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# Love Actually

MARRIAGE COUNSELING, COUPLES THERAPY, AN INTIMACY WORKSHOP: WHATEVER YOU WANT TO CALL IT, TERENCE REAL AND HIS "RELATIONAL MINDFULNESS" HAVE TURNED EVERYTHING UPSIDE DOWN. HE INSISTS THAT TRADITIONAL PSYCHOLOGY (ONE PERSON, ONE COUCH) IS INADEQUATE FOR COUPLES, HE OPENLY QUESTIONS THERAPY'S PATRIARCHAL ROOTS, AND...HE TAKES SIDES.

By Marcia DeSanctis — Photographs by Tim Barber





# A

about six hours into day one of Terrence Real's Relationship Bootcamp, I need a breather. Forty couples and some single people (plus me) are packed into a conference room on the edge of Manhattan's Chinatown, but it's not the smell of cold coffee or the human BTUs that have shifted the ions in my equanimity. It is, I realize, the impact of Real's insight on marriage and intimacy that he has deployed, ninja-like, straight to the heart, since 10 a.m. Pithy daggers such as this one: "We fail to acknowledge disharmony as part of the deal. It hurts. It's dark. This does not mean you're in a bad marriage. It means you're in a marriage." Whoa.

My first encounter with the acclaimed author, therapist, and relationship guru was only days earlier, when my husband, Mark, and I drove to his office in suburban Boston. Strangely, it's in my mother's hometown, three miles from where I grew up, and a short walk from a long-gone ice cream parlor where, on a hundred summer evenings, my father took me for sundaes. A heady stew for what I will soon confront: who I am, how I got that way, and how it affects my relationship.

As a couple, Mark and I are self-help-shy. We love each other deeply, and we always muddle through. In 26 years of marriage, we have sought counseling only once. Neither of us could stomach the therapist's faux empathy and wishy-washy neutrality. Terrence Real, we've heard, is different.

He greets us in groovy leather sandals and the residue of a summer sun-tan that sets off his bright blue eyes. He is so soft-spoken that at times during the three-and-a-half-hour session, both Mark and I ask him to repeat himself. We are here, we explain, because with two kids just flown, we are facing each other and ourselves in a big empty house. We're not exactly in crisis, and the issues are small, but we seek a road map ahead and a crowbar to bust us out of some of our negative patterns. We have many years together still and refuse to end up as that wordless old couple in the steak house. Fresh and connected is our goal, so I give him the basics.

Fifteen years ago, we left New York City for rural New England. Mark is a stone sculptor and spends his days carving massive blocks of granite into art. Even when the forklift jams in 10 feet of snow, he never has a bad day. I am married to the most joyous and fulfilled person I have ever known. But for me, life in the sticks is not always a *Green Acres* laugh riot.

Mark demands very little, but the household is a cumbersome load, and I bear most of it. I make plumber appointments, and I make dinner. Also, I'm impatient with those molehills that have turned into mountains, such as Mark sneaking inside in work clothes, coating the floor with stone dust. The atmosphere can be unromantic and downright tense. Even I can't stand my schoolmarm tone of voice, so I don't blame Mark for tuning it out. Another bummer: my bouts of hand-wringing self-doubt. Though he is my rock, Mark can be excessively positive. I love him for that quality, but sometimes what I need is not a cheerleader. So, small issues. Right?

Real is not the usual shrink, snoozing while feigning interest. He's engaged, proactive, and kind. Mark likes him, I can

tell. It takes about 10 minutes for Real to read me. "Ready?" he asks. "Take a breath. This will sting. You're resentful as hell. You feel stuck. Trapped. On a bad day, you feel like a victim."

Mark grasps my hand. "Baby," he whispers.

Real's dead-on diagnostics are groundbreaking, and so is his blunt but loving delivery. "If you tell the difficult news in a way that's respectful, you still feel like I'm on your side," he tells me later.

Unlocking the first difficult truth—for me, the toll of resentment in my life—is the first step toward greater intimacy and connection. Later, Real elucidates. I learned resentment because of influences in my childhood, and it dictates my knee-jerk response to Mark's laissez-faire attitude. "This is the part of you that just wants to be right, controlling, or self-protective in some way," he says about my "adaptive child." Mark has one too—boyish, charmingly irresponsible—at least concerning the duties of our household. In fact, in all marriages there are four people, the two adaptive children and the two "functional adults"—the

mature part in each of us that reasons and makes thoughtful choices. "Frankly, it's only this part of you that wants to be intimate," says Real.

