

“We found again and again that things get clumsy at a hundred and fifty,” Wilbert “Bill” Gore told an interviewer some years ago, so 150 employees per plant became the company goal.

The kind of bond that Dunbar describes in small groups is essentially a kind of peer pressure: it’s knowing people well enough that what they think of you matters. He said, remember, that the company is the basic unit of military organization because, in a group under 150, “orders can be implemented and unruly behavior controlled on the basis of personal loyalties and direct man-to-man contacts.” Gore doesn’t need formal management structures in its small plants – it doesn’t need the usual layers of middle and upper management – because in groups that small, informal personal relationships are more effective. “This is what you get when you have small teams, where everybody knows everybody. Peer pressure is much more powerful than a concept of a boss. People want to live up to what is expected of them,” said Jim Buckley, a longtime associate of the firm.

What Buckley is referring to here is the benefit of unity, of having everyone in a complex enterprise share a common relationship. This is what University of Virginia psychologist Daniel Wegner calls “transactive memory.” When we talk about memory, we aren’t just talking about ideas and impressions and facts stored inside our heads. An awful lot of what we remember is actually stored outside our brains. Most of us deliberately don’t memorize most of the phone numbers we need. But we do memorize where to find them – in a phone book, or in our personal Rolodex. Or we memorize the number 411, so we can call directory assistance. Perhaps most important, though, we store information with other people. Couples do this automatically. Wegner argues that when people know each other well, they create an implicit joint memory system – a transactive memory system – which is based on an understanding about who is best suited to remember what kinds of things. “Relationship development is often understood

as a process of mutual self-disclosure,” he writes. Transactive memory is part of what intimacy means.

In a family, this process of memory sharing is even more pronounced. Most of us remember, at one time, only a fraction of the day-to-day details and histories of our family life. Be we know, implicitly, where to go to find the answers to our questions – whether it is up to our spouse to remember where we put our keys or our thirteen-year-old to find out how to work the computer or our mother to find out details of our childhood. Perhaps more important, when new information arises, we know who should have responsibility for storing it. This is how, in a family, expertise emerges. The Thirteen-year-old is the family expert on the computer not just because he has the greatest aptitude for electronic equipment or because he uses computers the most, but also because when new information about the family computer arises, he is the one assigned, automatically, to remember it. Expertise leads to more expertise. Why bother remembering how to install software if your son, close at hand, can do it for you? Since mental energy is limited, we concentrate on what we do best. Women tend to be the “experts” in child care, even in modern, dual-career families, because their initial greater involvement in raising a baby leads them to be relied on more than the man in storing child-care information, and then that initial expertise leads them to be relied on even more for child-care matters, until –often unintentionally – the woman shoulders the bulk of the intellectual responsibility for the child. “When each person has group-acknowledged responsibility for particular tasks and facts, greater efficiency is inevitable,” Wegner says. “Each domain is handled by the fewest capable of doing so, and responsibility for the domains is continuous over time rather than intermittently assigned by circumstance.”

It’s knowing someone well enough to know what they know, and knowing them well enough so that you can trust them to know things in their specialty. It’s the re-creation, on an organization-wide level, of the kind of intimacy and trust that exists in a family.

“One of the immediate reactions we get when we talk to people is ‘Man, your system sounds chaotic. How in the devil can you do anything with no obvious authority?’ But it’s not chaos. It isn’t a problem,” Burt Chase said. “It’s hard to appreciate that unless you are working in it. It’s the advantage of understanding people’s strengths. It’s knowing – where can I get my best advice? And if you have some knowledge about people, you can do that.”

In order to be unified – in order to spread a specific, company ideology to all of its employees – Gore had to break itself up into semi-autonomous small pieces. That is the paradox of the epidemic: that in order to create one contagious movement, you often have to create many small movements first.

Chapter Six **Case Study** **Rumors, Sneakers, and the Power of Translation**

In everyday life, however, the problems and situations we face don’t always embody the principles of epidemics so neatly. In this section of the book, I’d like to look

at less straight-forward problems, and see how the idea of Mavens and Connectors and Stickiness and Context – either singly or in combination – helps to explain them.

Why, for example did Airwalk tip? The short answer is that Lambesis came up with an inspired advertising campaign.

The ads were entirely visual, designed to appeal to youth all over the world. They were rich in detail and visually arresting. They all featured a truculent, slightly geeky anti-hero. And they were funny, in a sophisticated way. Airwalk tipped because its advertising was founded very explicitly on the principles of epidemic transmission.

1.

