



Mistakes
Were
Made
(but not by me)

*Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs,
Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*

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To Ronan, my Wonderful O’

—Carol Tavis

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To Vera, of course

—Elliot Aronson

CHAPTER 6



Love's Assassin: Self-justification in Marriage

Love . . . is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.

—novelist Iris Murdoch

WHEN WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS got married in 1917, his father wrote him a warm letter of congratulations. “I think it will help you in your poetic development,” he said. “No one really knows human nature, men as well as women,” who has not lived in marriage—“the enforced study of a fellow creature.”¹ Married partners are forced to learn more about each other than they ever expected (or perhaps wanted) to know. With no one else, not even with our children or parents, do we learn so much about another human being’s adorable and irritating habits, ways of handling frustrations and crises, and private, passionate desires. Yet, as John Butler Yeats knew, marriage also forces couples to face themselves, to learn more about themselves and how they behave with an intimate partner

than they ever expected (or perhaps wanted) to know. No other relationship so profoundly tests the extent of our own willingness to be flexible and forgiving, to learn and change—if we can resist the allure of self-justification.

Benjamin Franklin, who advised, “Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, and half shut afterward,” understood the power of dissonance in relationships. Couples first justify their decision to be together, and then to stay together. When you buy a house, you will start reducing dissonance immediately. You will tell your friends the wonderful things you love about it—the view of the trees, the space, the original old windows—and minimize the things that are wrong with it—the view of the parking lot, the cramped guest room, the drafty old windows. In this case, self-justification will keep you feeling happy about your beautiful new home. If before you fell in love with it, a geologist had told you that the cliff above you was unstable and might give way at any moment, you would welcome the information and walk away, sad but not heartbroken. But once you have fallen in love with your house, spent more than you could afford to buy it, and moved in with your unwilling cat, you have too much invested, emotionally and financially, to walk away easily. If after you are in the house, someone tells you that the cliff above you is precarious, that same impulse to justify your decision may keep you there far too long. The people who live in houses along the beach in La Conchita, California, in the shadow of cliffs that have a habit of crashing down on them during heavy winter rains, live with constant dissonance, which they resolve by saying: “It won’t happen again.” This allows them to remain until it does happen again.

A relationship with a house is simpler than a relationship with another human being. For one thing, it’s only one-way. The house can’t blame you for being a bad owner or for not keeping it clean, though it also can’t give you a nice back rub after a hard day. Marriage, though, is the greatest two-way decision of most people’s lives, and couples are enormously invested in making it work. A moderate

amount of postwedding, eyes-half-shut dissonance reduction, in which partners emphasize the positive and overlook the negative, allows things to hum along in harmony. But the identical mechanism allows some people to remain in marriages that are the psychological equivalent of La Conchita, on the brink of constant disaster. What do deliriously happy newlyweds have in common with unhappy couples who have remained together, in bitterness or weariness, for many years? An unwillingness to take heed of dissonant information. Many newlyweds, seeking confirming signs that they have married the perfect person, overlook or dismiss any discrepant evidence that might be a warning sign of trouble or conflict ahead: "He goes into a sulk if I even chat with another man; how cute, it means he loves me." "She's so casual and relaxed about household matters; how charming, it means she'll make me less compulsive." Unhappy spouses who have long tolerated one another's cruelty, jealousy, or humiliation are also busy reducing dissonance. To avoid facing the devastating possibility that they invested so many years, so much energy, so many arguments, in a failed effort to achieve even peaceful coexistence, they say something like "All marriages are like this. Nothing can be done about it, anyway. There are enough good things about it. Better to stay in a difficult marriage than to be alone."

Self-justification doesn't care whether it reaps benefits or wreaks havoc. It keeps many marriages together (for better or worse) and it tears others asunder (for better or worse). Couples start off blissfully optimistic, and over the years some will move in the direction of greater closeness and affection, others in the direction of greater distance and hostility. Some couples find in marriage a source of solace and joy, a place to replenish the soul, a relationship that allows them to flourish as individuals and as a couple. For others, marriage becomes a source of bickering and discord, a place of stagnation, a relationship that squashes their individuality and dissipates their bond. Our goal in this chapter is not to imply that all relationships can and

should be saved, but rather to show how self-justification contributes to these two different outcomes.

Of course, some couples separate because of a cataclysmic revelation, an act of betrayal, or violence that one partner can no longer tolerate or ignore. But the vast majority of couples who drift apart do so slowly, over time, in a snowballing pattern of blame and self-justification. Each partner focuses on what the other one is doing wrong, while justifying his or her own preferences, attitudes, and ways of doing things. Each side's intransigence, in turn, makes the other side even more determined not to budge. Before the couple realizes it, they have taken up polarized positions, each feeling right and righteous. Self-justification will then cause their hearts to harden against the entreaties of empathy.

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To show how this process works, let's consider the marriage of Debra and Frank, taken from Andrew Christensen and Neil Jacobson's insightful book *Reconcilable Differences*.² Most people enjoy her-version/his-version accounts of a marriage (except when it's their own), shrugging their shoulders and concluding that there are two sides to every story. We think there's more to it than that. Let's start with Debra's version of their marital problems:

[Frank] just plods through life, always taking care of business, preoccupied with getting his work done but never showing much excitement or pain. He says his style shows how emotionally stable he is. I say it just shows he's passive and bored. In many ways I'm just the opposite: I have a lot of ups and downs. But most of the time I'm energetic, optimistic, spontaneous. Of course I get upset, angry, and frustrated sometimes. He says this range of feeling shows I'm emotionally immature, that "I have a lot of growing up to do." I think it just shows I'm human.

