**Exercise: The Problem with Reciprocity:**

*Past Balances*

Think of your own family, growing up. First think about the balance of give-and-take between your parents. How did they balance the responsibilities of family life? Did one do more, one less? Was one more a caregiver? How did you feel about that? If one made too many sacrifices, what did that teach you? If one didn’t do enough, how did you come to understand it? Do you model your own gauge to fairness on their relationship?

Next think of yourself and your siblings... was one too much in charge, too burdened; was another babied? How did that shape them, or you?

Finally, think back to the balance of give-and-take between you and your mother and then you and your father. Can you identify how they gave to you? Do you appreciate what they gave, or have pain about what they didn’t give, or both? Do you know what you contributed to them? Was what you could return valued? Did it feel like you’d done enough? Too much? How does this model for fairness play out in your relationship with them today? How does it shape how you relate to your partner? To your children?

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**The Baggage You Bring to Relationships**

“Everybody’s got baggage, but my ex-husband was not a neat packer.”

*(Ellie, married sixteen years, divorced five years)*

“It’s just endless. I repeated my crazy relationship with my father with my husband, and now my daughter is doing the same thing in her life.”

*(Jane, married twenty-seven years)*

“You keep bringing up the past, and my family, but the past is the past. In the past I wore diapers, too, but what’s it got to do with today?”

*(John, eight years, second marriage)*

*How many times does something have to happen to you before it occurs to you?*

—Robert Frost

Everybody brings baggage to a relationship. The trouble is sorting it into piles of yours, mine, and ours, and then figuring out what to do with it. It’s often easier to pin the blame for relationship problems on a partner, rather than claiming your own baggage. Your baggage consists of experiences from past relationships that have shaped your expectations, affected your level of trust, and recharged hot buttons from childhood. While we often think of baggage as the mess left over from old romances, have you ever noticed that people have an uncanny way of picking partners that match their unfinished business from childhood? In order to avoid changing partners, but dancing...
the same dance, you need to unpack your baggage, stop repeating unhealthy patterns, and strengthen your marriage.

You might challenge, as John did—what’s the past got to do with today? Remember Allie and Simon from the last chapter? Allie brought many unreasonable expectations to her marriage, transferred from her unhealed parent-child relationship. Her baggage had hidden explosives, detonated by the demands of sharing family life with her stepchildren. While your baggage never technically leaves your possession, your parents did help you pack it. Now you need to claim your baggage that propels the cycle of unfairness forward.

Reworking your unfinished business helps you avoid repeating mistakes. Most of us make promises to ourselves about what we’ll do differently from our parents—whether that’s with a partner or as a parent—*I won’t be a screamer, like my mom; I won’t be a workaholic, like my dad—I’ll go to all the kids’ games.* People also loyally value and carry on traditions and behaviors from their families—because baggage doesn’t imply there was no good, just that everyone has a mix of experiences, some wonderful, some painful, that we have to fully digest in order to grow up.

Another reason to care about baggage are the rather scary divorce statistics in the last generation. Your odds for divorce rise if your own parents were divorced (anywhere from a 50–100 percent rise). But this correlation isn’t fate. The good news is, it isn’t your parents’ marital state (blissful or vitriolic, married or divorced) that most impacts your chances in your own intimate relationship—it’s how your parents related to you. That’s where sorting your baggage comes into play. What counts most in creating a successful relationship is learning how to take responsibility for your baggage and developing the skills to negotiate a new fairness.

This chapter asks: What was it in your own upbringing that leads you to act fairly or unfairly now? How did your childhood experiences shape your model of what you owe and deserve and your beliefs about love and fairness? Were your parents fair in how they related to you? Were you expected to reproduce your parents’ values? Was that good for you? Were their expectations reasonable? What if there was a mismatch between your parents’ ex-

pecations and what you could or did do? Does love in your family permit you to question what’s fair? Does love in your family mean “Everyone did their best, so let’s understand and move on”?

It would be a mistake to confuse taking a harder look at fairness between you and your parents with whether they loved you or whether you loved them. Love, fairness, and injustice coexist in relationships. Yet, how do you make sense of this paradox? Since all parents relate unfairly to their children at times, there are bound to be some unhealed grievances. Children are capable of hurting their parents, too, of course. It’s just that there are different consequences when the passenger in a plane misbehaves than when the pilot does. Childhood injustices that aren’t righted (or at least addressed) teach unhealthy ways of relating that burden marriage. We’ll discover the six basic rights that children are entitled to have parents meet. When parents can’t or don’t provide a child with these fundamental needs, there’s fallout long into the future. Let’s begin our exploration of the baggage you bring to marriage by tracing unfairness from childhood to adulthood.

The Trajectory of Unfairness: From Childhood to Adulthood

*We live our lives forward, but understand them backwards.*

—Kierkegaard

As a parent, daughter, and psychologist, I have a keen understanding of the weighty responsibilities of parenthood, and the human limitations parents bump into, balanced by a major respect for the damaging consequences of unfair parenting to a child. I extend understanding with one hand and accountability with the other as I ask both parents and children in my practice, growing and grown, to reflect on the fairness record between them and its effects. Many people have parents who both loved them and couldn’t adequately meet their needs for nurturing and advocacy. Despite that, parents often try to give more to their children than they got (both materially and emotionally)
from their own parents. Since unhealthy patterns of relating often travel from generation to generation within a family, I encourage you to think about your own family history as you read ahead.

**Your History**

When I ask people to talk to me about their experiences of unfairness in their families, they often begin with particular memories, usually of onetime painful events. There was the time Dad punished me for breaking a window and I hadn’t done it. Once, Mom slapped me in the face in front of my friends. When I was seventeen, Dad got so drunk that he got into a fistfight with me. Mom told me that I dressed like a slut. I got grounded a few times when I was covering for my brother. Onetime events get burned into our memories, stuck in the playback loop even when we wish we could erase them. But curiously, it usually isn’t the onetime event of injustice (unless it’s an event of very high emotional intensity or violence) that has the most far-reaching consequences—it’s an unfair pattern of relating, repeated over a long time. Those patterns might include emotional or physical abandonment, abuse or neglect, poor boundaries, or ongoing criticism. For example, Allie will never forget the day her mother angrily told her that she had tried to abort her pregnancy. But it was the ongoing injustice of knowing her siblings were loved while her mother was mean to her, and her father emotionally disengaged, that most shaped Allie’s destructive behavior with Simon and his children. Let’s explore the mechanism for the transfer of these unfair patterns of relating from childhood to adulthood.

But, you may still be protesting: The past is the past. You can’t change the past. They did the best they could. Or: My brother got the worst of it. I wasn’t affected. Or: I had Ortie and Harriet for parents; it’s the in-laws who are the lunatics. Or: It feels wrong to be poking holes in my childhood. Or: They’re too old to change. They might have a heart attack if I upset them. Or the whitewash: My mother was too young to know what she was doing. Yes, my father hit me too much, but I was a handful. And the ultimate defense: Can’t we just respect the dead? But you can’t just rationalize unjust experiences away, even if it feels bad to take a hard look.

Why does it feel bad? Because it feels disloyal. But is it truly disloyal? No. It may be counter to what your mother or father would want. It might offend them. It might hurt their feelings if you question what they did. But it isn’t disloyal. In fact, it’s an act of obligation to explore your childhood experiences, because examining them is your best chance for healing them.

The ability to step back and gain perspective about your family’s context is a more complicated but compassionate and empowering way of relating to your parents, as well as to yourself. You’re shouldering this task rather than bringing unfinished business to your marriage, or forwarding it to the next generation. That’s an act of courage and responsibility. So even if it feels disloyal at first, I’m asking you to return to childhood memories and recall emotional experiences that may limit your ability to be fair to yourself and to your partner today. Ultimately, it’s good for you and for all of your relationships.

