Night in Review

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

Tonight, I learned that not all husbands are subject to Night in Review (NIR). I'm surprised, frankly, because I thought for sure that it was mandatory for everyone sporting a Y chromosome and a wedding band. Apparently not, so I've been told.

I should have had some inkling that my circumstance might be different from others because I never once heard NIR mentioned during all those comedy routines that focus on gender differences. They certainly joke about male tendencies toward sloppiness, insensitivity, and mild to moderate retardation. Open toothpaste tubes, raised toilet seats, strewn clothes, and questionable personal hygiene also garner attention.

But no one ever mentions Night in Review.

Women come in for their own share of spoofing. The catalogue of female quirks highlight shoes, shopping, mood lability, sexual aversion (post-marital), tardiness, unpredictability, illogicality, cyclic irritability, an appreciation for finely nuanced emotions, the need to talk about anything and everything in excruciating detail, and a capacity to know at all times what a man is thinking (which, by most portrayals, isn't much). Yet, with all the focus on the intricacies of the female mind, not once have I heard about a preference for conducting Night in Review.

What is Night in Review? You'll understand best if I describe the process. So you're out with your wife and two other couples on a Saturday night. You've known these folks forever and then some. The evening unfolds with its usual intimacy, warmth, and jocularity as the bruschetta are passed, the calamari consumed, and the veal medallions savored. Some of the conversations are universal but most are gender specific. The guys review music and sports, the conversation interlaced with allusions to sexual infrequency and spousal insanity.

The women spice their conversation with complaints about their husbands' irresponsibility and boorishness. But it's totally comfortable, inconsequential, and harmless.

You travel home en masse because you all live within a 5-iron distance of one another. You head for the basement because it seems to have become you primary responsibility in life to take the damn dog out (especially if it's snowing). He disappoints you once more by his obvious good health and enthusiasm for off-grass urination. But that's ok because you made it through a frenetic week, a two-dollar Nassau, and an afternoon of carefully supervised household chores.

You head upstairs, your mind warmed by the glow of good food, wine, and friendship. You're also intent on reminding your spouse of the joys that physical contact can produce. You climb into bed, dim the lights, and, to your utter horror and dismay, find out that Night in Review has commenced.

NIR has a tightly proscribed format that hardly wavers. The Initiation Phase starts with four words that signal that all hope for joy has died. These four words are: "I can't believe you . . ." The dot, dot, dot can be anything that you might have said, done or thought of doing that evening. It may have been that you made fun of your mother in law's cooking or alluded to a degree of mental incapacity on the part of another family member. You might have divulged some deep, dark secret that everyone knows about anyhow or told a joke that made too many references to certain secondary sex characteristics or perhaps you defended someone on the list of the Those Who Should Rot in Hell. You scarfed the bread or accepted a taste of a fellow diner's entree, which you shouldn't have done because he surely had a cold at some point during his lifetime and now you'll get sick.

The offenses can be major or minor, real, or imagined, omissions or commissions. They can even be simple suggestions about organizing an outing or vacation that wasn't first

vetted for date, feasibility, security, expense, family impact, and consequences for the proper care of the dog. The impetus for NIR initiation can range from the totally trivial to the, well, damn near close to the totally trivial.

Now it would be perfectly fine if NIR focused on the evening's infractions and went no further. I could deal with that because I'm not above a degree of impetuousness or irreverence that warrants reproach. The problem is that the evening's instigating circumstances are simply the fuse on a powder keg of other wrong doings that might have happened at any point over the past thirty years.

The Chain Reaction phase of NIR can be painful. My wife has total recall for absolutely every transgression she thinks I've committed since birth. The joke about her mother might branch to a resentment about my failure to fix her computer the day I promised which reminded her of the time I said I was going to set the VCR clock on a Tuesday but didn't get to it until Thursday leaving her poor mother struggling to survive despite the foreboding presence of a flashing 12:00 am display.

The focus might then change to other failed promises, serious ones, like when I had pledged to pick out the paint for the bedroom the prior week and you know how important it is that we do that now because the painter is coming in two weeks which might seem like plenty of time to select a gallon of paint but she doesn't want to have to worry about it next week because one of the kids is coming home and we'll never have time to handle everything even though our kids are grown, self-sufficient and therefore capable of amusing themselves while we take all of an hour to pick out a gallon of paint.

