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Cognitive Dissonance: *The Engine of Self-Justification*

PRESS RELEASE DATE: NOVEMBER 1, 1993

We didn't make a mistake when we wrote in our previous releases that New York would be destroyed on September 4 and October 14, 1993. We didn't make a mistake, not even a teeny eeny one!

PRESS RELEASE DATE: APRIL 4, 1994

All the dates we have given in our past releases are correct dates given by God as contained in Holy Scriptures. Not one of these dates was wrong . . . Ezekiel gives a total of 430 days for the siege of the city . . . [which] brings us exactly to May 2, 1994. By now, all the people have been forewarned. We have done our job . . .

We are the only ones in the entire world guiding the people to their safety, security, and salvation!

We have a 100 percent track record!¹

It's fascinating, and sometimes funny, to read doomsday predictions, but it's even more fascinating to watch what happens to the reasoning of true believers when the prediction flops and the world keeps muddling along. Notice that hardly anyone ever says, "I blew it! I can't believe how stupid I was to believe that nonsense"? On the contrary, most of the time the doomsayers become even more deeply convinced of their powers of prediction. The people who believe that the Bible's book of Revelation or the writings of the sixteenth-century self-proclaimed prophet Nostradamus have predicted every disaster from the bubonic plague to 9/11 cling to

their convictions, unfazed by the small problem that these vague and murky predictions were intelligible only after the events occurred.

More than half a century ago, a young social psychologist named Leon Festinger and two associates infiltrated a group of people who believed the world would end on December 21, 1954.² They wanted to know what would happen to the group when (they hoped!) the prophecy failed. The group's leader, whom the researchers called Marian Keech, promised that the faithful would be picked up by a flying saucer and elevated to safety at midnight on December 20. Many of her followers quit their jobs, gave away their houses, and disbursed their savings in anticipation of the end. Who needs money in outer space? Others waited in fear or resignation in their homes. (Mrs. Keech's husband, a nonbeliever, went to bed early and slept soundly through the night while his wife and her followers prayed in the living room.) Festinger made his own prediction: The believers who had not made a strong commitment to the prophecy—who awaited the end of the world by themselves at home, hoping they weren't going to die at midnight—would quietly lose their faith in Mrs. Keech. But those who had given away their possessions and waited with other believers for the spaceship, he said, would increase their belief in her mystical abilities. In fact, they would now do whatever they could to get others to join them.

At midnight, with no sign of a spaceship in the yard, the group felt a little nervous. By 2:00 a.m., they were getting seriously worried. At 4:45 a.m., Mrs. Keech had a new vision: The world had been spared, she said, because of the impressive faith of her little band. "And mighty is the word of God," she told her followers, "and by his word have ye been saved—for from the mouth of death have ye been delivered and at no time has there been such a force loosed upon the Earth. Not since the beginning of time upon this Earth has there been such a force of Good and light as now floods this room."

The group's mood shifted from despair to exhilaration. Many of the group members who had not felt the need to proselytize before December 21 began calling the press to report the miracle. Soon they were out on the streets, buttonholing passersby, trying to convert them. Mrs. Keech's prediction had failed, but not Leon Festinger's.

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The engine that drives self-justification, the energy that produces the need to justify our actions and decisions—especially the wrong ones—is the unpleasant feeling that Festinger called “cognitive dissonance.” Cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs when a person holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent with each other, such as “Smoking is a dumb thing to do because it could kill me” and “I smoke two packs a day.” Dissonance produces mental discomfort that ranges from minor pangs to deep anguish; people don’t rest easy until they find a way to reduce it. In this example, the most direct way for a smoker to reduce dissonance is by quitting. But if she has tried to quit and failed, now she must reduce dissonance by convincing herself that smoking isn’t really so harmful, that smoking is worth the risk because it helps her relax or prevents her from gaining weight (after all, obesity is a health risk too), and so on. Most smokers manage to reduce dissonance in many such ingenious, if self-deluding, ways.³

Dissonance is disquieting because to hold two ideas that contradict each other is to flirt with absurdity, and, as Albert Camus observed, we are creatures who spend our lives trying to convince ourselves that our existence is not absurd. At the heart of it, Festinger’s theory is about how people strive to make sense out of contradictory ideas and lead lives that are, at least in their own minds, consistent and meaningful. The theory inspired more than three thousand experiments that, taken together, have transformed psychologists’ understanding of how the human mind works. Cognitive dissonance even escaped academia and entered popular culture. The term is everywhere. The two of us have encountered it in political columns, health news stories, magazine articles, a *Non Sequitur* cartoon by Wiley Miller (“Showdown at the Cognitive Dissonance Bridge”), bumper stickers, a TV soap opera, *Jeopardy!*, and a humor column in the *New Yorker* (“Cognitive Dissonances I’m Comfortable With”). Although the expression has been thrown around a lot, few people fully understand its meaning or appreciate its enormous motivational power.

In 1956, one of us (Elliot) arrived at Stanford University as a graduate student in psychology. Festinger had started there that same year as a young professor, and they immediately began working together, designing experiments to test and expand dissonance theory.⁴ Their thinking challenged many notions that had been gospel in psychology and among the general public, such as the behaviorist's view that people do things primarily for the rewards they bring, the economist's view that, as a rule, human beings make rational decisions, and the psychoanalyst's view that acting aggressively gets rid of aggressive impulses.

Consider how dissonance theory challenged behaviorism. At the time, most scientific psychologists were convinced that people's actions were governed by reward and punishment. It is certainly true that if you feed a rat at the end of a maze, he will learn the maze faster than if you don't feed him, and if you give your dog a biscuit when she gives you her paw, she will learn that trick faster than if you sit around hoping she will do it on her own. Conversely, if you punish your pup when you catch her peeing on the carpet, she will soon stop doing it. Behaviorists further argued that anything that was associated with reward would become more attractive—your puppy will like you because you give her biscuits—and anything associated with pain would become noxious and undesirable.

Behavioral laws apply to human beings too, of course; no one would stay in a boring job without pay, and if you give your toddler a cookie to stop him from having a tantrum, you have taught him to have another tantrum when he wants a cookie. But, for better or worse, the human mind is more complex than the brain of a rat or a puppy. A dog may appear contrite for having been caught peeing on the carpet, but she will not try to think up justifications for her misbehavior. Humans think—and because we think, dissonance theory demonstrates, our behavior transcends the effects of rewards and punishments and often contradicts them.

To test this observation, Elliot predicted that if people go through a great deal of pain, discomfort, effort, or embarrassment to get something, they will be happier with that “something” than if it came to them easily. For behaviorists, this was a preposterous prediction. Why would people like anything associated with pain? But for Elliot,

the answer was obvious: self-justification. The cognition “I am a sensible, competent person” is dissonant with the cognition “I went through a painful procedure to achieve something”—say, join a group—“that turned out to be boring and worthless.” Therefore, a person would distort his or her perceptions of the group in a positive direction, trying to find good things about it and ignoring the downside.

It might seem that the easiest way to test this hypothesis would be to rate a number of college fraternities on the basis of how severe their initiations are, then interview members and ask them how much they like their fraternity brothers. If the members of severe-initiation fraternities like their frat brothers more than do members of mild-initiation fraternities, does this prove that severity produces the liking? It does not. It may be just the reverse. If the members of a fraternity regard themselves as being a highly desirable, elite group, they may require a severe initiation to prevent the riffraff from joining. Only those who are highly attracted to the severe-initiation group to begin with would be willing to go through the initiation to get into it. Those who are not excited by a particular fraternity and just want to be in one, any one, will choose fraternities that require mild initiations.

That was why it was essential to conduct a controlled experiment. The beauty of an experiment is the random assignment of people to conditions. Regardless of a person’s degree of interest in joining the group, each participant would be randomly assigned to either the severe-initiation or the mild-initiation condition. If people who went through a tough time to get into a group later find that group to be more attractive than those who got in with no effort, then we would know that it was the effort that caused liking, not the differences in initial levels of interest.

And so Elliot and his colleague Judson Mills conducted just such an experiment.⁵ Stanford students were invited to join a group that would be discussing the psychology of sex, but to qualify for admission, they first had to fulfill an entrance requirement. Some of the students were randomly assigned to a severely embarrassing initiation procedure: they had to recite, out loud to the experimenter, lurid, sexually explicit passages from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and

other racy novels. (For conventional 1950s students, this was a painfully embarrassing thing to do.) Others were randomly assigned to a mildly embarrassing initiation procedure: reading aloud sexual words from the dictionary.

After the initiation, each of the students listened to an identical tape recording of a discussion allegedly being held by the group of people they had just joined. Actually, the audiotape was prepared in advance so that the discussion was as boring and worthless as it could be. The discussants talked haltingly, with long pauses, about the secondary sex characteristics of birds—changes in plumage during courtship, that sort of thing. The taped discussants hemmed and hawed, frequently interrupted one another, and left sentences unfinished.

Finally, the students rated the discussion on a number of dimensions. Those who had undergone only a mild initiation saw the discussion for what it was, worthless and dull, and they correctly rated the group members as being unappealing and boring. One guy on the tape, stammering and muttering, admitted that he hadn't done the required reading on the courtship practices of some rare bird, and the mild-initiation listeners were annoyed by him. What an irresponsible idiot! He didn't even do the basic reading! He let the group down! Who'd want to be in a group with him? But those who had gone through a severe initiation rated the discussion as interesting and exciting and the group members as attractive and sharp. They forgave the irresponsible idiot. His candor was refreshing! Who wouldn't want to be in a group with such an honest guy? It was hard to believe that they were listening to the same tape recording. Such is the power of dissonance.

This experiment has been replicated several times by other scientists with a variety of initiation techniques, from electric shock to excessive physical exertion.⁶ The results are always the same: severe initiations increase a member's liking for the group. A stunning example of the justification of effort in real life came from an observational study done in the multicultural nation of Mauritius.⁷ The annual Hindu festival of Thaipusam includes two rituals: a low-ordeal ritual involving singing and collective prayer, and a severe-ordeal ritual called *kavadi*. "Severe" is something of an understatement.

Participants are pierced with needles and skewers, carry heavy bundles, and drag carts that are attached by hooks to their skin for more than four hours. Then they climb a mountain barefoot to reach the temple of Murugan. Afterward, researchers gave both the low-ordeal and severe-ordeal participants the opportunity to anonymously donate money to the temple. The severe-ordeal ritual produced much higher donations than the low-ordeal ritual. The greater the men's pain, the greater their commitment to the temple.

These findings do not mean that people enjoy painful experiences or that they enjoy things because they are associated with pain. What they mean is that if a person voluntarily goes through a difficult or painful experience *in order to attain* some goal or object, that goal or object becomes more attractive. If, on your way to join a discussion group, a flowerpot fell from the open window of an apartment building and hit you on the head, you would not like that discussion group any better. But if you volunteered to get hit on the head by a flowerpot to become a member of the group, you would definitely like the group more.

Believing Is Seeing

I will look at any additional evidence to confirm the opinion to which I have already come.

—Lord Molson, *twentieth-century British politician*

Dissonance theory exploded the self-flattering idea that we humans, being *Homo sapiens*, process information logically. On the contrary; if new information is consonant with our beliefs, we think it is well founded and useful—“Just what I always said!” But if the new information is dissonant, then we consider it biased or foolish —“What a dumb argument!” So powerful is the need for consonance that when people are forced to look at disconfirming evidence, they will find a way to criticize, distort, or dismiss it so that they can maintain or even strengthen their existing belief. This mental contortion is called the “confirmation bias.”⁸

Once you are aware of this bias, you’ll see it everywhere, including in yourself. Imagine that you are a world-class violinist and your proudest possession is your multimillion-dollar, three-hundred-year-old Stradivarius. What a thing of beauty it is! The aged warmth of its tone! Its resonance! Its ease of playability! Now some idiot researcher tries to convince you that modern violins, some of which cost a mere hundred thousand dollars or so, are in many ways better than your beloved Strad. It’s such a preposterous claim that you laugh out loud. “Wait,” the researcher says. “We set up blind tests in hotel rooms with twenty-one professional violinists and had them wear goggles that prevented them from knowing whether they were playing a modern instrument or a Stradivarius, and thirteen of them chose the new violin as their favorite. Everyone’s *least* favorite of the six instruments tested was a Strad.” “Impossible!” you say. “The testing conditions were unrealistic—who can judge a violin’s sound in a hotel room?” So the researcher and her colleagues fine-tune the study (so to speak). This time they use six three-hundred-year-old Italian violins and six contemporary ones. They have ten professional soloists blind-test them for seventy-five minutes in a rehearsal room and then for another seventy-five minutes in a

concert hall. The soloists rated the modern violins higher on playability, articulation, and projection, and their guesses as to whether they were playing an old instrument or a new one were no better than chance.⁹

A subsequent study found that listeners, too, prefer the sound of new violins over the allegedly better acoustics of Strads.¹⁰ Strads were rated as sounding better than modern instruments only when the listeners knew what they were hearing. “If you know it’s a Strad, you will hear it differently,” said the lead researcher. “And you can’t turn off that effect.”

Will these studies persuade most professional violinists that Strads might be inferior in certain ways to some modern violins? Chances are that the professional violinists will scrutinize the research, looking for flaws. “It’s not just the instrument, it’s the player,” said the concertmaster of the Milwaukee Symphony, whose own Strad is worth five million dollars. “If you’re comfortable with an instrument, automatically it’s a plus, and the newer instruments, they respond easily. I don’t know any great soloist who has a Strad or Guarneri who is trading it in for a new instrument.” Not even for a profit of \$4,900,040!

The confirmation bias is especially glaring in matters of political observation; we see only the positive attributes of our side and the negative attributes of theirs. Lenny Bruce, the legendary American humorist and social commentator, described this mechanism vividly as he watched the famous 1960 confrontation between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy in the nation’s first televised presidential debate:

I would be with a bunch of Kennedy fans watching the debate and their comment would be, “He’s really slaughtering Nixon.” Then we would all go to another apartment, and the Nixon fans would say, “How do you like the shellacking he gave Kennedy?” And then I realized that each group loved their candidate so that a guy would have to be this blatant—he would have to look into the camera and say: “I am a thief, a crook, do you hear me, I am the worst choice you could ever

make for the Presidency!” And even then his following would say, “Now there’s an honest man for you. It takes a big guy to admit that. There’s the kind of guy we need for President.”¹¹

In 2003, after it had become abundantly clear that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Democrats and Republicans who had favored going to war (before it began) were thrown into dissonance: We believed the president when he told us Saddam Hussein had WMDs, and we (and he) were wrong. How to resolve this? The majority of Republicans resolved it by refusing to accept the evidence, telling a Knowledge Networks poll that they believed the weapons *had* been found. The survey’s baffled director said, “For some Americans, their desire to support the war may be leading them to screen out information that weapons of mass destruction have not been found. Given the intensive news coverage and high levels of public attention to the topic, this level of misinformation suggests that some Americans may be avoiding having an experience of cognitive dissonance.” You bet.¹² Indeed, to this day we occasionally get a query from a reader trying to persuade us that WMDs *were* found. We reply that Bush’s top officials—including Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, and Colin Powell—have all acknowledged that there were no WMDs other than a cache of mostly decaying chemical weapons, nothing that warranted going to war over. In his 2010 memoir *Decision Points*, Bush himself wrote, “No one was more shocked and angry than I was when we didn’t find the weapons. I had a sickening feeling every time I thought about it. I still do.” That “sickening feeling” is cognitive dissonance.

Democrats who had backed President Bush were reducing dissonance too, but in a different way: by actually forgetting that they originally were in favor of the war. Before the invasion, about 46 percent of Democrats supported the invasion; by 2006, only 21 percent remembered having done so. Just before the war, 72 percent of Democrats said they thought Iraq had WMDs, but later, only 26 percent remembered having believed this. To maintain consonance, they were saying, in effect, “I knew all along that Bush was lying to us.”¹³

Neuroscientists have shown that these biases in thinking are built into the way brains process information—all brains, regardless of their owners' political affiliations. In one study, people were monitored by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) as they tried to process either dissonant or consonant information about George Bush or John Kerry. Drew Westen and his colleagues found that the reasoning areas of the brain virtually shut down when participants were confronted with dissonant information, and the emotion circuits of the brain were activated when consonance was restored.¹⁴ These mechanisms provide a neurological basis for the observation that once our minds are made up, it can be a major effort to change them.

Indeed, even reading information that goes against your point of view can make you all the more convinced you are right. In one experiment, researchers selected people who either favored or opposed capital punishment and asked them to read two scholarly, well-documented articles on the emotionally charged issue of whether the death penalty deters violent crimes. One article concluded that it did, the other that it didn't. If the readers were processing information rationally, they would realize that the issue was more complex than they had previously thought and would therefore move a bit closer to each other in their beliefs about capital punishment as a deterrent. But dissonance theory predicts that the readers would find a way to distort the two articles. They would find reasons to clasp the confirming article to their bosoms and hail it as a highly competent piece of work. And they would be supercritical of the disconfirming article, finding minor flaws and magnifying them into major reasons why they need not be influenced by it. This is precisely what happened. Not only did each side try to discredit the other's arguments; each side became even more committed to its own.¹⁵

This frequently replicated finding explains why it is so difficult for scientists and health experts to persuade people who are ideologically or politically committed to a belief—such as “climate change is a hoax”—to change their minds even when overwhelming evidence dictates that they should. People who receive disconfirming or otherwise unwelcome information often do not simply resist it;

they may come to support their original (wrong) opinion even more strongly—a backfire effect. Once we are invested in a belief and have justified its wisdom, changing our minds is literally hard work. It's much easier to slot that new evidence into an existing framework and do the mental justification to keep it there than it is to change the framework.¹⁶

The confirmation bias even sees to it that no evidence—the absence of evidence—is evidence for what we believe. When the FBI and other investigators failed to find any evidence whatsoever that the nation had been infiltrated by satanic cults that were ritually slaughtering babies, believers in these cults were unfazed. The absence of evidence, they said, was confirmation of how clever and evil the cult leaders were; they were eating those babies, bones and all.

It's not just fringe cultists and proponents of pop psychology who fall prey to this reasoning. When Franklin D. Roosevelt made the terrible decision to uproot thousands of Japanese Americans and put them in internment camps for the duration of World War II, he did so entirely on the basis of rumors that Japanese Americans were planning to sabotage the war effort. There was no proof then or later to support this rumor. Indeed, the U.S. Army's West Coast commander, General John DeWitt, admitted that the military had no evidence of sabotage or treason against a single Japanese American citizen. Still: "The very fact that no sabotage has taken place," he said, "is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action *will* be taken."¹⁷

Ingrid's Choice, Nick's Mercedes, and Elliot's Canoe

Dissonance theory came to explain far more than the reasonable notion that people are unreasonable at processing information. It also showed why they continue to be biased after making important decisions.¹⁸ In his illuminating book *Stumbling on Happiness*, social psychologist Dan Gilbert asks us to consider what would have happened at the end of *Casablanca* if Ingrid Bergman had not patriotically rejoined her Nazi-fighting husband but instead remained with Humphrey Bogart in Morocco. Would she, as Bogart tells her in a heart-wrenching speech, have regretted it—"Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life"? Or did she forever regret leaving Bogart? Gilbert gathered a wealth of data that shows that the answer to both questions is no, that either decision would have made her happy in the long run. Bogart was eloquent but wrong, and dissonance theory tells us why: Ingrid would have found reasons to justify either choice, along with reasons to be glad she did not make the other.

