THE POWER OF PERSUASION

how we’re bought and sold

ROBERT LEVINE
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

ONE
The Illusion of Invulnerability
Or, How Can Everyone Be Less Gullible Than Everyone Else? 5

TWO
Whom Do We Trust? Experts, Honesty, and Likability
Or, the Supersalesmen Don’t Look Like Salesmen at All 29

THREE
Killing You with Kindness
Or, Beware of Strangers Bearing Unexpected Gifts 65

FOUR
The Contrast Principle
Or, How Black Gets Turned into White 91
FOUR

The Contrast Principle

Or, How Black Gets Turned into White

The background has as much to do with the likeness as anything else. . . . The spaces on either side of the head and above the head can do so many different things good and bad to the head that it is remarkable how little attention is generally paid to them. A figure can be dwarfed by its placement, and if there is no sense of distance back of it and on this side of it it will most surely be flattened. . . . There are backgrounds so well made that you have no consciousness of them.

—Robert Henri, The Art Spirit

Matisse, it was said, could create any color in a painting without touching the color itself. All he asked was to control the colors around it. Similarly, look closely at a Van Gogh or a Monet or virtually any other impressionist work and you’ll have a hard time finding an accurately depicted color or clean brush stroke. These paintings are populated by oddities like people with bright orange hands and green faces; with irregular globs of paint that represent flags and trees; and with what appear to be accidental brush drippings that pass off as stars and steeples. Every detail on the canvas, seen in isolation, is inaccurate. But it all looks right when you stand back and take in the whole painting.

In perception, context is everything. Colors and shapes are elastic creatures that change with their surroundings. A black picture frame will make a gray painting look lighter; a white frame turns it darker. Put the same gray painting against a green background and it becomes pink. If you want to see a total color change, place a strong blue up against a red and watch the red turn orange—not orangish, but actual orange. Now vary the size, the shape, or the placement of any of these objects
and everything changes again. You don’t have to squint or make an effort to see the changes. If your vision is normal, they can’t be seen any other way. The changes are so dramatic that to the unprepared viewer, they can seem like magic.

The impressionists understood that the appearance of an object is controlled by the background as much as by the features of the object itself. Background forces are so powerful, in fact, that artists need to learn the seemingly absurd skill of knowing what “wrong” color will make a color look right. If you’re working against a dark background, for example, you need to paint the objects darker than they actually are to make them look like they actually are. When I studied art, we were taught not to overly intensify a color by surrounding it with a dull one, or to suck the intensity out of the color by surrounding it with an intense one. You even need to watch out for combinations that electrify each other. Try alternating strips of turquoise next to orange, for example, and you’ll see the two colors vibrate. Separate the colors and they both quiet down. Is the color really light or dark, red or orange, vibrating or still? Unless you live in an isolation tank, these are meaningless questions.¹

The human brain is wired to see relationships, not detached elements. The artist Heinz Kusel, who taught color theory for twenty years, explained: “Color by itself doesn’t exist. All that we see as color is created by relationships—what the color is next to, what surrounds it. A name for a color is absurd, because its appearance is constantly changing as a result of its environment. There are no fixed colors. In a different context it’s changed completely.”²

The creation of context is also the art form of persuasion professionals. Advertising, in particular, is all about background. There’s an old Madison Avenue axiom that every ad should include at least one dog, child, or sexy person. When in doubt, toss in another. Products are placed in the company of beautiful people and happy families, under cool waterfalls and tropical skies, in luscious mansions and manly wilderness—whatever casts the best light on the merchandise. Skim any magazine and count the ads that don’t use evocative background. I challenge you to find more than a handful. More attention, in fact, is usually paid to the context than to the product. This has been the case for many years. In 1917, Cyris Curtis made this observation about the then-popular ads for Arrow Collars and Pierce-Arrow cars: “They are almost all picture. It’s the atmosphere in these that sells . . . the quality
that gives prestige, the little imaginative sure touches that bring the thing before you.”

Some advertising is all background. Toyota, for example, introduced their then-new line of luxury cars, the Infinity, with a huge campaign that made a point of not showing the car. The visuals in these ads were Zen-like images intended to establish a feeling, a mood, for the sort of person who would want to own the new car. There were scenes of raindrops striking the surface of a pond, Japanese rock gardens, a flock of geese against an ethereal sky. One magazine ad showed a large granite rock—nothing else—on half the screen, with the question “What kind of person would drive an Infinity?” on the other half. Some ads strove for intellectual profundity about the meaning of the car; for example: “There are differences in philosophy between a car designer raised in Bavaria and one raised in Kyoto. Not so much on what is fundamentally good engineering, but on what luxury is.”

Toyota ran ads like these for six months, never showing the car or offering details about its mechanics (leave that toilet talk to the Bavarians), and certainly never stooping to vulgar matters like price. By omitting specific information, says Don Easdon, who codesigned the ads, “the scene becomes a frame for the message.” The message—that owning an Infinity will bring peaceful transcendence, or affirm your Zen-like presence, or God knows what salvation it’s supposed to offer you—would have presumably lost its impact from the sight of the car itself.

Advertising’s ultimate triumph of background over content may have been recently achieved in New Zealand, where graphic designer Fiona Jack conducted a peculiar billboard campaign to market her new product, Nothing. “I was thinking about advertising and all its strangeness, its coercive ability to sell the most completely bizarre things to people who usually don’t need them,” Jack observed. “I realized that the ultimate nonexistent product would be nothing.” New Zealand’s Outdoor Advertising Association became interested in her idea and agreed to feature the slogan “Nothing—What you’ve been looking for” on twenty-seven billboards around the Auckland area. The billboard company soon began receiving calls from potential customers wanting to know where they could buy some of that Nothing. “The majority of the population,” Jack says, “seem to be convinced that it is either a teaser for a campaign, or a new cosmetic product of a similar nature to the ‘Simple’ cosmetic range.”
The success of her campaign, Jack told me, “illustrates the absurdity of advertising and how it has established a kind of pseudo-authority which enables it to sell anything, even absolutely nothing, and consequently leaves the public in a vulnerable and gullible position.” The means of communicating this pseudoauthority is context. In the Nothing campaign, Jack pointed out, “the mere fact that people were very aware that ‘those billboards must have cost a lot of money’ means that what they’re advertising must be worthwhile. It couldn’t possibly be nothing, could it?” In an ironic postscript, Jack reported that “many people have been absolutely adamant that we make a product and call it Nothing. ‘You’ll make a fortune,’ they say. All I can wonder is, what could we make? Battery operated Zen gardens? Handy meditation kits? New Improved Satori—with an introductory offer of 30 milliliters extra free?”

While living in Brazil several years ago, I watched a variation on the Nothing strategy set to a campaign for the presidency. The country was, at the time, conducting its first free elections in many years. As you might expect, there was a great deal of excitement. Campaign ads were all over television. The streets were often filled with rambunctious caravans of vehicles blaring music and carrying beautiful women holding up signs for their candidate. The only thing people didn’t hear were the candidates themselves. The reason for this, it turned out, was that the ruling military government had banned the candidates from making public statements. I wondered how voters made their decisions. (“I liked the smile on the guy followed by the car with the blonde.” Or maybe, “I’m not voting for some jerk in a Volkswagen.”) To my surprise, few Brazilians I spoke to seemed bothered by the no-talking rule. “When the politicians start saying things,” one of my friends explained, “it just confuses people.” Muito bem, Brasileiros. (The Brazilian authorities might have pointed to the municipal elections that had taken place two years earlier in the town of Picoaza, Ecuador. Just before those elections, a product called Pulvapies Foot Deodorant had launched an opportunistic ad campaign with the slogan: “If you want well-being and hygiene, vote Pulvapies!” To everyone’s embarrassment, the product was elected mayor through write-in votes.)

The most fundamental of context effects is the principle of contrast. The principle relies on the fact that human minds magnify differences:
when two relatively similar stimuli are placed next to each other, they’ll be perceived as more different from each other than they actually are. Contrast is not only the most basic of context effects but probably the easiest to achieve. “I don’t paint things,” Matisse said. “I only paint the difference between things.”

The effect is well established in psychophysics. In a classic experiment, for example, psychologist Donald Brown asked subjects to lift various weights and judge how heavy each was. Some subjects were also asked to lift an anchor weight that was lighter or heavier than the target weight. Consistent with the contrast principle, subjects asked to lift a heavy anchor judged the target weight lighter than they had before lifting the anchor; lifting a light anchor led to judging the target as heavier. Of course, any baseball player who’s warmed up by attaching a weight to his bat could have told you the same thing.

On the sensory level, this magnification occurs physiologically. In vision, for example, we distinguish objects in space by seeing edges and boundaries. To make these edges stand out more clearly, the visual system oversharpens them in the mind’s eye through a process called lateral inhibition. When a sensory receptor cell is excited by a light source, it sends out two sets of messages. First, it sends impulses upward to the brain that announce the presence of the light. But it also sends inhibitory messages sideways to neighboring receptor cells to keep them from becoming excited at the same time. The more strongly the target cell is lit up, and the closer the two cells are to each other, the more the adjacent cell is inhibited. As a result, a light that is turning brighter may actually appear to get dimmer—that is, if its surroundings are brightening at an even faster rate. Lateral inhibition fools the visual system into seeing more contrast than actually exists.

The contrast effect occurs not only across space but over time. Our perceptions are affected by what occurred beforehand. This is called successive contrast. A loud noise on a quiet night sounds even louder. A cool breeze on a hot day feels that much cooler. Both spatial and temporal contrast apply to virtually every input that can be scaled from high to low. Boundaries seem sharper, brights look brighter, and darks turn darker. Our perceptual systems are like a big Clorox commercial.

When we move to the level of social experience, the contrast effect is even more pervasive. The human brain finds it extremely difficult to comprehend social cues outside of a context. How we respond to a
person or a request—whether it seems reasonable or excessive, important or trivial—depends on what came before and what other information sits beside it in the picture.

