The New York Times Magazine

How I Learned That the Problem in My Marriage Was Me

How I Learned That the Problem in My Marriage Was Me

It took a superstar couples therapist to help me see beyond my anger.

By Daniel Oppenheimer

Published Feb. 4, 2025 Updated Feb. 5, 2025, 7:24 a.m. ET

One thing I've learned from being married to my wife, Jess, who is a couples therapist, is how vast the distance is between the masks people show to the world and the messy realities that live behind them. Every couple knows its own drama, but we still fall prey to the illusion that all other couples have seamlessly satisfying relationships. The truth about marriage — including my own — is that even the most functional couples are merely doing the best they can with the lives that have been bestowed on them.

This past spring, Jess and I had the first of eight sessions of couples therapy with Terry Real, a best-selling author and by far the most famous of the therapists we've seen during our marriage. In November, I watched the recording of that session for the first time since treatment. In the footage, I see Jess and me as Real might see us. I look worn down, a little pained. Jess looks to me like the same beachy blonde who divebombed into my life 20 years ago, crashing at a few thousand miles per hour into the defenses against intimacy and vulnerability that I had dedicated so much energy to erecting. She is lithe and elfin where I am dense and rough-planed. She looks tired, too, though.

Real glows in the aura of his webcam light, at 74 still elfin in his own right. He's pushing me harder than I'm used to being pushed by a therapist, expressing skepticism of what strikes him as an overly sanitized version of my internal monologue when I feel criticized by Jess.

"If your hurt feelings could speak, what would they be saying?" he asks.

"I tell myself: 'I try really hard. I try to be a good person. I try to be thoughtful about Jess and what she needs. Maybe I don't get to everything, but it's not because I'm not a good person.'"

"Really?" Real asks. "That's what it sounds like?"

I laugh self-consciously.

"Can I tell you what I think it sounds like?" he asks.

Real pauses, intensifies his tone and confronts me with the kind of coarse language he is known to use with his male clients — the language he believes they understand and respond to. " 'No matter what I do,' " he says, " 'No matter what I fucking do — no matter

how hard I try — you're going to find the one damned thing I didn't do. I can't believe I have to put up with this bullshit again.' "

I concede the point. Jess, I can see on the video, is enjoying the scene.

To Jess, I am, at my worst, too angry, too withdrawn, too talky about the small things and too inarticulate about the big ones.

Real wants me to put more flesh on it. What does it actually sound and look like? What's a typical fight? It often begins, I say, when I think Jess is judging me. A form that one of the kids needs signed for school has gone missing, and she draws attention to it. It's an ostensibly neutral observation, but I'm pretty sure it's aimed in my direction. Then there's another observation, or sigh, and I respond with what I think of as a direct but reasonable response, though I admit to Real that there's an edge to it. "Hey, Jess, I've been up since 6:30 a.m. I'm doing the best I can. Can you lay off?" Real describes this back to me, more accurately, as a "mixed message."

"Reasonable with an edge to it," he says. "That's an interesting description. How much reason and how much edge you got?"

What happens next depends on how Jess responds. If I perceive defensiveness, I escalate to Defcon 4. More edge, less reason. If she pushes back again, I lose it. That she won't validate me is intolerable. My body floods with stress hormones, and I move rapidly to self-righteousness, pure victimhood. It ends with me yelling, maybe slamming a door, and storming away. If it's a really rough day, the kids will bear witness.

"You blow up," Real says.

"I blow up," I say. "Pretty zero to 60."

"And what does 60 sound like? And be honest."

I pause for a few seconds. "I mean, it can sound like fuck you or …"

Real interrupts, giving what he calls the New Jersey Jew version of my response. "'Here, Jess. I'll just put a bullet through my brain, and then you can be happy, OK?'"

That sounds about right. Jess is amused.

