

Chapter One

Why Did You Pick That Partner in the First Place?

In order to learn from our divorce, we must understand what led us to make the decisions we made and why we chose to behave the way we did. The idea is that the more we understand about ourselves, the better able we are to lead a life that pleases us and lives up to our image of the kind of person we want to be. The honest analysis of any failed relationship, even if we are better off without that person, provides us with an open window to our strengths and weaknesses.

There are many factors that influence the way we behave and the choices we make. Most of our interpersonal decisions are made with a focus on the here and now and the current facts before us. What we rarely think about is the “package” of life experiences within us that predisposes us to act one way rather than another or to make choice A rather than choice C.

Way back in 1807, the poet William Wordsworth wrote, “The child is father of the man.” The insight is still valid today. As adults we are an amalgam of our temperament, our childhood experiences with our parents, our experiences with our peers, the values we absorb, and, finally, the way we put this together in our heads in order to define both our self as a person and our expectations as to what life should be. Our sense of self and our expectations of life are powerful determinants of the choices we make, particularly in love relationships. It is in a love relationship that we open our hearts in hope of finding oneness with another.

A silly example will show how our temperament, experiences with our parents and our peers, our values, and the way we chose

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to integrate it all into our sense of self all join and interact to influence our decisions and the way we present ourselves. Suppose you are a person who finds scented oil massages an incredible turn-on in sexual foreplay. Right off the bat, you have a constraint on you when you meet another person who interests you, because society is pretty clear that you don't open your first conversation with "Hello, my name is Sam Smith, and I find scented oil massages an incredible turn-on before sex." People would run screaming from the room. This is an external influence on your behavior. It is a socially imposed constraint on your behavior.

In addition, suppose your parents were absolutely silent on sex as you were growing up, so you gained your sexual information (or most likely misinformation) from your friends. Your parents quashed talking openly about sex, and your friends were always looking to tease you about some dumb question you asked, so you spoke very carefully in front of them. This is an internally imposed constraint. Long ago you learned to be very cautious about doing anything that would expose you to mockery.

Further, let us assume that your self-image is that of a not particularly attractive person—a sex object you're not. This kind of self-image would make it very hard to come forward with that piece of erotic self-revelation about the scented oil massage in sexual foreplay. Other people might misread you because they feel no sexual vibes coming from you, so they walk on by, convincing you even more that you are not a very desirable sexual partner. This is another internally imposed constraint. Because you don't think of yourself as sexy, you do not send out an erotic charge to other people. They don't respond erotically to you, which further convinces you that you are not a sexy person.

So the interaction of these constraints that have arisen from your life experiences all gang up on you, with minimum awareness on your part. As a result, you behave, without any conscious intention, in a way that signals you are not a very sexy person. Ironically, you have many sexual feelings, but your life experiences have joined to make this a very inhibited area for you. It would be very easy to miss the point by saying to oneself, I am rejected because I am not very attractive, so I will be very cautious because I don't like rejection. The real issue, however, is that you are ignored (which is very different from being rejected) because no one can read any

sexual vibes coming from you. There is no encouragement for them to flirt or to approach you to test the waters.

To understand yourself you must first understand the internal and external influences on your life. Self-understanding is the first step in creating a new life for yourself after divorce. Once you understand your functioning and how it contributed to the breakup of your relationship, you can make conscious decisions as to how you will do things differently next time. An examined life offers many more degrees of freedom for the future.

Internal Influences

There are many internal influences that affect our relationships and our success or failure in marriage, including temperament, values and morality, fears, and self-concept. So let's take a look at each of these and see how they work.

Temperament

Temperament is one of those "inside" characteristics that we are all born with. Each of us has a particular style that shapes the way the world approaches us. For instance, you have heard the phrase, "He is a good baby." What that usually means is that as a baby, he doesn't give the adults around him much grief. He feeds well, doesn't spit up much, quickly learns to sleep through the night, and cries hardly at all. These characteristics reflect a temperament, an in-born style that has a powerful effect on the way the world interacts with the "good baby."

Compare the good baby to the high-strung child who is strongly reactive to things that happen around him. He startles easily, has a high energy level, sleeps little, and never whimpers when screaming will do! This child will often be labeled as a "difficult baby," and his world will be populated with people who are often frustrated or angry or resigned when dealing with him. How parents and others respond to the temperament a child is born with has much to do with the experiences a child has and how he eventually comes to see both himself and life.

Many years ago, when Bob was working in a child guidance clinic in North Carolina, he was asked by the mother and father of

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a one-year-old child to evaluate him for hyperactivity. They said their son was running them ragged. The mother and father were quite overweight. As they talked about their lives, it became clear that they were very focused on their own comfort and were very content to watch life from the sidelines as they took care of their needs.

A home visit was scheduled to see the child in his own environment, where he would be most comfortable. The child was observed with both of his parents, and he seemed very normal as he hooched around the house and played with his stack toys. The great “aha!” came when Bob went to say good-bye. Both parents were on the living room sofa watching TV. This was in the days before electronic zappers let people switch channels and turn the TV off by remote control. With great and laborious effort the dad got off the sofa and walked across the room to turn the TV off. Bob was struck that for the dad this was probably a form of violent exercise!

Obviously, the “aha!” was that a normally active baby in the context of two inactive, self-absorbed parents could be seen as hyperactive. The feedback the infant was getting, however, told him he was a handful and needed to slow down. The parents’ passive temperament created a perception of the child that in another context—that is, among normally active people—would be quite different. Think then what might happen to this child over the years as he was told that he was too lively. He might cut back and try to emulate the passivity of his parents to gain their approval. He might think of himself as a misfit and decide that if he can’t be good at being good, he will be good at being bad and actually become hyper. There are many paths he could take. The point is that the temperamental differences between his parents and him will be life-shaping.

In our search for a mate, temperament plays a role at the adult level as well. We have all met, and perhaps envied, the person who seems to have an easy, lively, and fairly energetic style. Such people are attractive in part because they can carry us over the lulls in the conversation or can be counted on to have ideas as to what to do when we are feeling bored. A person with a slower, more laid back temperament may need more time to connect with us and we with him or her.

For example, Ron and Skylar laugh about how they got together and fell in love. “We fell in love in an elevator stuck between the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth floors of the Parker Build-

ing,” laughs Skylar. She is a petite redhead with many freckles. Her tempo is bright and lively, and she tends to talk a mile a minute. She has a grand passion for dogs, and dreams of living on a ranch with dogs and horses. Ron is a great bear of a man. Although he is not handsome, his physical presence demands attention and respect. In high school his nickname on the football squad was Lurch. Ron was shy and low-key, but was a living example of “still waters run deep.” He was very thoughtful, cared a great deal about the environment, and liked working as a volunteer at a boy’s club near his apartment. He was a computer expert for his company; Skylar was an account manager in the advertising division of the same firm.