**Connecting the Dots: Past to Present**

Now let’s connect the dots between your parent-child baggage and your intimate relationship today. Emotionally fraught childhood experiences are the hot buttons your partner reactivates. When you get your buttons pushed, it won’t look the same as in childhood, but it will feel the same. It’s your psyche’s way of saying “I’ve been here before.” Take Julio for example, who hurls insults at his wife because she forgot to pick up orange juice at the grocery store. Julio’s screaming fit makes no sense, until a glimpse into his childhood reveals a mother who was verbally abusive when he made the slightest mistake. His wife’s absentmindedness triggers a torrent of anger disproportionate to the offense, which is similar to what his mother unleashed on him. And like many partners who haven’t claimed their own baggage, Julio has taken his revenge on the wrong person. His excessive and punitive expectations for a painful childhood mistreatment, have transformed him into a justice-seeking bully in marriage.

Every partner, no matter how good and loving, is unfair at some point since even good people can find themselves behaving in a grossly unfair manner. Conversely, partners put up with unfair or even abusive behavior for
reasons often unknown even to themselves. We'll explore the reasons for enduring injustices later in the book. When you’ve been treated unfairly it’s all too easy to pathologize your spouse (and often your in-laws, too). But it’s both too simple as well as too unproductive to simply be someone’s victim. If you’ve been treated unfairly, whether by your parents or spouse or both, at the very least you can learn from it. You can learn how your own familial script has shaped what you expect and how you relate. Insight helps make sense of suffering. On the flip side, when you’ve acted unfairly, it’s crucial to take your share of responsibility. But it’s also too simple, as well as too debilitating, to just be the bad guy. Being in the doghouse forever, unable to earn and receive forgiveness, results in the loss of hope. As one husband said to his wife after many months of repair efforts, “I’m tired of trying to make good. I might as well have done nothing.” She replied, with vengeance getting the better of her, “Good. Maybe now you’ll know how I felt all those years.” They were in a standoff, risking their marriage by maintaining their old roles of victim and victimizer.

In order to grow from unfairness, you’ll need to move beyond being either a victim or victimizer. You can set this process in motion by searching for the roots of unfairness—the familial script of expectations, of skewed give-and-take, of wounds—and set out to heal them. Rather than tally blame, I encourage you to make a searching inventory of the legacy of unfairness. In order to understand the roots of unfairness, you have to look for clues, beginning with your relationships with your parents. Of course, some unfairness is obvious: 

My father beat me black and blue. But more often unfairness is less apparent: My mother never wanted to spend time with me. My father never made a fuss over anything I did—I felt invisible. Whether obvious or not, damage gets done. No matter whether your parent-child relationship was mostly fair, flagrantly unfair, or unfair in subtler ways, it’s essential to understand how it shaped you.

In searching for clues it’s important to consider:

• how you may be repeating old patterns;
• how your unfinished business plays out in your expectations of yourself and of your partner;
• how it may feel easier to hold your spouse responsible for pushing your buttons than hold your parents accountable for installing them;
• how your marital experiences may have deepened old wounds; and
• how healing unfair childhood treatment can be a tremendous resource for your marriage.

Parental influences are often a mixed bag of both positive and protective factors along with dysfunctional interactions. When parents relate in a warm and nurturing way, show interest in a child’s activities, and set good limits, they are relating fairly, and providing what a child deserves. Fair parenting also means modeling healthy skills for resolving conflict at home, where it first takes place. And because no one is fair all the time, good parenting can require one parent to advocate for you when the other is being unreasonable (or worse). These ways of relating show love, teach fairness, and build a child’s trust. Fair parenting teaches a child a balanced model for give-and-take that promotes emotional growth and healthy relationship skills. These positive factors are predictive of a long and loving marriage.

There are also negative modes of parent-child interactions that contribute to later marital distress. These dysfunctional patterns include: 1) inappropriate parent-child boundaries—such as the kind of poor limits that put kids in the middle of parental problems; 2) topsy-turvy roles where the child has adultlike responsibilities or worries; 3) uninvolved or emotionally disengaged parents; 4) critical parent-child interactions; 5) harsh, inconsistent parental discipline; and 6) poor conflict-resolution skills.

But life is a bit more complicated than a list of positive or negative parenting factors. The consequences you sustain from these patterns of interacting are partially determined by who you are as an individual. For example, for one child, very strict parenting instills a sense of order and self-discipline. The meaning that child makes of his exacting upbringing is positive. That child grows into an adult who praises and repeats his parents’ approach to child rearing. But in the same family, another sibling may experience the stern expectations as stifling and punitive. That sibling grows to adulthood full of resentment and anger, feeling overcontrolled and unfairly treated. No doubt
the marriages of these two siblings look different. So, your outcome, for better or worse, depends not only on how your parents related to you, but also on how good a match you were for their expectations (reasonable or not) and their parenting style (ranging from fair to dictatorial).

To help you tease out the positive or negative tilt in your parent-child relationships, it's helpful to look at the six childhood entitlements, or "rights," that promote fairness and define the trajectory of fairness from childhood to adulthood. Think about your own childhood as you review these rights.

**Six Childhood Entitlements that Promote Fairness**

1. Protection and preservation of the primary relationships with your mother, father, siblings, and extended family
2. Safe, reliable, and nurturing parenting
3. Appropriate give-and-take between parent and child
4. Being valued
5. Negotiation of fairness issues
6. Repair and restoration of fairness and trust

Unlike marriage where give-and-take is expected to be reciprocal, parent-child relationships begin with parental responsibilities to provide care. Parents owe it to children to meet basic needs that promote the development of trust. Children are entitled, by virtue of their utter dependence and vulnerability, to have these birthright needs met. The world of childhood starts with these rights. Together, these six entitlements make up a relationship ethic for what parents owe and what children deserve.

If you were chronically deprived of one or more of these basic entitlements, your take on fairness is likely to be skewed. Just how much depends on the nature of what you experienced and whether you had protective factors, such as one "safe" parent who shielded you and advocated for you, your own inborn resilience, or a nurturing adult outside your family. Let's review the six basic entitlements and then see how growing up without them can encumber your ability to be fair, whether to yourself, your spouse, or to both. As you reflect on these basic rights, think of their meaning to you and any resulting unfinished business.

**Entitlement #1:**

**Protection and preservation of the primary relationships with your mother and father, siblings, and extended family**

**When deprived of #1, the consequence is:**

**You Don't Trust**

The preservation and protection of your parent-child relationship is an irreplaceable legacy. Ideally, this relationship is based on love, but whatever the circumstances—which may affect how you feel about the relationship—you are connected by birth. The long history of parenting further connects you, whether biological parents, grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, or some combination of parenting figures raised you.

When primary relationships aren't protected, a child's trust is damaged. The headline story of a mother who abandons her infant is an example of treating a child as if he or she was disposable and the relationship meaningless. It makes the news because we share a moral repulsion for the broken bond of parental protection. But more commonly, the parent-child bond is cut off or devalued in a less dramatic but trust-diminishing way. Parent-child cutoffs may be temporary estrangements or permanent disconnections. There are four general ways that the ecology of primary family relationships may not be protected or preserved:

1. **You were abandoned.** You knew who your parent was, but he or she dropped out of your life. Perhaps one parent disappeared soon after your birth. Or you had such infrequent contact with a parent that you felt rejected or even abandoned.
2. You were a pawn. You were put in an impossible bind, in which your emotional security depended on choosing one parent over the other (a split loyalty). Rather than a parent rejecting a child, the child (with the support of the other parent) rejects a parent. A split loyalty often creates a physical or emotional estrangement between a parent and child. Perhaps you were asked to explicitly take sides in the drama of a custody battle, or implicitly expected to side with your mother or father (one against the other) in their day-to-day tensions and arguments. You felt the need to rescue or at least support the more vulnerable-seeming parent. Split loyalties also occur when one parent repeatedly “bad-mouths” the other, and encourages a child to feel the same way by devaluing, having contempt for, or even cutting the other parent off.