Say you receive a registered letter from the Internal Revenue Service. You tear it open and see the words “Back taxes owed” across the top. After skipping a few heartbeats—and perhaps mentally bargaining with your preferred deity about how you will change your life in return for this letter going away—you read they are asking for a total of $75. Thank you, God. But suppose later that day, when checking out a movie at the video store, the clerk informs you that your son has run up a late-return bill of $75. Perhaps you now have a different message for your Lord. It’s a matter of context.

I have a friend, Lenny, who has a habit of answering every question of judgment with the retort “Compared to what?” It’s an extremely annoying habit. But the question has great psychological wisdom, for almost any aspect of our lives worth evaluating is a matter of relativity. Are you happy with your life? Your marriage? Your job? Your dinner? There can be no meaningful answers to these questions before establishing the great human baseline: “Compared to what?” Lenny doesn’t let me forget this. Whenever I express joy he bursts my bubble with the question “But are you really happy?” (I really don’t like Lenny.) After all, outside of the extremes of euphoria and depression, how do we evaluate life’s ambiguities other than by comparing ourselves to others? H. L. Mencken defined wealth as “any income that is at least one hundred dollars more a year than the income of one’s wife’s sister’s husband.”

Social psychologists call this process “social comparison.” Cognitive psychologists refer to it as “framing.” To me, it’s basically Lenny’s law: compared to what?

Which brings me back to advertising. To say advertising takes advantage of the contrast principle is something of a redundancy. The fundamental aim of most advertising is to make your product stand out from the field. Marketing talk is saturated with terms like product differentiation, positioning, and finding a niche.

Consider toothpaste advertising, for example. With all the toothpastes on the market, companies need to somehow make theirs appear different. Once upon a time, Crest set itself apart by advertising that it—implying it alone—had stannis fluoride and was recommended by the American Dental Association. Now shelves are filled with competitors who fight cavities with fluoride. Since each has pretty much the
same cavity-fighting formula, advertisers are challenged to find some other “differentiator” that will establish a “position” for their product. In other words, how do they create a visible contrast between their product and the competition? If the toothpaste aisle were a painting, it would be like challenging Matisse to make a small patch of color in the corner jump out to capture the viewer’s attention.

I recently conducted a survey of toothpaste packaging. (My study engaged the classic scientific methodology of walking down the toothpaste aisle in my local Long’s drugstore and reading the labels on each product.) Every toothpaste, I learned, touts its differential by highlighting one or two ingredients or a specific benefit that is its alone. Arm & Hammer tells you it’s the baking soda + peroxide toothpaste. Listerine toothpaste kills germs that cause bad breath. Tom’s of Maine is the natural toothpaste (with calcium to boot). Rembrandt is the whitening toothpaste. Metadent has fluoride, baking soda, and peroxide and—lest you confuse it with Arm & Hammer—adds that it has “the ingredients dentists recommend most for the care of teeth and gums.” One brand just calls itself by its differential: Plus + White Toothpaste. My own favorite is a Colgate toothpaste that contains “micro-cleansing crystals.” Take that, Mr. Tooth Decay. Crest, meanwhile, hasn’t stood still. It now promotes a series of toothpastes, each with its own special formula. The entire Crest line is contrasted not only with competitive brands but against itself. One Crest toothpaste features sensitivity protection, another has tartar protection, a third offers cavity protection, a fourth has gum care protection. Would it really be so difficult, one wonders, to mix all those protections together in one tube? (Maybe toss in a couple of micro-crystals while they’re at it, too.) All these pitches strive for the same goals: sharpen the edges, magnify the differences, and—most important of all—make consumers aware there is something you have for them that they need and don’t yet possess.

The most direct application of the contrast principle in advertising is what is known, literally, as “contrast advertising,” whereby your product is directly compared to specific competitors. For example, if you show a Big Mac next to your brand of hamburger while explaining how yours is cooked fresher, has more beef, and costs thirty cents less, this is contrast advertising.

Contrast advertising has a history of controversy attesting to its potential effectiveness. For years, the dominant trade groups and large
advertising agencies aggressively fought for its prohibition. The critics’ overt argument was the technique is uncivil and unprofessional. Their real fear, however, was it offered a weapon that small, aggressive competitors could use to cut into their share of the market. As a result, the major television networks initially banned the method. Consumer groups and the FTC, however, argued that contrast advertising held the potential for communicating relevant information. The best of these ads offered consumers hard, verifiable facts instead of the usual vague puffery coming out of Madison Avenue. NBC finally lifted its ban on contrast advertising in 1964. ABC and CBS didn’t relent until 1972, when they were under threat of FTC lawsuits over restraint of trade. By 1980, 25 percent of advertisements on ABC were drawing pointed comparisons with other products.  

Contrast advertising often focuses on images as much as it does facts. LOT Airlines, the airline of Poland, for example, not long ago set out to persuade more tourists to visit that country. The company designed an advertising campaign that emphasized the Europeanness of Poland. One typical ad showed a picturesque outdoor café in the old town of Warsaw with two happy tourists being fawned over by an eager, Continental-looking waiter. But how do you convince foreigners that la dolce vita awaits them in a country best known for wartime horrors, political repression, and economic depression? To show that Poland’s finest wasn’t just worthy by Polish standards, LOT set up a clever contrast with the established real thing in European charm—Paris. In one series, the ads showed cafés in Poland that easily passed as Parisian look-alikes. They then took advantage of the stereotype that French people are unfriendly to tourists. The slogan read: “Quaint little Parisian cafés without the Parisians.” In your visage, Maurice.  

Still, some advertisers question the sensibility of naming or showing competitors’ products. They argue that it both can be demeaning to your own commodity and gives your rival free publicity. But contrast advertising has an impressive history of success stories. As a case in point, Madison Avenue giant Amil Gargano has used contrast advertising in breakthrough advertising campaigns for some of the world’s largest corporations. The criteria for using comparative advertising are simple, he says: “You have to compare reasonably like products. If you are in the market for a car at—let’s say—between $12,000 to $15,000, what are your choices? What would you look for? What cars are selling in that price category and are they of comparable performance
characteristics? Of course, you must also have the superior product. Otherwise, why make the comparison?”

Gargano recently designed an advertisement for his client MCI that showed two pictures of the same woman side by side. In front of the first picture was a sign saying “Bell $8.20.” In front of the second picture was the sign “MCI $4.98.” The implied message: everything is the same, except MCI is less than half the price. “That’s a superior product benefit—a significant point of comparison,” he observes.

One of Gargano’s most notable campaigns, for Hertz rental cars, challenged the Avis “When you’re number two you try harder” slogan. Avis’s catchphrase was classic contrast advertising, even if it never did actually mention Hertz by name. Gargano built a countercampaign under the slogan “For years Avis has been telling you Hertz is No. 1. Now we’re going to tell you why.” The advertisements, which ran for ninety days, effectively killed off the long-standing Avis campaign. As Gargano observes, “If comparative advertising is done correctly, it can be enormously effective.”

In persuasion, contrast gets exploited in at least two ways. One is to convince you that what a company is selling is a better deal than what the competition has to offer. The second is to alter your expectations, or what’s known as your “anchor point.” Perhaps you’re shopping for a certain camera. Your friend tells you he just bought one for $200. You see the same one in a discount store for $175. Good deal, right? But say, instead, the friend had told you that he thought the camera should cost $150. That $175 price isn’t so attractive anymore.

It works something like a thermostat. Say your air conditioner is set to turn on at seventy-five degrees but the temperature in the room is only seventy degrees. Either of two events will start the air conditioner: the temperature in the room goes up five degrees or you lower the thermostat five degrees. Likewise, in persuasion, you can manipulate either a person’s anchor point or the features of the product you’re selling. Both achieve the same effect.

Anchor points are remarkably malleable. I like an observation Terry Prothro, the former director of the Center for Behavioral Research of the American University of Beirut, once made about his chaotic, war-torn years there: “There is a test we used to do in class to see how easily living things can adapt. You put a frog in a pail of water and gradually turn up the heat. The frog just keeps adjusting to the new
temperature, until it finally boils to death, because it is so used to adjusting that it doesn’t think to jump out of the pail. I feel like that frog.”

Sometimes salesmen up the ante so slowly and over such an extended period of time that we fail to recognize how much more they’re asking. A good example is the evolving advertising campaign for Michelob beer. Imagine how you’d react if a company came right out and told you to drink beer every night. Why not just preach the virtues of becoming an alcoholic? This is pretty much what the good people at Michelob have done. But they’ve been clever enough to up their requests in small increments. In the 1970s, Michelob’s slogan was “Holidays are made for Michelob.” Apparently limiting drinking to special occasions didn’t sell enough beer because a year later the slogan became “Weekends are made for Michelob.” Next thing we knew it stretched to “Put a little weekend in your week.” Eventually it became “The night belongs to Michelob.” Who knows what’s next? “Breakfast is Michelob time”? “Put a little weekend in your oatmeal”? Taken as a whole, the ad campaign sounds frighteningly like a tutorial written by drug dealers: get a little of the chemical in people’s systems, let them adapt, and then gradually up the dose until they’re hooked. But you don’t notice because no single step registers a noticeable difference.

Because our anchor points are so readily manipulable, they’re often easier to change than the product itself. Here are three traps to watch out for.

The anchoring trap. Consider these two questions:

1. Is the population of Turkey greater than 30 million?
2. What is your best estimate of Turkey’s population?

Most people’s answer to the second question, studies find, is heavily influenced by the figure of 30 million—which is, in fact, an arbitrarily selected number. But, now, what would happen if I substituted 100 million for 30 million in the first question? Almost without fail, the answer to the second question increases on the order of many millions. This is an example of what’s known as the “anchoring trap.”

The anchoring trap may be used to make a high price appear lower. For example, when Storer Cable Communications wanted to raise its rates to subscribers in Louisville, Kentucky, the company mailed out
this notice: “It’s not often you get good news instead of a bill, but we’ve got some for you. If you’ve heard all those rumors about your basic cable rate going up $10 or more a month, you can relax: it’s not going to happen! The great news is . . . the rate for basic cable is increasing only $2 a month.” In other words, Storer wasn’t charging you $2; it was saving you $8. What a swell company.

