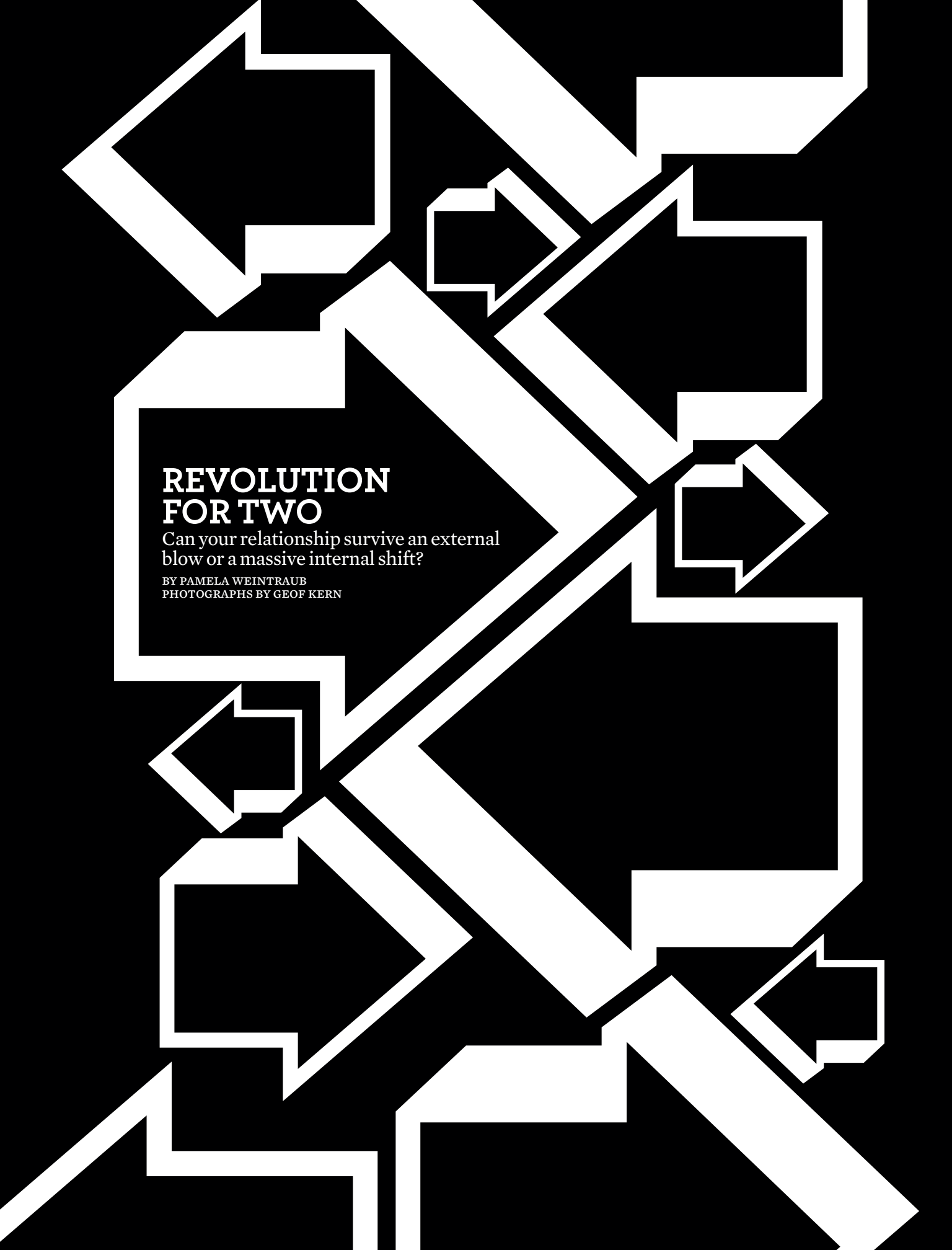




REVOLUTION FOR TWO

Can your relationship survive an external
blow or a massive internal shift?

BY PAMELA WEINTRAUB
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEOFF KERN



IT

WAS A DECADE AGO, AFTER A nameless malaise slithered from our backyard woods to the center of our lives, that my relationship with my husband, Mark, threatened to break apart. In the first grips of that illness, we were weary and disoriented. Later, diagnosed with tick-borne Lyme disease (easily curable early, but often devastating later on), we found ourselves in ruin: Mark was so cognitively scrambled he had trouble reading a sentence, threatening his work as an editor. My headaches were relentless, the fatigue profound. Our two sons seemed finished: The oldest, then 16, was bent as if hit by a Mack truck and in so much pain he could barely crawl across a room. The youngest slept 15 hours a day.