Once we make a decision, we have all kinds of tools at our disposal to bolster it. When our frugal, unflashy friend Nick traded in his eight-year-old Honda Civic on a sudden impulse and bought a new, fully loaded Mercedes, he began behaving oddly (for Nick). He started criticizing his friends' cars, saying things like "Isn't it about time you traded in that wreck? Don't you think you deserve the pleasure of driving a well-engineered machine?" and "You know, it's really unsafe to drive little cars. If you got in an accident, you could be killed. Isn't your life worth an extra few thousand dollars? You have no idea how much peace of mind it brings me to know that my family is safe because I'm driving a solid automobile."

It's possible that Nick simply got bitten by the safety bug and decided, coolly and rationally, that it would be wonderful if all his friends drove a great car like the Mercedes. But we don't think so. His behavior was so uncharacteristic that we suspected that he was reducing the dissonance he felt over impulsively spending a big

chunk of his life's savings on what he would once have referred to as "just a car." In addition, he did this just when his kids were about to go to college, an event that would put a strain on his bank account. So Nick began marshaling arguments to justify his decision: "The Mercedes is a wonderful machine; I've worked hard all my life and I deserve it; besides, it's so safe." And if he could persuade his cheapskate friends to buy one too, he would feel doubly justified. Like Mrs. Keech's converts, he began to proselytize.

Nick's need to reduce dissonance was increased by the irrevocability of his decision; he could not unmake that decision without losing a lot of money. Some scientific evidence for the power of irrevocability comes from a clever study of the mental maneuverings of gamblers at a racetrack. The racetrack is an ideal place to study irrevocability because once you've placed your bet, you can't go back and tell the nice man behind the window you've changed your mind. In this study, the researchers simply intercepted people who were standing in line to place two-dollar bets and other people who had just left the window. The investigators asked them how certain they were that their horses would win. The bettors who had placed their bets were far more certain about their choice than the folks waiting in line.¹⁹ Yet nothing had changed except the finality of placing the bet. People become more certain they are right about something they just did if they can't undo it.

You can see one immediate benefit of understanding how dissonance works: Don't listen to Nick. The more costly a decision in terms of time, money, effort, or inconvenience and the more irrevocable its consequences, the greater the dissonance and the greater the need to reduce it by overemphasizing the good things about the choice made. Therefore, when you are about to make a big purchase or an important decision—which car or computer to buy, whether to undergo plastic surgery, or whether to sign up for a costly self-help program—don't ask someone who has just done it. That person will be highly motivated to convince you that it is the right thing to do. Ask people who have spent twelve years and fifty thousand dollars on a particular therapy if it helped, and most will say, "Dr. Weltschmerz is wonderful! I would *never* have [found true love] [got a new job] [taken up tap dancing] if it hadn't been for him."

After investing all that time and money, they aren't likely to say, "Yeah, I saw Dr. Weltschmerz for twelve years, and boy, was it ever a waste." Behavioral economists have shown how reluctant people are to accept these *sunk costs*—investments of time or money that they've sunk into an experience or relationship. Rather than cutting their losses, most people will throw good money after bad in hopes of recouping those losses and justifying their original decision. Therefore, if you want advice on what product to buy, ask someone who is still gathering information and is still open-minded. And if you want to know whether a program will help you, don't rely on testimonials; get the data from controlled experiments.

Self-justification is complicated enough when it follows our conscious choices and we know we can expect it. But it also occurs in the aftermath of things we do for unconscious reasons, when we haven't a clue about why we hold some belief or cling to some custom but are too proud to admit it. In the introduction, we described the custom of the Dinka and Nuer tribes of the Sudan, who extract several of the permanent front teeth of their children—a painful procedure, done with a fishhook. Anthropologists suggest that this tradition originated during an epidemic of lockjaw; missing front teeth would enable sufferers to get some nourishment. But if that was the reason, why in the world would the villagers continue this custom once the danger had passed?

A practice that makes no sense at all to outsiders makes perfect sense when seen through the lens of dissonance theory. During the epidemic, the villagers might have begun extracting the front teeth of all their children so that if any of them later contracted tetanus, the adults would be able to feed them. But this is a painful thing to do to children, and in any case, only some would become infected. To further justify their actions, to themselves and their children, the villagers needed to bolster the decision by adding benefits to the procedure after the fact. Thus, they might convince themselves that missing teeth had aesthetic value—"Say, that sunken-chin look is really quite attractive"—and they might even turn the surgical ordeal into a rite of passage into adulthood. And, indeed, that is just what happened. "The toothless look is beautiful," the villagers say. "People who have all their teeth are ugly; they look like cannibals who would

eat a person. A full set of teeth makes a man look like a donkey.” The toothless look has other aesthetic advantages: “We like the hissing sound it creates when we speak.” And adults console frightened children by saying, “This ritual is a sign of maturity.”²⁰ The original medical justification for the practice is long gone. The psychological self-justification remains.

People want to believe that, being smart and rational individuals, they know why they make the choices they do, so they are not always happy when you tell them the actual reason for their actions. Elliot learned this firsthand after that initiation experiment. “After each participant had finished,” he recalls, “I explained the study in detail and went over the theory carefully. Although everyone who went through the severe initiation said that they found the hypothesis intriguing and that they could see how most people would be affected in the way I predicted, they all took pains to assure me that their preference for the group had nothing to do with the severity of the initiation. They each claimed that they liked the group because that’s the way they really felt. Yet almost all of them liked the group more than any of the people in the mild-initiation condition did.”

No one is immune to the need to reduce dissonance, even those who know the theory inside out. Elliot tells this story: “When I was a young professor at the University of Minnesota, my wife and I tired of renting apartments. So, in December, we set out to buy our first home. We could find only two reasonable houses in our price range. One was older, charming, and within walking distance of the campus. I liked it a lot, primarily because it meant that I could have my students over for research meetings, serve beer, and play the role of the hip professor. But that house was in an industrial area, without a lot of space for our children to play. The other choice was a tract house, newer but totally without distinction. It was in the suburbs, a thirty-minute drive from campus but only a mile from a lake. After going back and forth on that decision for a few weeks, we decided on the house in the suburbs.

“Shortly after moving in, I noticed an ad in the newspaper for a used canoe and immediately bought it as a surprise for my wife and kids. When I drove home on a freezing, bleak January day with the canoe lashed to the roof of my car, my wife took one look and burst

into laughter. 'What's so funny?' I asked. She said, 'Ask Leon Festinger!' Of course! I had felt so much dissonance about buying the house in the suburbs that I needed to do something right away to justify that purchase. I somehow managed to forget that it was the middle of winter and that, in Minneapolis, it would be months before the frozen lake would thaw out enough for the canoe to be usable. But, in a sense, without my quite realizing it, I used that canoe anyway. All winter, even as it sat in the garage, its presence made me feel better about our decision."

Spirals of Violence—and Virtue

Feeling stressed? One internet source teaches you how to make your own little Dammit Doll, which “can be thrown, jabbed, stomped and even strangled till all the frustration leaves you.” A little poem goes with it:

Whenever things don't go so well,
And you want to hit the wall and yell,
Here's a little dammit doll that you can't do without.
Just grasp it firmly by the legs and find a place to slam it.
And as you whack the stuffing out, yell, “Dammit, dammit,
dammit!”

The Dammit Doll reflects one of the most entrenched convictions in our culture, fostered by the psychoanalytic belief in the benefits of catharsis: expressing anger or behaving aggressively gets rid of anger. Throw that doll, hit a punching bag, shout at your spouse; you'll feel better afterward. Actually, decades of experimental research have found exactly the opposite: when people vent their feelings aggressively, they often feel worse, pump up their blood pressure, and make themselves even angrier.²¹

Venting is especially likely to backfire when a person commits an aggressive act against another person directly, and that is exactly what cognitive dissonance theory would predict. When you do anything that harms others—get them in trouble, verbally abuse them, or punch them out—a powerful new factor comes into play: the need to justify what you did. Take a boy who goes along with a group of his fellow seventh graders who are taunting and bullying a weaker kid who did them no harm. The boy likes being part of the gang but his heart really isn't in the bullying. Later, he feels some dissonance about what he did. “How can a decent kid like me,” he wonders, “have done such a cruel thing to a nice, innocent little kid like him?” To reduce dissonance, he will try to convince himself that the victim is neither nice nor innocent: “He is such a nerd and a crybaby.

Besides, he would have done the same to me if he had the chance.” Once the boy starts down the path of blaming the victim, he becomes more likely to beat up on the victim with even greater ferocity the next chance he gets. Justifying his first hurtful act sets the stage for more aggression. That’s why the catharsis hypothesis is wrong.

The results of the first experiment that demonstrated this actually came as a complete surprise to the investigator. Michael Kahn, then a graduate student in clinical psychology at Harvard, designed an ingenious experiment that he was sure would demonstrate the benefits of catharsis. Posing as a medical technician, Kahn took polygraph and blood pressure measurements from college students, one at a time, allegedly as part of a medical experiment. As he was taking these measurements, Kahn feigned annoyance and made some insulting remarks to the students (having to do with their mothers). The students got angry; their blood pressure soared. In the experimental condition, the students were allowed to vent their anger by informing Kahn’s supervisor of his insults; thus, they believed they were getting him in big trouble. In the control condition, the students did not get a chance to express their anger.

Kahn, a good Freudian, was astonished by the results: Catharsis was a total flop in terms of making people feel better. The people who were allowed to express their anger about Kahn felt far greater animosity toward him than those who were not given that opportunity. In addition, although everyone’s blood pressure went up during the experiment, subjects who expressed their anger showed even greater elevations; the blood pressure of those who were not allowed to express their anger soon returned to normal.²² Seeking an explanation for this unexpected pattern, Kahn discovered dissonance theory, which was just getting attention at the time, and realized it could beautifully account for his results. Because the students thought they had gotten the technician in serious trouble, they had to justify their actions by convincing themselves that he deserved it, thus increasing their anger—and their blood pressure.

Children learn to justify their aggressive actions early; a child hits his younger sibling, who starts to cry, and immediately the boy claims, “But he started it! He deserved it!” Most parents find these

childish self-justifications to be of no great consequence, and usually they aren't. But it is sobering to realize that the same mechanism underlies the behavior of gangs who bully weaker children, employers who mistreat workers, lovers who abuse each other, police officers who continue beating a suspect who has surrendered, tyrants who imprison and oppress ethnic minorities, and soldiers who commit atrocities against civilians. In all these cases, a vicious circle is created: Aggression begets self-justification, which begets more aggression. Fyodor Dostoyevsky understood perfectly how this process works. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, he has Fyodor Pavlovitch, the brothers' scoundrel of a father, recall "how he had once in the past been asked, 'Why do you hate so-and-so so much?' And he had answered them, with his shameless impudence, 'I'll tell you. He has done me no harm. But I played him a dirty trick, and ever since I have hated him.'"

Fortunately, dissonance theory also shows us how a person's generous actions can create a spiral of benevolence and compassion, a "virtuous circle." When people do a good deed, particularly when they do it on a whim or by chance, they will come to see the beneficiary of their generosity in a warmer light. Their cognition that they went out of their way to do a favor for this person is dissonant with any negative feelings they might have had about him. In effect, after doing the favor, they ask themselves: "Why would I do something nice for a jerk? Therefore, he's not as big a jerk as I thought he was—as a matter of fact, he is a pretty decent guy who deserves a break."

Several experiments have supported this prediction. In one, college students participated in a contest in which they won substantial sums of money. Afterward, the experimenter approached one-third of them and explained that he was using his own funds for the experiment and was running short, which meant he might be forced to close down the experiment prematurely. He asked, "As a special favor to me, would you mind returning the money you won?" (They all agreed.) A second group was also asked to return the money, but this time it was the departmental secretary who made the request, explaining that the psychology department's research fund was running low. (They still all agreed.) The remaining participants

were not asked to return their winnings at all. Finally, everyone filled out a questionnaire that included an opportunity to rate the experimenter. Participants who had been cajoled into doing a special favor for him liked him the best; they convinced themselves he was a particularly fine, deserving fellow. The others thought he was pretty nice but not anywhere near as wonderful as the people who had done him a personal favor believed.²³

The mechanism of the virtuous circle starts early. In a study of four-year-olds, children were given one sticker each and then introduced to a doggie puppet “who is sad today”; some of the children were told they had to give the sticker to Doggie, while others had a choice of whether or not to give the sticker away. Later, the children were given three stickers each, introduced to another sad puppet, Ellie, and told they could share up to three stickers with her. The children who had been *allowed to choose* to be generous to the sad doggie shared more with Ellie than the children who had been *instructed* to share. In other words, once children saw themselves as generous kids, they continued to behave generously.²⁴

Although scientific research on the virtuous circle is relatively new, the general idea may have been discovered in the eighteenth century by Benjamin Franklin, a serious student of human nature as well as science and politics. While serving in the Pennsylvania legislature, Franklin was disturbed by the opposition and animosity of a fellow legislator. So he set out to win him over. He didn’t do it, he wrote, by “paying any servile respect to him”—that is, by doing the other man a favor—but by inducing his target to do a favor for *him*. He asked the man to loan him a rare book from his library.

He sent it immediately and I returned it in about a week with another note, expressing strongly my sense of the favor. When we next met in the House, he spoke to me (which he had never done before), and with great civility; and he ever after manifested a readiness to serve me on all occasions, so that we became great friends, and our friendship continued to his death. This is another instance of the truth of an old maxim I had learned, which says, “He that has once done you

a kindness will be more ready to do you another than he whom you yourself have obliged.”²⁵

• • •

Dissonance is bothersome under any circumstances, but it is most painful to people when an important element of their self-concept is threatened—typically when they do something that is inconsistent with their view of themselves.²⁶ If a celebrity you admire is accused of an immoral act, you will feel a pang of dissonance, and the more you liked and admired that person, the greater the dissonance you’ll feel. (Later in this book, we’ll discuss the massive dissonance felt by Michael Jackson’s many fans upon hearing compelling evidence of his sexual relationships with young boys.) But that’s nothing compared to how you would feel if *you* did the immoral thing. If you regard yourself as a person of high integrity and you do something that harms another person, you’ll feel a much more devastating rush of dissonance than you would on hearing about a favorite movie star’s transgression. After all, you can always abandon your allegiance to a celebrity or find another hero. But if you violate your own values, you’ll feel much greater dissonance because, at the end of the day, you have to go on living with yourself.

In a sweet demonstration of how the need for self-esteem trumps the virtue of realistic modesty, the great majority of people think they are “better than average”—we might call this the Lake Wobegone effect. They say they are better than average in all kinds of ways—smarter, nicer, more ethical, funnier, more competent, more humble, even better drivers.²⁷ Their efforts at reducing dissonance are therefore designed to preserve these positive self-images.²⁸ When Mrs. Keech’s doomsday predictions failed, imagine the excruciating dissonance her committed followers felt—“I am a smart person” clashed with “I just did an incredibly stupid thing: I gave away my house and possessions and quit my job because I believed a crazy woman.” To reduce that dissonance, her followers could either modify their opinion of their intelligence or justify the incredibly stupid thing they had just done. It’s not a close contest; justification wins by three lengths. Mrs. Keech’s true believers saved their self-esteem by

deciding they hadn't done anything stupid; actually, they had been really smart to join this group because their faith saved the world from destruction. In fact, if others were smart, they would join too. Where's that busy street corner?

None of us is off the hook on this one. *We* might feel amused at *them*, those foolish people who believe fervently in doomsday predictions, but, as political scientist Philip Tetlock shows in his book *Expert Political Judgment*, even professionals who are in the business of economic and political forecasting are usually no more accurate than us untrained folks—or Mrs. Keech, for that matter.²⁹

And what do these experts do when *their* prophecies are disconfirmed? In 2010, a coalition of twenty-three prominent economists, fund managers, academics, and journalists signed a letter opposing the Federal Reserve's practice of buying long-term debt as a way of pushing down long-term interest rates. This practice risks "currency debasement and inflation" and fails to create jobs, the experts stated, and therefore should be "reconsidered and discontinued." Four years later, inflation was still low (indeed lower than the Federal Reserve's goal of 2 percent), unemployment had fallen sharply, job growth was improving, and the stock market was soaring. Accordingly, reporters went back to the letter's signers and asked, Have you changed your minds? Of the twenty-three signatories, fourteen didn't reply. The other nine said their views were unchanged; they were just as worried about inflation now as they had ever been. Like the failed doomsday prophets, they had clever self-justifications for not admitting they had been wrong, very wrong. One said the nation *had* had inflation; it just hadn't shown up yet in consumer prices. One, using what he later admitted were bogus statistics, claimed the country was in the midst of double-digit inflation. One said that "official numbers err" and that inflation was really much higher than the Bureau of Labor Statistics claimed. And several, with echoes of doomsday, said their *prediction* was right but the *date* was wrong: "High inflation will come someday; we just haven't said when."³⁰

Experts can sound pretty impressive, especially when they bolster their claims by citing their years of training and experience in a field. Yet hundreds of studies have shown that, compared to predictions

based on actuarial data, predictions based on an expert's years of training and personal experience are rarely better than chance. But when an expert is wrong, the centerpiece of his or her professional identity is threatened. Therefore, dissonance theory predicts that the more self-confident and famous experts are, the less likely they will be to admit mistakes. And that is just what Tetlock found. Experts reduced the dissonance caused by their failed forecasts by coming up with explanations of why they would have been right "if only"—if only that improbable calamity had not intervened; if only the timing of events had been different; if only blah-blah-blah.

Dissonance reduction operates like the burner on a stove, keeping our self-esteem bubbling along. That is why we are usually oblivious to the self-justifications, the little lies to ourselves that prevent us from even acknowledging that we made mistakes or foolish decisions. But dissonance theory applies to people with low self-esteem too, to people who consider themselves to be schnooks, crooks, or incompetents. They are not surprised when their behavior confirms their negative self-image. When they make wrong-headed predictions or go through severe initiations to get into what turns out to be dull groups, they merely say, "Yup, I screwed up again; that's just like me." A used-car dealer who knows that he is dishonest does not feel dissonance when he conceals the dismal repair record of the car he is trying to unload; a woman who believes she is unlovable does not feel dissonance when a man rejects her; a con man does not experience dissonance when he cheats his grandmother out of her life savings.

Our convictions about who we are carry us through the day, and we are constantly interpreting the things that happen to us through the filter of those core beliefs. When those beliefs are violated, even by a good experience, it causes us discomfort. An appreciation of the power of self-justification helps us understand why people who have low self-esteem or who simply believe that they are incompetent in some domain are not totally overjoyed when they do something well; on the contrary, they often feel like frauds. If the woman who believes she is unlovable meets a terrific guy who starts pursuing her seriously, she will feel momentarily pleased, but that pleasure is likely to be tarnished by a rush of dissonance: "What

does he see in me?” Her resolution is unlikely to be “How nice; I must be more appealing than I thought I was.” More likely, it will be “As soon as he discovers the real me, he’ll dump me.” She will pay a high psychological price to have that consonance restored.