I remember one incident that kind of sums up the way I see Frank. We went out to dinner with a charming couple who had just moved to town. As the evening wore on, I became more and more aware of how wonderful their life was. They seemed genuinely in love with one another, even though they had been married longer than we have. No matter how much the man talked to us, he always kept in contact with his wife: touching her, or making eye contact with her, or including her in the conversation. And he used “we” a lot to refer to them. Watching them made me realize how little Frank and I touch, how rarely we look at each other, and how separately we participate in conversation. Anyway, I admit it, I was envious of this other couple. They seemed to have it all: loving family, beautiful home, leisure, luxury. What a contrast to Frank and me: struggling along, both working full-time jobs, trying to save money. I wouldn’t mind that so much, if only we worked at it *together*. But we’re so distant.

When we got home, I started expressing those feelings. I wanted to reevaluate our life—as a way of getting closer. Maybe we couldn’t be as wealthy as these people, but there was no reason we couldn’t have the closeness and warmth they had. As usual, Frank didn’t want to talk about it. When he said he was tired and wanted to go to bed, I got angry. It was Friday night, and neither of us had to get up early the next day; the only thing keeping us from being together was his stubbornness. It made me mad. I was fed up with giving in to his need to sleep whenever I brought up an issue to discuss. I thought, Why can’t he stay awake just for me sometimes?

I wouldn’t let him sleep. When he turned off the lights, I turned them back on. When he rolled over to go to sleep, I kept talking. When he put a pillow over his head, I talked louder. He told me I was a baby. I told him he was insensitive. It escalated from there and got ugly. No violence but lots of words. He finally went to the guest bedroom, locked the door, and went to sleep. The next morning we were both worn out and distant. He criticized me for being so irra-

tional. Which was probably true. I do get irrational when I get desperate. But I think he uses that accusation as a way of justifying himself. It’s sort of like “If you’re irrational, then I can dismiss all your complaints and I am blameless.”

This is Frank’s version:

Debra never seems to be satisfied. I’m never doing enough, never giving enough, never loving enough, never sharing enough. You name it, I don’t do enough of it. Sometimes she gets me believing I really am a bad husband. I start feeling as though I’ve let her down, disappointed her, not met my obligations as a loving, supportive husband. But then I give myself a dose of reality. What have I done that’s wrong? I’m an okay human being. People usually like me, respect me. I hold down a responsible job. I don’t cheat on her or lie to her. I’m not a drunk or a gambler. I’m moderately attractive, and I’m a sensitive lover. I even make her laugh a lot. Yet I don’t get an ounce of appreciation from her—just complaints that I’m not doing enough.

I’m not thrown by events the way Debra is. Her feelings are like a roller coaster: sometimes up, sometimes down. I can’t live that way. A nice steady cruising speed is more my style. But I don’t put Debra down for being the way she is. I’m basically a tolerant person. People, including spouses, come in all shapes and sizes. They aren’t tailored to fit your particular needs. So I don’t take offense at little annoyances; I don’t feel compelled to talk about every difference or dislike; I don’t feel every potential area of disagreement has to be explored in detail. I just let things ride. When I show that kind of tolerance, I expect my partner to do the same for me. When she doesn’t, I get furious. When Debra picks at me about every detail that doesn’t fit with her idea of what’s right, I do react strongly. My cool disappears, and I explode.

I remember driving home with Debra after a night out with an attractive, impressive couple we had just met. On the way home I

was wondering what kind of impression I'd made on them. I was tired that evening and not at my best. Sometimes I can be clever and funny in a small group, but not that night. Maybe I was trying too hard. Sometimes I have high standards for myself and get down on myself when I can't come up to them.

Debra interrupted my ruminations with a seemingly innocent question: "Did you notice how much in tune those two were with each other?" Now I know what's behind that kind of question—or at least where that kind of question will lead. It always leads right back to us, specifically to me. Eventually the point becomes "We aren't in tune with each other," which is code for "You're not in tune with me." I dread these conversations that chew over what's wrong with us as a couple, because the real question, which goes unstated in the civil conversations, but gets stated bluntly in the uncivil ones, is "What's wrong with Frank?" So I sidestepped the issue on this occasion by answering that they were a nice couple.

But Debra pushed it. She insisted on evaluating them in comparison to us. They had money and intimacy. We had neither. Maybe we couldn't be wealthy, but we could at least be intimate. Why couldn't we be intimate? Meaning: Why couldn't *I* be intimate? When we got home, I tried to defuse the tension by saying I was tired and suggesting that we go to bed. I *was* tired, and the last thing I wanted was one of these conversations. But Debra was relentless. She argued that there was no reason we couldn't stay up and discuss this. I proceeded with my bedtime routine, giving her the most minimal of responses. If she won't respect my feelings, why should I respect hers? She talked at me while I put on my pajamas and brushed my teeth; she wouldn't even let me alone in the bathroom. When I finally got into bed and turned off the light, she turned it back on. I rolled over to go to sleep, but she kept talking. You'd think she'd have gotten the message when I put the pillow over my head—but no, she pulled it off. At that point I lost it. I told her she was a baby, a crazy person—I don't remember every-

thing I said. Finally, in desperation, I went to the guest bedroom and locked the door. I was too upset to go to sleep right away, and I didn't sleep at all. In the morning, I was still angry at her. I told her she was irrational. For once, she didn't have much to say.

