To Err is Human:

The Complexity of Security Failures

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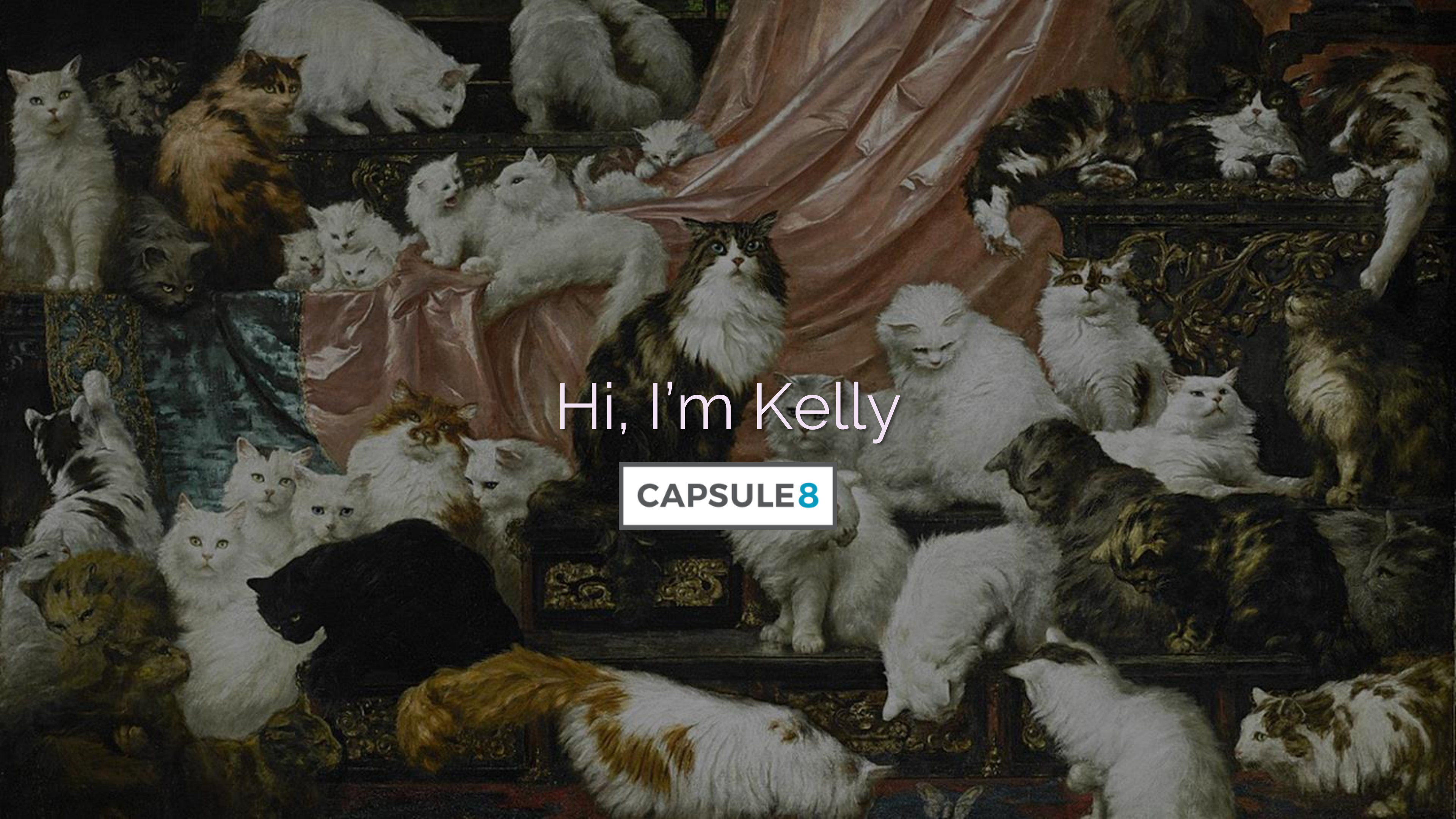
DC Chaos Eng Meetup, April 2020



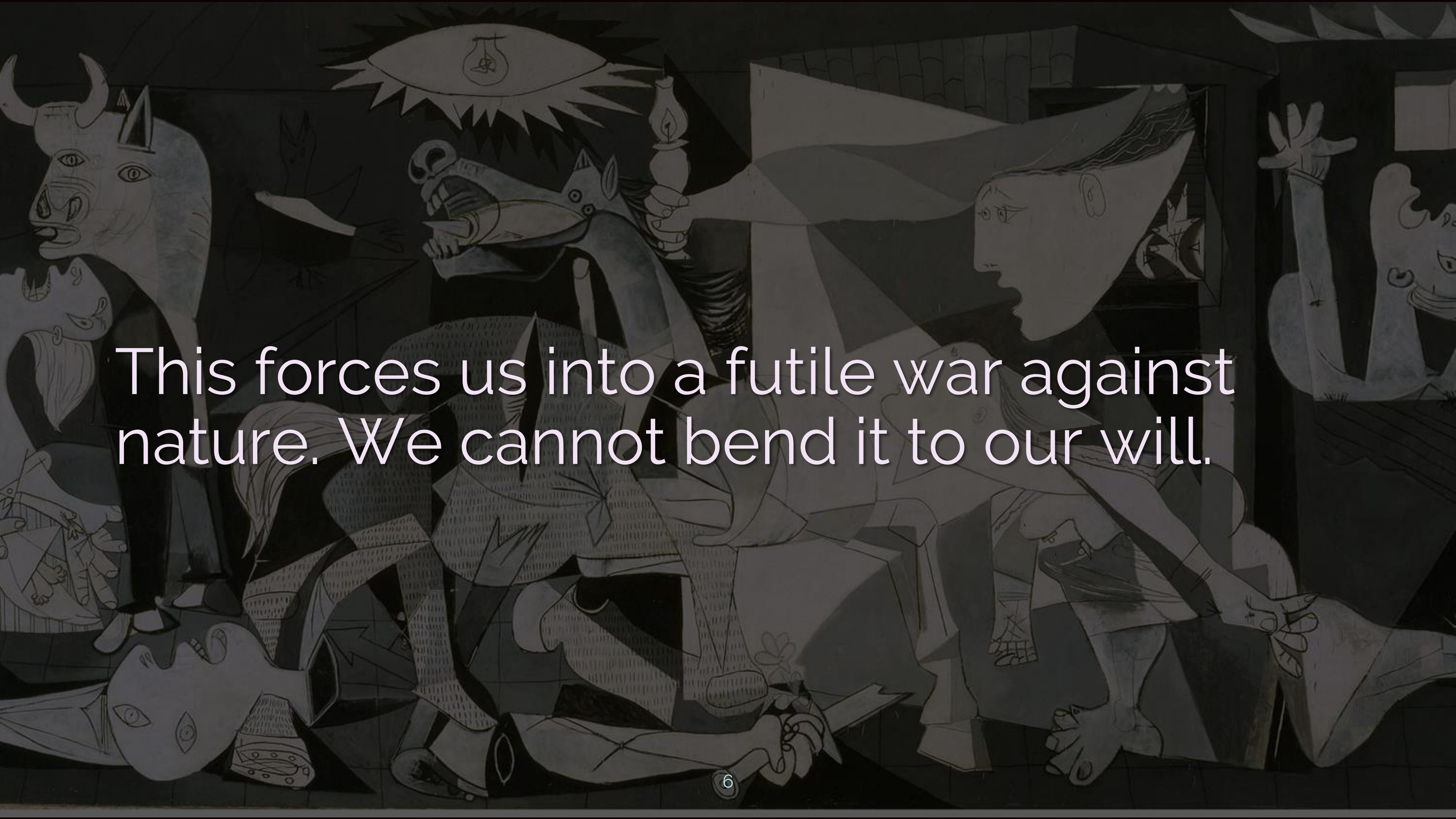
Hi, I'm Kelly

CAPSULE8

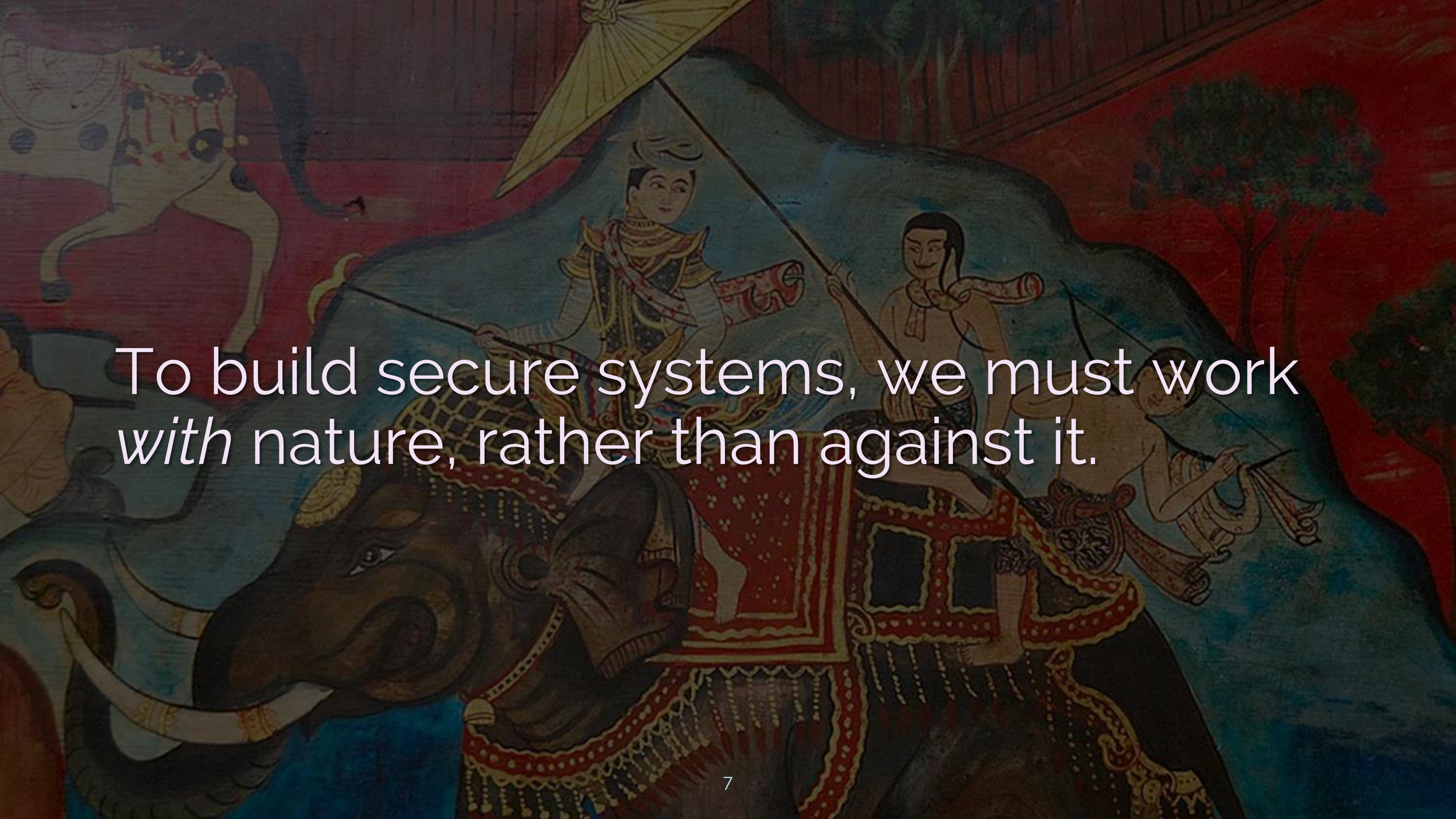
“To err is human; to forgive, divine.”
– Alexander Pope

Humans make mistakes. It’s part of our nature (it’s mostly a feature, not a bug)

Infosec’s mistake: operating as if you can force humans to never err



This forces us into a futile war against nature. We cannot bend it to our will.

