

# What Makes a Personality Scary?

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I've noticed recently that I sometimes find myself a little afraid of people's personalities. It's kind of a weird experience: it makes sense to be afraid of people and other things that can hurt you, but being afraid of a *personality*? It doesn't make a lot of sense. Personalities can seem quirky or interesting, but scary?

At first, I thought this was simply an odd personal tic, since you don't exactly hear anyone else talking about it. But on reflection, you sometimes do. Imagine a movie, the heroine character learning about some shocking evil deed the brave male lead has committed. "I don't even know who you are anymore," she sobs. "You're starting to scare me."

What's frightening, it would seem, is that people aren't the way we expected. They seemed to be brave and kind-hearted, but when the moment was right they were capable of being crafty and manipulative. We're shocked, at first, because it's not what we expected. "But he seemed so nice... How could he do that?" Then we're upset, because at some level it seems like dishonesty. "He made me think he was a good person, yet he's capable of so much bad." And finally, we're scared, because if we were wrong about him, then our view of the world seems a little bit off.<sup>1</sup>

Having the world be off is frightening. I remember once I found myself at Caltrain's Milbrae station late at night. Milbrae is a huge new station, a sprawling complex complete with a subway, 10 bus stops, a train, and a huge parking garage. There's nothing really around it for quite a bit and it's all open-air, with the cold night air chilling me in my shirt, as I was transferring between the subway and the train. On the way to the train tracks, I checked the schedule. The next train was at 10:47 it said; it was 10:40, so I hurried downstairs to wait for the train. I sat down and got out my book, waiting, and waiting, while the train never came. I checked the clock — it was past 10:47, well past. So I checked the downstairs schedule. There was no 10:47 train. I ran upstairs to see if the schedule I'd read was simply out-of-date. It had no 10:47 train either, nothing even close. I was certain I had read it saying 10:47 — the memory was clear in my mind, and I'd followed the line with my finger to make sure I had the right station.

I suddenly got quite scared. What was going on? Was I in a dream? Was someone sneaking around the schedules on me? Was I the victim of some practical joke? The fabric of my reality was being torn — something clearly impossible had happened: a time had disappeared off a train schedule. Things weren't working the way I expected.

I later figured out, of course, that nothing so devious had happened. In my hurry to catch the subway, I'd read the wrong side of the schedule — the train was at 10:47am, not 10:47pm, and when I went back to look for the time I looked at the right side of the schedule and, naturally, the train wasn't there. But my larger point is that tears in the way we think things work are scary. If things are this bad when a piece of paper doesn't say what we expect, it's not surprising that it's worse when people we know don't behave the way we thought.

I say we here, but as I mentioned at the start, I seem to be a bit alone on this. One possibility is that I'm hypersensitive to such emotions. Other people might simply feel a prick at such a scheduling anomaly, but I feel it as full-blown fear. Another (more flattering) possibility is that I'm more perceptive about people than others; since others don't notice the duplicity, they don't feel the associated fear.

The latter makes some sense to me, as the things that make me scared of people are often very subtle, and others don't seem to recognize them at all, even when I ask them about it specifically. Even I can't quite put my finger on what it is sometime, it's just a subtle signal that the person isn't being straight with you, that what they're saying sounds honest and friendly, but is actually manipulative. It's not a pleasant feeling.

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1. In talking about this sequence of emotions (shocked, upset, scared), I'm referring to a logical progression, not an actual one. I don't really feel all of these things in order upon seeing someone scary, just the last. But the other emotions are what gets you to the last.