Indeed, several experiments find that most people who have low self-esteem or a low estimate of their abilities do feel uncomfortable with dissonant successes and dismiss them as accidents or anomalies.³¹ This is why they seem so stubborn to friends and family members who try to cheer them up. “Look, you just won the Pulitzer Prize in literature! Doesn’t *that* mean you’re good?” “Yeah, it’s nice, but just a fluke. I’ll never be able to write another word, you’ll see.” Self-justification, therefore, will protect high self-esteem to avoid dissonance, but it will also protect low self-esteem if that is a default self-perception.

The Pyramid of Choice

Imagine two young men who are identical in terms of attitudes, abilities, and psychological health. They are reasonably honest and have the same middling attitude toward, say, cheating—they think it is not a good thing to do, but there are worse crimes in the world. Now they are both in the midst of taking an exam that will determine whether they will get into graduate school. They each draw a blank on a crucial essay question. Failure looms . . . at which point each one gets an easy opportunity to cheat by reading another student's answers. The two young men struggle with temptation. After a long moment of anguish, one yields, and the other resists. Their decisions are a hairsbreadth apart; it could easily have gone the other way for each of them. Each gains something important, but at a cost: One gives up integrity for a good grade; the other gives up a good grade to preserve his integrity.

Now the question is: How will they feel about cheating one week later? Each student has had ample time to justify the course of action he took. The one who yielded to temptation will decide that cheating is not so great a crime. He will say to himself: "Hey, everyone cheats. It's no big deal. And I really needed to do this for my future career." But the one who resisted temptation will decide that cheating is far more immoral than he originally thought. "In fact," he'll tell himself, "people who cheat are disgraceful. In fact, people who cheat should be permanently expelled from school. We have to make an example of them."

By the time the students are through with their increasingly intense levels of self-justification, two things have happened. One, they are now a great distance apart from each other, and two, they have internalized their beliefs and are convinced that they have always felt that way.³² It is as if they started off at the top of a pyramid a millimeter apart, but by the time they have finished justifying their individual actions, they have slid to the bottom and now stand at opposite corners of its base. The one who didn't cheat considers the other to be totally immoral, and the one who cheated thinks the other is hopelessly puritanical. This process illustrates how people who

have been sorely tempted, battled temptation, and almost given in to it—but resisted at the eleventh hour—come to dislike, even despise, those who did not succeed in the same effort. It's the people who *almost* decide to live in glass houses who throw the first stones.

When a cheating scandal occurred at the high-achieving, high-pressure Stuyvesant High School in New York City—seventy-one students were caught exchanging exam answers—students gave a *New York Times* reporter a litany of self-justifications that allowed them to keep seeing themselves as smart students of integrity: “It’s like, ‘I’ll keep my integrity and fail this test,’” said one. “No. No one wants to fail a test. You could study for two hours and get an 80, or you could take a risk and get a 90.” He redefined cheating as “taking a risk.” For others, cheating was a “necessary evil.” For many, it was “helping classmates in need.” When one girl finally realized her classmates had been relying on her to write their papers for them, she said, “I respect them and think they have integrity . . . [but] sometimes the only way you could’ve gotten there is to kind of botch your ethics for a couple things.” *Kind of botch your ethics?*

Minimizing ethical violations is a popular form of self-justification. Hana Beshara started a website that pirated films and TV shows for instant free downloading, in clear violation of the copyright laws. Caught, she was sent to prison for sixteen months for conspiracy and criminal copyright infringement. But did she make a mistake or do wrong? No. “I never imagined it going criminal,” she told a reporter. “It didn’t seem like it was something to be bothered with. Even if it is wrong.”³³

The metaphor of the pyramid applies to most important decisions involving moral choices or life options. Instead of cheating on an exam, you can substitute deciding to begin a casual affair (or not), take steroids to improve your athletic ability (or not), stay in a troubled marriage (or not), lie to protect your employer and job (or not), have children (or not), pursue a demanding career (or stay home with the kids), decide that a sensational allegation against a celebrity you admire is false (or true). When the person at the top of the pyramid is uncertain, when there are benefits and costs for both choices, then he or she will feel a particular urgency to justify the choice made. But by the time the person is at the bottom of the

pyramid, ambivalence will have morphed into certainty, and he or she will be miles away from anyone who took a different route.

This process blurs the distinction that people like to draw between “us good guys” and “those bad guys.” Often, when standing at the top of the pyramid, we are faced not with a black-or-white, go-or-no-go decision but with gray choices whose consequences are shrouded. The first steps along the path are morally ambiguous, and the right decision is not always clear. We make an early, apparently inconsequential decision, and then we justify it to reduce the ambiguity of the choice. This starts a process of entrapment—action, justification, further action—that increases our intensity and commitment and may end up taking us far from our original intentions or principles.

It certainly worked that way for Jeb Stuart Magruder, Richard Nixon’s special assistant. Magruder, a key player in the plot to burglarize the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex, concealed the White House’s involvement and lied under oath to protect himself and others responsible. When Magruder was first hired, Nixon’s adviser Bob Haldeman did not mention that perjury, cheating, and breaking the law were part of the job description. If he had, Magruder almost certainly would have refused. How, then, did he end up as a central player in the Watergate scandal? In hindsight, it is easy to say he should have known or he should have drawn the line the first time they asked him to do something illegal.

In his autobiography, Magruder describes his initial meeting with Bob Haldeman at San Clemente. Haldeman flattered and charmed him. “Here you’re working for something more than just to make money for your company,” Haldeman told him. “You’re working to solve the problems of the country and the world. Jeb, I sat with the President on the night the first astronauts stepped onto the moon . . . I’m part of history being made.” At the end of a day of meetings, Haldeman and Magruder left the compound to go to the president’s house. Haldeman was enraged that his golf cart was not right there awaiting him, and he gave his assistant a “brutal chewing out,” threatening to fire the guy if he couldn’t do his job. Magruder couldn’t believe what he was hearing, especially since it was a beautiful

evening and a short walk to their destination. At first Magruder thought Haldeman's tirade was rude and excessive. But before long, wanting the job as much as he did, Magruder was justifying Haldeman's behavior: "In just a few hours at San Clemente I had been struck by the sheer *perfection* of life there . . . After you have been spoiled like that for a while, something as minor as a missing golf cart can seem a major affront."³⁴

And so, before dinner and even before having been offered a job, Magruder was hooked. It was a tiny first step, but he was on the road to Watergate. Once he was in the White House, he went along with all of the small ethical compromises that just about all politicians justify in the goal of serving their party. Then, when Magruder and others were working to reelect Nixon, G. Gordon Liddy entered the picture, hired by attorney general John Mitchell to be Magruder's general counsel. Liddy was a wild card, a James Bond wannabe. His first plan to ensure Nixon's reelection was to spend one million dollars to hire "squads" to rough up demonstrators, kidnap activists who might disrupt the Republican Convention, sabotage the Democratic Convention, hire "high-class" prostitutes to entice and then blackmail leading Democrats, and break into Democratic offices and install electronic-surveillance devices and wiretaps.

Mitchell disapproved of the more extreme aspects of this plan; further, he said, it was too expensive. So Liddy returned with a proposal merely to break into the DNC offices at the Watergate complex and install wiretaps. This time Mitchell approved, and the others went along. How did they justify breaking the law? "If [Liddy] had come to us at the outset and said, 'I have a plan to burglarize and wiretap Larry O'Brien's office,' we might have rejected the idea out of hand," wrote Magruder. "Instead, he came to us with his elaborate call girl/kidnapping/mugging/sabotage/wiretapping scheme, and we began to tone it down, always with a feeling that we should leave Liddy a little something—we felt we needed him, and we were reluctant to send him away with nothing." Finally, Magruder added, Liddy's plan was approved because of the paranoid climate in the White House: "Decisions that now seem insane seemed at the time to be rational . . . We were past the point of halfway measures or gentlemanly tactics."³⁵

When Magruder first entered the White House, he was a decent man. But, one small step at a time, he went along with dishonest actions, justifying each one as he did. He was entrapped in pretty much the same way as the three thousand people who took part in the famous experiment created by social psychologist Stanley Milgram.³⁶ In Milgram's original version, two-thirds of the participants administered what they thought were life-threatening levels of electric shock to another person simply because the experimenter kept saying, "The experiment requires that you continue." This experiment is almost always described as a study of obedience to authority. Indeed it is. But it is more than that; it is also a demonstration of long-term results of self-justification.³⁷

Imagine that a distinguished-looking man in a white lab coat walks up to you and offers you twenty dollars to participate in a scientific experiment. He says, "I want you to inflict five hundred volts of incredibly painful shock to another person to help us understand the role of punishment in learning." Chances are you would refuse; the money isn't worth it to harm another person, even for science. A few people would do it for twenty bucks, but most would tell the scientist where he could stick his money.

Now suppose the scientist lures you along more gradually. Suppose he offers you twenty dollars to administer a minuscule amount of shock, say ten volts, to a fellow in the adjoining room to see if this zap will improve the man's ability to learn. The experimenter even tries the ten volts on you, and you can barely feel it. So you agree. It's harmless and the study seems pretty interesting. (Besides, you've always wanted to know whether spanking your kids will get them to shape up.) You go along for the moment, and now the experimenter tells you that if the learner gets the wrong answer, you must move to the next toggle switch, which delivers a shock of twenty volts. Again, it's a small and harmless jolt. Because you just gave the learner ten, you see no reason why you shouldn't give him twenty. And once you give him twenty, you say to yourself, "Thirty isn't much more than twenty, so I'll go to thirty." He makes another mistake, and the scientist says, "Please administer the next level—forty volts."

Where do you draw the line? When do you decide enough is enough? Will you keep going to 450 volts, or even beyond that, to a switch marked XXX DANGER? When people were asked in advance how far they imagined they would go, almost no one said they would go to 450. But when they were actually in the situation, two-thirds of them went all the way to the maximum level they believed was dangerous. They did this by justifying each step as they went along: "This small shock doesn't hurt; twenty isn't much worse than ten; if I've given twenty, why not thirty?" With each justification, they committed themselves further. By the time people were administering what they believed were strong shocks, most found it difficult to justify a decision to quit. Participants who resisted early in the study, questioning the validity of the procedure itself, were less likely to become trapped by it and more likely to walk out.

The Milgram experiment shows us how ordinary people can end up doing immoral and harmful things through a chain reaction of behavior and subsequent self-justification. When we, as observers, look at them in puzzlement or dismay, we fail to realize that we are often looking at the end of a long, slow process down that pyramid. At his sentencing, Magruder said to Judge John Sirica: "I know what I have done, and Your Honor knows what I have done. Somewhere between my ambition and my ideals, I lost my ethical compass." How do you get an honest man to lose his ethical compass? You get him to take one step at a time, and self-justification will do the rest.

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Knowing how dissonance works won't make any of us automatically immune to the allure of self-justification, as Elliot learned when he bought that canoe in a Minnesota January. You can't say to people, as he did after the initiation experiments, "See how you reduced dissonance? Isn't that interesting?" and expect them to reply, "Oh, thank you for showing me the real reason I like the group. That sure makes me feel smart!" To preserve our belief that we are smart, all of us will occasionally do dumb things. We can't help it. We are wired that way.

But this does not mean that we are doomed to keep striving to justify our actions after the fact, to be like Sisyphus, never reaching

the top of the hill of self-acceptance. A richer understanding of how and why our minds work as they do is the first step toward breaking the self-justification habit. And that, in turn, requires us to be more mindful of our behavior and the reasons for our choices. It takes time, self-reflection, and willingness.

In 2003, the conservative columnist William Safire wrote that a “psychopolitical challenge” voters often face was “how to deal with cognitive dissonance.”³⁸ He began with a story of his own such challenge. During Bill Clinton’s administration, Safire recounted, he had criticized Hillary Clinton for trying to conceal the identity of the members of her health-care task force. He wrote a column castigating her efforts at secrecy, which he said were toxic to democracy. No dissonance there; those bad Democrats are always doing bad things. Six years later, however, he found that he was “afflicted” by cognitive dissonance when Vice President Dick Cheney, a fellow conservative Republican whom Safire admired, insisted on keeping the identity of his energy-policy task force a secret. What did Safire do? Because of his awareness of dissonance and how it works, he took a deep breath, hitched up his trousers, and did the tough but virtuous thing: He wrote a column publicly criticizing Cheney’s actions. The irony is that because of his criticism of Cheney, Safire received several laudatory letters from liberals—which, he admitted, produced enormous dissonance. Oh Lord, he’d done something *those* people approved of?

Safire’s ability to recognize his own dissonance and resolve it by doing the fair thing is rare. As we will see, his willingness to concede that his own side made a mistake is something that few are prepared to do. Instead, conservatives and liberals alike will bend over backward to reduce dissonance in a way that is favorable to them and their team. The specific tactics vary, but our efforts at self-justification are all designed to serve our need to feel good about what we have done, what we believe, and who we are.

2

Pride and Prejudice . . . and Other Blind Spots

And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?

—*Matthew 7:3*

When the public learned that Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia was flying to Louisiana on a government plane to go duck hunting with Vice President Dick Cheney despite Cheney's having a pending case before the Supreme Court, there was a flurry of protest at Scalia's apparent conflict of interest. Scalia himself was indignant at the suggestion that his ability to assess the constitutionality of Cheney's claim—that the vice president was legally entitled to keep the details of his energy task force secret—would be tainted by the ducks and the perks. In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* explaining why he would not recuse himself, Scalia wrote, "I do not think my impartiality could reasonably be questioned."

. . .

Neuropsychologist Stanley Berent and neurologist James Albers were hired by CSX Transportation and Dow Chemical to investigate railroad workers' claims that chemical exposure had caused permanent brain damage and other medical problems. More than six hundred railroad workers in fifteen states had been diagnosed with a form of brain damage following heavy exposure to chlorinated hydrocarbon solvents. CSX paid more than \$170,071 to Berent and Albers's consulting firm for research that eventually disputed a link between exposure to the company's industrial solvents and brain damage. While conducting their study, which involved reviewing the workers' medical files without the workers' informed consent, the two scientists served as expert witnesses for law firms representing CSX in lawsuits filed by workers. Berent saw nothing improper in his research, which he claimed "yielded important information about

solvent exposure.” Berent and Albers were subsequently reprimanded by the federal Office of Human Research Protections for their conflict of interest in this case.¹

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When you enter the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, you find yourself in a room of interactive exhibits designed to identify the people you can’t tolerate. The familiar targets are there (blacks, women, Jews, gays), but also short people, fat people, blond-female people, disabled people . . . You watch a video on the vast variety of prejudices designed to convince you that all human beings have at least a few, and then you are invited to enter the museum proper through one of two doors, one marked PREJUDICED, the other marked UNPREJUDICED. The latter door is locked, in case anyone misses the point, and occasionally some people do. When we were visiting the museum one afternoon, we were treated to the sight of four Hasidic Jews pounding angrily on the Unprejudiced door, demanding to be let in.

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The brain is designed with blind spots, optical and psychological, and one of its cleverest tricks is to confer on its owner the comforting delusion that he or she does not have any. In a sense, dissonance theory is a theory of blind spots—of how and why people unintentionally blind themselves so that they fail to notice vital events and information that might make them question their behavior or their convictions. Along with the confirmation bias, the brain comes packaged with other self-serving habits that allow us to justify our own perceptions and beliefs as being accurate, realistic, and unbiased. Social psychologist Lee Ross named this phenomenon “naive realism,” the inescapable conviction that we perceive objects and events clearly, “as they really are.”² We assume that other reasonable people see things the same way we do. If they disagree with us, they obviously aren’t seeing clearly. Naive realism creates a logical labyrinth because it presupposes two things: One, people who are open-minded and fair ought to agree with a reasonable

opinion, and, two, any opinion I hold must be reasonable; if it weren't, I wouldn't hold it. Therefore, if I can just get my opponents to sit down here and listen to me explain how things really are, they will agree with me. And if they don't, it must be because they are biased.

Ross knows whereof he speaks from both his laboratory experiments and his efforts to reduce the bitter conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Even when each side recognizes that the other side perceives the issues differently, each thinks that the other side is biased while they themselves are objective and that their own perceptions of reality should provide the basis for settlement. In one experiment, Ross took peace proposals created by Israeli negotiators, labeled them as Palestinian proposals, and asked Israeli citizens to judge them. "The Israelis liked the Palestinian proposal attributed to Israel more than they liked the Israeli proposal attributed to the Palestinians," he says. "If your own proposal isn't going to be attractive to you when it comes from the other side, what chance is there that the *other* side's proposal is going to be attractive when it actually comes from the other side?"³ Closer to home, social psychologist Geoffrey Cohen found that Democrats will endorse an extremely restrictive welfare proposal, one usually associated with Republicans, if they think it has been proposed by the Democratic Party, and Republicans will support a generous welfare policy if they think it comes from the Republican Party.⁴ Label the same proposal as coming from the other side, and you might as well be asking people to support a policy proposed by Hitler, Stalin, or Attila the Hun. None of the people in Cohen's study were aware of their blind spot—that they were being influenced by their party's position. Instead, they all claimed that their beliefs followed logically from their own careful study of the policy at hand, guided by their general philosophy of government.

It's immensely hard to overcome this blind spot, even when doing so is part of your job description. Consider the challenge for members of the Supreme Court, whose job, as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. observed, is to protect the First Amendment's guarantee of "freedom for the thought that we hate." That's pretty strong dissonance to overcome, although most judges imagine that they are up to the challenge. But according to a study of 4,519 votes

by Supreme Court justices in over five hundred cases between 1953 and 2011, the justices were more likely to support freedom of speech for speakers whose speech they agreed with; conservative members of the Roberts court ruled in favor of conservative speakers about 65 percent of the time and liberal speakers about 21 percent. The gap for liberal justices was not as great, more like 10 percent, but they too were more likely to vote in support of speakers whose political philosophy they shared.⁵

We believe our own judgments are less biased and more independent than those of others partly because we rely on introspection to tell us what we are thinking and feeling, but we have no way of knowing what others are truly thinking.⁶ And when we look into our souls and hearts, the need to avoid dissonance assures us that we have only the best and most honorable of motives. We take our own involvement in an issue as a source of accuracy and enlightenment (“I’ve felt strongly about gun control for years, therefore I know what I’m talking about”), but we regard such personal feelings on the part of others who hold different views as a source of bias (“She can’t possibly be impartial about gun control because she’s felt strongly about it for years”).

All of us are as unaware of our blind spots as fish are unaware of the water they swim in, but those who swim in the waters of privilege have a particular motivation to remain oblivious. When Marynia Farnham achieved fame and fortune during the 1940s and 1950s by advising women to stay at home and raise children or risk frigidity, neuroses, and a loss of femininity, she saw no inconsistency (or irony) in the fact that she was privileged to be a physician who was not staying at home raising her own two children. When affluent people speak of the underprivileged, they rarely thank their lucky stars that they are privileged, let alone consider that they might be overprivileged. Privilege is their blind spot.⁷ It is invisible and they don’t think twice about it; they justify their social position as something they are entitled to. In one way or another, all of us are blind to whatever privileges life has handed us, even if those privileges are temporary. Most people who normally fly in an airline’s main cabin regard the privileged people in business and first class as

wasteful snobs, if enviable ones. Imagine paying all that extra money for a mere six-hour flight! But as soon as they are the ones paying for the business seats, that attitude vanishes, replaced by a self-justifying mixture of pity and disdain for their fellow passengers forlornly trooping past them into steerage.

