

1.

## **In the company of women**

### **Tim Lott ... lone man in a female household**

When my eldest daughter, Jean, now 18, was five I took her to the cinema to see the Disney version of *The Little Mermaid*. Towards the end, the Mermaid has to say goodbye to her father, so that she can go and live on land with the handsome (human) prince.

At this moment she started to cry.

I imagine she was having the premonition that the fairy tale was designed to elicit – the moment of separation between father and daughter. I think – partly from talking to other fathers – that this is a very particular kind of separation, qualitatively different from separation between fathers and sons, or mothers and children of either gender.

The relationship between father and daughter is jealous, passionate and bears many of the marks of a non-sexual love affair. Nothing, for me, compares to the unqualified love I receive from my daughters.

Even now, when I walk through the door, the younger ones - aged five and nine – will often run to me, screaming with excitement and hugging me ecstatically, an ecstasy that I fully reciprocate. Such passion has only one way to go – downhill, into separation and adulthood. The loss does not happen overnight. It begins when the daughter no longer wants you to read to her in bed any more. Then she doesn't want to go to the playground any more. Then – perhaps the hardest blow – she gets a boyfriend, her Human Prince, to supplant you, the King of the Ocean.

I recall going to see Jean in a play a few years ago, and her coming down the stairs in triumph after her brilliant performance. I waited for her to come to me, as I stood there, beaming all over my face. She ran instead to a young man at the side of the steps. It was her Prince. I had become an afterthought.

One can console oneself that this is not the losing of love, but its transformation. But sometimes that is hard to continue to believe because the process of necessary separation from one's father – or, in fact, either parent – involves hostility. I have been very aware over the last five years that the purest love I ever knew has turned to scepticism, resentment, sometimes even stronger feelings.

I know as a father I should be able to absorb such things – Man up! I tell myself – but the mourning countenance of the Ocean King cannot always be held at bay.

Jean is at university now. She was back for her Easter break for a month, during which we saw each other three times in total. The second time, we argued. Instead of her running to the door to greet me, she ran to the door to escape me.

All children blame their parents – I still blame my father for stuff I should have shouldered responsibility for long ago. And, rightly or wrongly, Jean sees me as someone who causes her pain. Not the sad, knowing pain of the Little Princess but something more inchoate, verging at times on fury, that scatters debris over everything in its path – falling not just on me, but her three sisters, who feel her absence just as I do. One day, I know, we will be able to stand in a room together without losing our tempers. We will be good friends, and stand together again. But the Little Mermaid is gone for ever. And the King of the Ocean watches, mutely, as more waves approach, welling out of the deep.

## 2.

### **In the company of women**

#### **Tim Lott ... Lone man in a female household**

I have been away from home travelling for most of the last four weeks. I've enjoyed it – but I have missed my family each and every day. It is like a wound that won't heal until I walk back in through my front door. Only the first part of the first sentence of this paragraph is true. The fact that I imagine 95% of people would have believed the last part is evidence of what a state of denial we are in about the concept of "missing" people when we go away.

We are hooked into the verbal convention of "missing". "Missing you already," we say as we walk out the door. "Missed you *so* much," we say, when we come back. Isn't it at odds with how we actually feel? It's rather like asking "how are you?" – a figure of speech, an arrangement of words disconnected from meaning.

Missing someone has nothing to do with how much you love them. I would fight a full-grown baby crocodile to protect my children, and a slightly smaller and less dangerous animal to defend my wife (this has been proven – I hardly flinched when I trapped a small, angry frog under a bucket when it invaded our hotel room). I miss my children fleetingly, even intensely, but it passes like heartburn.

My two younger children – reportedly – really do miss me when I go away, and sometimes acutely, to the extent of shedding tears. I am touched by this, but they also miss their teddy when it gets concealed under a cushion. Also, children are not adults. They really do need those around them. Adults should outgrow this. We are all semi-disposable.

My wife never says "Missed you, darling" when I come back from one of my extended visits abroad. She is too honest. Faintly disappointing though that is, I take that as the mark of a healthy relationship. It means my wife is a complete and independent person. Thus I can travel without guilt.

