

SEEING



Why your relationship goggles suck
and what you can do about it

Brett Rogers

Seeing

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This book is dedicated to my friend and adopted sister, Lizzie, whose honesty, strength, clarity, and bravery amaze me with every conversation.

For my children, who have watched me futz around with marriage and divorce and loved me in spite of myself.

For my mom, whose courage blazed the trail and whose friendship matters so much. Your wisdom is woven in here. Thanks for letting me learn from you.

And mostly...

Pour toi.

Seeing

Introduction

The hardest thing in life is to see things as they really are.

Sight itself is simple. It's one of the first experiences we have from the moment we're born into this world - and yet, seeing life and people and ourselves objectively, in truth, as these things really are, is the most elusive of tasks.

Why?

Our brains get in the way.

Eyeballs have an easy job, and they perform it well. They take what's there and send that picture to the brain. It's in the processing of the image that things go awry.

Standing in the desert, we see a shimmering reflection. It's sand, heat, and light that's in front of us and dutifully reported by our eyes, but our brain, feeling the deep thirst our body communicates to it, sees... water. We see what we want it to be, and not what it really is. The image becomes an optical illusion, a mirage.

And this doesn't just happen in the desert. It happens every day of our lives, no matter where we are. Our brain mismanages the information it's given and we "see" things that aren't there. Worse, we then act on the misinformation and so it begins: turbulence in, and sometimes the unraveling of, relationships and friendships due to the unnecessary drama our poor image processing brings to our lives.

The hardest thing in life is to see things as they really are. This book will attempt to give you some corrective lenses, or at least work to make you aware of the screwed up relationship goggles that you have. We all do. You're not alone. And that actually makes it worse, because we're all seeing things that aren't there.

But if you know about it, maybe you can do something about it. Let's see, shall we?

Seeing

Wiring

You may have heard of the infamous hole in your eye called the "blind spot." It's where the optic nerve attaches to the back of the retina, and in that particular spot, you have no rods or cones, which are the sensors that capture images to send to the brain.

In other words, you are truly blind almost in the center of your vision. In both eyes.

Yet, you don't notice the big swatch of nothing in your vision. Your brain is wired to fill in that dead space with whatever makes the most sense in the context of the rest of the image.

Humor me, if you would.

Swing your gaze, with one eye shut, around the area in which you sit, as fast as you can. High and low, up and down.

No really - go ahead and do it.

Now, there was nary a gap, was there? Not once. That is how lightning fast your brain is to fill in that space. It's quite remarkable to think about it. But please make note of one thing:

You didn't have any sense of the effort or even the loss of information. Your brain, not your eye, filled in that space so quickly and so well that you weren't conscious of it. It takes concerted effort to even discover that you have a blind spot, so well-concealed is it from our awareness.

Your brain's image processing is just that good.

This, then, is what you need to know:

You are hard-wired to fill in the gaps of your world, and most of the time, it's unnoticeable to you.

Imagine that your friend is late to have lunch with you. You're seated at the table, 15 minutes beyond the appointed time. In truth, you don't know why your friend is late. You really don't. But the historical context of your friendship informs you of the strongest possibilities, and more than likely, you will convince yourself that you damn sure know what happened. Then something amazing occurs. You respond emotionally to the "reality" you have constructed. You determine what to do next. In spite of the fact that you truly don't know, you believe you do, and you fully expect to be validated later with the explanation.

We don't deal well with not knowing, and knowing something is better than knowing nothing - even if it's a fake something that we pretend to know. It gives us a framework on which to make a decision and allows us to respond. Everyone does this. It's normal and natural, but it's also a complete fabrication.

Seeing

Patterns

What comes next in the series?

1, 2, 3, 4, __

Did you guess 5? How quickly did you guess? Did you have any doubt about it?

Your brain is hard-wired to search out, catalog, and recognize patterns. It's what allows you to predict the world around you, and you need that capability to survive.

If someone throws a ball at you, you know pretty accurately the trajectory of the ball. You then make the choice to either catch it or step out of the way. Or you remain motionless and get hit, which informs your action the next time someone throws a ball at you. (Or maybe you like getting hit... but no one would have predicted that.)

A ball in flight must respond to gravity, which is an immutable law of physics. Your friend, however, has few, if any, immutable laws. Predicting your friend's behavior is, at best, guesswork in the context of past behavior, and at worst, utter conjecture on your part. But like it or not, you're predisposed to do it, and you'll do it almost without thinking.

When you first meet someone, you see them and immediately file through the hundreds of people you've met in life to find someone similar. How often do you hear yourself say to this stranger, "You remind of someone I used to know?" That right there is patterning. Whether you find a match for them or not is irrelevant - your search through your database is as instantaneous as it is unavoidable. Then something amazing happens. You begin to respond emotionally to them out of recognition, even though you don't really know them.

Prediction is a good thing - until it isn't. Some people put a great deal of trust into a first impression. "Oh, I sized him up right away. I had his number."

When you do this, it's important that you know it's a guess, and not fact. You might be right; and then again, you might not be right.

It is quite normal to look for the smallest of cues to create a prediction in a fleeting moment. Zodiac sign, style of clothes, a facial expression, job title, etc, etc. We anchor to that prediction we make. It's hard to let go of it, but it's important to recognize that it's only a prediction, uninformed by facts of the individual or circumstance, and when we act on a false prediction, it can trip us up.

It's critical to know when you don't truly know.