Our anchors are easily manipulated through distortions like this. We’re especially vulnerable when our initial baselines are weak. This is often the case when entering a novel situation or a suddenly threatening one. When unsure of our bearings we look to others for clues. Sometimes we get good information, but other times we don’t. One thing’s for sure: you’ll find no shortage of manipulators happy to set your expectations for you.

The base rate fallacy. Not only is the level of our anchor point subject to manipulation, but we sometimes use the wrong anchor completely. Consider the following statements.

Benjamin Harper is best described as a meek, unassertive person. He’s either a salesman or a librarian. Which one do you think he is?

The almost unanimous answer to this question is that Benjamin is a librarian. When people are asked to set odds that he’s a librarian, the average estimate is in the neighborhood of 90 percent. The obvious reasoning behind the choice is that Benjamin’s personality fits the stereotype of a librarian and is contrary to the stereotype of salesmen. The logic sounds sensible. But it’s completely wrong.

The problem is your anchor, or what in this case is called your base rate. Benjamin’s personality may match that of a librarian, but the number of male salesmen in the United States outnumber male librarians by about one hundred to one. In other words, before even beginning to consider information about Benjamin’s personality, you should have recognized there’s only a 1 percent chance he’d be a librarian. Let’s assume the stereotype of the two professions turns out to be wildly accurate and that 90 percent of all male librarians are, in fact, meek and unassertive while 90 percent of salesmen are not. Even then, this works out to more than ten meek salesmen for every meek librarian.

I watched the base rate fallacy manipulated often by car salesmen. When I was training to sell at one dealership, one of my fears was how I’d be able to learn enough information about every car and model to give credible sales presentations. I explained to one of my managers
that I was (and am) virtually illiterate about cars. He told me not to worry, that lots of the other salesmen were, too. A few facts, he explained, would go a long way.

The manager assigned me to shadow one of the more experienced salesmen on a “walk around.” This is when the salesman slowly walks the customer around a specific car and points out as many attractive features as he can. The primary goal here is to make the car appear sufficiently special to warrant taking it out for a test-drive, a step which most salesmen consider the watershed commitment in the sales process (see chapter 7). The salesman usually begins his walk by pointing out features under the hood, then circles the chassis and trunk, and finally sits the customer in the driver’s seat. The walk around requires the salesman to be as specific as possible about the features of a car.

The salesman, whom I’ll call Lou, put on an impressive performance, firing a rat-tat-tat of facts as he moved the customer around the car. Under the hood, for example, Lou explained how this car had specially designed gauges for convenient reading. He moved quickly to the halogen headlights and how crisp and clear they were. After a few minutes of information like this, he ended the walk around with the safety features, stopping to emphasize the remarkable way the hood on this car was designed to crumple in predesigned areas during a frontal impact to “keep it from decapitating the driver and passenger.”

I was astonished by the volume of knowledge Lou had about this car. This couldn’t be one of the fellow automotive illiterates my manager was talking about? I asked Lou how he could possibly memorize so much about all the brands and models on the lot. It was easy, he said. You basically say the same thing about every car. Sure the fluid gauges in the car he’d shown were specially designed for easy reading. But the thing is, every car manufacturer does something to make fluid checking easier—one uses color coding, another uses icons, and so on—so you make the same statements about convenience no matter what the car. Similarly, it was true that the car he showed had crisp, clear halogen headlights, but so did every other car on the lot. The predesigned frontal-impact crumpling? This, too, was a fact. What Lou didn’t tell the customer was that by law, the hood on every automobile sold in the United States is required to fold up on frontal impact.

You see the base rate fallacy exploited a great deal in the advertising industry, too. Consider, for example, the Bayer aspirin ads that used to brag how the product was “100% pure aspirin.” They then went on
to say that “government tests have proved that no pain reliever is stronger or more effective than Bayer.”16 What they failed to mention was every aspirin is 100 percent aspirin, and so why in the world would you expect any brand to be more effective than the others? (Bayer’s duplicity was enhanced by the fact that they were among the most active critics of contrast advertising. When a competing aspirin compared its prices to Bayer’s over the air, the director of Bayer’s advertising agency, Frank Hummert, sent a venomous threat to NBC: “If this continues any further I personally will see to it that every relationship between us and National Broadcasting Company is impaired to the best of my ability and I think you know that I make good on these things.”)17 Bayer’s competitors over at Anacin were even craftier. They added a little caffeine to their pill and then, rather than calling the product aspirin, simply announced that “Anacin contains the pain reliever doctors recommend most.” The pain reliever they referred to was, of course, none other than good old aspirin.18

If you don’t begin with an accurate base rate, the contrast effect will just lead you further astray.

The decoy. Another application of the contrast principle entails showing the customer options he won’t buy but which will reset his base rate so that other products look more attractive. A Realtor, for example, might first show you a house that is similar but slightly inferior to one you’re interested in—a little smaller or more expensive, perhaps. Auto dealers might start off with an overpriced car, or the same car they hope to sell you but with fewer features, or one that is less comfortable or the wrong color. These setup items are decoys.

The decoy may be embedded in a manufacturer’s product line. Recently, for example, I went shopping for an espresso machine at a well-known gourmet cooking store. The saleswoman steered me to a quality German brand which she carried in three models, list priced at $199.95, $299.95, and $499.95, respectively. The $199.95 machine was being offered at a $25 discount. The saleswoman first spent a few minutes selling me on the virtues of the brand. “My customers say it makes better coffee than Starbucks” was her precise tag line. This was basic self-serving contrast advertising, of course.

She then turned to differences within her own product line. These contrasts were less blatantly self-serving and, as a result, more persuasive. The only difference among the three models, she explained, were
features. The two more-expensive machines made more coffee (up to twenty cups) on one tank of water than the $199.95 machine. The big feature of the $499.95 machine was that it used—in fact required—prepackaged packets of coffee rather than loose scoopfuls from a bag. These coffee packets had to be purchased from the manufacturer. “To tell you the truth,” the saleswoman said, “very few of my customers ever need to make twenty cups of espresso at one time. Besides, it only takes a couple of minutes to refill and heat a new tank of water if you do. And everyone I’ve talked to hates the idea of a [$499.95] machine that limits you to prepackaged coffee packets.” All three models, she explained, made the same quality coffee. “If you can live without the twenty-cup water tank,” she observed, “you’re buying all the best features of a $500 coffee machine for less than half the price.”

After pausing to let that sink in, she added, “You may want to know that almost everyone who comes in buys the $199 machine. I’ve seen a few customers take the $299 model, but that $499 machine—I haven’t sold one of them in the two years I’ve worked here. I don’t know why we even carry them.” When I inquired further, she told me the $499 machine rarely went on sale. How strange, I thought. Here was a store with limited and very expensive floor space, with professional buyers who carefully select their offerings from a highly competitive product line, and the store carries a coffee machine that nobody has bought for two years?

To understand the presence of the $499 machine, I might have looked to an experiment by Itamar Simonson and Amos Tversky that studied consumer responses to different microwave ovens. Half the shoppers in their experiment were given the choice of either a $179.99 Panasonic oven or a $109.99 Emerson oven, both of which were being offered at a 35 percent discount. The other half were also given a third option—a $199.99 Panasonic at a mere 10 percent discount. Results showed that very few shoppers (only 13 percent) selected this expensive third option. But that shouldn’t have bothered the good people at Panasonic. When the expensive Panasonic was not an option, more buyers (57 percent) chose the Emerson than the $179 Panasonic (43 percent). But when the expensive Panasonic was an added option, the results were reversed: 60 percent now selected the $179 Panasonic and only 27 percent wanted the Emerson. In other words, the addition of the relatively expensive, low-value microwave sold more of its sister Panasonics than it did of itself.19
And here lies the true value of the $499 espresso machine, which, for all I know, is still gathering dust on the shelf in that same store. Its critical function had less to do with selling itself than to provide contrast with the rest of the product line. How many of its more reasonably priced colleagues did that awkward $499 model help sell? A good decoy is a team player—it makes everything around it look better.

Of course, salespeople must avoid being too obvious with decoys. One strategy is to set up the decoy with another item—a decoy for the decoy. One clothing store I visited did this cleverly. They began with a come-on to get customers in the shop: at the entrance, about ten feet inside the doorway (thus avoiding the decompression zone just beyond the entrance), they placed a large sign with the seductive message “Save 10% when you open an instant credit card account.” A few feet beyond the sign and maybe thirty degrees off to the right (thus taking advantage of shoppers’ inclination to move toward the right), the customer’s eye was drawn to a small, sloppy table of name-brand cashmere sweaters at 40 percent off, of which only odd sizes remained. This was the decoy to set up the decoy. A few steps farther down the aisle, again slightly to the right, was a small table with the main decoy: name-brand cotton sweaters which were priced 20 percent to 30 percent higher than the cashmeres. Just beyond that was a large, neat, colorfully displayed table with the real catch of the day: “This Week’s Featured” sweaters, discounted generic-brand clones of the name-brand cashmeres, priced even lower than the sale-priced cashmeres and much lower than the decoy. You’re in the store, you’re down the aisle, your wallet is open.

A question marketers frequently face is how much difference a person requires to see contrast. How high, for example, can they raise the price of a drink before customers perceive it to be significantly more expensive? How much has to be shaved off the size of a candy bar before people notice a drop in value? How much sugar needs to be added for a cereal to taste sweeter?