This is not a doomsday tale: The heart-stopping fear that our children would stay sick; the nightmare of skeptical schools; the near-bankrupting cost of all those wrong diagnoses and treatment for what we had; all this is behind us.

Mark and I survived the crucible, but it transformed each of us so completely—and in such opposite ways—that our relationship was put at risk. From illness to lost jobs to the deaths of loved ones, from drug addiction to wars, partners are altered by experience; and the more profound, unusual, or shattering that experience, the bigger the change. “Every couple constitutes a system,” says Susan Pease Gadoua, executive director of the Transition Institute of Marin, based in San Rafael, California. “And a system requires a balance, a homeostasis. Often, you will find couples with seemingly opposite traits, for instance, a spender with a saver, but when an event disrupts the balance, one or both can change. The precipitating event is like a rock thrown into a pond, causing waves.”

Marriage can be challenging under the best of circumstances. Even anticipated changes like having children or getting promotions at work can throw relationships off track. But *unanticipated* stresses, the ones we never signed up for, can be especially rough. In the face of calamity, partners can “get into polarized positions that become rigid and intense,” says Harriet Lerner, author of *The Dance of Anger*. In the aftermath of such upheaval, some will strike a new balance and continue the relationship. Others will find that impossible, and move on.

How do relationships survive tumult? The odds are improved by a feeling of mutual purpose, shared struggle, and the sheer commitment to work it out. It also helps to remember that getting through adversity requires a different set of skills than those used to coast. We all change over the course

of a lifetime and every relationship has its highs and lows. When the road is rocky and the inner landscape turbulent, you can protect your relationship by accepting small annoyances and just moving past them. But when the change in your partner is profound, you may be forced to leave the relationship or meet the transformation with a complementary shift of your own.



FIND YOURSELF, LOSE YOUR PARTNER?

CARREN STROCK WAS a wife whose radical change surprised even herself. “I was married for 25 years when I was having coffee with my best friend. I looked across the table at her and suddenly realized I was in love with this woman,” she relates. “Our friendship was based on honesty and I told her what I was feeling. She didn’t reciprocate my feelings and so I went on a journey to find out if it was just her I was in love with or was I a lesbian. I realized that I was.”

It took a while, but Strock finally came out to her husband, whom she’d been with since age 16. “Long story short,” she says, “we are still together 20 years later. My husband and I have redefined our relationship and our marriage and we have made our life together work for us. My daughter recently said, ‘You and Dad have one of the best marriages, because you really talk to and know each other.’ And we do.”

The author of *Married Women Who Love Women*, Strock says that “being a lesbian is just another dimension to who I am. My husband and I have different needs, but we also have a connection. If sex was the only reason for marriage, our marriage would no longer exist.”

Whether a marriage sinks or survives such profound turbulence in one partner, the other endures whiplash of the most jarring kind. Initial feelings include anger, fear, disorientation, and profound self-doubt. The straight spouse feels “stupid and duped,” says Amity Buxton, founder of the Straight Spouse Network and author of *The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming Out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families*. “Your assumptions about marriage and gender are called into question. Your entire worldview is shaken.”

Indeed, the partner out of the limelight—the stalwart who *didn’t* have the breakdown, or announce herself as gay—often suffers alone, without much attention or support. Before you can let go of the past, you grieve for it, says Buxton. “When I learned my husband was gay after 25 years of marriage, I was near-suicidal.” Yet she lived to tell the tale. “Once you reconfigure your identity you can journey from trauma to transmutation, and you are stronger than you were before. You become who you really are, who you were always supposed to be.” In Buxton’s case, she founded the straight spouse movement and developed great empathy for gay people forced by society to live a lie.

Gillian* was in her mid-30s and a married mother of three in the 1960s when she moved with her family from Manhattan to a spacious apartment in her parents’ building, in Brooklyn. “After the move, I was flooded with early memories, the kinds

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STYLING: JOCELYN MENSTER



of things usually forgotten as you grow up.” Gillian says. Though she’d never been beaten or even verbally abused, she remembered a kind of severity—a coldness, harshness, and inflexibility that had filled her with anger. “My parents themselves were going through hard times,” says Gillian, “but I was repeating those toxic patterns with my own children, and passing that negativity onto them.”