Therefore, it's critical to know when you're making a prediction. No matter how informed by previous experience you are, it's wise to acknowledge that your assertion is still a prediction based on patterns you recognize.

No wonder it's so hard to see things as they really are.

Seeing

Assumptions

Where do you turn for information you need? Be it news, be it gossip, be it instruction, you learn to trust various sources for bits of information you need.

A smart guy named Daniel Wegner posited, in 1985, a concept he named "Transactive Memory." In short, each of us turns to others for knowledge that we ourselves do not possess.

If you've ever been in a conversation with someone, and then couldn't remember something, you might have said, "Oh! You know who would know about this? Hold on - I know who to ask." That is Transactive Memory - you use a lifeline to phone a friend.

But if you've ever watched Who Wants to be a Millionaire, you know that sometimes the friend is wrong. As are, at times, news networks about events and facts, experts about their field of expertise, and even Aunt Mildred about grandma's recipes...

In spite of the risk of being wrong, when you need to get information, you rely on trusted sources and use what they know to inform your vision. Men do this all of the time.

"Hey - I need a woman's opinion. There's a female manager at my office, and today in a meeting, she said..." Men need help understanding women. Naturally, they turn to a woman for an explanation. While she may not personally know the subject of the question at hand, she takes a stab at it, explaining it until the guy says, "Oh... I see." The light bulb turns on. Is it true? Maybe, but for the moment, it makes sense. That's what we're really after - our world making sense.

We all do this without feeling the need to verify the information. But that's the purpose - much like blind spots and patterns, we use these mechanisms as shortcuts to aid our sight, to help us see things.

The truth is that it's a calculated assumption. It's a social trick that can backfire.

When a trusted source gives you bad information, you feel, at best, disappointed, and at worst, betrayed. "She lied to me!" is sometimes the reaction to such a discovery. In truth, you might not know whether it was a lie or simple overconfidence, but the letdown is palpable and emotional because the world is not as it seemed, and you're forced to readjust.

We've all heard the saying, "When you ass-u-me, you just make an ass out of you and me."

Despite this, we make assumptions all of the time, without thinking, without questioning. It's normal, and it's important to become aware of when we're making assumptions. Otherwise, we really do risk making an ass out of ourselves.

Seeing

Prejudice

All rich people are greedy.

Is that true?

It's certainly false. What is true is that some rich people are greedy. Nevertheless, your prejudices - and yes, you have them - inform your vision of the world around you.

Prejudice is a form of assumption, a mass generalization you apply as a shortcut to understanding and decision-making. The moment you make a statement that fits this formula: "All [blank] are [blank]," you're exposing your prejudice. It's the word "all." Watch for that. Even if it's not there, when you can put the word "all" at the start of the sentence, it's likely a biased statement. Red flag.

"Boy Scouts are kind" = "All Boy Scouts are kind."

"Teachers are underpaid" = "All teachers are underpaid."

Neither is completely true.

Prejudice is a personal axiom designed to protect you from harm, or to supply you with good. You use it to trust, or to distrust. Your bias colors your world and skews your vision. We all do it.

Yes, I just employed a mass generalization.

"We all do it" = "Everyone has a prejudice."

Deal with it.

Seeing

Optometry

So, your eyesight is messed up.

Your mental and emotional blind spots, your acquired patterns and categories into which you filter and organize your world, your assumptions you constantly make, and your biases that you apply every day - all of these screw up your vision and prevent you from seeing truly.

Nobody trains us to watch for those moments when our sight is suspect. Instead, we reward leaps of intuition and urge trust in gut instinct.

Yes, you should lean on your intuition and instinct.

You should also know when you are doing this and acknowledge that you might, in fact, be wrong.

Relationships suffer from bad eyesight. We pretend to know what we truly do not know, and by doing so, we bring conflict.

"I saw that look. I know what you were thinking."

"You don't have a clue what I'm thinking."

"I know you. I know exactly what you're thinking."

We communicate in so many ways. Some say that 90% of all communication is non-verbal. If anything, that ought to make vision correction a top priority for all of us. I want healthy relationships. You want healthy relationships. The crazy thing is that relationships tend to erode over time. Marriages mostly end in divorce. Friendships rarely last forever. Family members sometimes don't talk to each other.

It's hell out there.

Part of the reason for that is because of the stress introduced into our lives when what we think we see isn't actually in alignment with reality. In those moments, we fight shadows and bogeymen that don't exist. It's wasted energy, and it can hurt those around us.

Which brings more stress.

Ask yourself: do you need more stress?

Hopefully, you said no.

Stress can happen when the world you thought you knew isn't the world that actually is. In fact, it can kick your butt.

Seeing

Training

Some people in life are very successful.

Some people in life struggle mightily.

Why the difference?

It's not luck. It's eyesight.

You see, children are taught by their parents how to view the world. Children are sponges and absorb whatever you hand them. Parents hand vision problems down to their children.

Blind spots? Check.

Patterns? Check.

Assumptions? Check.

Prejudices? Check.

Dysfunction runs in families not because it's inevitable, but because eyesight is taught.

"Management sucks."

"College is a waste of money."

"You don't have to kiss up to anyone."

Or, in families where addiction occurs, children are often told that what they think they see is not what they saw.

"Dad's not drunk... he's just sleeping."

"I ran into the door. It was my fault."

And children are taught to lie.

"My brother ran into the door. It was an accident."

