

Secrets, Lies, Betrayals

Chapter 13

THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN: EXTRAMARITAL AFFAIRS

As Karen Barry-freed recalled it, that summer had been a smoldering one, and she herself had been feeling perplexed and disoriented. It was as if she'd been aware of certain subsurface tremors that were still too negligible to suggest the scope of the impending earthquake. True, her husband, Jon, had been strangely unavailable to her and the children during the long, stifling August afternoons: He'd had a series of minor illnesses and had spent much of his time sleeping in the garden hammock. Eventually, though, she'd felt her patience giving way. "When you're not here you're not here; and when you're here you're not here," she'd complained, but the conversation hadn't led anywhere.

"I was clueless, totally clueless," Karen recounted. "I had no idea; never discovered lipstick on his shirt; none of that sort of stuff. I never found out until he told me." Her brown-fringed hazel eyes were staring and enlarged, and her open, friendly face seemed drained of life and color. It was as though the memory of that domestic catastrophe weren't five years in the past, but as current as the headlines in this morning's newspaper.

Throughout that summer's end and the beginning of fall, the Barry-Freeds' lives went on as usual. "In many respects, the marriage we had was like a business," said Karen. "We had a partnership; we ran a home; we were raising children; and that was it. Sex was not great, and to the extent that I thought about that, I thought, Maybe I'm just not a sexy person."

Sex was to her something on the order of an obligation—you had to do it once a week, but it wasn't particularly interesting. She'd never given much thought to how this might be affecting Jon, never wondered about how he might be reacting. Having grown up in a family where flawless conduct and keeping up appearances were of paramount importance, Karen was relatively oblivious when it came to the world of feelings. Therefore, she was thoroughly unsuspecting and unprepared—"hurt, insulted, devastated"—when her husband's feelings erupted with cataclysmic suddenness and he let her know how barren the marriage felt to him.

That upheaval happened in October, somewhere around the time of his fortieth birthday. Karen's gift to Jon had been a three-day vacation for the pair of them at Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires; but when he'd opened the gift envelope, he was clearly taken aback.

"I was surprised—hurt—by his reaction. I thought, How can you not be happy? We're always overwhelmed by these children, and won't this be a great chance for the two of us to get away? But he started making all kinds of excuses, saying he wasn't sure

he could spare the time—business reasons, something like that.” Jon had seemed downright shaken by her present, as if no prospect could be more threatening than an intimate getaway for the pair of them.

“I pointed out that it was an open reservation; we could go whenever we pleased,” Karen said evenly, “but of course it was the last thing he wanted to do with me.”

The following week had been characterized by appreciable silence and a sense of polite constraint until she’d felt the need to probe again, “I don’t know where you are anymore, Jon. Where are you?” He hadn’t offered up any explanations or answers, for he did know where he was, and it wasn’t with her and with their family. Another week went by, and eventually she made some puzzled comment about the fact that they hadn’t made love on his birthday, and they hadn’t made love on their anniversary, two significant events that were just a few days apart.

“Not that I was an overly sexual kind of person at that point in time; I really wasn’t,” Karen hastened to add. “But again, these were occasions. . . .” Her voice trailed off momentarily, and then she said, “It just seemed odd. So I brought it up, and he said, ‘I have to talk to you. I’m just not—I’m not real happy.’ And I said, ‘Oh, okay.’ But we didn’t talk about it that night. I did find myself wondering what was going on with Jon, but strange as it sounds, the thought of another person in the picture didn’t even occur to me.”

That evening, the Barry-Freeds finally sat down together to talk. “The children were in bed, the house was quiet, and the two of us went into the living room to have this conversation. I can’t remember everything he said, exactly, but there’s a kind of image of that scene that’s just burned into my brain,” said Karen, touching both temples with the tips of her fingers. Jon had been sitting in the rocker (she pointed to it at this moment), and she had sat on the sofa, facing him. Then, without any preamble, he’d told her that what he wanted to talk about was the fact that he wanted a divorce.