3. Your family cut off extended family relationships. Family conflict led to cutoffs with grandparents, aunts, or uncles, who were lost from your life. The underlying message: relationships are conditional, and your loyalty belongs to one side, not the other. It isn’t safe to invest in any relationship—you could be cut off, too.

4. You were adopted, or put in foster care. Adoption, foster care, or alternative, temporary arrangements offer invaluable parenting resources, but this instability may create significant emotional disruptions for some children. An age-appropriate sharing of information, which may include “open” adoption, can minimize the impact of these losses on a child’s experience of mistrust and split loyalties.

The failure to protect a child’s entitlement to primary relationships is a major and consequential loss that often translates in adulthood into baseline mistrust, the use of emotional distancing, and cutoffs as a way of managing hurt and protecting yourself from further experiences of rejection and loss. This kind of loss also colors your choice in a partner and may lead to oversimplified and distorted views of love and fairness. Let’s meet Roberto and Angie to see how the loss of this entitlement impacts marriage.

Roberto: Cut Off from a Parent: Consequences for a Marriage
Roberto is a successful fifty-three-year-old husband and father of two. He’d always scoffed at the idea that his lifelong estrangement from his father had caused any problem for him. His parents never married, and separated when he was a year old. Roberto hadn’t seen or spoken to his father or his paternal grandparents since he was five years old. His mother discouraged the visits and disparaged his father for being an “irresponsible bum,” blaming him for the breakup of their relationship. Roberto spent most of his life trying to be the antithesis of who he thought his father was. He was devoted to his mother and her family. He was a high achiever in school and went on to excel in college. He married Angie, his high school sweetheart. He owned a car dealership. With each accomplishment, Roberto secretly felt proud that he put more and more distance between himself and his father. Roberto wasn’t the kind of guy who would seek therapy for his parental loss, or for any other reason. He prided himself on not needing anyone’s help.

That was before his affair. Angie, his wife, issued an ultimatum after learning about his infidelity: go to therapy or move out. Shortly thereafter, his youngest daughter was hospitalized for depression—she had swallowed a handful of aspirin. Roberto couldn’t understand how this could be happening to him, or to his family. After all, he puzzled, he was a much better husband and father than his father had been—because he was there. How could things have gone so wrong? Over the next year, Roberto faced the consequences of his estrangement from his father. He learned that his difficulties with emotional intimacy, both in his marriage and with his children, were a direct result of how he coped with the cutoff from his father. In adulthood, as in childhood, he rejected his father out of a sense of loyalty to his mother. He felt indebted for all his mother had done, and so (unconsciously) repaid her by rejecting his father. This took a toll on his ability to be vulnerable or to trust. Roberto’s affair temporarily gave him the illusion of great closeness and intimacy with his affair partner. But while Roberto’s issues seem more clear-cut and obviously destructive to the couple’s trust and fairness, Angie also contributed to their fairness impasse in a different way.
Angie: Not Being Safe and Secure: Consequences for a Marriage

Angie’s father also abandoned Angie in her childhood—but emotionally, not physically. Her father was a quiet drunk, who worked the second shift. When he came home, he sat in front of the TV and drank his six-pack. Angie accepted the emotional distance that came with her father’s drinking as normal. His unavailability taught her to have low expectations for what she could get from a man. Angie didn’t consciously articulate this conclusion—she just unwittingly lived it.

When Angie met Roberto, he actually seemed the opposite of her father. He enjoyed doing things, didn’t sit at home drinking beer, and had ambition. Angie didn’t recognize that her marriage was emotionally remote. After the early rush of romance, they settled into a pattern of hard work, raising kids, and what seemed like a good life, though neither of them leaned on the other very much. Angie was always trying to please Roberto, who had a critical streak. When she’d gone through a couple of hard times—a stillbirth, her brush with cancer—she turned to her mother and sister for support. She didn’t really expect Roberto to be there for her, because she expected very little from a husband. Due to the emotional void with her father, Angie accepted the low level of emotional intimacy with Roberto as normal. She took solace in the fact that Roberto didn’t drink and was a good provider. Because Angie had never faced up to the childhood origins of her low sense of entitlement, she couldn’t identify the repeating dynamic in her marriage because Roberto seemed so different from her father. She felt satisfied in her marriage for many years. But when she discovered Roberto’s affair, Angie found herself floundering and angry. She knew she wanted more than someone who cheated on her; now she realized that she wanted more than a distant, but functional relationship. She wanted a more emotionally intimate partner.

Roberto and Angie had each grown up with a negative slant on paternal love. Their shared experiences of absent fathers (physically or emotionally) had bonded them initially. But once the romantic stage of their relationship ended, their unfinished business handicapped their ability for emotional connection with each other. The crisis in their marriage forced the couple to evaluate and work to change these patterns.

Entitlement #2:
Safe, reliable, and nurturing parenting

When deprived of #2, the consequence is:
You Don’t Feel Safe and Secure

A good trust base requires consistent, available parenting and a physically and emotionally safe family environment. When these are missing from a child’s life, the child enters adulthood with significant deficits in the ability to trust. There are two parenting patterns that deprive a child of a safe family environment and a secure parent-child relationship:

1. You experienced neglect or abuse. This could have been due to physical neglect, harsh parental discipline, or physical or sexual abuse. Children in these circumstances lose trust.

2. Your parent was emotionally unsafe. By emotionally unsafe, I include parents who were overly critical, called you names, blamed or made you a scapegoat, dismissed your concerns, or threatened you with the loss of love. Sometimes that same parent runs hot or cold. Emotionally abusive parenting creates an insecure attachment that damages a child’s trust.

Let’s talk about the ways that having unsafe parenting can later affect who you choose for a partner, and how you relate to your partner. If your trust was drained early on, your expectations for reciprocity in your marriage will be off-kilter. You may expect either too little or too much from your partner. It’s hard to predict out of context which outcome will occur, but let me offer a sketch of these variations.

If you expect too little, you won’t stick up for yourself enough. You’ll invest too much, and overgive to create more security for yourself. Paradoxically, one way to be in control and to feel safe is to expect less, like Angie. If you don’t expect much, you won’t be terribly disappointed (at least for a while). You’ll settle for an emotionally remote relationship because it “feels”
normal. Secondly, and out of your awareness, you'll choose a partner to repeat this pattern with, not because you're inherently masochistic, but to understand and gain mastery and control over your childhood experience in hopes of having it turn out better this time.

In other individuals, never feeling secure or important enough controls the relationship. Instead of expecting too little as a result of an unsafe childhood, you may find your neediness burdens your partner with the expectation that marriage will cure your childhood insecurity. In effect, you expect your spouse to be a better, more caring, less limited parent to you than your own parents were. Early romantic love tends to fool you into thinking that you'll always be taken care of, and initially reinforces your unrealistic and unreasonable expectations. After the dazzle of passion fades, you find that you haven't been rescued from your childhood needs. Your search for an idealized form of love and validation may continue through an affair, overworking, or emotionally leaning on your children to meet your needs. Let's look at how this plays out in Donna's marriage.

Donna: Unsafe Childhood: Consequences to a Marriage
Donna's childhood was characterized by a combination of strict parental discipline, emotional distance, and abuse by a sibling. Donna's mother was overwhelmed by the demands of nine children. Her father worked two jobs to support the family. Donna was third in line, with an older brother and sister and six younger siblings. Her older brother was put in charge of the children whenever the parents were out of the house. Donna remembers being terrified of him, and rightly so. When he was in charge, it was every man for himself. He hit Donna and taunted her with sexually inappropriate suggestions. One day when she was about fourteen, she remembers locking herself in her second-story bedroom, planning to jump out the window if he broke the lock. Donna didn't feel close enough to either parent to confide in them. Because of her unsafe childhood, Donna came to her marriage very needy, though she had the veneer of professional accomplishment and the outward appearance of a very caring and charming woman. Donna expected her hus-

band, Rafael, to provide frequent reassurance about her looks, pep talks about how her job was going, and comforting words about how much everyone loved her. Beyond that, she often chided her husband for what he could do better—be more attentive, make more money, make her feel desired. Her needs were always couched in terms of what her husband should do.