Drivers cannot avoid having blind spots in their field of vision, but good drivers are aware of them; they know they had better be careful backing up and changing lanes if they don't want to crash into fire hydrants and other cars. Our innate biases are, as two legal scholars put it, "like optical illusions in two important respects—they lead us to wrong conclusions from data, and their apparent rightness persists even when we have been shown the trick."⁸ We cannot avoid our psychological blind spots, but if we are unaware of them, we may become unwittingly reckless, crossing ethical lines and making foolish decisions. Introspection alone will not help our vision, because it will simply confirm our self-justifying beliefs that we, personally, cannot be co-opted or corrupted and that our dislikes or hatreds of other groups are not irrational but reasoned and legitimate. Blind spots enhance our pride and activate our prejudices.

The Road to St. Andrews

The greatest of faults, I should say, is to be conscious of none.

—*Thomas Carlyle, historian and essayist*

When *New York Times* editorial writer Dorothy Samuels learned that Tom DeLay, former leader of the House Republicans, had accepted a trip to the legendary St. Andrews golf course in Scotland from Jack Abramoff, a corrupt lobbyist then under investigation, she expressed her perplexity. “I’ve been writing about the foibles of powerful public officials for more years than I care to reveal without a subpoena,” she wrote, “and I still don’t get it: why would someone risk his or her reputation and career for a lobbyist-bestowed freebie like a vacation at a deluxe resort?”⁹

Why? Dissonance theory gives us the answer: one step at a time. Although there are plenty of unashamedly corrupt politicians who sell their votes to the largest campaign contributors, most politicians, thanks to their blind spots, believe they are incorruptible. When they first enter politics, they accept lunch with a lobbyist because, after all, that’s how politics works and it’s an efficient way to get information about a pending bill, isn’t it? “Besides,” the politician says, “lobbyists, like any other citizens, are exercising their right to free speech. I only have to listen; I’ll decide how to vote on the basis of whether my party and constituents support this bill and on whether it is the right thing to do for the American people.”

However, once you accept the first small inducement and justify it that way, you have started your slide down the pyramid. If you had lunch with a lobbyist to talk about that pending legislation, why not talk things over on the local golf course? What’s the difference? It’s a nicer place to have a conversation. And if you talked things over on the local course, why not accept a friendly offer to go to a better course to play golf with him or her—to, say, St. Andrews in Scotland? What’s wrong with that? By the time the politician is at the bottom of the pyramid, having accepted and justified ever-larger inducements, the public is screaming, “What’s *wrong* with that? Are

you kidding?” At one level, the politician is not kidding. Dorothy Samuels is right: Who would jeopardize a career and reputation for a trip to Scotland? No one, if that was the first offer, but many of us would if that offer had been preceded by several smaller ones that we had accepted. Pride—when followed by self-justification—paves the road to Scotland.

Conflict of interest and politics are synonymous, and we all understand the cozy collaborations that politicians forge to preserve their own power at the expense of the common welfare. It’s harder to see that exactly the same process affects judges, scientists, physicians, and other professionals who pride themselves on their ability to be intellectually independent for the sake of justice, scientific advancement, or public health. Their training and culture promote the core value of impartiality, so most people in these fields become indignant at the mere suggestion that financial or personal interests could contaminate their work. Their professional pride makes them see themselves as being above such matters. No doubt some are, just as, at the other extreme, some judges and scientists are flat-out dishonest, corrupted by ambition or money. In between the extremes of rare integrity and blatant dishonesty are the great majority who, being human, have all the blind spots the rest of us have. Unfortunately, they are also more likely to think they don’t, which makes them even more vulnerable to being hooked.

Once upon a time, most scientists ignored the lure of commerce. When Jonas Salk was questioned in 1954 about whether he would be patenting his polio vaccine, he replied, “Could you patent the sun?” How charming and yet how naive his remark seems today; imagine handing over your discovery to the public interest without keeping a few million bucks for yourself. The culture of science valued the separation of research and commerce, and universities maintained a firewall between them. Because scientists got their money from the government or independent funding institutions, they were more or less free to spend years investigating a problem that might or might not pay off, either intellectually or practically. A scientist who went public and profited from his or her discoveries was regarded with suspicion, even disdain. “It was once considered unseemly for a biologist to be thinking about some kind of

commercial enterprise while at the same time doing basic research,” said bioethicist and scientist Sheldon Krimsky.¹⁰ “The two didn’t seem to mix. But as the leading figures of the field of biology began intensively finding commercial outlets and get-rich-quick schemes, they helped to change the ethos of the field. Now it is the multivested scientists who have the prestige.”

The critical turning point occurred in 1980, when the Supreme Court ruled that patents could be issued on genetically modified bacteria independent of the process of development. That meant that you could get a patent for discovering a virus, altering a plant, isolating a gene, or modifying any other living organism as a “product of manufacture.” The gold rush was on—the scientists’ road to St. Andrews. Before long, many professors of molecular biology were serving on the advisory boards of biotechnology corporations and owned stock in companies selling products based on their research. Universities seeking new sources of revenue began establishing intellectual-property offices and providing incentives for faculty who patented their discoveries. Throughout the 1980s, the ideological climate shifted from one in which science was valued for its own sake or for the public interest to one in which science was valued for the profits it could generate in the private interest. Major changes in tax and patent laws were enacted, federal funding of research declined sharply, and tax benefits created a steep rise in funding from industry. The pharmaceutical industry was deregulated, and within a decade it had become one of the most profitable businesses in the United States.¹¹

And then scandals involving conflicts of interest on the part of researchers and physicians began to erupt. Big Pharma was producing new, lifesaving drugs but also drugs that were unnecessary at best and risky at worst; more than three-fourths of all drugs approved between 1989 and 2009 offered only minor improvements over existing medications, cost nearly twice as much, and had higher risks.¹² By 1999, seven major drugs, including Rezulin and Lotronex, had been taken off the market for safety reasons. None had been necessary to save lives (one was for heartburn, one a diet pill, one a painkiller, one an antibiotic) and

none was better than older, safer drugs. Yet these seven drugs were responsible for 1,002 deaths and thousands of troubling complications.¹³ In 2017, researchers at the Yale School of Medicine reported that nearly one-third of all new medications approved by the FDA between 2001 and 2010 had major safety issues that were not apparent until they had been on the market for an average of four years. Among the drugs withdrawn were Bextra, an anti-inflammatory medication; Zelnorm, for irritable bowel syndrome; and Raptiva, for psoriasis. The first two increased cardiovascular risk, and the third increased the risk of a rare and fatal brain infection. Seventy-one of the 222 approved drugs were withdrawn, required a “black box” warning about side effects, or warranted an announcement about newly identified risks. These risks were greatest for antipsychotic medications, biologics, and drugs that had been granted “accelerated approval.”¹⁴

The public has reacted to such news not only with the anger they are accustomed to feeling toward dishonest politicians but also with dismay and surprise: How can scientists and physicians possibly promote a drug they know is harmful? Can't they see that they are selling out? How can they justify what they are doing? Certainly some investigators, like some politicians, are corrupt and know exactly what they are doing. They are doing what they were hired to do: getting results that their employers want and suppressing results that their employers don't want to hear about, as tobacco-company researchers did for decades. But at least public-interest groups, watchdog agencies, and independent scientists can eventually blow the whistle on bad or deceptive research. The greater danger to the public comes from the self-justifications of well-intentioned scientists and physicians who, because of their need to reduce dissonance, truly believe themselves to be above the influence of their corporate funders. Yet, like a plant turning toward the sun, they turn toward the interests of their sponsors without even being aware that they are doing so.

How do we know this? One way is through experimental studies that assess an expert's judgment and determine whether that judgment changes depending on who is paying for it. In one such experiment, researchers paid 108 forensic psychologists and

psychiatrists the going rate to review four identical case files of actual sexual offenders and, using the same validated measures of risk assessment, offer their opinions on whether these men were more or less likely to reoffend. When experts use these measures in nonadversarial situations, their agreement is very high. But in this study, some of the experts were told they'd been hired by the defense; others were told they'd been hired by the prosecution, with the result that their assessments tilted toward their presumed employer: those who believed they were working for the prosecution assigned higher risk scores to offenders, and those who believed they were working for the defense assigned lower risk scores.¹⁵

Another way to measure the subtle effects of sponsorship is by comparing the results of studies funded independently and those funded by industry, which consistently reveal a funding bias.

- Two investigators selected 161 studies, all published during the same six-year span, of the possible risks to human health of four chemicals. Of the studies funded by industry, only 14 percent found harmful effects on health; of those funded independently, fully 60 percent found harmful effects.¹⁶
- A researcher examined more than 100 controlled clinical trials designed to determine the effectiveness of a new medication over older ones. Of those favoring the traditional drug, 13 percent had been funded by drug companies and 87 percent by nonprofit institutions.¹⁷
- Two Danish investigators examined 159 clinical trials that had been published between 1997 and 2001 in the *British Medical Journal*, where authors are required to declare potential conflicts of interest. The researchers could therefore compare studies in which the investigators had declared a conflict of interest with those in which there was none. The findings were “significantly more positive toward the experimental intervention” (i.e., the new drug compared to an older one) when the study had been funded by a for-profit organization.¹⁸

If most of the scientists funded by industry are not consciously cheating, what is causing the funding bias? Clinical trials of new drugs are complicated by many factors, including length of treatment, severity of the patients' disease, side effects, dosages, and variability in the patients being treated. The interpretation of results is rarely clear and unambiguous; that is why all scientific studies require replication and refinement and why most findings are open to legitimate differences of interpretation. If you are an impartial scientist and your research turns up an ambiguous but worrisome finding about your new drug, perhaps a slightly increased risk of heart attack or stroke, you might say, "This is troubling; let's investigate further. Is this increased risk a fluke, was it due to the drug, or were the patients unusually vulnerable?"

However, if you are motivated to show that your new drug is effective and better than older drugs, the better to keep your funding and your sponsor's approval, you will be inclined to downplay your misgivings and resolve the ambiguity in the company's favor. You will also be unconsciously motivated to seek only confirming evidence for your hypothesis—"It's nothing. There's no need to look further." "Those patients were already quite sick, anyway." "Let's assume the drug is safe until proven otherwise." This was the reasoning of the Merck-funded investigators who had been studying the company's multibillion-dollar painkiller Vioxx before evidence of the drug's risks was produced by independent scientists.¹⁹

In 1998, a team of scientists reported in the distinguished medical journal the *Lancet* that they had found a positive correlation between autism and the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine. *Boom*—the announcement generated enormous fear and put scientists, physicians, and parents at the top of the pyramid with this decision: Should we stop vaccinating children? Thousands of parents stepped off in the direction of "yes," relieved that they now knew the reason for their children's autism or reassured that they had a way to prevent it.

Six years later, ten of the thirteen scientists involved in this study retracted that particular result and revealed that the lead author, Andrew Wakefield, had had a conflict of interest he had failed to disclose to the journal: he was conducting research on behalf of

lawyers representing parents of autistic children. Wakefield had been paid more than eight hundred thousand dollars to determine whether there were grounds for pursuing legal action, and he gave the study's affirmative answer to the lawyers before publication. "We judge that all this information would have been material to our decision-making about the paper's suitability, credibility, and validity for publication," wrote Richard Horton, editor of the *Lancet*.²⁰

Wakefield, however, did not sign the retraction and could not see a problem. "Conflict of interest," he wrote in his defense, "is created when involvement in one project potentially could, or actively does, interfere with the objective and dispassionate assessment of the processes or outcomes of another project. We cannot accept that the knowledge that affected children were later to pursue litigation, following their clinical referral and investigation, influenced the content or tone of [our earlier] paper . . . We emphasise that this was not a scientific paper but a clinical report."²¹ Oh. It wasn't a scientific paper anyway.

No one knows Andrew Wakefield's real motives or thoughts about his research. But we suspect that he, like Stanley Berent in our opening story, convinced himself that he was acting honorably, that he was doing good work, and that he was uninfluenced by having been paid eight hundred thousand dollars by the lawyers. Unlike truly independent scientists, however, he had no incentive to look for disconfirming evidence of a correlation between vaccines and autism and many incentives to overlook other explanations. In fact, there is no causal relationship between autism and thimerosal, the preservative in the vaccines that was the supposed cause (thimerosal was removed from the vaccines in 2001, with no attendant decrease in autism rates). The apparent correlation was coincidental, a result of the fact that autism is typically diagnosed in children at the same age they are vaccinated.²² As of 2019, more than a dozen large-scale, peer-reviewed studies, including a Danish project involving more than 650,085 children, had found no relationship between the MMR vaccine and autism.

And did the thousands of parents who had started their slide down the pyramid by deciding there *was* a relationship exclaim in relief,

“Thank God for this helpful information”? Anyone who has been keeping up with the nationwide effort by some parents to block required vaccinations for their children knows the answer. Having spent six years justifying the belief that thimerosal was the agent responsible for their children’s autism or other diseases, these parents rejected the research showing that it wasn’t. They also rejected statements in favor of vaccination from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Medicine, the World Health Organization, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Faced with the dissonance between “I’m a good parent and know what’s best for my child” and “Those organizations tell me I made a decision that could harm my child,” what do they choose to believe? It’s a no-brainer. “What do those scientists know, anyway,” they say.

And that is how the “vaccinations cause autism” scare created tragic and lingering effects. A major epidemiological study found that vaccination programs for children have prevented more than a hundred million cases of serious contagious diseases since 1924 and saved between three and four million lives. But when some parents stopped vaccinating their children, rates of measles and whooping cough began to rise. The worst whooping cough epidemic since 1959 occurred in 2012, with 38,086 cases reported nationwide, and 2019 saw the greatest number of measles cases in twenty-five years—more than 1,250. This number represented a huge setback for public health, given that measles was declared eliminated in the United States in 2006. “Americans have witnessed an increase in hospitalizations and deaths from diseases like whooping cough, measles, mumps, and bacterial meningitis,” writes Paul Offit, chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases and director of the Vaccine Education Center at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, “because some parents have become more frightened by vaccines than by the diseases they prevent.”²³

We noted in chapter 1 that people often hold on to a belief long after they know rationally that it’s wrong, and this is especially true if they have taken many steps down the pyramid in support of that wrong belief. By then, getting information that contradicts a strong belief may actually backfire, causing the person to hold on to the

incorrect belief even more firmly. Brendan Nyhan and his colleagues gave a nationally representative sample of parents various kinds of scientific information assuaging their worries about vaccines: information about disease risks, a dramatic story of what can happen if a child is not vaccinated, even tragic images of sick children. The parents who had had mixed or negative feelings toward vaccines actually became *less* likely to say they would vaccinate their children. They were persuaded that vaccines didn't cause autism, but they came up with other concerns or vague discomforts to justify their reluctance to vaccinate.²⁴ (Nyhan got the same results with people who didn't get flu shots because they wrongly believed the vaccine gave you the flu.)

That is the lingering legacy of self-justification, because most of the anti-vaccine alarmists have never said, "We were wrong, and look at the harm we caused." Andrew Wakefield, whose license was revoked by British medical authorities, stands by his view that vaccines cause autism. "I will not be deterred," he said in a press release. "This issue is far too important."²⁵ In 2015, following an extensive outbreak of measles that started at Disneyland, Barbara Loe Fisher, president of an anti-vaccine organization that spreads misinformation and combats efforts to ensure that children are vaccinated, said that all the concern was simply "hype," designed to cover up vaccine failures. Her group is located, we assume, in Fantasyland.²⁶

The Gift That Keeps on Giving

Physicians, like scientists, want to believe their integrity cannot be compromised. Yet every time physicians accept a fee or other incentive for performing certain tests and procedures, for channeling some of their patients into clinical trials, or for prescribing a new, expensive drug that is not better or safer than an older one, they are balancing their patients' welfare against their own financial concerns. Their blind spot helps them tip the balance in their own favor, and then justify it: "If a pharmaceutical company wants to give us pens, notepads, calendars, lunches, honoraria, or small consulting fees, why not? We can't be bought by trinkets and pizzas." According to surveys, physicians regard small gifts as being ethically more acceptable than large gifts. The American Medical Association agrees, approving of gift-taking from pharmaceutical representatives as long as no single gift is worth much more than a hundred dollars. The evidence shows, however, that most physicians are influenced even more by small gifts than by big ones.²⁷

Drug companies know this. A national random-sample survey of nearly three thousand primary-care physicians and specialists found that 84 percent reported having received some form of compensation from the pharmaceutical industry—drug samples, food and beverages, reimbursements, payments for services.²⁸ According to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, in a five-month period, from August to December of 2013, pharmaceutical companies and device makers paid a total of \$3.5 billion to health-care professionals and teaching hospitals, an amount that included some \$380 million in speaking and consulting fees to 546,088 individual physicians—and that early estimate proved to be about \$1 billion short.²⁹ Some of those doctors were getting more than half a million dollars for their services, but the great majority were getting office trinkets, paid junkets, "continuing medical education" programs (where the only "education" is about the drug company's new medication), and "nonaccredited training."

The reason Big Pharma spends so much on small gifts as well as the big ones is well known to marketers, lobbyists, and social psychologists: being given a gift evokes an implicit desire to reciprocate. The Fuller Brush salespeople understood this principle decades ago when they pioneered the foot-in-the-door technique: Give a housewife a little brush as a gift, and she won't slam the door in your face. And once she hasn't slammed the door in your face, she will be more inclined to invite you in, and eventually to buy your expensive brushes. Robert Cialdini, who has spent many years studying influence and persuasion techniques, systematically observed Hare Krishna advocates raise money at airports.³⁰ Asking weary travelers for a donation wasn't working; the requests just made the travelers mad at them. And so the Krishnas came up with a better idea: They would approach a target traveler and press a flower into his hands or pin a flower to his jacket. If the target refused the flower and tried to give it back, the Krishna would demur and say, "It is our gift to you." Only then would the Krishna ask for a donation. This time the request was likely to be granted, because the gift of the flower had established a feeling of indebtedness and obligation in the traveler. How to repay the gift? With a small donation . . . and perhaps the purchase of a charming, overpriced edition of the Bhagavad Gita.

Were the travelers aware of the power of reciprocity to affect their behavior? Not at all. But once reciprocity kicks in, self-justification will follow: "I've always wanted a copy of the Bhagavad Gita; what is it, exactly?" The power of the flower is unconscious. "It's only a flower," the traveler says. "It's only a pizza," the medical resident says. "It's only a small donation for an educational symposium," the physician says. Yet the power of the flower is one reason that the amount of contact doctors have with pharmaceutical representatives is positively correlated with the cost of the drugs the doctors later prescribe. "That rep has been awfully persuasive about that new drug; I might as well try it; my patients might do well on it." Once you take the gift, no matter how small, the process starts. You will feel the urge to give something back, even if it's only, at first, your attention, your willingness to listen, your sympathy for the giver. Eventually, you will become more willing to give your prescription,

your ruling, your vote. Your behavior changes, but, thanks to blind spots and self-justification, your view of your intellectual and professional integrity remains the same. A friend of ours was given a prescription for a drug that had a long list of cautions. When she sought out an independent website that noted that all the research on this drug was done by the pharmaceutical company that developed it, she pointed this out to her doctor. He said, "What difference does that make?"