Have you taken sides yet? Do you think this couple would be fine if she only stopped trying to get him to talk or if he would only stop hiding under the pillow, literally and figuratively? And what is their major problem—that they are temperamentally incompatible, that they don't understand each other, that they are angry?

Every couple has differences. Even identical twins have differences. For Frank and Debra, like most couples, the differences are precisely why they fell in love: He thought she was terrific because she was sociable and outgoing, a perfect antidote to his reserve; she was drawn to his calmness and unflappability in a storm. All couples have conflicts, too: small irritants that are amusing to everyone but the participants—she wants dirty dishes washed immediately, and he lets them pile up for only one cleanup a day (or week)—or larger disagreements about money, sex, in-laws, or any of countless other issues. Differences need not cause rifts. But once there is a rift, the couple explains it as being an inevitable result of their differences.

Moreover, Frank and Debra actually understand their situation very well. They agree on everything that happened the night of their great blowup: on what set it off, on how they both behaved, on what each wanted from the other. They both agree that comparing themselves to the new couple made them feel unhappy and self-critical. They agree that she is more roller-coastery and he more placid, a gender complaint as common as ragweed in summer. They are clear about what they want from the relationship and what they feel they aren't getting. They even are very good, perhaps better than most, at understanding the other person's point of view.

Nor is this marriage deteriorating because Frank and Debra get angry at one another. Successful couples have conflicts and get angry,

just as unhappy couples do. But happy couples know how to manage their conflicts. If a problem is annoying them, they either talk and fix the problem, let it go, or learn to live with it.³ Unhappy couples are pulled further apart by angry confrontations. When Frank and Debra get into a quarrel, they retreat to their familiar positions, brood, and stop listening to each other. If they do listen, they don't hear. Their attitude is: "Yeah, yeah, I know how you feel about this, but I'm not going to change because I'm right."

To show what we think Frank and Debra's underlying problem is, let's rewrite the story of their trip home. Suppose that Frank had anticipated Debra's fears and concerns, which he knows very well by now, and expressed his genuine admiration for her sociability and ease with new people. Suppose he anticipated that she would compare their marriage unfavorably with this appealing couple's relationship and said something like "You know, tonight I realized that even though we don't live in the luxury they do, I am awfully lucky to have you." Suppose that Frank had admitted candidly to Debra that being with this new couple made him feel "down on himself" about his participation that evening, a revelation that would have evoked her concern and sympathy. For her part, suppose that Debra had short-circuited her own self-pitying ruminations and paid attention to her husband's low mood, saying something like "Honey, you didn't seem to be up to par tonight. Are you feeling okay? Was it something about that couple you didn't like? Or were you just tired?" Suppose she, too, had been honest in expressing what she dislikes about herself, such as her envy of the other couple's affluence, instead of expressing what she dislikes about Frank. Suppose she had turned her attention to the qualities she does love about Frank. Hmmm, come to think of it, he's right about being a "sensitive lover."

From our standpoint, therefore, misunderstandings, conflicts, personality differences, and even angry quarrels are not the assassins of love; self-justification is. Frank and Debra's evening with the new couple might have ended very differently if each of them had not

been so busy spinning their own self-justifications and blaming the other, and had thought about the other's feelings first. Each of them understands the other's point of view perfectly, but their need for self-justification is preventing them from accepting their partner's position as being as legitimate as their own. It is motivating them to see their own way as the better way, indeed the only reasonable way.

We are not referring here to the garden-variety kind of self-justification that we are all inclined to use when we make a mistake or disagree about relatively trivial matters, like who left the top off the salad dressing or who forgot to pay the water bill or whose memory of a favorite scene in an old movie is correct. In those circumstances, self-justification momentarily protects us from feeling clumsy, incompetent, or forgetful. The kind that can erode a marriage, however, reflects a more serious effort to protect not *what we did* but *who we are*, and it comes in two versions: "I'm right and you're wrong" and "Even if I'm wrong, too bad; that's the way I am." Frank and Debra are in trouble because they have begun to justify their fundamental self-concepts, the qualities about themselves that they value and do not wish to alter or that they believe are inherent in their nature. They are not saying to each other, "I'm right and you're wrong about that memory." They are saying, "I am the right kind of person and you are the wrong kind of person. And because you are the wrong kind of person, you cannot appreciate my virtues; foolishly, you even think some of my virtues are flaws."

Thus, Frank justifies himself by seeing his actions as those of a good, loyal, steady husband—that's who he is—and so he thinks everything would be fine if Debra quit pestering him to talk, if she would forgive his imperfections as he forgives hers. Notice his language: "What have I done that's wrong?" asks Frank. "I'm an okay human being." Frank justifies his unwillingness to discuss difficult or painful topics in the name of his "tolerance" and ability to "just let things ride." For her part, Debra thinks her emotional expressiveness "just shows I'm human"—that's who she is—and that everything

would be fine if Frank weren't so "passive and bored." Debra got it right when she observed that Frank justifies ignoring her demands to communicate by attributing them to her irrational nature. But she doesn't see that she is doing the same thing, that she justifies ignoring his wishes not to talk by attributing them to his stubborn nature.