Donna expected Rafael to meet her needs without having needs of his own (mimicking the feel of an early parent-child relationship). When Rafael voiced his needs, she felt angry—this wasn't "the deal." Donna could only be her good, charming self if Rafael took care of her. After a few years of this, Rafael was worn out. The less he gave, the more she drank. Rafael wanted her to get help, but Donna refused because "he couldn't tell her what to do." However, she was actually protesting the conditional nature of love. Wasn't she ever going to be loved absolutely? Her unsafe childhood led Donna to self-defeating behavior. I saw her drinking as an angry revenge exacted on herself for not being loved unconditionally, either by her parents or Rafael. Donna didn't get help or face the earlier trauma of her unsafe family life until treatment was court ordered, after she was arrested for drunk driving.

Entitlement #3: Appropriate give-and-take between parent and child

When deprived of #3, the consequence is: You Don't Know What's Fair to Give or Take
In chapter 4 you learned about two basic mistakes with reciprocity: you can give too much or take too much. Parents, being human, sometimes stray onto one side or the other of this divide. If short-lived, the experience of either imbalance of give-and-take can be appropriate and growth promoting. For example, parents may baby you temporarily (and appropriately) when you're sick. You get a break from the usual expectations and chores of family life. Conversely, a child may have to pitch in and take on more responsibilities than usual—for instance, when a parent is ill or is caring for an elderly family
member. Receiving care when you need it, and helping out when it’s reasonable, builds trust in the fairness of give-and-take between parent and child.

But when parents chronically err by either giving too much or taking too much from a child, it can be emotionally damaging and cast a long shadow over that child’s development. In some families, one sibling, often older, has too much expected, while a younger child is babied. Each imbalance handicaps an individual and their relationships with an unrealistic model of fairness. Let’s look at what these imbalances look like in childhood, and how they manifest themselves in intimate relationships.

Parents Gave Too Much
As you recall from the last chapter, infantilization occurs when parents don’t hold children accountable for age-appropriate behavior or responsibilities. Children might get a pass on tantrums or disobedience at a younger age; or excused for never getting anyone a Christmas present, though they expect theirs; the rules for them might be more relaxed than the rules for their siblings; they may take for granted that they can live at home forever and have their laundry done and meals cooked. This tilt of the seesaw creates an unrealistic expectation of remaining on the receiving end in relationships. It cripples a child’s maturity and warps his notion of fairness. In adulthood these individuals experience difficulty taking appropriate responsibility. While you might find it hard to feel sorry for these adults, they have paid a high price for receiving too much—they’ve never grown up emotionally. In fact, some of these adults literally never leave home. They may become a parent’s companion and eventually their caregiver. If they do leave home, the infantilized adult likely takes his fairness skew with him. Let’s follow this dynamic in the lives of Andy and Jan.

Andy: Infantilization: Consequences for a Marriage
Andy agreed to enter couples therapy because Jan, his wife of twenty years, was often mad at him. Jan loved Andy’s joie de vivre, his charm, and his larger-than-life personality. But she was enraged by his irresponsibility. Andy begrudgingly acknowledged Jan’s more notable grievances. Jan was the primary wage earner since early in their marriage. While Jan became a partner in a large public accounting firm, Andy set up a solo accounting practice. Andy attributed (and hurtfully dismissed) Jan’s advancement to a gender-driven bias in the corporation. He joked that her success was “panty hose promotion.” Andy was unsuccessful in his own practice. In fact, he had neglected to file or pay estimated taxes for a two-year period, and hid this problem from Jan. When this resulted in an IRS legal action, Andy reluctantly told Jan because he needed her to apply for a thirty-thousand-dollar loan to cover his debt. He had already burned through his credit line. Perhaps most personally painful to Jan was the fact that Andy never bought her a gift, despite all that she did financially to support him and their three children. She told me sadly one day: “My seventeen-year-old daughter came in while I was wrapping a birthday present. She said, ‘Who’s that for, Mom?’ I said, ‘It’s Dad’s gift to me. Who do you think buys them?’ She looked at me stunned. I guess I’ve hidden the sorry reality pretty well until now.”

While Andy recognized himself in Jan’s description, he lacked a realistic take on the severity of the consequences to his marriage. He tried to make Jan laugh things off, or worse still from her perspective, convince her that he knew best. He assumed a superior, dismissive position regarding her frustrations with him. What caused Andy to hold these unrealistic expectations for a marriage and for life? Because Andy’s parents had never held him accountable, Andy continued his unspoken “deal” with them in adulthood—being the pampered son who never grew up.

Andy’s father was emotionally remote from both the children and his wife, Natalie, who was fifteen years his junior. Andy was the firstborn and the child his mother turned to for both practical chores that her husband didn’t do and also for emotional connection. His mother absolutely adored Andy and never really wanted him to leave home. She did his laundry, she served him his meals before she served anyone else theirs, she bought him cars which his father told him were to be repaid (but never were), and she later loaned Andy money without his father’s knowledge (or Jan’s, either). The legacy of
his mother’s overgiving left Andy feeling entitled to be on the receiving end. Andy wrongly applied this model for give-and-take to his marriage (a wife, like his mother, would give and he would take).

This story didn’t have a happy ending, but a fair one. Jan loved Andy, but divorced him due to his unwillingness to take his fair share of responsibility. She concluded that despite love, she wasn’t obliged to remain in a marriage that grossly disregarded fairness. Years later she ran into Andy. He volunteered, “It’s a good thing you divorced me; I’m in another relationship, but I haven’t changed.”

Parents Expected Too Much

On the other side of the fairness fence is the situation of parentification. Parentification, as the word suggests, is a topsy-turvy role assignment in which the parent leans on the child in an age-inappropriate, adultlike way. For example, a child may be put in charge of younger siblings—from getting them dressed, to getting them to school, to disciplining them. Or a child may take over other parental functions such as meal preparation, or negotiating for the family with the outside world—for example, when there is a language barrier with immigration or when a parent feels incompetent. Potentially even more burdensome than overt role reversals is emotional parentification. That child may be under pressure to “be perfect,” or make up for a parent’s lost dream, or function as a best friend or a confidante, sometimes being turned against the other parent in the process.

Parentification creates a belief system for a child that equates meeting expectations (however unfair) with being loved. Because caretaking is reinforced, a self-fulfilling prophecy occurs: the more you do it, the more valued you feel, which in turn diminishes your ability to ask for a fair return. While you’ve earned the entitlement to receive, by virtue of all you’ve given, paradoxically, your capacity to ask, or even know what’s fair, is handicapped by your parentification. Since children typically don’t know what’s fair to give, they just give what’s expected. The outcome in adulthood can go a few ways.

The first outcome is a reduced sense of deserving for yourself (also called low entitlement) and usually results in giving. The second outcome in adulthood occurs with the combination of excessive parental expectations and a low level of parental nurturance. This contributes to destructive entitlement, (where you feel more deserving than you are) and shows up in expecting too much from a partner. Let’s first see what low entitlement looks like in the marriage of Mark and Shelly.

Mark: Parentification: Consequences for a Marriage

Mark was depressed. He had a low energy level, problems concentrating, and was irritable. His sleep wasn’t good, and he’d gotten in the habit of having a couple of glasses of wine every night just to “take the edge off.” But even with antidepressant medication and a reduction in his alcohol consumption, Mark remained depressed.

Mark’s wife, Shelly, had a chronic illness. While some days were better than others, it made it hard to enjoy their lives as they had before her diagnosis. Weekend after weekend, the couple’s plans were lost to a bout of Shelly’s illness. Hearing this, I wondered: Was Mark’s depression biological, primarily situational, or was there unfinished business that worked against him even now?