Missing an adult, to me, is not a measure of love but a measure of insecurity. I am connected into a web that is family, and this cradle supports me when I leave. No single point on the matrix of the family unit is permanently necessary. It is the connections that matter, the nexus that supports all individuals.

The truth is, the waters close over all of us swiftly when we go away. Why should it be otherwise? Is my personality so thrilling? Is my tagliatelle with gruyère, pine nuts and tapenade so delicious that the family will fall into ruins in its absence? I am made of the same dull mud of humanity as everyone else.

Perhaps this semi-detachment is more of a fatherly than a motherly impulse. Mothers, when they go away, worry that standards will drop. Lunchboxes will be packed with candy floss, Monster Munch and chewing gum. Bad American cartoons will be viewed dawn to dusk. Slobbery will break out like dengue fever.

Mothers sometimes fail to understand that although this is usually true, it does no one any long-term harm. The painful truth is, they are dispensable – at least temporarily. And I suspect what mothers miss is not their children or spouse, but the opportunity to keep both under their protective gaze.

Love and need are very different matters. I love my family and I need them, but I do not need them all the time. You cannot love anything that lives in the shadow of need, because all things change, and thus all things disappear. Children stop being children. The wife you married is not the wife she is now, and neither are you the same husband. All is in flux. Only the web, which reaches out to the four corners of the globe, because we carry it within us, is immutable.

### 3.

#### **In the company of women**

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Once, it was simple. When I first became a father, nearly 20 years ago, an occasional light slap on the bum was not the taboo it is now. I only recall using this method on a couple of occasions, chiefly to stop my children running into the road without looking. It was effective. I became very quickly convinced that whether it worked or not, it had to be abandoned on purely moral grounds. It seemed to me the same argument applied that led me to oppose capital punishment – it might act as a deterrent, but it was simply wrong and must be shunned.

However, I have felt the resulting vacuum of power since. Once you take away the smack, what remains? I asked this question of a child psychiatrist once, and he assured me that there was no need to punish children at all. The thing was, to reward them when they did the right thing, rather than penalise them when they did the wrong thing. This, he insisted, was much more effective than any negative sanction. This view has become a sort of received wisdom.

Doubtless in some world of research-led academia this is true. It is even true, to some extent in real life. We have all tried the star charts to encourage good behaviour and it can achieve positive results.

However, this pat-on-the-back culture has its dangers. Whenever I have tried it on any of my four daughters, the strategy has quickly got out of control. Before long, I was being asked for sweets and money, simply to get them to say thank you for their dinner or pick up a discarded crisp packet.

So what else can we do to control children's behaviour? (And they do need controlling. I'll take Golding over Rousseau any day). It is very difficult to reason morally with children because, well, they are children and have larger concerns than morality – such as their emotional needs and interests.

One can try bargaining. For instance, you can tell a child that if they don't stop hitting the baby with a stick, they will not get a story read to them that night. This doesn't usually stop them hitting the baby. This is because, when it comes to tonight and the reading is withheld, they have entirely forgotten – emotionally if not consciously – what the punishment was for.

Sadly, it seems to be that parents are often thrown back into the temptations of instantaneous punishment – this time, psychological rather than physical. Anger is displayed. Voices are

raised. Love is withheld. Disgust is registered. Sarcasm is vented. Instead of physical abuse some form of psychological abuse is vented, either mild or severe. Is that so much preferable?

I wish I had a solution to this problem, but I don't. I know that you're meant to be consistent in punishment, but people just aren't. I grab at whatever sanction comes into my head at any given moment of crisis, and I try my best to follow through if it involves a long-term injunction – no TV for a week! No puddings for two days! In the end, I am as bad at punishing as my children are at being punished. Amazing, really, that they have turned out to be such lovely kids.

There still remain temptations to smacking – not from me, but my children. My eldest frequently used to urge me to smack her in preference to other punishments ('It's just over so quickly') but I can't stand the idea of smacking any more. Anyway if it's that much of a soft option, it probably won't work. Then again, nothing does. Which perfectly sums up the nature of punishment, both in the family and society at large. It's mainly futile – but fundamentally inevitable.