Every marriage is a story, and like all stories, it is subject to its participants' distorted perceptions and memories that preserve the narrative as each side sees it. Frank and Debra are at a crucial decision point on the pyramid of their marriage, and the steps they take to resolve the dissonance between "I love this person" and "This person is doing some things that are driving me crazy" will enhance their love story or destroy it. They are going to have to decide how to answer some key questions about those crazy things their partner does: Are they due to an unchangeable personality flaw? Can I live with them? Are they grounds for divorce? Can we find a compromise? Could I—horror of horrors—learn something from my partner, maybe improve my own way of doing things? And they are going to have to decide how to think about their own way of doing things. Seeing as how they have lived with themselves their whole lives, "their own way" feels natural, inevitable. Self-justification is blocking each partner from asking: Could I be wrong? Could I be making a mistake? Could I change?

As Debra and Frank's problems accumulated, each developed an implicit theory of how the other person was wrecking the marriage. (These theories are called "implicit" because people are often unaware that they hold them.) Debra's implicit theory is that Frank is socially awkward and passive; his theory is that Debra is insecure and cannot accept herself, or him, as they are. The trouble is that once people develop an implicit theory, the confirmation bias kicks in and they stop seeing evidence that doesn't fit it. As Frank and Debra's therapist observed, Debra now ignores or plays down all the times that Frank isn't awkward and passive with her or others—the times he's been funny and charming, the many times he has gone out of his way to be helpful. For his part, Frank now ignores or plays down

evidence of Debra's psychological security, such as her persistence and optimism in the face of disappointment. "They each think the other is at fault," their therapists observed, "and thus they selectively remember parts of their life, focusing on those parts that support their own points of view."⁴

Our implicit theories of why we and other people behave as we do come in one of two versions. We can say it's because of something in the situation or environment: "The bank teller snapped at me because she is overworked today; there aren't enough tellers to handle these lines." Or we can say it's because something is wrong with the person: "That teller snapped at me because she is plain rude." When we explain our own behavior, self-justification allows us to flatter ourselves: We give ourselves credit for our good actions but let the situation excuse the bad ones. When we do something that hurts another, for example, we rarely say, "I behaved this way because I am a cruel and heartless human being." We say, "I was provoked; anyone would do what I did"; or "I had no choice"; or "Yes, I said some awful things, but that wasn't *me*—it's because I was drunk." Yet when we do something generous, helpful, or brave, we don't say we did it because we were provoked or drunk or had no choice, or because the guy on the phone guilt-induced us into donating to charity. We did it because we are generous and open-hearted.

Successful partners extend to each other the same self-forgiving ways of thinking we extend to ourselves: They forgive each other's missteps as being due to the situation, but give each other credit for the thoughtful and loving things they do. If one partner does something thoughtless or is in a crabby mood, the other tends to write it off as a result of events that aren't the partner's fault: "Poor guy, he is under a lot of stress"; "I can understand why she snapped at me; she's been living with back pain for days." But if one does something especially nice, the other credits the partner's inherent good nature and sweet personality: "My honey brought me flowers for no reason at all," a wife might say; "he is the dearest guy."

While happy partners are giving each other the benefit of the doubt, unhappy partners are doing just the opposite.⁵ If the partner does something nice, it's because of a temporary fluke or situational demands: "Yeah, he brought me flowers, but only because all the other guys in his office were buying flowers for their wives." If the partner does something thoughtless or annoying, though, it's because of the partner's personality flaws: "She snapped at me because she's a bitch." Frank doesn't say that Debra did a crazy *thing*, following him around the house demanding that he talk to her, and he doesn't say she acted that way because she was feeling frustrated that he would not talk to her; he calls her a crazy *person*. Debra doesn't say that Frank avoided talking after the dinner party because he was weary and didn't want to have a confrontation last thing at night; she says he is a passive *person*.

Implicit theories have powerful consequences because they affect, among other things, how couples argue, and even the very purpose of an argument. If a couple is arguing from the premise that each is a good person who did something wrong but fixable, or who did something blunderheaded because of momentary situational pressures, there is hope of correction and compromise. But, once again, unhappy couples invert this premise. Because each partner is expert at self-justification, they each blame the other's unwillingness to change on personality flaws, but excuse their own unwillingness to change on the basis of their personality virtues. If they don't want to admit they were wrong or modify a habit that annoys or distresses their partner, they say, "I can't help it. It's natural to raise your voice when you're angry. That's the way I am." You can hear the self-justification in these words because, of course, they *can* help it. They help it every time they don't raise their voice with a police officer, their employer, or a 300-pound irritating stranger on the street.

The shouter who protests, "That's the way I am!" is, however, rarely inclined to extend the same self-forgiving justification to the partner. On the contrary, he or she is likely to turn it into an infuri-

ating insult: "That's the way you are—you're just like your mother!" Generally, the remark does not refer to your mother's sublime baking skills or her talent at dancing the tango. It means that you are like your mother genetically and irredeemably; there's nothing you can do about it. And when people feel they can't do anything about it, they feel unjustly accused, as if they were being criticized for being too short or too freckled. Social psychologist June Tangney has found that being criticized for who you are rather than for what you did evokes a deep sense of shame and helplessness; it makes a person want to hide, disappear.⁶ Because the shamed person has nowhere to go to escape the desolate feeling of humiliation, Tangney found, shamed spouses tend to strike back in anger: "You make me feel that I did an awful thing because I'm reprehensible and incompetent. Since I don't think I am reprehensible and incompetent, you must be reprehensible to humiliate me this way."