As Mark described his growing up, he said that whenever he complained, his father scolded him for being selfish. Mark learned that love meant sacrificial giving. But how could he realistically change any of this now, since he needed to be in a caregiving role to Shelly, and even to their kids? Typically, Mark tried to keep these stresses to himself, but as a result he was often grumpy and withdrawn from Shelly. He thought, “What good will it do to say how I feel? Complaining won’t change the facts—I’d just be dumping on Shelly.” How could he feel frustrated about losing another weekend? After all, his wife was sick—he wasn’t. He felt selfish for even having those feelings. He reproached himself, just as his father had. Rather than accepting his feelings as legitimate and talking with Shelly about their mutual frustration, he withdrew, and his depression deepened. His old belief about love and fairness
contributed to his depression because he felt he must give, without ever asking for a turn. His parental mandate, “It’s stronger to absorb your suffering and weaker to burden others,” hadn’t served him or his marriage well, either.

I challenged Mark to consider the possibility that his withdrawal, which was intended to protect Shelly from the “burden” of his feelings, actually created further distance for both of them. I suggested that he would feel more connected to Shelly if he could share his sadness about their lost weekend plans. This was different than complaining about her illness. After all, she was frustrated and disappointed, too. His attempts to be unselfish, unintentionally made Shelly feel apologetic, and made their stressful situation even worse. With my encouragement, Mark decided to share his distress with Shelly, which was a conscious contradiction of his family’s mandate: “Don’t complain; don’t ask for yourself.”

To his surprise, Shelly was relieved when Mark opened up. She felt less alone and less guilty about her own helplessness. Finally she could offer him some care in return by simply acknowledging that he was struggling, too. She encouraged him to make alternate plans when she wasn’t feeling up to joining him. Mark began to think about what hobbies and activities he would enjoy. His depression lifted as he learned that balancing care for Shelly alongside his needs wasn’t selfish—and it was better for the relationship, too.

Like Mark, many parentified children are often highly functioning and very responsible adults—sometimes too responsible for their own good. As children they’ve learned that giving earns love, but love is conditional upon overgiving. When you overgive your way to being loved and valued, this eventually leads to depletion and depression. But parentification isn’t always even this benign. The second and more destructive face of parentification results when a child is both burdened and not valued (the one-two punch of all burden/insufficient care). Then you’re more likely to find a partner with exacting standards and punitive, even destructive, behaviors.

Once again, think back to Allie in her marriage to Simon. Allie was demanding, punished Simon, and mistreated her stepchildren. She was the Cinderella of her childhood, the unwanted child, blamed for ruining her mother’s life. Her mother was critical, her father was hands-off, and her extended family lived out of state. There were few protective factors for Allie. Allie’s adult relationship with her family of origin remained distant and conflictual. In marriage, she felt greedy for her husband’s time and attention, and was determined that her children wouldn’t feel second best as she had. Her stance was unjust, but followed a clear trajectory of how unfairness can get transmitted from childhood to adulthood, and from generation to generation.

These examples show that give-and-take is lopsided in both situations of infantilization and parentification. Each imbalance handicaps both individuals and their marriages. Of course, partners don’t wear a sign announcing, “Hi, I was an infantilized or parentified child.” Children don’t have the perspective to know whether their family’s model is fair or not. As one adult commented about understanding fairness in her own childhood: “Children are good observers, but bad interpreters.” An accurate interpretation of the baggage you bring takes thoughtful evaluation. As an adult, you owe that to yourself. Keep this ongoing balancing act of give-and-take between parent and child in mind, as you explore the fourth entitlement of being valued.

Entitlement #4: Being valued

When deprived of #4, the consequence is: You Don’t Feel Valued in Your Adult Relationships
Most children try their best to figure out and then meet parental expectations and values. That is a child’s loyalty return. Children typically keep trying, long into adulthood, to continue to meet these expectations in some way in order to feel valued. But feeling valued is different than knowing you were loved. People can know their parents loved them, without feeling valued. When I work with patients, I often ask: “What did your parents appreciate about you?” Sometimes people are stumped. Sometimes they point to their achievements—but then I frustrate them further by asking, “Not only what
you did, but who you are?” Frequently adults don’t know what they contributed to their parents or family growing up. More often they can identify whether their parents were disappointed in them. If you don’t know how you were valued, then what effects might this have today? As you read ahead, identify any of your own experiences listed below:

- You achieved love through your accomplishments. You felt valued only if you were “perfect” or met exceedingly high expectations. Now you feel more like a human doing than a human being.
- You were a disappointment to a parent, despite your best efforts. Now, you’re especially hard on yourself.
- Your unique contributions and efforts weren’t acknowledged. Now you feel insecure, and need frequent reassurance because you don’t feel “good enough.”
- You were primarily valued for “being good.” Now you’re worn out trying to live up to other people’s expectations.

Any of these inward struggles takes its toll on an individual and marriage, as Tonia learned.

In contrast to her feeling of despair about her pregnancy and impending marriage, her parents were delighted with the prospect that her boyfriend came from a good family and was headed for medical school. Many years later in my office, Tonia tearfully reported that at the time, she had asked her parents to support her wish to call off the wedding and help her place the baby for adoption. But through a combination of guilt and shaming, they talked Tonia into getting married. Tonia concluded that neither her mother nor her father really cared about how she felt. No one cared about her lost dreams for her future. Tonia tried to cope by pushing her feelings away. She married. Not long after their son was born, Tonia began an affair. When her husband found out, he left her, and even questioned if their child was his. She moved back in with her parents, who helped her raise her son.

Not being meaningfully valued in childhood contributed to Tonia’s self-defeating behaviors. While her acting out may be seen as immature, I often find that similar behaviors are fueled by a deep sense of injustice. Individuals like Tonia often hold themselves hostage to show others the damage they’ve done. Tonia’s affair was an indirect way of holding her parents accountable for pushing her into a marriage she didn’t want, and for not valuing her life aspirations. Tonia’s experience combines not being valued with the loss of the fifth entitlement—fairness isn’t negotiated, but decided unilaterally.

Tonia: Not Feeling Valued: Consequences for a Marriage
Tonia felt deeply hurt that her parents had paid for her brothers’ college educations, but refused to pay for hers, despite her better grades and stronger academic interests. Her parents thought college would be a waste of money because Tonia would get married and never use her degree. Neither her mother, who never had career goals, nor her father, who had a very traditional view of women’s roles, valued Tonia’s love of learning. Despite Tonia’s protests at the unfairness of their position, they were unyielding. Soon after completing high school, Tonia started a job to save her own money for college. She also began dating a college student. Within months of dating, she became pregnant. She was devastated. She didn’t want to go through with a pregnancy or a marriage, and for Tonia, abortion was out of the question.

Entitlement #5:
Negotiation of fairness issues

When deprived of #5, the consequence is:
You Capitulate or Cling to Control
The sense of fair treatment is forged by the way parent-child conflicts and disappointments are managed. Ideally, both parent and child (in an age-appropriate way) get a vote about what’s fair. In healthier families, differences and disappointments are openly discussed—even welcomed. But when parents don’t value or incorporate a child’s perspective and feedback, the re-
sult is misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Because no one person, not even a parent, can be the sole judge of what's fair in a family.

Yet a young child doesn’t have the information, judgment, or comprehension to determine what’s in his best interests. But all children need and deserve parenting that is sensitive to their input. Parents have the dual responsibility of being realistic about their own circumstances, and then reasonably offering their child choices. For a child this has the positive effect of knowing that your input counted. Even when you don’t get what you want, it helps to know that what you wanted, mattered. In this model, fairness is negotiated in a way that takes into account the best interests of each individual.