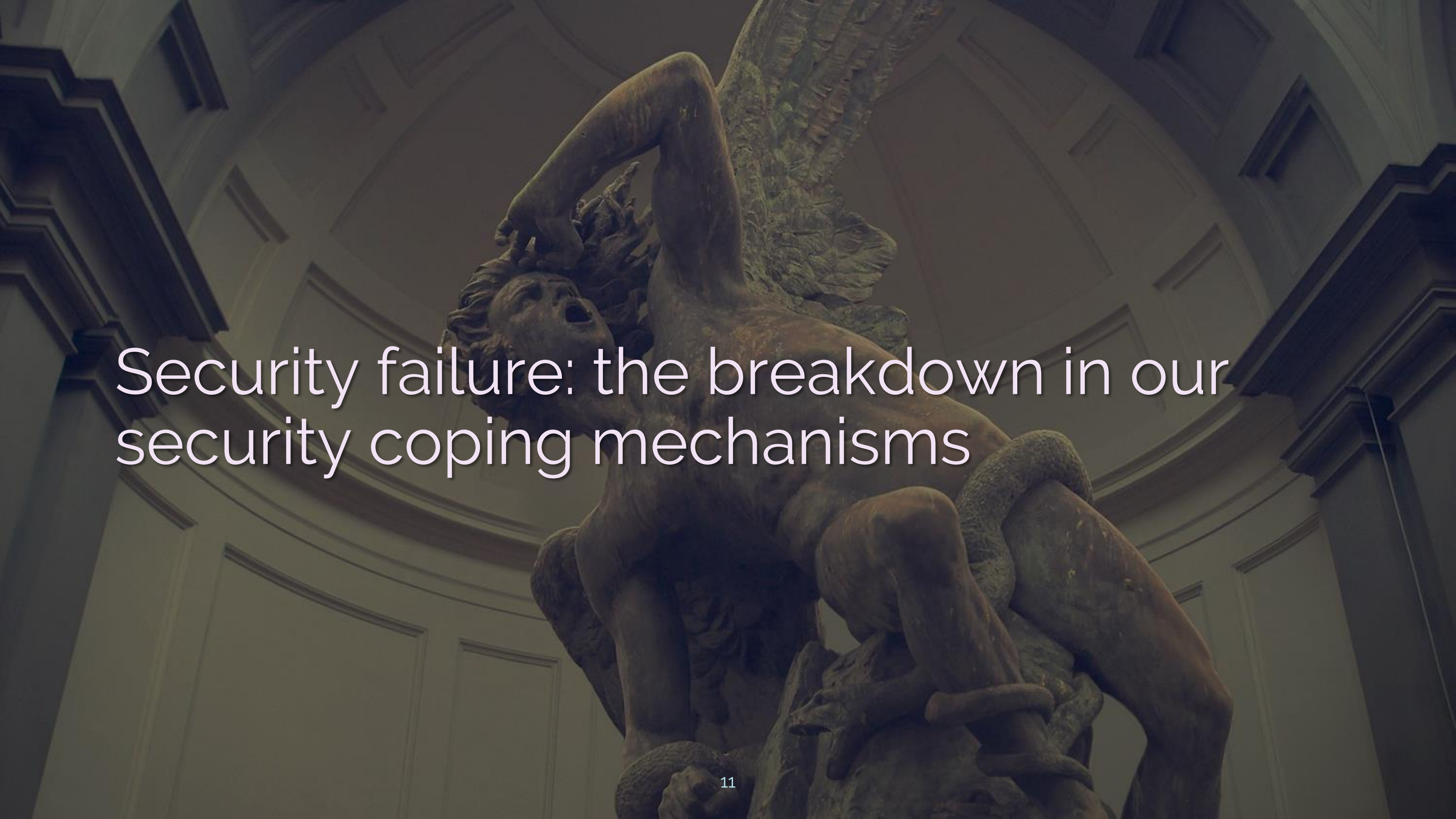


To build secure systems, we must work *with* nature, rather than against it.

1. Clearing the Err
2. Hindsight & Outcome Bias
3. Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms
4. Making Failure Epic

Clearing the Err

Error: an action that leads to failure or that deviates from expected behavior

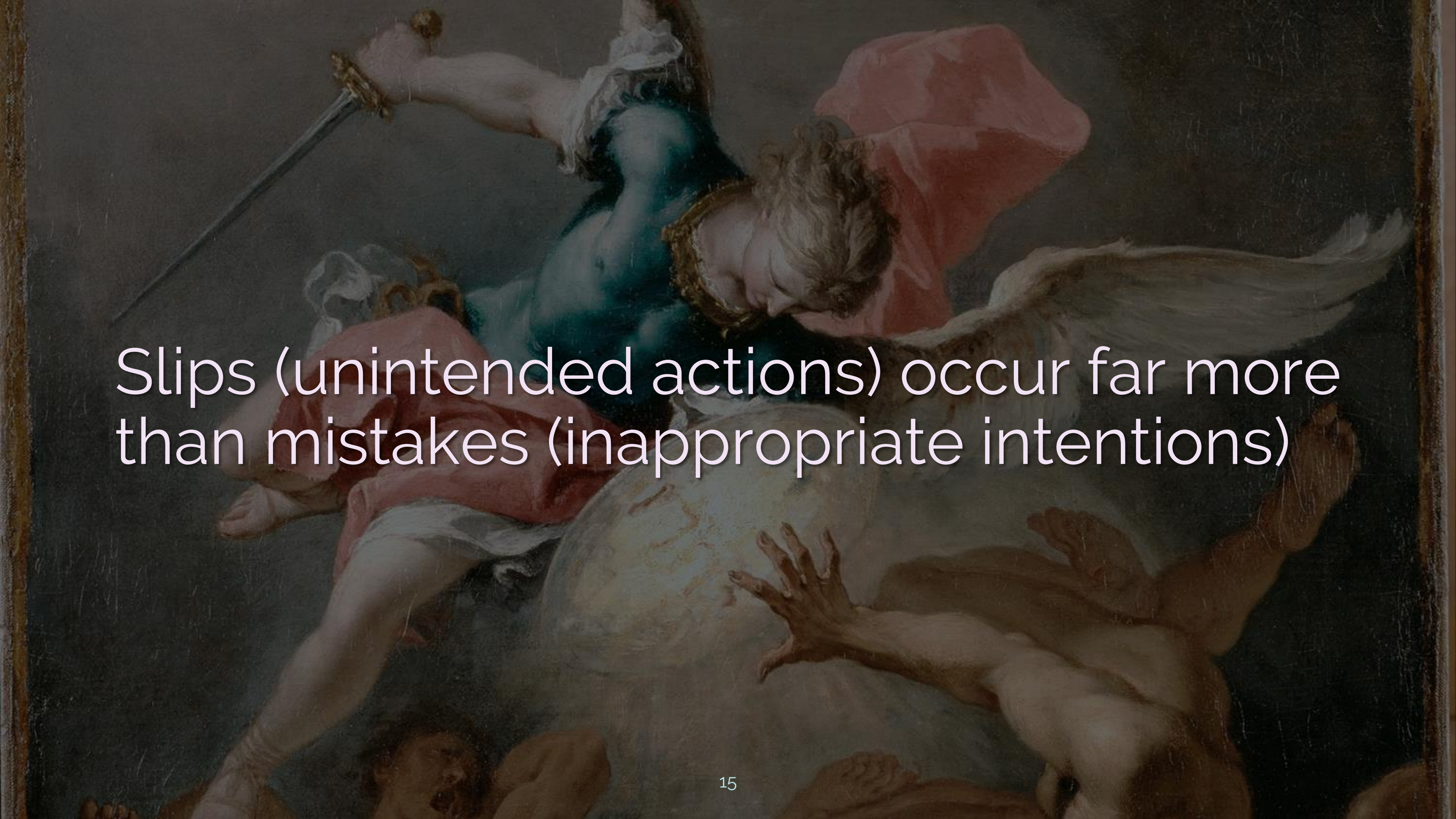


Security failure: the breakdown in our security coping mechanisms

“Human error” involves subjective expectations, including in infosec

Understanding why incidents happened is essential, but blame doesn't help

Aviation, manufacturing, & healthcare are already undergoing this revolution



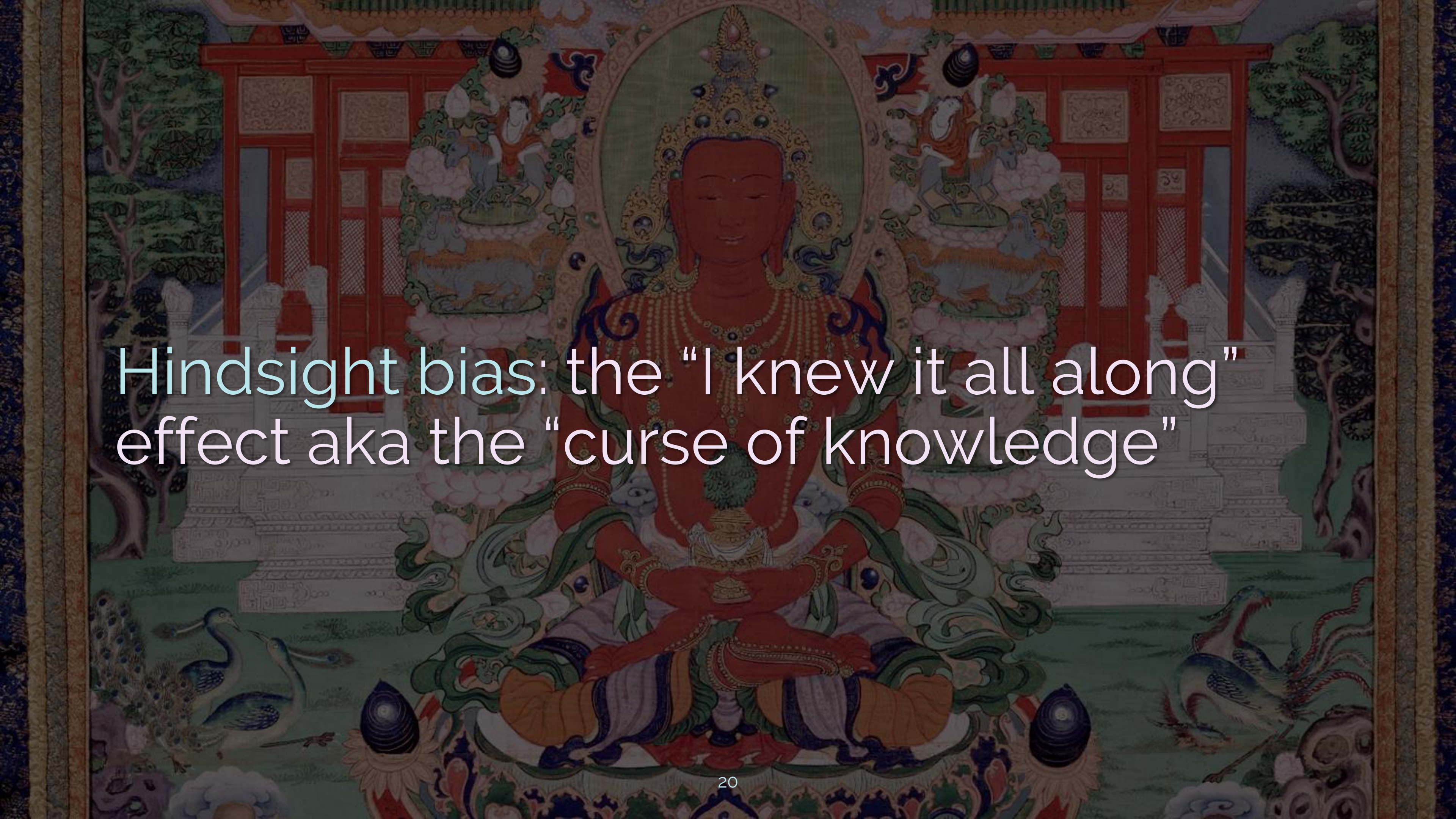
Slips (unintended actions) occur far more than mistakes (inappropriate intentions)

