

choose
to be
happily
married

How Everyday Decisions
Can Lead to *Lasting Love*

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with ALEXIA PAUL

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This book is dedicated to Dr. Shera Aranoff Tuchman
and our woman's study group. For twenty years you
emphasized the idea that we are our choices.
Here is the product of all of that learning.



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Chapter 15

GIVING THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT VERSUS MAKING ASSUMPTIONS

The Danger of Jumping to Conclusions

How would you feel if I assumed that you picked up this book because you cheated on your mate and now you want to find a way back to a loving partnership? Am I right? Probably not. In all likelihood, your situation is not something easy to guess. My making assumptions would not only be reckless; it could also elicit a defensive reaction: *That's not it at all! You've got me pegged all wrong.*

Making assumptions about people—their motivations, their actions in your absence, their private thoughts—is precarious guesswork. It's also usually incorrect, given the fact that individuals are moving targets, forever changing in surprising and sometimes contradictory ways. In an intimate relationship, the inclination to make assumptions about a loved one can feel irresistible. After all, you know your partner! You know why he didn't pick up when you called (he was probably on the phone with his horrible mother). You know why she was late (she is careless about time). We all think we know. In reality, we read one another based on our own narrow view of the world.

TRADING IN OUR ASSUMPTIONS FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

When you assume something about another person, you are choosing to project your own momentary feelings onto them. It is a reactive behavior that takes the place of checking in with a loved one to uncover the unpredictably complex individual he or she is. Making assumptions traps another person into a box you have created. Giving the benefit of the doubt, however, means that you confront your automatic assumptions, allowing that a loved one may confound your expectations. As the expression implies, there is a “benefit,” a reward that comes out of giving it. By inquiring into what's going on, you can, together with your partner, discover the identifiable human emotions behind any behavior. This approach demonstrates a generosity of spirit from which both people profit.

Of course, not every assumption is wrong, and giving someone the benefit of the doubt won't sidestep all conflict. You may be right in assuming that your partner didn't mow the lawn because he felt lazy that day. And, you may give her the benefit of the doubt that she didn't show up for your son's play because of work only to find out that she wasn't working late after all. But, over time, a propensity toward either choice in this Turning

Point can have important repercussions. If you have a tendency to make assumptions about a loved one, you probably do hit the nail on the head every once in a while. But learning what is behind feeling “lazy” or why she left work early but did not come right to the play can build a new bridge to an old relationship. Imagine years of guesswork applied to someone who is ever-changing and growing. The cumulative wrong suppositions create a gap between who you *think* your mate is and the reality of who he or she *actually* is. And it defeats the possibility of discoveries that keep your relationship fresh.

On the other hand, over time, giving someone the benefit of the doubt allows you to see a more accurate version of who your partner is continuously becoming. In this scenario, will yourself to respond with thoughtful awareness. Instead of reflexively reacting from a place of anger or suspicion, take a step back and think about the many possibilities of what could really be going on. Maybe he *is* too lazy to cut the lawn. You can stew and run around in angry mental circles, recalling all the other instances when he has disappointed you. But when he mentions later in passing that he simply decided to wait to cut the grass because the lawn was wet, all your inner turmoil will have been for naught. And anyway, why judge someone you love rather than understand what is going on, even if laziness had been truth of the matter?

FAMILY ARCHETYPES

Making assumptions about others is rooted in everyone’s original family, where there is a tendency to stereotype one another. This categorization is a shorthand in order to see each other as unique, although the approach often backfires and ultimately obscures the very thing that was being attempted, which is to recognize each person’s individuality. Are you the “funny one,” the “responsible one,” the “screwup”? Birth order and personality shore up these simplistic characterizations, all of which undermine the rec-

ognition of your more idiosyncratic adult development. Trapped in the typecasts of youth, it can feel like a Herculean effort to break free and prove that you were—and are—a multifaceted individual.

These myths tend to be reinforced when you see relatives during holidays and at other family gatherings. God forbid you get teary when given a sentimental gift. “She always was so *sensitive*,” your mother says to the group, shaking her head ruefully. While it may be true that you have a softer side, her implication of weakness is maddening—and impossible to disprove. Should you take that moment to describe your recent toughness during a negotiation at work, or your refusal to back down to your bullying landlord, you only prove her point. “See, what did I tell you?” she continues. “Relax, darling. Don’t be so defensive.”

When you are assigned a negative category by an important other, you tend to react by overcorrecting. So, the investment banker whose parents were disappointed when she quit the ice-cream shop at age sixteen now works eighteen-hour days and wonders why she’s unhappy. “Don’t be a quitter!” her dad said at every graduation. “As a kid she just never could stick with anything, but look at her now,” her mom tells her bridge group. Being categorized runs the risk of robbing you of the ability to have that specific human quality in your repertoire—in this case, knowing when to stop and relax.