When the world you're taught to see is not the world that really is, it's stressful. It's crazy-making. You doubt your very sanity.

And that invites vice.

Seeing

Coping

No family is perfect. (Yes, that's another mass generalization... all families are imperfect.)

The reason no family is perfect is because all humans have bad eyesight somewhere.

When your view of the world doesn't align with reality, you feel stress. Something's off. You know it. You likely can't put your finger on it, but it grates on you.

This can lead to coping mechanisms.

Children who grow up in dysfunctional families - which is, to a degree, everyone - tend to adopt a vice. They find something that helps them deal with stress.

For children from homes that had a high level of dysfunction, how they were taught to view the world is constantly at odds with what's real. They were taught to ignore their instincts, doubt their intuition, close their eyes...

It's maddening to learn that.

So they smoke. Or drink. Or eat. Or don't eat. Or have sex. It takes them away from the world they see that disagrees with so much around them. The world doesn't make sense. They have a hard time fitting in and finding their place.

They might become desperate to numb their vision. Being numb stops the pain of reality jarring against how they were taught to see the world.

You've heard of the Twelve Step program. Step One is all about how to see the world correctly.

"We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable."

That admission might just be the first time that their vision lined up with what was true in their world. Suddenly, the world is a little less chaotic. The world begins to make more sense. The Steps become a lens through which they can see the world as it is in truth.

Recovery = vision correction.

And vice versa.

The pain they once felt subsides as everything comes into focus. If you've ever talked to someone who has been in recovery for quite a while, their clarity of vision is remarkable. And their stress has greatly subsided. Some of those folks are downright peaceful and Zen-like.

No one teaches us to spot when a child inherits bad vision. It comes in many forms. And sometimes kids just have bad vision. It's why addiction can sprout in any child in any home, even when there is no outward sign that would explain it. It's why they might later seek to escape the world.

Seeing

Recovery

Your eyesight is never perfect all of the time.

It can't be. You mask your blind spots, seek patterns, make assumptions, and harbor biases.

But you can learn to recognize when you don't know the truth.

The hardest thing in life is to see things as they really are, and sometimes that means being patient and allowing the truth to reveal itself.

It's okay to don't know.

But... but...

No really. It's okay to hang out in "I don't know."

Those are brave words.

"I don't know" can look ignorant.

"I don't know" can immobilize you.

"I don't know" can go against your every instinct.

But sometimes, "I don't know" is simply the truth. The truth, I've heard, will set you free.

So don't pretend to know what you don't know. Because you don't know. And that's okay.

It's important to your life to see things as they really are.

It's important to your health to see things as they really are.

It's important to your every relationship to see things as they really are.

The first lesson toward seeing things as they really are is to understand the difference between nouns and verbs.

Seeing

Action!

Let's say that you see a person struggling in the water.
Let's say that you're a lifeguard.

You could shout to the person floundering around that you're a great lifeguard. "That's me - a lifeguard! I've won awards!"

Or, you could jump in the water and assist them to safety.

Which is more powerful?

Love is a noun. When it's a noun, it's a feeling.

Love is a verb. When it's a verb, it's an action which springs forth from the feeling. Gotta have the feeling, but the action is stronger and more satisfying to others.

I could tell you I love you, but if I never romance you, never acted to do anything to demonstrate the love I feel, it's akin to that silent tree in the forest.

"I've fallen for you!"

"Funny - I didn't hear a thing."

Who you are is defined by what you do. It's as simple as that.

Intentions and feelings are only the beginning. From what you feel in your heart and from what you think in your mind spring what you do. No one can see your heart, but everyone can see your actions.

Your actions define you.

You can go to medical school and become a doctor, but if you never see a patient, are you really a doctor?

You can say that you care about your spouse, but if you rarely do anything with your spouse, your well-intentioned feeling is unnoticed in the silence of your inaction.

Now let's turn it around.

You can imagine someone to be something that you want them to be, but only their actions tell you who they are. Too often, we don't pay attention to definition by action. Our first impression holds sway and we don't give someone the credit they earn. Or we give someone too much credit in spite of their actions because, well, we just need them to be something that they aren't.

We can see a person for who they are by what they do and by how they spend their time. Love? Love is a four-letter word spelled "T-I-M-E." What we do with our time, that's who we are.

Walk > talk.

Seeing

Why?

The motivation in your heart that explains why you do something is not apparent from the outside. No one can see it.

To you, it's obvious why you're doing what you do. You work long hours because you love your family and want to afford a life for them.

But in the absence of knowing why you do what you do, people observe your actions (or lack of actions) and come to their own conclusions - which aren't always flattering.

Actions, while observable, aren't the whole story. Others are weaving great plot lines around your actions, and you don't even know it. It's a tremendous story, lemme tell ya. But it might have nothing to do with the truth.

In their fascinating book, *Made to Stick*, the Heath brothers tell of a game devised by Stanford psychology student, Elizabeth Newton.

Tappers received a list of twenty-five well-known songs, such as "Happy Birthday to You" and "The Star Spangled Banner." Each tapper was asked to pick a song and tap out the rhythm to a listener (by knocking on a table). The listener's job was to guess the song, based on the rhythm being tapped.

The listener's job in this game is quite difficult. Over the course of Newton's experiment, 120 songs were tapped out. Listeners guessed only 2.5 percent of the songs: 3 out of 120.