“It was just like that—that direct—and I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I felt as if—as if I’d taken this massive punch to the stomach, and all the wind had been knocked out of me! . . . I mean, this couldn’t be happening. . . . This was so surreal. How did I not see this? I just sat there, looking at him, and what he said was, basically, ‘You’re a wonderful woman; you’re the most wonderful mother, the most moral, ethical person I’ve ever met. I feel just terrible, but I’m very unhappy and I want a divorce. I think you should get an attorney.’ It came out just like that, pretty much all in one sentence.

“I was in shock. I really was in shock. But I think when there’s been as much creeping distance in a marriage as there was in ours, you have no clue whatsoever . . . and I really wasn’t clued in.” In the course of this short, astounding conversation, her whole world had lurched crazily, rocked back and forth for a few breathless moments, and then came crashing down around her. “At some point, I looked at him, and finally the light is dawning,” Karen continued. “It’s dawning slowly, and I said, ‘Is there another woman?’ He couldn’t answer me; he just nodded his head up and down—there was. Even so, it

didn't seem possible. I mean, I did know this conversation was happening, but at the same time I couldn't take it in, couldn't believe it."

In retrospect, the most wounding words she'd heard that evening were not actually about herself; they were what Jon had to say about his responsibilities toward the children. He had always been the most caring and devoted of fathers, but when she asked him, "What about the kids?" he'd bristled and said coldly, "I've got only one life to live, and they'll be fine."

Nevertheless, Karen hadn't responded angrily or even felt angry; she'd felt dazed—numbed. Despite everything, her first thoughts had been focused solely upon saving what could be salvaged from the wreckage. Her proposal had been that the two of them go into marital counseling—work on repairing the relationship and forgiving whatever needed to be forgiven—but above all, try to keep the family intact.

Jon was willing, and agreed to participate in twice-weekly therapy with Karen; but at the same time, he had an underlying agenda. He was unhappy in the marriage, in love with someone else, and he wanted out. "He kept talking a lot about 'adventure,' about his craving for more excitement in his life. About his wanting to go white-water rafting, stuff like that. Let's face it, he was just turning forty, and the message was that he didn't want to be living in this house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, with this wife and these three children."

Betrayal Trauma

According to psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, the essence of trauma is the abrupt disintegration of the victim's inner world. Unbearable, unthinkable experiences have a way of demolishing the basic structure of the self, shattering those fundamental assumptions that have served to make life feel livable and safe. In Janoff-Bulman's view, such assumptions or core beliefs can be subsumed under the following propositions: 1) that the world is benevolent; 2) that the world is meaningful; and 3) that the self is worthy.

Most of us take these reassuring assumptions as facts of our existence—givens—and they usually exist outside our conscious awareness. But when overwhelming, inconceivable events—in the case just cited, the treachery of a trusted partner—demolish and scramble these bedrock beliefs, the injured person's inner world becomes an alien landscape, littered with the debris of destroyed convictions.

"Victims of trauma have come face-to-face with a highly unstable, dangerous universe, which has been made all the more frightening by their total lack of psychological preparation," writes Janoff-Bulman. It is as if a harsh, glaring light has suddenly illuminated the full panorama of the individual's existence, and the terrible fragility of the self has become painfully apparent. Not only is the self vulnerable in ways not hitherto realized, but the person experiences him- or herself as besieged by lies, malice, and meaninglessness in a world that offers no real stability or protection.

At the same time, a loud internal emergency alarm has been set off—one that can't readily be modulated or extinguished. The revelation of the betrayal has put the shocked partner's body into a state of high alert—one that can precipitate a wide range of the familiar physical and mental symptoms that follow upon traumatic experience, such as chronic anxiety, confusion, "flashbulb" memories of certain painful scenes, mood swings, irritability, sleep disturbances, depression, feelings of estrangement, shortness of temper, deep-rooted, ceaseless anger, digestive problems, substance abuse, chronic fatigue, and a host of other greater and lesser difficulties.

However, when it comes to making a formal diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder—in the big-T sense—the revelation of a partner's infidelity doesn't qualify. Although such an event is clearly shattering to a person's view of the self and of the world, it doesn't meet the current criteria of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which stipulates that a PTSD finding must be reserved for traumatic occurrences that involve actual or threatened death or serious harm to the self or nearby others—in other words, horrifying occurrences that put at risk the victim's physical survival.