The term “human error” is less grounded to reality than we believe…

Hindsight & Outcome Bias

Cognitive biases represent mental shortcuts that are optimal for evolution

We learn from the past to progress, but our “lizard brain” can take things too far



Hindsight bias: the “I knew it all along” effect aka the “curse of knowledge”

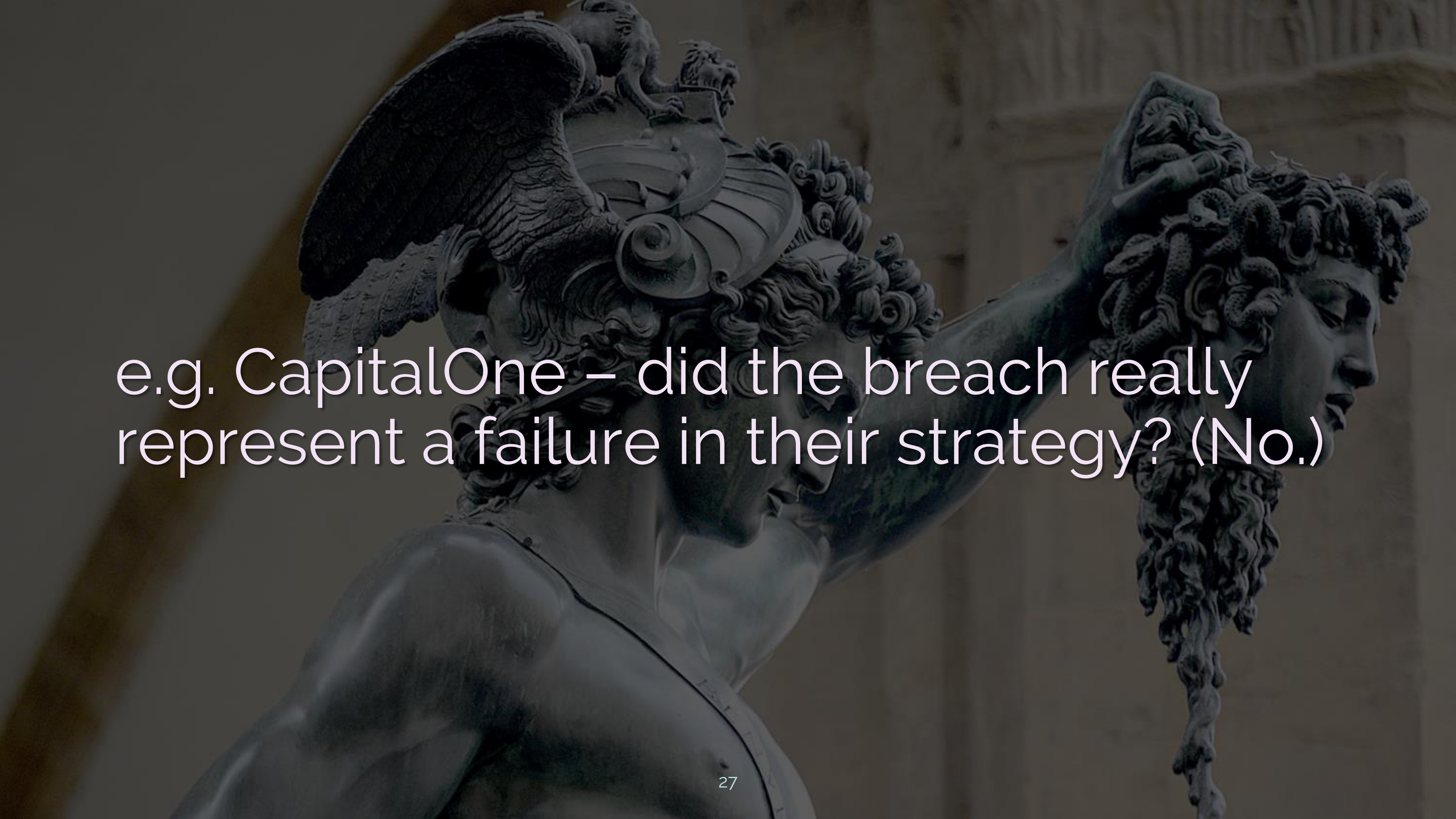
People overestimate their predictive abilities when lacking future knowledge e.g. skepticism of N.K. attribution for the Sony Pictures leak; now it is “obvious”

Outcome bias: judging a decision based on its eventual outcome

Instead, evaluate decisions based on what was known at that time

All decisions involve some level of risk.
Outcomes are largely based on chance.

We unfairly hold people accountable for events beyond their control



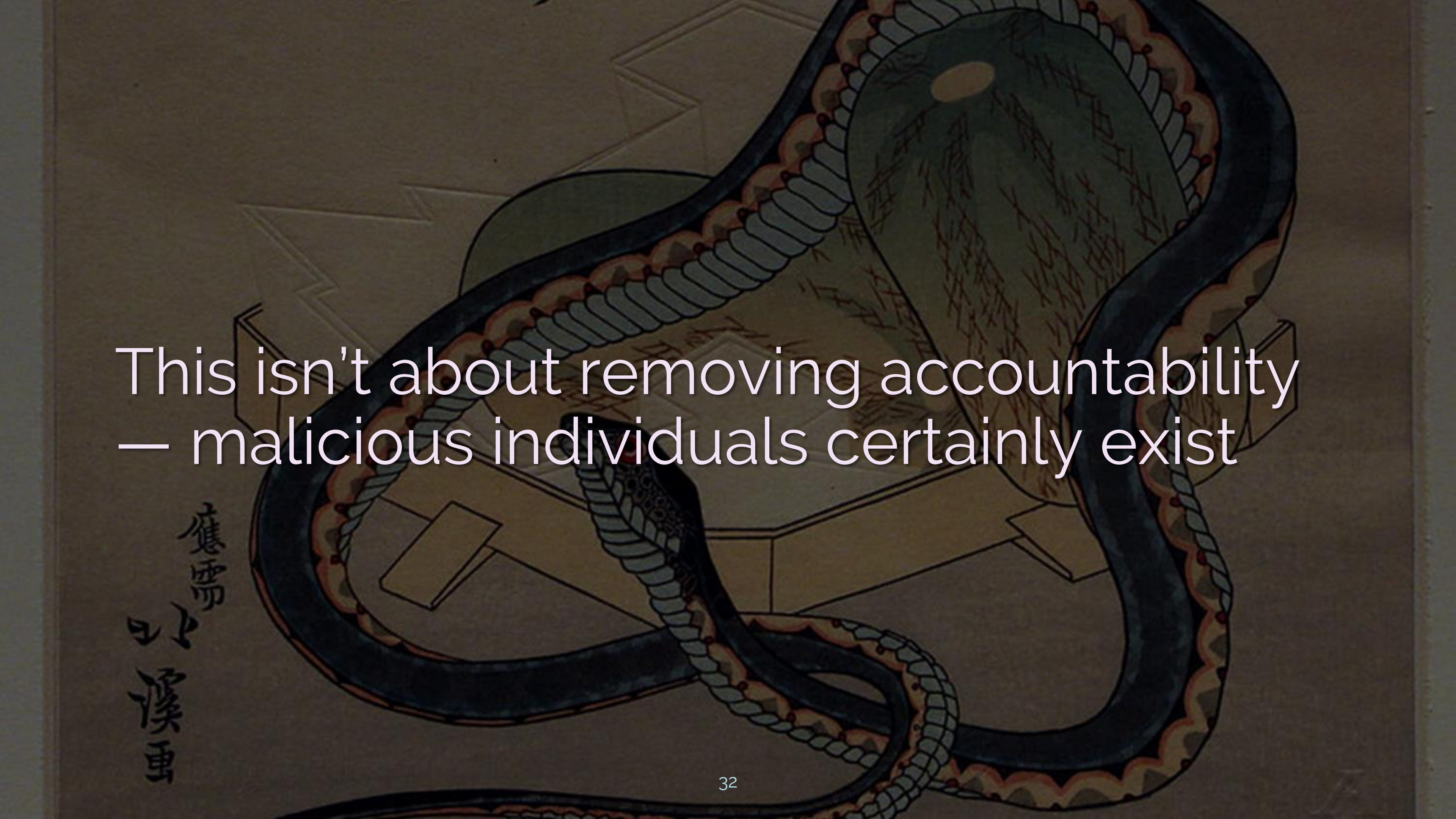
e.g. CapitalOne – did the breach really represent a failure in their strategy? (No.)

These biases change how we cope with failure…

Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms

Unhealthy coping mechanism #1: Blaming “human error”

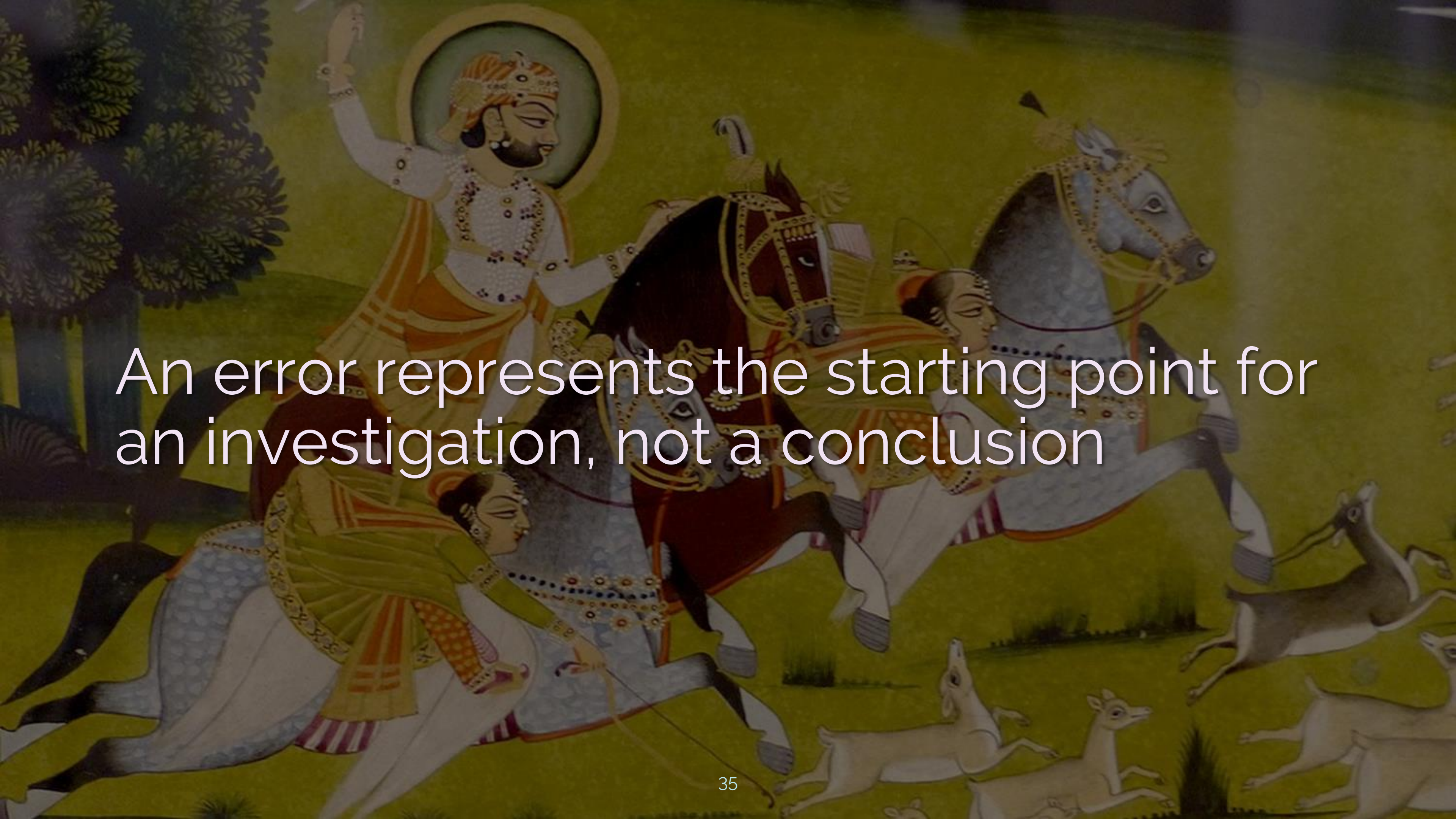
Infosec's fav hobbies: PICNIC & PEBKAC



This isn’t about removing accountability — malicious individuals certainly exist

Fundamental attribution error: your actions reflect innate traits, mine don’t

“You are inattentive, sloppy, & naïve for clicking a link. I was just super busy.”