Carl Elliott, a bioethicist and philosopher who also has an MD, has written extensively about the ways that small gifts entrap their recipients. His brother Hal, a psychiatrist, told him how he ended up on the speakers bureau of a large pharmaceutical company: First they asked him to give a talk about depression to a community group. Why not? he thought; it would be a public service. Next they asked him to speak on the same subject at a hospital. Next they began making suggestions about the content of his talk, urging him to speak not about depression but about antidepressants. Then they told him they could get him on a national speaking circuit, "where the real money is." Then they asked him to lecture about their own new antidepressant. Looking back, Hal told his brother:

It's kind of like you're a woman at a party, and your boss says to you, "Look, do me a favor: be nice to this guy over there." And you see the guy is not bad-looking, and you're unattached, so you say, "Why not? I can be nice." Soon you find yourself on the way to a Bangkok brothel in the cargo hold of an unmarked plane. And you say, "Whoa, this is not what I agreed to." But then you have to ask yourself: "When did the prostitution actually start? Wasn't it at that party?"³¹

Nowadays, even professional ethicists are going to the party; the watchdogs are being tamed by the foxes they were trained to catch. Pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries are offering consulting fees, contracts, and honoraria to bioethicists, the very people who write about, among other things, the dangers of conflicts of interest between physicians and drug companies. Carl Elliott described his colleagues' justifications for taking the money. "Defenders of

corporate consultation often bristle at the suggestion that accepting money from industry compromises their impartiality or makes them any less objective a moral critic,” he wrote. “‘Objectivity is a myth,’ [bioethicist Evan] DeRenzo told me, marshaling arguments from feminist philosophy to bolster her cause. ‘I don’t think there is a person alive who is engaged in an activity who has absolutely no interest in how it will turn out.’” There’s a clever dissonance-reducing claim for you—“Perfect objectivity is impossible anyway, so I might as well accept that consulting fee.”

Thomas Donaldson, director of the ethics program at the Wharton School, justified this practice by comparing ethics consultants to independent accounting firms that a company might hire to audit their finances. Why not audit their ethics? This stab at self-justification didn’t get past Carl Elliott either. “Ethical analysis does not look anything like a financial audit,” he says. An accountant’s transgression can be detected and verified, but how do you detect the transgressions of an ethics consultant? “How do you tell the difference between an ethics consultant who has changed her mind for legitimate reasons and one who has changed her mind for money? How do you distinguish between a consultant who has been hired for his integrity and one who has been hired because he supports what the company plans to do?”³² Still, Elliott says wryly, perhaps we can be grateful that the AMA’s Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs designed an initiative to educate doctors about the ethical problems involved in accepting gifts from the drug industry. That initiative was funded by \$590,092 in gifts from Eli Lilly and Company, GlaxoSmithKline, Pfizer, the U.S. Pharmaceutical Group, AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals, the Bayer Corporation, Procter and Gamble, and Wyeth-Ayerst Pharmaceutical.

A Slip of the Brain

Al Campanis was a very nice man, even a sweet man, but also a flawed man who made one colossal mistake in his 81 years on earth—a mistake that would come to define him forevermore.

—Mike Littwin, sportswriter

On April 6, 1987, *Nightline* devoted its whole show to the fortieth anniversary of Jackie Robinson's Major League debut. Ted Koppel interviewed Al Campanis, general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, who had been part of the Dodger organization since 1943 and who had been Robinson's teammate on the Montreal Royals in 1946. That year, Campanis punched a bigoted player who had insulted Robinson and, subsequently, championed the admission of black players into Major League Baseball. And then, in talking with Koppel, Campanis put his brain on autopilot. Koppel asked Al, an old friend of Jackie Robinson's, why there were no black managers, general managers, or owners in baseball. Campanis was evasive at first—you have to pay your dues by working in the minors; there's not much pay while you're working your way up—but Koppel pressed him:

KOPPEL: Yeah, but you know in your heart of hearts . . . you know that that's a lot of baloney. I mean, there are a lot of black players, there are a lot of great black baseball men who would dearly love to be in managerial positions, and I guess what I'm really asking you is to, you know, peel it away a little bit. Just tell me why you think it is. Is there still that much prejudice in baseball today?

CAMPANIS: No, I don't believe it's prejudice. I truly believe that they may not have some of the necessities to be, let's say, a field manager, or perhaps a general manager.

KOPPEL: Do you really believe that?

CAMPANIS: Well, I don't say that all of them, but they certainly are short. How many quarterbacks do you have? How

many pitchers do you have that are black?

Two days after this interview and the public uproar it caused, the Dodgers fired Campanis. A year later, he said he had been “wiped out” when the interview took place and therefore not entirely himself.

Who was the real Al Campanis? A bigot or a victim of political correctness? Neither. He was a man who liked and respected the black players he knew, who defended Jackie Robinson when doing so was neither fashionable nor expected, *and* who had a blind spot: He thought that black men were capable of being great players but weren’t smart enough to be managers. And in his heart of hearts, he told Koppel, he didn’t see what was wrong with that attitude; “I don’t believe it’s prejudice,” he said. Campanis was not lying or being coy. But, as general manager, he was in a position to recommend the hiring of a black manager, and his blind spot kept him from even considering that possibility.

Just as we can identify hypocrisy in everyone but ourselves, just as it’s obvious that others can be influenced by money but not ourselves, so we can see prejudices in everyone but ourselves. Thanks to our ego-preserving blind spots, we cannot possibly have a prejudice, which is an irrational or mean-spirited feeling about all members of another group. Because we are not irrational or mean-spirited, any negative feelings we have about another group are justified; our dislikes are rational and well founded. It’s the other group’s negative feelings we need to suppress. Like the Hasids pounding on the Unprejudiced door at the Museum of Tolerance, we are blind to our own prejudices.

Prejudices emerge from the disposition of the human mind to perceive and process information in categories. *Categories* is a nicer, more neutral word than *stereotypes*, but it’s the same thing. Cognitive psychologists view stereotypes as energy-saving devices that allow us to make efficient decisions on the basis of past experiences; they help us quickly process new information, retrieve memories, understand real differences between groups, and predict, often with considerable accuracy, how others will behave or think.³³ We wisely rely on stereotypes and the quick information they give us to avoid danger, approach possible new friends, choose one school

or job over another, or decide that *that* person across this crowded room will be the love of our lives.

That's the upside. The downside is that stereotypes flatten out differences within the category we are looking at and exaggerate differences between categories. Red Staters and Blue Staters often see each other as nonoverlapping categories, but plenty of Kansans do want evolution taught in their schools, and plenty of Californians oppose any kind of gun control. All of us recognize variation within our own gender, party, ethnicity, or nation, but we are inclined to generalize about people in other categories and lump them all together as *them*. This habit starts awfully early. Social psychologist Marilynn Brewer, who studied the nature of stereotypes for many years, reported that her daughter once returned from kindergarten complaining that "boys are crybabies."³⁴ The child's evidence was that she had seen two boys crying on their first day away from home. Brewer, ever the scientist, asked whether there hadn't also been little girls who cried. "Oh yes," said her daughter. "But only *some* girls cry. I didn't cry."

Brewer's little girl was already dividing the world into us and them. *Us* is the most fundamental social category in the brain's organizing system, and the concept is hardwired. Even the plural pronouns *us* and *them* are powerful emotional signals. In one experiment in which participants believed their verbal skills were being tested, a nonsense syllable such as *xeh*, *yof*, *laj*, or *wuh* was randomly paired with an in-group word (*us*, *we*, or *ours*), an out-group word (*them*, *they*, or *theirs*), or, for a control measure, another pronoun (such as *he*, *hers*, or *yours*). All participants then had to rate the syllables on how pleasant or unpleasant they were. You might wonder why anyone would have an emotional feeling toward a nonsense word like *yof* or think *wuh* was cuter than *laj*. Yet participants liked the nonsense syllables more when they were linked with in-group words than with any other word.³⁵ Not one of them guessed why; not one was aware of how the words had been paired.

As soon as people have created a category called *us*, however, they invariably perceive everybody who isn't in it as *not-us*. The specific content of *us* can change in a flash: It's us sensible Midwesterners against you flashy coastal types; it's us Prius owners

against you gas-guzzling-SUV owners; it's us Boston Red Sox fans against you Los Angeles Angels fans (to pick a random example that happens to describe your two authors during baseball season). "Us-ness" can be manufactured in a minute in the laboratory, as Henri Tajfel and his colleagues demonstrated in a classic experiment with British schoolboys.³⁶ Tajfel showed the boys slides with varying numbers of dots on them and asked them to guess how many dots there were. He arbitrarily told some of them that they were overestimators and others that they were underestimators and then asked all the boys to work on another task. In this phase, they had a chance to give points to other boys identified as overestimators or underestimators. Although each boy worked alone in his cubicle, almost every single one assigned more points to boys he thought were like him, an overestimator or an underestimator. As the boys emerged from their rooms, the other kids asked them, "Which were you?" The answers received cheers from those like them and boos from the others.

Obviously, certain categories of *us* are more crucial to our identities than the kind of cars we drive or the number of dots we estimate on a slide—gender, sexuality, religion, politics, ethnicity, and nationality, for starters. Without feeling attached to groups that give our lives meaning, identity, and purpose, we would suffer the intolerable sensation that we were loose marbles rattling around in a random universe. Therefore, we will do what it takes to preserve these attachments. Evolutionary psychologists argue that ethnocentrism—the belief that your own culture, nation, or religion is superior to all others—aids survival by strengthening your bonds to your primary social groups and thus increasing your willingness to work, fight, and occasionally die for them. When things are going well, most of us feel pretty tolerant of other cultures and religions—and even of the other sex!—but when we are angry, anxious, or threatened, our blind spots are automatically activated. *We* have the human qualities of intelligence and deep emotions, but *they* are dumb, *they* are crybabies, *they* don't know the meaning of love, shame, grief, or remorse.³⁷

The very act of thinking that *they* are not as smart or reasonable as *we* are makes us feel closer to others who are like us. But, just as

crucially, it allows us to justify how we treat *them*. Most people assume that stereotyping causes discrimination; Al Campanis, believing that blacks lack the “necessities” to be managers, refused to hire one. But the theory of cognitive dissonance shows that the path between attitudes and action runs in both directions. Often it is discrimination that evokes the self-justifying stereotype; Al Campanis, lacking the will or guts to convince the Dodger organization to hire a black manager, justified his failure to act by telling himself that blacks couldn’t do the job anyway. In the same way, if we have enslaved members of another group, deprived them of decent educations or jobs, kept them from encroaching on our professional turfs, or denied them their human rights, then we invoke stereotypes about them to justify our actions. By persuading ourselves that they are unworthy, unteachable, incompetent, inherently math-challenged, immoral, sinful, stupid, or even subhuman, we avoid feeling guilty or unethical about how we treat them. And we certainly avoid feeling that we are prejudiced. Why, we even like some of those people, as long as they know their place, which, it goes without saying, is not here in our club, our university, our job, our neighborhood. In short, we use stereotypes to justify behavior that would otherwise make us feel bad about the kind of people we are or the kind of country we live in.

But given that thinking in categories is a universal feature of the mind, why do only some people hold bitter, passionate prejudices toward other groups? Al Campanis was not prejudiced in terms of his having a strong emotional antipathy toward blacks; we suspect he could have been argued out of his notion that black players could not be good managers. A stereotype might bend or even shatter under the weight of disconfirming information, but the hallmark of *prejudice* is that it is impervious to reason, experience, and counterexample. In his timeless book *The Nature of Prejudice*, written in 1954, social psychologist Gordon Allport described the responses characteristic of a prejudiced man when confronted with evidence contradicting his beliefs:

MR. X: The trouble with Jews is that they only take care of their own group.

MR. Y: But the record of the Community Chest campaign shows that they give more generously, in proportion to their numbers, to the general charities of the community, than do non-Jews.

MR. X: That shows they are always trying to buy favor and intrude into Christian affairs. They think of nothing but money; that is why there are so many Jewish bankers.

MR. Y: But a recent study shows that the percentage of Jews in the banking business is negligible, far smaller than the percentage of non-Jews.

MR. X: That's just it; they don't go in for respectable business; they are only in the movie business or run night clubs. ³⁸

Allport nailed Mr. X's thought processes perfectly. Mr. X doesn't even try to respond to Mr. Y's evidence; he just slides along to another reason for his dislike of Jews. Once people have a prejudice, just as once they have a political ideology, they do not easily drop it, even if the evidence indisputably contradicts a core justification for it. Rather, they come up with another justification to preserve their belief or rationalize a course of action. Suppose our reasonable Mr. Y told you that insects were a great source of protein and that the sensational new chef at the Slugs and Bugs Diner is offering delicious entrées involving puréed caterpillars. Will you rush out to try this culinary adventure? If you have a prejudice against eating insects, probably not, even if this chef has made the front page of the *New York Times* Food section. You will, like the bigoted Mr. X, find another reason to justify it. "Ugh," you would tell Mr. Y, "insects are ugly and squishy." "Sure," he says. "Tell me again why you eat lobster and raw oysters?"

An acquired prejudice is hard to dislodge. As the great jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. said, "Trying to educate a bigot is like shining light into the pupil of an eye—it constricts." Most people will expend a lot of mental energy to avoid having to change their prejudices, often by waving away disconfirming evidence as "exceptions that prove the rule." (What would disprove the rule, we wonder.) The line "But some of my best friends are [X]," well deserving of the taunts it now gets, has persisted because it is such an efficient way of

resolving the dissonance created when a prejudice runs headlong into an exception. When Elliot moved to Minneapolis years ago to teach at the University of Minnesota, a neighbor said to him, “You’re Jewish? But you’re so much nicer than . . .” She stopped. “Than what?” he asked. “Than what I expected,” she finished lamely. By admitting that Elliot didn’t fit her stereotype, she was able to feel open-minded and generous while maintaining her basic prejudice toward the whole category of Jews. In her mind, she was even paying him a compliment: “He’s so much nicer than all those others of his . . . race.”

Jeffrey Sherman and his colleagues have done a series of experiments that demonstrate the effort that highly prejudiced people are prepared to put into maintaining consonance between their prejudices and information that is inconsistent with it. They actually pay more attention to this inconsistent information than to consistent information, because, like Mr. X and the Minnesota neighbor, they need to figure out how to explain away the dissonant evidence. In one experiment, straight students were asked to evaluate a gay man, Robert, who was described as doing eight things that were consistent with the gay stereotype (e.g., he had studied interpretive dance) and eight things that were inconsistent (e.g., he had watched a football game one Sunday). Antigay participants twisted the evidence about Robert and later described him as being far more “feminine” than unbiased students did, thereby maintaining their prejudice. To resolve the dissonance caused by the inconsistent facts, they explained them away as being an artifact of the situation. Sure, Robert watched a football game, but only because his cousin Fred was visiting.³⁹

These dissonance-reducing contortions occur in the world outside the lab all the time. Consider the lengths that some white supremacists go to upon learning that a potential ally is not 100 percent “white.” Aaron Panofsky and Joan Donovan examined hundreds of posts on the website of the white nationalist group Stormfront to see how the organization counsels applicants who report the “upsetting news” that their DNA revealed some nonwhite or non-European ancestry. Stormfront’s founders have absolutist rules of membership. They will admit only “non-Jewish people of

wholly European descent. No exceptions,” and they state that whiteness is determined genetically. But given that they want as many members as they can get, what are they to do with a would-be member whose DNA indicates nonwhite ancestry? They can reduce dissonance in two ways—the strict way and the flexible way. The strict way is to kick them out:

POST: Hello, got my DNA results and I learned today I am 61% European. I am very proud of my white race and my european roots. I know many of you are ‘whitter’ [*sic*] than me, I don’t care, our goal is the same. I would like to do anything possible to protect our white race, our european roots and our white families.

RESPONSE: I’ve prepared you a drink. It’s 61% pure water. The rest is potassium cyanide. I assume you have no objections to drinking it. . . . Cyanide isn’t water, and YOU are not White.

But the researchers found that most Stormfront members, to increase their numbers, reduce dissonance and console worried would-be supporters by offering unscientific reasons why the results can’t be trusted—“There are many ways of measuring whiteness, so stay with us”; “The tests’ statistics were not interpreted accurately”; and the ever-popular Jewish-conspiracy theory: “Jews own those genetic-testing companies and we all know about their malevolent multicultural agenda.” (There is “the fact that 23 and Me is Jewish controlled and it would not be surprising if all the others are too,” wrote one member. “I think 23 and Me might be a covert operation to get DNA the Jews could then use to create bio-weapons for use against us.”) Even people who reported evidence of black and Jewish ancestry, the two most despised ethnicities on Stormfront, got reassuring responses designed to explain away or minimize the dissonant results. One woman appealed “in a panic” to the community to help her interpret the evidence that her mother’s DNA showed “PersianTurkishCaucasus 11%”; did that mean she was racially contaminated? Don’t worry, said one respondent. Though the

Caucasus population is Muslim today, it was “white originally” and the “Persians are Aryans.”⁴⁰

Stormfront members and other unapologetic white nationalists flaunt their prejudices. But most Americans who are prejudiced against a particular group know better than to announce that fact, given that many people live and work in environments where they can be slapped on the wrist, publicly humiliated, or sacked for saying anything that smacks of an ism. However, just as it takes mental effort to maintain a prejudice despite conflicting information, it also takes mental effort to suppress those negative feelings. Social psychologists Chris Crandall and Amy Eshelman, reviewing the huge research literature on prejudice, found that whenever people are emotionally depleted—when they are sleepy, frustrated, angry, anxious, drunk, or stressed—they become more willing to express their real prejudices toward another group. When Mel Gibson was arrested for drunk driving and launched into an anti-Semitic tirade, he claimed, in his inevitable statement of apology the next day, that “I said things that I do not believe to be true and which are despicable. I am deeply ashamed of everything I said . . . I apologize for any behavior unbecoming of me in my inebriated state.” Translation: “It wasn’t me, it was the booze.” Nice try, but the evidence shows clearly that while inebriation makes it easier for people to reveal their prejudices, it doesn’t put those attitudes in their minds. Therefore, when people apologize by saying, “I don’t really believe those things I said; I was [tired/worried/angry/drunk]”—or, as Al Campanis put it, “wiped out”—we can be pretty sure they really do believe it.