Ron and Skylar saw each other occasionally at company events and occasionally worked together if she needed some help putting together some artwork on her computer for one of her accounts or, worse, if her computer went down right in the middle of a project with a critical deadline. He thought she was flighty and hysterical, she thought he was pretty much a clod. Further, their sizes were so different. Ron’s office mates would kid him about never dating her because one false move and she would be crushed to death. In sum, their size difference and their temperaments prevented them from considering each other as anything but coworkers in a large advertising firm. But then there was the day of the brownout, when, because of the intense heat, power failed in pockets throughout the city. Ron and Skylar were the only people in an elevator when it ground to a stop. She had gone to get him to come down to her office to check on a quirky computer program that was bedeviling her. They were trapped in the elevator for four hours.

As he recounts the story, Ron always laughingly says, “And when the doors finally opened we both shot off to the bathroom. Nobody would ever have thought we had started to fall in love.” What had happened in the four hours that they were forced to be together was that Skylar, in her typical chatty, lively way, began to ask Ron about himself. After a while he felt it was OK to ask her about herself. Once they got beyond their initial impressions of one another (the Oaf and Miss Professionally Perky), they discovered that there lived a very intriguing person inside. The relationship developed from there, and in this case the initial impact of opposing temperaments melted away with further self-revelation.

Values and Morality

In any relationship, be it with our children, our spouse, our parents, our work associates, or the plumber, our values and the level of our moral thinking have a great deal to do with how we treat people. In this book, we use the term *value* to mean any standard we hold that guides our behavior. Values can be major or minor, but the values we hold define us as human beings. For instance, we may hold the values of being honest and of not stealing, and as a result, we do not steal and we try to tell the truth. We may hold a value of cleanliness being next to godliness and so keep a clean house. We may hold the value that one must finish one's work before one plays. Moral behavior and moral values focus solely on how we feel we should behave in relationship with other people or how we should be in relationship to humankind. So whereas moral thinking is made up of moral values, we have many values that are not moral values because they don't impinge on how we feel we should be with our fellow humans. For instance, we may value low-calorie meals. This is not a moral value. We may value equal treatment of all races. This is a moral value.

Ethical behavior refers to how we apply our moral principles to our behavior toward others. When we behave ethically, we are taking our moral values and applying them to another human being or group of human beings in a manner that is consistent with our principles regardless of the particular human being. For instance, if we hold to the moral value that all people must be treated equally, then we apply that to all people. We do not say that some people can be treated "less equally" than others.

In an intimate marital relationship, our sense of the way humans should treat each other has great impact on how we treat our marital partner and on whether the relationship will be successful or not. How a person is treated in a relationship has a great deal to do with whether he or she is willing to remain in the relationship.

For example, George had been married to Colette for eight years. Over the eight years, he had put on about forty pounds of weight. His belly hung over his belt, and his legs tended to splay out at the knees as his body struggled to hold the extra pounds. His wife had told him, at first gently and then, over time, more forcefully, that sex with him was a super turnoff. His body was fat,

flabby, and increasingly repulsive. She begged him to go on a diet. She packed him lunches for work that had a small individual can of tuna and a couple of pieces of fruit. George dutifully agreed to lose weight and eat the food she put in front of him, but he also had a secret stash of his favorite snacks in a locked file in his study at home. He would go into his study at night to “work” and pig out on his snacks, which he also sneaked in his sample case. While he gobbled down his goodies, he listened intently for his wife’s footsteps in the hall. He was terrified of getting caught and facing her disappointment at his two-facedness.

He was lying to her, plain and simple. George was not behaving in an ethical manner—that is, in accordance with his moral principle that said he should not lie. He valued the feeling of a full belly more highly than behaving ethically, however. George was trying hard to offer the appearance of being a “good boy” when he knew he was not. He never did get caught, but his wife divorced him when he tipped the scales at 307 pounds.

Psychologists have been studying the development of moral thinking in children and adults for about the past seventy years and have come up with a developmental framework that attempts to describe the various stages through which our thinking evolves. As you will see, very few of us reach the highest stage of moral functioning. There is a certain irony here because it makes sense to want to reach the highest moral level, yet people who function at that level can be difficult to live with. You will have to decide for yourself whether being morally conventional is the better and ultimately kinder choice.

Psychologists who study the development of moral thinking and its translation into action have come up with three general levels of how people think about a person’s proper relationship to others: pre-conventional morality, conventional morality, and post-conventional morality. Here, *conventional* means “everybody does it.” It appears that moral functioning is distributed along a normal curve: the self-serving are at the far left, most of us cluster in the middle, and a few of us fall to the right, where moral behavior, doing what is right, always overrides our personal desires. Each level of moral functioning has been found to have two different *styles* of thinking, so, according to theory, there are six different ways to function morally.

Pre-Conventional Morality

Pre-conventional moral behavior is motivated by one of two concerns, but the dominant operating principles are Don't Get in Trouble and Don't Get Punished, not some overarching principle such as Do Not Steal. In other words, a person who functions at the level of pre-conventional morality is constantly looking out for number one.

One style focuses on not getting caught and not getting punished. For instance, this is the sort of person who would shoplift or have an affair if there were only a minimal chance of getting caught. The person who functions at this level is strictly into pain avoidance. Such individuals would think nothing of having bank accounts that are kept secret from their partners or having a second wife and children in another country. The only value they espouse is that of not getting caught—as that will lead to their being in trouble—so for them moral behavior comes into play only when getting caught is highly probable. When Bob's twin sons were about four, one of their favorite admonishments to each other was, "Don't do that or you will get yelled at!" In other words, stay out of trouble.

The second style of functioning found in pre-conventional morality is that of choosing to act in a moral manner or behave ethically only when there is a trade-off. In other words, "I will do good for you if you will do good for me." For these people, making a choice to behave morally comes into play only when they see that there is something in it for them. For instance, consider a man who has several brief flings while his wife is in the last trimester of her pregnancy and then recovering from her episiotomy. His justification is, *Well, she is not making herself sexually available to me, so I will go elsewhere because I have a right to sex.* In this kind of thinking, moral behavior is worthwhile only if it is rewarded. At higher levels of functioning, behaving morally is satisfying in and of itself. The person does not need a cheering section or somebody handing out rewards whenever she completes a moral act. She knows she has done the right thing, and that thought alone is comforting and reinforcing.

Being in a relationship with a person who functions according to the rules of pre-conventional morality is very difficult because you are always in an unpredictable arena. The person does not act by a moral principle that would enable you to predict how he

would behave if the particular moral principle were challenged. With the selfish practitioner, the answer to his moral behavior is always “It depends”; it depends on whether or not he will be caught and punished, or it depends on whether behaving morally has some very concrete reward in it for him.

A quick example will illustrate this type of moral functioning. Corey was a vice president for labor relations for a large international company. His job kept him traveling quite a bit overseas. He might be gone for five days at a time. When the job he had been sent for was over, on the last night of his stay Corey would go down to the hotel bar, where he would pick up a woman, have sex with her, and be on the plane back to the United States the next day.

He was shocked when his wife, informed by a coworker, was furious with him and asked for a divorce. His point was that he was not hurting anyone by what he did. He always had protected sex, he was not “getting any” at home because he was far from home, and his wife and kids were being supported well by his high salary. Corey also took some pride in his restraint: he had sex only after the job was done. This is how he rewarded himself. Plus, he had sex only once per trip. One could argue here that Corey behaved more morally toward his company than toward his wife in that he focused his energy on work and played only when the work was all done. You can get the sense that checking out the moral structure within which a potential partner functions is an important step when seeking a lasting relationship.