This is obviously not the case in extramarital situations, for most people don't die as a result of learning about a trusted partner's lies and deceptions. Nevertheless, a number of researchers and clinicians working in the field of EMS (extramarital sex) have come to recognize that betrayed partners often respond in ways that are characteristically present in other traumatic situations.

Interpersonal Trauma

Prominent among these EMS experts is the late Dr. Shirley Glass, who has posited the existence of a phenomenon that she has termed "interpersonal trauma." As Glass told me in the course of a series of conversations, she believes the word trauma to be apt because it captures the true extent of the stupefying emotional wound inflicted by a disloyal mate upon his or her trusting and believing partner. For the betraying spouse's behavior has in fact been an assault on her fundamental sense of who she is and on many of her most cherished assumptions.

Until the time of the affair's exposure, she's seen herself as someone unique and special in the eyes of another special person—the intimate partner who has bonded with her and promised to prize her above all others. Thus, when faced with the indisputable evidence of his horrifying dishonesty, her self-respect suffers a monumental reversal. In the wake of the revelation, she experiences herself as anything but special; she feels inconsequential and discardable, as if she'd been relegated to a kind of human waste dump.

Many of her most basic beliefs about her own personal qualities—her looks, her lovability, even her good judgment—disintegrate precipitously. She may have viewed herself as sophisticated and mature when it came to other people's dalliances, but nothing

in her experience has actually prepared her for the jolt of coming face-to-face with her own trusted partner's incredible duplicity.

It is so dizzying, so destructive an experience that everything she thought she knew comes suddenly into question. Her world has been shaken from its assumptive foundations—hit by malevolently powerful forces—turned completely upside down. And while the exposure of the partner's sexual betrayal is not mortally threatening, it often is experienced as a death—the death of faith in a critically important attachment and the loss of a secure base in a world that makes sense and is meaningful.

A Self-Willed Obliviousness

Later, Karen was to wonder why she had remained so hopelessly ignorant of what was happening during the months leading up to the revelation of her husband's affair. Perhaps it had been what she called the “creeping distance” in her sixteen-year marriage that explained her total lack of awareness, but in retrospect she did recognize that there had been numerous indications that something out of the ordinary was taking place.

Among them had been Jon's nervous primping before the mirror on certain mornings just before going into work. He would keep changing his shirt and his ties, keep asking her advice about which tie looked best with the suit he was wearing. Recollections such as these were particularly galling once she realized that this had occurred on the days when his lover—a woman who worked for an affiliate of Jon's family-owned shoemanufacturing business—was flying into Boston “on business.” Although he'd always arrived home in the wee hours on these occasions, her suspicions had never been awakened.

In hindsight, she found her naiveté stupefying; indeed, she felt moronic about the whole thing and looked upon the blindness of that time as her own very personal failing. But in fact this reluctance to register the knowledge of a trusted partner's betrayal is much more the commonality than the exception. So is the sense of perplexity and disorientation that Karen remembered experiencing throughout the period leading up to the extramarital affair's revelation. For even though the sense that something wasn't quite right had been palpable—in the conjugal air, somehow— she'd managed to keep the unthinkable information from her conscious awareness. Karen Barry-Freed, like so many other bright, intelligent people, was ready and eager to deny what was happening before her very eyes, and to do so right down to the wire.

What motivates this kind of self-willed obliviousness? You might explain it on the basis of the old “love is blind” cliché; but many deceived partners are in long-lasting, committed relationships rather than the early throes of romantic passion. What makes them cling so steadfastly to the irrational belief that nothing's amiss, even in the face of accumulating signs and signals to the contrary? Or if they should raise bewildered questions, what makes them so strangely prepared to accept the betraying mate's lies and misrepresentations? The superficial answers to such questions may vary widely, and they do; but they all boil down to the ordinary truth that the thought of a beloved, trusted

partner's defection is often too intolerable to penetrate the mind's defenses against experiencing pain.

"Refusing to Know"

Another example of a person "refusing to know" was that of Anne Bailey, who was in her late twenties at the time of our interviews. Anne told me that she had been strangely aware and yet unaware of her husband Mark's extramarital affair for a period of many months but had refused to acknowledge on an overt, conscious level what she did know. As she put it, "I just couldn't let my thoughts go down that track." It was as though she'd had the intuition that certain associative tracks could lead directly to a marital train wreck.