#### 4.

### **Being a sibling is a fight for survival**

#### **You become an individual by not being your brother or sister – and so you react against them**

As regular readers of this column will know, I have four daughters, each of whom I consider to be remarkable in her own way. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about them, however, is that they are all completely different from one another.

What's so odd about that? Actually, when you think about it, wherever you stand on the nature/nurture debate, it is quite unexpected. Obviously the two from my first marriage are likely to be different to the two from my second marriage, as they had different environments and a different genetic mix. However, each pair that grew up in the same household and who share half their genetic inheritance from their parents, had a very similar environment. But as far as I can make out, there is little to connect them. In fact they are more different than I would expect two strangers to be.

Psychologists, on the whole, broadly believe that one's fundamental personality traits – openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism – are determined half by genetic inheritance and half by environmental factors. This should mean that my daughters, each “pair” of them, should at least be more broadly similar than a random sample. But as far as I can see – admittedly without running any formal psychological profiles – they are not.

How can this be? One solution was offered to me when I was researching my novel on sibling rivalry, *Under the Same Stars*. Interviewing various developmental psychologists, I came across the idea that siblings make a deliberate and conscious effort not to be like their siblings in order to establish themselves as individuals.

Being a sibling is a fight for survival. As the psychologist Dorothy Rowe, author of *My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend: Making and Breaking Sibling Bonds* writes: “Siblings may scream insults at one another, or exchange heavy blows, or destroy each other’s possessions. Such fights are bitter and vicious, necessarily so because each sibling is fighting for survival as a person.”

One of the aspects this battle takes on is described by Judy Dunn, author of *Separate Lives: Why Siblings are so Different*: “You work out quite early on what aspects of your [sibling’s] personality makes him (or her) a success and you make yourself *as different as possible* [my italics]. The more time [siblings] spend in the same family, the more different they get. Even with identical twins, the longer they live in the same family, the more different they become. You try and secure your own identity not by emulating a sibling, but by reacting *against them*. You become an individual by not being your brother or sister.”

This supports my idea that when trying to understand the behaviour of children – or adults for that matter – one has to go beyond environment and heredity. What makes people different from one another is *interpretation* – the stories we tell ourselves about our experiences and the way we defend our identities against threat.

This matter of interpretation is not determined in any genetic or environmental sense. We are, to some extent, free to make sense of the world we are presented with in the way that we choose – even though, as a child, our information is limited and our interpretations immature. Thus we may often choose a bad or maladaptive way of making sense – hence the need for therapy later in life and the outcomes of depression, for instance. But it is still a choice.

The good news about this is that your children are different because they are free to be different, and they desire to be different. The person we invent out of our genetic personality, our upbringing and the meanings we construct is unique. And that is why when your children fight they are not just fighting to secure a privilege or win an argument. They are fighting to determine who they will become.

5.

## **15 ways to really annoy your partner**

### **Who needs love? Irritating your other half is a better way to add spice to your relationship**

It is often said that love and commitment are at the heart of any long-term relationship. This is patently false. The real centre of any marriage or partnership is, of course, annoyance. Irritating your partner keeps the boredom at bay, gives you something to do, and reassures you by keeping the dynamics between you comfortably predictable. However, occasionally you might want to try something new and so I have compiled the 15 Most Effective Ways to Annoy Your Partner.

These strategies can be used equally effectively by both men and women, although some are traditionally more popular among one gender than the other. Most of these methods are commonly used, but you may find some that you haven't come across. Feel free to try them out and add spice to everyday life by adding a touch of floating resentment and silent fury.

**1. Don't listen to them.** There's nothing your partner enjoys less than getting the impression that they are not important enough to be attended to properly. Pretend you're listening instead by making eye-contact and with attentive body language, but make sure you are thinking about something else entirely, such as "when is she or he going to stop talking so I can get back to much more important matters, ie me."

**2. Make it clear that your work takes priority** at all times. Respond to complaints about your distance or lack of involvement with the family with, "Well, someone's got to pay the bills" or "Money doesn't grow on trees, you know."

**3. When you do the chores** that you normally can't be bothered to do, always expect to be applauded for your wonderfulness. Don't quite do them properly – just do enough to claim credit.