Conventional Morality

This is the range in which most of us function. Conventional morality focuses on keeping society both peaceful and well functioning. At this level, a person accepts social conventions and rules because he believes that if society accepts them, he should adhere to them to preserve the social order. This is not just conformity to immediate authority to avoid punishment, or bartering with authority for reciprocity, as it is with pre-conventional morality; rather, it is conformity to sustain the broader social order. You will tend to act on and implement values if you see that by doing so, life goes on as you want it to.

One style of functioning in conventional morality is to be a nice person because it gets you accolades and keeps you included

in a lot of activities. This is a morality based on staying in good standing with family and lovers so as to maintain their approval. When considering right and wrong, a person who functions at this level is heavily influenced by what people think of him. Note that there is a shift from the pre-conventional morality level where one does things to avoid pain or to get something in return. The focus in this stage is to be liked, so one makes the moral choice by assessing what the popular choice would be.

At this stage of moral development it is easy to hold that a political protester should be punished because the protester is a threat to the social order and the peacefulness of society. One can begin to sense the difference between conventional and higher-order moral functioning, which adheres to principle in the abstract. A person functioning at the highest level of moral development, which we will describe shortly, might view civil disobedience as acceptable in certain circumstances because, for example, the right to be treated equally could override the sanctity of property. Our society's reaction to civil rights protests gives a good illustration of how different levels of moral functioning can divide us.

A second style of functioning within conventional morality is that which totally accepts social convention and rules. Individuals with this style believe that society's rules should be maintained to protect society and the social fabric within which we function. This is the classic "law-and-order" mentality that unquestioningly accepts social regulations. Conformity to rules is applauded.

A marriage can become vulnerable when one partner evolves to a higher level of functioning and begins to hold beliefs that threaten the social order and people who hold that the social order must be protected at all costs. Here are two examples, one frivolous (at least now) and one more serious.

About ten years ago, both Christie and Bob had an influx of families in their caseloads, usually dads and sons, who were quarreling about who owned the son's left earlobe. The parents, particularly the fathers, were incensed that their sons wanted to pierce their ears and wear earrings. From our perspective today, when men with earrings—several in fact—are a fairly common phenomenon, this conflict may seem to be a tempest in a teapot, but at the time it was a hot-button issue.

The clash was, of course, over the boys' break from gender conformity: boys simply do not wear earrings! What will people think of you? You will be ostracized! Nice boys do not wear earrings! Most important, the fathers felt that their sons were not treating them with the respect that youngsters should offer their parents and elders. As far as they were concerned, their sons were making an immoral choice because it showed great disrespect and served as a corruption of the social fabric. The fathers were turning a value issue (do guys wear earrings?) into a moral issue. They elevated a fashion value into a moral issue because they were functioning at the conventional moral level of being concerned with following society's rules, even if the rules were never made into laws. Up to that time, society had ruled that boys don't wear earrings. We can note that the older generation often reacts to a younger generation's fashion statement in a moral context, such as when the flappers of the 1920s raised their skirts and rolled down their stockings.

On a more serious note, there is a split in this country over the death penalty. Those in favor see it as a deterrent to individuals who would consider taking another's life and just retribution by society toward a person who has taken a life. This is essentially the law-and-order position found in conventional morality. Others argue that "Thou shalt not kill." The taking of a human life by anyone, including the State, is immoral. No one is seen as being above that moral imperative. If this example gets your juices going, pro or con, you will begin to understand the chasms that moral differences can create between people and within a society.

Post-Conventional Morality

The highest level of moral functioning conceptualizes morality in complex terms. Found at this level is the belief that moral behavior is based on a self-conscious social contract made between people. We agree to conform to norms that appear necessary to keep the social order and protect the rights of others. Because a social contract is a deliberate agreement between people, it can be modified if the participants rationally discuss alternatives that may benefit a greater percentage of the group than does the current social contract. So, unlike the conventional morality position that rigidly adheres to the social contract and sees it as cast in bronze, the next

level of thinking holds that the contract can be changed if we can talk about it and agree. Change is valued if it benefits an increased number of people in a group. For instance, civil disobedience is acceptable under certain circumstances if it prompts people to examine and revise an entrenched belief or social convention.

Individuals who function at the highest level of this stage have an internalized set of values to which they conform. They do not worry so much about the criticism of others, but rather about their self-criticism should they betray a closely held moral value. Such individuals can be problematic in society and hard to live with on an intimate basis because they march to their own drummer, often against the mainstream of society. Little things that most of us would look away from stop them dead in their tracks as they take care that their principles are not breached. "Go along to get along" is certainly not their model of moral functioning. The very traditional Jains in India believe that "Thou shalt not kill" applies to insects; they sweep the path in front of them to prevent the accidental death of an ant. A Jain in this country would be difficult to live with given the attention that sweeping a path before them would draw as one approached the local ballpark.

A fairly benign example and a more serious one will help anchor the concept. When a young person hits adolescence, sometimes he or she will decide to become a vegetarian on the moral principle that eating the meat of an animal that can feel pain is inappropriate. The decision, if accepted by the family, can be a terrible inconvenience, as not everyone will sit down to the same meal, which places a burden on the cook. Further, adolescent converts to vegetarianism can be hearty and occasionally heartless in their proselytizing of other family members to join their ranks.

Here we have an adolescent moving to a higher-order value system that the majority of people do not worry about. The value is held close to the heart internally regardless of the inconvenience it causes for others or for the holder. It certainly can create uproar in a less than tolerant family and uproar for parents who disagree between themselves.

Another example concerns Arlene. She was married, with an eight-year-old son, and she worked for a large city paper. She was called to court to testify on a story she had done about a drug distribution ring that had its roots in Latin America and sales points

all through the central United States. The prosecuting attorney wanted her notes on the interviews done for the story, and the judge ordered Arlene to turn them over. She refused, citing her prerogative as a reporter to protect her sources. She was jailed, where she sat for about six months.

Her absence from the family caused much hardship. Although the newspaper kept her on the payroll while Arlene was imprisoned, her husband was turned into an instant single parent, which was a struggle given his required evening work as the financial officer for a large car dealership in town. Her imprisonment was very costly to the family, it exposed her son to endless teasing at school, and as her husband Charlie put it, it kept him "busier than a one-armed paper hanger!"

Charlie was supportive of the position Arlene took, so although there was tension in the family because of the disruption and the absence of a loved one, there was cohesion among them as well, because morally they all thought she was doing the right thing. In this case, Arlene's moral stance brought everyone closer together emotionally, even though they were physically apart.

Where a person functions in his own moral development has a great influence on the kind of relationships he will have. In relationships, morality comes into play when a person has to decide how to handle a situation in terms of what is fair or, even better, what is morally right. An easy example is the decision to have or not have an affair. If one is functioning at the "getting caught" level of morality, then having an affair is a slam-dunk: just do it away from home where friends and spouse will not see you. Multiple affairs can be had under the umbrella of this kind of moral thinking. This is exactly what Corey did.

