

by
TERRENCE REAL

The Awful Truth

MOST MEN ARE JUST NOT RAISED TO BE INTIMATE

“I can understand why Jenn is so frustrated,” Peter says, sighing, his voice soft and Southern. He runs his hand through thinning hair. Early forties, I figure: he’s handsome—even sexy—in a cerebral, Ivy League sort of way. With a mop of jet-black hair, a long frame, and dark lipstick, Jenn is visually arresting as well. But despite her looks and style, there’s something faded about her, worn and fatigued.

“I’m glad I’m here,” Peter says tentatively. “Really, I am. It’s just—” He trails off. We wait for him. “I don’t know” he moans, frustrated. “I guess I’m not sure what I want, to be honest. I’m—” He pokes a hole with the tip of his polished shoe in my carpet. I resist the impulse to tell him to stop. “I guess I’m just, well, I’m confused.”

“Can I just cut in here?” Jenn offers. “Sure, perhaps we could—,” I begin.

But she breezes right past me, “I just have one thing to say,” she wheels on her husband.

“I’d like to suggest—,” I try again.

“Fuck you, Peter!” she delivers her payload. ‘just go fuck yourself.’ And then she leans back, arms folded over her chest, not heaving or screaming or anything, just staring.

Peter and I both look at her. “That’s it?” I ask.

“You want to be confused?” she asks him, ignoring me. “You’re confused? Then fine. Okay? But, I’m gone. All right? I hope you work it out someday, really.”

“Perhaps, Jenn, you might—,” I say.

“*Be* confused!” she snorts. ‘You’ve been confused our whole fucking marriage.’ She throws herself back against the cushions of the sofa, her foot tapping in the air, insistent and restive. Despite her baleful manner and threats, she isn’t going anywhere. The clock reads 10:17. We’re 15 minutes into the first hour of our two-day “intensive.” We have about 14 hours left, our agreement says, to transform their marriage or dissolve it.

Couples on the Brink

Five years ago, after the publication of my book, *I Don’t Want to Talk about It*, I started getting calls from people

around the United States who wanted help. Naming the issue of “covert depression” in men seemed to have struck a chord. Some of the calls were from men, but most were from women like Jenn, who were at the end of their rope, having already dragged their partners to therapy, veterans of at least one, most often several, failed courses of couples work. At first, I referred couples on the brink to local therapists as best I could, but eventually I began to invite them to Boston. I devised a model of working with them, a two- or three-day “intensive intervention,” at the end of which time, they’d agree that they were either “on track” or divorcing. My colleagues at the Family Institute of Cambridge facetiously dubbed such encounters “Terry’s Last Resort.”

If Peter and Jenn were on the brink, it was because Peter had pushed them there. Throughout the marriage, he’d always had his “special friends.” “Peter is charming,” Jenn smiles. “He’s honestly a friendly guy, with both men and women. He’d just get in over his head sometimes.” So Jenn had thought, until about six months ago, when she’d discovered he was having an affair. Jenn had contacted a lawyer the following day, but she didn’t really want her marriage to end. Peter had backed away from his young mistress, admitted being “inappropriate” in other relationships, and agreed to come up from Atlanta to see me—a last-ditch effort to salvage things. But after traveling so far, Peter now seemed loath to push himself all the way through. “My marriage has been dead for years,” he tells me, furtively glancing at Jenn. “And I’ve been dead in it. I guess I can’t really say for sure that I want to go back.”

“Are you open to trying?” I ask. “Do you want to resuscitate the marriage if you can?”

“Well, yeah,” he answers, repeating the nervous brush of his fingertips through his hair. “Sure, I guess~” he draws with a thunderous lack of conviction.

Clinically, it would have been straightforward if Peter had been lying, if he really did want the marriage to end but was having difficulty finding the nerve to say so. But as it would turn out., he didn’t want to leave Jenn, though it was hard to know this at the moment. He loved her; he told me without much enthusiasm during this first session. He just wasn’t sure, anymore, that he loved her, “like that.”

Like most clinicians, I’ve seen versions of Peter before. At first glance, he looked like a classic intimacy-avoider. He was a busy doctor, “married to his work,” he said. For years, Jenn had struggled to pull him back to her, trying to *make* him stay home, *make* him open up and talk, *make* him be close. The harder she worked, the more bitter she grew—and whatever passion there once was between them began to languish.

“When was the last time you felt cherished by him?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “In the beginning,” she answers. “I mean, Peter was quite passionate at first. We both were. But, really since the kids—we’ve been fighting about them since day one, it seems. And then—oh, I don’t know, he got busy with his work. Over time—” She trails off.