This is what we signed up for. Real, whose admirers include Gwyneth Paltrow and Bruce Springsteen, is one of a small number of thinkers who are actively shaping how the couples-therapy field is received by the public and practiced by other therapists. He is

also the bluntest and most charismatic of the therapists I've seen, the New Jersey Jewish version of Robin Williams's irascible Boston character in "Good Will Hunting" — profane, charismatic, open about his own life, forged in his own story of pain. He doesn't have his own show, as Orna Guralnik does, or a popular podcast, like his friend and occasional collaborator Esther Perel, but like them, he is a maestro of interpersonal drama. Perhaps his great distinction, in a field known for its gentleness and neutrality, is the force with which he confronts clients, particularly men, about their immaturity.

That we were able to see him remains surprising, as does the fact that I can now watch it unfold before me. Early last year Jess got an email from a fellow therapist saying that Real would provide affordable therapy to a couple if they agreed to do the sessions on Zoom, before an audience of therapists, recorded for his training library. Despite some misgivings, we volunteered, waiving confidentiality.

It was an offer we didn't feel we had the luxury to refuse. After so many years, and so much earnest effort, we had a good marriage, on balance, but not always a good-enough one. Our relationship was a mélange of genres. Sometimes we were like Alvy and Annie in Woody Allen's "Annie Hall," witty and sophisticated but unable to reach across the emotional chasm between us. At our best, we were a Judd Apatow comedy: bawdy, silly, earnest and full of affection for each other. At our worst, we were a cold indie film about two people mired in distance and reproach.

I didn't think too deeply about Real when he first crept into our lives around 2020. Jess read his book "The New Rules of Marriage," then "Us: Getting Past You & Me to Build a More Loving Relationship," and pushed him on me with real urgency. His earthiness spoke to her, as did his belief that we have a right to expect far more from our partners than just solidity and empathy. We should want, and demand, deep connection and honesty. I also suspect that he validated her sense that, in the grand ledger of our marriage, I was the balance of the problem. To Jess, I am, at my worst, too angry, too withdrawn, too talky about the small things and too inarticulate about the big ones. Real is known for his skill in handling men who cope using anger and withdrawal.

In the footage from that first session, I look anxious. I rumple my hair and smoosh my chin in my hand. I'm always looking up and offscreen, as though what's happening in front of me is a bit too much to face head on. I remember the discomfort in the moment, as Real drew me out. I also know, looking back, what's in store for me: He is establishing the crime scene for which I will need to take responsibility. I'm cognizant now too of Jess's uncomfortable smile, which I couldn't see when we were sitting side by side. She's more private than I am, less practiced in performing her distress for an audience, and she is acutely aware of the therapists watching us. We're there because Jess wanted Real's help more than she feared the public vulnerability, but it's hard on her.

Toward the end of the session, Real gives me a verdict.

“That’s a T-shirt you’re wearing in your marriage,” he says. “‘No matter what I fucking do, it’s never going to be enough for you.’” I’ve been wearing it, he says, since before I met Jess, and unless I take a hard look at myself and get to work, I’ll die with it on.

“I believe it,” I say. “I believe it.”

“Good,” Real says. “Let’s fix it. You want to fix it?”

“I would love to fix it.”

“How are you feeling about your husband these days?” Real asks in Session 6. Jess says, “I mean, mostly good.” David Hilliard for The New York Times

“Instead of looking to Jess to top me off with love, I need to take on that responsibility myself.” David Hilliard for The New York Times

Real's first book, "I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression," is an extended disquisition on male pain and loneliness, rooted in the belief that men are depressed because they're terrible at intimacy. They're terrible at intimacy because their capacities for it were extinguished in childhood.

It doesn't have to be this way, Real argues. We condition boys to repress their feelings, desires and ability to connect. It's no surprise, then, that so many of them grow up to be half-men — depressed, lonely, angry and empty. "Too often," he writes, "the wounded boy grows up to become a wounding man, inflicting upon those closest to him the very distress he refuses to acknowledge within himself." The real kicker is that often they don't even know this is happening. They're just acting out or shutting down, blindly.