The line of reasoning is as follows: affairs are a little harder to justify when one operates at the conventional law-and-order level of morality. An affair flies against socially held convention, but convention can be easily rationalized away. Affairs are not legally forbidden; only social convention and religion frown on them. If a person combines the idea that she will not destroy society ("After all, I am only one person") with the idea that happiness is a goal, then she can overthrow convention.

At the highest level of moral functioning, secret affairs would be impossible. Either the spouses would negotiate for an open

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marriage in which other sexual partners were known and not hidden, or the affairs would not occur in the first place because they would be seen as harmful to a person who had placed his or her trust in you. Simply put, one does not deliberately harm the people one loves and, even better, does not harm people at all if one has a choice.

The choices we make given our level of moral functioning have much to do with the success of our interpersonal relationships.

Self-Concept

Another internal part of ourselves that we bring to a relationship is our self-concept. Our self-concept is made up of the numerous ways we think of ourselves. For example, what do we think of ourselves as a lover, as an attractive person, as a cook, as a basketball player, as a story-teller, as a parent? The list can be very long. Hand in hand with self-concept is our level of self-esteem—that is, the favorableness with which we look upon ourselves. Also in the picture is our ideal self-concept, the image we hold of how we would like to be. We hope there is never too great a discrepancy between our actual self-concept and our ideal self-concept, or we are doomed to a life of discouragement.

How we think of ourselves and who we are has enormous power in shaping our behavior in terms of what we will be willing to risk and not risk doing. There are many shaping influences of self-concept that we will talk about when we deal with external factors. For the moment the question is, Given our self-concept, what do we bring to a relationship? Others often perceive aspects of our self-concept as personality quirks. For example, “George will just never go out on a dance floor no matter how hard I try to coax him. We tried it once when we were courting, and he had more than two left feet—there were three!” George saw himself as a bad dancer; he had convinced himself so thoroughly that he would “dumb down” when he tried it, so he was a picture of clumsiness. He defeated himself in his head by thinking he was a bad dancer.

Our self-concept, in both its positive and negative aspects, can heavily influence the person we choose as a partner. If for instance we feel we are terrible with names (as one of the authors does), we will select a partner who, among other things, is really good at names (as that author did). If we see ourselves as disorganized, we

might seek a partner who is organized. This selection based on our self-concept is double edged, because in choosing an organized person, we are also probably choosing being nagged to get organized and being gotten angry with for being disorganized. Further, because we see ourselves in this way, we may consider ourselves hopeless (as did George) and not try to do anything differently. Be aware that what is initially attractive in a relationship (“She is so incredibly organized!”) often becomes a strong negative in the unraveling of the relationship (“She is a compulsive bitch!”). The negative aspects of self-concept often hold us down and can become self-fulfilling prophecies, as we saw in George’s case. (*I think I’m bad at dancing, so I won’t try to dance. When I’m dragged onto the dance floor, my thoughts of being bad at it make me all left feet. See, I told you I was bad at dancing!*)

Name recall and dancing are pretty low-profile issues in the grand scheme of things in a marital relationship. The situation becomes more deadly when a person has a poor-self concept coupled with low self-esteem. This syndrome often shows up in abusive relationships. A woman comes to domestic abuse thinking very poorly of herself and often feeling she deserves the punishment she gets because, as a wife, she should please her husband. In addition, in her self-concept she sees herself as weak, ineffective, or damaged and in need of a man to make her life work. Because of these aspects of her self-concept, she stays in the abusive relationship and feels no power either to change it or move out of it. Abusing men are often described as having a very poor self-concept in that they do not believe, in their heart of hearts, that they are very attractive and loveable. As a result, they are very concerned about losing their spouse to another man who is more socially skilled, sexier, or more charming. His hypervigilance about the possible loss of the relationship is translated into obsessive control. He justifies beatings and verbal abuse as a method of teaching the wife a lesson and keeping her in line.

Fears

Yet another internal issue that influences our functioning is fear. Sometimes we experience fear as a reaction to an obvious threat such as a snarling dog, a house fire, getting diagnosed with cancer,

or seeing the stock market plunge when we are seventy and watching our retirement funds melt away. These we will call survival fears. They are normal reactions to threats to our existence. For most of us our response is direct: escape the dog, call the fire department, get medical treatment, pull out of the stock market. The cause of the fear is beyond our control, is typically unexpected, and prompts us to take a problem-solving approach.

There is a second kind of fear that is often more invisible and subtle, yet equally powerful: the fear that springs from any threat to our self-concept. It is the fear of appearing foolish or stupid or too smart or rude or a bumpkin or impolite or . . . The list is endless. The underlying issue is that our self-concept and thus our self-esteem will be undermined or assaulted. Everyone has these fears. How we choose to handle them often determines the level of efficiency with which we cope with life.

For example, Bonny and Zelda both have a fear of public speaking. The idea of getting up in front of a crowd and saying something is pretty scary for both. Each handles her fear differently, with very different results. Bonny decides that she will acknowledge the fear and take it on. She decides to try out for the high school play even though she knows she will be terrified at first. She shares her fear with a friend who has no trouble with public speaking. By externalizing her fear through telling a friend, Bonny opens herself up to coaching from the friend. Her friend Alice tells her that she too gets a little anxious when she gets up to perform, but the anxiety is not overwhelming and in fact sharpens her for her performance. Alice coaches Bonny and helps her with her lines, and Bonny is able to overcome her fear and perform. Like Alice she is not completely without fear, but she has learned to harness it to work for her rather than against her.

Zelda, in contrast, is ashamed of her fear of public speaking and worries that if anyone learns of it, she will be teased and put down. She copes with her fear through avoidance. She simply will not get up in front of a group and speak. This cost her a grade in school because she dodged making a classroom presentation by "being sick" each day she was scheduled and rescheduled to speak. When a person shuts down so as not deal with a problem, psychologists refer to it as ego restriction. Another example is of a person who does not believe she is good at math, so that when she is

confronted with math she becomes “stupid” and simply can’t deal with it.

Our fears related to self-concept can come from our experiences with our families. Several examples used later in this book have to do with individuals who are conflict avoidant. That is, they will do anything to avoid a fight because they see arguments and strong disagreements as harmful and dangerous. They fear “harming” their spouse if they do not agree with him or her and therefore give the person what he or she wants, and they are so fearful of being rejected if they disagree that they just go along to get along. In a marriage, the personal cost of this strategy can be enormous because the person can disappear as a separate individual with his or her own needs, which are fully as valid as those of the spouse. Often such timid souls come from families where parents did not tolerate deviation from what they wanted their children to do or where the parents fought long and hard and divorced. In these families, the child sees fighting as leading to abandonment. Disagree and you’re dumped—so don’t disagree.

Often the reason people enter psychotherapy is that they see themselves locked in self-defeating behavior but do not know why they are doing it. The recognition of self-defeating behavior is the first step toward a cure. That recognition is a central part of this book. For instance, if we can begin to recognize that our needs to be bossy and to micromanage, behaviors that are very annoying to their target, are based on our fear of being controlled (in other words, the best defense is a good offense), then we can begin to question formerly automatic responses. When we recognize we are about to micromanage, we can then ask ourselves, Is this micromanagement really necessary, or am I just being fearful?