I've taken a poll of other husbands to find out the shortest number of words that can produce intense spousal irritation. Most of the responses involve full sentences like, "Honey, I'm thinking about going fishing in Canada for two weeks with my buddies" or

“Wouldn’t it be great if we traded our SUV for a Corvette?” or “Yes, you do look like you might have put on a pound or two.” I admire that they can get out that many words before causing a marital tumult.

I can easily kick off an NIR with just a single word. The most likely utterance to cause offense is “Good.” You probably wouldn’t think that a word with as positive a connotation as that one could lead to conflict. After all, “Good” shows up in so many pleasant phrases like “Good evening” or “Good for you” or “Good going” or “Good luck.” But I have learned that my use of this word can reflect my poor judgment, lack of support, and general foolishness.

Here’s an example: My better half announced that our then college-aged son called to inform us that he intended to travel with three classmates to Florida over spring break. His plan was to drive down with his friends, stay at motel, enjoy the sun, partake of festivities, and return a week later. “What do you think of that?” I’m asked. At that point I must have missed something because I answered with the G-word. I thought that it was a good thing that our high achieving, thoroughly compliant, safety-conscious son experience some of the trials and tribulations of spring break or any other such age-appropriate social activity. While I knew matters occasionally get out of hand in Daytona Beach, my impression was that most students come home alive and disease free.

Man, was I wrong. “Good? Good? You think it’s good that drunken college kids will be driving Our Son in what probably is some cheap death trap through states that haul people like him into jail if they’re even a mile over the speed limit and then do things to them that make Deliverance look like Mary Poppins? You think it’s good that he’ll be in a drug-infested rat’s nest of a city with countless thousands of intoxicated and quasi-psychotic college kids flinging themselves off balconies and causing general mayhem at every turn?

You think that's good? I didn't go through nine months of pregnancy and a difficult labor just to have my kid wash ashore near some godforsaken fleabag motel because his father won't tell him to come home for vacation instead of risking life and limb to bask in the sun which, by the way, isn't all that good for you either. I wish that just this one time you'd support me by explaining to him why the whole thing's a bad idea."

My strategy for managing my side of Night in Review has evolved over the years. In the 80s, when I still had some modicum of dignity and self-respect, I would offer up a vigorous defense of my actions. I would explain how my behavior and motivations had been misconstrued, offer some evidence that I was not exactly a Daumer-level criminal, and wax poetic about the futility of focusing on the overblown.

I learned in short order that this approach constituted a catastrophic mistake that fueled further outrage and a marital version of shock and awe. Among the many factors working against me was that logic had no meaningful role in the discussion, nor did reality or a sense of perspective. Every time I thought I had her cornered on one point, I'd suddenly find that we were on a whole other topic that was related only by some random process I'll never understand. It was like trying to catch a slimy fish flopping on the bottom of the boat. You think you have it in hand only to find that it slipped away.

During this era of NIR-management, I wouldn't launch right into my defense. I'd usually begin by feigning sleep. That didn't work too well but it seemed at least worth the effort. After being prodded sharply in the ribs, I'd listen to the Initiation Phase indictments a little, hoping against hope that the Chain Reaction Phase wouldn't follow. But it almost always did, at which point I'd mount my defense (which is not the kind of mounting I first had in mind).

One time I really got on a roll. With what I thought was Darrow-type eloquence and

force of logic I detailed how my wife was wrong on every point. I explained how she was ascribing to me an agenda that was hers, not mine. I laid out all the reasons why it made no sense to solve problems in this fashion. I must've also thrown in various professions of hurt, resentment, and indignation. At the end of my closing statement, thoroughly impressed by my discourse, I asked what she thought. I never got a response because she was dead asleep. I don't think I ever quite understood the concept of ambivalence until that moment.

In the nineties I explored contingency management as a way of coping with NIR. This involved deploying my arsenal of incentives, which while admittedly limited, could still be effective. My most potent weapon derives from that fact that I do all the cooking. And I don't mean chili or macaroni and cheese. We're talking full-blown, well-presented meals most nights. This week featured Blue-Cheese Crusted Filet Mignon with Red Wine Thyme Sauce on Monday, Duck Breast with Ginger-Orange Sauce on Tuesday, Grilled Salmon Wrap with Mango, Red Pepper, Cajun Rice and Ancho Chili Mayonnaise on Wednesday, and a Shrimp, Asparagus, Grilled Vegetable, and Raclette Cheese Frittata for Thursday. I'm not sure about tomorrow yet but I've been thinking about Pan Seared Lamb Steaks with Marsala Wine Sauce that's been a perennial favorite. It will depend on what ingredients speak to me as I walk the aisles of Wegman's, my ancestral home.