CONFOUNDING THE PATTERN

When you become conscious of the stereotype that was placed upon you in childhood, you increase your chance of breaking free of these unintentionally held assumptions and revealing yourself as you truly are. You hope that the person you fall in love with will appreciate and encourage you to express yourself in all your complex, multifaceted glory, as you anticipate encouraging him in all of his contradictions. The danger of making assumptions about a long-term partner is that it repeats the old pattern of

placing him into a reduced characterization. As a child, you were powerless and therefore a victim of the assumptions of your family. If, in your mature relationships, you are unable to break out of the habit of putting loved ones into fixed categories, the consequences are judging, blaming, and assuming that their behavior is because they are somehow fundamentally sneaky, or selfish, or naive. As time goes by, both partners become, in each other's minds, caricatures of who they really are. This treacherous path can take years to recover from and requires a virtual deprogramming of entrenched beliefs.

Giving people the benefit of the doubt shatters your instinct to classify objects as well as people. It offers breathing room to take a step back and see your loved ones for who they really are. This more open-minded approach supports your quest for finding joyful experiences as you continue to discover the evolving person she is becoming, instead of living day after day with someone whose inner life you think you know, but about which you can actually only guess.

RUTHIE AND ROB

Ruthie and her husband, Rob, together for three years and married for six months, are both on their second marriages. They have a beautiful baby boy, Nikolai. Ruthie supports their family as a high-end hair colorist; Rob is barely scraping by as a dentist. He maintains that the current health care system thwarts his efforts to earn a pay grade he deserves. He also blames depression for his lack of motivation, which prevents him from arriving at the office before noon.

Ruthie begins her day at 6:30, when she gives the baby his first feeding as Rob dozes on in bed. Getting ready for work, Ruthie pokes Rob under the covers as she walks by to reach her closet. She reminds him to take the car in, as the oil needs changing. "And don't forget—you promised to follow up with that practice in Morristown. It sounded like it could be a good spot for you." Rob,

not answering, puts a pillow over his head as the hair dryer begins its predawn screech. As soon as she heads out the door, mumbling to herself that he'll probably get nothing done, Rob emerges from his cocoon. He revels in the silence and goes to pick up baby Nikolai. Father and son cuddle as they watch a Dora video together before the nanny comes at 9:00.

It is no great leap to understand Ruthie's frustration with her husband, as he lies prone on the bed. From her perspective, there is just too much to do for her to cuddle him and leave him a sweet "honey-do" list that she assumes he won't take seriously. Her patience with his depression, and with his lack of organizational skills, which hinders his professional success, are near an end. So, what are Ruthie's options besides a daily dose of nagging and a staunch refusal to offer him the benefit of the doubt? Is there another way to get the results she wants?

The fact is, love is not a results-oriented game. Ruthie may never transform Rob into the man she wishes he were. Rob is who he is, and she knew this going into the marriage. His long history of owing money to friends and relatives, of not being able to support himself, was no secret. Ruthie is not going to change him, and neither could his ex-wife or the many therapists he has seen before and since. So, what is she to do? Just swallow all of the major and minor glitches in their relationship? Yes and no.

Giving Rob the benefit of the doubt would allow her to see him as a human being—not just a lump in the bed. If she could forgo her assumptions that Rob is going to sleep in *again*, and will likely fail to update his resume, it would help Ruthie to feel kinder to her husband. This friendlier thought can help her to remember why she was attracted to Rob in the first place and remind herself that the qualities she admired three years ago are still there. He is a committed companion; he supports her need for independence and makes her laugh. And, he provided her with a son in her forty-third year with the help of two in vitro

fertilization treatments. Rob is a good father. Doesn't that trump occasionally sleeping in? If she wants her marriage to last, the answer must be yes.

Ruthie can only take charge of her perception of the situation. Following are six steps that Ruthie—and you—can take in order to transform making assumptions into giving the benefit of the doubt.

HOW TO OFFER THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

To live in harmony with who you believe is a frustrating partner, do the following exercise:

1. Make a list of *his* five *best* qualities.
2. Put them on your bathroom mirror.
3. Make a list of *your* five *worst* qualities.
4. Put them on your bathroom mirror.
5. Read each list once in the morning and once in the evening.

You have completed this exercise when you can replace frustration toward him with gratitude that he chooses to live with you despite your five frustrating qualities.

SOLUTIONS

Determined to keep her marriage on solid ground now that she has experienced gratitude, Ruthie suggested that maybe Rob needs more structured days to keep his motivation primed. They decided together to have the nanny only come in the afternoons, relying on Rob to take care of their son during the morning hours. Besides saving them money, this gives Rob the advantage of starting each day with a strong dose of love and the feeling of being needed—good medicine for his depression. And, by giving Rob the benefit of the doubt that he is doing his part, Ruthie

feels that they are now more equal partners in providing for their small family.



The decision to give a loved one the benefit of the doubt is a dynamic act of investing in your relationship. In the beginning, when you were falling in love and your partner could do no wrong, you were “all in,” eager to believe that he or she was acting in your best interest. As time passed and mistakes were made, however, it may have become more difficult to conjure up that original inclination. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal suggested, in what is famously known as Pascal’s Wager, that although it may be impossible to prove God’s existence with reason, one has everything to gain and nothing to lose by believing. So it is with benefit of the doubt: it risks nothing and opens the door to the possibility of lasting love.