But most people are unhappy about believing it, and that creates dissonance: “I dislike those people” collides with an equally strong conviction that it is morally or socially wrong to say so. People who feel this dissonance, Crandall and Eshelman suggest, will eagerly reach for any self-justification that allows them to express their true beliefs yet continue to feel that they are moral and good. No wonder it is such a popular dissonance reducer. Even Donald Trump, with his rants against a long list of groups he dislikes (notably Latinos, Muslims, and disabled people), his promulgation of the “birther” lie that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, and his

history of discriminatory treatment of African Americans, felt the need to assure the public via Twitter that “I am the least racist person you have ever met” and that “I don’t have a Racist bone in my body!” “Justification,” Crandall and Eshelman explain, “undoes suppression, it provides cover, and it protects a sense of egalitarianism and a nonprejudiced self-image.”⁴¹

In one typical experiment, white students were told they would be inflicting an electric shock on another student, the learner, ostensibly as part of a study of biofeedback. The students working with a black learner initially gave lower-intensity shocks than students working with a white one, reflecting a desire, perhaps, to show they were not prejudiced. Then the students overheard the learner making derogatory comments about them, which, naturally, made them angry. Now, given another opportunity to inflict electric shock, the students who were working with a black learner administered higher levels of shock than students who were working with a white learner. The same result appears in studies of how English-speaking Canadians behave toward French-speaking Canadians, straights toward homosexuals, non-Jewish students toward Jews, and men toward women.⁴² Participants successfully control their negative feelings under normal conditions, but as soon as they become angry or frustrated or when their self-esteem wobbles, they express their prejudice directly because now they can justify it: “I’m not a bad or prejudiced person, but, hey—he insulted me!”

In this way, prejudice is the energy of ethnocentrism. It lurks there, napping, until ethnocentrism summons it to do its dirty work, justifying the occasional bad things we good people want to do. In the nineteenth-century American West, Chinese immigrants were hired to work in the gold mines, potentially taking jobs from white laborers. The white-run newspapers fomented prejudice against them, describing the Chinese as “depraved and vicious,” “gross gluttons,” “bloodthirsty and inhuman.” Yet only a decade later, when the Chinese were willing to accept the dangerous, arduous work of building the transcontinental railroad—work that white laborers were unwilling to undertake—public prejudice toward them subsided, replaced by the opinion that the Chinese were sober, industrious, and law-abiding. “They are equal to the best white men,” said the

railroad tycoon Charles Crocker. “They are very trusty, very intelligent and they live up to their contracts.” After the completion of the railroad, jobs again became scarce, and the end of the Civil War brought an influx of war veterans into an already tight job market. Anti-Chinese prejudice returned, with the press now describing the Chinese as “criminal,” “conniving,” “crafty,” and “stupid.”⁴³

Prejudice justifies the ill treatment we inflict on others, and we want to inflict ill treatment on others because we don’t like them. And why don’t we like them? Because they are competing with us for jobs in a tough job market. Because their presence makes us doubt that ours is the one true religion. Because we want to preserve our positions of status, power, and privilege. Because our country is waging war against them. Because we are uncomfortable with their customs, especially their sexual customs, those promiscuous perverts. Because they refuse to assimilate into our culture. Because they are trying too hard to assimilate into our culture. Because we need to feel we are better than *somebody*.

By understanding prejudice as our self-justifying servant, we can better see why some prejudices are so hard to eradicate: They allow people to justify and defend their most important social identities—their “white” race, their religion, their gender, their sexuality—while reducing the dissonance between “I am a good person” and “I really don’t like those people.” Fortunately, we can also better understand the conditions under which prejudices diminish: when the economic competition subsides, when the truce is signed, when the profession is integrated, when *they* become more familiar and comfortable, when we stop seeing *them* as an undifferentiated mass and realize that they are as diverse a collection of individuals as we are.

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“In normal circumstances,” wrote Hitler’s henchman Albert Speer in his memoirs, “people who turn their backs on reality are soon set straight by the mockery and criticism of those around them, which makes them aware they have lost credibility. In the Third Reich there were no such correctives, especially for those who belonged to the upper stratum. On the contrary, every self-deception was multiplied as in a hall of distorting mirrors, becoming a repeatedly confirmed

picture of a fantastical dream world which no longer bore any relationship to the grim outside world. In those mirrors I could see nothing but my own face reproduced many times over.”⁴⁴

Our greatest hope of self-correction lies in making sure we are not operating in a hall of mirrors in which all we see are distorted reflections of our own desires and convictions. We need a few trusted naysayers in our lives, critics who are willing to puncture our protective bubble of self-justifications and yank us back to reality if we veer too far off. This is especially important for people in positions of power.

According to historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, Abraham Lincoln was one of the rare presidents who understood the importance of surrounding himself with people willing to disagree with him. Lincoln created a cabinet that included four of his political opponents, three of whom had run against him for the Republican nomination in 1860 and who felt humiliated, shaken, and angry to have lost to a relatively unknown backwoods lawyer: William H. Seward (whom Lincoln made secretary of state), Salmon P. Chase (secretary of the Treasury), and Edward Bates (attorney general). Although all shared Lincoln’s goal of preserving the Union and ending slavery, this “team of rivals” (as Goodwin calls them) disagreed with one another furiously on how to do it.

Early in the Civil War, Lincoln was in deep trouble politically. He had to placate not only the Northern abolitionists who wanted escaped slaves emancipated but also the slave owners from border states like Missouri and Kentucky. These border states could have joined the Confederacy at any time, which would have been a disaster for the Union. As a result of the ensuing debates with his advisers, all of whom had different ideas about how to keep both sides in line, Lincoln could not delude himself that he had group consensus on every decision. He was able to consider alternatives and eventually enlist the respect and support of his erstwhile competitors.⁴⁵

As long as we are convinced that we are completely objective, above corruption, and immune to prejudice, most of us from time to time will find ourselves on our own personal road to St. Andrews—and some of us will be on that plane to Bangkok. Jeb Stuart

Magruder, whose entrapment in the political corruption of the Watergate scandal we described in the previous chapter, was blinded by his belief in the importance of doing whatever it took, even if that involved illegal actions, to defeat “them,” Nixon’s political enemies. But when he was caught, Magruder had the guts to face himself. It’s a shocking, excruciating moment for anyone, like catching sight of yourself in a mirror and realizing that you’ve got a huge purple growth on your forehead. Magruder could have done what most of us would be inclined to do: Get some heavy makeup and say, “What purple growth?” But he resisted the impulse. In the final analysis, Magruder said, no one forced him or the others to break the law. “We could have objected to what was happening or resigned in protest,” he wrote.⁴⁶ “Instead, we convinced ourselves that wrong was right, and plunged ahead.

“There is no way to justify burglary, wiretapping, perjury, and all the other elements of the cover-up . . . I and others rationalized illegal actions on the grounds of ‘politics as usual’ or ‘intelligence gathering’ or ‘national security.’ We were completely wrong, and only when we have admitted that and paid the public price of our mistakes can we expect the public at large to have much faith in our government or our political system.”

overt rancor and hatred between blacks and whites, and the concerted effort to create a society in which racial harmony and economic justice will prevail.”²⁹

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Understanding without vengeance, reparation without retaliation, are possible only if we are willing to stop justifying our own position. Many years after the Vietnam War, veteran William Broyles Jr. traveled back to Vietnam to try to resolve his feelings about the horrors he had seen there and those he had committed. He went because, he said, he wanted to meet his former enemies “as people, not abstractions.” In a small village that had been a Marine base camp, he met a woman who had been with the Viet Cong. As they talked, Broyles realized that her husband had been killed at exactly the time that he and his men had been patrolling. “My men and I might have killed your husband,” he said. She looked at him steadily and said, “But that was during the war. The war is over now. Life goes on.”³⁰ Later, Broyles reflected on his healing visit to Vietnam:

I used to have nightmares. Since I’ve been back from that trip, I haven’t had any. Maybe that sounds too personal to support any larger conclusions, but it tells me that to end a war you have to return to the same personal relationships you would have had with people before it. You do make peace. Nothing is constant in history.

8

Letting Go and Owning Up

A man travels many miles to consult the wisest guru in the land. When he arrives, he asks the great man: “O wise guru, what is the secret of a happy life?”

“Good judgment,” says the guru.

“But, O wise guru,” says the man, “how do I achieve good judgment?”

“Bad judgment,” says the guru.

As we follow the trail of self-justification through the territories of family, memory, therapy, law, prejudice, conflict, and war, two fundamental lessons from dissonance theory emerge: First, the ability to reduce dissonance helps us in countless ways, preserving our beliefs, confidence, decisions, self-esteem, and well-being. Second, this ability can get us into big trouble. People will pursue self-destructive courses of action to protect the wisdom of their initial decisions. They will treat those they have hurt even more harshly, because they convince themselves that their victims deserve it. They will cling to outdated and sometimes harmful procedures in their work. They will support torturers and tyrants who are on the right side—that is, theirs. People who are insecure in their religious beliefs may feel the impulse to silence and harass those who disagree with them, because the mere existence of those naysayers arouses the painful dissonance of doubt.

But there is another side to dissonance: the pain that people feel when they *cannot* allow self-justification to erase the memory of the harms they caused, the mistakes they made, the decisions that backfired. That inability to let go can leave an indelible mark of regret and guilt, in extreme cases leading to despair, depression, or

alcoholism. In soldiers, we call those symptoms PTSD. “How does a soldier justify his taking of life in the face of the powerful sanctions against this act that likely informed his upbringing?” asked psychologist Wayne Klug and his colleagues in their study of Iraq veterans. “Does his subsequent struggle with guilt, grief, and cognitive dissonance suggest a moral indictment of war?”¹

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, who advises the military on posttraumatic stress disorders, observed that some veterans suffer continued “moral pain” over killings that they feel violated their ethical code, even if the killing was an inevitable part of war: “It occurs when you’ve done something in the moment that you were told by your superiors that you had to do, and believed, truthfully and honorably, that you had to do, but which nonetheless violated your own ethical commitments,” he says. “There is a bright line between murder and legitimate killing that means everything to them . . . They hate it when they have killed somebody they didn’t need to kill. It’s a scar on the soul.”²

The art of living with dissonance is as much about coping with the scars on the soul as it is about avoiding them. Just as Odysseus had to steer his ship between Homer’s mythical sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis—embodiments of rocky shoals and a whirlpool in the Strait of Messina, both perilous to sailors—so we must find a path between the Scylla of blind self-justification on one side and the Charybdis of merciless self-flagellation on the other. That middle course is more complex than letting ourselves off the hook right away with a quick defense—“What else could I have done?” or “It’s the other guy’s fault” or “I was just following orders” or “I wasn’t wrong on the main point; just on a few details” or “Can we put this behind us and get back to business?” This tactic won’t cut it, not with others and not with ourselves. It is important to stay on the hook for a while, to suffer some anguish, confusion, and discomfort on the road to understanding what went wrong. Only then can we gain an appreciation of what we have to do to make it right.

That process was certainly hard for Linda Ross, the psychotherapist who had practiced recovered-memory therapy until she realized how misguided she had been; for Grace, whose false recovered memories tore her family apart for years; for Thomas

Vanes, the district attorney who learned that a man he had convicted of rape and who had spent twenty years in prison was innocent; for Vivian Gornick, who belatedly acknowledged her part in her history of failed relationships; for the couples and political leaders who eventually manage to break free of the spirals of rage and retaliation. And it is surely hardest of all for those whose professional mistakes cost the lives of friends and coworkers.

N. Wayne Hale Jr. was the launch integration manager at NASA in 2003, when seven astronauts died in the explosion of the space shuttle *Columbia*. In a public e-mail to the members of the space-shuttle program, Hale took full responsibility for the disaster:

I had the opportunity and the information and I failed to make use of it. I don't know what an inquest or a court of law would say, but I stand condemned in the court of my own conscience to be guilty of not preventing the *Columbia* disaster. We could discuss the particulars: inattention, incompetence, distraction, lack of conviction, lack of understanding, a lack of backbone, laziness. The bottom line is that I failed to understand what I was being told; I failed to stand up and be counted. Therefore look no further; I am guilty of allowing *Columbia* to crash.³

These courageous individuals take us straight into the heart of dissonance and its innermost irony: the mind wants to protect itself from the pain of dissonance with the balm of self-justification, but the soul wants to confess. To reduce dissonance, most of us put an enormous amount of mental and physical energy into protecting ourselves and propping up our self-esteem when it sags under the realization that we have been foolish, gullible, mistaken, corrupt, or otherwise human. And yet, much of the time, all this investment of energy is surprisingly unnecessary. Linda Ross is still a psychotherapist—a better one. Thomas Vanes is still a practicing attorney, perhaps a more thoughtful one. Grace got her parents back. William Broyles found peace. N. Wayne Hale was promoted to manager of NASA's space-shuttle program at the Johnson Space Center, a position he held until his retirement.

The need to reduce dissonance is a universal mental mechanism, but, as these stories illustrate, that doesn't mean we are doomed to be controlled by it. Human beings may not be eager to change, but we have the ability to change, and the fact that many of our self-protective delusions and blind spots are built into the way the brain works is no justification for not trying. Is the brain designed to defend our beliefs and convictions? Fine—the brain also wants us to stock up on sugar, but most of us learn to eat vegetables. Is the brain designed to make us flare in anger when we think we are being attacked? Fine—but most of us learn to count to ten and find alternatives to beating the other guy with a cudgel. An appreciation of how dissonance works, in ourselves and others, gives us some ways to override our wiring. And protects us from those who can't. Or won't.

Mistakes Were Made—by Them

These two gentlemen did not deserve what happened, and we are accountable. I am accountable.

—Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson, after two African American men were arrested while waiting for a friend at a Starbucks

Imagine, for a moment, how you would feel if your partner, your grown child, or your parent said: “I want to take responsibility for that mistake I made; we have been quarreling about it all this time, and now I realize that you were right, and I was wrong.” Or if your employer started a meeting by saying, “I want to hear every possible objection to this proposal before we go ahead with it—every mistake we might be making.” Or if you heard a district attorney at a press conference say, “I made a horrendous mistake. I failed to reopen a case in which new evidence showed that I and my office sent an innocent man to prison. I will apologize and this office will make amends, but that’s not enough. I will also reassess our procedures to reduce the likelihood of ever convicting an innocent person again.”

How would you feel about these people? Would you lose respect for them? Chances are that if they are friends or relatives, you will feel relieved and delighted. “My God, Harry actually admitted he made a mistake! What a generous guy!” You’re not alone. In one study, 556 people were asked to read a scenario in which a pedestrian was injured by a speeding bicyclist. They were asked to imagine that they were the injured party and would be negotiating a settlement with the bicyclist. In one version of the scenario, the pedestrian received no apology; in another, a sympathetic apology (“I am so sorry that you were hurt. I really hope that you feel better soon”); and in a third, a responsibility-accepting apology (“I am so sorry that you were hurt. The accident was all my fault. I was going too fast and not watching where I was going until it was too late”). Participants who got the responsibility-accepting apology evaluated the bicyclist more positively, were more likely to forgive the bicyclist, and were more likely to accept a reasonable settlement.⁴

If the person who admits mistakes or harm is a business or political leader, you will probably feel reassured that you are in the capable hands of someone big enough to do the right thing, which is to learn from the wrong thing. The last American president to tell the country he had made a mistake that had disastrous consequences was John F. Kennedy in 1961. He had trusted the claims and faulty intelligence reports of his top military advisers, who assured him that once Americans invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban people would rise up in joy and overthrow Castro. The invasion was a disaster, but Kennedy learned from it. He reorganized his intelligence system and decided that he would no longer accept uncritically the claims of his military advisers, a change that helped him steer the country successfully through the subsequent Cuban missile crisis. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy said: "This administration intends to be candid about its errors. For as a wise man once said, 'An error does not become a mistake until you refuse to correct it.' . . . Without debate, without criticism, no administration and no country can succeed—and no republic can survive." The final responsibility for the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion was, he said, "mine, and mine alone." As a result of that admission, Kennedy's popularity soared.

That story sure feels like ancient history, doesn't it? Imagine a president apologizing and gaining respect and admiration for doing so! The legal scholar Cass Sunstein found in his studies that for many people today, "apologies are for losers." They can backfire, because if you don't like the person apologizing, you take his or her words as evidence of weakness or incompetence.⁵ Moreover, given a national climate in which offenders *must* admit wrongdoing, express remorse, and promise repentance or they'll lose their jobs, their roles in a show, or their academic careers, apologies themselves have become polarized and politicized. When are they important, and when not? And for what behavior should they be offered? Many people are as dismayed by forced apologies for actions they personally find unobjectionable as they are by failures to apologize for behavior they find reprehensible.

Whatever the error, sin, or mistake, apologies fail when listeners know that the speaker has to say *something* to reassure the public

but the statement feels formulaic and obligatory (which it often is, having been generated by a press agent or someone in human resources). That's a sure sign that the speaker doesn't really believe the apology is warranted and is self-justifying. Most of us are not impressed when leaders offer the form of an apology without its essence, saying essentially, "I didn't do anything wrong myself, but it happened on my watch, so, well, I guess I'll take responsibility."⁶ We are not persuaded when CEOs apologize with vague hand-waving, as in Apple's non-apology apology over the performance of iPhone batteries. "We've been hearing feedback from our customers about the way we handle performance for iPhones with older batteries and how we have communicated that process," the company said. "We know that some of you feel Apple has let you down. We apologize." As Lisa Leopold, who has studied the language of apologies, wondered, what were they apologizing for, the poor-performing batteries, their bad communication process, or the feelings of their customers?⁷

When there is incontrovertible evidence of wrongdoing, the public longs to hear authorities own up, without weaseling or blowing smoke, followed by the next part: "And I will do my best to ensure that it will not happen again." Daniel Yankelovich, the highly regarded survey researcher, reported that although polls find that the public has an abiding mistrust of the nation's major institutions, right below that cynicism is a "genuine hunger" for honesty and integrity. "People want organizations to operate transparently," he says, "to show a human face to the outside world, to live up to their own professed standards of behavior, and to demonstrate a commitment to the larger society."⁸

An example of that hunger underlies the movement in the health-care system to encourage doctors and hospitals to admit and correct their mistakes. Traditionally, most doctors have been adamant in their refusal to admit mistakes in diagnosis, procedure, or treatment on the self-justifying grounds that doing so would encourage malpractice suits. They are wrong. Studies of hospitals across the country have found that patients are actually less likely to sue when doctors admit and apologize for mistakes and when changes are

implemented so that future patients will not be harmed in the same way. “Being assured that it won’t happen again is very important to patients, more so than many caregivers seem to appreciate,” says Lucian Leape, a physician and professor of health policy at the Harvard School of Public Health. “It gives meaning to patients’ suffering.”⁹

Doctors’ second self-justification for not disclosing mistakes is that doing so would puncture their aura of infallibility and omniscience, which, they maintain, is essential to their patients’ compliance and confidence in them. They are wrong about this too. The image of infallibility that many physicians try to cultivate often backfires, coming across as arrogance and even heartlessness. “Why can’t they just tell me the truth and apologize?” patients and their families lament. The physician Atul Gawande has written eloquently of “the problem of hubris” that afflicts many doctors, their inability to admit they can’t cure everything, to talk straight to patients, to accept their limitations.¹⁰ In fact, when competent physicians come clean about their mistakes, they are still seen as competent but also as human beings capable of error. Richard A. Friedman beautifully summarized the difficulties and benefits of owning up. “Like every doctor,” he began, “I’ve made plenty of mistakes along the way.” In one case, he failed to anticipate a potentially dangerous drug interaction, and his patient ended up in the intensive care unit and almost died. “Needless to say, I was distraught about what had happened,” he said. “I wasn’t sure what went wrong, but I felt that it was my fault, so I apologized to the patient and her family. They were shaken and angry, and they quite naturally blamed me and the hospital . . . but in the end they decided this was an unfortunate but ‘honest’ medical error and took no legal action.” The disclosure of fallibility humanizes doctors and builds trust, Friedman concluded. “In the end, most patients will forgive their doctor for an error of the head, but rarely for one of the heart.”¹¹

Recipients of an honest admission of error are not the only beneficiaries. When we ourselves are forced to face our own mistakes and take responsibility for them, the result can be an exhilarating, liberating experience. Management consultant Bob

Kardon told us about the time he led a seminar at the National Council of Nonprofit Associations' conference. The seminar was entitled, simply, "Mistakes," and twenty leaders of the statewide associations attended. Kardon told them that the only ground rule for the session was that each participant had to tell about a mistake he had made as a leader and not try to clean it up by talking about how he had corrected it—or dodged responsibility for it. He did not allow them to justify what they did. "In other words," he told them, "stay with the mistake":

As we went around the circle the magnitude of the mistakes burgeoned. By the time we reached the halfway point these executives were copping to major errors, like failing to get a grant request in on time and costing their organization hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost revenue. Participants would often get uncomfortable hanging out there with the mistake, and try to tell a redeeming anecdote about a success or recovery from the mistake. I enforced the ground rules and cut off the face-saving attempt. A half hour into the session laughter filled the room, that nearly hysterical laughter of release of a great burden. It got so raucous that attendees at other seminars came to our session to see what the commotion was all about.