Published in 1997, "I Don't Want to Talk About It" was the first book to give voice not just to the choked pain of depressed men but also of their suffering partners. Almost three decades later, it still reads well. What strikes me now, maybe more than it would have struck a reader back in the '90s, is how wise the book is about the role that power plays in all this. This is a through line in all of Real's work: the necessity of exercising power in relationships but also the profound difference between wielding it in loving relation to others and using it to dominate them. He is not asking men to sacrifice their power to their partners. He asks that we stop exercising power the way little boys do — with tantrums, bullying, sulking, hitting, silence — whenever someone tries to talk to us about feelings. In the place of our well-crafted defenses, he insists, we should aspire to "fierce intimacy": a healthy inversion of the wounded intensity of the traumatized person.

Early in our marriage, I would simmer for days, accumulating a resentful charge until a tiny remark, a gesture, a joke sparked an explosion.

We need to reach into the parts of ourselves that so many of us have cordoned off and express them, so that we can say what we feel, ask for what we desire and assert control over how we behave in our relationship. All of that, though, requires that we be strong enough to listen openly to our partners when they express their own desires, fears and frustrations and that we work through inevitable differences with loving candor. This intimacy is one in which men embrace qualities of emotionality, introspection and affection that have historically been typed as feminine and women practice habits of strength and assertion that have long been typed as masculine. There is great compassion for the pain people have endured but little tolerance for playing the martyr.

He calls this “relational empowerment,” a subtle but profound shift from the individualistic focus so central to our culture of therapy, self-help and self-care. The goal is to develop the strength to confront your own traumas so that you can be better for and demand more of your loved ones. “All over this culture, you have people moving from disempowerment to what I call individual empowerment,” he says. “‘I was weak, now I’m strong, go fuck yourself.’ Relational empowerment is: ‘I was weak, now I’m strong. I’m bringing my strength into this relationship. I’m telling you what I need. I’m being assertive. I love you. What do you need from me to help you do this?’ ”

In therapy with Real, learning relational empowerment can be bracing. He takes sides, calls for big change in short order and describes with forensic precision what stands on the other side of failure: divorce, disconnection, loneliness. It is no fun to be called out for behaving like a child, but there’s relief — even excitement — to being held in Real’s gravitational field. It puts you at the center of the drama, creating space for you to step into the role of hero.

What it reminds me of, more than any therapy I’ve had, is my days on the wrestling team in high school, learning under the square-jawed care of our coaches, Bill and Hank, a father and son duo who looked as if they had stepped directly out of central casting for “coach: old school.” There was a satisfaction to hustling for them, earning their hard-won approval. Even their disappointment had its compensations.

Once in a while, on a day when we were slacking in practice, Bill (or Buff, as we called him) would launch into an expletive-laden tirade about what a bunch of coddled children we were, how much we’d been given and how little we seemed intent on making of it. It was clear, by the second or third year in a row that we earned this speech, that it was a performance. It was exhilarating anyway. There was respect in the accusation. Buff was judging us as men, even if the judgment was hard. He was disappointed in our behavior but only because he knew we were capable of more.

Real has that maneuver down, although there’s far more obvious affection in the mix than I’m used to receiving from the patriarchs I’ve encountered in my life. This is the truth, man. This is what you’re capable of, and what you should expect of yourself. I can’t make you do anything, but I can tell you what I see and describe both the cost if you keep this up and the reward if you can change. And I’m here for you, every step of the way.

After our first session, Jess was visibly relieved. Real had skillfully challenged me, and I was more open to the challenge than she expected me to be. In the days after the session, the symbolic T-shirt became a running joke between us. In the next session, Real turned to Jess, asking her to reflect on the first session, on me, on herself. Watching her on camera, I’m struck by how much more vulnerable she allows herself to be, how close at hand her full range of emotions are, even when she’s expressing skepticism. I’m always sure I’m on the precipice of change. She has learned to know better.

The previous session gave her hope, she says. Maybe there can be more closeness in our relationship. It also made her sad. There were so many years lost to conflict and fear. “I used to fight more for the closeness,” she laments. “And over time, I’ve just withdrawn.”