Perhaps the best way to understand what Lambesis did is to go back to what sociologists call the diffusion model, which is a detailed, academic way of looking at how a contagious idea or product or innovation moves through a population. Of the 259 farmers studied by Ryan and Gross, only a handful had started planting the new seed by 1932 and 1933. In 1934, 16 took the plunge. In 1935, 21 followed, then 36, and the year after that a whopping 61 and then 46, 36, 14, and 3, until by 1941, all but two of the 259 farmers studied were using the new seeds. In the language of diffusion research, the handful of farmers who started trying hybrid seed at the very beginning of the 1930s were the Innovators, the adventurous ones. The slightly larger group who were infected by them were the Early Adopters. They were the opinion leaders in the community, the respected, thoughtful people who watched and analyzed what those wild Innovators were doing and then followed suit. Then came the big bulge of farmers in 1936, 1937, and 1938, the Early Majority and the Late Majority, the deliberate and the skeptical mass, who would never try anything until the most respected of farmers had tried it first. They caught the seed virus and passed it on, finally, to the Laggards, the most traditional of all, who see no urgent reason to change.

The message here – new seeds – was highly contagious and powerfully sticky.

The first two groups – the Innovators and Early Adopters – are visionaries. They want revolutionary change, something that sets them apart qualitatively from their competitors. They are the people who buy brand-new technology, before it's been perfected or proved or before the price has come down. They have small companies. They are just starting out. They are willing to take enormous risks. The Early Majority, by contrast, are big companies. They have to worry about any change fitting into their complex arrangement of suppliers and distributors. "If the goal of visionaries is to make a quantum leap forward, the goal of pragmatists is to make a percentage improvement – incremental, measurable, predictable progress," Moore writes. "The word risk is a negative word in their vocabulary – it does not connote opportunity or excitement but rather the chance to waste money and time. They will undertake risks when required, but they first will put in place safety nets and manage the risks very closely."

Moore's argument is that the attitude of the Early Adopters and the attitude of the Early Majority are fundamentally incompatible. Innovations don't just slide effortlessly from one group to the next. There is a chasm between them.

Most of us in the Early and Late Majority don't want to make a revolutionary statement or take risks with fashion at all.

This is where, I think, Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen play their most important role. In the chapter on the Law of the Few, I talked about how their special social gifts can cause epidemics to tip. Here, through, it is possible to be much more specific about what they do. They are the ones who make it possible for innovations to overcome this problem of the chasm. They are translators: they take ideas and information from a highly specialized world and translate them into a language the rest of us can understand. The Innovators try something new. Then someone – the teen equivalent of a Maven or a Connector or a Salesman – sees it and adopts it. “Those kids make things more palatable for mainstream people. They see what the really wired kids are doing and they tweak it. They start doing it themselves, but they change it a bit. They make it more usable. They look at it and say, it’s a little off. But there’s a way I can change it and make it okay. Then it takes off.

Psychologists have found that this process of distortion is nearly universal in the spread of rumors. Memory experiments have been done in which subjects are given a story to read or a picture to look at and then asked to return, at intervals of several months, and reproduce what they had been shown. Invariably significant leveling occurs. All but a few details are dropped. But certain details are also, simultaneously, sharpened. In one classic example, subjects were given a drawing of a hexagon bisected by three lines with seven equal-size circles superimposed on top of it. What one typical subject remembered, several months later, was a square bisected by two lines with 38 small circles arrayed around the fringes of the diagram. “There was a marked tendency for any picture or story to gravitate in memory toward what was familiar to the subject in his own life, consonant with his own culture, and above all, to what had some special emotional significance for him,” Allport writes. “In their effort after meaning, the subjects would condense or fill in so as to achieve a better ‘Gestalt,’ a better closure – a simpler, more significant configuration.”

This is what is meant by translation. What Mavens and Connectors and Salesmen do to an idea in order to make it contagious is to alter it in such a way that extraneous details are dropped and others are exaggerated so that the message itself comes to acquire a deeper meaning. If anyone wants to start an epidemic, then – whether it is of shoes or behavior or a piece of software – he or she has to somehow employ Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen in this very way: he or she has to find some person or some means to translate the message of the Innovators into something the rest of us can understand.

3.

Lambesis, in other words, was piggy-backing on social epidemics, associating Airwalk with each new trend wave that swept through youth culture. “It’s all about timing,” Gordon says. “You follow the trendsetters. You see what they are doing. It takes a year to produce those shoes. By the time the year goes, if your trend is the right trend, it’s going to hit those mainstream people at the right time.”

Gordon says, for example, that when something fails to make it out of the trendsetter community into the mainstream, it’s usually because the idea doesn’t root itself broadly enough in the culture: “There aren’t enough cues. You didn’t see it in music and film and art and fashion. Usually, if something’s going to make it, you’ll see that thread running throughout everything – though what they like on TV, what they want to

invent, what they want to listen to, even the materials they want to wear. They took the cultural cues from the Innovators – cues that the mainstream kids may have seen but not been able to make sense of – and leveled, sharpened, and assimilated them into a more coherent form. They gave those cues a specific meaning that they did not have previously and packaged that new sensibility in the form of a pair of shoes.

