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How to Recognize,
Understand, and Deal
with People Who
Try to Control You

PATRICIA EVANS

Bestselling author of The Verbally Abusive Relationship

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How to Recognize
Understand, and Deal
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The Verbally Abusive Relationship

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Enter In

I want to leave you
to your own unhappiness,
fat lip, cantankerous,
canker sore rage.
I want to leave you
to your Archie Bunker ways,
your kingdom of complaint:
You didn't. You don't. You won't.
I want to leave you,

but I always enter in.

And when I look in the mirror,
someone has taken my place—
someone duller, stupider,
fatter with shiftless,
dead-pan eyes.

—Melissa McIntosh Brown

Introduction

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re too sensitive.”

“If you leave me I’ll tell the courts what a bad parent you are. I’ll take the kids from you.”

“No one else will ever want you.”

These and similar phrases flow from the mouths of those who try to control people. Such instances of verbal abuse and threats are sometimes followed by acts of violence. The following story is an example of such behavior, and of a controlling relationship.

In the mid-nineties I received a letter from a woman describing her refusal to succumb to her husband’s attempts to control her. The woman’s letter described how her spouse, whose behavior often frightened her, had grabbed the book she was reading, torn it into pieces, and dumped all of it in the trash.

I was appalled to read this. A book, for heaven’s sake! But, as I read further, I was touched by this woman’s courage: “I went out to the trash and gathered up every piece, then I sat at the kitchen table and carefully glued every piece together.”

Six years later I was signing books when a woman came forward from the line, handed me her book all glued and taped together and said, “This is the book I wrote you about.”

If you have ever wondered why some people try to control others, or why one particular person tries to control you, or why someone tries to control a whole group of people, or even if you find yourself wanting to control others, this book is for you.

You are not alone in your desire to understand the problem of control. Thousands of people have asked me, “Why would anyone act ‘like that’?” They describe the way they’ve been treated and they wonder what compels one to try to control others. “Why don’t most people who try to control others see that they’re being oppressive? Are they under a spell or what?” they ask.

Many people have also asked why they can’t seem to stop attempting to control others, even when these destructive behaviors are driving their loved ones away. They often say that something seems to “come over” them and things “go wrong.” At times, they are so unaware of their behavior and its impact that they don’t realize that anything has gone wrong until it’s too late—a loved one has left or violence has erupted.

If some people don’t recognize their own attempts to control others, could they actually be under a spell? Does a spell explain oppressive and controlling acts toward not only individuals but also groups and even countries? If there is such a spell, what is it? Is there some compelling force behind it?

This book is a quest to find answers to these questions. It will take us on a journey of exploration through a maze of senseless behaviors woven into our world. By the end of our journey we’ll be in a new place with a new perspective on the problem of control. And the journey itself may very well be spell-breaking.

Part I

In Part I we will examine the problem of control and how, even without intending to, some people may attempt to control us. We will begin to see how a “spell” seems to come over them and, for the first time, we’ll understand just why some people indulge in oppressive behavior. We will explore the nature of the spell, and we will learn why people who attempt to control us often don’t realize how destructive they are. We will also meet a Spellbreaker—a person capable of breaking the spell—and we will find out how any one of us can become, or may already be, a Spellbreaker.

Chapter I

Sense and Nonsense

*Ignorance does not
justify oppression. It
only makes it possible.*

Have you ever been puzzled or disturbed by the behavior of a family member, friend, or coworker and found yourself wondering, “What’s going on? Why is he acting like that?” Or, “She doesn’t understand what I’m saying no matter how I say it.” Or, “He tells me I’m being____, but I’m not. *It doesn’t make sense.*”

May stepped into the company conference room. Her mind was on a thousand details. She was distracted because she was handling one of several small crises common to a small new business.

“Surprise!” her employees shouted.

“Happy Birthday!” resounded through the room.

“Oh, my gosh! I completely forgot it was my birthday!” May was surprised and thrilled.

“Oh, May, you did not forget your birthday,” said Dee.

“Yes, I did,” May replied.

“Come on, you remembered. You knew we’d have a party for you,” said Dee, insistently.

