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INSIDE THE
MINDS OF
ANGRY AND
CONTROLLING
MEN

Why
Does
He Do
That?

Lundy Bancroft



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To the thousands of courageous women,
many of them survivors of abuse themselves,
who have created and sustained the movement
against the abuse of women, and to the many
men who have joined this struggle as allies.

QUESTION 2:
IS HE DOING IT ON PURPOSE?

When a client of mine tells me that he became abusive because he lost control of himself, I ask him why he didn't do something even worse. For example, I might say, "You called her a fucking whore, you grabbed the phone out of her hand and whipped it across the room, and then you gave her a shove and she fell down. There she was at your feet, where it would have been easy to kick her in the head. Now, you have just finished telling me that you were 'totally out of control' at that time, but you didn't kick her. What stopped you?" And the client *can always give me a reason*. Here are some common explanations:

"I wouldn't want to cause her a serious injury."

"I realized one of the children was watching."

"I was afraid someone would call the police."

"I could kill her if I did that."

"The fight was getting loud, and I was afraid neighbors would hear."

And the most frequent response of all:

*"Jesus, I wouldn't do **that**. I would never do something like that to her."*

The response that I almost never heard—I remember hearing it twice in fifteen years—was: "I don't know."

These ready answers strip the cover off of my clients' loss-of-control excuse. While a man is on an abusive rampage, verbally or physically, his mind maintains awareness of a number of questions: "Am I doing something that other people could find out about, so it could make me look bad? Am I doing anything that could get me in legal trouble? Could I get hurt myself? Am I doing anything that I myself consider too cruel, gross, or violent?"

A critical insight seeped into me from working with my first few dozen clients: **An abuser almost never does anything that he himself con-**

siders morally unacceptable. He may hide what he does because he thinks *other* people would disagree with it, but he feels justified inside. I can't remember a client ever having said to me: "There's no way I can defend what I did. It was just totally wrong." He invariably has a reason that he considers good enough. In short, **an abuser's core problem is that he has a distorted sense of right and wrong.**

I sometimes ask my clients the following question: "How many of you have ever felt angry enough at your mother to get the urge to call her a bitch?" Typically, half or more of the group members raise their hands. Then I ask, "How many of you have ever acted on that urge?" All the hands fly down, and the men cast appalled gazes on me, as if I had just asked whether they sell drugs outside elementary schools. So then I ask, "Well, why haven't you?" The same answer shoots out from the men each time I do this exercise: "But you can't treat your *mother* like that, no matter how angry you are! You just don't *do* that!"

The unspoken remainder of this statement, which we can fill in for my clients, is: "But you *can* treat your wife or girlfriend like that, as long as you have a good enough reason. That's different." In other words, the abuser's problem lies above all in his belief that controlling or abusing his female partner is *justifiable*. This insight has tremendous implications for how counseling work with abusers has to be done, as we will see.

When I was new to counseling abusive men, my own loss-of-control myth collided repeatedly with the realities contained in the stories of my early clients. Kenneth admitted that he used to dim the lights and then insist to Jennifer that nothing had changed, trying to make her feel crazy. (He also stands out in my mind for his outspoken criticisms of his group mates for their insensitivity toward their partners, despite his own actions.) James told me that he sometimes would hide something his partner was looking for, such as her pocketbook or car keys, wait for her to become frantic and frustrated looking for it, and then put it back out in plain view and insist that it had been there all along. Mario measured the distance from his house to the supermarket, and when his wife reported going out to shop during the day, he would check the odometer of her car to make sure she hadn't gone anywhere else.

One year my colleagues David and Carole were preparing a skit on abuse for a conference, and they decided to perform a rehearsal for their