But here's what made the result worthy of a dissertation in psychology. Before the listeners guessed the name of the song, Newton asked the tappers to predict the odds that the listeners would guess correctly. They predicted that the odds were 50 percent. The tappers got their message across 1 time in 40, but they thought they were getting their message across 1 time in 2. Why?

When a tapper taps, she is hearing the song in her head. Go ahead and try it for yourself - tap out "The Star-Spangled Banner." It's impossible to avoid hearing the tune in your head. Meanwhile, the listeners can't hear that tune - all they can hear is a bunch of disconnected taps, like a kind of bizarre Morse Code.

Your actions do a lot of tapping, and to you the song you're beating out through your daily activities is clear as a bell. Of course everyone gets what I'm doing, you tell yourself.

Not so much. One time out of forty, perhaps.

Your "why?" needs explanation. Your action, not how you feel in your heart, is what defines you. And if people don't know why you do what you do, they will interpret your action as seems right to them.

One out of forty. Seriously. You are likely deeply misunderstood, and you misunderstand others as well.

Seeing

Ask

Picture this:

Little Johnny didn't do his homework after school. At all. Didn't even crack a book. His mother arrives home from work and asks how his homework is coming along as she steps through the front door. He says that he hasn't started it. So she proceeds to light into him, scolding him for not being responsible. Then she walks into the kitchen and notices that the morning dishes are clean, the floor is spotless, and the counters are shiny.

Yep. Mom feels real bad.

You've done something like this. We all have.

These awkward moments could be easily avoided if we just asked the question: why? Our leaps to conclusions are sometimes kinda treacherous. Questions are a safety device. They're a net to keep us from falling flat on our butt.

Honestly, try as you might, you don't know the motivations of others. You can't. While their actions are instructive, the intention behind an action is sheer guesswork - unless we ask.

I am flattered when you ask me about my favorite subject: me. Your interest in me is interesting to me. It shows me that you care.

It also avoids arguments. As opposed to stepping out on supposition, you can find firm footing with facts you discern by asking questions.

To see truly, we shouldn't imagine people to be something that they don't demonstrate. We have to take them at their action, not at their word. Then - we can ask about the action and what drove it.

The bible has a verse in Matthew that says, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." What's in the heart of others drives their actions and speech. To really know them, we need to observe then ask. Until then, we don't know.

Seeing

Now

I am what I'm doing right now.

I am not what I did yesterday.

I am not what I intend to do tomorrow.

To those observing me, I am what I am doing at this very moment. My actions define me for everyone watching me.

Likewise, a person is who we observe them to be today. And we sometimes do a refashioning in our heads where we change people. Because we want them to be something that they aren't.

Have you ever done that? Expected someone to do something that they never intended to do?

Of course you have. You're human.

It led to conflict, right? So maybe you tried to rationalize why they should have stuck to your script for them. After all, doing what you thought they should do, that's just what any normal person would do. Right? And maybe you tried to use guilt or something to goad them into your way of thinking for them and you tried to make them admit that they were wrong for not behaving as you expected. Ignorance is no excuse... it's just logical! "C'mon, think! Use your head!" you might have urged them.

Yeah. How'd that turn out?

Relationships break down when our vision fails us. When we don't see others clearly for who they really are, we weaken the relationship.

Is that what we really want?

We either embrace the people in our lives as they are in truth, or we suffer from constant disappointment and even anger because they don't act to our expectations. (More about that later...)

We need to see them as they are right now. Not as who they might be tomorrow, with the proper motivation, you know...

Now. What we see right now might be who they will always be. And if it is, that is their right and their choice.

We can only accept that about them as truth. Otherwise, we invite agitation and disappointment as we fight reality. And who wants the stress of that?

Seeing

Attraction

"You got what I want." That pretty much sums up attraction right there.

Be it a pretty face, a strong body, a poetic mind, a razor wit, a pickup, a TV, a fat wallet, delicious food, plumbing skills, or a beautiful house... you're attracted to those who have something you want.

To ensure that your attraction isn't misplaced, it's important to see people as they are. And to be sure that you're not wearing beer goggles, you solicit the opinion of friends to validate your own perceptions. Unless your friends don't see the person as you do. And then you ignore your friends. Usually.

You've heard the phrase "Opposites attract." For some reason, that perplexes people. But if you understand the benefit of Transactive Memory, then think of attraction as the acquisition of Transactive Assets.

Said another way: "You got what I don't have, and I want it."

If I'm not good with emotions, I might be attracted to someone with emotional intelligence.
If I'm terrible at fixing things, I might desire someone handy.

And so on...

You've heard the other phrase: You complete me.

Some therapists go running for the fire extinguisher when they hear you say that. They want to douse that flame in your heart. But sometimes it's not about stuffing a hole in your heart, but about you discovering that the other person brings missing necessities to your life. Skills you don't have... vision you lack... contacts or connections from which you can benefit.

You are attracted to those who can benefit you in some way. It might be that the person just allows you to fulfill a functional (or dysfunctional) role in life that you want to play. Fair enough. There's perceived benefit to you. You esteem a characteristic or talent or resource someone has. You lack it. They have it. Capiche?

Consider that no one hires an employee for skills that the company already has in house. We hire people for a need not being met. We hire for new abilities, strengths, and insights.

So of course opposites attract. It's easy for us to admire someone for skills we respect but don't possess personally. If we're successful in attracting that person to us, then we have new Transactive Assets. The relationship improves us. It makes us look better and helps us to feel more competent.