**4. Invite the cat to sleep in bed** and to wake your partner at 5am by sharpening its claws on the bedside table.

**5. Prevent the cat** from sleeping in the bed.

**6. When out with friends,** make sure you destroy any inadequately thought-out point or argument that your partner makes in front of them. This will demonstrate to everyone in the room what a smart person you are and what an idiot your partner is. Make it clear that the opinion of your friends is more important to you than that of your partner

**7. Play loud music** or the radio whenever you feel like it. It's your right to listen to what you want to, when you want to, and if your partner doesn't like it, or is trying to meditate or have some quiet time, make it clear you think they're just being a killjoy or, worse, acting like an old person.

**8. Snore** and don't try to do anything about it (such as lose weight) because, well, you're asleep and therefore it's not your problem.

**9. Don't bother to answer** when your partner speaks to you. Better still, answer in an unintelligible mumble.

**10. Make it clear that your screen/phone/tablet** is more interesting than they are.

**11. Ask them where stuff is** without bothering to look for it yourself first.

**12. Make yourself a cup of tea** without asking if they want one.

**13. Take food from their plate** without asking.

**14. Ask to take food** from their plate.

**15. Contradict your partner** in front of the children when he or she is trying to discipline them or teach them a different way of doing things. This will make you popular with your children since you are siding with them and getting short-term emotional income. However, like the other 14 possibilities, it is a wonderful tactic for making your partner blow their top, want to stick a carrot up your arse, have an affair, leave you, get a divorce, and kick you out of the house. This is the ultimate outcome of being Really Annoying. And, with practice and commitment, it can really produce dramatic results you never believed were possible.

## 6.

### **Take away the idea of true love and we would all have a better chance of happiness**

#### **The concept is dangerous because it sets up a whole battery of expectations and it downgrades the business end of love**

I have been invited by the Oxford Union to debate the question “This house would abandon the ideal of true love”. I’m not sure why they invited me, a Family columnist, but I suppose it’s because families usually begin with two people falling in love.

The only problem is that I’m not sure which side to take. Eventually, and somewhat reluctantly, I came to the conclusion that I should speak for the motion. True love unquestionably exists – between parent and child. But I assume they are referring to romantic love. And here, I am less sure.

I remember my father very clearly cautioning me against the idea of romantic love – at least when choosing a long-term partner. He believed one had to make a practical choice based on sensible propositions (my father was a thoroughgoing empiricist). I rejected his view at the time, despite the fact he enjoyed a long and happy marriage. I was all for passion.

Now, at 61, I have probably fallen in love at least half a dozen times. Two of the people I fell in love with, I married – and that didn’t end well. Falling in love, though real enough, does not guarantee success in a relationship. I suppose that’s what my father was trying to tell me.

What is the nature of the love between two people, anyway? Some would say it is something transcendental, a feeling of nakedness and connection – a connection so great that you can stare into each other’s eyes without embarrassment.

Others would say, “that’s all very well – but love is about behaviour”. You can say you love someone all you like, and you can feel that love as a sensation in the pit of your chest – but if it does not translate into loving behaviour, then it amounts to nothing much at all.

Behaviour and loving are unlinked in the child-parent relationship. Both parties have no choice but to love one another. In that sense, the bond resembles the ideal of romantic love. You love your children whatever they do, and they love you back.

Those who believe that sort of thing can exist among adults hold that if you truly love someone, it doesn’t matter what they do – you will love them all the same. Although I think it is a theoretical possibility, I am not sure it is particularly desirable. People being who they are, such a love would be quite hard not to take advantage of.

Perhaps “true love” suggests that the adults who participate in it, by definition, would do nothing but act in the best interests of the object of their love. Fair enough. However, I decided to speak in favour of the motion not because “true love” is unrealistic – I’m sure it happens – but because the idea of true love is dangerous, as it is popularly understood.

It’s dangerous because it sets up a whole battery of expectations, about bliss and unlimited goodwill, that are immensely hard to fulfil, and it downgrades the business end of love, certainly when you have a family – that of doing the groundwork, compromise and endless negotiation that love in-practice inevitably involves.