“No, honestly,” said May.

“You knew we’d have cake and you were just waiting for it. We know you were,” Dee said snidely.

“Not at all,” said May.

“Oh, come on, out with it. You’re just pretending like you’re surprised,” said Dee.

“Let’s not argue, let’s have the party,” someone said.

While everyone’s attention turned to the cake, May felt frustrated and uneasy.

Why did things like this happen with Dee? It all seems so crazy, May thought. Why did Dee act like that?

May just didn't know. And it didn't seem like anyone else in the room did either.
~~No one wants to spend party time watching an argument, she thought. But, she also thought, it wasn't an argument.~~

She had felt assaulted and forced to defend herself. Everyone else felt uncomfortable. She was getting depressed on her birthday.

The whole incident reminded her of other similar ones. "Let it roll off your back," people said.

Forgetting one's birthday may seem strange, but the point is that Dee was *unable* to hear May, she was *unable* to understand what May was trying to tell her, and that is the behavior of a person who tries to control you.

What is going on? If you have pondered similar incidents in your own life, you have already seen some important pieces of this puzzle. Not only have you brought them into view, but also you've properly identified them as "nonsensical." These incidents don't make sense to most people.

In a certain way, the person you encountered *couldn't* hear you, understand you, or know you, no matter how long he or she had known you, and no matter what you told them about yourself. The person who has defined your experience seems to have failed to grasp that you are a person with your own reality.

When people encounter controlling behavior, they often feel "erased," as if, to the perpetrator, they don't exist. In relationships, particularly, this kind of behavior sets the stage for all kinds of abuse. Trying to maintain this kind of relationship leaves one exhausted and subject to intense mental anguish and emotional pain, not to mention the possibility of physical battering.

Not hearing, understanding, or wanting to understand the "other" is behavior central not only to many of our everyday problems, but also to the violence that affects people's lives in every part of the world, every second of every day. Acts against others—whether cold and subtle, such as a contemptuous glance, or hot and explosive, such as a burst of rage—are, paradoxically, both senseless and understandable. And they are also attempts to control.

I invite you to unravel the mystery with me, to make sense out of the nonsense, to discover just what is going on. I think the reason we haven't yet found out just why people try to control others is because senselessness has become so familiar that it seems to be "just the way it is."

This book presents a specific view that, like a lens, sorts out our experiences so that they can be seen clearly, so that everything can be taken into account. I will make this lens as clear as possible, having faith that others will polish it with new insights and new applications.

As we look through the lens, we will see that those who are most harmful to us, even dangerous to us, feel a *need* to exert control over us. But recognizing oppressive behavior does not in itself solve the problem. To be effective we must ask and answer the question, "From whence does this need come?"

We will find that, even though childhood upbringing, cultural mores, economic injustices, and erroneous beliefs can all be major influences in perpetuating oppressive and controlling behaviors, they don't fully explain them. Something else does. But what? The answer is hidden in the shadows of ignorance and it is in many ways astonishing. The need to control is driven by a force so compelling that it is almost as if we are under its spell.

Difficulties revolve around our non recognition of this compelling force, a current so deep, so

constant, and so unchanging that it is tantamount to evolution itself. It has had a continually increasing impact upon humanity, begging to be recognized, but it has not yet been attended to—indeed, it has only begun to be noticed. When we remain unaware of it, our people-problems gain momentum.

To understand this compelling force, we will explore its influence in our daily lives. Once we see its effects, we will know what it is and whether we can align with it rather than ignore or oppose it. *If we are aligned with the force, life gets better. If we oppose it, life in general becomes more chaotic.*

I invite you to join me in this journey of exploration. But be forewarned. We will meet some strange paradoxes along the way. Our journey will forge a path through a maze of illusory actions woven into our world. If you do join me, I am confident that we will not only come to know the compelling force behind oppressive and controlling behaviors but also come to understand how this very same force, *if recognized and understood, compels just the opposite—behaviors that support our individual lives on planet Earth.*

Finally, after identifying the compelling force and its effects—both negative and potentially positive—we will see how best to align with it in order to avoid the negative consequences of moving against it.