We are more complete for a broader array of tasks because we believe in the person's abilities to help us. Which brings us to belief...

Seeing

Belief

The beginning, health, and longevity of all relationships revolve around one simple nugget: expressed belief in the other person.

Think for a moment about what it means to you when someone you know expresses a belief in you, in your capabilities, in your future... you begin to soar. You want to be around that person more.

Many people will tell you that they find "trust" to be the essential element in all successful relationships. But upon what is trust based? The belief that the other person will do what is expected, and if you didn't believe that, you wouldn't trust them. Trust comes after belief.

Belief is never skeptical. It's never pessimistic. Belief is optimistic and positive and hopeful. Belief is therefore attractive. It's belief that "gets" another person. Belief covers the gaps and the flaws of the other person, choosing to overlook those and choosing instead to cheer the person overcoming their flaws.

In a marriage, belief in each other is the essence of the marriage. You can see that by removing belief. Removed belief makes comments like "I can't rely on you," or "What makes you think you can do that," or "What a waste of time." Disbelief treats us and talks to us like children. It issues backhanded compliments like, "For someone supposedly good at abc, you're certainly xyz." Merited or not, removed belief erodes the relationship's underpinnings. People distance themselves from the person expressing removed belief.

Some women find deeply Christian men attractive, perhaps because of shared faith, but I think more because a man capable of showing passionate faith appears more likely to deeply believe in his wife and his family. A person wants to be believed in like that. We look for signs of it in others around us. It doesn't have to be an outward religious faith - a person who deeply believes in a cause is said to be attractive for soulful devotion to the cause.

Love is, in many ways, an expression of faith. It looks with the infamous "rose-colored glasses" upon its object of fascination and sees only good.

Belief brings out the best in the other person. Belief looks on those strengths possessed and pulls them forward and outward, for the benefit of all around. Belief celebrates demonstrated strength and cheers on more of it. It's not that one person improves or makes better another person. It's that each person brings out the best in the other so that each feels recognized and rewarded for their strengths.

The longest and most successful relationships, whether consciously or unconsciously, bring out the best in each person, not because that best was spawned by the relationship or the other person, but because that best was already there and was noticed and was cherished.

"I believe in you" - powerful words. Optimistic words. They're capable of helping us rise to our potential.

Everyone around us needs the best in us. And if they're not helping to bring out the best in us, then perhaps they shouldn't be around us.

Seeing

Special

You deserve to be in a relationship where your partner believes that you hung the moon.

Where you are admired and respected for the strengths you possess. Where belief in you is obvious and evident.

Where your "special sauce" is delicious to the one who savors it every time it's cooked up.

Likewise, you need to invest time to discover what's special about your partner. What makes them unique. Like a treasure found, something you can claim to yourself as your special discovery.

If you don't, "Ex" might mark the spot where you once found treasure.

Once you both discover what's special about each of you, take time also to discover what's special about the two of you - together.

Seeing

Us

Every relationship has three people.

You.

Me.

Us.

Have you noticed that when some people get together, there is a tangible change in the room? It's more electric, it's funnier, or maybe the tension rises...

Whatever it might be, the combination of two people can bring its own personality to a situation.

"Oh my goodness, whenever he gets around Bob, look out!"

That new persona that steps into the room? That's the Us. And it is its own entity.

Each person is a noun to the relationship, but the Us is the verb. It's the interaction of the two people.

It's chemistry. It's opposites combining, like acid and base. There's a reaction, and a new product between the two.

That's the Us.

To see things as they are in truth, the Us is important to recognize. It's as vital to your relationship as you are.

Take a moment to mull that over. The Us that exists in every relationship you have affects you more than you know, and this might be the first time that you really thought about an Us.

You might have heard someone in love say to the object of their affection, "I love us."

They get it. They see it. They recognize it. They might not give Us its own weight as they do each individual, but they see Us, and that's a good start.

Seeing

Chemistry

There's no such thing as a bad atom.

Some atoms don't mix well with others. Some are perfect for bonding together.

No one would deny that relationships have chemistry. That new molecule that forms when two people collide together? That's the Us. It's the blend. It's the interaction.

You know what's nutty? Defining what you want in a person when looking for a mate, but not defining what you want in an Us.

Most people, when you ask them what characteristics they seek, they list individual traits:

Funny, smart, has a job, a car, financially stable, cute in some way, blah blah blah...

What they usually don't say:

Makes me feel special, gets me, romances me, believes in me, my biggest fan, empowers me, makes me feel like I am more...

Which is more important?

If you said both, then congratulations - you just elevated Us to the same level as the individual. You see it and get it. Both are equally important.

Sometimes, the reaction that forms the Us is negligible. It might even give off a funny odor.

This doesn't make the atoms bad. It just means that the combination of the two isn't meant to be. Or shouldn't be. In new and potential relationships, that initial period is all about discovering whether there is an Us worth pursuing. It's not about measuring the worth of the other person. (It's hard to avoid the rejection you feel when someone tells you that they don't think it will work, but usually it's not personal. It's the Us, not the You, that doesn't have that swing.)

When an established relationship erodes, it's almost always the Us that withers. Something takes place that causes the chemistry to begin to fail.

The Us determines the health of the relationship. Not the individuals. It's the chemistry that matters, and it either works or it doesn't, or it takes a lot of work to keep the chemistry active.

Chemistry = Us.

Seeing

Interaction

In a relationship, the Us is defined by the interaction.