But what happens to a child’s development when a parent was a fairness dictator? When a parent’s “I don’t care what you want, do it because I say so,” style of relating drains trust over time? What if choices were made for you, even when they felt wrong to you? What if, like Tonia, you objected and were told to stop being foolish or ungrateful? When a parent decides fairness unilaterally, a power-based relationship operates that fails to teach conflict resolution skills. Instead, the style of a fairness dictator breaks trust and teaches a child to either capitulate, rebel, or manipulate. The capitulator doesn’t stick up for herself because she has learned helplessness. The activist becomes a powerful advocate for others, in personal life or in career choice. That individual partially heals her own childhood injustice through a quest to get justice for others. Finally, more simply and destructively, if a child doesn’t trust that she’ll get a say, that child may cope by sneaking, lying, or manipulating—strategies that often find their way into marriage, as Charlise discovered.

Charlise: Life with a Fairness Dictator:
Consequences for a Marriage
Charlise and Paul arrived for couples therapy. Paul stated, “I’m always picking up the pieces for her bad decisions.” He turned to his wife and said in an exhausted tone, “I feel so disrespected by you. The word ‘negotiate’ doesn’t exist in your family. Any difference becomes an all-out fight.” Paul then went on to describe what he meant.

Charlise hid things from Paul. They might be small matters—a shopping purchase she anticipated would get Paul’s veto—or large—quitting her job. Eventually, when Paul found out, he’d feel betrayed and burdened by the unplanned financial impact. Sometimes Charlise angrily defended herself: “It’s my life and these are my decisions.” Sometimes she was remorseful. Either way, Charlise maintained a pseudowaltz, “in control” stance, while she continued to put Paul in a parental position. Like a naughty child, Charlise sidestepped Paul’s anticipated objections by leaving him out of the loop, only later to need his help to fix the problems. How had Charlise, an otherwise very likable young woman, learned to relate in such a grossly unfair way?

In Charlise’s childhood, her father ran the show. He made the decisions, both large and small, for everyone. They might involve where the family lived, what time dinner should be, or on any given day, whether the children could have dessert. Or his decisions might even intrude into very personal areas—such as his insistence that the children (through their teen years) be naturists (nudists) on their family vacation, like he was. Any minor attempt to assert her own opinion were met with consternation, disapproval, or an all-out fight. Charlise’s mother, though distressed by her husband’s rigid manner, deferred to him. Charlise learned to sneak behind her father’s back. Charlise turned to manipulation when there was no possibility for fair negotiation with her father, just as her father relied on power instead of trust to get his way. Therapeutically, it was important for me to acknowledge that Charlise had experienced grossly unfair treatment by her authoritarian father—coupled with the lack of advocacy by her mother. Then, I asked Charlise to recognize that she was doing to Paul (making decisions without regard to him) as her father had done to her. With this insight, she was motivated to change her behavior and treat Paul more fairly. It was a win-win scenario for Charlise to learn a new model of fairness and risk trusting that Paul would consider her needs. As Charlise related more fairly, she earned Paul’s trust that she would no longer go behind his back. Charlise learned to truly negotiate decisions, big and small.
Entitlement #6:  
Repair and restoration of fairness and trust

When deprived of #6, the consequence is:  
You Carry and Perpetuate Unfairness

After childhood, it becomes your responsibility to recognize and right the effects of unfairness—because the past awaits you when unfair experiences are unhealed. No matter what relationship you’re in, you bring your baggage with you. The trajectory of unfairness brings us to our sixth experience: What happens to you when unfair experiences have never been acknowledged? Can you get over them simply by putting the past behind you? Or is there something to gain by returning to the source of the injustice? Is it possible that “the hand that hurts can be the hand that heals”? The extent of the damage from breaches to the first five entitlements turns on the crucial sixth: the repair and restoration of fairness and trust. Injuries from the past can be mitigated by your attempts to heal them.

When parents and grown children attempt to right a wrong, and restore fairness, they can create more trust in their relationship. But the first barrier to true repair is the denial that damage was done. Parents and children may each deny the extent of harm done. It’s a bit more intuitive that a parent would deny harming their child (after all, no parent wants to think that). But why would the child, who experienced unfair treatment, remain in denial even into adulthood?

With this denial we come full circle, to the beginning of the book, where we began our first exploration of the family fairness model. This deeply ingrained model may have a skewed take on fairness, full of unreasonable expectations and beliefs that aren’t particularly rational. Denial about this painful reality is a loyal defense that serves a vital purpose during childhood—it’s an accommodation to the family culture. Many people protect themselves from the distressing recognition of parental injustice by clinging to myths such as: I had a happy childhood (which may be partially true); or the

best offense is a good defense, like Roberto’s cover: I rejected my father; he didn’t reject me; or the overly simplistic myth: My mother was a saint and my father was a jerk (or vice versa). Myths help explain things, but unconsciously they function as a defense against loss, and protection from feeling disloyal to your parents. But life and relationships are usually more complicated than the myth that denial allows.

In addition to denial, the defenses of avoidance and blame may be used to shield against future reinjury. Psychologist Leslie Greenberg reminds us that people overlearn emotional pain in order to avoid repeating it. Because unfair treatment is painful, people sometimes fool themselves into thinking that the past is the past and won’t be repeated. So you might resent, blame, or even silently forgive your parents for some hurtful experience, but still repeat patterns from those relationships in your romantic life. And many people avoid thinking about their relationship with their parents altogether. They muscle their way through the pain of the past, rather than heal it.

For it’s not only the fact of injustice but also how you deal with the past that makes all the difference in the world. I encourage you to think about your unfinished business as you ask yourself these next questions:

- Did your parents assist you in expressing your feelings about unfair or hurtful situations, or was this discouraged?
- What happened when you protested unfairness? Did you feel considered or dismissed?
- Was showing your feelings considered a weak thing to do? Were you expected to just “get over it”?
- Did you worry that you were hurting your parents if you questioned how they related to you?
- If there wasn’t a good way of resolving unfairness, did you protest, or did you “give up” and withdraw emotionally or physically?

Your responses reflect whether you developed a repertoire of behaviors to protect yourself from further injustice and hurt. Old coping behaviors—the
defenses developed from past injuries—are designed to make you feel less vulnerable. Now, instead of showing you feel hurt, you show anger; now, instead of speaking up, you opt for a wounded silence; now, when you’re disappointed, you pull a third person into the mix to side with you; now, when you feel bullied, you lie; now, when you feel mistreated, you seek revenge; now, when you don’t get what you need, you blame; now, when things are grossly unfair, you resolve never to speak again. The problem isn’t that you developed these defenses—we all did to some degree—it’s that you still use them—despite the fact that they’re outdated and no longer constructive. Once upon a time, they felt protective. But now in your intimate relationship, these childhood defenses can be downright detrimental. The truth is, the events from your past are affecting your intimate relationship today. And while it may be difficult, working to repair holdover issues with your parents can enhance your relationship with your spouse. You can finally let go of the baggage for good. You’re probably wondering, “But how?”

**Revisiting Unfinished Business with Your Parents**

Again, remember that you aren’t exploring childhood injustices for the purpose of an interesting archaeological dig into the past, but because of their current impact. Most of us experience a mixture of fair and unfair treatment. Hopefully, the fair experiences can give you courage to address those that were unfair.

**What Good Would It Do?**

While the paradigm for repair is similar for parent-child relationships and intimate relationships, the reasons you might resist repair differ. Let’s look at the most common rationalizations that adults give to avoid addressing their unfinished business with their parents.

- They’re too old (old can mean anything from age fifty on).
- They did the best they could. I don’t want to be a parent basher.

- What good would it do? The past is the past.
- “Sure, when I was nineteen, I screamed at my father/mother about what happened, but they never apologized.” (Screaming accusations isn’t generally conducive to an apologetic response.)
- It’s better to forgive and forget.
- They’re still the same—they’ll never change.
- Back then, parents just didn’t talk openly with their children.
- I shrug it off.
- I become cool and distant, and assume that if they care, they’ll notice something is wrong.
- I forgave them a long time ago. Why should we talk about things now?
- What unfairness? I had a happy childhood.
- My childhood has nothing to do with my marriage.
- How can you resolve something with someone who’s dead?