According to Real, learning to recognize, forgive, and ignore the instinctive, harmful voice of the adaptive child is a crucial step in marriage recovery, a purposeful effort involving constant on-the-spot decisions. "Love is not something you have," he says. "It's something you do." Deep intimacy, says Real, is a spiritual practice. This state of awareness is what he calls "relational mindfulness," and the quest for it is one of the hallmarks of Relational Life Therapy, or RLТ. Real is the founding father.

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Real's own father was a frustrated artist whom he describes as depressed, violent, and ultimately the inspiration for his life work. "I started my family therapy career at about age four," he says of his troubled New Jersey boyhood. "In my dysfunctional family, I had to manage my mom and dad or I would have been hurt."

Real's early specialty and first book tackled the often-ignored subject of male depression, which he himself battles. Back then, as he traveled around the country, he saw that therapies used on individuals were highly ineffective for two people. There was another problem. Everything had to be 50-50. "The cardinal rule in couples therapy has always been 'Thou shalt not take sides,'" he later tells me. "I've thrown all that out the window. I take sides."

The methods and principles of RLT are spelled out in Real's best-selling book, *The New Rules of Marriage*. For the past 10 years, he has been training therapists worldwide, and his technique is hugely influential—as is the man himself. "He definitely transforms marriages," says couples therapist Esther Perel (page 14), author of *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity*. "When a couple is on the brink, he is among the few people I will send them to as a last-ditch effort."

Real, married 34 years to Belinda Berman-Real and the father of two grown sons, is also considered a leader in feminist-oriented couples therapy, which looks at gender roles under the long-entrenched patriarchy. It's a dynamic, he points out, that's present under my own roof—and even, he discloses freely, his own. I'm burdened by the legacy of my mother's generation, and Mark has inherited another. "Every time you pull those privileges, usually implicit, and leave it to her to clean up after you, is a time you are inviting her away from true intimacy," he says to Mark. So what's the solution? "Don't come inside trailing granite dust," he says. "How hard can it be?"

Mark acknowledges that my resentment can't get fixed until the petty things are dealt with. "It doesn't take Sigmund Freud to see that your stance of resentment and Mark's stance of charming irresponsibility have been reinforcing each other," says Real.

As he sees it, marriage is a biosphere. You never want to pollute it because you are also breathing it. My anger at feeling like the family maid and personal assistant poisons the air, as does Mark's seeming indifference. "It's in your interest for her to feel less like a victim," Real tells Mark. "Do you want to come home with flowers tonight, or do

you want to come home to criticism? I think I'd pick the flowers. It's being thoughtful and deliberate."

Boyish and charming, compliant and resentful: Let's say Real has seen this combo once or twice. "The work," he says, "is to get the man to show up and grow up and to help the woman be more lovingly assertive on the front end and less resentful on the back end." Real suggests I list everything I do to keep the family afloat and tell Mark what I'd like to off-load to him. That's easy, and Mark's all in. More difficult, perhaps, is the self-care I need to address. I need to start inhabiting the positive elements of my own life and character.

As for Mark's everything-is-perfect mantra, Real suggests that he try listening without dismissing, with real empathy and curiosity. This is elemental Real: freedom from our automatic responses. Perhaps Mark could share some of his own vulnerabilities with me. "Give her the opportunity to be the strong one sometimes," he says. Is it that easy?

"No," he says. "It's work. But you can't just say, 'That's the way I am.' You need total self-awareness. This is about cultivating mindfulness." Only a victim refuses to change. "We don't do victims in RLT," he says.

At the workshop, Real breezes us through the skills and basics of RLT and keeps us entertained, crying, and rapt for 14 hours. He offers a list of relationship no-fly zones, among them unbridled self-expression and the need to be always right, most of which I cop to. Some of us were first-timers to RLT. Others, like Kristy Stone, a social worker and mother of four from Salt Lake City, have been doing his work—both as a student and practitioner—for years. "He's amazing and he's changed my life," she tells me. "His voice is always in my ear."

I am sold on the idea of marriage as a constant practice because intimacy, for me, is the cure for everything. Real doesn't take sides in our session, not really. But I'll admit that it's perhaps a trickier commitment for me to deal with my issues than it is for Mark to notice the trash bag is full. According to Real, our work is far from over.

After the workshop, I creak over to my car. I have been sitting a long time. I dial Mark from my parking space, in front of the building we lived in when our son was born, 23 years ago. We have shared so much, I think. I love this man to bits.

"Hi, baby. Dinner's ready, and I've opened up a nice bottle," he says. "Hurry home." ●

