Facing Self-Deception
By Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

"The lies we tell other people are nothing to the lies we tell ourselves." — Derek Landy

I was working on a writing task at the kitchen table, which adjoins the family room, when my wife came in, turned on the TV, and sat down on the sofa to watch. I tried to ignore the show while continuing my work, but it disrupted my concentration.

The family room is Ann's favorite, most comfortable, place to watch TV. There are other places in the house I could take my project, but there are also TVs in other rooms and I already had my stuff spread all over the table. So I proposed what I considered an elegant solution. "Would you consider wearing earphones so I can continue working here?" It was eminently reasonable and justice was on my side since I had been there first and was the one engaged in important stuff, while she was merely watching TV. Productivity trumps entertainment. Right?

Only Ann didn't see it that way. "I've been looking forward to this show all week and now you're asking me to wear earphones? I don't like earphones. Besides, what if something goes wrong with them in the middle of my show?

Ann's like that about technology. At least she's like that about my ability to successfully wield technology. There may have been previous unsuccessful attempts with headphones that could possibly justify her doubt, but that's another story and hardly worth mentioning.

"Look, I said, "I'll get it all set up during the next commercial. You won't miss a thing.

"Alright," she said, "but, if the headphones aren't working by the end of these commercials, I'm not doing it. You understand?

Sure, I understood. I had two minutes to get this right. But the technological world has this fiendish way of refusing to be taken for granted. After two minutes of feverish tinkering, the earphones were emitting nothing.

"Time's up," Ann said.

"I just need another minute," I pleaded.

"My show is back on. I don't want you messing around while I'm trying to watch."

"But…"

"That was the agreement," she said.

I was hung with my own rope. I had agreed to the terms and they turned against me. I packed up my earphones and sulkily withdrew to the kitchen table. I tried again to concentrate, but the sitcom sounded more loudly in my ears than ever. I found myself stewing in my own negativity. "Why is she like that? Why can't she be more flexible. I would have figured out the earphones in a few more seconds. Why does the fact that I'm already set up here mean nothing? Why can't she be the one to go somewhere else? Why is watching a sitcom so important anyway?" I was frustrated by my electronics, annoyed by Ann's implacability, and felt down right picked on. The more I tried to concentrate, the more derailed I became. I was working myself into an impressive snit.

Then an unbidden and, at the time, unwelcome thought entered my head. A year or two before, I'd read a book entitled *Leadership and Self-Deception*. It described how, like an infant, we are capable of crawling into situations like a baby crawls under a table and chairs. Then, finding our way blocked, we become frustrated, and bang our heads as we thrash about in our angst to get out. We see the problem as the immovable table and chair legs, while unaware of how we got ourselves into this dead-end or how to back away. Blaming others for something we helped create is called self-deception.

This concept forced its way into my petulant consciousness. I was busy feeling abused and didn't want to think otherwise. But there it was, refusing to be ignored. It kept inviting me to think beyond my grievance and this perceived injustice. It bade me to think about Ann.

And so, reluctantly at first, I thought about Ann. There she was, fifteen feet from me, laughing at a sitcom she loves. Ann has an unrestrained, child-like laugh, when nobody's around except family. It relieves her stress, keeps her sane, and makes me smile. For her, a good sitcom is like a mental massage. The house rings with her mirth.

And there I was, licking my self-inflicted wounds, imagining that I was the one hurt, thinking justice would be better served by denying Ann this enjoyment. Other more reasonable thoughts started forming in my mind. "I guess I can continue to work on my project if I just wear earplugs. I know that she's a person for whom small pleasures mean a lot. This really isn't worth getting upset about." I began feeling a transformation of emotion. I began to see my way out. Suddenly Ann wasn't looking selfish, inconsiderate, inflexible or unreasonable. Yet, nothing about the situation had changed. My upset was about me. All along, it was me!

Self-deception is easy to get into and hard to face up to. Believing our own view is the "right" view is human nature. But it's seldom accurate, mostly because disagreements usually boil down to preferences rather than "right/wrong." Through self-deception we justify negative feelings and reactions, which can result in hostility or withdrawal which usually invites backlash. It requires courage to stop, look around, and recognize the role we played in getting ourselves stuck.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when you find yourself angry, upset, or otherwise stuck. "Is my ego involved? Might I be distorting the situation, the other person's motives, or my own motives? Am I as aware and concerned about the other person's needs, challenges, pressures or burdens as I am my own? Am I mischaracterizing or mistreating this person? Is there important information I'm missing? Is there anything I could do for that person that could help resolve the situation and would not substantially hurt either of us?

Self-deception is a concept that's well worth looking into, especially since we all do it more than we care to admit. For those wanting more information, Google *Leadership and Self Deception, The Anatomy of Peace,* or *The Peacegiver*.