By the time a couple's style of argument has escalated into shaming and blaming each other, the very purpose of their quarrels has shifted. It is no longer an effort to solve a problem or even to get the other person to modify his or her behavior; it's just to wound, to insult, to score. That is why shaming leads to fierce, renewed efforts at self-justification, a refusal to compromise, and the most destructive emotion a relationship can evoke: contempt. In his groundbreaking study of more than 700 couples, whom he followed over a period of years, psychologist John Gottman found that contempt—criticism laced with sarcasm, name calling, and mockery—is one of the strongest signs that a relationship is in free fall.⁷ Gottman offered this example:

Fred: Did you pick up my dry cleaning?

Ingrid (mocking): "Did you pick up my dry cleaning?" Pick up your own damn dry cleaning. What am I, your maid?

Fred: Hardly. If you were a maid, at least you'd know how to clean.

Contemptuous exchanges like this one are devastating because they destroy the one thing that self-justification is designed to protect: our feelings of self-worth, of being loved, of being a good and respected person. Contempt is the final revelation to the partner that “I don’t value the ‘who’ that you are.” We believe that contempt is a predictor of divorce not because it causes the wish to separate, but because it reflects the couple’s feelings of psychological separation. Contempt emerges only after years of squabbles and quarrels that keep resulting, as for Frank and Debra, in yet another unsuccessful effort to get the other person to behave differently. It is an indication that the partner is throwing in the towel, thinking, “There’s no point hoping that you will ever change; you are just like your mother after all.” Anger reflects the hope that a problem can be corrected. When it burns out, it leaves the ashes of resentment and contempt. And contempt is the handmaiden of hopelessness.

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Which comes first, a couple’s unhappiness with each other, or their negative ways of thinking about each other? Am I unhappy with you because of your personality flaws, or does my belief that you have personality flaws (rather than forgivable quirks or external pressures) eventually make me unhappy with you? Obviously it works in both directions. But because most new partners do not start out in a mood of complaining and blaming, psychologists have been able to follow couples over time to see what sets some of them, but not others, on a downward spiral. They have learned that negative ways of thinking and blaming usually come first and are unrelated to the couple’s frequency of anger, either party’s feelings of depression, or other negative emotional states.⁸ Happy and unhappy partners simply think differently about each other’s behavior, even when they are responding to identical situations and actions.

That is why we think that self-justification is the prime suspect in the murder of a marriage. Each partner resolves the dissonance

caused by conflicts and irritations by explaining the spouse’s behavior in a particular way. That explanation, in turn, sets them on a path down the pyramid. Those who travel the route of shame and blame will eventually begin rewriting the story of their marriage. As they do, they seek further evidence to justify their growing pessimistic or contemptuous views of each other. They shift from minimizing negative aspects of the marriage to overemphasizing them, seeking every bit of supporting evidence to fit their new story. As the new story takes shape, with husband and wife rehearsing it privately or with sympathetic friends, the partners become blind to each other’s good qualities, the very ones that initially caused them to fall in love.

The tipping point at which a couple starts rewriting their love story, Gottman finds, is when the “magic ratio” dips below five-to-one: Successful couples have a ratio of five times as many positive interactions (such as expressions of love, affection, and humor) to negative ones (such as expressions of annoyance and complaints). It doesn’t matter if the couple is emotionally volatile, quarreling eleven times a day, or emotionally placid, quarreling once a decade; it is the ratio that matters. “Volatile couples may yell and scream a lot, but they spend five times as much of their marriage being loving and making up,” Gottman found. “Quieter, avoidant couples may not display as much passion as the other types, but they display far less criticism and contempt as well—the ratio is still 5 to 1.”⁹ When the ratio is five to one or better, any dissonance that arises is generally reduced in a positive direction. For example, social psychologist Ayala Pines, in a study of burnout in marriage, reported how a happily married woman she called Ellen reduced the dissonance caused by her husband’s failure to give her a birthday present. “I wish he would have given me something—anything—I told him that, like I am telling him all of my thoughts and feelings,” Ellen said to Pines. “And as I was doing that I was thinking to myself how wonderful it is that I can express openly all of my feelings, even the negative

ones . . . The left over negative feelings I just sent down with the water under the bridge.”¹⁰

When the positive-negative ratio has shifted in favor of those negative feelings, however, couples resolve dissonance *caused by the same events* in a way that increases their alienation from one another. Pines reported how an unhappily married woman, Donna, reacted to the same problem that upset Ellen: no birthday present from her husband. But whereas Ellen decided to accept that her husband was never going to become the Bill Gates of domestic giving, Donna interpreted her husband’s behavior quite differently:

One of the things that actually cemented my decision to divorce was my birthday, which is a symbolic day for me. I got a phone call at six o’clock in the morning from Europe, from a cousin, to wish me a happy birthday. Here is someone miles away who’s taken the trouble. And he was sitting there listening, and didn’t wish me a happy birthday. . . . And I suddenly realized, you know, that here are all these people who do love me, and here’s a person who doesn’t appreciate me. He doesn’t value me, he doesn’t love me. If he did he wouldn’t treat me the way he did. He would want to do something special for me.

