Rowing TO NOWHERE

When is Enough Enough?

BY TERRY REAL

Like most therapists, I love it when couples step into new beginnings. Watching a partner move into accountability for the first time, or become vulnerable as never before, or demonstrate empathy where there'd been none—such moments make my day. But what about couples who've run out of new beginnings? If beginnings bring me delight, do endings always evoke sorrow? Not necessarily.

How I feel about couples splitting up depends on the situation and the couple. Some endings have broken my heart, made me look hard at my technique, and wonder what I might have done differently. But when I believed the couple, the therapy, and even the children were better served by the partners' letting go, I've breathed a sigh of relief. In other words, I don't see my job as stitching every couple together no matter what. Sometimes, in fact, my job turns out not to be forestalling the dissolution of a family, but facilitating it.

Most often, both partners don't pull the plug at the same time: one partner wants out, while the other, to whatever degree, is devastated. The question then becomes, where do we therapists stand? When and how do we know if it's time to help the couple dissolve versus throwing our weight behind one last try? And how do we, as therapists, let go ourselves? Of course, the therapeutically correct attitude is that where we stand shouldn't matter. It's not our decision, and it's presumptuous of us to wade into a question that rightly belongs to the couple. Yet while that stance may be great in principle, it usually doesn't work out so cleanly in real life. Often one partner is asking, sometimes desperately, for our help in reeling his or her mate back in, while the other partner is teetering on the edge of whether to stay or go, asking for a kind of permission from us, or conversely, wanting us to offer some good reasons to stick it out.

In such situations, you can kiss the idea of therapeutic neutrality goodbye. If ever there were such a thing, it surely doesn't exist here. The questions we choose to ask, the goals of the therapy we define, the amount of attention we give one issue over another, our tone, even our facial expressions, clearly convey our real convictions to our clients. No matter how neutral we strive to be, most of our clients know where we stand. They can feel it. Those exquisite mirror neurons we talk about so much not only enable us to read our clients, but them to read us. So by what criteria do we decide when it's time to push the relationship on, and when it's time to pull the plug?

Some situations seem clear. Most of us would agree, for example, that the relationship is untenable if one partner has a serious addiction to drugs, alcohol, or sex that they refuse to treat appropriately, or if there's a major psychiatric disorder that the partner will do nothing about. Other examples are physical violence, chronic emotional sadism, continual lying and manipulation, a pattern of longstanding gross irresponsibility—financial, marital, parental—not to mention flagrant untreated character disorders, like severe narcissism or sociopathy. Sometimes the partner who feels drawn to leave admits never having really loved the spouse to begin with, marrying to please parents, under pressure from a pregnancy, or because the person looked good on paper. It's hard for us therapists to create love where there's been none all along.

But these outliers aren't the cases that keep us awake at night. The more bothersome cases are the ambiguous ones, the marriages in pretty bad straits that aren't so obviously far gone that demise seems inevitable. These

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are marriages where, after months and months of trying every trick we know, the couples still stubbornly refuse to improve, or where the dissatisfied partner remains intractable, even while the other makes positive changes, or where couples make us think, *Well, they could stay together, but if they do, will they be truly fulfilled?*

I've worked with couples where I can honestly say the therapy moved the relationship from absolutely intolerable to adequately bearable: things got just better enough that both partners stayed. But could they sustain happiness? Often I believed they couldn't, not by my standards, anyway. In these cases, was I of service to them, or would they've been better off if I'd facilitated their saying goodbye to one another?

A MAN BEHIND WALLS

Two months into our work together, I watch Henry puff out his cheeks and slowly exhale, trying to keep his composure. I can practically hear him counting to 10. Sometimes I wish he'd just let go and lose it, which I've never seen him do, though his wife, Jane, reported that once, after a tough therapy session, he'd suddenly pulled the car off to the side of the road, gotten out, and thrown up. Getting back in the car he'd told her, "We're not going to discuss it." And that was that.