I remember wanting to argue with her when she said that. In my story of our relationship, she has always wielded the threat of distance when she feels rejected or abandoned. It’s not a product of my actions, I wanted to say. I couldn’t deny, though, that I have given her ample reason to be wary. Early in our marriage, I would simmer for days, accumulating a resentful charge until a tiny remark, a gesture, a joke sparked an explosion.

The content changes, but the form is the same. At a recent dinner with friends, I mentioned an exchange I had in the comments section of Substack, where I publish a podcast and newsletter. “It’s good you have so much time to spend on social media,” Jess said. It took me all of a nanosecond or so to conclude that she was annoyed with me. She’d been taking on more than her share of domestic duties, over the previous few weeks, so that I could finish an important project at work, and I intuited — or perhaps imagined — that she didn’t love me noodling around on Substack. It was time I should have spent more constructively. Without even thinking about it, I swore at her in front of our friends.

By the time we were in therapy with Real, the circuit was lower voltage but the sensitivity remained. If I was on alert, all it took was a tease from her with a smidgen of subtext or a tossed off complaint to trigger a reaction. Then we would go at it, our familiar dance of distrust. Her dart. My anger. Her fear. My grievances. Her grievances. She doesn’t care about me. He doesn’t care about me.

This is us trapped in what Real calls our “core negative image” of each other. It is not all of us. We have a lot in common, including a fascination with human relationships and an endearing tendency to over-analyze them. We both love music by feely white dudes with beards. We are united in our devotion to our three children. Too often, though, we revert to the worst stories we have about each other. In the videos of our sessions, I can see Real carefully stepping around and through these narratives, helping us to revise them. The raw material isn’t new. We’ve been over our childhoods before. We’ve talked about our fights. We’ve diagnosed ourselves, cataloged our wounds and each other’s flaws, but in conversation with Real, it feels different. He explains, more cogently than we’ve gotten from a couples therapist before, why we sought each other out, drive each other crazy and have the potential to be great together.

Terry Real established the Relational Life Institute to train other therapists in his approach. David Hilliard for The New York Times

“In our hearts,” Real said in one of our sessions, “we all think that we deserve the goddess or god who will deliver us from our childhood, even heal us and make it all better and give to us what we didn’t get. What we wind up with is somebody who is perfectly designed to stick it to us.”

When we began dating at the end of our 20s, it was an easy decision to marry Jess, but also a terrifying one. She was so charismatic: sexy, whip-smart, shockingly sensitive to the subtleties of human interaction. I shared her intellectual interest in relationships but not her compulsion toward them. She hadn’t been single for more than a few months

since she was a teenager. I had spent the previous decade engineering a life that defended against the threat of other people: no long-term relationships, six or so hours of television a day and a job in journalism that gave me the regular simulacrum of intimacy without any of its real obligations. She would lean in for more. I would feel the threat of suffocation and lash out. She would feel rejected and respond with great drama and threats of catastrophe. I would feel unseen and unloved. Get away from me, but also, how dare you fail to take care of me?

Jess was so much more capable — and demanding — of love and intimacy than I was. This was part of the attraction but also the problem. I was an ambivalent fortress, always defending against her siege while secretly hoping she would breach the walls. In our third session, Real said something that complicated the metaphor even more. Yes, he said, I am avoidant. But I'm also a "love addict." I'm dependent on Jess for a steady drip of smiles, touches, attuned listening and welcoming body language to affirm that I am being seen and valued. I need it to compensate for my low self-esteem. A fortress, maybe, but one that all along has been relying on the invaders at the gate for its essential supplies.

It's not until the fourth session that Real really fillets me.

The diagnosis comes after I relate the story of a tantrum I threw at my 48th birthday dinner. It involved me storming out of a restaurant, in front of our kids and friends, and coming back only after a solid 15-minute sulk. It's not a flattering story, and I don't try to render it so. Jess and I argued beforehand about what restaurant to pick, which left us tense for days. One of the kids was being difficult. Jess wasn't as affectionate as I wanted her to be. I wasn't getting the birthday I felt I was owed. I blew my stack. I finish the story and wait for Real to give me a hard time about how I behaved. He goes in a different direction.

