

## (MIS)REMEMBERING THE PAST

How many of us have heard this parting (or opening) shot from a client, “I never loved her/him anyway.” While *sharing* that sentiment with the soon-to-be-ex-spouse is usually a gratuitously cruel blow, we may hear that from our clients as they sort out their emotional experiences during divorce. Although these people may genuinely believe what they say, Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert throws some cold water on the accuracy of this honestly held belief - and others like it.

In his recently published *Stumbling on Happiness*, Gilbert explores our universal inability to accurately recount our past emotional states or predict our future happiness with those things, people or circumstances for which we ardently strive. He buttresses his argument with an encyclopedic citation to the psychological literature. Yet our own experience suffices. My mother always used to say, “Don’t go to the market when you’re hungry.” Try this experiment: Shop for food when you have eaten a huge lunch. Do the same after having skipped a couple meals. Now compare your marketing receipts. Your food shopping is a prediction of your future hunger or need. That prediction is deeply influenced by your present state. This is but one example of how our present feeling state influences our prediction of our *future* feeling state.

Gilbert’s discussion of future prediction is particularly charming. He recounts the books and magazines of the 50’s that predict a Jetsons space age future, with highways of levitating vehicles and kitchens full of futuristic nuclear powered gadgets unheard of in the time of Ike. Yet, Gilbert notes, the pictures of the future are devoid of.....men with babies in diapers and women with briefcases; African-Mexican- or Asian-Americans and young people tattooed and pierced for posterity. As Gilbert notes, we imagine our futures through the lens of the present. That is why our predictions of our future appreciation is governed by our present state. In one study, a group of people predicted how they would enjoy a bag of luscious Tims Cascade-like potato chips the next day ( not now or in an hour but *the next day*). One group hadn’t eaten much recently and the other had gorged themselves on high level nachos-type food. The heavy feeders thought that tomorrow they would not particularly enjoy the chips - a prediction which proved quite false, of course, when their engorgement had traveled the full alimentary canal and they were ready for more the next day.

As our view of the future is warped by the prism of the present, so is our past shaped by our current state of mind. As Gilbert notes, “The tendency to fill in the holes in our memories of the past with material from the present is especially powerful when it comes to remembering our emotions.” Gilbert cites myriad studies that suggest that one’s memory of past headache pain is influenced by present pain; of the grief that widows or widowers felt five years previously is influenced by the grief they presently experience; feelings about romantic partners two months previously is influenced by their present feelings.

A sitting with Gilbert convinces you that there is no way you can avoid remembering the past free of your present state of mind. Divorcing people have an even greater incentive to embrace negative memories. After all, they are trying to distance themselves from their spouses

emotionally. This can be a very trying exercise, however, because divorcing people are often, quite naturally ambivalent about this seismic change in their lives. Even when they are committed to emotional disengagement, the sheer intensity of the connection renders this process an inner challenge that may take great (negative) fortitude.

Ambivalence issues aside, we are all quite familiar with the rampant negativity which permeates the atmosphere of divorce. John Gottman employs Gilbert's insight in assessing couples who come in for marital therapy. He engages in a pretty comprehensive intake and one of the items he explores is the memory of each person of their first impressions of the other. Since we often are quite attracted to the person *we end up marrying* (!), the question will often break the chill in the room and generate some positive affect. However, Gottman notes that there are red flags when either or both people cannot dredge up a positive, ameliorative, memory of their first meeting. Among other things, this suggests that the negativity is so deeply ingrained that it even contaminates what would usually be a pleasant, often sweet, memory.

When colored by present dark emotions, the past is filtered in an altogether bleak fashion. Again, the ambivalence will tend to make the divorcing individual shy away from positive memories so as not to be confused. Yet on an entirely different level, the anger simply filters out the positive and accentuates the negative.

Why is that important for us to understand? Well, for one, we ought to take protestations of longstanding antipathy and unhappiness with more than a grain of salt. The spouse may not be the creep our client says he is - she may not be the unrelenting bitch recounted in lore in our office. If we feel our goal is in any way to assist our client in disengaging in a reasonable and humane fashion, so that they don't harbor anger and spend valuable emotional energy licking the wounds inflicted by the divorce, Gilbert's research may assist us in our counseling function. Additionally, our clients will usually have to interact with their ex-spouses for years to come. Helping foster a more balanced view of the other, and the marriage, will help lay the groundwork for effective problem solving and conflict resolution in the future - when they have to do it on their own for free.