You, as an individual, are defined by your actions. And in a relationship, you individually can muster up a lot of action, but that's you, the individual, kicking the verb.

In a relationship, it's all about the interaction, or joint action. It's about both people verbing together.

Sometimes, you kid yourself into believing that your relationship is fine, doing fine, thank you, yes just fine. But it might be all action on the part of one person. Or separate actions on the part of each person.

When that happens, Us is a mirage, and it's important to see it for the mirage that it is.

Interaction is partnership. What we do, we do together. Or maybe more accurately, who we are is what we do together.

As partners, each has a role, and that role is generally defined by the strengths each person brings to the relationship. Strengths naturally delineate the function.

But there is overlap where both can do the task, and there are gaps where neither can do the task. Partnership works out those details. Availability might determine the role. Individual ego can play a factor. But throughout the logistics planning, it's important to keep in mind: Us is what matters. Us is the goal. And no matter what comes up, Us should be preserved and protected.

Otherwise interaction turns from productive movement forward, to erosion and movement apart. Which can lead to no Us. And then everyone wonders what happened and why.

Seeing

Caretaking

Picture a perfect triangle. At each point: you, me, Us.

Each has needs.

It's your job to take care of all three points in the triangle. Equally. It doesn't have to be a perfect division of time, although quantity matters as much as quality. It does matter that each receives the esteem deserved. Your personal well-being is determined by the quality of all three points.

Or how about: you can only be as vibrant as the least attended point.

Each point on the triangle has a way in which it needs to be loved. Do you know it? Do you give time to it?

It doesn't much matter how you want to love it. That's right - it really doesn't. Not if it's not received in the manner in which you deliver it.

That's a bit like serving filet mignon to a vegetarian. It might be amazing. It might smell delicious. But if it turns their stomach, what was the point? Why the effort?

If it's in our best interest to see things as they really are, then listening to the needs and the desired means of delivery for the care you intend to give is crucial.

It also flatters the one receiving to know that you cared enough to do it like they wanted it.

"But I spent all that time cooking you dinner! I spent a lot of money!"

"But it's meat! I don't eat meat!"

Is that love? No. It's self-serving.

"Well, I'm not cooking tofu!"

"Well, no one asked you to!"

But what if you had?

Likewise, caring for Us is not the same as dragging your partner to something that caters only to your needs.

"But we're spending time together!"

No. It's self-serving. Of course you do things together at times that only minister to one of you. But they ought not be confused with Us time, which is defined as time spent for the chemistry you share together. It's something that builds you both up, strengthens your bond, and refreshes Us.

Stronger, together.

Seeing

More

The right relationships in your life will enable you. You will feel capable of More through the nourishment you enjoy from the friendships and partnership you have.

Pay special attention to those moments when you feel Less. Subtractive moments erode and create distance.

It might be something said. It might be accommodations you make to preserve the relationship. It might be neglect, whether real or perceived.

You might try to rationalize away these moments. You might try to shrug it off. But fair warning: they're like darts, and they stick to you. You can ignore them, but only at your peril.

Others will notice them. Close friends will ask you, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm good."

"No really - I can see something's wrong. I'm here if you want to talk about it."

And if they can see it, you ought to strive very hard to see it clearly for what it is.

It's easy to talk outside the relationship about issues inside the relationship. Sometimes, you need the perspective of others for a fresh look or suggested guidance. But before you do that, ask: is their agenda to strengthen the relationship or weaken it? To protect me, perhaps at the expense of the relationship?

Just be clear about the agenda. Don't be swayed. Gather facts to help you correct your vision as necessary, but that's it. Determine your own direction with the aid of the person you share Us with.

The right relationships in your life will enable you to be More than you could be on your own - especially when you are working toward fixing something between you and someone else. Be sure that they are helping toward the destination you select.

Seeing

Direction

When you meet someone you consider a contender for your affections, one question important to everything is this:

Are we going in the same direction?

You might have heard before of a friend who met someone who seemed an incredible fit, but was moving far away or lived far away. We all know someone who has tried a long-distance relationship. They rarely work.

Or perhaps you know of a couple who've struggled to balance their demanding careers.

Separate lives typically do just that - separate.

Proximity is everything. If you're not heading the same direction, you can't be near each other to take care of each other or to strengthen the Us.

Sometimes, the relationship is important enough that one person - or both - will choose to make a sacrifice to protect and preserve the bond.

That's no small thing. When it happens, taking that sacrifice for granted is likely to become a wound that slowly festers and eats away at what you share. Don't make that mistake. Otherwise, you'll be heading in different directions soon.

Seeing

Roles

Role is an easy concept: who does what?

Kids?

Fixing things?

Making money?

Anniversary?

Paying bills?

Housework?

The list of stuff to do can be lengthy. Partners divide the list according to strength, availability, trust, and avoidance.

Yes, avoidance.

"I don't like doing that. Can you do that?"

Sometimes you get this in reply:

"I don't like it either."

Most couples don't consider these things in advance. Tasks land on the doorstep of life and surprise us.

"Honey, the disposal won't work."

Moments like this give us a chance to learn about each other, how we handle, or mishandle, these little surprises.

"Okay. I can fix a garbage disposal."

"What's with the hammer?"

"Well... it might be jammed. Maybe I just need to shake things loose."

The problem is that, next to money, role confusion likely leads to the most arguments. Role confusion is always due to a false expectation.

"I thought you said you were good at that." Or "I thought you were going to do that." Or "I thought I was going to do that." Or "I thought we were going to hire someone to do that."

