1. *Primed for Action*

Imagine that I'm a professor, and I've asked you to come and see me in my office. You walk down a long corridor, come through the doorway, and sit down at a table. In front of you is a sheet of paper with a list of five-word sets. I want you to make a grammatical four-word sentence as quickly as possible out of each set. It's called a scrambled-sentence test. Ready?

01 him was worried she always
02 from are Florida oranges temperature

03 ball the throw toss silently
04 shoes give replace old the
05 he observes occasionally people watches
06 be will sweat lonely they
07 sky the seamless gray is
08 should now withdraw forgetful we
09 us bingo sing play let
10 sunlight makes temperature wrinkle raisins

That seemed straightforward, right? Actually it wasn't. After you finished that test — believe it or not — you would have walked out of my office and back down the hall more slowly than you walked in. With that test, I affected the way you behaved. How? Well, look back at the list. Scattered throughout it are certain words, such as "worried," "Florida," "old," "lonely," "gray," "bingo," and "wrinkle." You thought that I was just making you take a language test. But, in fact, what I was also doing was making the big computer in your brain — your adaptive unconscious — think about the state of being old. It didn't inform the rest of your brain about its sudden obsession. But it took all this talk of old age so seriously that by the time you finished and walked down the corridor, you acted old. You walked slowly.

This test was devised by a very clever psychologist named John Bargh. It's an example of what is called a priming experiment, and Bargh and others have done numerous even more fascinating variations of it, all of which show just how much goes on behind that locked door of our unconscious. For example, on one occasion Bargh and two colleagues at New York University, Mark Chen and