Are you ready to take this step? It means that we will cross a threshold together, taking what we discover through time well into the third millennium.

Chapter II

The Problem

A difficult problem is a master teacher. If you miss one tiny part of the solution early on, it can call you to task at any moment.

—“Nan”

Thousands of people have shared with me the intimate details of their attempts to free themselves from the influence of people who tried to control them. Others have shared their attempts to stop exerting controlling tactics against others. In those instances in which the “Controllers” became truly conscious of their behavior, they were shocked at what they discovered about themselves. They were horrified.

The wise words at the beginning of this chapter were spoken by a woman I’ll call “Nan,” a happily married career professional, a mother, and a grandmother. But Nan didn’t always have happiness. At one time her life was in chaos. During that time she spent many courageous years trying to understand “what was wrong.”

While she was growing up, the people who were responsible for her had acted senselessly against her—people who were old enough to know better—people who thought that they *were* sensible.

They had disparaged her, ridiculed her, and thus defined her. They had oppressed her and attempted to control her. The people who treated her this way were, in fact, her parents. They called her their “little numskull.” They ignored her complaints with accusations: “Don’t you talk back to me,” “You think you’re better than the rest of us.” Most of the time, Nan felt sad, inadequate, and confused, but she wasn’t sure why.

At nineteen, she met a charming and intelligent man, but upon marrying him, he changed drastically. In fact, instead of charming her as he had when courting her, he put her down, called her vile names, and yelled at her so much that she became traumatized and sick. She felt that if she stayed she would die from pain, but she didn’t know what to do, because she was accused of causing it all. She didn’t see herself as wise, nor did she know where to look for a solution. This, of course, made her task, to make sense of nonsense, extraordinarily difficult.

In time, she found some answers. She saw the nonsense for what it was. She had been surrounded by people who acted senselessly and who had attempted to control her. Her realization enabled her to leave her abuser and her past behind her, and to create order out of the chaos. Still she was perplexed. *Why* had senselessness run rampant through her life?

Families fall apart, people fight depression, or escape emotional pain with drugs. Whole industries are built around raising self-esteem and developing positive thinking. Therapies are developed to help us to gain a positive self-concept and products are sold to lighten our moods. But the problem itself— people trying to control people—is not solved.

The senselessness that ran rampant through Nan's life creates chaos in the lives of millions of people. This chaos calls us to task. It is like the clamor of an insatiable beast almost at our doorstep. What is it all about? What compels it? What are we supposed to learn? Do we have a clear perspective?

In personal relationships, many people have experienced inexplicable acts against them that are covert or overt attempts to control them. But even when they recognize this behavior for what it is, they thirst to understand. *Why would someone want to control me? Why can't he or she see that their behavior is destroying our relationship? Do they know what they're doing?*

A medical doctor told me the following:

My father isn't well. He's in his eighties, has a number of complications, and a bad prognosis. So with my sisters, their families, and my children, we all went to see him.

While we were gathered at his bedside, he reminisced about his childhood and how terrible it was for him. He shuddered at the memory of criticism and angry outbursts. As he talked we learned that his own father had been really great with people and well liked by friends but, paradoxically, cruel at home. He took my breath away—that he could tell that story and not know that he treats us exactly the same way. It was incomprehensible. No matter how we have tried to tell him, he just doesn't get it! It makes no sense!

The doctor's father seemed so unaware. His behavior seemed to make no sense. Thinking of the world and the problems in it, I realized that many people have said almost the same thing.

Is it human fate that we should live in a world where people are as unaware as the doctor's father was? Is it preordained— as if some people, in keeping with a god's joke, were born to build "bad karma," while others were born to suffer its effects?

Since we've arrived without directions, albeit holy books abound, we make our map as we go. "Don't take that route," one person warns another. "Look what happened to me."

At the same time we see that some people, even those committed to treating others as they would be treated, paradoxically do just the *opposite*. Who can forget the sad epic of the nineties—a man who battered his wife, cursed and humiliated her in public, saying, "I treat people the way I want to be treated."