Planning out "who does what" helps to prevent arguments because it sets the stage for correct expectations. Otherwise, we might apply the wrong tool for the job at hand and make the problem bigger than it was, and that generally makes things worse.

Seeing

Anger

You get angry for one reason: things did not go as you expected them to go.

That doesn't mean that every time something doesn't go as expected, you get angry. You don't. But every time you're angry, it's due to dashed expectations.

Role confusion can cause anger.
Shirking responsibilities can cause anger.
Neglect in caretaking can cause anger.
Being hurtful can cause anger.

It can come about for a variety of reasons. And it can bring a variety of responses.

Shouting. Vicious words. Leaving. Breaking things. Turning to a vice. Silence.

Occasional failure is inevitable. Things aren't going to go as expected.

Do you see your world as a place you cannot control? If so, if you've accepted that, then you likely don't turn to anger. Or maybe you haven't accepted that.

Anger is the means by which you try to reassert your dominion over your world again.

Shouting because your world wasn't agreeing with you the first time.
Vicious words because your world needs to be put in its place.
Leaving because your world is more than you can handle at the moment.
Breaking things because your world should be reminded that you're in charge.
Turning to a vice because you want to tune out your lack of control and become numb to your world.
Silence because to hell with your world.

Anger frightens those around you in your world. Anger is designed to frighten. It's like the cat that sees something scary and then turns sideways, arched with fur on end, hissing.

Anger says, "I'm a big deal. Don't mess with me. I'm important and in charge, damn it."

One thing happens when anger shows up within a relationship: Us is dismissed. The triangle becomes a straight line comprised of the points "You" and "Me."

Unfortunately, it usually becomes you versus me. When that happens, there is no Us. And is that really what you want?

Seeing

Disagreement

Disagreement is not anger - yet.

You will never know the true quality of your relationship until you have your first strong disagreement. Disagreement will test whether it's okay for all points of the triangle to remain equal even when you see something differently than your partner.

If you never have a disagreement, then one of the two of you is perpetually Less in the relationship and your relationship is in deep jeopardy right now.

If you are always in disagreement, then quite simply, what the hell? You are two inert atoms trying desperately to bond. Not gonna happen. See it for what it is and make appropriate plans.

The majority of couples are in the middle, and disagreement is normal. How you handle disagreement gives Us a stress test on the treadmill.

Disagreement will show you whether each of you has a voice, whether your partner esteems your point of view enough to try and understand it, and by doing so will tell you whether they truly listen to you.

So ask yourself: when you're in disagreement, do you seek to understand your partner's point of view? Or do you simply insist on pushing your own point of view?

Do you esteem your partner enough to make them feel like they've been heard? It's not a matter of whether you can recite what they've said. Do they feel you've listened enough to try and understand and appreciate their perspective?

At this point, disagreement can simply be a revealing and healthy discussion. It can be a thoughtful, "Hmm... I never thought of it that way."

Or, it can become a fast track to damaging your relationship by dismissing or ignoring your partner's point of view.

After listening, you might still disagree, and then one or both people might have to choose to make a sacrifice to protect and preserve Us.

When disagreement ends in "I love Us," your relationship is quite fit. A stress test shouldn't exhaust you. If it does, you need to practice listening better, or communicating more clearly, or maybe just remember that by going to anger, you're dismissing Us.

Not listening, which is a form of neglect, will lead to frustration, and frustration will likely lead to anger.

Anger is not a good look for either of you.

Seeing

Damage

Anger can be many hats, some bigger than others.

The first hat is Disappointment. It's small and decorative. Things didn't go as you expected. You feel let down, and you're going to voice it. Non-verbally or verbally, you communicate it.

Disappointment says, I didn't see this coming, and it's likely just a slip on your part, but I'm hoping this is not who you are.

Disappointment doesn't stop believing in the other person. It tries to gently remind them of who you expect them to be.

The next hat, a size larger, is Disrespect. You employ Disrespect when you see a habit developing and you don't like it. Disrespect says, Here's an insult and that's what I'm going to think of you if you continue doing what I don't want you to do.

Disrespect comes in shades of sarcasm and namecalling, depending on your preference.

Disrespect still believes, but its open mockery leaves belief as an open question. And everyone knows it. It's a hat labeled "I'm with Stupid."

For really big occasions, Disdain cuts a wide swath. It's made for those red carpet moments when you want to draw attention to yourself as an individual and you walk before the paparazzi alone.

Disdain says, I am ashamed of my partner. I don't know what I ever saw in them. Yuck.

When you sport Disdain, you have one foot out the door. The label on the hat changes to "I'm NOT with Stupid." You wear Disdain when you almost never feel More in the relationship, and almost always feel Less. You spend a lot of time breaking the bond between you, rather than repairing the bond.

The final hat is Divorce. It's black. You wear it at funerals.

Divorce says, I'm done. It's over.

Divorce, at the end of the day, is an act of self-preservation. You're exhausted. You feel Less all the time. You feel More by yourself than you do in the relationship. Only Jesus could revive the Lazar-Us in the relationship, because it's dead and requires a miracle and a lot of faith.

Divorce sucks. And the steps toward it suck too.

Is that what you really want?

Seeing

Insecurity

Anger at having our expectations violated isn't the only means to relationship drama.

Insecurity is anger's ugly twin. Where anger occurs when things don't happen as expected, insecurity occurs when you don't feel as expected. You feel Less, not More.