Becoming aware of our fears and how they can run us is a great step toward personal freedom and smooth relationships.

External Influences

One way to think of external factors is to appreciate that we live in an “atmosphere” that shapes our behavior often without our realizing it. We do not often think of the earth’s atmosphere unless it is doing something dramatic, such as creating a thunderstorm or tornado. Yet the atmosphere is with us every day. Some people are

quite sensitive to it. For example, when it gets very damp, those of us with arthritis can get creaky. When it gets very dry, we can get nosebleeds; when it gets hot, we can get very cranky.

Some elements of the psychological atmosphere that influence how we behave are parental expectations, societal factors, and peer pressure. In addition, there is a dynamic among the factors that further complicates things and often places us between a rock and a hard place, as when, for instance, our parents may press for one kind of decision and our friends another. We may impulsively make decisions just to get them made because of the pressures we feel from family, friends, and our own needs.

Parental Expectations

Our parents' expectations have a strong influence on our choice of partner even though we may be unconscious of those expectations. Most of us do not fall very far from the family tree. There is the old joke about "Oh, my God! I have become my father [mother]!" For most of us that is not a bad thing to be. We love our parents and would be proud to emulate many aspects of their personalities. Sometimes, though, people purposely try to become the opposite of their parents in an attempt to break the "family curse."

Tom is a good example. He grew up in a "country club" family that was very prejudiced against Jews and African Americans. He went to a private school where neither group was admitted. He never really thought about the issue very much because he was so insulated from people of color and Jews. He went to a small private college where although both African Americans and Jews were in attendance, he remained isolated from both groups. He took ROTC in college and went into the army upon graduation.

In the army, isolation was no longer an option, nor was it something he desired. He chose a friend who was Jewish, almost as an antitoxin to his parents' worldview. Although Tom did not realize it at the time, the friend was an emotional target for Tom not only to work through his issues around prejudice but also to make amends or reparations for what he now saw as the bigotry of his parents and their social set.

Here are Tom's words: "There were so many signals coming from this guy that he was a user. But I was blind to that because

every time he did something that my folks' prejudices would say he would do, I would say, 'No, that is just my prejudiced thinking, a gift from my folks.' I could not see him for what he really was as a human being because I was so busy battling my legacy from my folks. I could not see the man because the symbol got in the way. If he ever naturally fit one of my parent's Jewish stereotypes I reacted as if it were not there and it was not him." Tom and friend had a parting of the ways when the fellow borrowed a considerable sum of money from Tom over time and did not pay it back. The experience opened Tom's eyes in terms of seeing people as people regardless of the labels they come with. He now has friends who are Jewish and doesn't give it a thought. He does have a Christian wife and belongs to a country club that does not exclude people according to religion. His parents' world created a major struggle for Tom as he tried to come to his own terms about moral concepts.

Most of us wish to please our parents with our choice of a partner. Further, the cliché about marrying one's mother or father has a kernel of truth to it. Each of our parents has a style to which we become very accustomed as we grow up in their presence. For instance, if you have a mom who is bubbly and outgoing but with a quick, explosive temper—kaboom! and then it's over—you develop skills to cope with this. The lateral transfer to a wife who is bubbly with a quick temper is easy.

Unconsciously using the parental template to choose a mate can backfire and cause problems as well. If a woman grew up with a very domineering father, she might find herself attracted to a partner who has the same style. As life progresses, however, she might come into her own in terms of developing her own mind and preferences and, most important, begin to have the courage of her convictions. You can sense the pending conflict. If one's partner is used to being "alpha dog" and is suddenly challenged, some very powerful attitude adjustments may have to take place that a marriage may not be able to survive.

Besides the influence of our parents' value system or a personal style with which we have learned to cope, parental messages are probably the part of parenting that has the most impact on us. If you have children, you probably have directly experienced this. Kids love hearing family stories about themselves and their parents. In the stories are messages and assumptions about the person

being talked about, and those messages can be life shaping. The messages can be quite negative, however, and exert influence over a person long after an event.

One of Bob's clients, Philip, came to therapy because his wife was divorcing him. He had come home from a sexual encounter with a woman who was a friend of his wife. The woman's signature perfume was Orchid Passion, a very heavy, powerful, and aggressive perfume. It made the wearer smell nice, but everybody in the room was very aware that the wearer was present. One evening, when Philip came home and leaned over to kiss his wife, who was sitting in a chair, the scent of Orchid Passion poured off his body. She guessed what had happened because she was well aware of the predatory nature of her friend who wore it. A confrontation ensued, and a separation quickly followed when Philip admitted to the affair.

In therapy, Philip admitted to numerous affairs, many of which he carried on simultaneously. He even had a Rolodex in which he kept track, for instance, of which woman got what kind of flower from him on Valentine's Day. He feared that if he did not write this sort of information down he would ask one girlfriend how she liked the roses when he had in fact given her daisies. Ah, the stresses of deceit!

As Philip's therapy progressed, several messages from his parents, particularly from his mother, surfaced that helped Philip understand why a stable of mistresses was a psychological necessity. His mother did not like sex. She did not like any evidence of sexual activity emanating from her son. Essentially the message was that nice boys did not think about sex; their thoughts were "pure" and "clean." You will note that through her choice of words, sex was obliquely labeled as dirty and impure. As an adolescent with normal (not exaggerated or extreme) sexual needs, Philip developed a second life outside his home. He sneaked dates, dances, and moonlit drives. He developed a parallel life where he could experience sex and keep a "pure" life with his mother during his adolescence. He never spoke of a girlfriend, and Mother never asked about one. The other part of the maternal message "took" as well. After Philip married (his mother could tolerate married sex), he developed a craving for unusual variations in sex. He liked sex toys such as handcuffs, whips, and battery clamps. He liked women who enjoyed being dominated and humiliated. So he took the message

about sex being dirty and impure and turned it into something that would profoundly shock his mother if she only knew.

Parental messages can come in even subtler forms than the one Philip experienced. For instance, Tammy had spent her childhood helping her mother manage her father, who was an alcoholic. She helped him to bed some nights and covered for him on the phone when he was too drunk to talk. She was an expert in cleaning up his messes.

Tammy's mother was very grateful for Tammy's help, which made her caretaking for her father all the more meaningful. By the time she was twenty-seven, she had had a string of boyfriends who used her and dumped her. They were guys who had drug and alcohol problems, had a hard time keeping a job, and depended on her heavily to organize them and essentially make their lives work.

Tammy woke up one morning and asked herself why these men kept gravitating to her. Then she had the horrendous realization that it was she who was gravitating to them! Her whole childhood had taught her that in order to be loved and valued, she needed to dedicate herself to cleaning up other people's messes as she did for her father and her ever-grateful mother. She realized she was aiming symbolically toward marrying her father—a marriage she realized she did not want. At this point she entered psychotherapy and began to turn her life around. In Tammy's case, her mother never said anything directly to her. What was so powerful and rewarding was her mother's gratitude to her. Making Mother happy became very reinforcing.

