

Avoiding The Assumption Trap

By Carol Kurtz Walsh

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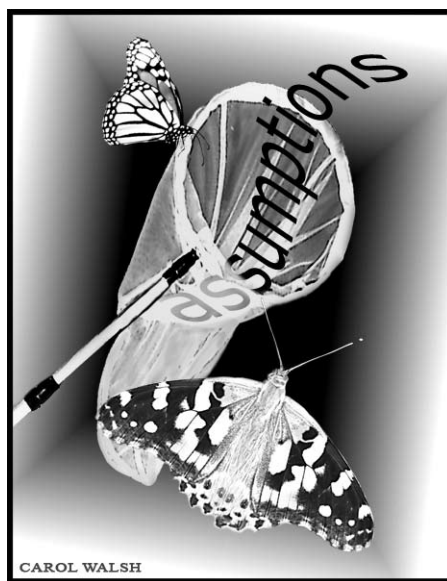
—John Seely Brown,
Fast Company

“Assumptions are the termites of relationships.”

—Henry Winkler

There is a parable about a group of people traveling in a car who never discuss where they want to go. Each makes an assumption about what the others are thinking. As a result they end up in Kansas – a place where no one wishes to be. What an image that creates – silent people trapped inside a moving piece of metal, ending up at a misguided destination. *Assumptions are entrapping.* They lead us toward undesirable results.

In a recent personal experience I went into Washington, DC, to meet a friend visiting from Massachusetts. I trudged in the heat from the Dupont Metro to the Doubletree Inn. Upon arriving I called, and she suggested coming to her room. After multiple knocks at room 500, no one answered. Puzzled, I went to the front desk only to be told she wasn’t registered. I fussed a bit, but after calling again I discovered that she wasn’t there, but at another Doubletree Inn. I had made the inaccurate assumption that there was only one Doubletree Inn in DC. Although frustrating, this was not a big



deal. But had I checked out my assumption, my time and energy would have been spent more wisely. Assumptions trap us by monopolizing our valuable inner resources.

My energy consuming experience reminded me of my father’s rule to “Never make assumptions”. As a child that rule was hard to understand, for in my childhood innocence I often made assumptions. Many got me into trouble, like the time I cut up my mother’s new magazines, assuming she was happy when I quietly worked on my art projects. As an adolescent I continued to assume many things, for example that coming home five minutes past my midnight curfew was no big deal. How mistaken I was!

As children we all made assumptions, and many of these were positive, reasonable and appropriate to our vulnerable age, i.e., that we would be physically and emotionally taken care of, listened to, respected, val-

ued and hopefully loved. Even if we were too young to express these assumptions, we held them subconsciously within us.

As children mature, their assumptions are gradually challenged and some prove to be wrong. For example, the child who does not listen to his/her parents and is never reprimanded will assume that authority figures do not have to be obeyed. These children will eventually have a rude awakening when they go to school and discover that teachers won’t stand for inattentiveness, or disobedience. Or, consider the child who assumes they are the center of their parent’s life. When a sibling is born the first child’s assumption becomes fully tested.

The *Encarta Dictionary* defines assumptions as, “... something that is believed to be true without proof.” Despite our gradual awakening to the fact that our assumptions may not be accurate, many adults still hold onto their false beliefs; for example, the wife that assumes her husband will never cheat only to have a very hurtful awakening. (Mentally review last year’s news and recall the amount of “shocked” wives who found out that their VIP husbands had strayed.) Or consider the man who assumes he is doing such a great job he won’t be laid off, despite the fact that he is bored and plays computer games instead of working.

In her book *The Wishing Year*, Noelle Oxenhandler tells the story of Greta, who moved out of a tiny apartment into a spacious house with her partner.

Greta told Noelle that despite her happiness she was continually anxious and afraid that “the other shoe was going to drop.” When Greta’s car was stolen she felt relief – as though she had paid her dues. Oxenhandler says, “...we still operate with certain primal assumptions in place, yet without fully acknowledging them – and this gives them even more power.” Mistaken assumptions do hold a lot of power and can take us on the wrong path, even if that path is purely emotional as it was in Greta’s case. Her assumption made her anxious until something bad happened.