The realization was a turning point. Gillian vowed that she would “grow in understanding and break those ingrained habits,” before she damaged her children more. In an act of self-discovery she began writing plays, including some that attracted the attention of prominent directors, who produced them in New York. Her husband, an aspiring writer as well, had encouraged her work, but she found herself moving beyond him. She took the children and headed to California, then Oregon, finally bringing them back to her husband in New York so she could explore on her own. Over the course of a decade, she studied Buddhism, crisscrossed North America, and spent years as a teacher in the Caribbean while the children lived with him.

Looking back, Gillian calls her rapid transformation “a breakdown that was the beginning of my actual life.” Once she passed through the looking glass, her marriage could not survive. “It was a question of attitude,” she says, groping for the words to explain why the relationship had become too suffocating for her to sustain. Her ex valued amenities like city streets, good theater, and fine cuisine, “a regular life,” says Gillian, not to mention steady schooling for the kids. “I wish I’d handled these changes with greater maturity and wisdom, with more love and care for those around me,” she comments today, reflecting on the time away from her children. But she clamored for experience and felt angry that, as a young woman, she’d been denied the privilege of seeing the world. Her husband’s lifestyle felt so stultifying that even the thought of it made it difficult for her to breathe.

ROLE RECASTING

IF LYME WAS a thunderbolt dividing our lives, then before Lyme, I was the careful one, strategic about finances and calculated about work. Buying a house, all the better to build equity: my impetus. The choice of an upscale suburb with testosterone-laced sports dads and Ivy League lust: my call. The wide-open yard abutting the screeching wilderness: That would be Mark. The laissez-faire tendency to leave work for later, the hours of tennis, the video games: Mark as well. Before Lyme, I was the pragmatist and my husband the carefree kid, but we had a balance—a yin and yang of endeavor and fun, gritty detail and blue sky. It worked well.

After Lyme we switched roles, as if each one had commanded the body of the other to keep us afloat. Formerly money-conscious, I now threw caution to the wind seeking help for my children: thousands of dollars for doctors and drugs

not covered by insurance? Tens of thousands for tutors and private schools to keep them afloat? Hey, I had credit cards. Work? A freelance journalist with a hefty load of well-paying assignments, I dropped them all to write a book on—you guessed it—Lyme disease, giving me access to experts and information that could help my children, but with an advance so low I earned almost nothing at all. Mark took up the slack: Recovered after Lyme disease treatment, he found a job to balance the checkbook and stem the drain of cash. Against his nature, he became an anchor. Before Lyme we’d been in balance, but after Lyme we were planets on a collision course with each other—the sicker our children got, the more money we spent trying to heal them, the longer I worked on my book, the more each one felt the other was lost in a universe gone awry.

The talents we’d each valued in times of ease were different than those we claimed in crisis. When I turned from a peacetime consigliere to wartime consigliere, I risked my relationship to survive. But after the crisis was past, many of the changes remained. My devil-may-care husband would never again play tennis instead of making a living wage. My concern with certain externals—prestigious schools and houses—was gone for good. “Money is round and it rolls,” I liked to say. Work was judged by my love of it, not how much it paid. Empathy was a quality I sought in neighborhoods and friends. We’d both grown through adversity, but differently. As individuals we were healthier, but our relationship felt altered and strained.

AFTER GOING THROUGH HELL, THE CHASM BETWEEN THEM WAS IMPASSABLE AND COULD NOT BE TRAVERSED.

PERMANENT UPHEAVAL

SOMETIMES CHANGE is so profound that sustaining a relationship becomes a near-heroic act. Some studies show, for instance, that many marriages can’t survive the death of a child. While more research is needed, one statistic contends that couples in this situation are eight times as likely to divorce as those who aren’t.

Pete*, a journalist from New Jersey, took a simple blood test to determine whether he was a carrier of Tay-Sachs, a devastating disease that predominantly strikes Jewish children. “I was tested at a local hospital and was told I was not a carrier, so since both parents must be carriers in order to produce a Tay-Sachs child, there was no reason for my wife to be tested,” Pete explains. (Two parental carriers have a one out of four chance of producing a baby with the disease.)

In 1986, the couple had a baby girl named Emily. “She appeared to be a normal, happy baby, but when she didn’t sit up or progress the way other babies her age did, we became concerned and consulted a specialist,” Pete relates. The diagnosis was Tay-Sachs. Shocked, the couple learned the lab had made a simple mathematical error, miscalculating the results. What ensued were three nightmare years, in which Pete and his wife, Donna, watched their beloved baby

*all names in this family have been changed

girl get sicker and sicker.