“Over time, it began to feel easier just to let go of it,” I offer.

“Let go of *him*,” she answers without feeling. “Let go of *us*.”

Not fully in the marriage and yet not out of it, Peter had parked in a position I call “stable ambiguity.” For those of us who have emerged from painful childhoods or dysfunctional families, intimacy can be a conundrum. Too immature to deal with the pain of being alone and to tolerate the pain inherent in any important relationship, some of us avoid both loneliness and commitment by arranging connections that we’re in, but not of—affairs, star-crossed situations, long-distance romances. The most prevalent form is “I’m with you, but I don’t really belong here.”

“There’s a word,” I tell Peter later in the session, “for going to sleep each night and waking up each morning with someone you’re not sure you really want to be with. Do you know what it is?” He shakes his head. “It’s called torture,” I tell him. “It’s a way of torturing someone.” Peter opens his mouth to speak and then clamps it shut firmly as Jenn puts her head in her hands and starts to cry. Her shoulders tremble slightly as she turns from us. I offer her some tissues.

It’s at this juncture that many women cry. Why? Because, like Jenn, pushed to the brink of a divorce they don’t really want, they’ve dragged their male partners to several therapists hoping for backup, validation, help—with little result. I believe these are tears of relief.

Love Found and Lost

For the past five years, Carol Gilligan and I have worked on an informal exploration of intimacy. I bring to the collaboration a resonance with men’s voices, and a focus on relational trauma and its consequences. Carol brings a resonance with women’s voices and a focus on pleasure.

Interviewing couples together transformed our thinking. A common story began to emerge—of boys and girls attached to their mothers in pleasure and then losing that connection, of men and women attached to each other in love and then losing that connection. As we tracked the course of love found and lost in childhood, found and lost again as adults, our work became ever more clearly guided by one overarching principle: authentic connection—intimacy—is our natural state as human beings, the state we begin life in, the state we function best in, the condition we most crave, despite our wounds and defenses. It’s the “relationality” that Relational Life Therapy seeks to recover. That conviction guides each moment in therapy, and it gives us the courage to speak the truth.

Peter looks on blankly as Jenn wipes her face.

“Can you say why you’re crying?” I ask her. “Can you put it into words?”

“I’m crying because it’s true,” she says, hurling the last word at her husband. “I’ve felt it for years. For *years*, Peter!” She wads the tissue in her hand. “I didn’t even have the guts to say it to myself, but I’ve felt it all along, Peter. I’ve felt tortured by you and your goddamn ambivalence.”

“And you’ve hated him for it,” I finish for her.

My words take her aback. They’re too harsh, too lacking in nuance.

“It’s not that I hated you,” she corrects me. “I still don’t hate you, even now. it’s just a part of me has died.”

“Do you want it back?” I ask, “that part of you?”

“Yes!” she answers unhesitatingly. “Yes, if we were in a healthy relationship.”

“And do you want her to get it back?” I ask Peter

“Well, I think everyone deserves to feel—,” he trots out, prevaricating.

“With you, Peter,” I press. “Are you interested in a return of her feelings for you?”

“Well, I suppose so,” he says, hedging. “I—I have to say, I’m not really sure.”

“Well, this is therapy,” I answer expansively. “Think about it. Take your time. Take a full minute or two. If this marriage can be set to rights, put where you want it to be, are you even open to it? Or is it a foregone conclusion that--.”

“No,” he says. “I’d rather work things out if we can.”

“Why?” I ask him.

“Why?” he says. “Why? Well, we have a lot of history. We’ve been married 13 years. We have two kids, a house.”

I lean in a little toward him. “And you love her?”

For a long while he contemplates his wife. “Yes,” he answers at last. “As much as I think I love anybody.” No one says anything for a moment; we sit in the rippling silence of Peter’s admission.

“Why do you say that?” I ask softly, ““As much as I love anyone?””

“I didn’t mean—I just—.” He starts to back off.

‘You’re not sure you quite know how to love completely?’ I press.

“I—,” he pauses, on the brink. And then he let’s himself go. “Right,” he confesses. ‘Yes, you’re right. Not completely.’”

“Thank you, Peter;” I answer, shaking his hand.

“What for?”

“Courage,” I answer, “and honesty. Because I think you’re probably right. I think you don’t quite know how to love. We don’t know why yet, where it comes from, but I believe you when you say it. It feels true.”

“Oh,” he seems a little dazed that I’ve agreed with him. Looking square into my face he asks, “So what happens now?” It’s the most direct thing he has said so far.