One way to avoid giving assumptions power is to check out their validity. Let’s use the medical profession as an example. How many people assume their doctor is really listening to their complaints, even if they continue to experience the same symptoms? It would be great if we could all assume that our doctors and hospitals had our best interests in mind, that they really read all of our family’s medical history, listened to all of our symptoms, and that they were truly concerned about us. I happen to have a doctor who listens, and yet despite this fact my experience has told me that I cannot assume anything. I have to question. I have to be assertive, for I have a right to be heard and receive answers concerning my body. But I may not get what I deserve.

Assumptions can be false beliefs we hold about others, but they can also be entirely self-focused. For example, the person that feels they are above the law assumes that stealing one small item from a store is “no big deal.” They also assume invincibility – that they won’t get

caught. Others assume they are in some way defective. I remember a young, beautiful, slim woman I’ll call Barbara, who assumed she was ugly and too heavy, and that because of this a man would never love her. Although her false beliefs were originally created by external factors (shaming input from her parents), Barbara internalized these to the point that they became her beliefs. No amount of convincing shook her distorted self-image. That was sad, because as John Seely Brown said, “The harder you fight to hold on to specific assumptions, the more likely there’s gold in letting go of them.”

Assumptions become even more of a trap because they are often connected to expectations. An expectation is what is considered most likely to happen. For example a pregnant woman is said to be “expecting”— she is expecting to have a baby. Together, assumptions and expectations contain hopes, beliefs, and wishful thinking. We hope and then expect that certain things have the potential of coming true. In our daily lives we assume and then expect if we go to a restaurant or a store we will be attended to and given the service advertised. Or, if we call for a cab it will arrive, or that a newly purchased piece of equipment will not be defective.

However, assumptions and expectations can also create emotional pitfalls, for they can be based on fantasy and denial. For example, if Suzie wants to confront her mother about childhood emotional abuse, but hopes that her mother will both listen to her and then apologize, then Suzie is setting herself up

with emotional expectations. Of course it would be great if both would happen. However, these expectations are based on the wishful thinking that if Suzie does it right, she will be able to control her mother’s behavior and the eventual outcome. If Suzie chooses to confront her mother, the healthiest approach would be for Suzie to present her authentic self without any assumptions or expectations.

Assumptions and expectations have a huge impact on intimacy, for they often cause misunderstandings, distrust, and emotional upheaval. I love this quote by Henry Winkler – “Assumptions are the termites of relationships.” They erode the foundation of any emotional intimacy by eating holes in our beliefs and trust in one another. If we make an assumption about our partner but neglect to check it out, we will create expectations and probably take actions based on our (possibly erroneous) beliefs. If our assumptions are wrong this can have a detrimental effect, i.e., if we assume our partner is angry at us we might retaliate with defensive and angry actions. Or, if we assume that our loved one is not hearing our thoughts or feelings, but do not check out that assumption, we may become upset over nothing. For example, if we say we need some help around the house and our spouse nods yes, but doesn’t immediately take action, we might clean the house ourselves and then become resentful. This would create emotional distance and conflict. However, if we were to check out our assumption, we may find that our spouse is willing to help in an hour or so. In order for relationships to remain emotionally inti-

mate, assumptions need to be checked out before they turn into expectations. Even if our negative assumptions turn out to be correct, this gives us the opportunity to work out an amicable solution.

Assumptions and expectations are the opposite of awareness. There are times when we may not want to see the truth, as in the case of Jean who refused to admit that her husband was a gambling addict. Although he hid his gambling from her, she knew but chose to “bury her head in the sand” by making excuses for his behavior. She wanted to assume he was being honest with her, for she feared a huge confrontation if she were to open up the topic. Subconsciously she also had no idea how to cope with the truth. What would this do to their marriage?

We often make assumptions and expectations based on fear – fear of the truth. Jill Taylor reminds us in her powerful and enlightening book, *My Stroke of Insight*, of a favorite definition of fear – “Fear equals *False Expectations Appearing Real*.” If our assumptions and expectations are based on fear, as they were for Jean, they will certainly hinder us on our spiritual/emotional journey.