Insecurity isn't always provoked. Sometimes it happens all by itself.

Your partner may tell you that you're beautiful. But you don't feel beautiful. What they see is not what you see, and that invites stress.

"You're just saying that. I'm not beautiful."

"You are. Really."

"Okay - what do you want?"

Or you might feel that you have to live up to the notion of beautiful as you see it.

"One day you'll wake up and see me as I am, and then what happens?"

Your partner did nothing wrong. In fact, your partner did everything right.

Sometimes it's provoked.

"I saw you looking. You like that?"

Or maybe...

"What's wrong with the house we're in? Not good enough for you?"

Your insecurities trigger a fight or flight response. They can lead to anger, whether provoked or unprovoked.

Insecurities are a third rail in a relationship. They're electric. We all have them. It's normal, and your partner needs to know what they are and might find it wise to find ways to avoid stepping on them.

It's worse when you're mocked for having an insecurity.

"I thought you were stronger than this."

Nothing diminishes you like feeling vulnerable about your vulnerability.

You need to know the insecurities of the person you choose. And then you need to decide whether you can live with those insecurities. They will come up, and they will invite stress.

Choose well.

Seeing

Repair

You can tear down in five minutes what took five years to build.

You should re-read that a lot. It's important.

Anger, when you allow yourself to go there, does nothing to protect or preserve Us. Quite the opposite. And at that point, carelessness overtakes caretaking and damage occurs.

When that happens, you need to repair the damage you've done.

It is bullshit to believe that time heals all wounds. Yes, that broken bone might fuse back together, but did you take the time to set it correctly before you left it alone to mend? Or did it "heal" bent and twisted?

Time does not heal all wounds. People heal wounds. Ignoring your partner is a form of neglect, and neglect is not repair.

Got that?

Anger damages belief.

Anger damages attraction.

Anger inserts Doubt into the relationship, and if you don't scrub out the Doubt, it will remain. Doubt is the opposite of Belief. Your partner has got to know that you believe in them. Your partner has to know that you are attracted to them. There can be no Doubt.

Anger says and does things that erode both of these. You reset the bones of Us to repair correctly when you re-establish both attraction and belief.

Know why there is make-up sex? It re-establishes attraction and demonstrates the craving for Us.

But it's what happens after the sex that matters just as much. Without re-establishing belief, Doubt can remain. You don't understand partnership if you suck at complete repair.

"I'm sorry I said that. I was stupid and careless. You're amazing, and I've always admired you. I believe in you. I believe in Us."

Or however you want to communicate it, but it has to be loud and clear and about you owning your own actions - as loud and clear as the damage you inflicted, if not more so.

You must become an expert at repair, as much as you need to be open to being repaired. If you do not allow your partner to engage in repair, it's Disdain, which is just a continuation of the argument. And ditto if you do not engage in repair. In which case, Divorce is in your future.

Seeing

One

Ultimately, your interactions as a couple define the life (singular) you build together.

The life you build together is the life of Us. It's something you share. It's precious and fragile. Most marriages end in divorce. Those that remain, many of them aren't worth mimicking.

Separate lives typically do just that - separate.

Jewel, in her song, Painters, uses this wording:

"...this life we created with these four hands."

That is intimate and wise. The Us life is a creation of both people, applying belief and repair and strengths and commitment to a life you build together.

One life, four hands.

Your vision through your relationship goggles will screw it up. You will see the world not as it is in truth, but as your blind spots and assumptions and biases skew it. As will your partner. The two of you will meet in the middle and disagree occasionally - or frequently - but stressors will test your bond and your fitness as a couple.

Do you esteem your partner?

Do you invest yourself into that life and those interests, whether you share them or not?

Do you show in your actions and words that they hung the moon?

Do you crave them and the Us you build together?

You only receive a return on what you invest. As you listen and give and support, you invest. As you love as they wish to be loved, you invest. As you own your mistakes without pointing the finger back to them, you invest.

It's rough at times. Most relationships degrade over time. But they don't have to.

Life is the sum of your choices. You can't always choose the circumstances, but you can choose your reaction to those circumstances.

The hardest thing in life is to see things as they really are. If you know that your vision of the world is not always correct, if you know that you can benefit from the perspective of others, and if you work hard to keep your eyesight as true as possible, you will find your way through with humility and dignity.

Do this, and you will enjoy the best possible world for you, with the people and relationships that bring richness and color to it, every day of this life.

"Try to learn to breathe deeply, really to taste food when you eat, and when you sleep really to sleep. Try as much as possible to be wholly alive with all your might, and when you laugh, laugh like hell. Try to be alive. You will be dead soon enough" - William Saroyan

About the Author

Brett Rogers married and divorced three times. He acquired the privilege of knowing and loving eight children along the way. He lives each day to the fullest, working to accomplish whatever is before him, and strongly believes that his truest talent, which is not particularly unique, is putting one foot in front of the other. He's been practicing since about nine months of age and very nearly has it down to an art. Any day now, he might just have it perfected...

About This Book

I wrote Seeing because I needed to figure out what I kept doing wrong. I took the accumulated wisdom from friends and relationships and through the course of incredible conversations started to cobble together a few things. What you have is the result of that. Writing this book convicted me of my own flaws, and gave me hope at the same time. My wish is that it helps others.

This is the first book of three. The next is Being, and I'll write it after I figure out more about my place in my own life.