The ideal of true love, then, should be abandoned because it is either unattainable or fundamentally misunderstood. Like all ideals, it ultimately leads, if taken too literally, to disappointment, and that disappointment is lodged in the very kernel of the idea in the first place. True love may well exist, but it is best not at any moment to expect it, or define it in that way.

Take away the idea of true love and we would all have a better chance of happiness. And if you are one of those people who happen to stumble on it anyway, then you are lucky and you are blessed – but I suspect you are very far from typical.

7.

## **To lose love is terrible, but to never have had it is worse still**

### **Children who are unloved by their parents often try to please them with the aim of winning their approval – a recipe for depression later in life**

Earlier this month, I wrote a column suggesting that the only “true love” was that existing between parent and child. Several contributors to the comment thread remarked – quite rightly – that I was ignoring the fact that there were parents and children who did not love one another.

I know this can be the case, however rare, and it is a tragedy. An unloved child can barely survive – experiments with chimpanzees have shown that, even if they are well fed and sheltered, to be removed from their parent’s nurture is disastrous, and they will waste away and often die.

Human beings are perhaps more resilient, since they can at least conceptualise such behaviour and try to explain it. Unfortunately, children who are unloved have, like all children, an unformed set of conceptual tools to make sense of such things. They are also extraordinarily vulnerable: they rely absolutely on their parents for their survival.

Their need for their parents to be benevolent is so urgent and intense that is bound to lead to a certain amount of rationalisation. The logic might go something like this: “I cannot afford to believe that my parents do not actually have my best interests at heart, or in fact, wish me harm. Therefore I must ensure I have some kind of agency – that is, the hope that I can, through personal effort, find a way of making them love and protect me. If they are punishing me by not giving me their love and protection, it is my fault. And if it is my fault, by working hard I will find a way to behave of which they will approve, and therefore deliver their love to me, which I so urgently need.”

The fact that this way of behaving will probably have no effect on the behaviour of their parents is beyond the child’s resources or comprehension. So they fall into the pattern of desperately trying to please their parents at any cost. And every failure, they feel as a personal failure, rather than a lack on the part of their parents.

This is a tried-and-tested recipe for depression later in life. As any psychotherapist knows, most depressives are people who want to be good, but can’t find a way of doing it. They hate themselves and consider themselves failures. This is often rooted in their relationship with their parents, and their struggle to be acknowledged and cared for.

This behaviour may continue long after the parent has been separated from them, or is dead. Guilt and a sense of failure may be a lifelong curse for such people. Stronger children, perhaps, will find the wherewithal to reject unloving parents, or at least see them for what they are. They will be furious with their parents – but this may be a more functional way of responding to a lack of care, rather than the continuing desperation to please them. And the fury may eventually be replaced, one day, by a relatively painless indifference.

The damage is mainly on the child's side, but of course, it is no picnic being a parent who is unable to love – as some women who suffer postnatal depression may be able to testify. Parents who don't love their children may be condemned, but they also are an object for pity, perhaps even sympathy. For, in not loving their children, they are not only harming them, but also inflicting a wound on themselves from which they can never recover. It may not be their fault – their own childhood experiences may have led them to such a stance or orientation.

To lose love is a terrible thing. To never have had it – or never to have given it – is worse still. So, yes – I must acknowledge that the love between parent and child is not always true love. It is simply the love that every child passionately needs, and has the right to expect.

## 8.

### **Why Marx and Plato don't make my philosophers' fantasy football team**

**The classical Greek idea of learning how to live a good life by studying ideas is one we should adopt – but only if we put the right thinkers on the curriculum**

I was pleasantly taken aback recently when my teenage daughter came home from her (state) school telling me that she had just had an interesting lesson on Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. At her age, I had neither heard of these philosophers nor been able to spell their names.

Philosophy is now often disguised under the rubric of “religious studies”. Despite this, I think its adoption is an immensely positive step. Organisations such as The Philosophy Foundation and Philosophy4Children are working to push philosophy further up the educational agenda.

The inventors of philosophy, the ancient Greeks, had a different idea from us of what education meant. You weren't at school in classical Athens to prepare yourself for the world of economic activity – on which much of modern education is predicated – but to learn “virtue”: how a citizen should live a good life.