In psychophysics, these critical points are called “just noticeable differences,” or JNDs. Scientists have been studying JNDs for a long time; in fact, since before there was even a field of psychology. In 1834 (the first psychology laboratory was established by Wilhelm Wundt in 1879), Ernst Weber published the results of a series of experiments in which he asked observers to lift a standard weight and a comparison weight and to then judge which was heavier. By carefully varying the
difference in heaviness between the pairs of weights, Weber was able to quantify the smallest difference that could be detected at each weight level. Weber’s crucial discovery was that the greater the weight you begin with, the more must be added to see a JND. If you begin with a standard weight of ten pounds, for example, the addition of about two pounds is just noticeably different. A fifteen-pound weight, however, requires an additional three pounds to see a JND, and a twenty-pound weight requires an additional four pounds. A JND is defined as the point at which two stimuli are recognized as different half the time.

After a long series of experiments, with many types of sensory inputs, Weber discovered that the JND between any two stimuli is based on a precise ratio between the size of the increase and the size of the beginning standard—what is known today as Weber’s law. The particular magnitude of this ratio depends on what you’re comparing. Studies have shown, for example, that it requires on average less than half a percent change in the pitch (frequency) of a tone for the change to be noticed, a little less than 2 percent in the brightness of a light for it to be recognized as brighter, a 14 percent change in pressure on the skin surface to be felt, and 20 percent more salt to be added to food before it tastes saltier.20

Marketers, naturally, are very interested in JNDs. Their focus is on perceptions of price and product quality and how these data can be applied to maximize their profit margin. To put it cynically, the question marketers want to answer is this: how much less value can I give you before you notice a difference?

Let’s return, for example, to the question of how much a price must be altered before it makes a difference. Strictly speaking, measuring JNDs in price perception is ridiculous. Prices, unlike sensory experience, come to us in the form of numbers. You don’t need to run experiments to figure out that two numbers that are different will be noticed as different. But there’s the more challenging—and potentially profitable—question of subjective meaning: How different must prices be before they affect a purchase decision? Do buyers really care whether the product costs ninety-nine cents or a dollar? Is there a JND when it’s dropped to ninety-five cents? Where are the cutoffs?

As with all JND questions, the answers begin with the rule of proportion: a $1 difference obviously has a bigger impact when we’re choosing between inexpensive items (say, two cereal brands) than if we’re comparing expensive ones (for example, new cars). The specific
ratio? This is where it gets messy. As a beginning, however, we might turn to the results of an experiment by marketing researcher Joseph Uhl and colleagues that measured people’s reactions to various price changes for a range of products. Uhl found that on average, something on the order of a JND occurred when prices varied by 5 percent. Variations of at least 5 percent made a difference to 64 percent of the consumers he tested. (This is about half the change [10 percent] needed for the loudness of a tone to be noticed as different.) This means that all things being equal, more than half of us will perceive a meaningful difference when a $1 item is dropped to $0.95: ninety-five cents is a sale, ninety-six cents is not. The higher the base price, the more absolute change required to make a difference. A $5 item must be reduced to $4.75 to achieve a JND. A $20,000 automobile needs to be discounted to $19,000.²¹

But this 5 percent figure is only a rough generalization. Studies show that the ratio required for a price change to produce a meaningful difference for consumers is considerably more elastic than the JND ratios for weights or sounds in a laboratory. Research has found, for example, that:

- We’re more sensitive to price differences when shopping for necessities than for luxuries.
- Women are more discriminating of price differences than are men.²²
- It takes a smaller price increase to deter poor shoppers than rich ones.²³
- Price drops are weighted more heavily for name brands than for generic store brands. For example, a name-brand product requires a smaller discount to be perceived as a bargain than does a generic store brand.²⁴

In other words, the percentage of change needed to create a JND for prices depends on a host of factors, ranging from the nature of the product to the context of the purchase to the resources of the consumer.

Equally important is the slippery problem of the appearance or “surface features” of the numbers themselves. These can be as influential as the actual magnitude of the prices. This has led to a practice sometimes called “psychological pricing.” There is evidence, for example, that:
• Odd-number prices (like $199 or ninety-nine cents) tend to be perceived as significantly lower than the next highest even, round numbers ($200 or $1). In other words, the “ninety-nine cents” strategy works. On the other hand, an equal price drop, when it goes from an odd to an even number, has less impact. Dropping a price from $201 to $200 or from $199 to $198, for example, doesn’t create a JND.

• Prices ending with odd numbers create the impression of being more different from each other than do pairs of prices ending with even numbers. Consumers perceive the difference between $5.99 and $7.99, for example, as significantly greater than the difference between $6.00 and $8.00.

• For many products, we typically don’t look past the second digit in the price. This is more likely to be true for high-priced items, but it is also the case for many low-cost articles, such as grocery items. For example, consumers don’t discriminate price-wise between a can of tuna selling for $1.59 and one selling for $1.53.

Given these and many other quirks, there’s clearly no single, invariable ratio that defines JNDs for prices. What makes for a meaningful difference in the consumer’s eyes depends on many factors, all of which must be taken into account.

If you want to observe cutting-edge JND research nowadays, there’s no need to visit a psychophysics laboratory. You’ll find all the specimens you need in your mailbox. The ones I find most interesting are the solicitations from charitable organizations because they don’t simply look for a yes or no sale, but are out to obtain the largest gift possible. Contributions are theoretically limitless.

Many of these solicitations are haphazard. The National Federation for the Blind, for example, recently sent me a letter with the request to “send $55.00, $27.50, $37.25, $12.50, $17.25 or as much as you can share with us.” There’s not a lot of psychophysics in that machine-gun fire. Other organizations, however, are more systematic. The typical strategy is to first win a minimal commitment and to then apply the contrast principle from a reverse perspective, with the express goal of pushing you just short of a JND to a larger commitment. The surface features of the numbers are often key elements in this strategy.
Recently, for example, I received a donation request from Special Olympics. To be more specific, it was a “sponsorship request” from their spokesperson, ex-football great Roger Staubach. Even more specifically, it was my “SECOND NOTICE” (Roger’s capitals) of his sponsorship request. “Dear Dr. Robret Lemine,” he addressed me. (Roger is one of several “friends” who write for my money who call me “Robret Lemine.” Ed McMahon does, too. Robret Lemine also happens to be the misspelling that was transcribed when I signed up for a subscription to a popular magazine. It doesn’t take Sherlock Holmes to figure out that this magazine is the source, or at least the source of the source, from which Roger and Ed both bought my name. It seems that Special Olympics and Publishers Clearing House work from the same mailing list. Go know.)

Roger went on to say, “Any amount you decide on or whatever you can afford will help tremendously and be deeply appreciated.” Stuffed in the envelope was my “SECOND NOTICE Reply Form,” which confronted me with the following statement:

I have enclosed my contribution of:
( ) $20 ( ) $24 ( ) $28 ( ) Other

How did Roger arrive at these numbers? First off, he needed to decide on a baseline. This was a no-brainer. His computer knew I’d donated $20 to Special Olympics the year before. Roger was relying on a common strategy. Begin your request at the highest level the purchaser has committed to in the past. If there’s anything we’ve learned in psychology over the years, it’s that the single best predictor of how a person will behave in the future is how he behaved in the past. It’s like fishing. With all the possible spots on the lake, how do you decide where to drop your bait? As a general rule of thumb, you begin where the most fish were caught the last time around.

After establishing my most likely acceptable baseline point at $20, Special Olympics goes on to ask me to dig a little deeper this year. This is where JNDs come in. The graduated solicitations are designed to avoid the perception of contrast. It’s their hope I’ll see all three as reachable, giveable amounts and I’ll opt for the highest one.

But the magnitude of the upward requests is a slippery business. On one hand, they should be high enough to be profitable. Aiming too high, however, can put your solicitation—literally—in the trash. This is because a request falling outside our latitude of acceptance is not only
rejected but may lead to a paradoxical effect. If we’re pushed too hard, we react with everything from suspicion and annoyance to anger and dislike. Research has shown the entire solicitation then loses its credibility, and people are less likely to give anything at all.\textsuperscript{28} It sets off one of the great banes of solicitors—the boomerang response.

How effectively has Special Olympics played to my JND? Consider its first suggested increase, to $24. On one hand, this 20 percent increase (from $20) seems a bit steep, at least compared to what Uhl found for the JND of retail prices. On the other hand, it works nicely when you consider surface features: most people are going to weigh the increase of $4 against a second standard—the round figure of $5. You’ve got to assume that almost any donor who chooses to raise his contribution level is thinking in minimal increments of $5. Anything smaller seems chintzy. By that standard, the suggested $4 increase seems a bargain—a full 20 percent less than $5.

All in all, then, the $24 request is a reasoned attempt to exceed the limits of my JND without moving into my range of rejection. In addition, how many people will actually write out their check for an awkward figure like $24? It’s safe to assume that many of the contributors who are willing to take the leap to $24 will, in the end, toss in another buck, rounding their donation up an additional less-than-JND increment to $25.

Another approach Special Olympics might have taken here is to separate the payments into smaller portions. This is the “How much does it cost a day?” strategy. For example, another nonprofit group, a school for special children, recently sent me a solicitation with a nickel pasted at the top of the cover letter. Next to the nickel was a large photo of a beautiful, angst-faced little boy who looked like he could have played the lead character in \textit{Angela’s Ashes}. Below that was the appeal: “Only a nickel a day helps you give a child like Frankie a new chance at life.” Hey, brother, are you going to tell me you can’t spare a lousy nickel? Try explaining why you said no to that pitch.

The small payments strategy isn’t, of course, limited to nonprofits. Cellular phone companies, for example, typically offer you a deeply discounted or free phone if you commit to an extended service contract. If you’re a moderate user, perhaps you’d consider signing up for $39.00/month for the next two years. The phone is thrown in for free. How would you feel, however, if the company hung a $959.76 price tag
on that new phone, which is at least what you’ll be paying before your contract expires?

But back to Roger Staubach. His next suggestion, for yet another $4 increase, to $28, is even more reasonable than the first. It’s asking an even smaller proportional increase (16.7 percent) from the previous level ($24) while at the same time remaining 20 percent below the $5 reference standard. But there’s also a flaw in this solicitation. If Special Olympics thinks $4 is the lower limit of my JND at the $20 level, then they’re too far under a JND at this one. The absolute dollar increase should go up at each level. If there’s a 20 percent increase at the first level, there should be another 20 percent at the next. You get the picture.