“It all depends on what you want. But if you want to, really want to, what happens now is that we fix it.”

At first, I see Jenn’s face tighten. But then her expression softens, and she leans back on the couch. She has decided to let me play my hand. Peter looks bemused, and then his jaw sets and he seems, for the first time since he entered the office, resolved. ‘You may think I like *putzing* around in all this,’ he says, the Yiddish sounding funny on his Southern lips, “But I really am tired of it. I want it settled—one way or another”

“Good,” I answer. “Good. Then we have a deal.”

Reversing Entropy

Like most of the couples I see, Peter and Jenn didn’t start off this way. Jenn thought Peter was brilliant and charming. Peter said Jenn had “simply knocked me out; and not just her looks, either, but her character, her *being*.” By the time they met me, they’d drifted a long way from those feelings.

What is it that’s so difficult about relationships? Why do so many good men and women, like Peter and Jenn—successful at work, as parents, as friends— fail so miserably with one another? Does some natural law of entropy pull couples apart? As a culture, we imbue men and women with the ability to fall in love, but not the skills to stay in love. While Jenn and Peter have a unique story, there are too many couples like them to lay blame wholly on

personal failings. What goes wrong?

I, was once surprised to learn that the old Chinese phrase “May you live in interesting times” was actually a curse. For the ancients, periods of boring stability not turmoil and change, were associated with prosperity and safety. Like it or not, as men and women, we currently find ourselves living in inter-sting times. The fundamental nature of marriage itself is undergoing a sea-change-one for the better, I believe, if we make it through the transition.

Over the last 40 years, women’s roles—and the way women see themselves—have radically changed. The problem is that the same can’t be said of men.

With new economic, cultural, and psychological resources, empowered women are, for the first time in history, insisting on real emotional intimacy in their marriages. *And men are coming up short.* We can’t blame each of these men individually. It isn’t enough to sift through each one’s family of origin in search of clues for their domestic failures. Men’s job description has changed—and men are unprepared for the change. We don’t raise, nor have we ever raised, boys and men to be intimate partners, but to be strong, competitive performers. The pressure to be hard, logical, independent, and stoic all too often sets men up to be emotionally distant, arrogant, numb to their own feelings, and unconcerned about everyone else’s, as well as contemptuous of vulnerability and weakness.

These aren’t pathological aberrations; they’re the defining characteristics of manhood in our culture. I tell clients like Peter, “The very values and traits instilled in us as boys—whether we wanted them or not—ensure that we’ll become lousy husbands.” I lift the burden of responsibility from their shoulders, but I also break one of marital therapy’s cardinal rules.

I side with the woman.

An Open Secret

When I first trained as a couple’s therapist, the prime directive was, “Thou shalt not take sides”—particularly not with the woman against the man. Evenhandedness was the order of the day. If we “formed a coalition” with one partner against the other, we were sent to supervisors who sorted out our “counter-transference issues” and set us back on the path of wise neutrality.

Structural family therapy warned us not to become enmeshed, strategic therapy cautioned against triangulation, constructionists taught us to become “friendly editors, co-constructing” our clients’ “new narratives.” From psychodynamic to narrative, all these evenhanded approaches assume a level playing field between the partners. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Let’s start with the first phone call. Do you imagine that Peter called me saying, “We’ve got to come see you: we’re

just not as close as we used to be.” Do men like Peter fuel the self-help industry, or scan monthly magazines for articles on “Ten ways to keep your relationship hot”? No. *It’s women, not men, who seek our services.* Here and there, some enlightened fellow may volunteer for counseling, but most of the guys I treat are what I call “wife-mandated referrals.”

Generally, men don’t feel at odds with the status quo of the marriage. Whereas many women are desperate for change, most of the men I see are not unhappy with their marriages: they’re unhappy that their wives are so unhappy with them. Pretending that both partners approach therapy equally disturbed and equally motivated is simply a fairy tale. Why do we therapists participate in it? Because, like women, we’ve been taught to protect men from the truth about themselves.

The field of psychotherapy has allowed itself to be intimidated. The unvoiced open secret, the elephant in the middle of the room, is that men bring into the therapy room the same privilege they bring into the living room and bedroom: the privilege to flee.