"How long have you been with this woman?" Real asks.

"We've been together 20 years," I say. "Been married for almost 18."

"You're still in minute-to-minute doubt about whether she cares about you or not?"

Yes, I say.

"So you know what I'm going to call that, right, Dan? I'm going to call that love addiction."

What?

“It’s like using her warm regard as a self-esteem dialysis machine,” Real says. “When the warm regard is flowing, you feel pumped up and all’s well with the world. When it’s not flowing, you get scared and lonely. I’ve been there. I call it a self-esteem well-being crash. Empty, dark, jagged, cold, sharp, agitated.”

It’s not until the fourth session that Real really fillets me. We’ve been talking about my anger and the ways it manifests: sarcasm, yelling, quiet but venomous contempt. Real has just told me, bluntly but compassionately, that I need to stop.

“I have two words for you,” he says, “and I say this with love: Wake up.” I need to learn how to deal with my distress in a way that doesn’t involve dumping it all over my wife, and I need to do it now, not next month or next year. “This is nuts,” he says to me. “That you get to yell and scream at her, and she is supposed to stay close to you? That’s nuts, Dan. But it doesn’t feel nuts because it’s what you grew up with.”

This lands. I grew up in a family that didn’t know how to deal straightforwardly with feelings. We could talk about almost anything, as long as we could analyze it with limited emotional vulnerability. Politics, ideas, sex, faith, family, people — it was all fair game. So much of the talk, however, was a way of smuggling feelings into ostensibly cerebral conversations. When we were hurt, we yelled a lot. Often we didn’t talk at all. For me, as a sensitive boy, it was devastatingly confusing, and I retreated into anger, withdrawal and intellectualization. Anger was a defense against being sucked into someone else’s chaos and also a means of seeking recognition. Push them away, and if that doesn’t work then have a big raging fight. At least if we’re yelling, my needs are being reckoned with. My solace was stories: TV shows, movies, science-fiction and fantasy novels. I was safe and warm tucked away in there, with my action heroes, dogged detectives and young wizards and warriors. And the whole family sought connection in intellectual exchange.

None of this translated very well to Jess. She crumples under the heat of anger and doesn’t care much for TV or genre stories. Though she has her own defense mechanisms, borne of her own trauma, they don’t involve sublimating her emotions into cerebral claptrap.

Real talks a lot, in his book and in our sessions, about the “adaptive child” — the part of us that evolves to survive in the hostile terrain of childhood. It’s what allows us to defer until later in life the distress that we don’t have the resources to process when we’re young. Now it’s later, though. If our adaptive child is still running the algorithms for our adult relationships, we’re in trouble.

In the footage, Real tells me to knock it off. I remember hearing him, but only sort of. His observation cut so close to my core stance in the marriage, which is perhaps also my core fear: If I don’t scream for what I need, I will not be loved. I said none of this in the session. Instead I protested, articulately but lamely, that I was making progress. I’m

better than I was a few years ago, I hear myself say in the recording, and I was better a few years ago than I was a few years before that. I'm not trying to excuse my bad behavior, but don't I get some credit for the trend line moving in the right direction?

Real isn't impressed.

"Your expectations of your own progress are pretty mediocre at best," he says. "Just transpose it to the physical. Well I only hit her twice this year. The year before that I hit her 12 times. Am I doing better? No. Not on my watch. How about cleaning it up all together? How about stopping it?"

Hearing this from Real is — at last — a ton of bricks. The arsenal of rationalizations falls away. Yes, of course. This is right. Enough. Time to stop. How utterly embarrassing, to think that it's OK to speak to my wife this way, to rage in front of my kids. My blood pressure drops. I deflate into the couch. The arrow that pierces is not Real's comparing me to a wife beater, though that doesn't feel great. It's this: "Your expectations of your own progress are pretty mediocre at best." This cuts not just to the core of the man I imagine myself to be but also what I need to do to hold onto the life I share with Jess. One of the tricky yet liberating things about Real's practice is that, when it comes to rage, he doesn't care that much about matters of degree and scale. Brutal physical abuse is violence, but so is rage, and so is lacerating contempt. This is not abstract for Real. In "I Don't Want to Talk About It," he tells the horrific story of his own family's generational cycle of abuse. His grandfather tried to kill his father and uncle. That was violence. His father, in turn, beat Real. "He whipped my brother and me if we dared to rebel," he writes. "And, conversely, he whipped us if we showed too much vulnerability. Mostly, he whipped us as a proper man should, to keep us corralled and teach us our lessons."