I understand that for many of the reasons above, you may not want to run the risk of reentering the maze of your parent-childhood experiences. Anticipating a dialogue with a parent about experiences in the past evokes a familiar pain. But you forget—perhaps both you and your parents have grown up some. Perhaps both of you would welcome a chance to clear up unfinished business before it’s too late. Perhaps you need to remind yourself that the primary reason to risk healing wounds of unfairness is the empowerment to you and the benefits to all of your relationships. Repairing unfinished business can liberate you from sad or bitter feelings from your past, and free you for your future.

**The Benefits of Repairing Unfinished Business**

Since imagining gains is sometimes harder than predicting problems, it’s important to understand the benefits of repairing unfinished business. You need to understand not only the risks of engagement, but also the potential benefits as well. Here’s what you stand to gain:
• an increased ability to take personal responsibility;
• an increased empowerment and self-advocacy;
• an interruption of a cycle of unfairness; and
• the skills for relating in a new way.

In order to illustrate the trajectory of unfairness and then how repair works, the next vignette describes a significant issue of unfairness in my own family many years ago.

Healing for the Future
I was a classic case of the emotionally overfunctioning, parentified child. Fortunately, I was also loved and valued. But I was burdened by my special role of confidante to my mother about her unhappiness with my father. My favored status with my mother turned me against my father. In this way, I lost the entitlement to have my primary relationship with my father protected. For as much as my mother gave me, I was obliged to return care more on her terms. She leaned on me. That was the deal. I didn’t recognize any of these concerns as fairness issues, nor even how burdened I was—emotionally, I was much older than my years. I certainly didn’t recognize my family’s questionable assumptions about fairness and love that had been in place for generations. I simply accepted the myth of a happy childhood with a mother who loved me, and—oh, well—a distant and ill-tempered father.

My first clue that something was wrong occurred in my young adulthood, after the very unhappy ending of a serious relationship. I became symptomatic—despondent, depressed, lost trust in men, and yet was drawn to emotionally remote partners. To get away from all this pain, I took the geographical cure and I moved across the country.

My situation was this: I had recently completed my first graduate degree in psychology. I found my new psychological insights both enlightening and depressing. At last I knew why I was a mess—because my family was. My mother and father had a tense marriage. My father was irritable and unpleasant to be around; my mother was depressed. I was still quite close to my mother, who continued to confide in me about her disappointments with my dad. Her complaints certainly seemed reasonable to me. I was also having similarly disappointing experiences with men. Like my mother, I gave too much in relationships, I expected too little, and then felt hurt and disappointed in return. In my experience, life and relationships were definitely unfair.

My ideas about life, love, and fairness were about to be shaken up. My second graduate degree was in marriage and family therapy. I trained with pioneers in the field of relationship ethics—what people owe to and deserve from parents, partners, and family. My indebtedness to these great thinkers and generous colleagues—Drs. Iván Böszörményi-Nagy, Barbara Krasner, and Margaret Cotroneo—is lifelong. From them, I learned how to understand fairness within the context of the family sweep of generations and in the present. I learned how to offer and claim fairness in primary relationships, on behalf of my relationships and myself.

But before I could do this, I had to examine my own unanalyzed set of assumptions about what I owed and what I deserved in relationships. I had to acknowledge that the fairness model I had learned from my parents wasn’t always a good guide. I had to recognize the misconceptions I held about my parents, my family, and myself, and learn what to do about them. I had blind spots in my model of fairness, which were causing significant problems in my life. I had just about every distorted belief about love and fairness there was. I thought that being "strong" and putting the other person’s needs first was paramount; I thought that I instinctively knew what was fair because I was such a caring person; I thought that my take on the issues with my mother and father was accurate; I thought that my mother had never treated me unfairly because her love for me was so evident. After all, she chose me to confide in—I was special in her eyes. I had no clue that these issues were governing my choice in a partner and in my own tendency to be sacrificial and then disappointed in return.

Until I challenged my assumptions, I didn’t realize that I needed to change. I didn’t know that what seemed normal (if depressingly so) was in fact a way of relating, guided by a fairness model that I had learned, and so, could
change. Before I could become a competent couples and family therapist and help others, I had to take a new look at my own family. I had to make a claim for my own entitlement to a relationship with my father, unimpeded by my loyalties to my mother (Entitlement #1). I had to right the balance of give-and-take between us, so that I wasn’t the child emotionally taking care of the parent (Entitlement #3); I had to stop perpetuating a cycle of injustice that had a play-it-forward component (Entitlement #6). Here’s what I did:

With the first insight that my mother had been unfair by using me as her confidante, I felt more depressed. Had my mother set out to treat me unfairly? Of course not. Most parents do the best they can. But my mother—due to her depression and the neediness of her own mother—had blind spots in her expectations of me. Without realizing it, she leaned on me in ways that were unfair to me. Then there was my father. I thought I was fair to my father—I wasn’t. I had never even imagined his side of things. Now I was disappointed in my mother, my father, and in myself. What good was this doing?

Slowly I understood that I needed to move beyond my insights and address these unfair experiences with my parents directly. I decided to do this for the sake of my relationships with them, but also for my own future relationships and in order to have integrity with my clients. I couldn’t very well give advice that I hadn’t followed myself. I had to risk changes in all of my relationships in order to gain a better balance of give-and-take.

How did I deconstruct the old beliefs that made up my dysfunctional fairness model? First I had to reevaluate my assumption that because I was a good person, I could know with conviction what was fair. In my own case, I felt that I had tried my best to be a good and thoughtful daughter. But when I looked at my relationship with my father, I saw that I had held him, and perhaps all men, at a distance. My mother’s disappointments with my father had shaped my negative expectations both of my father, and of men in general. These insights would shift the ways I related to each of my parents and the ways I related in other close relationships. Beyond insight, I knew I needed to confront this unfairness directly.

Some readers might wonder if I simply lacked the skill of being assertive with my mother, or perhaps I was having this difficulty because I just wasn’t autonomous. Those are reasonable questions, but in other relationships in my life I seemed to have no trouble standing up for myself. I thought leaving home some years before reflected my self-sufficiency—living on my own across the country, managing my own finances, and generally being very self-reliant. So why hadn’t these skills helped me with the years-long injustice of being my mother’s confidante?

First, I was lost within the fairness model that I had learned in particular from my mother. I didn’t even see the injustices. I was in denial. My family’s fairness model was so much a part of who I was, I couldn’t see it for what it was. And second, perhaps as important, I was powerfully motivated to be my mother’s loyal daughter. Since loyalty is both a way of being connected and paying back a parent, I was returning care to my mother (totally outside my awareness at the time) by taking her side. I had been loyal to my mother at the expense of my relationship with my father. If I insisted on creating new terms, I now understood that I would be breaking all the invisible, powerful, unspoken rules about how mothers and daughters relate, and had related for generations in my family. Mothers and daughters had been closer to each other than husbands and wives were. I would break the unquestioned fairness deal that had been in place since before I was born.

How did I change this unfair pattern in which I was implicitly asked to take sides against my father and accept the premise that men were just disappointing? The change was part revolution and then years of evolution in my relationship with both parents. The revolution began with a talk with my mother. I was visiting my parents during my midwinter break in my second year of family therapy training. On this particular day, which I will always remember, I broke the biggest rule in the unspoken assumptions about love between mother and daughter in my family—I made a claim for fairness on my terms. I summoned up the courage to tell my mother that she hadn’t been fair to me. She had leaned on me too much in my role as her confidante, at too early an age, and had hurt me by repeatedly enlisting my sympathies against my father. For my mother, such an encounter with me was a radical departure from my typically comforting role. I pressed on, asking her to care about me by leaving me out of her disappointments with my father. I told her that I wouldn’t continue
to be drawn into discussions about my father’s temper, and other enumerated shortcomings. I cared deeply about her, but as much as I loved her, I didn’t owe her this, because I owed something to myself, and to my father, too. The old model wasn’t fair to me, and it wasn’t fair to my relationship with my father.