4.

Suddenly Airwalk wasn't an Innovator shoe anymore. "We made another critical mistake," Lee Smith, the former president of Airwalk says. "We had a segmentation strategy, where the small, independent core skate shops – the three hundred boutiques around the country who really created us – had a certain product line that was exclusive to them. They didn't want us to be in the mall. So what we did was, we segmented our product. The boutiques were given the technical shoes: different designs, better materials, more padding, different cushioning systems, different rubber compounds, more expensive uppers." We had a special signature model – the Tony Hawk – for skateboarding, which was a lot beefier and more durable. It would retail for about eighty dollars." The shoes Airwalk distributed to Kinney's or Champ's or Foot Locker, meanwhile, were less elaborate and would retail for about \$60. The Innovators always got to wear a different, more exclusive shoe than everyone else. The mainstream customer had the satisfaction of wearing the same brand as the cool kids.

But then, at the height of its success, Airwalk switched strategies. The company stopped giving the specialty shops their own shoes. "That's when the trendsetters started to get a disregard for the brand," says Farmer. "They started to go to their boutiques where they got their cool stuff, and they realized that everyone else could get the very same shoes at J C Penney." Now, all of a sudden, Lambesis was translating the language of mainstream products for the mainstream. The epidemic was over.

"My category manager once asked me what happened," Smith says, "and I told him, you ever see *Forrest Gump*? Stupid is as stupid does. Well, cool is as cool does. Cool brands treat people well, and we didn't. I had personally promised some of those little shops that we would give them special product, then we changed our minds. That was the beginning. In that world, it all works on word of mouth. When we became bigger, that's when we should have paid more attention to the details and kept a good buzz going, so when people said you guys are sellouts, you guys went mainstream, you suck, we could have said, you know what, we don't. We had this little jewel of a brand, and little by little we sold that off into the mainstream, and once we had sold it all" – he paused – "so what? You buy a pair of our shoes. Why would you ever buy another?"

Chapter Seven

Case Study

Suicide, Smoking, and the Search for the Unsticky Cigarette

2.

The kind of contagion Phillips is talking about isn't something rational or even necessarily conscious. It's not like a persuasive argument. It's something much more subtle than that. "When I'm waiting at a traffic light and the light is red, sometimes I wonder whether I should cross and jaywalk," he says. "Then somebody else does it and

so I do too. It's a kind of imitation. I'm getting permission to act from someone sled who is engaging in a deviant act."

Phillip's permission-givers are the functional equivalent of the Salesmen I talked about in chapter 2.

Chapter Eight **Conclusion** **Focus, Test, and Believe**

Not so long ago a nurse by the name of Georgia Sadler began a campaign to increase knowledge and awareness of diabetes and breast cancer in the black community of San Diego. She wanted to create a grassroots movement toward prevention, and so she began setting up seminars in black churches around the city. The results, however, were disappointing. "There'd be maybe two hundred people in church, but we'd get only twenty or so to stay, and the people who were staying were people who already knew a lot about those diseases and just wanted to know more. It was very discouraging." Sadler couldn't get her message to tip outside of that small group.

She realized she needed a new context. "I guess people were tired and hungry after the service," she says. "We all have a busy life. People wanted to get home." She needed a place where women were relaxed, receptive to new ideas, and had the time and opportunity to hear something new. She also needed a new messenger, someone who was a little bit Connector, a little bit Salesman, and a little bit Maven. She needed a new, stickier way of presenting the information. And she needed to make all those changes in such a way that she didn't exceed the very small amount of money she'd cobbled together from various foundations and funding groups. Her solution? Move the campaign from black churches to beauty salons.

"It's a captive audience," Sadler says. "These women may be at a salon for anywhere from two hours to eight hours, if they're having their hair braided." The stylist also enjoys a special relationship with her client. "Once you find someone who can manage your hair, you'll drive a hundred miles to see her. The stylist is your friend. She takes you through your high school graduation, your wedding, your first baby. It's a long-term relationship. It's a trusting relationship. You literally and figuratively let your hair down in a salon." There is something about the profession of stylist, as well, that seems to attract a certain kind of person – someone who communicates easily and well with others, someone with a wide variety of acquaintances. "They're natural conversationalists," Sadler says. "They love talking to you. They tend to be very intuitive, because they have to keep an eye on you and see how you're doing."

Starting epidemics requires concentrating resources on a few key areas. The Law of the Few says that Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen are responsible for starting word-of-mouth epidemics, which means that if you are interested in starting a word-of-mouth epidemic, your resources ought to be solely concentrated on those three groups.