Understand that I don't cook for marital leverage. I enjoy creating a flavorful and attractive meal regardless of its impact on my conjugal fortunes. But while I don't chop, dice, and stir because I expect that a gourmet essence will make the heart grow fonder, I have come to realize the dependency I've created in an otherwise independent person. I can stop NIR or other noxious nuptial interchanges dead in their tracks with the threat of a culinary embargo. Apparently, the thought of Lean Cuisine instead of Basil Cheese Terrine is so horrible as to promote a more genteel form of interaction.

Now in our third decade of NIR, I will likely resort to unbridled outrageousness to forestall protracted harangues. This has been by far my most successful strategy. When I hear those fateful words, I respond instantly with the most ludicrous antic I can muster. This has involved mooning of the non-celestial variety, sticking a flashlight in my jockey shorts and singing "You light up my life," belting out hymns usually reserved for religious holidays devoted to atonement, initiating the Mother of all Shaving Cream Wars, threatening to kill the dog if I heard one more complaint, and showing her the business end of a Super Soaker. It turns out that it's hard for a wife to build up much rhetorical momentum when she's staring at her husband's buck-naked backside or competing with a raucous rendition of "Our father Our King we have sinned against Thee."

Now back to the NIR format. After the Initiation and Chain Reaction phases comes the You Never Ever segment of the process. The theme here is that I am characterologically incapable of accepting responsibility for anything, ever. As best I can tell, the proof of my externalizing nature is that I didn't agree with much of anything my better half said during NIR Phases I or II. Failure to comply with spousal assertions that make no sense whatsoever is apparently grounds for being considered arrogant and narcissistic. My refusal to give ground or, better yet, beg for mercy on bended knee leads to my wife's conclusion that I never, ever apologize for anything, ever. That's not really true either because I have apologized many times. I even have my wife's signature on a statement I made her sign (under pain of not getting dinner). It says that I apologized on 8/9/03 for mixing up some travel dates. I also have signed statements that I was inarguably nice to her on 5/23/84 and a pile of pictures that prove I'm not the only one who leaves the milk out or shoes in the middle of the floor. All of that evidence means nothing in the heat of an NIR, but the data gathering process appeals to the empiricist in me.

Exasperated beyond all measure, my truly delightful but strong-willed wife brings NIR to a close. Having exhausted all unexploded ordnances of fury and resentment, she wallows in the futility of trying to influence the intractable.

Truth be told, we haven't had too many full-blown NIR bouts recently. After almost 30 years together, we may be slightly edging toward a marginal degree of mutual acceptance and trust. Go figure.

I do worry a little about the diminished frequency of NIRs because it makes me think that I'm not having a good time anymore when we go out with our friends or spend time with family. I'll roll into bed after what I thought was a somewhat raucous, fun-loving evening, wait to hear confirmation that my frontal lobes were indeed underfunctioning, and . . . nothing. Just an eerie silence or, more unnerving, a pleasant conversational interchange.

I lie in bed wondering if maybe I've lost my edge. Could this be the first step on the road to middle-age lethargy, frequent nocturnal urination, fossilized arteries, and chronic Viagra dependence? Is my scalp about to release all hold on my hair? Will my legs soon sprout varicose veins that inscribe my initials? Is their life after NIR? God forbid, am I actually maturing?

I suppose I shouldn't panic right yet. A few months of NIR abatement does not a male menopause make. I'll have another chance this weekend to see if I still have it in me to make that line you're not supposed to cross more dotted than solid. I'm sure I'll succeed if I concentrate intensely, keep my eye on the ball, and let no statement pass that offers any opportunity whatsoever for an obscene double entendre or sexualized remark. I'll use the G-word often, vigorously tout the benefits of grown children making independent decisions, offer up prayers for the dog's speedy demise, jump to the defense of a neighbor that my wife (and most others) can't stand because they have granola filling spaces usually occupied by

brains, and perhaps even suggest that we plan a trip that will be perceived as entirely too risky because it involves foreign travel. I hereby pledge that I will show undiminished capacity and steely resolve in my efforts to trigger a life-affirming edition of Night in Review.