It is entirely possible, of course, that Donna’s husband doesn’t love and appreciate her. And of course we don’t have his side of the story about the birthday gift; perhaps he had tried giving her gifts for years but she never liked any of them. Presumably, though, most people don’t decide to divorce because of a missing birthday present. Because Donna has decided that her husband’s behavior is not only unmodifiable but intolerable, she now interprets everything he does as unmistakable evidence that “he doesn’t value me, he doesn’t love me.” Donna actually took the confirmation bias further than most spouses do: She told Pines that whenever her husband made her feel

depressed and upset, she wrote it down in a “hate book.” Her hate book gave her all the evidence she needed to justify her decision to divorce.

When the couple has hit this low point, they start revising their memories, too. Now the incentive for both sides is not to send down the negative things “with the water under the bridge,” but to encourage every negative thing to bubble up to the surface. Distortions of past events—or complete amnesia—kick in to confirm the couple’s suspicion that they married a complete stranger, and not a particularly appealing one, either. Clinical psychologist Julie Gottman worked with an angry couple in therapy. When she asked, “How did the two of you meet?” the wife said, contemptuously, “At school, where I mistakenly thought he was smart.”¹¹ In this twist of memory, she announces that she didn’t make a mistake in choosing him; he made the mistake, by deceiving her about his intelligence.

“I have found that nothing foretells a marriage’s future as accurately as how a couple retells their past,” John Gottman observes.¹² Rewriting history begins even before a couple is aware their marriage is in danger. Gottman and his team conducted in-depth interviews of fifty-six couples, and were able to follow up on forty-seven of them three years later. At the time of the first interview, none of the couples had planned to separate, but the researchers were able to predict with 100 percent accuracy the seven couples who divorced. (Of the remaining forty couples, the researchers predicted that thirty-seven would still be together, still an astonishing accuracy rate.) During the first interview, those seven couples had already begun recasting their history, telling a despondent story with confirming details to fit. For example, they told Gottman they had married not because they were in love and couldn’t bear to be apart, but because marriage seemed “natural, the next step.” The first year, the divorced couples now recalled, was full of letdowns and disappointments. “A lot of things went wrong but I don’t remember what they were,” said one soon-to-be-ex-husband. Happy couples, however, called the

same difficulties “rough spots” and saw them as challenges that they proudly had survived, with humor and affection.

Thanks to the revisionist power of memory to justify our decisions, by the time many couples divorce, they can't remember why they married. It's as if they have had a nonsurgical lobotomy that excised the happy memories of how each partner once felt toward the other. Over and over we have heard people say, “I knew the week after the wedding I'd made a terrible mistake.” “But why did you have three children and stay together for the next twenty-seven years?” “Oh, I don't know; I just felt obligated, I guess.”

Of course, some people do make the decision to separate as a result of a clear-eyed weighing of current benefits and problems; but for most, it's a decision fraught with historical revisionism and dissonance reduction. How do we know? Because even when the problems remain the same, the justifications change as soon as one or both parties decides to leave. As long as couples have decided to stay in a relationship that is far from their ideal, they reduce dissonance in ways that support their decision: “It's not really that bad.” “Most marriages are worse than mine—or certainly no better.” “He forgot my birthday, but he does many other things that show me he loves me.” “We have problems, but overall I love her.” When one or both partners starts thinking of divorce, however, their efforts to reduce dissonance will now justify the decision to leave: “This marriage really *is* that bad.” “Most marriages are better than mine.” “He forgot my birthday, and it means he doesn't love me.” And the pitiless remark said by many a departing spouse after twenty or thirty years, “I never loved you.”

The cruelty of that last particular lie is commensurate with the teller's need to justify his or her behavior. Couples who part because of clear external reasons—say, because one spouse is physically or emotionally abusive—will feel no need for additional self-justification. Nor will those rare couples who part in complete amicability, or who eventually restore warm feelings of friendship after the initial pain of

separation. They feel no urgency to vilify their former partner or forget happier times, because they are able to say, “It didn't work out,” “We just grew apart,” or “We were so young when we married and didn't know better.” But when the divorce is wrenching, momentous, and costly, and especially when one partner wants the separation and the other does not, both sides will feel an amalgam of painful emotions. In addition to the anger, anguish, hurt, and grief that almost invariably accompany divorce, these couples will also feel the pain of dissonance. That dissonance, and the way many people choose to resolve it, is one of the major reasons for postdivorce vindictiveness.

If you are the one being left, you may suffer the ego-crushing dissonance of “I'm a good person and I've been a terrific partner” and “My partner is leaving me. How could this be?” You could conclude that you're not as good a person as you thought, or that you are a good person but you were a pretty bad partner, but few of us choose to reduce dissonance by plunging darts into our self-esteem. It's far easier to reduce dissonance by plunging darts into the partner, so to speak—say, by concluding that your partner is a difficult, selfish person, only you hadn't realized it fully until now.

If you are the one who is leaving, you also have dissonance to reduce, to justify the pain you are inflicting on someone you once loved. Because you are a good person, and a good person doesn't hurt another, your partner must have deserved your rejection, perhaps even more than you realized. Observers of divorcing couples are often baffled by what seems like unreasonable vindictiveness on the part of the person who initiated the separation; what they are observing is dissonance reduction in action. A friend of ours, lamenting her son's divorce, said: “I don't understand my daughter-in-law. She left my son for another man who adores her, but she won't marry him or work full-time just so that my son has to keep paying her alimony. My son has had to take a job he doesn't like to afford her demands. Given that she's the one who left, and that she has another relation-

ship, the way she treats my son seems inexplicably cruel and vengeful." From the daughter-in-law's standpoint, however, her behavior toward her ex is perfectly justifiable. If he were such a good guy, she'd still be with him, wouldn't she?