You might go to a school of the Epicureans or the Stoics or the Cynics – and each would offer a different approach to life. I don't think there is any more important question than: “How should you live?” that can be asked in schools, particularly now, when there is such confusion

around the answer. It seems crucial to ask: “What are we doing all this for?” rather than just assuming everyone wants to work to buy a nice house, put nice possessions in it, possibly have a family and then retire and die.

Taking my cue from Plato, who enjoyed speculating on the ideal organisation of society, I have been asking myself which philosophers I would teach in schools to provide instruction on ethics, meaning and “virtue” – a kind of philosophical fantasy-football team. I might well leave Plato on the bench, given his belief that only philosophers had the wisdom to build the ideal society, but his mentor, Socrates, who believed truth was something that was real and could be uncovered, rather than just being a matter of clever argument, would definitely feature.

Heraclitus, with his formulation that “you never step into the same river twice”, would be a proponent of the idea that all life is change and flux – and that pupils should appreciate their childhood, because it’s going to disappear. The Stoics, who were in no doubt that life involved a lot of suffering, were experts in understanding how that suffering could be navigated – and what more valuable lesson could there be to our children?

Given the nature of the teaching profession, I suspect the philosopher who won the BBC’s “greatest philosopher of all time” vote in 2006, Karl Marx, would be the most popular choice for schools. I wouldn’t let kids anywhere near him, not because his philosophy is “bad” – although an awful lot of people have died in its name – but because it is largely incomprehensible, at least in its more contemporary formulations (step forward, backwards and sideways Adorno and the Frankfurt School.)

And what about Marxism’s bastard children, the postmodernists, who teach that truth is an ideological construction? Theirs probably isn’t the ideal path to go down, because 2+2 can be made to add up to 5. They would probably oppose classical philosophy on the basis that old, dead, white men invented it and therefore were pushing their own agenda.

As an old, white man myself, I don’t believe wisdom can be corralled into any age, race or gender. This is an unfashionable view, but freeing yourself from fashion (and ideas are subject to fashion as much as cars or dresses) should start as early as possible. Otherwise, we end up, well, where we are now. And I definitely wouldn’t wish that on my kids.

## 9.

### **Why do we hold on to first impressions in a relationship?**

#### **We need to take responsibility for our mistakes in choosing our partner rather than simply justifying it to ourselves**

I have been reading *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)* by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, a book about cognitive dissonance – the phenomenon that arises, with uncomfortable feelings, when two deeply held internal points of view come into conflict with one another. To avoid such feelings, we resort to self-justification.

The book contains a chapter on cognitive dissonance in marriage, which holds this process to be the main culprit in the outcome of relationships. “Misunderstandings, conflicts, personality differences and even angry quarrels are not the assassins of love – self-justification is,” the authors remark.

How does cognitive dissonance work? Let’s say partner A has a problem with partner B’s recklessness with money – as they understand it. Perhaps one of the things that attracted them originally was what they thought of as B’s “generosity and spontaneity”. In a relationship, however, the behaviour starts to look irresponsible. How does A resolve the fact that they made a misjudgment about B?

One way is for A to accept that they made that misjudgment and that the responsibility is partly theirs. Another way is for A to carry on maintaining the “positive” dissonance, and convince themselves that B is wonderfully, joyfully open-handed even though the joint account is in the red again.

But the easiest way, as it avoids damaging their self-esteem, is for A to decide B has betrayed them and is a “bad person”. Such retrospective self-justification applies to the whole spectrum of domestic behaviour from housework to childcare. It’s not, “If I hadn’t seen it, I wouldn’t have believed it”, rather, “If I hadn’t believed it, I wouldn’t have seen it.”

What is the “real” situation between a couple? With cognitive dissonance and another related psychological principle, confirmation bias, operating at all times – both affect any particular situation and the writing and rewriting of memory – it is difficult to know “the truth”. But often the price of that truth is the realisation that “I was (at least somewhat) wrong” – usually the most painful way of resolving dissonance, and thus the least palatable.