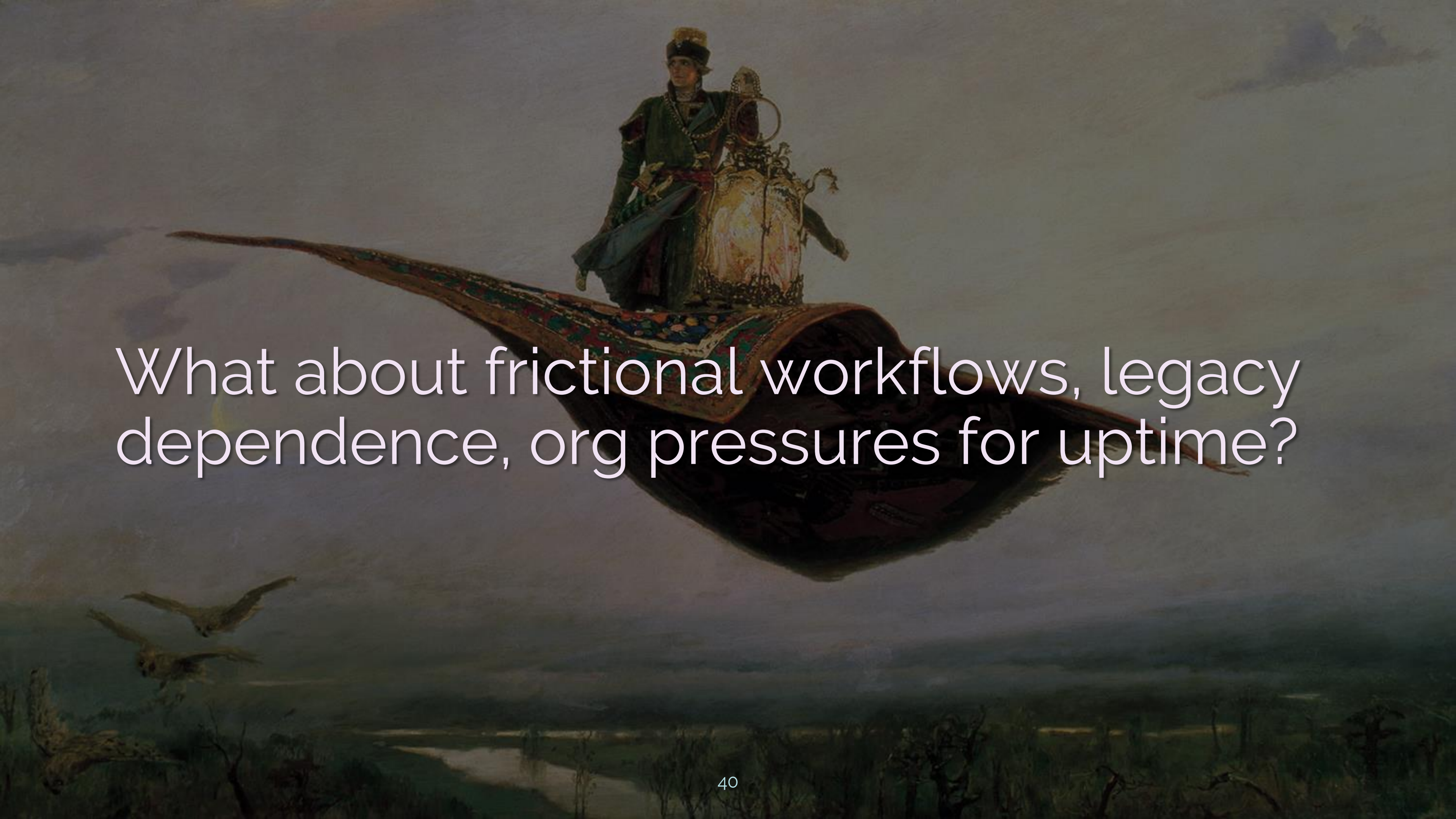
An error represents the starting point for an investigation, not a conclusion

"Why did they click the link?"
"Why did clicking a link lead to pwnage?"

These questions go unanswered if we accept the “human error” explanation

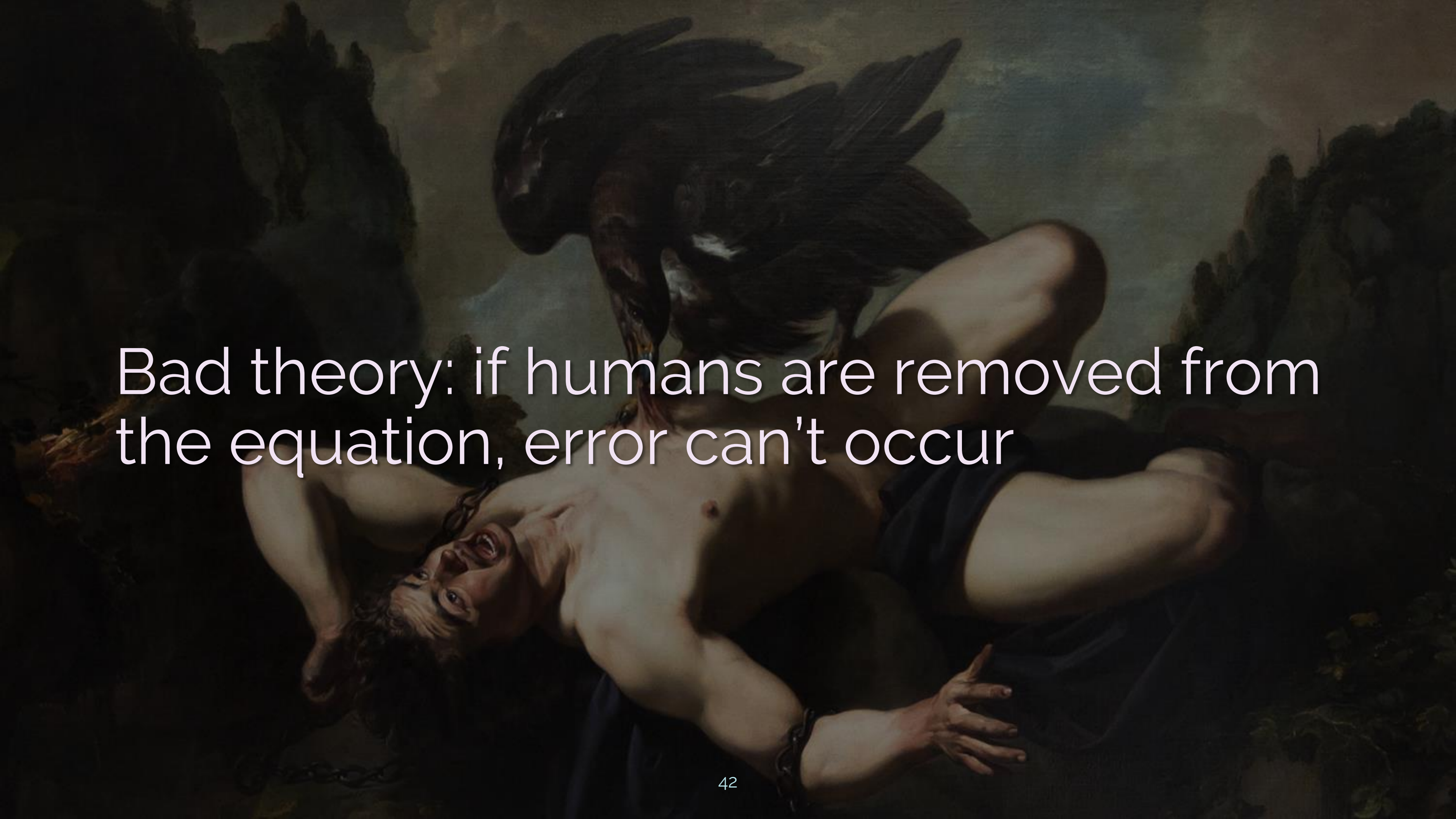
e.g. training devs to “care about security” completely misses the underlying issue

Equifax's ex-CEO blamed "human error" for the breach. He was wrong.



What about frictional workflows, legacy dependence, org pressures for uptime?

90% of breaches cite “human error” as the cause. That stat is basically useless.



Bad theory: if humans are removed from the equation, error can’t occur

Unhealthy coping mechanism #2: Behavioral control

“An approach aimed at the individual is the equivalent of swatting individual mosquitoes rather than draining the swamp to address the source of the problem.”

– Henriksen, et al.

“Policy violation” is a sneaky way to still rely on “human error” as an answer

The cornucopia of security awareness hullabaloo is a direct result of this

Solely restricting human behavior will never improve security outcomes.

We focus on forcing humans to fit our ideal mold vs. re-designing our systems

Formal policies are rarely written by those in the flow of work being policed

Infosec is mostly at the “blunt” end of systems; operators are at the “sharp” end

People tend to blame whomever resides closest to the error

Operator actions “add a final garnish to a lethal brew whose ingredients have already been long in the cooking.”