Divorce mediators, and anyone else who has tried to be helpful to warring friends in the throes of divorce, have seen this process up close. Mediators Donald Saposnek and Chip Rose describe the "tendency of one spouse to cast the other in a vilified image, for example, 'He's a weak, violent drunk,' or, 'She's a two-faced, selfish, pathological liar who can't ever be trusted.' These intensely negative, polarized characterizations that high conflict divorcing couples make of each other become reified and immutable over time."¹³ The reason they do is that once a couple starts reducing dissonance by taking the ego-preserving route of vilifying the former partner, they need to keep justifying their position. Thus they fight over every nickel and dime that one party is "entitled to" and the other "doesn't deserve," furiously denying or controlling custody matters and the ex's visitation rights because, look, the ex is a terrible person. Neither party pauses in mid-rant to consider that the terribleness might be a result of the terrible situation, let alone a response to their own behavior. Each action that one partner takes evokes a self-justified retaliation from the other, and voilà, they are on a course of reciprocal, escalating animosity. Each partner, having induced the other to behave badly, uses that bad behavior both to justify his or her own retaliation and to marshal support for the ex's inherently "evil" qualities.

By the time these couples seek mediation, they have slid pretty far down the pyramid. Don Saposnek told us that in the more than 4,000 custody mediations he has done, "I have *never* had one in which a parent has said, 'You know, I really think that she should get custody, since she really is the better parent and the kids are closer to her.' It is virtually always a bilateral stand-off of 'why I am the better and more deserving parent.' Not a single point of acknowledgment is ever given to the other parent, and even when they freely admit

their own acts of retaliation, they always justify it: 'He deserved it, after what he's done—breaking up our family!' The agreements they reach are invariably some kind of compromise which each experiences as 'giving up my position because I felt coerced, I'm exhausted fighting, or I ran out of money for mediation . . . even though I know that I'm the better parent.'"

Dissonance theory would lead us to predict that it is the very people with the greatest initial ambivalence about their decision to divorce, or who feel the greatest guilt over their unilateral decision, who have the greatest urgency to justify their decision to leave. In turn, the bereft partner feels a desperate urgency to justify any retaliation as payback for having been treated so cruelly and unfairly. As both parties come up with confirming memories and all those horrible recent examples of the ex's bad behavior to support their new accounts, the ex turns completely villainous. Self-justification is the route by which ambivalence morphs into certainty, guilt into rage. The love story has become a hate book.

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Our colleague Leonore Tiefer, a clinical psychologist, told us about a couple in their late thirties, married ten years, whom she saw in therapy. They could not make a decision about having children because each wanted to be sure before even raising the issue with the other. They could not make a decision about how to balance her demanding business career with their activities together, because she felt justified in working as much as she wanted. They could not resolve their quarrels over his drinking, because he felt justified in drinking as much as he wanted. Each had had an affair, which they justified as being a response to the other's.

Yet their normal, if difficult, problems were not what doomed this marriage; their obstinate self-justifications were. "They do not know what to give up in order to be a couple," says Tiefer. "They each want to do what they feel entitled to do, and they can't discuss

the important issues that affect them as a pair. And as long as they stay mad at each other, they don't have to discuss those matters, because discussion might actually require them to compromise or consider the partner's point of view. They have a very difficult time with empathy, each one feeling completely confident that the other's behavior is less reasonable than their own. So they bring up old resentments to justify their current position and their unwillingness to change, or forgive."

In contrast, the couples who grow together over the years have figured out a way to live with a minimum of self-justification, which is another way of saying that they are able to put empathy for the partner ahead of defending their own territory. Successful, stable couples are able to listen to the partner's criticisms, concerns, and suggestions undefensively. In our terms, they are able to yield, just enough, on the self-justifying excuse "That's the kind of person I am." They reduce the dissonance caused by small irritations by overlooking them, and they reduce the dissonance caused by their mistakes and major problems by solving them.

We interviewed several couples who have been together for many years, the kind of couples Frank and Debra admired, who by their own accounts have an unusually tight and affectionate marriage. We didn't ask them, "What is the secret of your long marriage?" because people rarely know the answer; they will say something banal or unhelpful, such as "We never went to bed angry" or "We share a love of golf." (Plenty of happy couples do go to bed angry because they would rather not have an argument when they are dead tired, and plenty of happy couples do not share hobbies and interests.) Instead, we asked these couples, in effect, how, over the years, they reduced the dissonance between "I love this person" and "This person is doing something that is driving me crazy."

One especially illuminating answer came from a couple we will call Charlie and Maxine, who have been married more than forty years. Like all couples, they have many small differences that could

easily flare into irritation, but they have come to accept most of them as facts of life, not worth sulking about. Charlie says, "I like to eat dinner at five; my wife likes to eat at eight; we compromise—we eat at five to eight." The important thing about this couple is how they handle the big problems. When they first fell in love, in their early twenties, Charlie was attracted to a quality of serenity in Maxine's soul that he found irresistible; she was, he said, an oasis in a tumultuous world. She was attracted to his passionate energy, which he brought to everything from finding the perfect peach to writing the perfect sentence. But the passionate quality she enjoyed in him when it was attached to love, sex, travel, music, and movies was alarming to her when it was attached to anger. When he was angry, he would yell and pound the table, something no one in her family had ever done. Within a few months of their marriage, she told him, tearfully, that his anger was frightening her.