Family therapist Virginia Goldner once cautioned clinicians to remember that historically, women’s participation in domestic life, both logistical and psychological, has been mandatory, men’s discretionary. This isn’t criticism, but a simple statement of fact. Even today, men’s entitlement to withdrawal or attack when confronted, and women’s vacillation between silence, eruption, care-taking, and manipulation are the central components of heterosexual relations under the rule of patriarchy. And in therapy, under the rubric of “winning the man over,” “gaining his trust,” “forming an alliance,” we therapists are taught, in other words, to replicate the traditional wifely role. Twenty-five years of teaching and giving workshops have convinced me that we usually get about as far with most men as their wives do.

The subtext is that men, if pushed too hard, will explode, fall apart, or bolt, so it’s best to soothe them, win them over, and then tell them the difficult truth. In Relational Life Therapy, my colleagues and I do things differently. *We form a trusting relationship with the man by engaging the difficult truth, right out of the starting gate.* I often say to my students: I don’t know how to teach a man authentic relatedness while not being authentic with him.

Blowing up at Steven

“What did you mean, Peter, when you said you weren’t sure you could love?”

He smiles, fidgeting with something. “Look, I’m not really sure.”

“Well, what have you been doing that feels so unloving?” I persist.

He thinks for a moment, sort of shrugging, and passes a hand through his hair.

“Why don’t you tell him about it?” Jenn puts in, pugnacious, a dare.

“What about it?” Peter says, looking cornered.

“How about the fight we had before we came here?” Jenn’s voice could pierce a hole in her husband. “The same fight we have every night. The one we’ve have every night. The one we’ve been having every fucking--.”

“Aww, now Jenn,” Peter whines.

I step between them. “What’s she talking about?” I ask him. “You can pass on the question if you want to.”

“No,” he says, ever the reasonable one. “No actually, I think it’d be good to get it out.”

Jenn snorts.

“So, what’s up with Steven?” I ask.

Peter takes a long time to answer. We wait. He seems to be deep in thought, not at all uncomfortable keeping us sitting there. This alone would be enough to start me wondering about his lack of sensitivity, his narcissism.

“Peter?” finally I cut into the silence, annoyed.

“Jenn has never supported me with the children,” he says and clams up. We all start to wait again, but I’m out of patience.

“So, Peter, you want to answer the question?”

“Which was?” he says calmly.

“Your son?” I prompt, less than calm.

“Steven?”

“I was getting there,” he answers, looking injured.

“Why don’t you talk about what happened the night before we left to come here?” Jenn asks again.

“I’m not sure I remember,” he begins.

“She’s better at this game than I am.” Jenn bristles.

“It’s not a game,” I head them both off. “Just do your best, Peter.”

Eventually, the story trickles out. Peter came home one night to find Steven, their 12-year-old, watching TV before he’d done his homework, breaking a house rule. Peter had told him to turn the TV off. Steven had refused, with attitude. Peter claims that Jenn had come in and “undermined” him with Steven, “as she always does. She always gets in the middle between me and Steven, totally sabotaging me.”

“I didn’t undermine him,” Jenn practically yells. “I said to Steven, ‘This is no way to talk to Daddy. Daddy’s right. You know the rule. If you want to ask us to make an exception, let’s all sit down together and be respectful.’ I was trying to support him, not undercut him!”

“Do you hear that?” I ask Peter “Did you hear it at the time?”

“Well, actually no,” he admits. “I thought she was saying something different.”

“Do you think she did say something different then, and is lying now?”

“No,” he answers. “No, Jenn doesn’t lie. She’s pretty accurate, most of the time.”

“What’s it like to hear this now?” I ask.

He pauses and smiles, a fresh, boyish smile that lightens his whole face. “It sounds nice,” he says. “It’s grand.”

“Wish you’d been there,” I tease and we all laugh. “Then what happened?”

“Well, what happens when she cuts in like that? When I feel undercut, you know, I just lose it”

“How bad?” I ask softly.

“I don’t hit him or anything,” he starts. Jenn shifts in her chair “Well, a couple of times, maybe, when he was younger, I’d grab him,” glancing at her, or throw him against a wall or something. But mostly I get mad, verbally. I get angry.”

“You get vicious,” Jenn corrects. I watch Peter contract, getting walled in, careful—and ashamed. “You call him a loser;” she continues. “You say, ‘This is why no one likes you.’ You say ‘You’ll never get anywhere in the world.’”

“But he won’t,” he responds, “he won’t *if*—”

“But that’s no way to tell him, for god’s sake, Peter! You know that!” she snaps back.

I watch Peter deflate. “I lose my temper,” he admits. “I say things I shouldn’t. I yell”

“And then what?” I ask.

He blinks, lifting his head. “Well, I catch myself eventually and I feel mortified, just mortified. I know I’m hurting him so I—.”

“You what?”