Of course, the fund-raisers from Special Olympics could care less whether they get high marks from an academic theorist. They’re not taking a class in research methodology. Salespeople—no matter whether they work for profit or nonprofit causes—are probably the most empirical of all professionals. “It is an immutable law in business,” supersalesman Harold Geneen observed, “that words are words, explanations are explanations, promises are promises—but only performance is reality.” The bottom line is always the same: does it sell? By that criterion, I would grade the Special Olympics appeal a clear success: I ended up writing a check for $30. After all, Roger’s my bud. Then again, I signed the check “Robret Lemine.”
Much of this book has been about overt compliance. We’ve looked at techniques that get you to buy kitchen knives, give a donation, or obey orders. Many times that’s all the persuader cares about. The bottom line in these situations is getting you to take out your wallet or cast your vote or perform some other onetime behavior.

There are some situations, however, in which mere compliance isn’t enough. With sufficient force, for example, all parents can get a child to do a homework assignment. But how do you get him to work hard time after time, when you’re not around to hold discipline over his head? What you really want him to do is internalize discipline, to become self-disciplined. How do you move a person from mere overt compliance to private acceptance?

It’s the same issue faced by any organization that thrives on group commitment, be it a business organization, a religious group, a sports team, or one’s family. Cults epitomize the problem. Almost any huckster can offer sweet perks to get you to come by for a weekend. But cults don’t thrive on people who simply show up. They’re in the market for true believers: people who will devote their entire selves to whatever is required for the cause.
Winning hearts and minds carries the principle of escalating commitments to the hilt. Think of this chapter as the advanced lesson to the principle. The process requires a long, patient sequence of demands. It also, however, necessitates the demands be framed in particular ways. There’s no absolute template for this level of mind control. Ultimately, it’s an artform that, like any exercise in persuasion, must be adjusted according to the characteristics of the persuader, the audience, and the message in question. But the following eight general principles are good basic guides for what to watch out for.

Watch Out for the Invisible

The esteemed social psychologist Elliot Aronson likes to tell about a baseball game he once umpired. The day after the game he met an acquaintance who’d been in the stands watching the entire game. When Aronson asked the man what he thought of his umpiring, the man was surprised. He said he hadn’t noticed that Aronson was the umpire, or noticed much about the umpire at all. To Aronson, this was the ultimate compliment of a job well done. He’d successfully steered the game without getting in the way.

The most dangerous mind controllers are a little like invisible umpires except, unlike Aronson, they control events to meet their needs, not yours. They know how to pull the strings so subtly you don’t realize they’re doing it.

The Moonies are often held up as contemporary examples of the spellbinding power of brainwashing. The media has portrayed members as already-vulnerable weaklings who are overcome by insidious, hypnotic, even Satanic-like programs of mind control. But if the Moonies are brainwashed, it’s far from the popular stereotype.

Moonies almost invariably deny that POW-type coercive brainwashing had anything to do with their conversion. “When I was in the Moonies I ‘knew’ I hadn’t been brainwashed,” recalls ex-Moonie and now anticult activist Steven Hassan.1 Brainwashing, Hassan imagined, “would involve being tortured in a dank basement somewhere, with a light bulb shining in my face. Of course, that never happened to me while I was in the Moonies.” But the fact that he wasn’t being brainwashed didn’t mean there was no mind control. “When I was under mind control, I didn’t really understand what it would be all about,”
says Hassan. Only years later did he see that subtle psychological pressures were insidiously altering his belief system more powerfully than torture and brainwashing ever could have.

Hassan didn’t see pressure because he was looking in the wrong place. The most effective mind control is channeled through peers, other recruits, and members—people who seem like colleagues, not bosses. A smart leader suppresses his ego and remains quietly in the background like an invisible umpire. In the Moonies, this is easy because everyone else you interact with encourages you to convert.

To begin with, the recruit encounters an army of enthusiastic members. “For the average person, talking with an indoctrinated cultist is quite an experience,” Hassan observes. “You have probably never met anyone else, friend or stranger, who is so absolutely convinced that he knows what is best for you. A dedicated cult member also does not take no for an answer, because he has been indoctrinated to believe that if you don’t join, he is to blame.” The member feels enormous pressure to succeed in winning you over.

On top of this, you’re surrounded by social proof. It seems that every other recruit is impressed by what they see. Little do you know that this unanimity, too, is manipulated. At the beginning of a Moonie workshop, members sometimes set up teams to quickly evaluate and divide recruits into the “sheep”—newcomers who are “spiritually prepared”—and the “goats”—stubborn individualists who are less likely to become good members. The goats are kept at a safe distance from the sheeps to be sure their “negativity” doesn’t rub off. Goats who can’t be “broken” are asked to leave. “When I left the group,” Hassan recalls, “I was amazed to learn that entirely different cults were doing the same thing. We thought we had invented the technique.”

Moonie leaders even exploit the term brainwashing. When outsiders denounce members as brainwashed—a regular occurrence in the life of a Moonie—the condemnation is spun to produce a counterproductive effect. “It’s too bad the word ‘brainwashing’ is used so loosely by the news media,” Hassan observes. “It evokes a picture of conversion by torture. Those inside a cult know they haven’t been tortured, so they think critics are making up lies. I do remember, however, Moon giving us a speech in which he said a popular magazine had accused him of brainwashing us. He declared, ‘Americans’ minds are very dirty—full of selfish materialism and drugs—and they need a heavenly brainwashing!’ We all laughed.” Most Moonies, in fact, are proud of their
new identity. Ex-members describe wearing T-shirts and drinking from coffee mugs emblazoned with the slogan “I’m a Moonie and I ♥ it!” Accusations of brainwashing increase this wish to belong. “Whenever people yelled at me and called me a ‘brainwashed robot,’” Hassan says, “I just took it as an expected persecution. It made me feel more committed to the group.”

**Force: Less Is More**

We resent being controlled. When a person seems too pushy, we get suspicious, annoyed, and often angry, and yearn to retain our freedom of choice more than before. Psychologist Jack Brehm called this the principle of “psychological reactance.” Or, if you prefer, it’s what the social psychologist Joseph Masling labeled the “screw you effect.”

Anyone who’s encountered a willful child is familiar with the scenario. Tell the child something’s prohibited and he becomes obsessed with nothing else. In an experiment by Sharon Brehm and Marsha Weinraub, two-year-old boys were placed in a room with a pair of equally attractive toys. One of the toys was placed next to a Plexiglas wall, the other was set behind the Plexiglas. For some boys, the wall was one foot high, which allowed the boys to easily reach over and touch the distant toy. Given this easy access, they showed no particular preference for one toy or the other. For other boys, however, the wall was a formidable two feet high, which required them to walk around the barrier to touch the toy. When confronted with this wall of inaccessibility, the boys headed straight for the forbidden fruit, touching it three times as quickly as the accessible toy.

Research shows that much of that two-year-old remains in adults, too. The most effective way to circumvent psychological reactance is to begin the demands so gradually that there’s seemingly nothing to react against. Steven Hassan recalls how, in the Moonies, “behaviors are shaped subtly at first, then more forcefully. The material that will make up the new identity is doled out gradually, piece by piece, only as fast as the person is deemed ready to assimilate it. The rule of thumb is ‘Tell him only what he can accept.’” When Hassan was a lecturer in the Moonies, he’d often discuss this strategy with other lecturers. “To rationalize our manipulations we would use this analogy: ‘You wouldn’t feed a baby thick pieces of steak, would you? You have to feed it something...
it can digest, like formula. Well, these people (potential converts) are spiritual babies. Don’t sell them more than they can handle, or they will die.’ If a recruit started getting angry because he was learning too much about us, the person working on him would back off and let another member move in to spoon feed some pablum.”

The magician and persuasion artist Gregory Wilson calls this reach and withdrawal: “When I reach, you withdraw. I withdraw, you reach.”

Another shortcoming of excessive force is that it’s usually temporary. If someone exercises enough force, of course, most of us have the good sense to keep our rebelliousness to ourselves. Point a gun at someone’s head, or offer them enough money, and you can get most people to do about anything. But if it’s hearts and minds you’re after, this won’t carry you far. People will obey, but only as long as the gun is at their head. Overt force elicits short-term, public compliance, but it’s not very effective at changing internal beliefs. “Sheer, naked force has many disadvantages as a means of social control, not the least of which is that, when it’s applied, people are aware of being oppressed and therefore may seek freedom,” observed former marketing director David Edwards. “It’s much more effective to get people to want to obey, to believe that disobedience is sin and obedience is virtue.”

The CIA’s “non-coercive counter-intelligence interrogation” procedures, which I referred to earlier, are founded on the least necessary force principle. The CIA has certainly, in the past, showed a willingness to use direct, physical coercion to obtain its goals. It’s well documented how it has experimented with techniques like forced confessions, drugs, and hypnosis. But even the CIA has learned that the best way to get information from an interrogatee is to avoid the appearance of pressure. The training manual observes that “the non-coercive interrogation is not conducted without pressure. On the contrary, the goal is to generate maximum pressure, or at least as much as is needed to induce compliance. The difference is that the pressure is generated inside the interrogatee. His resistance is sapped, his urge to yield is fortified, until in the end he defeats himself.” The training manual adds that “manipulating the subject psychologically until he becomes compliant, without applying external methods of forcing him to submit, sounds harder than it is.” Unfortunately, it’s right.