Charlie's first impulse was to justify himself. He didn't think that raising his voice was a desirable trait, exactly, but he saw it as one that was part of who he was, an aspect of his authenticity. "My father yelled and pounded tables," he said to her. "My grandfather yelled and pounded tables! It's my right! I can't do anything about it. It's what a man does. You want me to be like those wimpy guys who are always talking about their 'feelings'?" Once he stopped yelling and considered how his behavior was affecting Maxine, he realized that of course he could modify his behavior, and, slowly and steadily, he reduced the frequency and intensity of his flare-ups. But Maxine, too, had to change; she had to stop justifying her belief that all forms of anger are dangerous and bad. ("In my family no one ever expressed anger. Therefore, that's the only right way to be.") When she did, she was able to learn to distinguish legitimate feelings of anger from unacceptable ways of expressing them, such as pounding tables, and for that matter from unconstructive ways of *not* expressing them, such as crying and retreating—her own "unchangeable" habit.

Over the years, a different problem emerged, one that had devel-

oped slowly, as it does for many couples who divide up tasks on the initial basis of who's better at them. The down side of Maxine's serenity was unassertiveness and a fear of confrontation; she would never dream of complaining about a bad meal or flawed merchandise. And so it always fell to Charlie to return the coffeepot that didn't work, call customer service with complaints, or deal face-to-face with the landlord who wouldn't fix the plumbing. "You're so much better at this than I am," she would say, and because he was, he would do it. Over time, however, Charlie grew tired of shouldering this responsibility and was becoming irritated by what he was now seeing as Maxine's passivity. "Why am I always the one handling these unpleasant confrontations?" he said to himself.

He was at a choice point. He could have let it slide, saying that's just the way she is, and continued to do all the dirty work. Instead, Charlie suggested that perhaps it was time for Maxine to learn how to be more assertive, a skill that would be useful to her in many contexts, not only in their marriage. Initially, Maxine responded by saying, "That's the way I am, and you knew it when you married me. Besides, no fair changing the rules after all these years." As they talked more, she was able to hear his concern without letting the jangle of self-justification get in the way. As soon as that happened, she could empathize with his feelings and understand why he thought the division of labor had become unfair. She realized that her options were not as limited as she had always assumed. She took an assertiveness-training course, diligently practiced what she learned there, got better at standing up for her rights, and before long was enjoying the satisfaction of speaking her mind in a way that usually got results. Charlie and Maxine made it clear that he did not turn into a lamb nor did she turn into a tiger; personality, history, genetics, and temperament do put limitations on how much anyone can change.¹⁴ But each of them moved. In this marriage, assertiveness

and the constructive expression of anger are no longer polarized skills, his and hers.

In good marriages, a confrontation, difference of opinion, clashing habits, and even angry quarrels can bring the couple closer, by helping each partner learn something new and by forcing them to examine their assumptions about their abilities or limitations. It isn't always easy to do this. Letting go of the self-justifications that cover up our mistakes, that protect our desires to do things just the way we want to, and that minimize the hurts we inflict on those we love can be embarrassing and painful. Without self-justification, we might be left standing emotionally naked, unprotected, in a pool of regrets and losses.

Yet, in the final analysis, we believe it is worth it, because no matter how painful it can be to let go of self-justification, the result teaches us something deeply important about ourselves and can bring the peace of insight and self-acceptance. At the age of sixty-five, the feminist writer and activist Vivian Gornick wrote a dazzlingly honest essay about her lifelong efforts to balance work and love, and to lead a life based on exemplary egalitarian principles in both arenas. "I'd written often about living alone because I couldn't figure out why I *was* living alone," she wrote. For years her answer, the answer of so many in her generation, was sexism: Patriarchal men were forcing strong, independent women to choose between their careers and their relationships. That answer isn't wrong; sexism has sunk many marriages and shot holes through countless others that are barely afloat. But today Gornick realizes that it was not the full answer. Looking back, without the comfort of her familiar self-justifications, she was able to see her own role in determining the course of her relationships, realizing "that much of my loneliness was self-inflicted, having more to do with my angry, self-divided personality than with sexism."¹⁵

"The reality was," she wrote, "that I was alone not because of my politics but because I did not know how to live in a decent way with

another human being. In the name of equality I tormented every man who'd ever loved me until he left me: I called them on everything, never let anything go, held them up to accountability in ways that wearied us both. There was, of course, more than a grain of truth in everything I said, but those grains, no matter how numerous, need not have become the sandpile that crushed the life out of love."

CHAPTER 7

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Wounds, Rifts, and Wars

High-stomached are they both, and full of ire,
In rage deaf as the sea, hasty as fire.

—William Shakespeare, *Richard II*

ONE YEAR AFTER HE had confessed his affair, Jim felt there was no letup in Diane's anger. Every conversation eventually turned to the affair. She watched him like a hawk, and when he caught her gaze her expression was full of suspicion and pain. Couldn't she realize that it had just been a small mistake on his part? He was hardly the first person on the planet to make such a mistake. He had been honest enough to admit the affair, after all, and strong enough to end it. He had apologized, and told her a thousand times that he loved her and wanted the marriage to continue. Couldn't she understand that? Couldn't she just focus on the good parts of their marriage and get over this setback?