However, reality never stays hidden. Like a whale breaking through the water’s surface, it eventually breaks through our denial. The power of this breakthrough and the ultimate ripple effect can rock us off our emotional base. Just look at what has happened with the financial industry. The whale of truth is truly breaching the waters and making huge waves. Reality is hitting hard. All assumptions and expectations that the average

person made about the safety of their homes and investments are being questioned.

The whale of truth almost broke Meryl, who expected that her husband would care for her financially. Meryl was a wonderful stay-at-home mom and a great wife. She maintained the house, the kids, and was good at organizing the family’s schedules. However, she had no interest in their finances, and let her husband take total responsibility. She had no idea how her husband managed their money or even what his salary was. She relaxed with her assumption that he loved the family so much he would protect them financially. Then in his late forties, he suddenly died of a heart attack.

After her husband’s death, reality violently surfaced when Meryl realized there was no will, no savings – only a hefty credit card debt. Sadly, during the most traumatic time of her life, Meryl had to go back to work. Ignorance is not forever bliss.

When we make decisions and choices based on assumptions and expectations – even if those assumptions are someone else’s – it can cost us a lot emotionally, financially and physically. It must also be noted that Meryl’s husband probably made assumptions, i.e., that he would be making more money, that he would live a long life, or that Meryl would never know the truth. By Meryl’s not checking out her assumptions and expectations, she also unknowingly bought into his. We need to be curious about the world around us and ask questions. We owe it to ourselves to stay alert and aware. Meryl had the right – and in fact owed it to herself – to check out

her assumptions and then alter her expectations accordingly. When we alter our expectations we will inevitably make different choices.

Assumptions and expectations are dysfunctional defense mechanisms, as they not only help us stay in denial, but they make us feel momentarily safe and in control. (For more on “defense mechanisms, see my new book *Break Through: Coping Skills for Chaotic Times*.) When we assume “A”, we will make choices and take actions based on that assumption. We often follow that first assumption with another one – the assumption that we can relax. Jack assumed his professional wife, who stayed up late working on the computer, was writing a proposal for her consulting job. Jack felt they had a good relationship and knew his wife wouldn’t cheat on him. However one night when he felt agitated and couldn’t sleep, he found her chatting on-line with another man. Her behavior was hindering the emotional intimacy with her husband, as she was giving her emotional energy to someone else.

Having said all of that, there are conflictual thoughts about expectations. How do we reconcile the following views? One comes from Fritz Perls, the psychiatrist who said, “I am not in this world to live up to other people’s expectations, nor do I feel that the world must live up to mine.” Another one comes from Norman Vincent Peale who said, “If you paint in your mind a picture of bright and happy expectations, you put yourself into a condition conducive to your goal.” Or, how do we “hold” these two thoughts by Mason Cooley the aphorist who said,

“Make the expectations lively enough and action will follow.” But, he also said, “Disappointments prove that expectations were mistaken.” Did he feel that expectations could be positive, but they also have the potential of causing us emotional difficulties? Perhaps we need to strike a healthy balance, by having reasonable, healthy expectations, and yet not hold onto them too tightly.

There *are* times when expectations are important. For example, an effective parent creates healthy and reasonable expectations of their children, e.g., concerning behavior, safety, cleanliness, achievements, and morals; having no expectations of our children can create huge problems. Additionally, it may also be helpful to have *some* expectations of ourselves as adults. For example, we can expect that maintaining a budget will help us stay out of debt. Likewise we can expect that eating nutritious food and engaging in exercise will keep us healthier.

We also have personal expectations concerning our various roles in life – for women that could include the roles of wife, mother, grandmother, friend, and professional. Of course this also holds true for men in their various roles. Melinda M. Marshall said that, “True balance requires assigning realistic performance expectations to each of our roles...to acknowledge that our performance in some areas is more important than in others. True balance demands that we determine what accomplishments give us honest satisfaction as well as what failures cause us intolerable grief.” Determining our values and priorities in relationship to our roles

helps us develop healthy expectations of ourselves.