Here's a final example. This is a story of two young men, George and Evan. George was Catholic, from a family whose parents were very active in the church. His father owned a very successful car dealership and was highly visible in the community on volunteer boards and at charity functions. It was here that his mother also shined. She had won many awards for her charitable good works for the local children's hospital, even to the point of having a hospital wing named in her honor.

George had four brothers. The family joke was that all Father had were Y chromosomes. As George began to seek a mate, he felt he was looking for a well-connected Catholic girl who wanted many children and who could help George rise in the corporate world by being a charming hostess. George's wife needed to be very ca-

pable and willing to promote her family's rise to eminence in the community.

Evan, in contrast, was an only child whose parents were teachers. His dad taught at a local community college, and his mother taught English as a second language at the high school. His parents had dedicated their lives to helping others. They lived modestly and drove their cars until they fell apart. They gave much of their nonwork time to young people's organizations, and for a time Evan's father was chairman of the local chapter of the ACLU. Evan went to the local state-supported college as a commuter, lived at home, and held a part-time job at a law office as a clerk and gofer. He was thinking of a law career in environmental protection.

As he began his search for a life partner, he thought not at all about her religious leanings or training. Instead he was looking for a woman who had an active interest in environmental issues. She could not be preoccupied with money and the toys it would buy, but she should want children and, most important, want a cause of her own, something that was quite separate from Evan's interests. Evan wanted a strong, independent woman who would through her interests bring a new dimension to his life.

Each of these young men was influenced by his background and his parents' expectations of him. Neither man, however, was consciously aware that he was imitating his parents' relationship and its messages. Their behavior and their choices were purely original with them, or so they thought.

As of this moment, one marriage has failed and the other appears to be working well. George and his wife are now divorced, while Evan and Louise continue to march along in relative harmony. Each man went about choosing a wife very differently. George chose a wife as he would choose a car from a crowded field of high-end sedans. He was methodical and focused. He made a list of characteristics he felt he needed in a wife. As mentioned before, he wanted a wife with good family connections in the business community, one who wanted children, liked to entertain, and was educated and polished enough to charm people and make them want to be with her. He had his parents check with family friends and inquired of people in his circle to see if they knew of anyone who filled the bill.

After many dead ends, he finally found Betsy. She fit the requirements perfectly. She was Catholic, she wanted children, her

father was president of the town's largest privately owned bank, and she really enjoyed people. What George did not realize was that he was buying a role. He saw Betsy as a bundle of potential for his life's dreams, but did not really have a good sense of her as a person. After about ten years of marriage, three children in quick succession, and George's acquisition of partnerships in two more car agencies, Betsy became restless and dissatisfied. She saw herself as constantly in George's shadow—his handmaiden, not his equal partner. Now that all the children were in school, she wanted to open an antique store. To put it simply, as she matured, she changed. Her changes did not fit the role that George had always had in his mind's eye. He could not let go of the image of what he needed when he married her. He began to nag at her for not being a team player. She grew increasingly resentful and finally wanted out. She asked for a separation that is now leaning toward divorce.

In contrast, Evan and Louise are still going strong. If anything, they complain about not having enough time together. Louise works very hard, but not for money. Evan's law career in water rights brings in a generous income. Louise has devoted herself to the cause of acquiring more open space for her city and the surrounding counties. She has chaired several drives to obtain private funds to acquire plots of land contiguous to already existing open space owned by the county. She points with some pride to the fact that she, with the help of others, has added 1,239 additional acres to preexisting open space. Evan is extraordinarily proud of her. She is widely known in the community, and he often jokes that he is known as "Mr. Louise" rather than as Evan. Evan sought a person with a set of beliefs, not a role-filler. He takes as much pleasure from Louise's successes as he does from his own.

What both Evan's and George's marriages represent is a search for a partner who fulfilled certain expectations about what they felt life should be. Those expectations are guided, in part, by what parents say we are supposed to be and do.

Societal Factors

U.S. society expects people in their twenties and thirties to find an intimate relationship with another person. The pressure is great to do so, although there is some evidence that people are marrying later, after they have established themselves as a viable economic

unit in the relationship marketplace. Actually, during this time period we are assigned three tasks:

- To have an intimate relationship with another person
- To accept adult role commitments such as a job or a career (or further education for such)
- To begin to acquire things that will reflect increased stability, commitment, and participation in society

The outcomes of these decisions define the rest of our adult life. Once on a chosen path it is very hard to change direction, so these decisions are quite crucial for one's future life. The person who has trained to be a medical doctor much of her adult life and then decides she wants to leave medicine and become a novelist has a long, upward climb to convince people that she is not being foolish. The assumption will be "What a terrible waste of time and money. What took you so long to decide what you want to do when you grow up?" Similarly, when we make the choice of a husband or a wife, it's very painful and difficult later to have to explain to all our family and friends that we are getting divorced. "What a terrible waste of time and money," they may say. "Such a nice girl . . . and what about the children?"

Many societal factors we take for granted. They become so ingrained that they are absorbed into our unconscious and became part of our assumptions about how the world is. Trying to deal with these influences if we become aware of them and don't like them can be quite difficult and anxiety provoking. Travel to a foreign country can be a cultural eye-opener because one's ingrained assumptions are not taken for granted elsewhere. On a first visit to England, Bob found that he kept bumping into people coming toward him on the sidewalk. It was embarrassing. One day, light dawned. In the United States we pass on the right, so if someone is coming toward us on the sidewalk, we drift right to avoid a collision. It is absolutely unconscious and ingrained. In England people pass on the left, so when an American and a Brit come at each other, they veer in the same direction because their culture has told them to, and unless they are agile, collision occurs.

In selecting a mate, societal influences press in from all sides. In the United States, this is in. Our concept of beauty has evolved

from the rather voluptuous, hourglass-waisted woman of the turn of the century to a thin woman with small, high breasts. In the 1990s, the male body began to be held up as an icon as the female's had for a long time. Now men are concerned with having hairless, well-defined chests with "six-pack abs." Popular films glorify the ugly duckling (as in chubby, pimples, and dingy brown hair) becoming the swan, and here you can fill in your version of the swan. Beauty is culturally determined, and it sorts people along a continuum from desirable to very undesirable. Research indicates that people marry someone similar to them in physical attractiveness, although the very wealthy can break the curse of plain by knowing that beauty likes money more than looks. We have jokes about "but she has a nice personality" that underline our cultural obsession with good looks. The old bromide about beauty being only skin deep recognizes that the search for external beauty is ultimately shallow. It merely represents an external set of physical characteristics that has nothing to do with what is inside a person. It is what is inside that will form the basis for a friendship and lasting companionship.

Our search for beauty can make it difficult for us to seek people other than the very attractive person for a partner. It is hard for Americans to believe that in some societies fat is considered beautiful because it means that a person is wealthy enough to afford food in large quantity and rich in fat. We do have ways of making ourselves miserable!

Through its assumptions and imperatives, society closes us off from thinking outside the proverbial box. That is what society is supposed to do, so as to preserve a viable social organization. In any society we lose degrees of freedom of choice when we live by its rules. An occasional challenge to a societal imperative opens all kinds of new opportunities. For instance, a recent article in a Denver newspaper reported the "news" that more and more older women are taking on men ten to fifteen years their junior as lovers and partners. This was seen as a radical departure from society's unwritten rule that men can have relationships with younger women, but older women are cradle robbing if they choose a "boy toy." If, as you read this, you find yourself disapproving of the concept of younger men with older women, while feeling comfortable with older men and younger women, you are signaling that you have bought society's hidden rule.