Kardon's exercise illuminates just how difficult it is to say, "Boy, did I mess up," without the protective postscript of self-justification—to say "I dropped a routine fly ball with the bases loaded" rather than "I dropped the ball because the sun was in my eyes" or "because a bird flew by" or "because it was windy" or "because a fan called me a jerk." A friend returning from a day in traffic school told us that as participants went around the room, reporting the violations that had brought them there, a miraculous coincidence had occurred: Not one of them had broken the law! They all had justifications for speeding, ignoring a stop sign, running a red light, or making an illegal U-turn. He became so dismayed (and amused) by the litany of flimsy excuses that, when his turn came, he was embarrassed to give in to the same impulse. He said, "I didn't stop at a stop sign. I was entirely

wrong and I got caught.” There was a moment’s silence, and then the room erupted in cheers for his candor.

There are plenty of good reasons for admitting mistakes, starting with the simple fact that you will probably be found out anyway—by your family, your company, your colleagues, your enemies, your biographer. But there are more positive reasons for owning up. Other people will like you more. Someone else may be able to pick up your fumble and run with it; your error might inspire someone else’s solution. Children will realize that everyone screws up on occasion and that even adults have to say “I’m sorry.” And if you can admit a mistake when it is the size of an acorn, it will be easier to repair than if you wait until it becomes the size of a tree, with deep, wide-ranging roots.

At work, institutions can be designed to reward admissions of mistakes as part of the organizational culture rather than making it uncomfortable or professionally risky for people to come forward. This design, naturally, must come from the top. Organizational consultants Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus offer a story about the legendary Tom Watson Sr., IBM’s founder and its guiding inspiration for over forty years. “A promising junior executive of IBM was involved in a risky venture for the company and managed to lose over \$10 million in the gamble,” they wrote. “It was a disaster. When Watson called the nervous executive into his office, the young man blurted out, ‘I guess you want my resignation?’ Watson said, ‘You can’t be serious. We’ve just spent \$10 million educating you!’”¹²

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Dissonance theory demonstrates why we can’t wait around for people to turn into Tom Watson or have moral conversions, personality transplants, sudden changes of heart, or new insights that will cause them to sit up straight, admit error, and do the right thing. Most human beings and institutions are going to do everything in their power to reduce dissonance in ways that are favorable to them, that allow them to justify their mistakes and maintain business as usual. They will not be grateful for the evidence that their methods of interrogation have put innocent people in prison for life. They are not going to thank us for pointing out to them why their study of

some new drug, into whose development they have poured millions, is fatally flawed. And no matter how deftly or gently we do it, even the people who love us dearly are not going to be amused when we correct their fondest self-serving memory . . . with the facts.

Because most of us are not automatically self-correcting and because our blind spots keep us from knowing when we need to be, external procedures must be in place to correct the errors that human beings will inevitably make and reduce the chances of future ones. In hospitals across the country, indeed around the world, the simple requirement for doctors and nurses to observe prescribed checklists of steps that must be followed in surgery, emergency-room procedures, and aftercare has reduced normal human error and mortality rates.¹³ In the legal domain, we have seen that mandatory electronic recording of all forensic interviews is one obvious and relatively inexpensive corrective to the confirmation bias; any bias or coercion that creeps in can be assessed later by independent observers. This is the impulse for the movement to equip police officers and their vehicles with cameras, which can help resolve disputes when officers are accused of using excessive force. However, even having cameras on every car, lamppost, cell phone, and police officer will not fully fix the problem. Because “believing is seeing,” people can watch the same videos of the same events—such as the dozens of police killings of African Americans that spurred the Black Lives Matter movement—and come away with entirely different views of what they saw and who was to blame. The chokehold death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, who died gasping, “I can’t breathe”; the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; the shooting of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old boy brandishing a toy pistol in a Cleveland park; the shooting of Philando Castile in his car, the aftermath of which was live-streamed by his girlfriend—many viewed these episodes as clear examples of unprovoked and excessive police brutality; others saw them as acceptable police behavior.

It is not only potential police bias we need to worry about; it is also prosecutorial bias. Unlike physicians, who can be sued for malpractice if they amputate the wrong arm, prosecutors generally have immunity from civil suits and are subject to almost no judicial

review. Most of their decisions occur outside of public scrutiny, because fully 95 percent of the cases that the police hand over to a prosecutor's office never reach a jury. But power without accountability is a recipe for disaster in any arena, and in the criminal justice system, that combination permits individuals and even entire departments to do anything for a win, with self-justification to smooth the way.¹⁴ (This is why the Center for Prosecutor Integrity, mentioned in chapter 5, is an important step in the right direction.) When district attorneys actively seek to release an inmate found to be innocent (as opposed to grudgingly accepting a court order to do so), it is usually because, like Robert Morgenthau, who reopened the Central Park Jogger case, they were not the original prosecutors and therefore have no need for self-justification. That is why independent commissions must often be empowered to investigate charges of corruption in a department or determine whether to reopen a case. Their members must have no conflicts of interest, no decisions to justify, no cronies to protect, and no dissonance to reduce.

Few organizations, however, welcome outside supervision and correction. If those in power prefer to maintain their blind spots at all costs, then impartial review boards must improve their vision—against their will, if it comes to that. Scientific and medical journals, aware of the taint on research when conflicts of interest are involved and having been deceived by a few investigators who faked their data, are instituting stronger measures to reduce the chances of publishing biased, corrupt, or fraudulent research. Many scientists are calling for greater transparency in the review process, the same solution that reformers of the criminal justice system are seeking. The ultimate correction for the tunnel vision that afflicts all of us mortals is more light.

Mistakes Were Made—by Me

It is considered unhealthy in America to remember mistakes, neurotic to think about them, psychotic to dwell upon them.

—*Lillian Hellman, playwright*

Our national pastime of baseball differs from the society that spawned it in one crucial way: It keeps track of its mistakes. The box score of every baseball game, from the Little League to the Major Leagues, consists of runs, hits, and errors. Errors are not desirable, but all fans and players understand that they are unavoidable. Errors are inherent in baseball, as they are in medicine, business, science, law, love, and life. But before we can deal with them, we must first acknowledge that we have made them.

If letting go of self-justification and admitting mistakes is so beneficial to the mind and to relationships, why aren't more of us doing it? If we are so grateful to others when they do it, why don't we do it more often? Most of the time we don't do it because, as we have seen, we aren't even aware that we need to. Self-justification purrs along automatically, just beneath consciousness, protecting us from the dissonant realization that we did anything wrong. "Mistake? What mistake? I didn't make a mistake . . . The tree jumped in front of my car . . . And what do I have to be sorry about, anyway? Not my fault."

So what exactly are we supposed to do in our daily lives? Call an external review board of cousins and in-laws to adjudicate every family quarrel? Video all parents' interrogations of their teenagers? In our private relationships, we are on our own, and that calls for some self-awareness. Once we understand how and when we need to reduce dissonance, we can become more vigilant about the process and often nip it in the bud, catching ourselves before we slide too far down the pyramid. By looking at our actions critically and dispassionately, as if we were observing someone else, we stand a chance of breaking out of the cycle of action, followed by self-justification, followed by more committed action. We can learn to put a little space between what we feel and how we respond, insert a

moment of reflection, and think about whether we really want to buy that canoe in January, really want to send good money after bad, really want to hold on to an opinion that is unfettered by facts.

Social scientists are finding that once people are aware of their biases, know how they work, and pay mindful attention to them—in effect, once they bring them into consciousness and say, “*There you are, you little bastard*”—they have greater power to control them. Consider the bias we discussed in the first chapter, naive realism: the bias to believe that we see things clearly and therefore have no bias. This bias is the central impediment to negotiations between any two individuals or groups in conflict who see things entirely differently. In a study with Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Israelis, making them aware of naive realism and how it operates was enough to lead even the most hawkish participants to *see the bias in themselves* and become more open to seeing the other side’s point of view.¹⁵ We aren’t naive; we do realize it will take more than this modest intervention to resolve the Middle East conflict. But the point is that people are educable about their biases and about dissonance too.

In 1985, Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres was thrown into dissonance by an action taken by his ally and friend Ronald Reagan. Peres was angry because Reagan had accepted an invitation to pay a state visit to the Kolmeshohe Cemetery at Bitburg, Germany, to symbolize the two nations’ postwar reconciliation. Because forty-nine Nazi Waffen-SS officers were buried there, the announcement of the proposed visit enraged Holocaust survivors and many others. Reagan, however, did not back down from his decision to visit the cemetery. When reporters asked Peres what he thought of Reagan’s action, Peres neither condemned Reagan personally nor minimized the seriousness of the visit to Bitburg. Instead, Peres took a third course. “When a friend makes a mistake,” he said, “the friend remains a friend, and the mistake remains a mistake.”¹⁶

Consider for a moment the benefits of being able to separate dissonant thoughts as clearly as Peres did: People can remain passionately committed to their nation, religion, political party, and family while disagreeing with actions or policies they find inappropriate, misguided, or immoral. Friendships are preserved, not

terminated in a huff; mistakes are not dismissed as unimportant but properly criticized and their perpetrators held responsible, even if the perpetrators are friends. In a 2017 YouTube video, Sarah Silverman spoke directly about the dissonance she felt over the sexual misbehavior of Louis CK, her dear friend of twenty-five years: “I need to address the elephant masturbating in the room,” she began. The Me Too movement was long overdue, she said, and we were going to learn bad things about people we liked—and people we loved. “I love Louis, but Louis did these things. Both of those statements are true. So I keep asking myself, Can you love someone who did bad things? . . . I am at once very angry for the women he wronged and the culture that enabled it, and also sad, because he’s my friend.” It was vital, she concluded, to hold people accountable for their actions. And it was also vital to support and help the friends we loved.

Peres’s third course can also help us navigate the eternal dilemma of how to respond to information that a beloved or admired artist is, or was, a son of a bitch, a racist, an anti-Semite, a homophobe, a pedophile, a sexual harasser, or a contemptible individual in some other way in private life. The 2019 documentary *Leaving Neverland* described Michael Jackson’s long-running sexually abusive relationships with two boys, beginning when they were ages seven and ten. The film devastated and divided Jackson’s legion of fans. One side reduced dissonance by denying the allegations, vilifying the credible men who told their stories, maintaining Jackson’s innocence, buying ads, loudly criticizing the HBO film, and, in some cases, threatening those involved in its production; a lawsuit for “sully Jackson’s memory” was filed against the men who alleged they had been abused.¹⁷ The other side reduced dissonance by swearing they would never again listen to Jackson’s music or by trying to erase his legacy from pop culture; *The Simpsons* pulled an episode that had a character voiced by Jackson, and Louis Vuitton removed some Jackson-inspired pieces from its collection.

Amanda Petrusich, a music critic and passionate admirer of Jackson, wrote: “It is admittedly difficult, while watching ‘Leaving Neverland,’ to hold in mind two contradictory but equally imperative ideas: that victims should be believed, and that the accused are

innocent until proved guilty. The first is wildly crucial if we wish to protect the disenfranchised from egregious abuses of power. The second remains the crux of the American criminal-justice system.

Can these two ideas coexist?"¹⁸

Well, yes, they damned well better coexist, but an understanding of dissonance shows why that coexistence is often so very difficult. Petrusich continued: "Right now it feels as if they have to, which means that we are sometimes required to make personal choices about how we accept or dismiss the information made available to us." Biographer Margo Jefferson did just that. In an updated introduction to her book *On Michael Jackson*, she wrote, "We've long seen how charming and generous he could be. Now we've also seen how calculating, selfish, and gripped by demons he was. We can't erase or unknow that. We can only accept it, acknowledge what it stirs in us—despair, grief, anger, compassion—and try to turn it into wisdom."¹⁹

When the dissonance is caused by something we ourselves did, it is even more vital to keep Peres's third way in mind: Articulate the cognitions and keep them separate. "When I, a decent, smart person, make a mistake, I remain a decent, smart person and the mistake remains a mistake. Now, how do I remedy what I did?" By identifying the two dissonant cognitions that are causing distress, we can often find a way to resolve them constructively or, when we can't, learn to live with them until we have more information. When we hear about a sensational allegation in the news, especially one in which sex is involved, we can resist the emotional impulse to hurl ourselves off that pyramid in outraged support of the accused or the accuser. Instead of slotting the story into an ideological framework—"Children never lie"; "Believe survivors, even if they remember nothing"; "All fraternity men are rapists"—we can do something harder and more radical: wait for the evidence. If we don't and instead take sides impulsively, it will be difficult to accept that evidence later if it suggests that we were wrong, as happened in the McMartin preschool case (where, the nation later learned, children had been pressured to report increasingly preposterous allegations of abuse) or the Duke lacrosse case (where, the nation later learned, a stripper's allegations of rape against a group of players were false,

and the district attorney was disbarred for prosecutorial misconduct). We can try to balance sympathy and skepticism. And then we can learn to hold our conclusions lightly, lightly enough so that we can let them go if justice demands that we do.

Becoming aware that we are in a state of dissonance can also help us make sharper, smarter, conscious choices instead of letting automatic, self-protective mechanisms resolve our discomfort in our favor. Suppose your unpleasant, aggressive coworker has just made an innovative suggestion at a group meeting. You could say to yourself, “An ignorant jerk like her could not possibly have a good idea about anything,” and shoot her suggestion down in flames because you dislike the woman so much (and, you admit it, you feel competitive with her for your manager’s approval). Or you could give yourself some breathing room and ask yourself: “Could the idea be a smart one? How would I feel about it if it came from my ally on this project?” If it is a good idea, you might support your coworker’s proposal even if you continue to dislike her as a person. You keep the message separate from the messenger. In this way, we might learn how to change our minds before our brains freeze our thoughts into consistent patterns.

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Mindful awareness of how dissonance operates is therefore the first step toward controlling its effects. But two psychological impediments remain. One is the belief that mistakes are evidence of incompetence and stupidity; the other is the belief that our personality traits, including self-esteem, are embedded and unchangeable. People who hold both of these ideas are often afraid to admit error because they take it as evidence that they are blithering idiots; they cannot separate the mistake from their identity and self-esteem. Although most Americans know they are supposed to say “We learn from our mistakes,” deep down they don’t believe it for a minute. They think that making mistakes means they are stupid. That belief is precisely what keeps them from learning from their mistakes.

About a fourth of the entire American adult population has been taken in by one scam or another, some of them silly, some serious:

“You’ve won a brand-new Mercedes, and we’ll deliver it to you as soon as you send us the tax on that amount first”; “We’re offering you gold coins you can buy at a tenth of their market value”; “This miracle bed will cure all your ailments, from headaches to arthritis”; “Your nephew or grandchild is in dire medical straits in a foreign port and needs your money.” Americans of all ages lose millions of dollars to telemarketing frauds, but old people are hit hardest, losing several times as much money in any given scam as young people.

Con artists know all about dissonance and self-justification. They know that when people who think of themselves as smart and capable are faced with the evidence that they spent thousands of dollars on a magazine-subscription scam (yes, those still exist) or were lured into a romance with a fraudulent but seductive online Romeo (or Juliet), few will reduce dissonance by deciding they aren’t smart and capable. Instead, many will justify spending that money by spending even more money to recoup their sunk costs—their losses. This way of resolving dissonance protects their self-esteem but virtually guarantees their further victimization: “If only I subscribe to *more* magazines, I’ll win the big prize,” they say; or “I know it’s unlikely that we fell in love by e-mail, but I’m sending money to help bring him over because this is the real thing”; or “Those nice, thoughtful people who made me the investment offer would never cheat me, and besides, they advertise on Christian radio.” Some older people are vulnerable to reducing dissonance in this direction because many of them are already worried that they are losing it—their competence as well as their money. And they don’t want to give their grown children grounds for taking control of their lives.

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Understanding how dissonance operates helps us rethink our own muddles, and it’s also a useful skill for helping friends and relatives get out of theirs. Too often, out of the best of intentions, we do the very thing guaranteed to make matters worse: We hector, lecture, bully, plead, or threaten. Anthony Pratkanis, a social psychologist who investigated how scammers prey on old people, collected heartbreaking stories of family members pleading with relatives who had been defrauded: “Can’t you see the guy is a thief and the offer is

a scam? You're being ripped off!" "Ironically, this natural tendency to lecture may be one of the worst things a family member or friend can do," Pratkanis says. "A lecture just makes the victim feel more defensive and pushes him or her further into the clutches of the fraud criminal." Anyone who understands dissonance knows why. Shouting "What were you *thinking?*" will backfire because it means "Boy, are you *stupid.*" Such accusations cause already embarrassed victims to withdraw further into themselves and clam up, refusing to tell anyone what they are doing. And what they are doing is investing more money or buying more magazines, because now they really have an incentive to get the family savings back, show they are not stupid or senile, and prove that what they were thinking was perfectly sensible.²⁰

Therefore, says Pratkanis, before a victim of a scam will inch back from the precipice, he or she needs to feel respected and supported. Helpful relatives and friends can encourage the person to talk about his or her values and how those values influenced what happened while they listen uncritically. Instead of irritably asking "How could you possibly have listened to that creep?" you say, "Tell me what appealed to you about the guy that made you trust him." Con artists take advantage of people's best qualities—their kindness, politeness, and desire to honor their commitments, reciprocate a gift, or help a friend. Praising the victim for having these worthy values, says Pratkanis, even if they got the person into hot water in this particular situation, will offset feelings of insecurity and incompetence.