In Anne's case, as in that of Karen (and those of so many other deceived spouses), the affair had become known only when knowledge of it became completely unavoidable. This happened to Anne Bailey when she, her husband, Mark, and their six-month-old son, Timmy, were vacationing on Nantucket island. The whole matter came to light by the merest chance—when Anne picked up the downstairs phone to make a call and overheard a scrap of whispered, excited-sounding conversation. It was Mark, talking to a woman, someone whose voice was faintly familiar.

Startled and confused, Anne had replaced the receiver immediately. Then she stood where she was for a heart-pounding few moments. She knew she recognized that person's voice, and yet she couldn't quite place it. After a short interval she tiptoed halfway up the stairs to see if that strangely overheated conversation had ended.

It was quiet on the second floor, so she hurried downstairs again. Come to think of it, she had heard the phone ring sometime earlier, so she quickly dialed *69 and found herself connected to the sender of the last call that had come in. "Hi," said the woman at the other end of the line in a bright, friendly tone of voice.

Anne did recognize the voice this time. She knew the person to be one of the young postdocs who'd been working in Mark's laboratory since the previous winter; she replaced the phone on its cradle without speaking. But in that moment, she knew with complete certainty everything she'd fought so hard against knowing before.

"It was like having a rug pulled out from under me—not the rug of a room, but the rug of the whole world—and I felt as if I were spinning. It was like whirling through space, breaking apart into pieces—I was demolished. And the thought that came into my head was, My life is just over."

At the same time, said Anne, those terrible feelings had been accompanied by a strange sense of relief. For so many crazy, confusing things had been going on for such a long period of time, and now she understood why those things made sense. "All of a sudden, things clicked into place, and I could understand why I'd been feeling so

strange—so unlike myself, so weepy, so mad at the world, rejectable, and quick to take offense.”

Scanning backward in time, she realized how long and how elaborately Mark had been lying to her. What a stupid idiot she had been! There had been so many clues that he was involved elsewhere—blatant symptoms of an underlying malady for which she now had the firm diagnosis. How had she managed to dismiss a whole series of seemingly insignificant incidents from her awareness? The telephone calls he’d been getting at odd hours—from an annoying, klutzy new colleague, he’d said. The unusually long hours he’d been spending at the lab—leaving so early in the morning and coming home so late almost every night. He’d had to work harder than ever on his government grant, he’d told her, for the money was getting much tighter.

It had all been an ingenious stew, a mixture of half-truths and blatant deceptions. She did recall questioning him about one incident along the way and remembered being puzzled by the guilty expression on his face. “I wasn’t clear on what that could be about. But let’s face it, a part of me didn’t want to push matters. Maybe it was because Mark was so miserable at the time, worried about his laboratory’s funding. Maybe it was because my own job was so demanding, and we had a young baby, and I was so involved there.”

She had done her best not to know, but on the morning of that overheard phone call she had known with a sense of furious certainty. So she’d marched directly upstairs to confront her husband, said directly, “Look, I have to talk to you. . . . I know you’re having an affair.”

Mark was working at a small computer in their bedroom, but he’d stiffened, then jumped up, almost knocking over his chair. The two of them had just stood there, staring. Anne remembered the scene vividly: the ragged sound of her own breathing, the way she’d crossed her arms over her chest as if to shield herself from him. Mark, looking hangdog, had let out a long sigh, then admitted that it was the truth.

The effect upon his wife was volcanic. It was as if a stockpile of rage that had been silently building up inside her had erupted on the instant. “I felt like I was exploding, literally blowing apart—as if I wanted to kill him—him or myself, I wasn’t sure!” The worst part was having to keep it under wraps for a while, because at that moment the baby woke up from his morning nap and started crying for someone to get him from the crib. It was already close to eleven a.m., and the Baileys had houseguests who were due to arrive somewhere around lunchtime.

“Even now, that whole weekend is a big blur in my mind,” Anne recounted. “But what is vivid is the memory of being alone with Mark at bedtime. . . . How embarrassed I felt getting undressed in his presence, because now he was someone strange to me. I didn’t want to be seen by him. I felt so soiled, so humiliated, so utterly betrayed.”

