

# CHAPTER 6

## IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO KNOW

*“To sustain love, a man and a woman must continually be marrying and divorcing, moving with, against, away from, and beyond each other, saying ‘yes’ and ‘no’.”*

— Sam Keen

### **Your Brain on Marriage**

It is physically and psychologically impossible to know how difficult a marriage is going to be. I will explain. But I want to normalize your experience so far if you are having challenges, frustrations, or moments of confusion.

There was no way you could have ever known what would unfold. Why? Because throughout most of the third decade of your life, from ages twenty to twenty-eight, biologically and electro-magnetically your brain is different than it is starting at the age of thirty. Your brain on marriage, when you said, “I do” during your twenties, is not the same brain even four or five years later, let alone fifteen years later.

There is so much going on with the neurons between and within your left and right brains over the course of your marriage that it is a wonder that any marriage survives. I am kidding. But the brain does undergo such powerful, developmental, mini-evolutionary phases and processes throughout life that I am shocked it is not discussed more.

### Welcome to Your Crisis

These cycling, shifting and maturing neuron currents create and demand ongoing changes in our psychological, emotional, and spiritual sensibilities. The midlife crisis, for instance, is a natural and common experience and product of these anatomical changes. I had my midlife crisis early, when I was thirty-one. I unwittingly got a jump on that sucker. I enjoyed it so much that I am having another these days in my mid-fifties.

The late forties and early-to-mid-fifties crises are deeper, slower, and more intense than the psychological shifts earlier in life. I will not say harrowing, but big and heavy, like a glacier slowly and unexpectedly rolling into a quiet harbor town. It methodically pushes, upends, displaces, and consumes the docks, houses, boats, and everything else in its path. That sounds dramatic, but ask anyone who has been in or through one. It is a reckoning, a fierce, inexorable search for some kind of significance to what we are doing or have been doing for the last twenty years.

All of these life shifts, whether in our teens, twenties, or fifties, are caused by the melding, colliding and resisting forces of our left and right brains. Throughout our life, our brain biology continually calls up everything in us that we cannot touch — our longings, dreams, and regrets — so that they can be reconciled and integrated with our rationally formed thoughts, beliefs, and expectations. Life is an unending coalescing of these forces. The progress and development of our marital bond are a direct reflection of how we reconcile these neuron machinations.

These crises of the self, big or small, are expected,

natural, and part of the evolutionary construct of humans. But so many of us see these agonizing bouts and phases of questioning and doubt as failings. They are not. They are experiences of expansion that demand your time, attention, and ability to listen to their demands.

The word crisis is rooted in the Greek word *krisis*, which means to decide or interpret. That is what the timeless intelligence of our body chemistry is doing to us during these times. Our left and right brains are being blended. If you give up on these siren calls from within, you will give up on your marriage. Fatigue, fear, ignorance, and lack of will in the face of these transitional cycles of our inner lives will often cause people to punt on their spouse. I am asking you to hang on — it is worth the ride.

## **Takes Much More Than Love**

Regardless of the changes our brains undergo, I believe that successfully sustaining and maintaining a healthy and mature marriage has little to do with love. Love is too hard to define and identify to be the deciding factor in such a powerful exercise as marriage. I have heard it said many times, “If you have love, the marriage will work.” I do not agree. I have seen plenty of couples who love each other but whose marriage stopped. That is not a bad thing. I am just confirming my belief that it takes more than love.

Try this Love-Gut check:

- Close your eyes for a minute, put your right hand on your heart and focus all your attention on that

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space behind your rib cage.

- Imagine clearly seeing all twelve of those curved bones of your chest plate. Keep your attention there, on your hand on your heart.
- Welcome to the home of your heart.

Humor me for a few more minutes as we explore the intelligence and sensations stored under the hood.