The key, always, is to apply the least necessary force every step of the way—just enough to kindle the conversion process without dousing it with external justification. The Hollywood superproducer Peter
Guber, when asked the secret of his success, put it well: “What I learned was that power is all perception, that its nonuse is its most powerful use. The trick is to use the least amount of power to create the maximum amount of change. Someone who has elegance can apply power selectively, like a laser, and carefully, almost unobtrusively, so that you don’t feel that you’re being overpowered. You feel like you’re being motivated.”\(^{10}\)

**Beware the Illusion of Choice**

Persuasion that is exercised invisibly and with minimal force creates an illusion of choice. Consider the case of Patty Hearst, believed by many people (not the least of whom her lawyers) to be another textbook case of brainwashing. How else to explain why this wealthy, well-liked, attractive, and by all appearances emotionally stable young woman would leave her privileged way of life to become a soldier in the gritty Symbionese Liberation Army, an organization that violently opposed virtually everything and everyone from Patty’s past?

On one level, of course, Patty was clearly coerced, even terrorized, by her SLA captors. She was kidnapped from her university apartment under a barrage of gunfire and then made to endure an incessant ordeal of revolutionary rhetoric and psychological and physical abuse, including a period of fifty days she spent blindfolded in a closet. When Patty emerged from her ordeal, she announced that she’d joined the SLA, taken on the name Tania, and denounced her parents. Most famously, she appeared on the nightly news carrying a carbine during an SLA holdup of a San Francisco bank—the robbery for which she eventually was tried, convicted, and sent to prison. Patty’s legal team argued that Patty’s persona of Tania represented nothing more than robotic obedience created by an ordeal of torture.

But what her lawyers couldn’t explain was why Patty was so passionate about her new identity. Tania looked and sounded very much like a woman acting under her own volition and not at all like the stereotype of the zombielike puppet associated with brainwashing. Why, for example, did she pass up chances to escape before the bank robbery? Why, when Tania jilted her fiancé, did she so fervently plea for nothing more than that he, too, “could become a comrade.” When Tania addressed the world, it was a heartfelt plea to accept her new way
of life. “All I expect,” she said, “is that you try to understand the changes I’ve gone through.”

The fact is that Tania truly believed in her new identity. This didn’t mean she wasn’t victimized. What her lawyers and the jury overlooked, however, was that Patty’s conversion wasn’t produced by the brute force of the SLA as much as their psychology. During the course of Patty’s confinement, her captors gradually reduced their overt pressure and, at the same time, engaged in progressively more rational dialogue. They slowly returned her freedom. Finally, they left her with the illusion of choice. “At the last second before Tania took off her blindfold Cinq [SLA leader Cinque] reminded her that she could walk freely out the door and that we would help her return to her family and friends,” one of her captors, William Harris, testified later. “We all wanted Tania to stay, but we wanted to make sure that she saw all her options and was making a strong choice with no regrets or indecision.”

When, at this juncture, Tania chose to remain, she crossed a psychological line. She’d become one of them—a true believer.

Or consider Marshall Applewhite, a.k.a. Do, the father of the Heaven’s Gate cult. If you think all cult leaders spew fire and brimstone, you never heard this man speak. He looked and sounded less like Hitler in Berlin than Leslie Nielsen in The Naked Gun. But Do knew psychology. He bound his vulnerable following together with promises of magical fixes: savior spacecrafts, “graduating to the next level,” a utopian life with ultimate meaning if they followed his lead. (Applewhite also lied a lot. For example, he added time pressure to their suicide decision by spreading false rumors that his body was “disintegrating” and that he’d be dead within six months.)

But Applewhite’s greatest sales talent was communicating the perception of choice. Not only were members free to come and go but, at one point, Applewhite offered a thousand dollars to anyone who’d leave the group. No one took up the offer. If you stayed on at camp (called Central), however, it required sacrifices. Members were to check in with leaders every twelve minutes. You were assigned a “check partner” to protect against backsliding and individualistic thinking. Anyone who wavered from the cause was sent to a decontamination zone. Your family was a thing of the past. Men were encouraged to get castrated; many did. How do you explain these commitments to yourself after you just turned down a cash reward to leave? In fact, Applewhite’s very lack of charisma added to the illusion
of choice, because they certainly couldn’t attribute staying on to his oratory skills. I’m here because I choose to be.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Rewards: Less Is More}

The least-force rules also hold true when it comes to positive rewards. Too much is not only ineffective at winning hearts and minds; it can also undo enthusiasm that already exists.

Imagine a little girl who loves to draw. Give her a box of Magic Markers and she plays for hours on end. Her teacher wants to encourage the girl’s passion. The teacher has just taken a course in behavior modification where she learned—correctly—that the best way to increase an overt response is to reward it. One afternoon, when the girl looks tired and frustrated, the teacher offers her a prize if she’ll do a few drawings. The next day, the girl has her award prominently displayed. Has the teacher’s strategy worked?

Social psychologists Mark Lepper, David Greene, and Richard Nisbett designed an experiment to test this question. They went into a nursery school and identified a group of students who, left on their own, enjoyed spending lots of time drawing. Some of these students were told that a visitor was coming to class to observe their work and they’d win a special “Good Player Award” if they drew pictures for him. “See? It’s got a big gold star and a bright red ribbon, and there’s a place here for your name and your school,” the students were informed. Other students were also asked to draw pictures for the visitor but were told nothing about a reward. After the visitor left and the first group got their awards, the teachers monitored the amount of time students now chose to spend drawing. The teachers found that over the next two weeks, students who’d been given an award were now only half as likely to spend their free time drawing as were the students who’d received no award. Further, according to ratings by outside observers, the quality of the award students’ pictures was considerably inferior to those drawn by the no-award students. Once you’re a pro, the students seemed to say, it’s hard to get excited about what you used to do as an amateur.\textsuperscript{13}

As a university professor, I’m all too well acquainted with the scenario. By the time students get to the college level, their intrinsic interest has long since been undermined by a lifetime of overly controlling
extrinsic motivators. They’ve been pushed and pulled by so many exams and grades that only the most extraordinary among them take my class because of a passion for learning. It’s humbling to realize that every student’s favorite lecture seems to be no lecture at all: if I tell students I’m canceling the next lecture, they greet the news with cheers and outright handclapping, none of which I’ve heard after even my best lectures. (And the applauders include students who like me.) It’s not that they’re necessarily bored by what I have to say. It’s just that all the papers, exams, and other assignments take priority, so any intrinsic interest the students once had is relegated to a back burner. I can prepare and perform the best lecture in the world, I can yell and holler until I’m exhausted, and when I ask for questions the only one I’m liable to get is “Will this be on the exam?”

This is very strange if you think about it. The precursors to the first universities, in the Middle Ages, consisted of groups of learners who would hire outside experts to assist them with problems they couldn’t master on their own. The professor was employed by the students, and if he didn’t produce, he was fired. This arrangement still exists in nondegree learning contexts. When, for example, I’m hired to speak to community groups—often giving the same lecture I might give to my regular classes—the audience is there simply because it wants to be, and we all know the one who’s expected to produce is me. If I don’t, I won’t be hired back. In many nondegree programs—for example, lifelong learning and extended-education classes—there’s a report card at the end of the class. But it’s filled out by the students, not the instructor.

In traditional university settings, however, the arrow of evaluation has been reversed. Students pay my salary, yet I decide whether they’re doing a good job. The average cost of an education in private universities is, conservatively, about $750 per credit. This works out to about $50 per lecture hour. I’ve often thought that we should make students buy tickets for each lecture rather than having them pay tuition by the semester. If people coughed up that kind of money for a rock concert, I wonder how many of them would cheer if the group announced the performance was canceled. But, alas, that’s what happens when you overstuff students with extrinsic rewards. The passion for learning gets pretty much lost in the process.

Extrinsic reinforcers don’t always undermine intrinsic interest. That occurs mostly when the reinforcers are too obviously coercive:
when you offer to buy your son a car if he raises his grades or threaten to take the car away if his grades go back down; or when an athlete is paid to play or a musician is paid to perform. Take away the money and the recipient now asks, “Why bother?” When extrinsic reinforcers are offered in a less-controlling manner, they may actually enhance intrinsic interest. This happens when the rewards seem to simply provide information about your performance rather than coerce you to perform. In the Good Players Award study, for example, a third group of students heard nothing about an award initially but, after they turned in their drawings, were informed they’d done such a good job that they deserved something special. These student spent more of their subsequent free time drawing than even the no-reward group did. After all, we take pleasure doing what we do well.

Winning hearts and minds means propelling people from the inside. If we receive too much reward, we may do what’s asked, but only as long as the goods are coming. To be captured for the long haul, we need to convince ourselves we’re doing it because we want to.

**Guilt and Shame Are More Powerful Than Rules and Laws**

The most direct route to internalization is through that formidable regulating agency we refer to as our conscience. The conscience, our inner voice of oughts and should nots, is an enigmatic animal. It’s an agent of self-control over which we seem to have no control. It’s the storehouse of our very innermost beliefs about morality, yet its contents seem to have been planted by everyone but ourselves—by our parents, teachers, society, and collective cultural heritage. The voice comes from inside of us, yet it mostly seems to operate against us. Is it us or them speaking? As scientists are best able to tell, the conscience is not localized in a single structure of the brain. But there’s nothing ambiguous about its effects. What makes the conscience so powerful is that it’s not only judge and jury but also has the means—guilt and shame—for enforcing its decisions.

Guilt and shame enforce society’s expected standards of behavior—what we call social norms. These norms are generally unwritten. But don’t let their invisibility fool you. We understand implicitly what constitutes appropriate social behavior and that when we misbehave the
consequences are painful. There is ostracism or humiliation from other people that in turn lead to self-punishment.

We often think of legal authorities—the police, the courts, prisons—as the most formidable enforcers of our society’s rules. But because social norms are so powerful, there’s still a gaping flaw in this system. Laws simply threaten you with formal penalties. They work through fear of external threats. Once the enforcers are gone, you’re safe. With social disapproval, however, the punishment persists inside the transgressor. Shame and guilt are like having little policemen living in your mind. They never go away.