The Body Reacts

It will come as no surprise that in the aftermath of an affair's exposure, the betrayed and bereaved partner is likely to develop post-traumatic stress symptoms and reactions. Acute hyperarousal was surely one of Anne's most evident reactions, for the exposure of Mark's infidelity had quickly shunted her into an amphetamine-like "high"; she'd felt pressured, supercharged with seething energy, chronically agitated, and unable to calm herself down. Plagued with intrusive thoughts and disturbing images of the lovers' embraces, she'd been preoccupied by fantasies of murdering her deceiving mate or of committing suicide. It was impossible to get to sleep, and when she did manage to do so, she was often wakened by violent nightmares. She simply couldn't soothe herself, calm herself down.

From the point of view of outward behavior, Anne's reactions were completely different from those of Karen Barry-Freed, whose responses looked completely opposite. Instead of speeding up, Karen had slowed down, almost to the point of complete immobilization. Hers had been the second kind of bodily reaction—"freezing" or numbing out.

Karen didn't rage or feel vengeful; she felt "as if I couldn't move, as if I were weighted down with stones." It was as though she were some confused survivor staggering around in the wake of a devastating catastrophe, seeking foggily for some points of orientation in a bizarre world that was no longer safe or familiar.

"In one sense, I knew everything that was happening, but in another sense it all seemed like it was happening to someone else—I was so out of it," Karen said. "When I drove my kids to school I didn't even hear them when they spoke to me. They kept saying, 'Earth to Mom! Earth to Mom!' because my thoughts were just elsewhere—no, not elsewhere, but nowhere. It was like the inside of my head was . . . blank. And I was so disoriented, I could get lost just driving to the grocery store."

At times, for no specific reason, tears would start running down her cheeks; yet those tears felt strangely unconnected to any emotions such as sadness or grief. By and large, she felt numb—a leaden feeling that would be pierced now and then by sudden visitations of horror. It was usually an impromptu visualization of that scene in the living room when Jon had sprung the news that the marriage was over and she should get herself an attorney.

That image, when it popped into her mind, had the power to make Karen double over, her entire body gripped by anguish and fear. Sometimes she even imagined she was hearing the words that had been spoken—hearing them aloud, in the moment. This made her fear she might be going crazy, for wasn't "hearing voices" a sign that something deadly might be happening?

Fight, Flee, or Freeze

Clearly, here were two women who had reacted to the same traumatic revelation in polar opposite ways. Karen had closed down and become almost paralyzed, while Anne (like Claudia Martinelli) had become visibly “hyper.” Anne had been filled with bubbling anger that continually threatened to boil over in some rage-driven destructive act. Despite all outward appearances, however, inside Anne’s and Karen’s bodies a similar physiological situation prevailed.

For the biological bottom line is that when we humans are faced with threats of a potentially overwhelming nature, an inner siren is triggered and we switch into an altered state of high readiness to meet the challenge at hand. Even as we make an instinctive, instantaneous assessment of the danger, an upsurge of neurohormones and neurotransmitters is activated. These substances inundate our brains and bodies: Our hearts start pumping faster; our muscles contract; and our blood vessels constrict in order to reroute blood flow away from those organs most vulnerable to serious damage. On the instant, we are primed, psychologically and biologically, to face up to the threat, to attempt to escape it, or to freeze and “play dead.”

This swift bodily reaction to stressful circumstances is, as we know, highly adaptive; it promotes survival. But again, what is generally a vital asset can become a burdensome debit in those life circumstances where neither fight nor flight is a remotely plausible option. We are then simply faced with our terrible inability to do anything about the threatening situation, which therefore remains unresolved; and this in turn leaves our bodies in a state of unremitting preparedness—that is, chronic hypervigilance and readiness to meet with danger. From a physiological point of view, traumatic stress leaves the body’s engine running in overdrive.

Thus, despite the fact that Karen looked immobilized and Anne looked intensely souped-up, the two women were in very similar internal, bodily states. This is also true of the many individuals who respond to a faithless partner’s deception by ricocheting back and forth from “lows” of frozen, dissociated numbness to “high” bouts of explosive, uncontainable fury. In other words, however disparate various individuals’ outward responses to the insult of infidelity may appear to be, the same sorts of reactions to this intense stressor exist within the body itself.