

To be afflicted with a case of muddled thinking is disconcerting for the confusion it engenders. Yet it may happen to any of us one time or another, including people who have trained themselves to listen carefully and read closely. The affliction swept over me last week, causing days of anxiety and nights of insomnia that culminated in an email to my newspaper editor and others.

I watch television rarely, if ever, and I delete unread emails from political parties or their affiliates. The radio gets flipped off when it bleeps election-year blather. I do consider the opinions of analysts I respect. One of these is Dustin Bleizeffer, Editor-in-Chief of the online WyoFile. Then I talk with my cousin in Germany, where political ads are unknown and television programs proceed uninterrupted by commercials. I select readings that clarify an issue, which encourages reasoning and initiates ideas. While digesting the material, I play guitar to myself or weed the garden.

There's good reason I stay away from hyperbole and diatribe. They contaminate the mind. They foster inaction or, worse, ill-conceived action. Oh, I'll skim an introductory paragraph for its message and the concluding script for an unexpected insight, but I'll skip the justification of an argument that showed itself lopsided at inception.

So it was with an article last week that featured a by-line reference to a WyoFile column. Its headline resonated with something from a Bleizeffer essay, yet the article featured finger-pointing, propaganda, and hard-sell proposals. I went back to Dustin's piece and read it again. And again. Something was wrong with the newspaper account, and I studied WyoFile offerings half a dozen times. In the end I concluded that someone had misquoted Dustin and sent off an indignant email.

The editor's response wasn't long in coming. It showed I had failed to read the newspaper piece with attention to detail. My disgust with invective had prompted a premature averting of the gaze. I'd failed to take in the names of its authors and substituted Dustin's.

You should have called me, he fumed. You know very well I give you lots of leeway.

This is true. Every time I've come to him with a question, even when the question involved but a haphazard groping toward an as-yet unformed idea, he has made himself available.

The trouble with thought processes turned obsessive: they keep the thinker from recognizing possibilities perfectly clear to outsiders. They, in turn, become frustrated and alarmed by the individual affected. Only when the individual backtracks and thinks things through is the conflict resolved. Consulting with the editor was, of course, the thing to do; still, it didn't occur to me.

When I'm at an impasse, I try to write myself out of it. Numerous files exist on my computer with notes to myself, anything from summaries of book passages or articles to action items deemed important. Last week, instead of the infamous email I should have written myself a note, "Stop by the editor's office."

Instead I sought refuge in readings that comfort with their clarity of thought and graceful prose. In addition to WyoFile, last week I also engaged with Steve Coll's "Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power," a tome of close to 700 pages, alongside Sandra Steingraber's "Raising Elijah," an inquiry of 330 pages into how we might keep young children from harm "in an Age of Environmental Crisis."

Among other things, the former discloses how Exxon executives routinely impose fossil-fuel spin on otherwise neutral data. For example, projected energy needs by 2030 led to company press releases that aligned increased energy needs with increased fossil-fuel production and consumption.

By contrast, Sandra Steingraber on page 328 quotes from a 2009 article in *Scientific American*: "Recent studies indicate the U. S. and world could rely 100 percent on green energy sources within 20 years if we dedicate ourselves to that course."

If anything, "Raising Elijah" is even more disturbing than "Private Empire": it shows that our children's health is hugely compromised today, not only by the polluting effects of fossil-fuel production and consumption but also through rising temperatures occasioned by global warming. (More on Steingraber's findings on children's unhealth in a later essay.)

Her critique of natural-gas extraction via hydraulic fracturing includes a thoughtful discussion of water contamination in “Pavilion, Wyoming, population 166” before moving on to Colorado via Theo Colborn’s analysis of endocrine disruptors embedded in “fracking” chemicals, published on [www.endocrinedisruption.org](http://www.endocrinedisruption.org). Then she turns to her own state’s beleaguered opposition to the practice, as “Halliburton and Exxon are massing at the border.” She quotes an industry rep to a reporter: “The shale army has arrived. Resistance is futile.”

Resistance is futile. I wonder if a sense of beleagueredness was the impetus behind the newspaper account that drove me to distraction last week; hence, its insistence on blaming others. Unfortunately, the approach precludes any intelligent and compassionate consideration of the problems it raised. The write-up, what I read of it, left me with a sense of futility and despair. Not that that’s any excuse for muddled thinking or the inattentive reading that triggered it.