Consider, for example, highway speed laws. Anyone who’s watched a pack of speeders suddenly slow down when a police car makes its appearance, then shoot back up to their original speeds when the patrolman is safely out of sight, knows what I’m talking about. Many speeders treat beating the law as a game. They invest in devices like radar detectors or communicate by radio to learn whether it’s safe to speed up ahead. But what would happen if, instead, we could tap into speeders’ sense of social responsibility? Say you’re speeding along and come upon a car with a vulnerable-looking, motherly type inside. On her window you see a photo of a cute little boy and girl and below that a sign that says, “My eight-year-old son Mikey and my six-year-old daughter Emily were killed in an accident with a speeder. Please don’t speed.” I bet that would keep you under the legal limit well after the woman’s car was out of sight.

When social norms operate effectively there’s no need for rules or laws. I don’t have to write into my class syllabus that any students caught not wearing clothes to class will have their grades lowered. Their own aversion to shame takes care of that. Formal rules are only needed when norms break down. For example, because there’s sometimes a student or two in my classes who suffers no shame when they’re caught plagiarizing, I have to establish formal punishments—an F in the class, filing a disciplinary report—for transgressors. Laws put teeth into failing norms.

Laws and norms aren’t inherently incompatible. One of the most provocative new movements in law enforcement, in fact, appeals to shame and ostracism rather than simple fear of getting caught. One target, for example, is the so-called victimless crime of prostitution. The traditional procedure for enforcing prostitution laws entails a policeman who poses as a customer and then arrests the hooker. The

Winning Hearts and Minds
problem with this approach, as the police are the first to tell you, is that the same woman will be back the next night, or she will move to a new location. In response, law enforcement in many cities are now reversing the sting operation by having a female officer pose as a prostitute and then arrest the customer. The assumption is that the customer is more likely to be connected to his family and community by norms of traditional moral behavior and so must face the more formidable punishment of public humiliation and ostracism. Similarly, many communities are reversing drug sting operations from traditional “buy busts”—whereby an undercover officer posing as a drug buyer arrests the dealer—to “sell busts”—in which the officer poses as a dealer and then arrests the buyer.14

Sometimes, in fact, purely law-based punishments send the opposite of the intended message. Meting out fines to people who can afford them, for example, may proclaim nothing more than money really counts. If you give fines to a landlord who repeatedly disobeys housing violations, they may simply become a license fee to run slums. When you fine a wealthy tax evader instead of sending him to prison, doesn’t it say that he can buy his way out of anything?

Instead of fining or sending low-level felons to prison, some judges are experimenting with shame-based sentences. Drunk drivers in New York have been sentenced to display brightly colored DUI bumper stickers on their cars; in Texas, they’ve been given stickers like this one: “The owner of this vehicle is on probation in the County Court of Law of Fort Bend County, Texas, for driving while intoxicated. Report unsafe driving to Adult Probation Department.” Nonviolent sex offenders in Florida and Oregon are being required to post warning signs on their property. In California, a shoplifter was ordered to wear a T-shirt proclaiming “I am a thief.” In Seattle, a woman was made to wear a sign that read “I am a convicted child molester.” A South Carolina man was sentenced to sit outside the courthouse for ten days with a sign that read “I am a Drunk Driver.” People convicted of public urination in Hoboken, New Jersey—even millionaire executives—are required to sweep city streets. Minors convicted of misdemeanors in Maryland are in some cases being required to get on their knees and apologize to their victims. They’re released only if the victim is convinced of the sincerity of the apology.

Some strategies are designed to provoke empathy with the victim. Burglars in Tennessee have been sentenced to open their houses to
their victims and allow the victims to take anything they want. A man convicted of assaulting his ex-wife was required to “let the ex-wife spit in his face.” The judge explained, “It’s my way to express upon him the humiliation of his act.” A New York slumlord was sentenced to house arrest in one of his rat-infested apartments. A national organization called the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) has victims and their offenders meet together in a voluntary, unofficial environment where the victim describes, face-to-face, how he was damaged—monetarily, emotionally, socially—by the criminal act.

Some of the most radical norm scholars advocate the systematic transformation of norms themselves. Law professor Cass Sunstein, a leader of this movement, offers the example of the changes in public attitudes toward smoking that took place in the late eighties and early nineties. They had less to do with health concerns, he observes, than with the effects of normative social pressure. There was little progress in antismoking regulations after the surgeon general’s initial 1964 declaration that smoking was dangerous. It wasn’t until 1986, when the surgeon general issued his report on the dangers of secondhand smoke, that the public began treating smokers as inconsiderate, immoral pariahs who were dangerous to others as well as themselves. Smoking rates steeply declined. I, personally, was a smoker during those transition years, and I’ll never forget the impact on me the first time I saw a no-smoking sign in a restaurant that was also labeled “ENFORCED BY CUSTOMERS.” The reason recent draconian no-smoking laws (in states like my own, it’s against the law to smoke in bars) have encountered such little resistance is they reflect the dominant cultural attitude that smoking is a violation of the norm of social responsibility.

Or consider the striking success of the juvenile gun-control program in Charleston, South Carolina. The public schools in Charleston, like those in many big cities, have had a long-standing problem with students carrying guns. The city had experimented with several traditional policies—zero tolerance, severe punishment, education programs, weapons buybacks—with the usual lack of success. The problem, as law professor Dan Kahan explains, is that “juveniles carry weapons less to protect themselves from violence than to acquire status among their peers. Against the background of social norms, possessing a weapon expresses confidence and a willingness to defy authority, dispositions that juveniles believe their peers respect.” The conventional punishments for carrying weapons, in fact, can activate a
counterproductive norm. “What makes guns appealing to juveniles is their connotation of defiance,” Kahan observes. “By showing just how much authorities resent guns, buy-backs, sanctions, and education campaigns all accentuate the message of defiance that possessing one projects.”

To counter this effect, Charleston offered a cash reward to anyone who simply reported a fellow student carrying a weapon. One’s peers now became the agents of control. Once students began turning their colleagues in—which they did—it dispelled the perception that possessors were universally admired by their peers. “Showing off your gun under these circumstances doesn’t mark you as tough and cool,” Kahan points out. “It marks you out as a chump.” With this new set of norms now dominant, the incidence of juvenile gun possession dropped to virtually zero.¹⁷

As with all profound persuasion, however, the key to effectively challenging a norm is avoiding the appearance of too much force. “If the law condemns too severely—if it tries to break the grip of the contested norm (and the will of supporters) with a ‘hard shove’—it will likely prove a dead letter and could even backfire,” Kahan observes. “If it condemns more mildly—if it ‘gently nudges’ citizens toward the desired behavior and attitudes—it might well initiate a process that culminates in the near eradication of the contested norm and the associated types of behavior.”¹⁸

There is considerable controversy in the legal academy as to whether policy makers should act as “norm entrepreneurs.” Opponents argue, for good reason, that it raises enormous ethical questions. Empowering policy makers to control social values is, after all, a rather Orwellian notion. As pure social psychology, however, the approach is pitch perfect. With laws based solely on fear, you merely obey because you have to. When laws are driven by accepted norms, you obey because you’re too embarrassed not to.¹⁹

**Self-Justification: The Road to Perpetual Persuasion**

Westerners strive for personal consistency—to do what we say, say what we do, and convince ourselves that our present actions are compatible with those we performed in the past.²⁰ We disapprove of people who think one thing and do another. It smells of hypocrisy and
phoniness. As a result, when our beliefs are inconsistent with our actions, it creates an unpleasant state of mind—one that we feel compelled to reduce, in the same way we want to eat when we’re hungry or get warm when we’re cold. Psychologists refer to this tension as cognitive dissonance.

Say, for example, you smoke cigarettes but also know cigarette smoking is hazardous to your health. The behavior and the attitude are in a state of dissonance, which you’re driven to reduce. There are a number of ways you can do this. The most sensible strategy is to quit smoking. But as anyone who’s been a smoker knows, quitting is no easy task. Instead, you rationalize.

You could, for example, add information that minimizes the health risk: “No one in my family has ever had lung cancer.” “My brand is low in tar and nicotine.” Or you could focus on exceptions: “My Uncle Harry smoked two packs a day his whole life and lived until ninety.” “My Cousin Benny died of lung cancer at fifty and he never touched a cigarette.” You might trivialize the importance of the inconsistency: “I need to smoke to relax and to keep my weight down, both of which are more important to me than worrying about getting cancer thirty years from now.” “Everyone has to die of something.” Any smoker you ask can probably add his own justifications to this list. What’s important is all of these examples reduce your dissonance, but none result in the one change that can save your life—quitting smoking. And here’s the crux of the problem: the less you change your behavior, the more you rationalize; and the more you rationalize, the less likely you’ll quit smoking.

Dissonance will only be aroused, however, if the other rules in this chapter are followed. If I comply because you’ve forced me to, the force is all the justification I need. Dissonance thrives on the illusion of choice. To arouse my dissonance, you need to be subtle, to stay in the background, so I’ll see no one to blame but myself.

In a classic experiment, Leon Festinger and J. Merrill Carlsmith had subjects work for an hour on an extremely boring task: turning pegs a quarter of a turn to the right and then a quarter of a turn to the left. The subjects were then told the actual purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of expectations on performance. Another subject was sitting in the waiting room, and it was important he be convinced that this was going to be an interesting experiment. The research assistant who usually did the job of convincing the other subject, the subjects were
told, couldn’t make it today. “Could you fill in and do this?” the anxious experimenter pleaded.

Subjects were assigned to one of two groups. Half of them (the insufficient justification group) were offered a small sum—about $5 by today’s standards—to lie to the next subject about how interesting the experiment was. The other half (the sufficient justification group) were paid handsomely—about $100 by today’s standards—to lie. Assume you go along with the request. After you’ve deceived the poor soul in the waiting room and ruined his next hour, another research assistant asks you to fill out a questionnaire asking how interesting you actually found the experiment.