People who have indulged in controlling behaviors are often stunned when they realize what they've done. I have heard many people, from many different parts of the country, all say the same thing: "I am a horrible person." Some, literally unable to stomach the knowledge of their own behaviors, threw up. But even these found it exceedingly difficult to change, no matter how much they wanted to.

Of course none was a "horrible person." They simply felt horrible. Unlike the doctor's father,

they had awakened. Prior to this awakening they had been oblivious to their own behavior and its effects. *What compelling force has gripped them and seems even to have gripped the world?*

I don't believe that destruction and violence are the outcome of bad karma, joking gods, or jealous ones. Nor are they just human nature. I *do* believe that there is a perspective that we haven't yet seen, one that makes sense of oppressive behaviors designed to control others and explains why, in a great many cases, people are blind to the havoc they wreak. This book presents this unique perspective. It reveals just what compels people to control others, and why people who attempt to control others act as if they are under a spell.

In talking with people caught up in oppressive behaviors in everyday situations, I've found that while often their anguish and guilt were notable, their frustration and confusion over giving up their wayward ways were even more striking. A client sent me the following description of how he tried to control his partner by sometimes acting as if she didn't exist and at other times acting as if her very being was wrong:

No one witnessed it because I was nice and kind to our friends. But when no one was around I got very irrational and angry. Knowing how I acted, that I sounded crazy. I wanted to understand myself. I was always willing to get help for any problem in our relationship, but I never knew what the problem was. I feel terrible that I did these things. This is what I recall at the moment though I'm sure there were lots more.

I gave her the silent treatment and left her to feel alone and isolated.

I would act cold and aloof and then, when she asked what was wrong, I would act very cold and say, "There's nothing wrong."

Sometimes I'd just drive off and not tell her when she looked forward to an evening at home.

I cut down her friends.

If she asked me a question I'd get angry.

I started telling her she was abnormal.

I told her I was a lot better off before I married her.

I told her she didn't know what she was doing.

When I realized what I'd done, I cried a lot. I want to understand.

I recall another man's anguished plea. He had recently realized that he was hurting the people he wanted to love. "Why can't I take it ten minutes down the road? I just don't understand why I don't, when I'm determined that I will." "It" was his supportive and equitable treatment of his employees, and "ten minutes down the road" was his wife and family. In other words, he treated people rationally and respectfully at work, and couldn't understand why he couldn't do the same at home. He'd "seen" himself some time before we talked. He'd struggled with what he'd seen yet felt nothing but frustration, confusion, and desperation. His intentions to be supportive and equitable at home, while laudable, just didn't seem to be enough. During his commute from work he'd lecture himself. He'd be appreciative, polite, or at least businesslike, he told himself. But he wasn't.

Why wasn't he?

I have heard many similar stories and each was, to me, a newly found puzzle piece. Some stories brought a number of pieces together. Some gave tiny glimpses of the whole at a distance, some enhanced the tone and color, and others revealed mysteries like a child's picture-puzzle

reveals objects hidden in the foliage.

~~The picture is now complete. The smallest pieces fit. Nothing, I hope, is overlooked. I present this picture to you with the belief that it will be both clear and revealing. It needs to be because it is a map of the problem.~~

If we can describe and name the problem, I believe that we will then see its solution. If the picture is very clear, the solution will be most evident. For instance, if the “problem” were a knot in a tangled cord and you could see and describe it clearly, “The cord goes up here, around here, down there, is looped back and across this,” you would see the solution to the problem. You would know how to untie it. Similarly, we will explore this problem so that the solution is clear. The problem concerns why people act against people, oppressing them in attempts to control them.

It is important that we look directly at the problem and that we not get sidetracked. Some people, taking their cue from the perpetrators of oppressive behaviors, look in the *opposite* direction from where the problem lies. Influenced by the perpetrators, these people, in a backwards way, explain violence and abuse as caused by the victim—something a person was “asking for” or “at least partially responsible for,” or “should have seen coming,” or “created,” or “deserved,” or “wanted.” Or they explain oppression as being the work of something bodiless—something beyond the world, beyond time and space altogether, something done by the personification of evil itself. The devil. Badness itself made it happen. But making up a “devil” to serve as a handy scapegoat would divert us from our search.