“I just leave. I leave him to her.” He seems close to tears.

“And where do you go?” I ask him gently.

“I go to my room, I go to my study— anywhere, I guess.”

“To protect him?” I ask. His eyes fill. “What are you feeling now, Peter?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he answers. “I just feel like shit about it, okay? Why do you think I’ve been spending more and more time at work? Out of the damn house?”

“And with other women,” I remind him.

“Yes, all of it. It’s true. I just don’t want to be here,” he begins to cry. “I don’t belong here anymore, okay? No one needs me, and I only seem to hurt people anyway.” He bends over and cries. Jenn offers him a tissue, but he wipes his face with his hand.

Taking Responsibility

I lean back; think about where I’m going to go.

Peter raises his head. “We’ve been to four therapists already” he begins. “If Jenn would just even agree to pull me aside, I—.”

I hold up my hand for him to stop, asking him to wait a minute while I gather my thoughts.

“Peter,” I begin. “This is one of those make-it-or-break-it moments in therapy.” He waits expectantly “She’s right,” I tell him. “You’re wrong.”

Peter looks startled. “But—but I—.”

“Normally speaking,” I explain, “you’d be a hundred percent right on this. It’s a bad thing when a parent steps in to undercut another parent’s authority. And I want to reassure you that we’re going to do what we need to in order for that to stop.”

“Yes, but?” he waits for the other shoe to drop.

“The only time stepping in like that is ever called for is when the other parent is being abusive. Jenn’s first responsibility is protecting her child.”

“But she comes in *all* the time,” he protests. “Sometimes she’s right, but a lot of the time--.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “Do you know why?” Because if she makes a mistake and cuts you off at a time when you’re in control, that’s really bad. But if she makes a mistake and doesn’t cut you off when you’re out of control, that’s whole lot worse. If she ‘s going to err, let her err on the side of protecting Steven from your rage. This isn’t her problem, Peter. It’s yours.”

Jenn quickly folds in on herself and cries, hard, steady.

“Don’t you see how she just perpetuates--,” he begins.

“She does nothing of the sort,” I counter. “You’d do this with anyone, Peter. You could be married to Mother Teresa and you’d still wind up doing this.” I lean toward him. “Do you know how I know?” He shakes his head. “Okay,” I tell him, “now watch this. Are you, okay?” I ask Jenn, an aside. She nods. “Can I go on with this?” I ask her. Again, a nod.

I turn back to him. “Peter, who’s responsible for your temper?”

“Well, I am, of course.”

“That’s right. You are. But that’s not how you’ve been talking.”

“But I only lose it when she—.”

“There you are,” I stop him. “That’s the voice of blame right there. When she what, exactly, Peter? When and how does your temper turn into her responsibility?”

“But I feel so helpless when she does that. I—don’t you think she has some culpability in—.”

“None whatsoever” That stops him for a moment. “She’s the trigger, Peter. That helplessness? It’s also a trigger. What we call a *trauma trigger*. I understand that you feel overwhelmed with helplessness at that moment. No doubt that comes from your childhood growing up, your family. We’ll get back to that. But first, let’s deal with this. What happens when you feel that helplessness?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, literally, what do you do? If there were a video camera recording things, what would it show?”

He looks suddenly ashamed. “I yell. I say things, things I shouldn’t.”

“What kind of things?”

“Like what she said,” he allows.

“‘Loser?’ ‘Idiot?’ Like that?”

“And worse,” he barely whispers.

“Like, ‘I hate what you’ve turned into.’ Like, ‘I wish you weren’t my son,’” Jenn says, softly without venom. Peter begins to cry.

“Let it go,” I tell him. He cries harder, his face red, his sobs choke in his throat. “Open your throat,” I instruct. “Make noise. If you choke this off you’ll just make yourself sick.”

He sobs in earnest, tears and mucus flowing, banging his hand into his thigh.

“Put what you’re feeling into words, Peter” I put my hand over his, stopping him from hurting himself.

“I hate it! I hate it! I *hate* it when I act like that!” through his tears.

“Good, Peter That’s good to know.”

Exploring Shame

‘The work I was doing with Peter I call bringing someone “into shame.” As I explained later on in the session, the part of Peter I was speaking to in that moment did indeed thoroughly hate his behavior but unfortunately, that’s not the part in command when he lashes out. That part of Peter has no compunction whatsoever about hurting his wife and child. In the moment he hurls his rancor, he feels self-righteous and utterly justified: *they* have wounded *him*; they need to be put in their place; they deserve it. To avoid feeling belittled and helpless, Peter escapes into defensive grandiosity. His behavior becomes shameless.