– James Reason

e.g. Equifax's 48-hour patching policy that was very obviously not followed

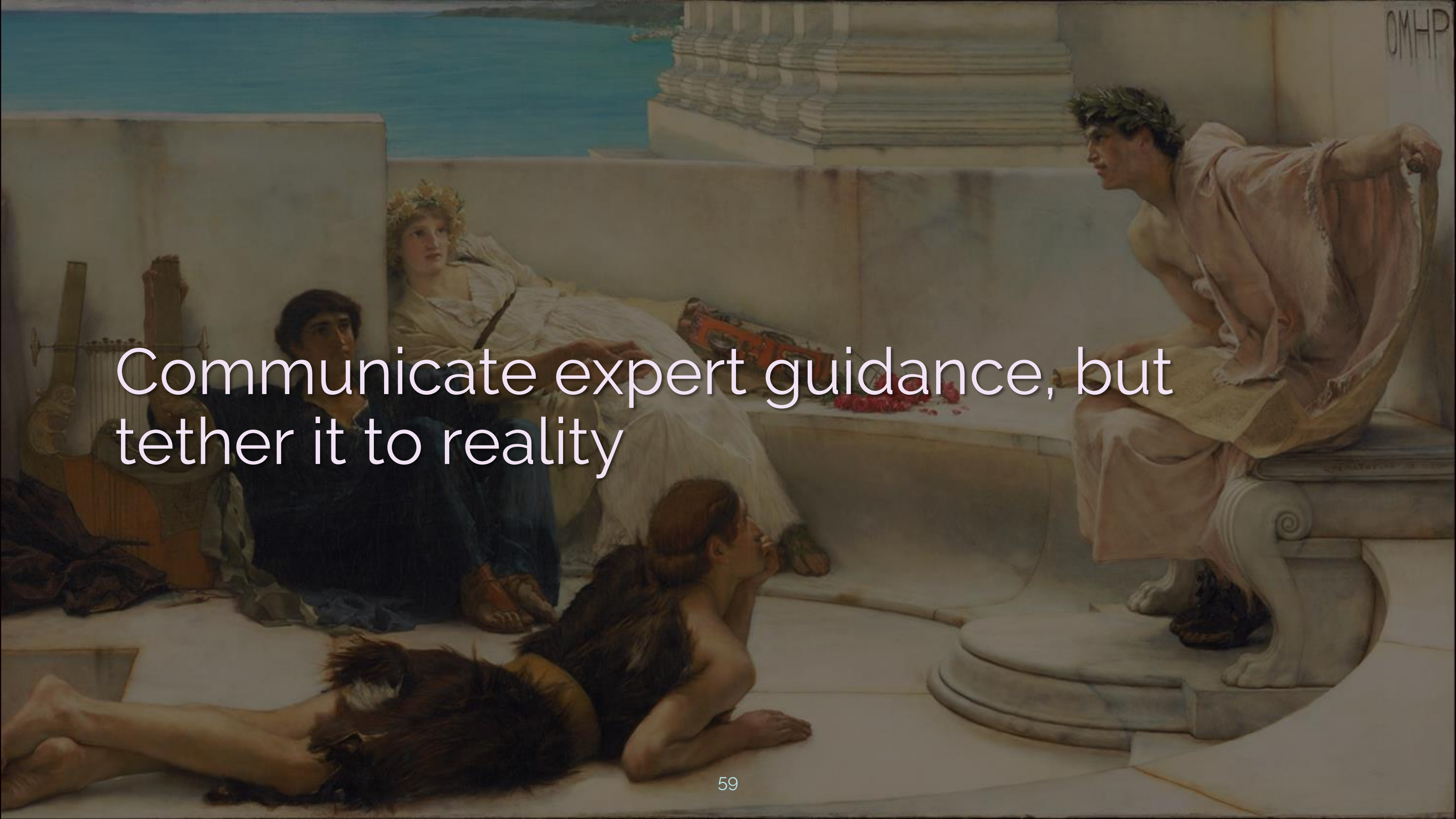
Creating words on a piece of paper & expecting results is… ambitious

Discipline doesn’t actually fix the “policy violation” cause (but it does scapegoat)

Case study: SS&C & BEC

Solely implementing controls to regulate human behavior doesn’t beget resilience

Post-WWII analysis: Improved design of cockpit controls won over pilot training



Communicate expert guidance, but tether it to reality

Checklists can be valuable aids *if* they're based on knowledge of real workflows

Policies must encourage safer contexts, not lord over behavior with an iron fist.

Unhealthy coping mechanism #3: The just-world hypothesis

Attempting to find the ultimate causal seed of failure helps us cope with fear

The just world hypothesis: humans like believing the world is orderly & fair

The fact that the same things can lead to both success & failure isn’t a “just world”

Case Study: The Chernobyl disaster

Errors are really symptoms of pursuing goals while under resource constraints

How can security teams more productively deal with security failures?

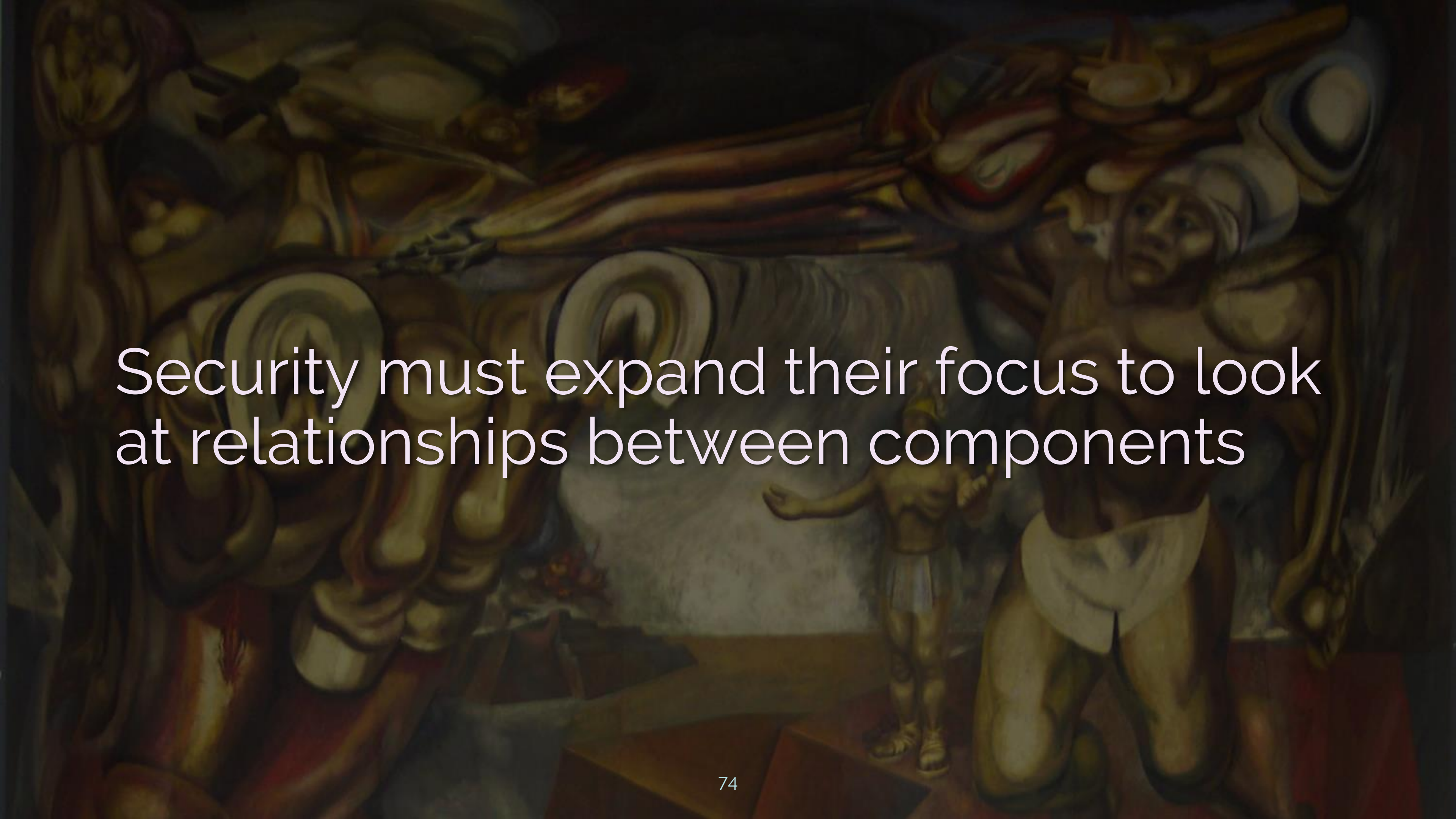
Making Failure Epic

Infosec will progress when we ensure the easy way is the secure way

1. System perspective
2. A spoiler alert…

System perspective

Security failure is never the result of one factor, one vuln, or one dismissed alert

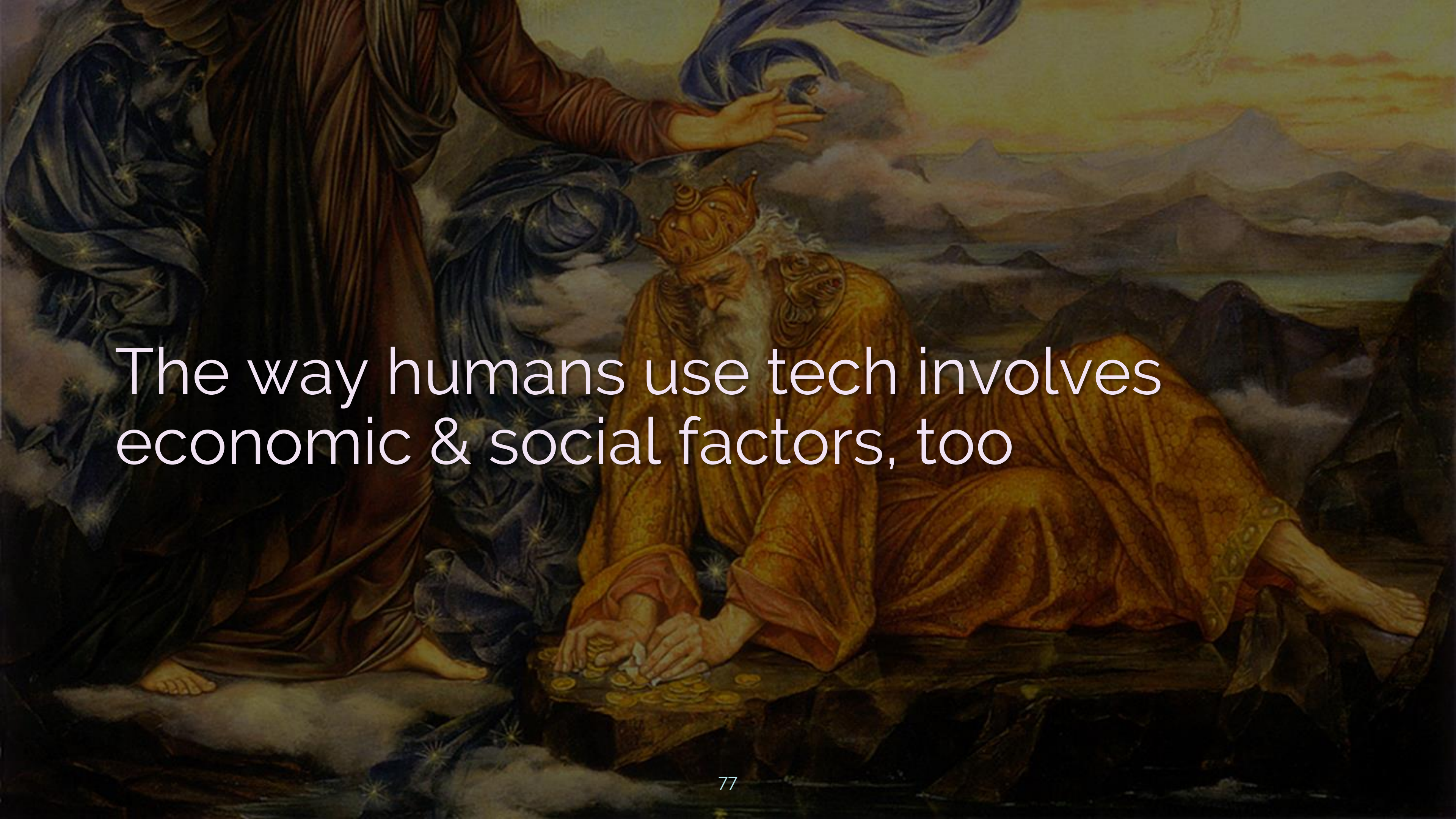


Security must expand their focus to look at relationships between components

A system is "a set of interdependent components interacting to achieve a common specified goal."