Over the long haul, whether you marry someone plain or beautiful or handsome, fat or thin, younger or older does not matter if you believe that a relationship is between two people and no one else. When you consider all the forces and people outside with their noses pressed against the glass looking in, you can begin to grasp how difficult it is to maintain a relationship and how much more successful at relationships we can be if we are fully aware of what drives us to make the choices we do.

Peer Influences

We often hear of peer pressure making adolescents take drugs, indulge in sex too early, and drink to the point of drunkenness and, in general, being the major propellant down the primrose path. The power of peer pressure does not weaken as we grow older, however; it just becomes more subtle because we no longer have our parents demanding an explanation for what we've done. Your peer group is likely to fall into one of three categories. Some of us choose peers as a kind of family antitoxin. "My family was preppy and yacht-clubby, so my friends are all counterculture types." By choosing such a peer group, a person can actively reject the lifestyle in which he was raised and surround himself with people who tell him that his new choice of lifestyle and values is preferable. Your peer group, as a second choice, could largely be your family, perhaps your extended family. Your cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandparents can essentially be the crowd you run with. It means, in all likelihood, that your family is a tight and cohesive group and that you share their values and ideals. A third choice you could make, partly to distance yourself from family dynamics or to create a greater sense of privacy in your own life, is of peers who reflect the values of your family but put a younger, more up-to-date twist on things.

A profitable question to ask and answer is, Why did I choose the peer group I did? For many it will not seem like a choice, but something that just happened. It really is a choice, however. Note that even in your peer group or circle of friends, there are some whom you will seek out more readily and frequently.

Our friends have power over us to the extent that with them we do not feel lonely if there is a true connection. As adults we

must accept loneliness as part of the human condition. For most, however, loneliness is not a good feeling. The more satisfied we are with our friendships, the less lonely we will be. We also use friends to gain feedback and reduce uncertainty about how to behave. There are very few certainties in life, and we can use friends as sounding boards and reality testers to help place our feelings in perspective. It can be extraordinarily helpful to have a friend to talk to about a situation. Often the best friends are those who will simply listen and let us bounce ideas off of them.

Given the reasons you have friends, it is easy to see how terribly influential they can be in your choice of a partner. First, it is probably with friends that you will want to check out a potential lover. What will your friends think? Will they approve? Will they more than approve and think it a perfect match? Will they pull away from you because they do not want to hurt your feelings by saying what a loser your partner is?

It is difficult to say exactly what role your friends play in your selection of a partner, other than to say that their approval or disapproval will be influential. A couple of examples will demonstrate the point.

Tony had grown up in a family that was indifferent to organized religion. They did not take him to any form of religious service, did not pray or say grace, and did not own a Bible. Religion and spirituality just did not exist in the context of his family. When he got to college, he took a course titled "The Bible as History." He thought it would keep his parents calm because it was not about the Bible as religion, but it would also expose him to the Bible. He did not know the story of Jonah and the whale, for instance, and he thought that if nothing else, at least he would understand some of the biblical references he had been hearing much of his life.

The course was a revelation. He found a part of himself, the spiritual part, that was untapped and hungry for expression. For the next three years in college, Tony took numerous religion courses even though his major was chemistry. He joined an on-campus church youth group. Partly in reaction to his parent's liberal viewpoint, he chose a church that was quite conservative. His friends from the church's Youth Fellowship were quite conservative. They felt the Bible was law.

At the beginning of his senior year, Tony met Alma, who seemed the girl of his dreams. He fell head over heels for her, and Alma seemed to reciprocate his feelings. They began to plan to get married at the end of Tony's senior year and then go off to graduate school in chemical engineering. As Tony and Alma were having one of their many soul-baring, heart-to-heart talks, Alma, with some hesitation, told Tony that she had had an abortion when she was sixteen. Tony was shocked and, wanting to do some reality testing, spoke to his friends in his church group. They too were very shocked and held that abortion was a sin and an abomination. Ironically, Tony was painfully aware that Alma's abortion would mean nothing to his liberal family, but to his friends at church it was a major negative issue. Tony talked with his friends. Although he did not feel as strongly about abortion as they did, he did feel more strongly than he imagined his parents would have. Tony finally decided to break off the relationship with Alma. His friends strongly supported his decision, as they saw Alma as having taken a life, which was morally repugnant to them regardless of other factors such as her age and her goals for herself in life.

Here's another example with a happier ending. Peter, in his mid-twenties, was in open rebellion against his mother and father, who were wealthy, straitlaced, upper-middle-class professionals. Peter's father was a physician, his mother a lawyer who specialized in representing women in their divorces. Peter was brought up being told he should save for a rainy day, walk the straight and narrow, and above all, behave responsibly. Using the proper fork at a formal dinner and wearing the correct clothes at every function were also part of the rules.

To escape these powerful parents and be his own person, Peter took on an antimother, antifather philosophy. He did not save money and lived on the fringes in a bohemian lifestyle. He was into heavy metal concerts, mosh pits, and marijuana. A mattress on the floor and boxes in which to keep his clean clothes were all he needed for furnishings. He worked at a used CD and record store and hung out with his friends when he was not working.

One day a girl, Samantha, came into the store looking for some old hard rock CDs with an emphasis on Pink Floyd and AC/DC. She and Peter, who was the store's resident expert on heavy metal music, struck up a conversation. He was very helpful to her, and

she asked him if he would join her for coffee when he got off work to continue the conversation. Samantha attended the local music school, and for her M.A. she was doing a comparative paper on African influences on rock music of the 1970s. The two of them hit it off over coffee, and in the next few months the relationship began to bloom.

Although her tastes in music were right up-to-date, Samantha came from a background similar to Peter's when he was growing up. He could relate to her easily, because they had had so many similar experiences. The girl had left her past without the flamboyance that Peter did his. She had somehow come to terms with her past, but had remodeled herself to be someone in the here and now. Peter was where he was because he could not accommodate to his past.

Peter found himself intensely attracted to Samantha. He was surprised at himself because she came from a background that was similar to his, one he was angry at for its rules. Samantha pointed out to him in one of their all-night marathon "Let's get to know each other" sessions that he seemed hung up on the *rules* of his parents' social class, but had he thought about the values? Her comment opened a door for Peter. "I realized that I was throwing out the baby with the bathwater. My parents were very controlling through their rules for everything. I hated that, but their values, such as anticipating the future, being responsible to others, and being a good citizen, I did not have trouble with. I had confused the packaging with the gift."

Peter began to move slowly into the mainstream *on his terms*. He still doesn't own a tie, but he does have a job with a record producer and, God help him, a house in the suburbs with Samantha.