From its inception, in a myriad of ways, psychotherapy has tried to help clients “come up” from shame. But comparatively little has been done or written about what I call “the other self-esteem disorder.” For the most part, therapy has not helped people “come down” from grandiosity. And as I tell therapists in workshops around the country: if you don’t know how to help with issues of grandiosity you don’t know how to help men.

Women in our culture tend to lead with shame. Their grandiosity, which most often shows up as managing men (rather than being with them), being manipulative, and being condescending, tends to be covert. Men, by contrast, tend to lead with grandiosity while struggling with covert shame. There are exceptions; there’s no surfeit of offensive women or role-reversed couples. But, as the women’s literature has detailed for decades, most women in our culture struggle with disempowerment, and their healing work centers on re-empowerment. Men, by contrast, struggle with disconnection: their healing work centers on reconnection.

“Look, Peter,” I begin. “My read on what’s going on with you is that you lose your temper when you get into a downward spiral of shame. When you feel overwhelmed and helpless, you’re in what we call a ‘shame state.’ You feel small, inadequate, unworthy”

“Yes,” he agrees.

“And, like many guys, you have about a millisecond’s tolerance for that shame, so you bounce right up into what we call grandiosity. You go from feeling less-than to feeling better than, from dominated to dominator, from feeling victimized to attacking. We call this ‘offending from the victim position’: ‘hit me and I’ll kick your face in.’ Do you understand? ‘Kick me and I’ll nuke you.’”

“Okay, yes, I get it,” he says.

A Second Language

Healthy self-esteem is the capacity to hold yourself in warm regard, to cherish yourself, while fully recognizing your imperfections as a flawed human being. It's a rare commodity in our anti-relational culture, particularly for men. In the world of men, you're either one-up or one-down, winner or loser, dominator or dominated. Where's the platform in this setup, I ask men like Peter, for healthy self-esteem? For that matter, where's the platform for love?

Conventional wisdom has it that men are afraid of intimacy. But I don't think so. I think many men, like Peter, don't know what real intimacy is. They bring the one-up, one-down framework of masculinity into their relationships and read closeness through the only filter they know. *Men aren't afraid of intimacy; they're afraid of subjugation.* Many men read emotional receptivity as an invitation to be run over. But shame and grandiosity are incompatible with love. Peter needs a new space, a median space of loving truthfulness, of moderation and accountability.

The problem with toxic shame—the kind of self-flagellation Peter engaged in after verbally brutalizing his son—is that it's a very aversive state. In fairly short order, most of us can't stand the pain. “And where do you think we go to escape?” I ask Peter. “Right back up into grandiosity. We drink, or run away, or rage. And the whole thing starts up all over again.” But, there's a mature state of appropriate shame, in which we feel proportionately ashamed for our bad behavior and yet still manage to hold onto our essential worth as an imperfect human being.

“The common name for appropriate shame,” I tell Peter, “is *remorse*. You can tell the difference. When someone moves out of shamelessness and grandiosity into toxic shame, they feel like big shits. And in a funny way one form of self-preoccupation just replaces another. You know: ‘Don't bother me; I'm too busy feeling like hell about what I just did to you.’ Real remorse doesn't pull you in like toxic shame does. When you feel remorseful, your attention is on the people you hurt and their feelings. You're moved to do whatever you can to make amends, to repair things. Can you feel the difference?”

Step by step, Peter begins the process of rebuilding his capacity for appropriate shame and legitimate self-esteem. We work on letting go of contempt, letting go of control, experience empathy and true remorse.

For many men, learning the steps to a new way of being in relationship is like learning a second language. The practice of intimacy requires a conscious effort. It has been for me in my marriage. I was raised in a violent home. My first responses are generally grandiose and defensive: “Why should I have to rouse myself from the dinner conversation and bring in a few dishes?” Often, it takes a conscious effort, when my kids are angry at me or behaving immaturely, not to haul off and smack them the way I was smacked. This “second consciousness” is that moment when every muscle and nerve of your body is screaming to do the same old thing, and then another force comes in that says, “Stop!”— a force that, through discipline, helps you lift yourself off of your accustomed track onto something more functional, more loving, more sane.

“But you do understand,” Peter tries again later on in the session. “I don’t get into this with *anybody else*. In every other circumstance—.” And then he stops, shuts his mouth, and shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter, does it?” he says. “None of that matters, does it?”