No doubt, most of us have at some time been mistreated by others or have unwittingly mistreated someone else. Apologies and forgiveness acknowledge our human failings. But some people who mistreat us declare that they’ve done nothing wrong, or were driven to it (by us), or had good intentions, so we’ve nothing to complain about. These people just don’t view the wrongs that they do as *wrong*. Even the perpetrators of the most extreme acts against others often do not feel that they’ve done anything wrong.

For instance, the media reported that a letter prosecutors said was written by Timothy McVeigh, dated February 10, 1995, stated “I might as well do some good when I can be 100 [percent] effective.” McVeigh was found guilty of the Oklahoma City bombing, an attack that shocked the world. It took place April 19, 1995, just a little more than two months after he’d written the letter.

The bombing was described as the bloodiest terrorist attack to take place on American soil. One hundred and sixty-eight people were killed and another 500 were wounded. To do some good?

An even deadlier terrorist attack was launched against America and freedom itself on September 11, 2001. The hijacked-plane bombings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon stunned the world and cost more than 6,000 lives. Scholars tell us that the terrorists were “religious” extremists who believed that their horrifying acts against the innocent were mandated by God.

This terrorizing unconsciousness is what we call evil. However, a strikingly similar unconsciousness is evident in even very common and less pervasively destructive acts, such as striking a child to “get it to stop crying.” Such acts against children destroy their ability to release their emotions, confuse them, and leave them with buried rage. I frequently hear that this kind of child battering, even toward babies as young as six months, is still going on.

While I am not in any way equating hitting a child with the quite different act of terrorism, I

am pointing to the fact that they both arise from a terrifying unawareness on the part of the aggressor. And that in most cases, when people act against other people, they feel justified. They feel sensible.

If an act against a person is justified in the mind of the perpetrator, it is, in a *backwards* way said to be caused by the victim rather than by the perpetrator. Just the *opposite* of the truth.

A second fact is that wrongful acts, acts *against* people, usually bring about just the opposite of what the perpetrators intend. Going back to our previous examples: in one case, “to do some good,” McVeigh does harm, and in the other, “to stop a child’s crying,” a person exacerbates the anguish that brought forth the child’s crying in the first place.

If you have ever encountered a person who acted against you by harassing you, defining you, discriminating against you, or physically assaulting you, you may have noticed that the act was perpetrated against you as if you were deserving of it.

Whether they are experienced as horrifying, hurtful, or simply nonsensical, acts against others have certain commonalities. Primarily, they are as follows:

1. Perpetrators usually believe that their oppressive actions are necessary, even right. Their behavior is actually the opposite: unnecessary and wrong.
2. Generally, acts against others, that is, attempts to control others, eventually bring the perpetrators just the opposite of what they want.
3. Acts against others originate with a distortion or lack of awareness. Perpetrators almost universally believe that they see clearly and are aware: the *opposite* of reality.

When it comes to acts against others, of *what* are people unaware? I believe that this is a very important question, because if we can answer it, if we know *what* they are unaware of, we will have begun to unravel a knotty problem and to answer the question “Why do a great many people try to control other people?” I’ll never forget a case I encountered some years ago. A man became so difficult to live with that his wife separated from him, moving into an apartment a couple of blocks from their home. This she did after tolerating his growing misbehavior for more than twenty years. She had always held the hope that he would change, become gentle, kind, and loving, and that somehow the investment of her time and energy in all those years would be realized in a close relationship.

Her husband always wanted her back and even after two years hoped that she would return. With her encouragement he decided to talk with me. During our consultation, I asked him if he knew what his wife wanted—what change, if any, might bring her back?

He said, “She just wants me to be nice to her.”

“Is it possible that you could be nice to her?” I asked.

“How can I be nice to her when I’m so angry that she left?”

