

## **Mistakes Were Made**

(but not by *me*)

Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts

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“As fallible human beings, all of us share the impulse to justify ourselves and avoid taking responsibility for any actions that turn out to be harmful, immoral, or stupid. ... The higher the stakes -- emotional, financial, moral -- the greater the difficulty.

“It goes further than that: Most people, when directly confronted with proof that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action but justify it even more tenaciously.”

These are the opening statements of this book, the rest consists of examples. The authors bring clarity to much of what we experience as citizens of the planet and members of the human race.

Of course, you don't have to go far to find good examples of this phenomena. They open with stories about the Bush administration. Obvious as these are, it's not that simple. In each of our own minds, we emphasize evidence we want to accept and ignore information contrary to what we want to believe. The more pressure, the less likely a change of heart or mind is. There ought to be a name for this.

A big caution: If you don't find your own foibles somewhere in this book, probably several places, then you either are not paying attention or have isolated yourself from reality to where you need to see your therapist, not about *them* but about *you*.

This is a fairly deep problem. People want to believe that they are basically good. Doing something wrong, for whatever reason, conflicts with this. The jargon is, “creates dissonance.” The mind works harder to restore consonance than it does to be accurate.

An image the authors use (which I don't like much, but illustrates well enough) is of a pyramid. You start at the top of the pyramid in consonance with everything, but then take one step down in one of many possible different directions, perhaps away from what is right and best. The difference, for example, between a congressman accepting a dinner and accepting a golf vacation to Scotland from a lobbyist is only one of degree. Stepping from one compromise to another doesn't generate much dissonance in the mind of the congressman each time, but the final result is an outrage to the public who sees the end result in the papers as the first example of lobbying technique. Going down the pyramid on his side, he is far from everybody else (on other sides).

See why the image doesn't exactly work? Everybody was going "down," right or wrong. But the principle is useful. As we move away from each other's points of view, the chasm can get large. Reinforcement is away from unity and reality and towards self justification and conflict, unless there's room to just move away. I see this happening everywhere.

A lot of what they talk about is frightening. Here, only a month after finishing the book, I've forgotten most of the illustrations. I don't want to believe that society can be so self destructive, though I know it's true. For instance, they talk about the McMartin pre-school molestation case and they talk about the way that police investigators interrogate suspects and they talk about recovered memory psychotherapy. In each of these cases, someone *begins* with a theory or diagnoses: the McMartins molested the children in their care, or the therapy client is repressing sexual abuse from childhood, or the suspect is guilty. All the investigations, all interpretation of statements, all tend to support that conclusion, even in the presence of mounting and eventually overwhelming evidence to the contrary. There was the murder suspect who had no opportunity and no motive but who did have an alibi. Nonetheless, investigators who had decided in advance he was guilty managed to get him convicted, even though there was present in the community a real home-invasion suspect who made much more sense. Sometimes these cases are exposed and corrected, most times not, one suspects.

It's no wonder that law enforcement all over the country is busy destroying old DNA evidence right now. They can't be wrong! And, anyway, if they are wrong, those people were guilty of *something* and should still be punished.

Lives are destroyed when therapy clients "recover" memories of bad things that never happened. The therapists have no checks on their work, after all, it's all confidential. Anything that looks like wavering or a retraction is just denial repression, or whatever. The therapist's reputation is staked on being right, after all. Professional society disputes erupt in which those holding to unprovable beliefs end up insisting nearly violently, that detractors from their point of view be silenced, though they would seem to an "objective" observer to be quite reasonable skeptics.

The authors even take on Freud himself, refuting the "catharsis" theory. No, actually, beating on things makes it worse, it doesn't "let out" anger, making it go away, it reinforces it and builds it up.

The implications for religion and religious conflict are obvious and sobering.

The authors go to some trouble to convict themselves of this same flight from dissonance. In one case, one of them was considering two houses to buy, one out in the country that would be better for the kids, one close to the university that would be better for career. After having chosen the country, this author went and bought a canoe in mid January, which he would supposedly use in the more rural environment later in the year. His wife thought he exhibited the very dissonance reduction that he studied.

I didn't find this example particularly compelling. The author's interpretation of his own actions was that buying the canoe before it was needed was a way of attempting to bring consonance to a difficult choice that had been made. I might buy this if he had bought the canoe *before* making the difficult choice, but *after*, I just say that he was trying to move forward in the direction chosen, for better or for worse, and maybe get a good mid-winter price on watercraft in the process.

But, this book is loaded with great quotes of obvious dissonance. If you want to know all about the ridiculousness of Nixon or some famous figure in sports, this is the place.

There is the story of Benjamin Wilkomirski, author of *Fragments*. Wilkomirski invented horrors from Nazi concentration camps and, when confronted with evidence that they could not have occurred to him, decided he could trust his memories better than all those facts that all those uninvolved historians who kept refuting him.

Or the case of Will Andrews, who made up stories of alien abductions and had Oprah sucked in for a while until she took hold of reality, cut him loose, and brought him back on the show to confront him about it.

Or, I thought to myself: Michael remembers his own birth.

Not addressed in the book, but other possible examples, are Holocaust deniers, moon-hoaxers, and so forth, people who, for whatever reason and due to whatever agenda, will not believe what most of us accept as historical fact, and for better reasons.

An example of reinforcing consonance is the example of the benevolent dolphin. Because sailors have sometimes been rescued by dolphins, they are thought to be benevolent. This ignores the possibility that some are led further to sea by dolphins and do not live to tell stories of malevolence.

This is, in essence, the problem I have with the Psalms. "Lord, save me, else, who will sing your praises! The dead don't!" Like I said, the implications for religion are sobering.

And then they take on marriage. Marriages, and other relationships, are held together or broken apart through these same means. I see it in my own marriage and in those of others. One useful metric is given. A relationship (particularly a marriage) survives if it has at least five good experiences for every one bad. The rate doesn't matter, it is the ratio that is a better predictor of marital success than most others.

I got this title from my own therapist. We spent the last year discussing corporate issues in which I had been central, in which disagreements between otherwise reasonable people had reached painful degrees of separation, misunderstanding, and consequences. Seeing myself and

other parties to these problems through the lens of dissonance reduction was not all that surprising to me, but I did find myself convicted in yet another dock.

Towards the end, the authors point out that children do better who are encouraged for their effort rather than their innate ability. If your identity *is* an innate ability, a failure is independent. If your identity is your ability to strive and try, success itself is a reward. We had always praised our children for what they *were* rather than what they *undertook*, a reaction from our (well, my) own upbringing, possibly a faulty reading of the Bible, now or then. But, an over-reaction. Now they suffer from it. They have had to learn to strive and succeed on their own and it has been (and continues to be) painful. We have done them a disservice. Though they are all out of the house now, we can still set an example, however. We can change our understanding and, whatever influence and power we still have, can still try to do the right thing.

Learn what you can and move forward. The past is a teacher. Do not let it be a master.

The context for this insight is that our culture disparages stupidity and equates failure with stupidity. We therefore have to cover up and deny all failure, leading to even more dissonance reduction work. It is true that our culture does this. It's not all my fault, then. Mistakes were made, *by them!* I know that it is not true that mistakes equal stupidity and that it is true that mistakes are inevitable (the imperfect four dimensional universe, you know) but I am part of the culture and live and quip with it as well as the next guy.

Personally, I have to be careful. Somehow I have learned to err on the side of self judgement. It has been an improvement for me not to take beatings from myself and others so quickly and seriously. Yeah, all those other guys need to read this book and internalize it and correct themselves. Mistakes were made, *by them!* Well, mostly.