"A narrow focus on operator actions, physical component failures, and technology may lead to ignoring some of the most important factors in terms of preventing future accidents"

– Nancy Leveson



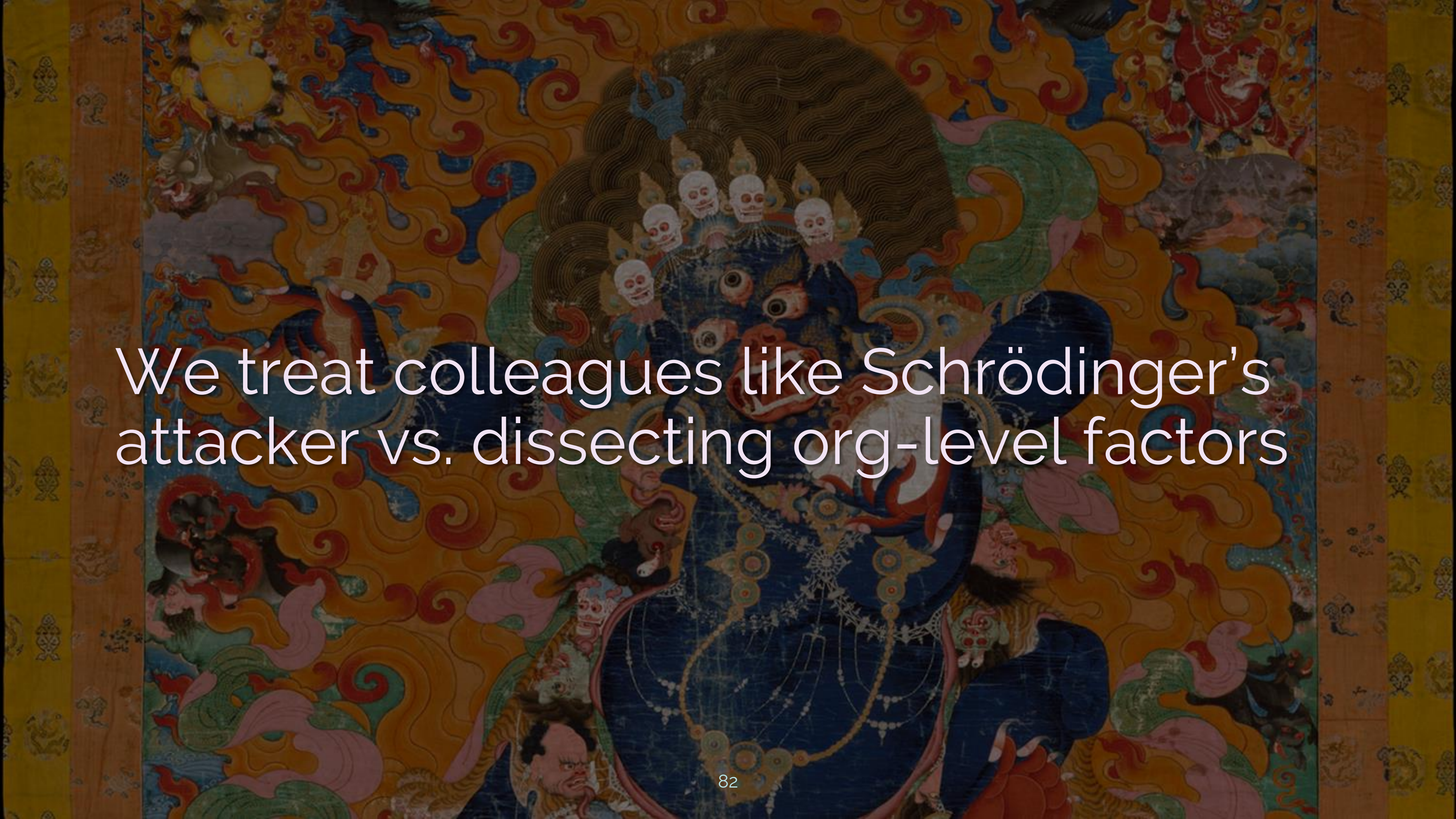
The way humans use tech involves economic & social factors, too

Economic factors: revenue & profit goals, compensation schemes, budgeting, etc.

Social factors: KPIs, expectations, what behavior is rewarded or punished, etc.

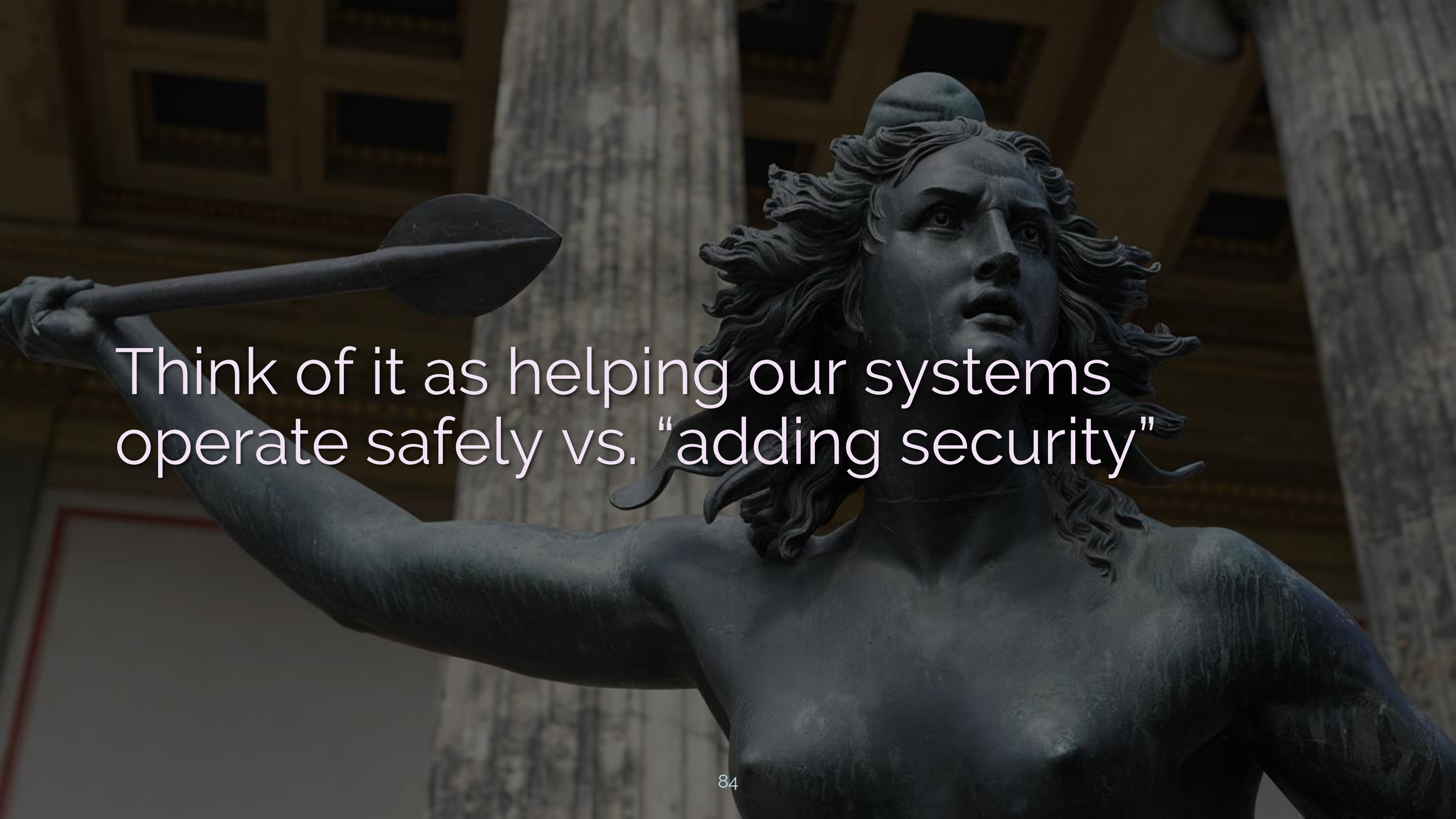
Pressure to do more work, faster is a vulnerability. So is a political culture.

Non-software vulns don’t appear in our threat models, but also erode resilience



We treat colleagues like Schrödinger’s attacker vs. dissecting org-level factors

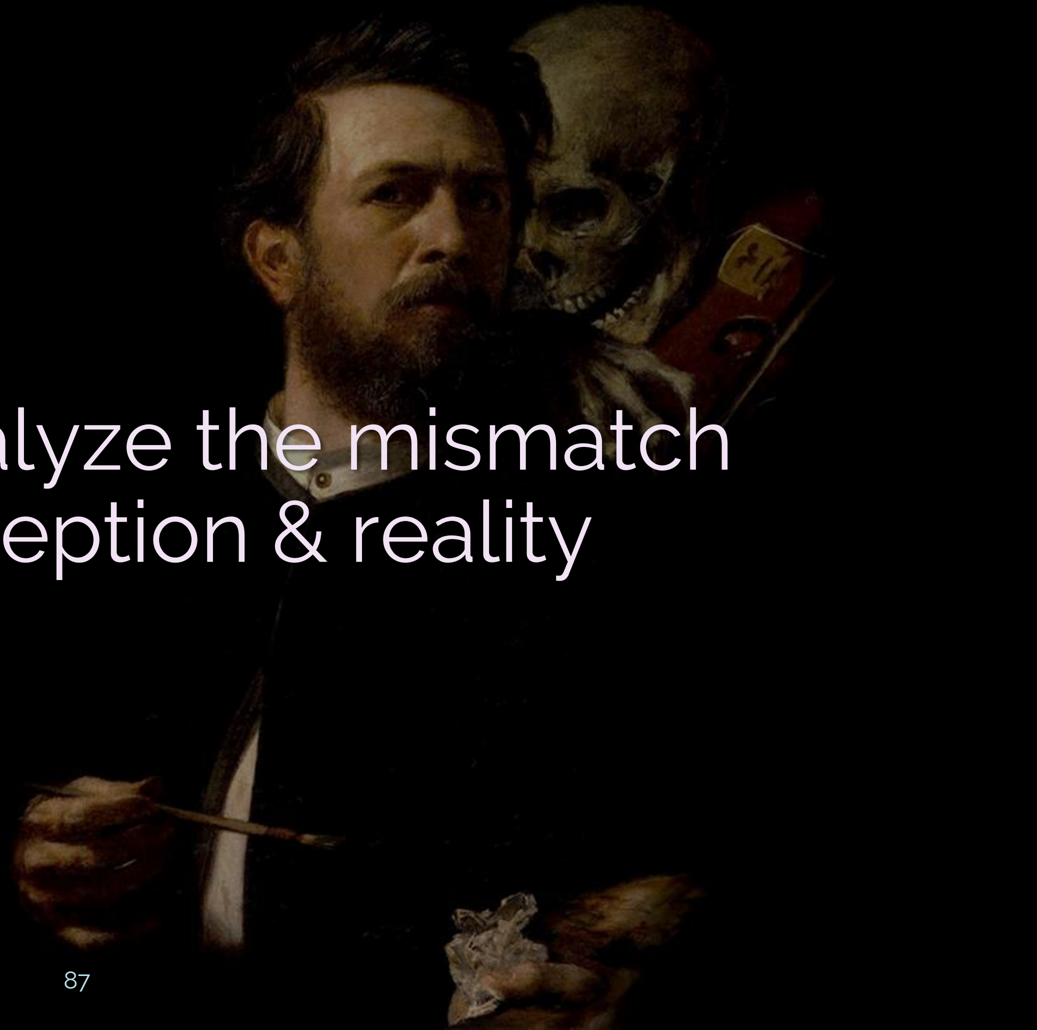
Security is something a system does, not something a system has.