As we talked, his approach to his problems became perfectly clear. Somehow he felt that if he were angry enough, frightening her with sudden outbursts and demonstrations of rage; yelled enough, showing her just how mad she made him; put her down and intimidated her enough, telling her she could never make it on her own; even hit her enough, she would pay attention and realize the error of her ways. She would come back. Clearly, his attempt to control her was what had driven her away in the first place. And he couldn’t see it. *This* is what he was unaware of. That doesn’t mean that he was crazy. I would say instead that he, like all perpetrators, had acted *backwards*. People who act against others truly act in a backwards way, doing the opposite of

what they would need to do to realize their goal.

~~In the previous example, both the wife and the husband wanted a close relationship, but closeness meant something completely different to each person. Each one's idea of closeness and how to achieve it was the opposite of the other's. One person's idea of how to achieve closeness was sure to fail and actually did. In fact, it ended all possibility of closeness.~~

As we continue exploring the maze of illusory actions woven into our world, we will find out why some people act against their own intentions, whether to achieve closeness or to “do some good.” Since all oppressive acts have a backwards quality to them, they can be said to take place in the context of backwardness. We will find out just what it is that is actually backwards.

Even ordinary behaviors are inexplicable unless we are aware of the context in which they take place. Once we understand the context, we can begin to interpret the behaviors, and most important, to find out why the context of backwardness exists.

Let's first take a closer look at how important context is. If you saw me shouting and quickly looking around, my behavior would seem odd, certainly inexplicable. If you saw the context in which it took place—watching a basketball game—my actions would no longer be inexplicable. In this example, the context or broad view explains the specific: my behavior.

By knowing the context in which people act against others, we can begin to explain their acts

Chapter III

Intentions

*Despite their good intentions
it turned out wrong.*

As we have seen, acts against others take place in the context of backwardness. I believe that most people who act in oppressive ways, consciously or unconsciously, attempting to control others, are trying to meet a particular *need* that overrides their good intentions. Misdirected, they have sought to meet this need in extraordinarily destructive ways, *even while unaware of the need itself*. Ultimately, destructive behaviors never succeed in fulfilling the need. As a result, we are witness to cycles of destruction.

Since most people intend to “do right by others” and want to be treated the same way, why, in certain cases, do their good intentions and all their efforts to realize them, come to naught?

There is an old tale called “The Miller’s Daughter.” The miller gives away part of his property and all that is on it in a bargain with the devil. He gives away the property in exchange for riches, thinking that only an apple tree is lost. But, what the miller “thinks” isn’t enough. He loses his daughter to the devil because *she* is there with the apple tree. He learns too late the sad news from his wife. The miller and his wife suffer tremendously from such a great loss. And the daughter, too, suffers severely, going through many trials before finally escaping from the devil to go on with her life.

What the miller knew or thought he knew was not enough. His good intentions just to gain wealth were not enough. He did not know that there was something that he did not know: that before he actually lost his daughter to the devil, he had lost her in another way. He had lost (if ever he’d had it) his ability to relate to her. If he truly related to his wife and daughter as real people with real lives of their own, he would have at least talked to them about giving away the field before he did it. He would have realized that since they were living on the property it was their backyard, too, and he would never have struck his ill-fated bargain. Or his daughter would have known his plan and would have stayed off the back property.

If only he’d asked. Instead the miller acted for everyone. Even with good intentions, everyone suffers if the ability to relate is lost. How could the miller have lost his ability to relate? Could the ancient tale still be relevant?

Do people even now speak and act for others? “We’re going now.” “You’re not wearing that.”

“That’s not what you want.” “You knew..”

Just as I was writing about the miller, I had a miller experience myself. A kindly man arrived to repair some electronic equipment. I told him, “I’ll be working in my office. If you have any questions, please just ask.”

He was unable to hear that I was working and didn’t ask about interrupting my work. Unconscious control shows up in just this way. Here is what happened.

Working on this manuscript, I was in the process of moving text via my computer software when my computer screen went blank. Everything was gone. Not even a bomb or a sad face appeared. In the deadly silence I rushed out to see what had happened. My first thought was “Did he electrocute himself?” He was fine. He was working.