The question is which of the two groups is more likely to believe its own lie? Common sense says the more you pay someone to tell a lie, the more they’ll believe it. Cognitive dissonance theory, however, predicts the opposite: if someone is paid a lot of money he has sufficient justification for lying; there’s little dissonance and, so, no need to rationalize. But if someone is paid only $5—the minimal pressure group—he needs to come up with a reason for lying. The most convenient rationalization is to persuade oneself that it wasn’t really a lie, after all. This is exactly what Festinger and Carlsmith found. Subjects paid only $5 to lie rated the task more than twice as interesting as did those who were paid $100.

Cognitive dissonance is the mind controller’s best friend. If dissonance can be created between what you think and what you do, you’ll try your best to change one or the other. And changing your thoughts is usually the easier way out. Once the wheels of self-justification begin turning, the persuader sits back and watches you do his work for him.

When Behavior Is Controlled, the Mind Follows

It is common sense that people’s inner beliefs may drive their external behavior. If you’re attracted to a certain person, you should be more likely to socialize with that person. If you favor a brand of toothpaste, you’re more prone to buy it. Of course, our internal thoughts don’t always predict our public behavior, but, overall, what we do obviously reflects what we think.

But beliefs and behaviors are also related in a more remarkable way. It turns out that the arrow is as likely to point in the reverse direction.
As social psychologist David Myers observes, “If social psychology has taught us anything during the last 25 years, it is that we are likely not only to think ourselves into a way of acting but also to act ourselves into a way of thinking.” In other words, the saying “I'll believe it when I see it” is as valid the other way around: “I'll see it when I believe it.”

In a famous study, social psychologist Philip Zimbardo turned the basement of the Stanford University psychology building into a mock prison. Subjects were a group of psychologically normal young men who happened to be in Palo Alto for the summer. They were divided into prisoners and guards based on flips of a coin. The experiment was scheduled to last for two weeks.

To Zimbardo’s astonishment, the two groups quickly came to act like their real prison counterparts. The prisoners became despondent. Some broke down. In less than thirty-six hours, one had to be discharged because of “extreme depression, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying and fits of rage.” Over the next three days, three other prisoners had to be released with similar anxiety symptoms. A fifth prisoner was released when he developed a psychosomatic rash over his entire body, an apparent reaction to his parole appeal being rejected by the mock parole board.

The behavior of the guards was even more disturbing. All, to one degree or another, flexed their power. They made the prisoners obey trivial and often inconsistent rules. Prisoners were forced to perform tedious, pointless work, such as moving cartons from one closet to another or continuously picking thorns out of blankets (an unpleasant task created by the guards having dragged the blankets through thorny bushes). They were made to sing songs or laugh or stop smiling on command; to curse and malign each other publicly; to clean out toilets with their bare hands. They were required to continuously sound off their numbers and do push-ups, occasionally while guards stepped on their backs or made another prisoner sit on them. The situation got so out of hand that the planned two-week experiment had to be aborted after six days and nights.

The Stanford prison experiment shows how seamlessly playing a role may turn to becoming the role. Act the part of prisoner and you soon feel like a prisoner; play a guard and you’ll start thinking like a guard. Doing turns to believing.

Cults thrive on this effect. Most of them rigidly control every waking moment of a member’s behavior—what he eats, the clothes he
wears, when he sleeps, incessant rituals, his every task. Leaders know a crammed schedule not only restricts a recruit’s mind from dangerous wandering but leads to internalizing thoughts and feelings that are conducive to the group. Some cults go further. Like British acting coaches, they require members to practice detailed mannerisms—speech, posture, facial expressions—that are unique to the group. But they insist that members believe in what they’re doing. When a member appears to be just mechanically obeying, he may be accused of not caring or not trying enough, of being selfish and impure. In the Moonies, poor performers might be told to imitate an older group member, even to mimic the tone of his voice. “The leaders cannot command someone else’s thoughts,” ex-Moonie Steven Hassan observed, “but they know that if they command behavior, hearts and minds will follow.”

For an insight into how saying turns to believing, consider another study. E. Tory Higgins and his colleagues asked college students to read a personality description of a person and then to summarize the description for someone they were told either liked or disliked the person. Not surprisingly, the subjects described the target in more glowing terms to admirers. But then, having said positive things, they actually believed what they said: asked to recall what they’d originally read, the positive-oriented subjects recollected the original description as more positive than it actually was. In other words, you adjust your presentation to please the listener and, in so doing, convince yourself in the process.

When you play a part, it becomes that much likelier you’ll play it again, and with greater intensity. “He who permits himself to tell a lie once,” wrote Thomas Jefferson, “finds it much easier to do it a second and third time, till at length it becomes habitual; he tells lies without attending to it, and truths without the world’s believing him. This falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all its good dispositions.” As Jefferson understood, the act of taking a stance galvanizes the belief behind the stance.

Public displays are especially self-persuasive. Before many Middle Eastern suicide bombing missions, a ritual videotape is recorded by the terrorist’s recruiters. The video, filmed hours before the attack, shows the bomber giving a last testament of his commitment to the cause. The bomber knows that whenever possible, scenes of his approaching attack and news stories showing the results of the attack will be added to the tape and given over to his family as a souvenir for posterity. Journalist Joseph Lelyveld, who interviewed both terrorists and the families of
suicide bombers, observes how this ritual is a “key stage in the psychological prepping that deepens the candidate’s conviction that he is about to perform a great deed for his family, his people and his faith, that he has reached the point of no return.”

Failure May Persuade You More Than Success

Another consequence of cognitive dissonance is that a belief may actually get stronger when it’s proven wrong. The more you stand to lose, and the more foolish you look, the greater the dissonance and, so, the greater the pressure to prove you were right in the first place. In other words, if you’re in the business of mind control, sometimes nothing succeeds like failure.

Say, for example, you’ve been a dedicated member of a group and are now confronted with evidence that your group’s cause is just plain wrong. Would you admit that you made a mistake and leave? If you’d already committed enough, probably not.

Consider the classic case of Marian Keech, a charismatic, self-proclaimed clairvoyant from Wisconsin who prophesied that much of the Americas would be destroyed by a massive flood just before dawn on the coming December 21. Keech had been receiving messages through “automatic writing” from the Guardians, a group of superior beings who lived on the planet Clarion. Fortunately for us doomed earthlings, the Guardians said that they’d be dropping by in their flying saucers on the dreaded date to pick up Keech and any disciples who took the trouble to join her. A group of individuals, many from considerable distances around the country, believed the story and traveled to join Keech and make preparations for the Guardians’ visit. The disciples staked a great deal on their decision. They were ridiculed by friends, and in some cases quit their jobs or dropped out of college. A few abandoned their spouses.

Leon Festinger and his fellow researchers joined the group under false pretenses to chronicle its development, in particular to observe changes in the intensity of members’ beliefs and commitment to the cause. In the weeks before the predicted flood, the researchers found, converts showed virtually no desire to promote their cause. They shunned opportunities to publicize their beliefs and recruit converts and invariably turned away reporters.
On the morning of December 20, Keech received a message that her group would be picked up at precisely midnight. Members were instructed to remove all metal from their clothing. Everyone obediently complied, carefully removing zippers and clasps from their skirts, pants, and shirts. After an all-night vigil, they waited for the Guardians. Cynical reporters surrounded the event. When spacemen failed to appear at midnight, four and a half hours of tremendous tension ensued. The disciples sat in stunned silence; by 4:30 Keech was crying. But at 4:45 she became elated. She said she’d just received a telepathic message from the Guardians saying that her group of believers had spread so much light with their unflagging faith that God had spared the world from the cataclysm.

After this lame explanation, you might expect followers to become disillusioned and make a quick retreat for home. A few—mostly fringe members who hadn’t invested much energy or time—did split off. But here’s the important part. Most disciples not only stayed but, having made that decision, were now even more convinced than before that Keech had been right all along. Even more notable was what they did to convince themselves they were right: they set out to convince others. In a far cry from their previous secrecy, members immediately contacted all newspapers and national wire services to herald their message. In the days that followed, they held numerous press conferences, held open houses, and explained their beliefs in great detail to as many newcomers who would listen. Being wrong had turned them into true believers.28

Marian Keech’s story has been reenacted in many variations. Psychology professor Ray Hyman, who at the time was investigating the claims by the disciples of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and transcendental meditation that they could perform miracles such as levitation and invisibility, summed it up nicely in his report: “It is all too easy to view Dr. Rabinoff [a physics Ph.D. who was lecturing nationally about TMers’ miracles] as some self-deluded misfit. But, I suspect, he typifies most of us in the way we cope with the stresses of life and the search for the Answer to Big Questions about the Meaning of It All. Once an individual, especially a fairly bright one, latches onto a belief system that offers comfort and universal answers, then nature has provided him with innumerable mechanisms to avoid facing up to discomforting challenges to that belief.”29

The more one endures, the greater the need to self-justify. Nansook Hong was raised by her parents in the Moonie church. At age fif-
teen, she was handpicked to marry Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s oldest son, Youngjin Moon. Hong lived fourteen years among the royal Moon family before leaving her emotionally troubled and abusive husband. In her subsequent book, *In the Shadow of the Moons*, Hong detailed the pathologies she endured. She then struggled to explain what kept her from leaving for so long:

Much has been written about the coercion and brainwashing that takes place in the Unification Church. What I experienced was conditioning. You are isolated among like-minded people. You are bombarded with messages elevating obedience above critical thinking. Your belief system is reinforced at every turn. You become invested in those beliefs the longer you are associated with the church. After ten years, after twenty years, who would want to admit, even to herself, that her beliefs were built on sand?

I didn’t, surely. I was part of the inner circle. I had seen enough kindness in the Reverend Moon to excuse his blatant lapses—his toleration of his son’s behavior, his hitting his children, his verbal abuse of me. Not to excuse him was to open my whole life up to question. Not just my life. My parents had spent thirty years pushing aside their own doubts.

We’re compelled to justify our commitments. If there’s no justification in sight—that invisible umpire, again—you’ll look to your own motives for an explanation. There lies the biggest problem of all: once the process begins, it becomes self-perpetuating. If I did it, I must believe it. And if believe it, I’m more likely to do it again, and more so.