- Now, with your hand still on your heart, take note of your next breath as you inhale into your nose.
- Notice your stomach and chest as you inhale. Try to hold the next breath right at the very top of the inhale, before you need to exhale, and then release it slowly out your mouth as your chest and stomach compress to the back of your spine.
- Repeat this for your next five breaths while you settle into a relaxed state.
- Keep your hand gently on your heart. Your heart likes this attention, whether you know or believe this.
- Now, quietly define, characterize, call up, and animate the word and concept of love. Use the relaxed motion of your heart to do the talking and visualizing. Keep your eyes closed.

### **Categorizing Love**

Maybe you are feeling love as a longing for a grandparent that has passed and the joy they brought. Maybe it is an old, unrequited high school fling that cut you deeply, but you still feel giddiness under the regret. There was an

innocence and simplicity in that adolescent love. Right now, as I do this exercise, I feel the soft pangs of a bond and appreciation for the Christmas gifts my three daughters gave me. These pangs are brewing a tear for a father's inexhaustible pride in the care and appreciation my girls share with me.

One of my other overwhelming experiences of love is in the memory of my dog, Sunny. He passed two years ago, but his patience and abiding affection for me floods my heart with warmth. His picture, a whole collage of photos, is three feet away.

Maybe you're conjuring of love held within an unrivaled friendship and union with your spouse, friend, sibling, or colleague. Love is in all of these, as well as being just a warm feeling, a sadness for days, friends, or family members that are no longer here. It could be in the sensation of wanting something more, or appreciation for what you have, knowing that someone is home or on the other side of a phone call. Or maybe it's plain old sex.

The point is that love is an experience, sensation, and perception, and there are a thousand ways to conceive it. But this incredibly powerful yet amorphous construct cannot sustain or hold two people together in a relationship for fifty years. Constructs cannot mend the resentment, frustration, anger, insecurity, financial issues, distrust, in-law issues and confusion that can eat away at marriages. Unfortunately, marriage statistics support this notion, as fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce as of 2018. If all we needed was love, that number would be different.

Love can be the fuel, goal, and passion that drives your work, studies, and finishing the yardwork. But a mature

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marriage depends on much more. It needs stamina, commitment, a willingness to be completely undone, a selfishness and selflessness, as well as a singular truth living in the bottom center of your stomach that says, “My life is better with my spouse in it, period.” No other partnership or relationship in your life asks this of you.

Your marriage is a long story that must be constantly read, examined, felt, interrupted, laughed at, broken, lost, and wept over. There is a long history of memories and unconscious sensations stored in you and your partner, as we know. You have no idea of the heft of these memories and how you will react when your partner’s inner story painfully spills on you. You are not supposed to. Why? Because the age at which we typically get married and the stages of human brain development that occur during these early phases preclude our ability to comprehend the intensity and shifts in our storylines.

The science of your brain and the developmental process called myelination is the culprit behind this changing plot of your marriage. Myelination is an epic shifting point that completely alters your interpretation and translation of your experience of life. It is an integration phase when the neuron fibers of the left brain blossom and strengthen, allowing them to more fully blend, merge, and communicate with the right brain. You had no idea that myelination was going to force you to adjust, tune in, hold on, and let go in order to make it through to the end.

The only thing you can do to stay within the plot of your marriage, the only time-tested, ancient exercise that answers all the marital questions is the one we have been propounding: to slowly teach your dominant, adult left-

brain perspective the language of your right brain emotions. This is work done in your silence and in the counselor's office. Conscious sitting and listening alone and therapy are the only classrooms that can reconcile the blending of these currents. There is nothing logical about any of this.

*"The more angry one person gets, the more sad the other. The more sad one gets, the more angry the other."*

— Gahl Sasson

## **Unlikely Bedfellows, this Sadness and Anger**

Cassandra Clare sums up, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the profound truth about marriage when she says in *City of Bones*, "To love is to destroy, and that to be loved is to be the one destroyed." You must open up and die to your childhood anger and fears. These are the mini-crises, times to interpret.

This is the irony and rub of being married, the pain within deepening the bond with your spouse. But only through the sadness, which is the surfacing of old hurts, can relief and joy be found.