He’d shut off the electricity to the whole building. If only he’d asked. But like the miller he acted without regard to me, as if he didn’t know I was there. Had he been beside himself—somewhere else—when I told him I was working? Would he have heard me if I were someone else—a general, a supreme court judge?

I told the electrician about the miller. And he most graciously accepted the story. “I’ve learned an important lesson here today. I won’t ever forget it. I didn’t intend to spoil your book.”

Unlike the man who destroyed his wife’s book, tearing it into pieces, the electrician apologized and determined to change. He had no intention of interrupting my work. He just hadn’t really seen me. People who do not really see or hear others, even when *intending* to help them, may do just the opposite.

An intention is like the rudder on a ship. It sets our course. Guides us toward our objectives. Describes our purpose. But even with the best of intentions, some people fail. And, even if they realize that they are off course, and so affirm their good intentions, “something happens” and they get the opposite of what they wanted. Why? If their intentions are *the best*, what goes wrong? Isn’t a good intention, like the rudder on a ship, an ever-present guide? If it is, then how do things go wrong?

What can it be like for people who find they’ve failed to bring their intentions to fruition, like for instance, the man who couldn’t seem to follow through on his intention to “take it home to his family,” or even the miller?

In order to see the dilemma some people are in, let us imagine the following episode.

We’re each on a ship and the current has carried us along for a very long time. It has always done so. And we assume it will always take us where we need to go. But we’re beginning to feel a bit uneasy. We sense that something is wrong just under the surface. Our ship has gone off course. Our world is not as safe and sane as we would like.

Our intention and the course we have come to expect does not hold. We’ve come under the influence of a new current. Some of us become aware of it and so we make the necessary adjustments. In a sense, we reset our rudder. But others, not realizing that they are off course, have compounded their error by holding firm, reaffirming their intention, only to get to where they don’t want to go more quickly.

These people don’t notice that they’re moving more and more gradually off course. They don’t notice until they see that the scenery is quite different from what they had expected. And even then, when they do notice something’s wrong, they don’t know why or what. No matter how firmly they have relied upon the rudder of good intentions, their good intentions are not manifested, because something else, quite unknown to them, has come into play and because it is a deep, strong, and hidden current, it is a very compelling force.

Beside Yourself

*Where do people go when
they are beside themselves?*

Attempts to control people bring about “people problems.” Let us look now at the nature of a classic “people problem,” one that shows us something important about people’s attempts to control others.

In our everyday lives, most of us have observed kinds of behavior that under ordinary circumstances would be intolerable, but in extraordinary or overwhelming circumstances are both tolerated and understandable. The context in which the action takes place makes all the difference. For instance, in the extraordinary circumstance of a disaster, a person’s behavior may change drastically. Someone experiencing a disaster may shout, swear, give orders, and in other ways assault, in a sense, whomever is around: “Get a tourniquet! Damn you! Hurry up!”

Knowing the circumstance explains the behavior. We even have words for this: “He was *beside himself* with fear,” or in another circumstance, “She was *beside herself* with grief.” Knowing when a person is momentarily beside themselves, we ignore the assaults and instead of shouting back or leaving, we cope gently with the situation.

Imagine witnessing or being told of a great personal disaster. If you experienced such a great shock, you might automatically grasp something nearby, a chair or table, for instance. Or you might stagger or in some other way show that you feel dislodged—beside yourself.

Disaster strikes suddenly, and when it does, our reality seems to collapse. We find ourselves adrift beyond time and space.

Commonly, people who are beside themselves try to take control of what’s “out there” in any way they can. They’ve lost their inner connection, so they try to get a grip on something, anything—even someone.

When people are in this state, we not only say that they are beside themselves, we may also say that they don’t know what they are doing. It is as if they are disconnected from their everyday reality. To reconnect, a person may not just get a grip on a table or chair to restore physical balance and contact, but may also try to get a grip, so to speak, in someone around them, wanting someone to be like the glove on their hand, an extension of themselves, instantly available to do their bidding.

People can be *beside themselves* for any number of reasons, including an overriding feeling of pain, urgency, or loss. When we know the context, we can make sense of the behavior. But how

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