Think of it as helping our systems operate safely vs. “adding security”

Health & “security vanity” metrics don’t say whether systems are *doing* security

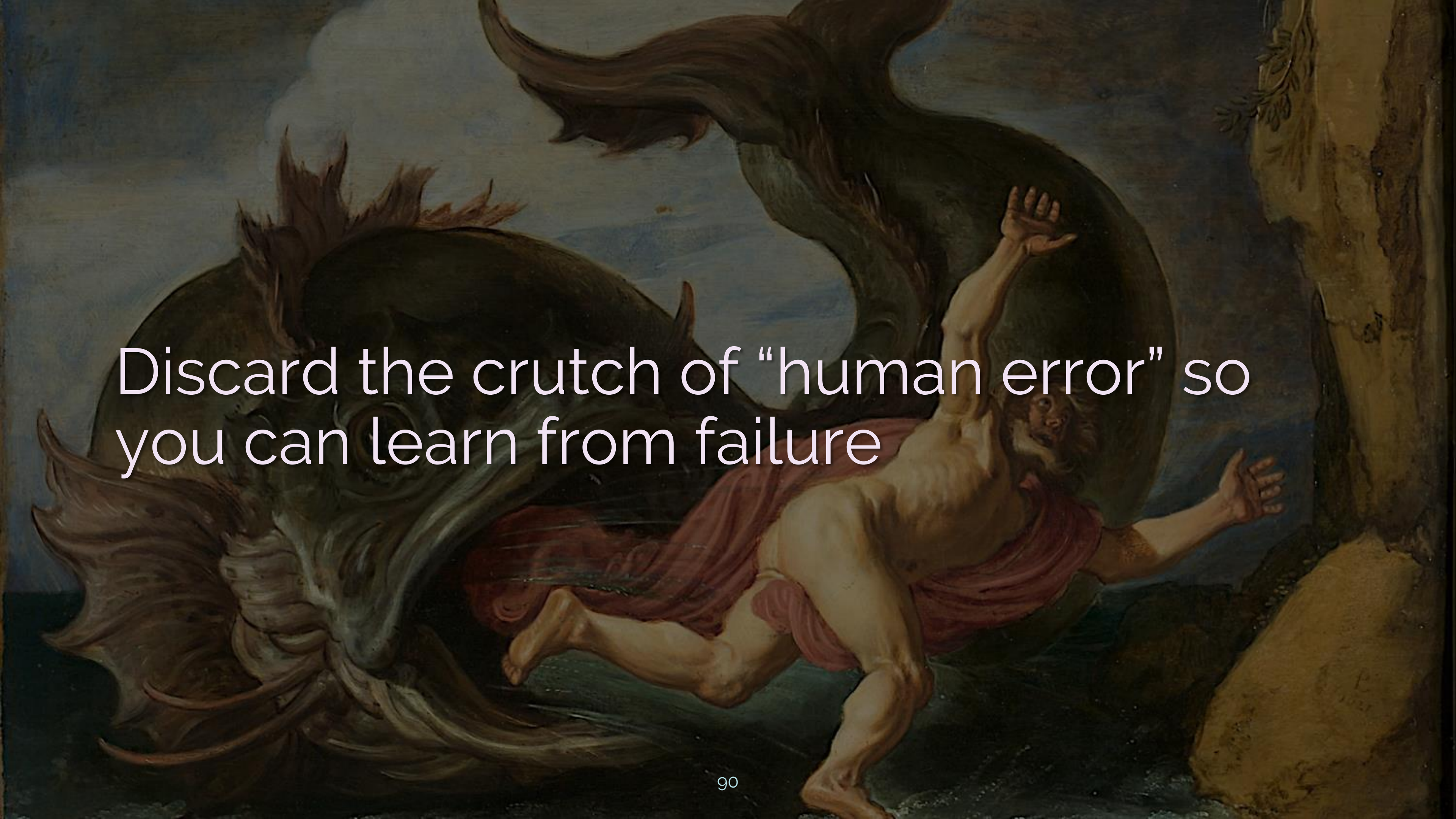
Number of vulns found matters less than their severity & how quickly they're fixed



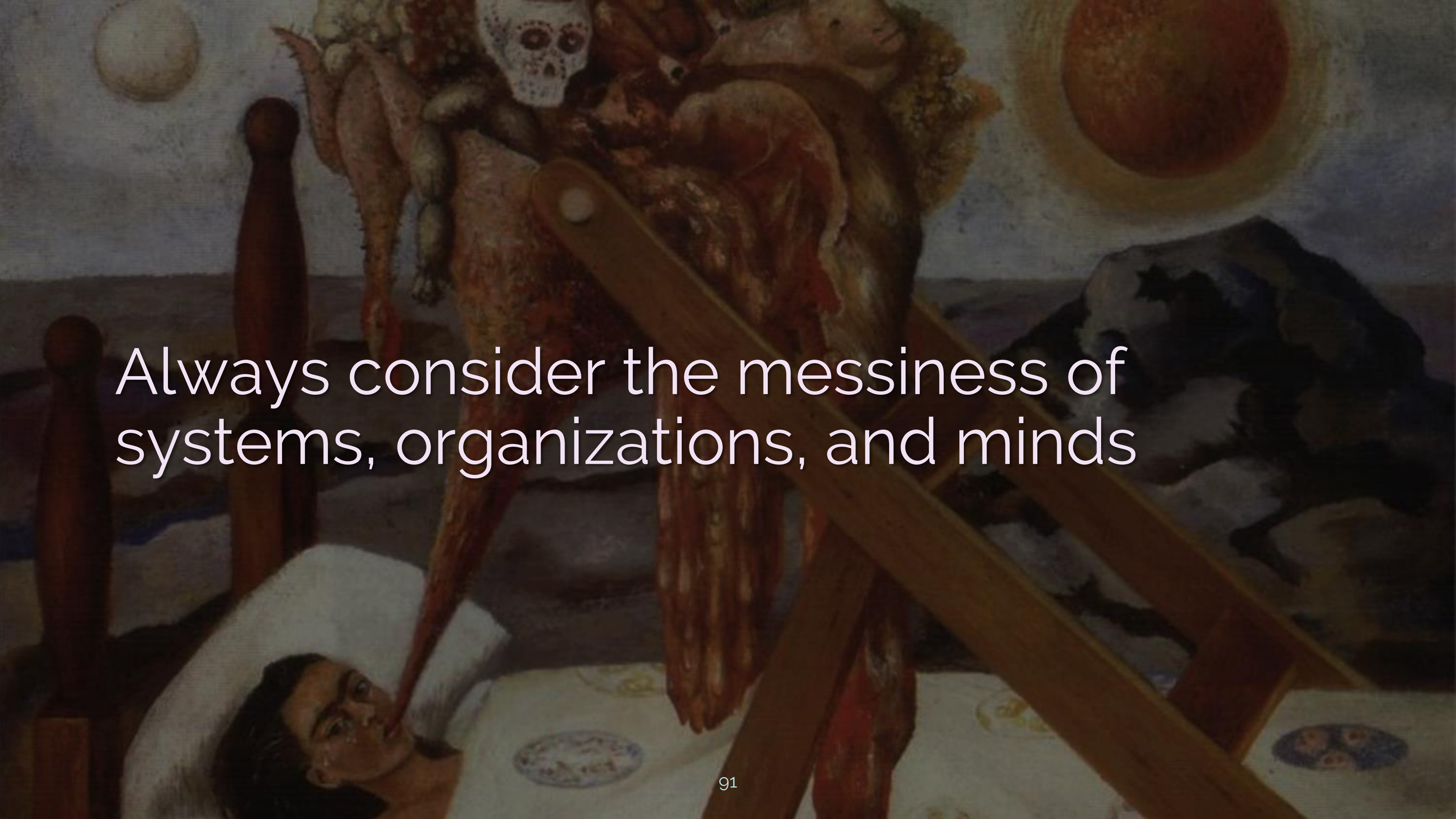
Infosec should analyze the mismatch between self-perception & reality