My (modest) rage (which isn't that bad, I find myself wanting to protest even now) is a violence that replaces intimacy with fear. What I encountered in my childhood is also violence. In the gospel of Real, we all deserve compassion for what was done to us. He's not looking to shame us. But we're grown-ups now. We should want better for ourselves and loved ones.

Watching the recording of Real telling me to shape up, I noticed for the first time that Jess is crying. She looks so sad. Real is confronting me but also testifying to what my behavior has felt like to her, how isolated and fearful it has left her. And somehow, and this is the art of couples therapy at its most sophisticated, it's all one thing: his confrontation of me, his affection for me, his validation of Jess, his care for her, his hope for our marriage.

"It's a sequence issue," Real says a few minutes later. For so long, through so many rounds of couples therapy, in so many fights between us, I have been demanding equity. I'll do this, but you need to do that. I'll calm down, but you need to stop withholding. I'll learn to hold your fears, but you need to learn to tolerate my anger. No, Real says. Anger blocks everything else and has to leave the stage first.

I need to go first. I get to go first.

Epiphanies are real, but they're fragile. They are a one-leafed seedling, pushing up through the crust of the ground, or a blind hatchling waiting, naked and alone, for its mother to return with a worm. They are easily crushed under foot or done in by harsh weather. If they're not protected and nurtured, they will crumble and blow away in the wind, as though they never existed.

Session 4 was an epiphany for me, but one that would need to survive the crucible of conflict, not once but repeatedly, to establish its reality. A few hours after the session ended, driving back from dinner, Jess and I got into a tiff. She said something that upset me, and I started to snap — but then I stopped. "I need to get out of the car," I said to her, as calmly as I could. We were only about a half mile from our house, so I walked the rest of the way, stopping at the market midroute for a few things. By the time I got home, Jess and I had both cooled off, and we were able to stay connected the remainder of the night. It was a small but important victory.

Real has a bit he does when clients say they "can't" control themselves in a moment of distress. "No one selectively loses control," he says to me. Would I rage, he asks, if he had a gun to my daughter's head? No? Then it's not can't. It's won't. It's a choice. Every small victory over "can't" is evidence that I'm not impotent before the whims of my adaptive child, even when I've already traveled a step down the road toward meltdown. I was starting to believe.

Much of the next two sessions is the scut work of gaming out what it would look like for the two of us to deal better with our inevitable failures to be the most evolved versions of ourselves. We talk about timeouts and Real's very specific instructions for how to take one.

We talk about the "feedback wheel," which is a series of structured steps he recommends for constructively bringing a complaint to your partner. We run through a few typically fraught scenarios, scripting out how we might talk to each other better than we have in the past.

These aren't new ideas or practices for us. We've read his books. We've both been to a lot of therapy before. As a couples therapist, Jess has been guiding people in this kind of work for years. The truth remains, though, that when the task is one of deep brain rewiring, no one is exempt. Not Real. Not Jess. Definitely not me. Two steps forward, one and nine-tenths of a step back.

"How are you feeling about your husband these days?" Real asks in Session 6. "I mean,

mostly good," Jess says.

She is cautious. I can see it on the video. I knew it then. She hasn't had an epiphany. I'm not sure she needed one. But she did need to see a way forward for us. The hope is visible, in treatment and in the days between. I can feel her opening up to me. It's tentative, but real. She has her tasks, too, and is willing to undertake them, if I can make it safe for her.