What emerges from this inner work is a love and appreciation for self, for the crusade that you have been on throughout your life. All roads to completing your marriage, finishing up life with your spouse, lead through you and the exposing of your inner child heart through the mortar and pestle of marriage.

Go back to putting your attention on your breath. Take two to three minutes again and put your hand on your heart, count seven or eight slow breaths, and just sit

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quietly.

Now spend a few minutes feeling back into moments when you were an adolescent, when you felt lost, confused about life, or dispirited, as Laurie, James, and I have done. Feel those old joys and trepidation of adolescence. Press an old self-esteem bruise from a breakup or failure. Put your full adult attention into the middle of your fifteen-year-old heart, or whatever age you are feeling as you sit. You will know if you have penetrated that moment because your shoulders, stomach, and heart will thump or twinge. Your body will tell you when you have truly perceived and melded with your younger heart.

Those parts of you will no longer be separated. You will contact your experience of those moments right now. This is how you find your way home. Home is where and when you realize that you are a singular entity filled with a lifetime of unique experiences and emotions, moving in time. Many call this connectedness, oneness, or a union with God. This moves you to experience an acceptance of self. This acceptance incites a deep and quiet love for the most important person on the planet, you.

You loving you, or at least deeply appreciating your story, is the story of how your marriage subsists and thrives. Your spouse is a distant second on the list of key factors which will ensure success. Sounds New Age, but is not.

How can you really engage your spouse and your marriage, or another's desires, or know why your spouse rages at you if you do not know the most delicate and deepest pangs of your own heart? You have to desire your own growth within the arena of marriage because the self-undoing, the vulnerability, and destruction that Cassandra

Clare mentions is unavoidable.

## **Where Does this Come From?**

You are going to tune into a channel that you had no idea existed, that you never imagined you would need to find. John, who we met in Chapter 1, started our first session together with a comment. "I know things are a lot different from when we were first married," he told me. "The kids, diapers, all the driving around, me being at work while she's home, all our stuff. But some of the things we end up saying to each other, some of the anger and fights, where the hell does this come from?"

He went on to say that his debates with his wife, Amy, were getting so loud. She hated how he avoided doing dishes and helping out with even the small stuff. He got so grumpy and frustrated with her irritable looks when he came home from work that he did not feel like kissing her. He told me he loves hugging the kids and kissing the dogs. "That," he says, "pisses her off even more."

Could John have ever imagined those words or that scenario when they were on their honeymoon or even a year or two into their marriage? As he continued to share his frustrations and growing resentment, I said that what he and his wife were going through is normal.

Just on a fundamental physical and psychological level, sharing space every day with another person is a biological challenge. Each of us wrangling with the ongoing weight of feelings, ruminations, desires, joys and insecurities. Each is carrying a personal cargo of unexamined and unconscious sensibilities and reactions. Placing someone within the same four walls is supposed to create major

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collisions. The natural and normal psychological and emotional gravitational pull on both bodies will always be active, impinging on each other's inner and outer orbits.

But there is much more than proximity that creates the inevitable confusion and unexplainable nuttiness of marriage. I said to John, "Even if someone like the priest or the entire wedding party had told you and Amy that the discourse of your marriage would be this intense, you two would've still gotten married." He agreed.

All three core challenges of marriage that were wholly unknowable – the constant proximity, intensity of our reactions, and the amount of indelible sensitivities that we carried from childhood – were built into the seed of your bond the day you married. These issues are not the real problem. It is the fact that the psychological, emotional, and behavioral changes that unfold over time in each partner seem to come out of nowhere.

They come out of nowhere because of the silent merging of our left and right brain neurons during the myelination phase, one that begins in our mid to late twenties and early thirties. This developmental phase begins to crack our sensibilities, like two inner oceans colliding.

*"Our left brain finds meaning...by rendering the world more orderly and predictably."*

— Iain McGilchrist

### **A Car Accident and Your Marriage**

It is important to review again the contrasting ways that we view and experience the world. Our adult attention