The Interactional Factor

The *interactional factor* is an amalgam of the messages we have received from friends and parents, plus our own life experiences and feelings about ourselves. It forms the template through which we look at ourselves and the world. This factor includes the interaction between our conscious view of ourselves based on experience and what we have been told and our unconscious assumptions about our lovability, our ability to survive, our sense of wholeness,

and our need for closeness or distance. It also comprises the effects of the Greek chorus in our lives made up of the oughts, shoulds, and musts that our peers and society tell us are important.

As stated before, what we think we need is influenced by our parental input and how we dealt with it, input from friends and the times we live in, and how we arrange this information into a decision-making system. The interaction between our internal and external issues is what determines the choices we make. Choosing between what we want and what society says it is okay to have is often a struggle. Yet the transactions between our internal world and our external world as we perceive it define us in the eyes of others and consequently give us feedback about who we are as people.

Sharla and Gordon were attracted to each other because they had such a fun time together. Each was professionally employed with a good salary, so they had much discretionary income with which to buy “toys” and travel to the four corners of the earth. After a time, Sharla wanted children. Gordon did not, because children would tie them down and drain their discretionary resources. Actually Gordon was very fearful of being a father. His father had abandoned him before he could be aware of who his father was. In the thirty-four years of his life he had never met the man, as far as his memory could recall. He chose a “fun and games” wife because he did not want to be confronted with his fears about his adequacy as a human being.

If you asked Gordon, he would never be able to say, “I married my wife because I did not want to have children.” Children simply had not come up as an issue because his wife, initially, was not interested in children either; she wanted a life where she was not tied down and so could behave as the moment seized her. In this example, Gordon’s father never said anything to him at all. By abandoning him, however, Gordon’s father “said” much in terms of what Gordon heard as his lovability and his capacity to father without a primary model. Gordon’s unconscious fears about his adequacy as a father drove him to emphasize a fun-and-games approach to life. He could not let go of that attitude when his wife approached him with her request to have a child. His fear kept the door shut. He handled the predicament by blaming his wife: she had suddenly changed; she had suddenly turned serious on him. By blaming her, he could remain blind to his own issues. Yet he did feel

some pressure from society in terms of such questions as “Got any kids?” or “When are you going to get pregnant?” He became annoyed at these questions because they reminded him of his sense of himself as a flawed person, so he gravitated to having single or divorced friends rather than married friends.

Pamela had been raised to believe that sex was an unpleasant but necessary activity to create children. She was raised in a religious community with very restrictive sexual messages. Her mother and father never kissed or touched in front of her. Birth control was forbidden, and girls and boys were never unchaperoned and were forbidden to touch until they were married. Upon graduation from high school, Pamela rebelled against her upbringing, moved to a major city, and began a new lifestyle with the enthusiasm of someone who had just discovered sex. She chose young men who were very interested in sex and who demanded that of their dates.

But soon Pamela found that her partners quickly dumped her. They called her unresponsive, frigid, and sexually inhibited. For Pamela there was a will but there did not seem to be a way. The messages she had received from her parents and her friends were too powerful. She could overthrow them up to the point where she could consciously decide to be sexually active, but her feelings could not let go of the messages of her upbringing, so she remained her parents’ child and was sexually unresponsive.

Her struggle was between her family’s messages in the past and her own physical desires. She could not permit herself to enjoy sex, something she desperately wanted to do, because of the struggles with the messages from external sources that had now become a part of her.

Andrew was a fit, bright, and very boyish man of about forty-eight. He looked like he was on a crew team from an Ivy League school: handsome, clean-cut, and dressed in a preppy style. He came to therapy as his third marriage was unraveling. He had what is labeled a Don Juan complex, named after the eighteenth-century seducer of many women. Andrew had never been without a romantic relationship since he left home. He moved from home at age nineteen into the apartment of his first girlfriend. While he was with her, he started a number of affairs and one-night stands.

As the relationship started to fail, he began another “permanent” relationship that overlapped his first by about four months.

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So when he left his first love, he was firmly ensconced in the relationship with his second. This was characteristic of all his relationships. They all overlapped and all contained affairs with other women while he was living with his current partner. Andrew complained that the chase was very exciting, but the sex, though nice, was not terrific. What was striking was how impermanent his conquests were, exhibiting the proverbial Chinese meal effect. He would be thinking about his next conquest as he lay beside his most recent. This pattern of behavior continued through his three marriages. Each time, once he married he was looking out for the next lover.

By the time he came to therapy he was filled with self-loathing. He realized he was using women and hurting them, but he could not stop. The thrill was in the hunt, and the woman offering herself to him helped convince him that he was loveable. He had no internal way of generating a personal knowledge that he was loveable, and he always had to rely on sources outside himself for reassurance. He needed conquests to reassure himself.

His therapist reframed the issue by asking why he had no internal “battery” with which to store the strokes he was getting from his conquests to tell himself he was OK, whether or not there was a woman in his life. This refocusing enabled Andrew to begin to think about his relationship with his mother, who was an undemonstrative drug-dependent woman who was always unpredictable and slightly out of control.

Andrew laughed when he said, “Oh no, not my mother, that is such a cliché!” Going back to Mother, however, was crucial for him: he needed to understand how he had been shaped by that relationship in terms of his lack of self-esteem and his constant need for reassurance that he was an attractive, loveable guy. His conquests never satisfied his hunger because his mother’s cold, self-centered, drug-driven, erratic way of raising him left him unable to believe that he was OK. He was never able to store away enough positive strokes from that initial relationship with his mother. His perceived (yet unconscious) lack drove him to successive situations in which women, by giving themselves to him sexually, said he was just fine, thank you!

Andrew is still a work in progress. He is now divorced and without a permanent relationship, which is a brave break from his old pattern. He is struggling with his fears that if he does not lie to a woman to get her into bed by telling her that this will be a perma-

ment relationship, he will get no sex whatsoever. He and his therapist have made a deal that Andrew will now be as honest as he can with women and see where it gets him. He is confronting one of his major fears: I must lie and tell a woman what she wants to hear because she will never want me in her bed on my terms. With some trepidation, he is now going to try to say that he wants sex and fun but that marriage is not in the picture.

In each of these examples, the characters make choices based on their perceptions of themselves. These perceptions arise out of their experiences with their parents and their friends, and society's expectations of them. But their perceptions of themselves are also influenced by their fears, their sense of their own moral behavior, and their self-concept.

As you can imagine, this chapter cannot paint a tidy picture of the influences that shape our lives and our decisions. It is impossible to focus on all of them at once. But if we can gain some understanding of which influences tend to dominate the decisions we make, we can narrow down what we look at when we try to understand our behavior. It is as if you have a closet full of clothes, but you choose only two or three items to wear to a given function. All the clothes remain in your possession, but only a few define you at this particular event in this particular instance. So it is with all the factors we carry with us in life. Given the situation, some are more salient than others. The problem, however, is that unlike silent clothes, internal and external factors can suddenly cry out for attention and for influence over our decision-making process.

One such factor is the myths we buy into about what a marriage is all about. Our society says that marriage is the norm. It is expected. As a result, we attribute a great many things to marriage, particularly as to how it will meet our needs as adults. If we buy a myth and it doesn't describe our particular marriage, our disappointment can be bitter. The next chapter sheds light on marital myths so that you can better understand if they blinded you to the reality of your marriage.