The longer cognitive dissonance worms its way into memory and our understanding of what has happened, the more powerful it becomes as a predictive factor for conflict, because then a relationship becomes more about what a person “is” as opposed to what they “do”. Any behaviour that contradicts that presupposition will be discounted and any evidence that confirms it will be exaggerated.

If you form an opinion early in your relationship about the other person, and then use every opportunity to screen out information that runs counter to that opinion, then you have a coherent worldview, but possibly an unreliable view of your partner, who – whether they actually improve or not – is trapped within your prejudices.

There is only one solution to this conundrum (one I failed to embody in either of my marriages, both now sadly ended) or rather, three solutions – humility, honesty and good faith.

Humility means the ability and courage to say “I may be wrong”, so that every time anything goes awry you don’t self-justify. Good faith is the default position that your partner means well, and is trying, even though they may be failing. Honesty is the hardest, given all the distorting filters our mind provides – but it is at least to be held as an ideal, as a hedge against the temptations of self-justification.

These stances have to be mutual for there to be any chance of success – if one side holds good faith and the other does not, or if one side is prideful and the other humble, that is a recipe for the continuation of self-justification on one side and accumulating resentment and frustration on both.

Self-justification, one-sided or mutual, is the course most frequently chosen. Other choices are possible. To make them constitutes the difference between a happy and an unhappy marriage.

## 10.

### **To be happier, women should try giving up on being good**

#### **Women are more unhappy than men, and men are blamed for this. But perhaps men aren't the real culprits**

A new NHS survey shows women to be unhappier than men for almost their entire lives – until their mid-80s, by when the men with whom they have often shared those lives have usually dropped dead. It is not an encouraging scenario. That women are unhappy until their partners die is not flattering for men. For the women, it is even worse – they are the miserable ones. Post-Weinstein, we fear that powerful men are toxic. Now it appears that everyday male partners are toxic, too.

This must be put into context – men are three times more likely to kill themselves. But for everyday misery, women beat men every time. For anyone of a remotely feminist persuasion, this is unanswerable proof that men are a trial, a burden and selfish to boot. Men make you miserable.

Women are unhappiest in the middle years, with 24% aged between 45 and 54 classifiable as mentally ill. Kate Lovett, dean of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, explains that at this point women “are still more likely to bear the brunt of domestic and caring responsibilities”. The misery levels tail off as old age kicks in and the burdens of children and looking after ageing parents lessen. All women have to make them miserable then is their husbands.

Further analysis of the figures supports the case that men are the problem. Above the age of 65, more men than women have mental health problems – 19% against 14% – because men who are single, widowed or divorced are more likely to develop depression. In contrast, married women are the most likely to be miserable. One of the comments following a newspaper article in which this survey is reported talks about a grandmother who hated her husband so much that when he went to the loo, she would get up and punch the chair, pretending it was him.

As a man, I feel compelled to offer an alternative explanation for wives' unhappiness. Psychometric analyses show women, cross-culturally, registering higher levels in four of the “big five” personality matrices: agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and extraversion (the other is openness).

Most of these differences are relatively small, if consistent, but the “neurotic” matrix – and this a misleading word, as it does not mean “hysterical” or “hypersensitive”, but something more

like “easily hurt” – has the biggest variation by far. Women tend to be higher in negative emotion and more responsive to grief, threat, punishment and isolation, whether they are Swedish, Spanish or Saudi. The phenomenon crosses all cultures, suggesting, heretically, that it is inborn. And conscientiousness, while useful, can lead to unhealthy perfectionism: if you expect things to be perfect you will be disappointed.

If you discount psychometrics – some brand it junk science – there are other reasons why women in middle age are likely to be unhappy. The menopause isn’t much fun. And perhaps the fading of physical charm that both genders experience may be taken harder by women, as it is usually so much more powerful for them in the first place.

I am not making excuses for men. Well, I am. Perhaps our ability to wriggle off the hook is the other reason why we find more reasons to be cheerful. Maybe women are unhappier than men because they pin themselves to higher moral standards.

I think I would rather be happy than good. Women should try it. They might be amazed at how much their partners appreciate it, because it will reduce their burden of male guilt. And, at the same time, it will cheer up the women themselves. Given all the chairs wives will no longer have to punch, there will be a considerable saving on upholstery.