Blind to Betrayal

Betrayal blindness means not seeing what is there to be seen. Julie Stone is now a respected lawyer in her forties who told us about her experience with betrayal blindness. Her story gives us many insights into the phenomenon of blindness—both how it happens and why.

Julie told us about a time when she was a young wife, sitting in a bar and waiting for her husband, who had been traveling all week. She knew his ritual on returning to town: having a beer or two at this bar with the guys. Usually, she waited at home with their infant son, but this time she made an exception. A friend—the wife of her husband’s work partner—had talked her into a rare evening out. Initially reluctant, Julie was now eager to surprise her husband. She knew it would be a special evening for them both.

Julie explained to us that she didn’t get to town very often, spending almost all of her time minding their young son and caring for their home and farm: canning fruits, working in the garden, tending the animals. With her thick curly hair and winsome eyes, she was lovely. Perhaps because she was so busy as a mother, a homemaker, and a farmer, she did not appreciate her own beauty, and she was even less aware of her powerful intelligence. That evening, she was excited because their son was home with a babysitter, and she would be free to spend the evening with her husband.
She watched the door closely, and when he finally walked into the bar, she broke into a joyful, loving smile. Yet her husband never saw the smile, because almost immediately another woman—a stranger to Julie—jumped from her seat and ran into his arms. They kissed.

“When they stopped kissing, he looked up, and our eyes met. And I’m kind of watching this, and he walked over to me and said, ‘I don’t know who that was.’ And I believed him.”

As Julie said these words to us, we sat in her living room on comfortable contemporary furniture, under a vaulted ceiling, facing a picture window that revealed the forest surrounding the house. A tape recorder sat between us, preserving Julie’s story. Outside, the August sun filtered through the tall Douglas firs. Bits of sunlight speckled the ceramic art Julie had created in her “spare time.” How does she manage all this? we wondered. The room felt warm and light and airy. We felt good, privileged to be there. Julie exuded an air of competence and self-confidence. She seemed to like herself and to enjoy her life, and she could laugh at herself, too. It would be nearly impossible not to like and admire this woman. Yet as we sat there liking and admiring her, Julie told us about a series of betrayals that she managed—in her words—to “whoosh” away from her own awareness. How did she remain so blind to what was so obvious? we wondered.

The bar incident wasn’t the first time Julie had reason to doubt her husband’s fidelity.

“My ex-husband was a good-looking guy. Women definitely were attracted to him. In fact, I know that they approached him. I had this friend who kept telling me, sort of kidding, that she was always lusting after my husband. It was sort of a joke between us. One time we were sitting around with a bunch of women. I brought this up somehow, and I laughingly asked her if she still had a thing for my husband. There was a hush in the group. I thought it was funny, but much later I realized that everybody there except me knew that she was sleeping with him. I didn’t find out until her boyfriend approached me and said that since my husband and his girlfriend were having an affair, he thought we should get together. That was just shocking to me. I was so surprised. He was really stunned that I didn’t know.”

Then Julie became aware that her husband was sleeping with yet another woman. Amazingly, the bar incident happened the
following year—after she had learned of two prior infidelities. So now the mystery was even greater: how could she have “whooshed” away the fact of that kiss between her husband and the other woman? She explained that between finding out about the first two cases of infidelity and the bar incident, the simple passage of time had worked its magic.

“My husband and I had a big fight over it and kind of made up, and time goes by. I was still with him, and it didn’t occur to me . . . I thought it was finished.”

She went on, telling us in her own words about the bar incident.

“I was kind of a stay-at-home person, and my son was under two years old. One of the standing fights I had with my husband was that he never came straight home after being away at work all week. He always went to a bar first and drank with his buddies. That really bothered me because he had a little boy and a wife, and he didn’t want to come home right away to see us? I could never understand that. He said, ‘Look, I work hard all the time, and I deserve to have a good time with my buddies.’ . . . So anyway, this Friday, the wife of a man he worked with said to me, ‘Come on, we’re going to surprise them.’ She had gotten a babysitter. We were going out—and I never went out, never.

“I decided to go, and we got all dressed up. We got to the bar in this small town before my husband and his coworker arrived. It had a local band, and the place was filled with people. We were kind of excited, waiting to surprise our husbands. They walked through the door and as my husband came inside, a woman jumped up and went over to him, and they kissed. When they stopped kissing, he looked up, and our eyes met. I’m kind of watching this, and he walked over and said, ‘I don’t know who that was.’ I believed him. I seriously believed him. I thought, ‘That was weird’ and . . . whoosh! That was it. I spent the rest of the evening with him, dancing. . . . I never questioned him again about that woman.”

“Whoosh?” What exactly is this mental process? we wondered, while replaying the audiotape of our interview with Julie. We are psychologists—we should know. We do in fact investigate the ways people can forget and remain unaware of important events. You could even say we study “whoosh” in the laboratory and observe it in the consulting room. Although we must admit that it remains something of a mystery to us, there is much we do understand.
We have come to call this “whooshing” away of important betrayals “betrayal blindness.”