“Our marriage wasn’t the greatest before this happened,” reflects Pete. “But the strain of caring for a dying child and the grief after she died made it much worse.” On every level, the experience pulled them apart. As Emily declined, Donna felt too overwhelmed to care for her at home and wanted her placed in a hospice, but Pete insisted they keep the child close. (Pete finally agreed to the hospice.) Donna wanted to talk about Emily constantly, while Pete often preferred to exercise, read books, do anything to keep his mind off his pain. After Emily died, Donna became religious, but Pete just felt “bitter against God and religion.” Beyond all this, the disease and especially the error were so rare that Pete began seeing the relationship as star-crossed. “I started wondering why we even had to meet each other,” he says. “The relationship seemed to bring bad luck.”

That sense only increased when they conceived two more Tay-Sachs babies in a row, aborting each in turn. Pete and Donna finally had a healthy child, a beautiful daughter who is now a college student. But it wasn’t enough to heal the wounds. By the time that daughter was in grade school, Donna was almost an allergen to Pete. “She spent money on trips we could not afford. She often had a tough-love style of parenting, while I was more easygoing. She wanted more downtime from parenting than I did. I think I became more empathetic, but she became more hard-edged.” The couple split.

WHEN ONE PARTNER CHANGES RADICALLY, THE OTHER ENDURES WHIPLASH OF THE MOST JARRING KIND.

MAKING IT THROUGH

MARSHA AND GARY RIVELES were thrown for a loop when Gary’s 27-year career as a systems analyst was outsourced to India. “For decades my identity was tied to my work,” Gary, 58, says today. “Losing it was a shock. I didn’t know who I was.” But that wasn’t the only problem. His money-earning prowess had special value for the family because Marsha, 54, had chronic fatigue syndrome. Gary’s large income allowed Marsha to work part-time in her career as a podiatrist while the family thrived. With the loss of Gary’s income, the pressure was back on Marsha: She was now the major breadwinner, sick or not.

Yet the Riveleses have kept their relationship and lives afloat because they personify mutuality: They share a house they want to keep; they have two children they still need to launch; and their shared history is decades old. Their solution is masterful: By driving Marsha to and from work, Gary saves her two hours a day of fatigue on the road, enabling her to work four days a week instead of three. By acting as her second assistant on those days, he saves her the cost of an employee to boot. As if all this isn’t enough, Gary now works two more days a week as a bookkeeper—a modest endeavor compared to his work in software, but he says that at least he is pitching in. Still a worker at heart, he says, “now I work for Marsha as the

assistant to her assistant. ‘*Sure doctor,*’” he jokes about the instructions he takes with aplomb. “I have a lot of fun working with her, and I know I’m helping her out.”

“Remaining connected in a crisis requires a strong commitment to staying together and to bringing your best self into the relationship,” says Harriet Lerner. She also recommends being mindful. “If you are attentive and attuned, you can stop the experience from hijacking you—and you can realize this too shall pass.” Indeed, if you and your partner are cognizant of turning points as they occur, it might be easier to change life direction without throwing the relationship under the bus.

When your partner has been through a tough situation, “don’t keep score,” adds Lawrence Calhoun of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, who has studied trauma as a source of growth. “Give more than you receive, just be generous and don’t expect to be paid back.” In fact, the best kind of support could be what experts call “invisible.” The very act of receiving support puts stress on the recipient, studies show, but when support is so low-key it goes virtually unnoticed, recipients benefit most. And sometimes your partner must simply be left alone.

These notions of “being your best self” and “giving more than you expect to get” are difficult to heed. That’s because when your partner becomes a stranger, or when a wrench is thrown into your plans and routines, life seems terribly unfair. How could the person you agreed to be with suddenly decide to be someone else? Why was *your* family hit with catastrophe while others seem to float along, untouched by tragedy or bad luck? When you’re grappling with feelings of injustice, the call to be the most noble version of yourself is all the more difficult to answer. And yet, setting aside your hurt (and your underlying belief that things *shouldn’t* change) while working for the good of your union is the best way through the woods, if you want to emerge from them hand in hand.

As for Mark and me, we have rebalanced the equation, and find we are making it through. We are healthy now, and our two sons are thriving. I’ve gone back to work, and our income is virtually equal. Nonetheless, I’ve conceded to him more control over managing the checkbook. He’s vested in me more agency for life decisions regarding our living circumstances and health. Our biggest strength is the very thing that almost shattered us—the decade of shared struggle and the fight we waged (over strategy, but not the goals) to save our kids. The other night, when my youngest son finished a college paper on deadline and went out with friends, Mark called me on the phone, jubilant with the news. “It’s so *normal!*” he said. Who else could grasp the sweetness of that simple thrill? **PT**

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