I take his hand. “You know that moment right there?” I ask him. “That moment when you stopped yourself, thought it over, and redid it?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“That’s called recovery,” I say, “Welcome aboard.” Peter begins to cry. Jenn caresses his back. “This is a big moment, Peter;” I tell him, “It’s a pleasure to be with you.”

Clean Grief

While many women, like Jenn, have trouble connecting in healthy ways, many men, like Peter, need help learning how to connect at all. Does Jenn have her issues? Of course, and they’ll emerge most clearly and be dealt with just as emphatically, after her husband begins to change. As my male clients begin to move into recovery, to give their partners what they’ve been asking for all these years, most women don’t swoon in their arms in loving gratitude. They most often hesitate behind walls of anger and complaint, just as their men have predicted they would. But as they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, “First things first.”

“A friend of mine used to say,” I tell Jenn and Peter; “that everyone is either blatant or latent. The thing is that Jenn can hide behind Peter. She can fold her arms and say, ‘Hey. I have no issues. I’m dying for closeness. But who could be close to *this* jerk?’ And my problem as your therapist is that she’d be right. Who could be? So the way this works is what I call, ‘calling her bluff.’ We’ll get to both of you eventually but the blatant one goes first.

“It doesn’t seem fair;” Peter pouts.

“You can have fair or you can be married,” I answer. “What’s more important to you?” But he doesn’t seem to be listening. He’s looking intently at his wife, who is meeting his eyes.

“You look so tenderly toward her now,” I tell him. “What’s that look saying?”

“That I’m sorry,” he speaks to her.” Sorry for how I’ve been acting all these—all this time, that I’m worried about what I may have done to the kids, particularly Steven. We’ve got to—I’ve got to set that to rights.” Tears fill his eyes, and he stops for a moment.

“Speak them,” I say softly “Give those tears words.”

“I’m just,” still speaking to her, “I’m just so *sad* at all the wasted time!” Jenn leans toward him.

“Do you want to go to him?” I ask her. She nods. “Okay” I say. “Go, ahead. Go!” She holds him to her, rocking. “Aww baby,” she soothes.

“This is clean grief,” I say. “It’s an appropriate, grown-up, present-based feeling. The first thing that hits in early-stage recovery is grief at what has been lost while you were out of control. These are good tears, healing tears.” But it’s not clear for whose benefit I speak. They’re lost in each other.

I look up at the clock. It’s past 1:45. We’ve blown through our morning break and what would have been lunch. It’s time to stop, to breathe, and assimilate. And then the hard work begins. Skill by skill and brick by brick, they’ll build— with me and the others I’ll recommend, local therapists, workshops, men’s groups, women’s groups, twelve-step work—it’s too early to tell. But while the particulars of their treatment regime may not yet be clear, the path is.

Leveraging Grandiosity

I want to add a few technical thoughts on the treatment of grandiosity. Grandiosity impairs judgment, and it feels good: think intoxication, think mania. That’s why we turn to it in myriad forms for self-medication. Those of us dealing with grandiosity are not in pain; it’s the people around us who are in pain. Shame makes you feel bad, and you want to get out of it, but grandiosity sends you on a collision course with others.

A core myth of patriarchy—one that fuels thousands of “codependent” women—is that tending to the “wounded boy” healing the shame-core underlying grandiosity will magically resolve the problem. Unfortunately a lot of therapy implicitly buys into the same wishful thinking. Traditional nurturing therapy while comforting does little to help. Grandiose people don’t primarily struggle with blunted empathy toward themselves, as shame-driven people do. They feel impaired empathy toward others.

You can empathize with a grandiose person for a few decades, and you won’t shift his behavior or “character” because you’re not helping him recover what’s really lacking. The therapist needs to supply the grandiose person’s deficient empathy toward *others*, highlight the effect his behavior is having. I call this “remedial empathy.” It can be taught.

Just as the “ouch” in grandiosity is interpersonal, so too should be the treatment. It’s extraordinarily limiting to treat grandiose men alone, and I try not to do it if possible. If we see men as traumatically shut down, walled off, emotionally truncated, and emotionally insensitive, why would we rely on *them* to tell us what’s going on? Bring in

their partners, or, if appropriate, others: kids, siblings, colleagues, friends. Open up the therapy! Help male clients recover relationality by helping them work on their real current relationships.

Instead of relying on the grandiose individual's goodwill, as conventional therapy does, Relational Life Therapy relies on leverage. We assume that most men aren't intrinsically motivated to do recovery work. For them to come back session after session, we have to have something that will make it worth their while. By and large, that leverage must come from the woman partner. She must be willing to tolerate the man's discomfort and even to risk the relationship itself. That doesn't mean necessarily packing her bags, but it does mean openly acknowledging her unhappiness with the marriage, if, indeed, she's unhappy.