Women in particular seem to struggle with this issue. Barbara Walters discusses in her new book, *Audition: A Memoir*, how extremely difficult it was to balance the expectations placed on her as a wife, mother and a high profile professional woman. Like Walters, many women are beginning to realize they cannot do everything perfectly. They cannot expect to be an A+ mother, wife, friend, community organizer and professional all at the same time. Perhaps there needs to be a hierarchy of expectations created, based on our personal priorities. In Barbara Walter’s case, her priority was her profession and as she says in her book, she was not really meant to be married.

We need to personally define the expectations we have of ourselves. If our expectations are realistic, doable, humanistic, involve creative envisioning, and a realistic structuring of priorities and values, this may be a good thing. If our expectations are based on fantasy, denial, wishful thinking and control, they could reap unwanted emotional/spiritual results.

Thus it seems when it comes to expectations, we need to tune into our reality – our intuition and self-awareness. We all have brains. We all have hearts that speak to us. We all have voices. We need to pay attention. For example, Ken’s intuition would send him physical signals by creating back pain whenever something was amiss. Sandra got migraines, and Jim’s heart fluttered. Joan would have very clear dreams, and Nora could even visualize what she really “knew” in her

heart. Yet all of these people ignored their intuitive “knowings” and followed their old patterns of assumptions/beliefs, which led them to making hurtful and destructive choices.

Look at the case of Jerry. Every time his adolescent son walked into the house after school, Jerry’s stomach did a “flip-flop.” Jerry loved his son and assumed they had excellent communication and a good, open relationship. Jerry finally paid attention to his intuitive stomach and decided to have a heart-to-heart talk with Jason. When that yielded no positive response, he searched his son’s room and found a stash of pot. We need the courage to listen to all these intuitive parts of ourselves, instead of allowing old assumptions from our families, culture and our personal habitual patterns control us.

Trusting our intuition instead of our assumptions is vitally important. Of course that means we have to discern the difference between our emotionally based assumptions and our intuition. As I say in my new book, *Break Through: Coping Skills for Chaotic Times*, “At a very basic level, intuition is a knowing. It is a knowing that transcends the physical, mental, and emotional components of the self. It transcends present day reality and any previous experiences.” To have intuition is to have insight or second sight. It is to have a gut reaction, a sixth sense, a hunch, or an instinct. It is a flash, an “aha.” Following our intuition helps us avoid making erroneous assumptions, or following wishful expectations. I also say, “Our intuition is a powerful resource allowing us to be our wisest self.”

Assumptions and expectations fall away in the face of death, for death has no road maps. My mother has recently passed from this life to the next. Throughout this past year, I watched how her once full life gradually narrowed to the bare basics of existence. As I observed the quality of her life slowly diminish, I saw her abilities, interests, friends, and possessions progressively fall away. Very little was important to her – only her children, the aide she loved, and being able to sleep. She had to let go of all assumptions and expectations, for she had no control. At the age of ninety, she was at the mercy of her declining body and mind.

My siblings and I also had to let go of our expectations about how she and we would approach her death. During her last five days of life, we watched as her body grew more lifeless and her few last words became mantras, i.e., “love, love, love.....honest, honest, honest.” Then her words stopped, and all movement ceased except her very slow breathing and her heart beat. For six days she held on to life without food or water. What was clearly important during my mother’s last days was the presence of loved ones, for looking into her tearful, yet unblinking eyes, I felt as though we could see deeply into her soul.

As she slowly declined, my siblings and I sat beside her bed and told family stories. Then remembering how we would often sing together as a family, we broke into joyous old songs – “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are grey...” Our hour or so of singing drove away the

crying nurses, for it was a powerfully intimate time. As a family, together in this spare nursing home room, we had created a sacred space. Then, having exceeded everyone’s expectations of what was physically possible, she let go of her hold on life.

Steve Jobs, US computer engineer and industrialist says, “Almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.”

We are approaching the holidays and the New Year. During these special occasions and transitional times we have a perfect opportunity to practice avoiding the assumption trap by re-evaluating our expectations and focusing on what is truly important.

Carol Kurtz Walsh is a psychotherapist, writer and artist in private practice in Bethesda, MD. For information about her new book, Break Through: Coping Skills for Chaotic Times, her other writings and her new artwork, contact her, at 301-656-6420, e-mail her at Carol@ckwalsh.com, or check her website, www.ckwalsh.com.

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