Betrayal blindness means you do not or cannot see what is there in front of you. The information that her husband was unfaithful was there the whole time. When Julie later replayed the bar incident in her own mind, she finally saw what she couldn’t see at the time.

“It wasn’t until much later, after we were divorced, I was working as a gardener, and when you work as a gardener, you have a lot of time . . . to just mull things over in your mind, and I remembered that night, and I thought, ‘Oh, my God, he must have been having an affair with her.’”

How could Julie be blind to her husband’s infidelity when she already knew of at least two of his previous affairs? Her husband kisses a strange woman and she accepts his claim: “I don’t know who that was”?

What would it take for Julie to acknowledge the betrayal? Julie provided the answer: “Did I have to see it right in front of me? Yes, I did, because the final event that happened, when I could no longer deny it, was when a mutual friend of ours came to spend the night, a woman. I can’t remember exactly the series of events leading up to this, but I was downstairs, and they were upstairs, and all of a sudden I thought, ‘What is going on?’ I tip-toed upstairs, and they were making love in our bed. I saw them. And I couldn’t exactly . . . There it was. So I just went back downstairs again.”

Some months after finding her husband in flagrante delicto with another woman, Julie did manage to leave him. Yet her reasons for doing so were as much about his marked cruelty toward her as they were about his infidelity. Her husband had become scary: alcoholic, emotionally abusive, and threatening violence. By that point, his infidelity was less significant than his reign of terror, and maybe that is why Julie let herself creep up the stairs and get the hard evidence for what was probably so obvious already. Staying with her husband was becoming a risk to her safety and her son’s well-being.

The human mind is marvelously convoluted. Julie almost surely knew about her husband’s betrayals in some sense of the word *knew*, even as she didn’t let herself know in another sense. Betrayal blindness requires this convolution, so that one can be
in the dual state of simultaneously knowing and not knowing something important.

Why would Julie not know something that’s there for the knowing? The answer likely resided in her need to survive. During the initial period of her marriage, Julie had a powerful—although unconscious—motivation for remaining blind to her husband’s betrayal: she was utterly dependent on her husband. Knowing about the betrayal would have required some action, yet she could not afford to rock the boat. Sometimes ignorance can preserve the relative bliss of the status quo when knowledge would inevitably lead to chaos. Ignorance is bliss when it allows you to survive.

“You know, people always look at other people’s marriages and their bad relations and say, ‘Why does she stay?’ There are so many reasons to stay, and it’s so hard to leave, because everybody says no relationship is perfect, and you have to go through the bad times, and you have a child with someone, and also you have no resources. I had no resources at all. . . . I spent all of my money, $250, on a car, and I drove it away, and it threw a rod and died completely, and there I was in the middle of nowhere with a two-year-old in the backseat. I thought, ‘Okay, this sucks,’ and then I went back, and he had moved back into the house. . . . So you wonder . . .”

We asked Julie how her financial situation had affected her ability to leave him.

She explained, “I had no money of my own. I wasn’t working. I was isolated. I was completely dependent on him. Once I got out of that relationship, I knew I could never again be financially dependent on a person like that, to not have any kind of options.”

With Julie’s financial dependence, how did she manage to leave her husband? Partly it was her willingness to call on other relationships.

“I had to get help to leave him. A girlfriend said she would send me the money to get out. I was dependent on him to take me to the airport. I didn’t have a vehicle. We lived in the country. The airport was really far away, so I had to lie to him. I had to pretend I was just visiting my mother, so I couldn’t take my stuff. I had a lot of really nice things I had to leave because he would have known, and he wouldn’t have driven me to the airport.”

“It sounds like an escape,” we said.

Julie agreed. “It was an escape. I had to escape.”
So Julie did escape, and over time she re-created herself into the successful professional she is today. She is very happily remarried. We asked Julie to think back to her friends: “You said other people knew at the time. Do you know how they knew?”

“That one friend wasn’t the only one in the group who was sleeping with him, as it turned out, so some of them knew through firsthand experience, and some knew from gossip. They talked. It’s amazing that nobody told me.”

Why didn’t her friends tell her?

Julie saw part of the answer: “I think we tend not to tell others because we don’t want to set the ball in motion that might break up a marriage. It feels like none of our business.”

We were getting a sense of Julie’s first marriage, the betrayals, the blindness, the collusion of those around her. Yet the psychological mystery persisted: Where did the information in front of her eyes go?

Julie tried to help us understand. “If we take the event where I actually saw a woman kiss him, it didn’t even seem like a special event. I didn’t even think about it again, until I began to think about my marriage when I was gardening. I was remembering that night, the excitement of getting together and going out because I never went anywhere. I had a really good time, actually. And then I remembered that kiss, and I stood up, and my jaw kind of dropped. I thought, ‘Oh my God, what an idiot I am! What do I have to do to . . .?’ See? I had to see him actually having sex before I could really accept it. So, yeah, where does the information go? It feels like it just completely didn’t register. And he walks over and says to me, ‘I don’t know who that was.’ He’d just kissed her, for God’s sake!

“Because I’m not a stupid person, right?”

No, Julie is not a stupid person at all. She’s quite brilliant. So imagine our surprise when she told us about being blind again after she left her first husband.