"You're very cute, and I'm sort of jealous of you and how unprotected you are," I say, my eyes closed. "I can't imagine being that open to being hurt. But I want to be that open to being loved."

It's the last of our eight sessions, and I'm talking to my "inner child." I remember, under Real's guidance, closing my eyes and bringing him up out of my memory so that we could talk. He was 6 or 7, a bit chubby, wearing clunky eyeglasses and shorts pulled up too high above his waist. He's a composite, I realize now, of details of me at my most awkward self across the ages.

I find this session the hardest of all of them to watch. What we talk about is intensely vulnerable, but that's not the most difficult part. Nor is it imagining the silent audience evaluating me. It's that I'm too sealed off from it, then and now. I couldn't — can't — feel it in the way I so urgently want to.

When therapy is dramatized on TV or in the movies, there's a classic scene where the deep childhood trauma is finally exposed. "It's not your fault," Robin Williams says to Matt Damon in "Good Will Hunting," referring to the gruesome abuse Damon's character suffered in foster care. Damon tries to turn away from him, to deflect his approach. Williams keeps moving forward. "It's not your fault. … It's not your fault." Eventually, Damon breaks down in tears. They embrace. It's a turning point in the therapy, in the character's life.

I want my tears. I want my catharsis. I want my scene. I'm also afraid of what it means that I can't achieve them.

Real asks me to describe what I'm feeling, in my body, as we talk to my inner child.

"It's like I'm inflating from the inside right now," I say.

"What's your body filling with?" he asks.

Energy, I tell him. Trapped energy.

He asks, again, what it feels like.

I pause. What finally comes to mind are the tantrums I would have, sometimes, when I was young. My temper tantrums, as my mom called them. An explosion of anger. Screaming. Hitting the floor. Smashing against the universe.

"There was this sense that there was this massive rage inside of me," I say, "that would just come out in these sort of violent ways. And I guess that I was scary to other people."

Real keeps me in that space, eyes closed, talking to my inner child, for about 30 minutes. We ask him what he was mad about, what he was trying to feel or say that could only express itself through inchoate rage. I get angry on his behalf, that he didn't feel safe enough to be all of himself. I take him in my arms and embrace him. I promise to hear him and protect him from now on.

I have to be my own keeper, so that I can be whole for the people I love the most.

It's not as hard as I feared it would be to inhabit this role, even though it has its corny aspects. I don't break, though, or break through. The energy remains trapped by my skin. The box of tissues next to me, which Real asked Jess to get before we started the exercise, remains unused. I'm not surprised, but I am disappointed. Jess looks enigmatic on the recording. I can't read her.

At the end, I put my inner child back inside myself and open my eyes. Real tells me I did a good job.

"Joy, pain, anger, fear, shame, guilt, love. What are you feeling right now?" he asks.

"I guess I feel loved," I say.

"So what you're feeling right now," he says, "is the cure for love addiction, Dan."

I remember believing him. I still do. Instead of looking to Jess to top me off with love, I need to take on that responsibility myself. I have to be my own keeper, so that I can be whole for the people I love the most. What worries me, watching this now, is simply that I don't know if I'll be able to do it. It's an odd endeavor, trying to evolve into a version of yourself that you can only perceive, from your present self, somewhat dimly. Am I waiting for the tears to come, in a crystalline moment of cathartic release? Is it enough to follow the program, day by day, timeout by timeout, evolving by increments?

I'm not yet whole, and the way forward isn't entirely clear, but something has shifted in our marriage. There has been an expansion in the space for connection. We're talking more. We're tolerating more. We're better at repair. My protection is no longer a coat of armor, hard-shell and opaque. It's more of a translucent force field. It surrounds me, filtering the light, protecting and denying me but also, in the right conditions, letting some rays pass through. The rest is waiting for me, whatever it is, on the other side. Waiting for Jess too. More often than not, these days, I can feel her hand reaching through into mine.

Daniel Oppenheimer is the author of “Far From Respectable: Dave Hickey and His Art.” He is currently working on a book about relationships and couples therapy with his wife, who is a couples therapist. They live in Austin, Texas.