Spoiler alert: security chaos engineering

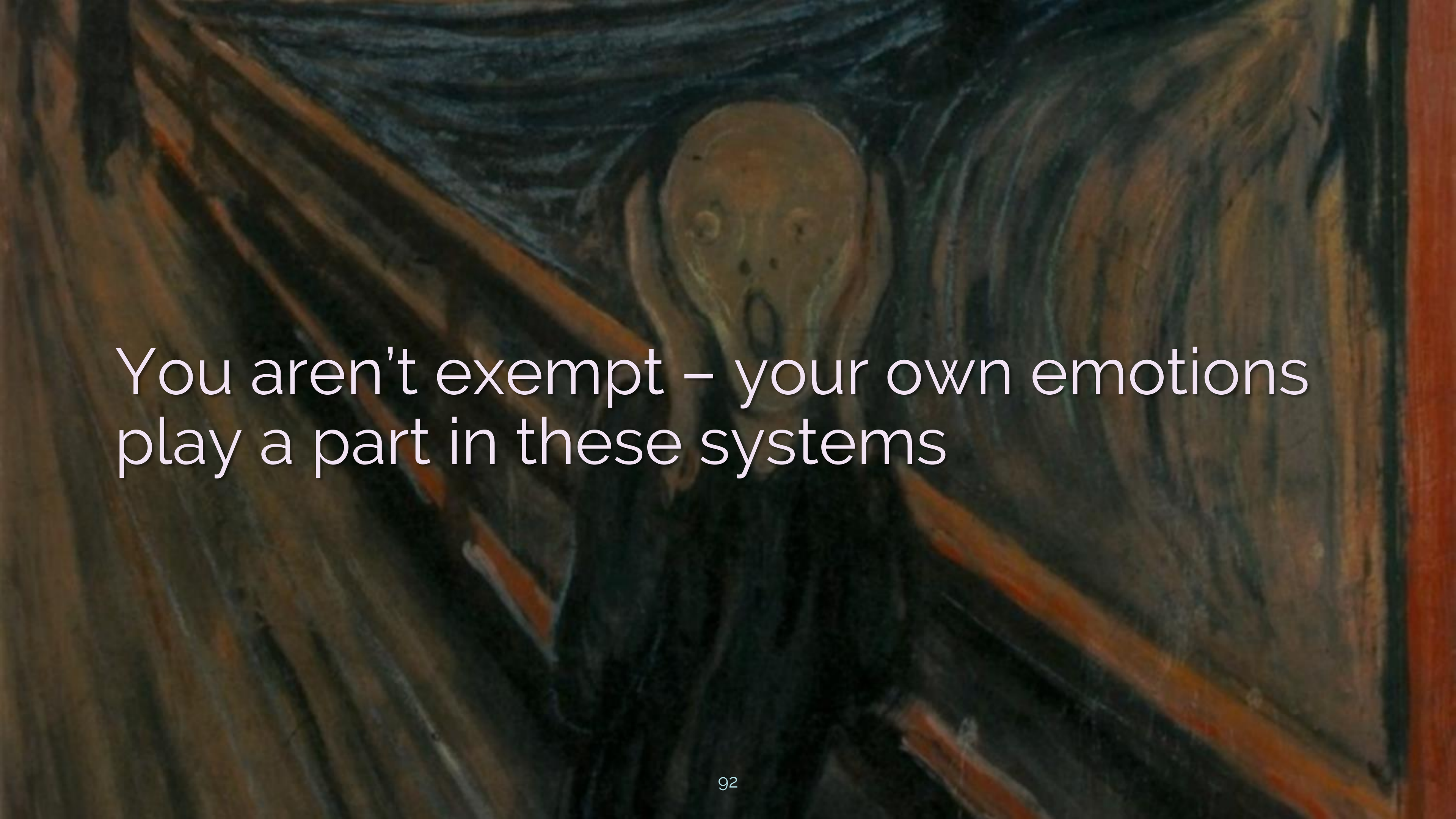
In Conclusion



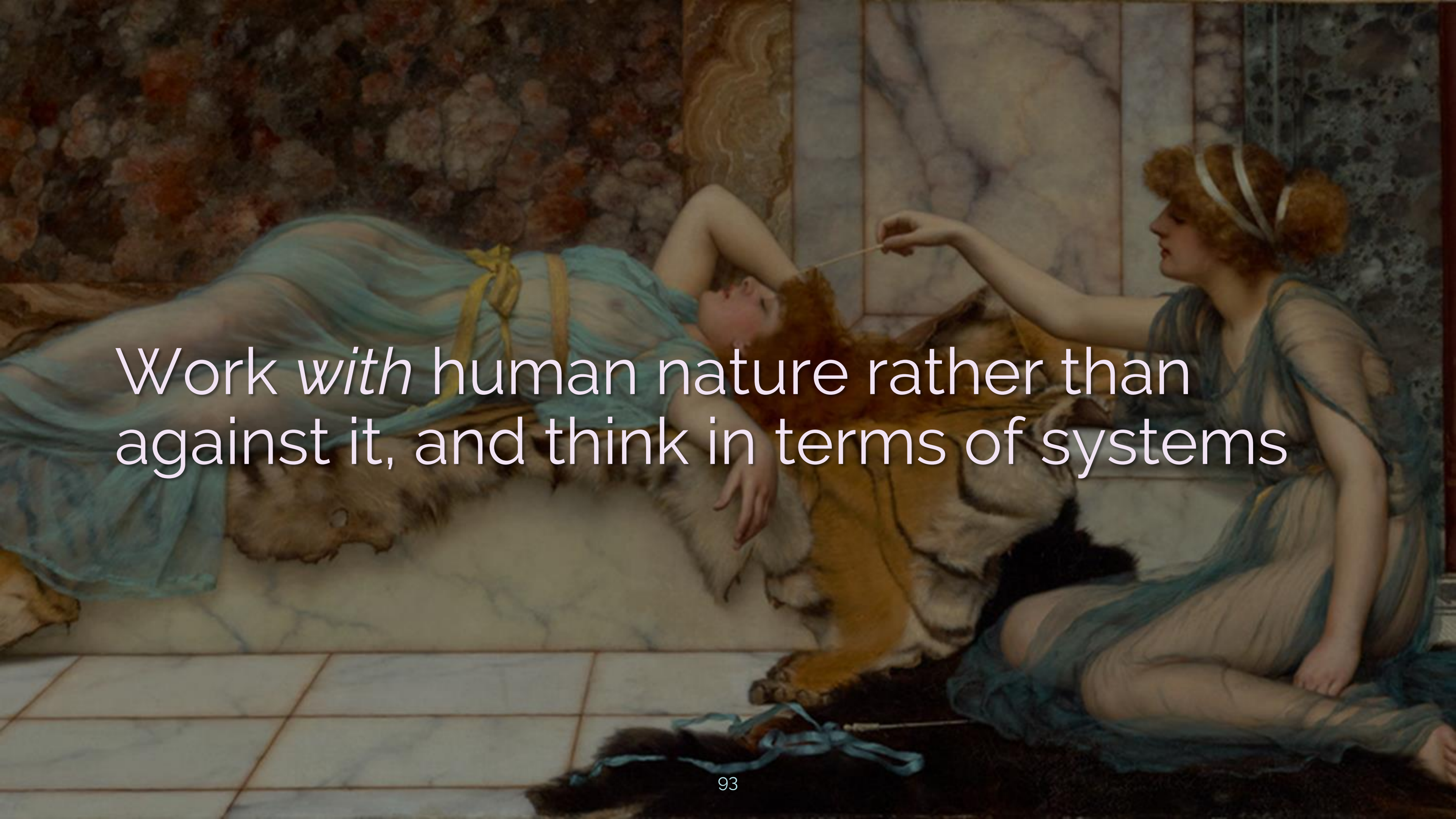
Discard the crutch of “human error” so you can learn from failure



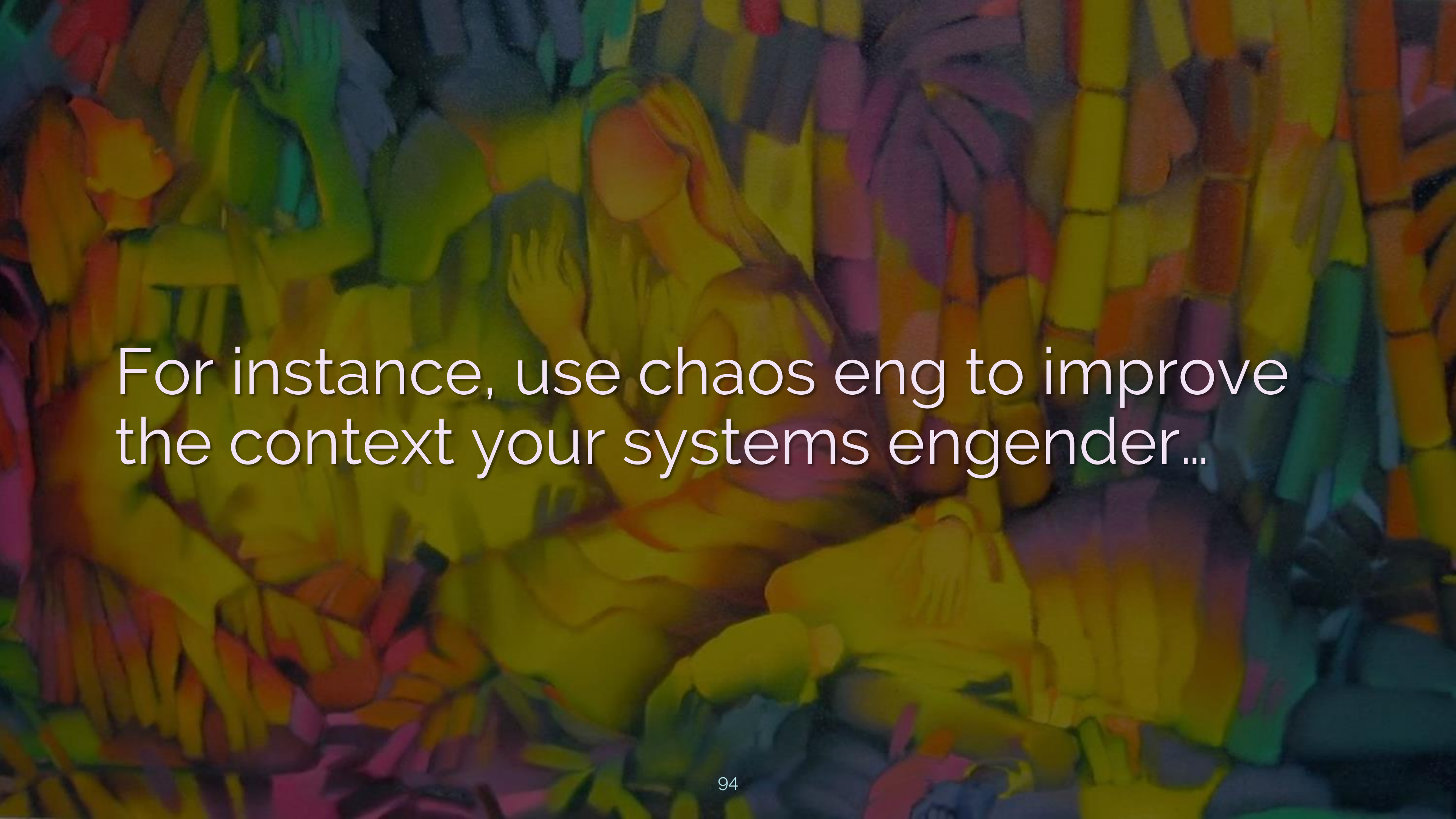
Always consider the messiness of systems, organizations, and minds



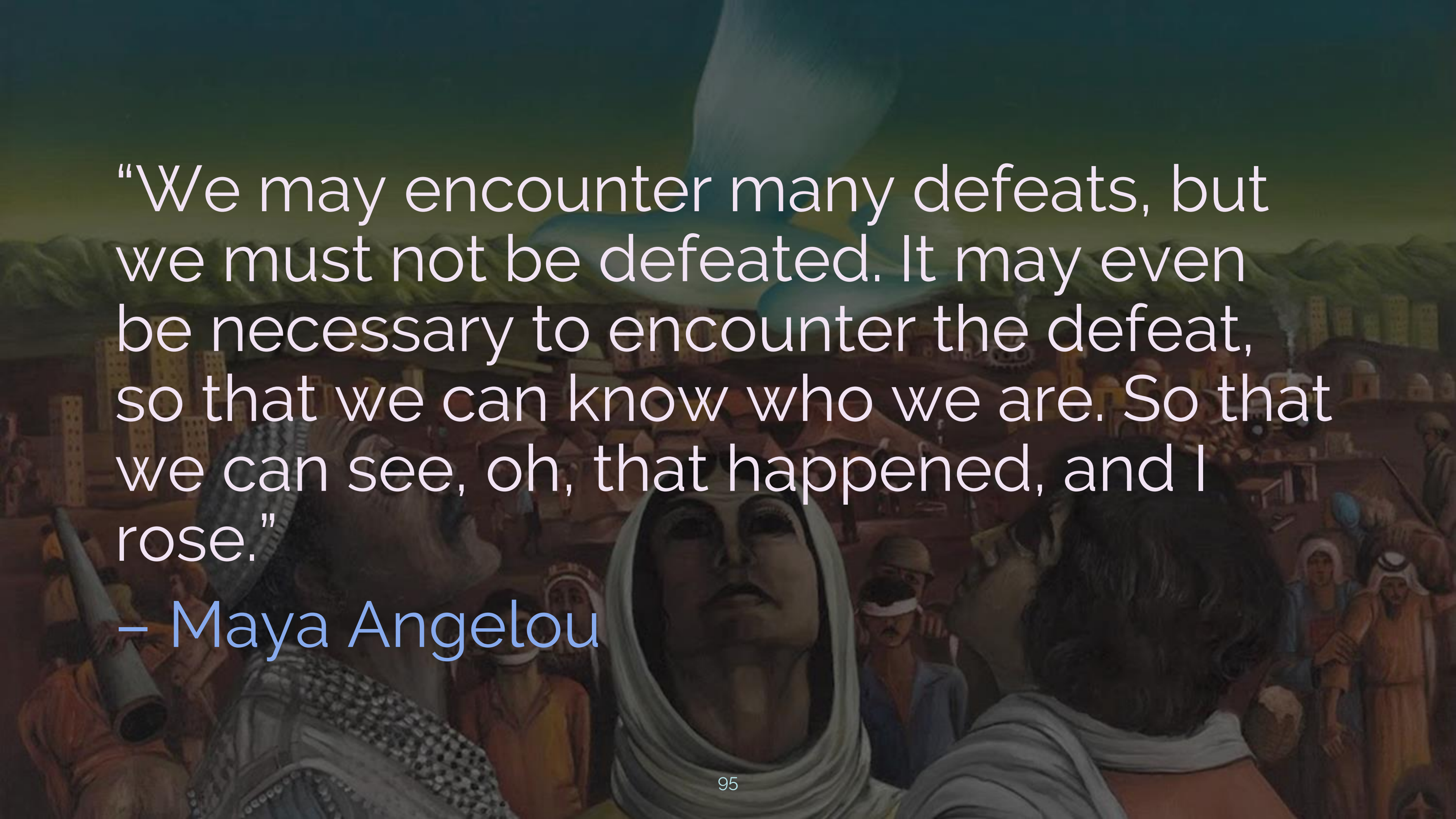
You aren’t exempt – your own emotions play a part in these systems



Work *with* human nature rather than against it, and think in terms of systems



For instance, use chaos eng to improve the context your systems engender…



“We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. It may even be necessary to encounter the defeat, so that we can know who we are. So that we can see, oh, that happened, and I rose.”

– Maya Angelou

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Suggested Reading

- “The evolution of error: Error management, cognitive constraints, and adaptive decision-making biases.” Johnson, D., et al.
- “Hindsight bias impedes learning.” Mahdavi, S., & Rahimian, M. A.
- “Outcome bias in decision evaluation.” Baron, J., & Hershey, J. C.
- “Human error.” Reason, J.
- “Behind human error.” Woods, D., et al.
- “People or systems? To blame is human. The fix is to engineer.” Holden, R.J.
- “Understanding adverse events: a human factors framework.” Henriksen, K., et al.
- “Engineering a safer world: Systems thinking applied to safety.” Leveson, N.
- “‘Going solid’: a model of system dynamics and consequences for patient safety.” Cook, R., Rasmussen, J.
- “Choice Architecture.” Thaler, R. H., Sunstein, C.R., Balz, J.P.
- “Blameless PostMortems and a Just Culture.” Allspaw, J.