So embedded is the link between mistakes and stupidity in American culture that it can be shocking to learn that not all cultures share it. In the 1970s, psychologists Harold Stevenson and James Stigler became interested in the math gap in performance between Asian and American schoolchildren: by the fifth grade, the lowest-scoring Japanese classroom was outperforming the highest-scoring American classroom. To find out why, Stevenson and Stigler spent the next decade comparing elementary classrooms in the United States, China, and Japan. Their epiphany occurred as they watched a Japanese boy struggle with the assignment of drawing cubes in three dimensions on the blackboard. The boy kept at it for forty-five

minutes, making repeated mistakes, as Stevenson and Stigler became increasingly anxious and embarrassed for him. Yet the boy himself was utterly unself-conscious, and the American observers wondered why they felt worse than he did. “Our culture exacts a great cost psychologically for making a mistake,” Stigler recalled, “whereas in Japan, it doesn’t seem to be that way. In Japan, mistakes, error, confusion [are] all just a natural part of the learning process.”²¹ (The boy eventually mastered the problem, to the cheers of his classmates.) The researchers also found that American parents, teachers, and children were far more likely than their Japanese and Chinese counterparts to believe that mathematical ability is innate; if you have it, you don’t have to work hard, and if you don’t have it, there’s no point in trying. In contrast, most Asians regard math success like achievement in any other domain; it’s a matter of persistence and plain hard work. Of course you will make mistakes as you go along; that’s how you learn and improve.

Making mistakes is central to the education of budding scientists and artists of all kinds; they must have the freedom to experiment, try this idea, flop, try another idea, take a risk, be willing to get the wrong answer. One classic example, once taught to American schoolchildren and still on many inspirational websites in various versions, is Thomas Edison’s reply to his assistant (or a reporter), who asked Edison about his ten thousand experimental failures in his effort to create the first incandescent light bulb. “I have not failed,” he told the assistant (or reporter). “I successfully discovered ten thousand elements that don’t work.” Most American children, however, are denied the freedom to noodle around, experiment, and be wrong in ten ways, let alone ten thousand. The focus on constant testing, which grew out of the reasonable desire to measure and standardize children’s accomplishments, has intensified their fear of failure. It is certainly important for children to learn to succeed, but it is just as important for them to learn not to fear failure. When children or adults fear failure, they fear risk. They can’t afford to be wrong.

Research by psychologist Carol Dweck suggests one reason for the cultural differences that Stevenson and Stigler observed: American children typically believe that making mistakes reflects

poorly on their inherent abilities. In Dweck's experiments, some children were praised for their efforts in mastering a new challenge; others were praised for their intelligence and ability ("You're a natural math whiz, Johnny"). Many of the children who were praised for their efforts even when they didn't get it right eventually performed better and liked what they were learning more than children who were praised for their natural abilities did. They were also more likely to regard mistakes and criticism as useful information that would help them improve. In contrast, children praised for their natural ability were more likely to care more about how competent they looked than about what they were actually learning.²² They became defensive if they did not do well or if they made mistakes, and this reaction set them up for a self-defeating cycle: If they didn't do well, then, to resolve the ensuing dissonance ("I'm smart and yet I screwed up"), they simply lost interest in what they were learning ("I could do it if I wanted to, but I don't want to").

It is a lesson for all ages: the importance of seeing mistakes not as personal failings to be denied or justified but as inevitable aspects of life that help us improve our work, make better decisions, grow, and grow up.

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Understanding how the mind yearns for consonance and rejects information that questions our beliefs, decisions, or preferences not only teaches us to be open to the possibility of error but also helps us let go of the need to be right. Confidence is a fine and useful quality; none of us would want a physician who was forever wallowing in uncertainty and couldn't decide how to treat our illness, but we do want one who is open-minded and willing to learn. Nor would most of us wish to live without passions or convictions, which give our lives meaning and color, energy and hope. But an unbending need to be right inevitably produces self-righteousness. When confidence and convictions are unleavened by humility, by an acceptance of fallibility, people can easily cross the line from healthy self-assurance to arrogance. In this book, we have met many who crossed that line: the psychiatrists who are certain that they can tell if a recovered memory is valid; the physicians and judges who are

certain that they are above conflicts of interest; the police officers who are certain that they can tell if a suspect is lying; the prosecutors who are certain that they convicted the guilty party; the husbands and wives who are certain that their interpretation of events is the right one; the nations that are certain that their version of history is the only one.

All of us will have hard decisions to make at times in our lives; not all of them will be right, and not all of them will be wise. Some are complicated, with consequences we could never have foreseen. If we can resist the temptation to justify our actions in a rigid, overconfident way, we can leave the door open to empathy and an appreciation of life's complexity, including the possibility that what was right for us might not have been right for others. "I know what hard decisions look like," says a woman we will call Janine.

When I decided to leave my husband of twenty years, that decision was right for one of my daughters—who said, "What took you so long?"—but a disaster for the other; she was angry at me for years. I worked hard in my mind and brain to resolve that conflict and to justify what I did. I blamed my daughter for not accepting it and understanding my reasons. By the end of my mental gymnastics I had turned myself into Mother Teresa and my daughter into a selfish, ungrateful brat. But over time, I couldn't keep it up. I missed her. I remembered her sweetness and understanding, and realized she wasn't a brat but a child who had been devastated by the divorce. And so finally I sat down with her. I told her that although I am still convinced that the divorce was the right decision for me, I understood now how much it had hurt her. I told her I was ready to listen. "Mom," she said, "let's go to Central Park for a picnic and talk, the way we did when I was a kid." And we did, and that was the beginning of our reconciliation. Nowadays, when I feel passionate that I am 100 percent right about a decision that others question, I look at it again; that's all.

Janine did not have to admit that she made a mistake; she didn't make a mistake in terms of her own life. But she did have to let go of her need to insist that her decision was the right one for her children. And she needed to have compassion for the daughter who was hurt by her action.

Act 2: The Arduous Journey to Self-Compassion

There are no second acts in American lives.

—*F. Scott Fitzgerald*

One afternoon Elliot got into a lively discussion with his friend David Swanger, a distinguished poet, about F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous aphorism.

"It means we don't get second chances," said Swanger. "We don't recover from early failure. That's why every time a politician or athlete or other public figure has a comeback, some commentator uses that person's success to disprove the quote."

"Don't Americans go to the theater?" Elliot said. "There are *three* acts in a traditional play. His quote is not about second chances—it's much more interesting than that. Besides, Gatsby himself is the best example in American literature of a man reinventing himself. You don't think F. Scott Fitzgerald knew about comebacks?"

"Well, that's the common meaning," said Swanger.

"But in any classic play, act two is where the action is," said Elliot. "In life as in a play, you can't leap from act one to act three. We skip act two at our peril, for that's when we go through the turmoil of confronting our demons—the selfishness, immorality, murderous thoughts, disastrous choices—so that when we enter act three, we have learned something. Fitzgerald was telling us that Americans are inclined to bypass act two; they don't want to go through the pain that self-discovery requires."

When Elliot started teaching, in 1960, he used Fitzgerald's observation to make a point that the two of us now regard as the centerpiece of our views about living with dissonance. Act 1 is the setup: the problem, the conflict the hero faces. Act 2 is the struggle, in which the hero wrestles with betrayals, losses, or dangers. Act 3 is the redemption, the resolution, in which the hero either emerges victorious or goes down in defeat.²³ In his lectures, Elliot used *Death of a Salesman*, the quintessential American play, to make Fitzgerald's point that Americans would just as soon skip the part

about the struggle. Willy Loman's older brother, Ben, Biff and Happy's impressively rich uncle, represents the American dream.

WILLY [*to his sons*]: Boys! Boys! Listen to this. This is your Uncle Ben, a great man! Tell my boys how you did it, Ben!

BEN: Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich!

WILLY [*to the boys*]: You see what I been talking about? The greatest things can happen!

"What the hell happened in the jungle?" Elliot would ask his students. "That's where the story is! That's act two! How did Ben do it? How did he solve his problems? *How* did he get rich? Did he help people? Did he kill people? Did he lie, steal, cheat? What did he learn, and was it a lesson he can now offer his nephews?"

When the two of us were writing the first edition of this book, we disagreed about whether to discuss the other side of dissonance, the suffering it creates in people who can neither justify nor forgive themselves for the harms they have caused or the bad decisions they have made. Elliot was opposed to our saying much about self-forgiveness because of his concern that people would miss the point of act two. "I don't want people short-circuiting the process," he said. "It's not enough to say, 'Hey, I did a bad thing and I won't do it again. It's important for me to forgive myself.' Yes, it is important, but the goal is not to use self-compassion as a Band-Aid to cover up the wound rather than take active steps toward its healing. People can go to confession, religiously or publicly, and admit they did a bad thing and they are sorry, but it won't make a dime's worth of difference if they don't *get* what that bad thing was and *get* that they are not going to do it again."

There is, in short, a big difference between superficial self-compassion and earned self-compassion. This distinction is especially important nowadays, because in recent years there has been a growing movement in positive psychology emphasizing the emotional, cognitive, and even motivational benefits of self-compassion. Who could be critical of this glowing concept? Yet it is

more complex than it first appears, and it is easy to oversimplify it into a buzzword.

Psychologists Laura King and Joshua Hicks argue that maturity depends on the adult's capacity to confront lost goals, or lost possible selves, and acknowledge regrets and sorrows over roads not taken or dreams unfulfilled. "Lost possible selves," they write, "represent the person's memory of a self they would have pursued 'if only'"—if only my child did not have Down syndrome, if only I had been able to have children, if only my partner hadn't left me after twenty years. Reflecting on these lost expectations poses costs to happiness—in our terms, it generates painful dissonance—but, King and Hicks add, "that work, the articulation of what might have been, may have benefits in terms of the complexity of a person's sensibility and, perhaps, the very meaning of happiness itself. That there is value in loss is more than a platitude. Although it may be a peculiarly American instinct to search for the positive in any negative event, we argue that the active, self-reflective struggle to see the silver lining is a key ingredient of maturity."²⁴ Exactly: maturity means an *active, self-reflective struggle* to accept the dissonance we feel about hopes we did not realize, opportunities we let slide by, mistakes we made, challenges we could not meet, all of which changed our lives in ways we could not anticipate.

And to do this, we must apply the same compassion to ourselves that we would extend to others. King and Hicks found that the people in their sample who had the lowest psychological well-being perceived their earlier selves as "foolish," "misguided," or "stupid," and could see no benefits or gains to the losses of their dreams. Those with the highest well-being, however, had been able to take what the researchers describe as "an unusually brutal perspective on a former self": "Should I say I was an idiot?" said one woman. "I had no idea what the life was that I was dreaming about." Yet she can now look back at that lost self with compassion, a self who can be excused for her naïveté. The happiest, most mature adults were those who could embrace the losses in their lives and transform them into sources of deep gratitude—not with platitudes or Pollyanna glosses, say the researchers, but by discovering the genuinely positive aspects of their multifaceted lives.

How, though, can we forgive ourselves for actions we consider unforgivable? Causing an innocent person's death is the most extreme mistake people can make; as Jonathan Shay said, it leaves a "scar on the soul." Consider the stories of two men who sought to treat that scar in different ways.

When Reggie Shaw was nineteen, he was texting as he drove his SUV to work and, distracted, he crossed the yellow divider and clipped a car coming the other way. The car spun out of control and crashed, killing the other driver and his passenger. For two years, until his trial for negligent homicide, Reggie Shaw denied any culpability. Then he listened to the testimony of scientists describing the psychology of distraction—how the brain responds to the demand for split attention, how reinforcing texting is, how it impairs accurate perception of danger; in short, how technology can, in one expert's words, cause "neurological hijacking." The more that Reggie learned about the science and confronted the other evidence that indisputably convicted him, says Matt Richtel, who wrote a book on the case, "the more he transformed into a zealot against the use of phones behind the wheel." Reggie was sentenced to only a brief stay in jail and community service, but the sentence he imposed on himself was much more severe. Ever since, Reggie has been telling his story to anyone who will listen, including high-school kids, athletes, policymakers, and legislators. "I'm here for one reason," he begins his talks. "That's for you guys to look at me . . . and say: 'I don't want to be that guy.'" The prosecutor who brought the case against Reggie told Richtel: "I have never seen anybody try to redeem themselves as much as Reggie Shaw. Period. End of story." The judge added, "He's done more to effect change than anyone I've ever seen."²⁵

Some people don't want the scar on the soul to heal over. They see it as a reminder of what they did, a protest against apathy or forgetting. One of the most touching examples we encountered was an essay by Eric Fair, who had been a contract interrogator in Iraq in 2004 at Abu Ghraib. Ten years later he was teaching a college writing class. "The course's title, Writing War, kept me from straying too far from the memories that have haunted me over the last decade," he wrote. "I tortured. Abu Ghraib dominates every minute of

every day for me.” And then he showed his students the iconic photos of the tortured detainees. “As I looked at their blank faces, I realized I could let myself feel a powerful sense of relief,” he said. “Abu Ghraib will fade. My transgressions will be forgotten. But only if I allow it.”

Eric Fair has no intention of allowing it. After confessing to the U.S. Army’s Criminal Investigation Command, he went on to speak about his actions to any audience that invited him. “I’ve said everything there is to say. It’s not hard to pretend the best thing to do is put it all behind me.”²⁶

I stood before the class that day tempted to let apathy soften the painful truths of history. I no longer had to assume the role of the former interrogator at Abu Ghraib. I was a professor at Lehigh University. I could grade papers and say smart things in class. My son could ride the bus to school and talk to his friends about what his father does for a living. I was someone to be proud of.

But I’m not. I was an interrogator at Abu Ghraib. I tortured.

Fair chooses not to reduce dissonance over his actions at Abu Ghraib by putting it all behind him and justifying what he did as something he had to do, under orders, as part of his job. Instead, he has chosen to bear witness to history, to the ugliest parts of the human psyche. He wants to remind his students that “this country isn’t always something to be proud of.” He doesn’t want to forget. He doesn’t want to forgive himself. That’s his moral choice.

Yet it seems to us that Eric Fair is in the middle of his personal act 2, not engaging in repeated or purposeless self-flagellation but rather *wrestling with his demons*. By revealing what he did at Abu Ghraib to one class of students after another, he is working his way to a resolution, one in which he need not forget what he did but in which the memory does not dominate “every minute of every day” for him. His own words illuminate how he might get there: “I tortured,” he says. He does not say “I am a torturer.” In this way he separates his behavior from his identity, and that ability is what ultimately allows people to live with behavior they now condemn. His son may not be

proud of what his father did in Iraq, but he can certainly be proud of his father's courageous honesty and determination to make amends—starting with teaching his family, his students, and his fellow citizens the lesson he suffered to learn.

All of us can carry this understanding into our private lives: something we did can be separated from who we are and who we want to be. Our past selves need not be a blueprint for our future selves. The road to redemption starts with the understanding that who we are *includes* what we have done but also *transcends* it, and the vehicle for transcending it is self-compassion.

Getting to true self-compassion is a process; it does not happen overnight. It does not mean forgetting the harm or error, as in “Ah, well, I’m basically a good, kind person, so I’ll treat myself gently and move on.” No; you might be a good, kind person but you are one who committed a grievously harmful act. That’s part of you now, of who you are. But it need not be all of you. It need not define you—unless you keep justifying that act mindlessly.

In the previous chapter, we discussed the nation’s response to the Senate Intelligence Committee’s indictment of the CIA for brutality and deceit in its program of “enhanced interrogation” techniques. Instead of demanding the hard work of reforming the CIA, many members of Congress and political commentators were quick to say, in effect, that was act 1. It’s what we did after 9/11. It’s in our past. What’s done is done. The mistakes can’t be remedied now; we’re in act 3. No one illustrated this attitude better than Fox news commentator Andrea Tantaros. “The United States of America is awesome,” she said. “*We* are awesome. But we’ve had this discussion. We’ve closed the book on it. The reason they [the Senate Intelligence Committee members] want the discussion is not to show how awesome we are. It’s to show us how we’re not awesome. They apologized for something.”²⁷ (She dismisses torture as *something*?) Now, if Andrea Tantaros understood that her country needs to spend a little time in act 2, that would be awesome.

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Dissonance may be hardwired, but how we think about mistakes is not. After the disastrous bloodbath of Pickett’s Charge at the Battle

of Gettysburg, in which more than half of his 12,500 men were slaughtered by Union soldiers, the Confederate general Robert E. Lee said, “All this has been my fault. I asked more of my men than should have been asked of them.”²⁸ Lee was a great general who made a tragic miscalculation, but that mistake did not make him an incompetent military leader. If Robert E. Lee could take responsibility for an action that cost thousands of lives, surely all those people in traffic school can admit they ran a red light.

There are a few Robert E. Lees in our modern military. Retired lieutenant general Daniel Bolger, who commanded troops in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2005 and 2013, published a mea culpa. “By the enemy’s hand, abetted by my ignorance, my arrogance, and the inexorable fortunes of war,” he wrote, “I have lost eighty men and women under my charge, with more than three times that number wounded. Those deaths are, as Robert E. Lee said at Gettysburg, all my fault”:

As generals, we did not know our enemy—never pinned him down, never focused our efforts, and got all too good at making new opponents faster than we could handle the old ones . . . we backed into not one but two long, indecisive counterinsurgent struggles to which our forces were ill-suited. Time after time, as I and my fellow generals saw that our strategies weren’t working, we failed to reconsider our basic assumptions. We failed to question our flawed understanding of our foe or ourselves . . . In the end, all the courage and skill in the world could not overcome ignorance and arrogance. As a general, I got it wrong. And I did so in company with my peers.²⁹

General Bolger’s willingness to face up to the immense magnitude of the disaster that the United States unleashed in the Middle East is inspiring. But just as Vivian Gornick’s life might have been vastly happier had she not waited until age sixty-five to see her role in her failed relationships, we are entitled to wish that General Bolger and his fellow officers had spoken up sooner. The worsening of disasters

might be averted if our political and military leaders could change direction when the course they are on is headed over a cliff. General Bolger leaves the solution to fighting the “war on terror” to the next generation of military leaders, just as, he says, the American military “took an uncompromising look at itself” after the failures in Vietnam. “Good ideas and bad, lessons learned, re-learned, and unlearned—all deserve thorough scrutiny and discussion,” he writes. Yes, they do. But it’s late; possibly too late. We can’t keep fighting the past war, let alone the lost war. What is needed is a deep understanding not only of what went wrong then but also of what is going wrong right now, the better to prepare for *what could go wrong* with current decisions. We need an Eisenhower strategy.

In June 1944, Dwight Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied forces in Europe, had to make a crucial military decision. He knew the invasion of Normandy would be costly under the best of circumstances, and the circumstances were far from ideal. If the invasion failed, thousands of troops would die in the effort, and the humiliation of defeat would demoralize the Allies and hearten the Axis powers. Nonetheless, Eisenhower was prepared to assume full responsibility for the possibly catastrophic consequences of his decision to go forward. He wrote out a short speech he planned to release if the invasion went wrong. It read, in its entirety:

Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and the troops have been withdrawn. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the Air [Force] and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone.³⁰

After writing this note, Eisenhower made one small but crucial change. He crossed out the end of the first sentence—“the troops have been withdrawn”—and replaced that passive construction with “and I have withdrawn the troops.” The eloquence of that / echoes down the decades.

In the final analysis, a nation’s character, and an individual’s integrity, do not depend on being error free. It depends on what we

do after making the error. The poet Stephen Mitchell, in his poetic rendering of Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, writes:

A great nation is like a great man:
When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.
Having realized it, he admits it.
Having admitted it, he corrects it.
He considers those who point out his faults
as his most benevolent teachers.