Too many women take a position to their mates that sounds something like: "I hate how you treat me. What can I get you for lunch?" So before we can even begin to work on the man, the woman must be empowered enough to deliver him to us—and keep him there. If she's unwilling to make waves, or if he doesn't care if she leaves, the odds are there's no case.

Speaking the Truth

A lot of the artfulness in this phase of Relational Life Therapy lies in helping men move into appropriate shame without feeling abused by the therapist and just acting out their offending-from-the-victim behaviors. People often ask how I can get away with speaking so bluntly to men. Here are a few pointers:

- I normalize their limitations. No one ever taught them how to be intimate. Quite the opposite: they were robbed of their birthright to guidance and nurture in their emotional lives; they were "set up" to be dysfunctional by today's raised standards.
- It's critical that the therapist be in recovery himself or herself, that he or she practice self-esteem while teaching it, going neither one-down, nor one-up to the man. Our aim, in relational recovery, is to tell men the truth with love, and our clients sense that. We're rooting for them, wanting them to be the husbands and fathers they deserve to be.
- We emphatically do *not* tell men what to do. We don't try to control them. It's their lives. They get to do what they want. But they *will* suffer the consequences, and we're unusually blunt about those consequences, as we see them.
- We self-disclose, speaking as imperfect humans. We're truly no better than our clients. If intimacy is a demanding daily practice for them, so it is for us. If they come from dysfunctional families, so do most of us. If they look ugly when they lose it, so do we. And if we can recover, so can they.

Please notice that the one factor I do not include is my sex. Women therapists routinely ask if the reason I can “take men on” is that I am male. The answer is an emphatic, “No.” I see this constraining belief as a variant of the patriarchal axiom that only a man can teach a man how to be a man—a belief that dis-empowers hundreds of thousands of single mothers, and many female therapists. Obviously women cannot speak man-to-man to their male clients, but women can avoid some of the blatant male-to-male power struggles. The three colleagues I routinely confer with when I’m stuck with a male client are women. All three are stunningly effective—in ways as different from one another as from me—in helping men see when they are, as Pia Mellody puts it, “coming on like a garlic mouthwash.”

Relational Life Therapy (RLT) isn’t about a damsel in distress bringing her troublesome man to some male enforcer. It’s about someone outside the system willing to break the rule of silence and name the truth with respect and authority. In the early stage of therapy, we scan for leverage, then tell the truth about what we see as wrong, and offer compelling tools to set things to rights. If the man understands that he’s relationally close to drowning, and believes that we offer a reliable life preserver, chances are that he’ll listen. My experience working with colleagues and training students is that when women therapists are willing to take on such a powerful voice, effectiveness trumps gender.

In RLT we empower the “latent” to take on the “blatant.” Both partners are dealt with, but in sequence. In role-reversed couples, the usual sequence is also reversed—the woman goes first. In couples in which both partners engage in blatantly offensive or irresponsible behaviors, both are addressed simultaneously.

Mainstream culture rewards compliance to traditional roles. Grandiose men and accommodating women are often “successful” by the world standards, even while their relationships are miserable. Moving men and women into true intimacy means moving them out of patriarchy. It’s more than personal work: it’s insurrectionary. And there may be consequences—consequences to our careers, consequences to our sons if we’re serious about raising them to be different, consequences to our friendships.

In the final phase of therapy I focus with the couple on building ongoing support for their continued work, building a *recovery subculture* that sustains them and stands between them and the anti-relational forces of the culture at large. “No one recovers relationality by himself,” I say. That truth seems as important for the practitioner as it is for the client.

Real intimacy is the conjunction of truth and love. Patriarchy and the rules sustaining it, blunt women’s capacity to live in the truth and men’s capacity to live with love. Conventional therapy has done as much to replicate these mores as challenge them. It’s time for men and women of good faith to join in the understanding that this traditional arrangement harms both sexes and compromises the union between them. Undoing those structures isn’t feminist work any more than it’s masculinist: it’s work for all of us who stand in serious pursuit of fulfilling lives—for our-

selves, and for the troubled, searching men and women who come to us in hope of guidance and relief.

Terrence Real is founder of the Relational Life Institute and maintains a private practice. He is the author of three books: "New Rules of Marriage", "I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression", and "How Can I Get Through To You?" Address: Relational Life Institute, 754 Massachusetts Ave., Arlington, MA 02476. E-mails to the author may be sent to treal@relationallife.com

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