I let my mother know that I had to separate her marital problems from my relationship with my father as a parent. I needed to relate to my father through my own experiences of him, not her experiences of him. I couldn’t give my father a “fair shake” and still take sides with her against him. Until then, I hadn’t even cared to know my father with any degree of complexity. I wasn’t entirely sure how my negative view of him had influenced my own ability to choose a loving partner, but I knew it couldn’t be helping that I held such a pessimistic view of men. I had begun to realize that the past was not the past; it was bleeding into the present.

As I spoke, my mother was stunned with hurt and anger. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she replied indignantly, “I would have never said that to my mother!” The clear implication was that I had done the unthinkable by telling my mother that she had been unfair to me. By taking this risk, I had revealed the difference between love and fairness. The change I needed in my relationship with my mother had nothing to do with not being “loved enough,” but it had everything to do with fairness.

Now, my mother rightly prided herself on what a fair-minded, good, and generous woman she was. Yet she had a large blind spot about fairness. This blind spot developed particularly in her relationship with her own mother. While her mother languished in bed, depressed for months at a time (sadly, there was no psychopharmacy available in that era), her father was more available, but periodically debilitated by a heart ailment. My mother learned to be a competent, highly independent child, who couldn’t show her own needs. That was how she gave back, and how she had overgiven to her mother since early childhood. She had never risked talking with her mother and father about this lopsided balance, and was unable to set her own limits for giving. Instead, she passed the debt forward—to me. My mother expected (without knowing it) that in repayment for all that she had done to “be strong” by taking care of her mother, while never asking for fairness for herself, that her children would give her the same. I had done so until that moment.

Had I continued to accept this payback system of being “strong” and giving sacrificially, I would, no doubt, have passed it down to my future spouse and children as unknowingly as my mother had done. This imbalanced way of relating was already negatively impacting how typically “used” I felt, how little I expected for myself, and how generally angry and depressed I was. I also realized how little I had really gotten to know my father, and how unlived and unlovable that made me feel.

Now, in that moment, I was asking my mother to give me something that she had never asked for and certainly never gotten—an acknowledgment that what I had given had cost me too much. I stood still before my mother’s intergenerational call to retreat, her claim of “I would have never said that to my mother!” Somewhere, from the depths of both my pain and hope, I had the courage to respond, “Well, then I’m glad I have you for a mother, because I wouldn’t want that kind of relationship.” I hugged her and hoped that neither of us would shrink from the challenges of fair relating.

With that first dialogue, nothing apparently dramatic changed overnight, except for my mother’s wounded and wary regard for me and my new studies. But I was freed almost immediately from that old way of relating in which I was depleted and let down. While this exchange may sound simple, it struck terror into my heart. I knew at a deep level that not only was there far more to gain, but also far more to lose, in claiming fairness. I had risked disappointing my mother in the deepest emotional way. But these were the necessary losses that accompanied the gains in pursuing fairness. I didn’t know if my mother would remain distant from me, or if we would grow into a healthier and closer way of relating. I hoped, but didn’t know, that this beginning dialogue would become a paradigm for fair relating in all of my relationships. I hoped, but didn’t yet know that I would again feel close to my mother, because I could risk saying what was fair to me, and she could embrace this new way of relating where love doesn’t trump fairness. Now love was based on a new model that encompassed truth with compassion and mutual respect as well as love.
The new fairness that emerged transformed my relationship with my mother over time, from one in which I had felt very loved but also exploited as a confidante, to one of freedom and great mutual respect as well as love.

My gains from this dialogue quickly changed my ability to reconnect with my father. He and I developed a closer and more understanding relationship. I no longer simply saw him as an angry man, but a hurt and rejected one, deeply scarred by the early deaths of both his parents. As I expressed this understanding, and cared about getting to know him, my father was able to show remorse for how his anger had affected me. To my father, I was the lost sheep, returned after many years of emotional distance. I was again his loving daughter. He was again my loving father—something I hadn’t felt for years and years. I also was able to ask for a fairer balance of give-and-take in many of the other relationships in my life. Whenever my courage wavered, I would remind myself that if I could hold my parents accountable for fairness, I could ask for fairness from anyone—the rest of the world was a piece of cake. Some time later, the new way of relating that I’d developed helped me when I met my future husband. All of these crucial shifts, all of the love that has followed, were made possible because I was becoming more fair-minded.

Shortly after reworking these lost entitlements with my parents, my father had a massive stroke. He never regained much of his speech, but our renewed bond remained powerfully present until his death some years later. My mother and I have had the gift of over twenty-five years of working through fairness issues. To her enormous credit, and my relief and gratitude, after some years of struggle, we came to terms with the past. Readers may wonder how my relationship with my mother, now in her eighties, fared after she read my account of this time. With some trepidation, and sensitivity to her feelings, I asked her to respond to this excerpt before it was published—that was only fair. I asked whether I had offended her by any of my reflections. She immediately responded, “Why should I feel hurt? It’s all true.” I can think of no higher compliment anyone could pay this book than her declaration upon reading it: “I wish I’d had a book like this when your dad and I got married.”

As my story shows, and you’ll see in later chapters, working on unfinished business from the past benefits both you and your relationships. My experience of reworking unfairness, rather than merely understanding it, transformed my beliefs about love and gave me the conviction that healing injuries, even severe ones between family members, is possible.

As you move on to Part Two of the book, you’ll be applying your new insights to four kinds of dilemmas in couples’ relationships. Some will make you laugh at your reflection, mirrored in the couples arguing over the smallest details of day-to-day life. Others will remind you of challenges you’ve already encountered (or prepare you for those you may face). And others will move you as you feel a couple’s heartache, and rejoice as you watch them heal. We begin chapter 6 by entering the drama of one of the earliest and most crucial balancing acts requiring fairness between partners.

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**EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 5**

**Exercise: Six Entitlements: Connecting the Dots . . . Consequences for a Marriage**

For each of the six entitlements below, write a statement that relates the entitlement from your parents (whether or not you received it) to how you suspect that outcome plays out in your relationship with your partner today:

1. Protection and preservation of relationships:
   - What I got:
   - What I didn’t get:
   - Consequence for my marriage:

2. Safe, reliable, and nurturing parenting:
   - What I got:
   - What I didn’t get:
   - Consequence for my marriage:

(continued)
3. Appropriate give-and-take:
   What I got:
   What I didn’t get:
   Consequence for my marriage:

4. Being valued:
   What I got:
   What I didn’t get:
   Consequence for my marriage:

5. Negotiation of fairness issues:
   What I got:
   What I didn’t get:
   Consequence for my marriage:

6. Repair and restoration of fairness and trust:
   What I got:
   What I didn’t get:
   Consequence for my marriage:

**Exercise: Addressing Childhood Entitlements**

I encourage you to reflect on the entitlements of this chapter and relate them to your own experiences growing up. If you choose to address any area of your relationship with your family members, as I did, do so with preparation.

Before you address any issue of unfairness, it’s helpful to imagine a more benign explanation for the occurrence. What did a parent struggle with? How did their own parenting shape them? At the very least, this may help you depersonalize an injustice—and recognize it as more

their problem than yours. This may free you of the confusion surrounding love and unfairness.

Next, ask for their care. Let them know that you wish to talk about an area that is still impacting you today. Sometimes it’s safer to start by asking about their family history before speaking about your history with them. Be prepared for the possibility that you may meet with resistance, such as denial, hurt, or defensiveness. Resist the urge to point fingers. Be specific about what you’re hoping for, and what claim for change you’re making.

Preparation may include consultation with a family-trained therapist, or in a session designed for that purpose. Don’t feel any pressure to tackle these challenges without help, or if it doesn’t feel safe.