We have trouble estimating dramatic, exponential change. We throw up our hands at a problem phrased in an abstract way, but have no difficulty at solving the same problem rephrased as a social dilemma. All of these things are expressions of the peculiarities of the human mind and heart, a refutation of the notion that the way we

function and communicate and process information is straightforward and transparent. It is not.

The world – much as we want it to – does not accord with our intuition. To make sense of social epidemics, we must first understand that human communication has its own set of very unusual and counterintuitive rules.

What must underlie successful epidemics, in the end, is a bedrock belief that change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus.

Simply by finding and reaching those few special people who hold so much social power, we can shape the course of social epidemics. In the end, Tipping Points are a reaffirmation of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action. Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push – in just the right place – it can be tipped.

Afterword **Tipping Point Lessons from the Real World**

The AIDS epidemic is fundamentally a social phenomenon. It spreads because of the beliefs and social structures and poverty and prejudices and personalities of a community, and sometimes getting caught up in the precise biological characteristics of a virus merely serves as a distraction; we might have halted the spread of AIDS far more effectively just by focusing on those beliefs and social structures and poverty and prejudices and personalities. (my website www.galdwell.com).

One of the things that motivated me to write *The Tipping Point* was the mystery of word of mouth – a phenomenon that everyone seemed to agree was important but no one seemed to know how to define. It is on this subject that readers have talked to me the most over the last year, and on which I have thought the most as well. What is now obvious to me – but was not at the time I wrote *The Tipping Point* – is that we are about to enter the age of word of mouth, and that, paradoxically, all of the sophistication and wizardry and limitless access to information of the New Economy is going to lead us to rely more and more on very primitive kinds of social contacts. Relying on the Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen in our life is the way we deal with the complexity of the modern world. This is a function of many different factors and changes in our society, of which I'd like to talk about three: the rise of isolation, particularly among adolescents; the rise of immunity in communication; and the particularly critical role of the Maven in the modern economy.

Understanding the Age of Isolation

The best analogy to this kind of epidemic is the outbreak of food poisoning that swept through several public schools in Belgium in the summer of 1999. It started when forty-two children in the Belgian town of Bornem became mysteriously ill after drinking Coca-Cola and had to be hospitalized. At seventeen parts of sulfides per billion, the Coke simply imparts a bad smell – like rotten eggs – which means that Belgium should have experienced nothing more than a minor epidemic of nose wrinkling. More puzzling is the fact that, in four of the five schools where the bad Coke allegedly caused illness, half the

kids who got sick hadn't actually drunk any Coke that day. It was a kind of mass hysteria, a phenomenon that is not at all uncommon among school-children. Almost all cases fit a pattern. Someone sees a neighbor fall ill and becomes convinced that he is being contaminated by some unseen evil – in the past it was demons and spirits; nowadays it tends to be toxins and gases – and his fear makes him anxious. His anxiety makes him dizzy and nauseated. He begins to hyperventilate. He collapses. They are manifestations of a threat that is wholly imagined.

Ritualized, dramatic, self-destructive behavior among teenagers has extraordinary contagious power.

My sense is that the way adolescent society has evolved in recent years has increased the potential for this kind of isolation. We have given teens more money, so they can construct their own social and material worlds more easily. We have given them more time to spend among themselves – and less time in the company of adults. We have given them e-mail and beepers and, most of all, cellular phones, so that they can fill in all the dead spots in their day – dead spots that might once have been filled with the voices of adults – with the voices of their peers.

Beware the Rise of Immunity

The conventional “icons of wealth” – diamonds, gold – are precious because they are rare. But the logic of the network is exactly the opposite. Power and value now come from abundance. The more copies you make of your software, the more people you add to your network, the more powerful it becomes.

When people are overwhelmed with information and develop immunity to traditional forms of communication, they turn instead for advice and information to the people in their lives whom they respect, admire, and trust. The cure for immunity is finding Mavens, Connectors, and Salesmen.

Finding the Mavens

The Ivory soap 800 number is what I call a Maven trap – a way of efficiently figuring out who the Mavens are in a particular world – and how to set Maven traps is one of the central problems facing the modern marketplace. Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen are a little different. They are distinguished not by worldly status and achievement, but by the particular standing they have among their friends. People look up to them not out of envy, but out of love, which is why these kinds of personalities have the power to break through the rising tide of isolation and immunity. But love is a very difficult thing to track. How on earth do you find these kinds of people?

Connectors, I think, are the sorts of people who don't need to be found. They make it their business to find *you*. But Mavens are a little harder, which is why it is so important, I think, to come up with strategies for find Mavens – Maven traps.

In a world dominated by isolation and immunity, understanding these principles of world of mouth is more important than ever.