“Later I had another relationship where the guy had an affair, and this was after my marriage. It was actually the next really important relationship, which was a few years later. I was vigilant. At that point, I had become obsessed with the possibility that somebody could be having an affair. I looked for all signs of this activity, and I never felt like that was happening with this guy. . . . But when we were leaving to go on a long trip—we had some dogs—all of
a sudden, he had rented the house to this woman who was going to look after the dogs. It struck me as weird that I had never met this woman before. He had just made this arrangement, and she had come over one night to see the house and look at the dogs. I was very friendly to her, and she was strangely reserved around me. I thought, ‘Who is this woman?’ She was a very attractive young woman, and I thought, ‘Wow.’ Then, years later, I found out that he had been having an affair with her!”

We were struggling to understand. We asked Julie, “Do you remember suspecting and discounting it, even though you were being vigilant?”

“When my other friend said, ‘Remember the woman who looked after the dogs?’ I was not surprised. I felt like, right, okay, and a long time later, confronted the guy.”

How could Julie fail to detect betrayal in a new relationship after living through her husband’s betrayal? “The second time is puzzling,” we said. “You described yourself being observant, and we still don’t understand what went through your mind when you met the dog-sitting woman.”

“Well, I remember thinking, ‘We have this problem: we have these dogs, and we need someone to look after them in this house.’ Also, the dogs were very important to my boyfriend. The person who was looking after the dogs had to be someone he could really trust. He said, ‘Well, I know this woman, and she is going to do it,’ and I thought, ‘Who is this woman?’ You know, it crossed my mind. I was puzzled because it seemed that you would have to know someone quite well if you were going to leave your beloved pets under her care. And then I remember her being very attractive and very quiet. She was exactly the way you might be if you were meeting the woman whose boyfriend you were having an affair with. She was uncomfortable and reserved. I was quite friendly to her, and she didn’t reciprocate. But it didn’t occur to me then that he was having an affair with her.”

Julie reflected on her own process of remembering and figuring out the betrayal. “Where does the information go? To me, it is interesting that when I was remembering the event—going out to surprise my husband . . . Then just replaying the event, I remembered the woman, and then in light of later events and my understanding of who he was, I realized what I had missed, and it just
stunned me. So the information was all coded in memory but not interpreted as evidence of his having an affair.”

Perhaps some people don’t suspect infidelity because they don’t think it is possible. Yet by the time Julie saw her husband kiss the woman in the bar, she had already learned of two of his prior infidelities. Perhaps before the very first fight she had with her husband, she didn’t suspect infidelity because she didn’t really believe it was possible. After the fight, though, after she had learned of his first and then his second infidelity, she must have known it was at least possible that he could be unfaithful. And yet she had accepted his explanation of the kiss, and she didn’t think about the matter again for years. How could this be?

“I had the idea, but in terms of information, I think it was just unprocessed, somehow—it’s there, but it’s just totally not processed. Yet it’s available if you recall the incident for some other reason.”

We wondered how much of it was motivated by a desire not to know. Julie answered, “I wanted to believe that we had a happy marriage, that it was going to work.”

The need to trust is a powerful agent, a blinding agent.

Were Julie’s experiences unusual? From our research and interviews with many other individuals, we know that Julie’s experiences of remaining blind to infidelity are fairly common for both women and men. Furthermore, betrayal occurs in many domains besides infidelity. People can be betrayed at work, in the family, and in society. Betrayal can occur at the individual and at the societal level. Betrayal can be the act of a terrorist or the act of a friend. Parents can betray by abandoning or abusing their children. Treason is betrayal. Social injustice and oppression often entail betrayal and betrayal blindness, as will be illustrated in the next chapter by the case of Kevin, who remained blind to being a victim of racial discrimination for so many years.

Although not all betrayal involves blindness, ongoing or repeated betrayal is intrinsically linked with unawareness. Ongoing betrayal can occur only when there is some deception that is not fully detected. Sometimes this lack of knowledge is the result of insufficient information, but other times the obliviousness is in part the result of betrayal blindness—unawareness of information that is present but is somehow “whooshed” away. Moreover, the discovery of betrayal always seems to prompt a profoundly new awareness:
the world is not the same. Someone who was trusted is now considered unsafe. On discovery of betrayal, a key response is to reorganize one’s perceptions of what has happened—to rewrite history. Betrayal therefore has a fundamental impact on one’s perceptions of reality. As one woman who had been betrayed by an unfaithful husband said to us, “Betrayal is so contrary to what one expects that it throws you off balance. It tips you over. It’s like, where have I been? Everything that I know to be true is not true. It’s insidious, it’s got tentacles that reach in and make you question everything.”

And yet, although betrayal is so common and insidious, very little has been written about it in the psychological literature. Psychology as a discipline may suffer from betrayal blindness. Part of the problem stems from a tendency in clinical psychology and psychiatry to focus on individuals and individual symptoms. As a result, the relations between people—betrayal and its blindness—are not seen. Betrayal, depending as it does on interpersonal and institutional relationships, never quite makes it onto center stage. Perhaps beginning to look at betrayal in scientific ways can also make the discipline of psychology question everything it thinks it knows.