Dark-haired, short, and handsome, Henry was getting a crash course in not being in control—a position he neither liked, nor was used to. His accustomed world shattered the night Jane had said she was considering leaving him. As Jane told him, he'd been pushing her out of their marriage for years. While remaining calm externally, inside Henry was shocked and devastated. *Sure*, he'd thought, *there's been fighting. Sometimes, we didn't get along so well, but* this? *What about the kids? Was she really willing to break the family apart? And for what? Were things actually that bad?* These were the questions Henry eventually spoke out loud to Jane in their first therapy session with me, a few weeks after Jane's announcement. It was Henry who'd called, telling me that his wife was fed up and that I needed to pull her off the ledge.

"Yes, Henry," Jane had said in that first meeting two months ago. "Things *are* that bad. They've *been* that bad. And I wouldn't be where I am now if I didn't believe that things will stay bad." She then turned to me, saying, "I've given up hope."

Blonde and muscular, Jane dominated her opponents on the tennis court. She allowed herself to be fierce with everyone but Henry, though she'd been plenty ferocious with him in her day. The old pattern was that Henry would withhold, and Jane would eventually go berserk—yelling, cursing, sometimes throwing things. This happened the night her oldest daughter, Priscilla, who was 11, walked in on her while she was in a frenzy. "I looked at that little girl's face," Jane told me, "and I knew in that instant—okay, this has to stop. Now!" So Jane had gotten herself into therapy, and she'd been fortunate enough to find the right therapist. In my language, Jane was love dependent, a woman struggling with an anxious insecure attachment style, someone who desperately needed her husband's unwavering warm regard to bolster her own shaky sense of self-worth.

To a layman, walled-off Henry would seem a poor choice in partners for someone as pursuant as Jane, but we therapists are used to seeing such love-dependent/love-avoidant (or pursuer/distancer) pairs. The more Henry withheld, the angrier Jane became, and the angrier Jane became, the more Henry withheld. But with two years of therapy under her belt, Jane was finally opting out. She no longer wanted to play the game. About a third of the way through our first session, I asked Jane to give me an example of what Henry did to "push her out of the marriage."

One of the unusual characteristics of the work I do and teach is that I *do* take sides.

"I'm going to tell Terry about the garbage," she tells her husband, who doesn't respond. Jane lingers a moment, scanning Henry's impassive face for a reaction, then shrugs and goes on. "Last month, Henry came home after four tough days on the road. I think he'd been to three different cities in that time."

"Maybe I should tell this part," Henry interjects.

"Sure," she says easily, backing off.

Henry takes over. "So I'm really looking forward to being home," he says, smiling at something private, not looking at either of us. His smile feels jarring to me, condescending. I want to ask him what he's thinking about that's so darn funny, but I restrain myself. "I was really looking forward to seeing Jane, and I try to pull into my parking spot by the garage and there's [here's a small laugh] there's *garbage cans* and *spilled garbage* in my spot. I have to get out of my car, clean up everything, and then get back in and park. Okay, hey, welcome home. The front door is locked. The hall is

dark. My supper's on the table, and Jane's off with one of the kids."

"I was doing homework with her," Jane protests. "You might have joined us, come in, *helped*."

"Not your idea of a happy homecoming, Henry?" I commiserate.

"But here's the thing," says Jane, who's listened enough. "Does he *say* anything to me about it? Does he show any vulnerability, like 'Hey, my feelings were hurt,' which I could've handled. No, Henry basically doesn't speak to me for the rest of the night. I have no idea why. I was looking forward to him coming home, too, you know? But he pretends he's tired and just goes to bed. So what do I do? I take myself to bed along with him, to be with him. I'm not really tired, but I want to be there. When I get into bed he pretends he's sleeping. Am I dealing with a *child*? 'Henry, please,' I say, 'just tell me what's wrong.' Nothing. I get nothing. I get his back. Do you know how many times I've lived through some version of that night? In the past, I'd blame myself, but I'm not doing that anymore. I'm not doing any of it. I'm *done*."

"Is this true?" I ask Henry.

"Essentially," he allows.

I look at him. "You were hurt," I say. "You were angry?" He doesn't answer. "You punished her," I inform him, still getting no response."This is how it is?" I ask Jane.

"Always," she tells me. Next to her, Henry frowns. "Well, often," she amends.

I ask for a few more examples, trying to bring Henry's point of view into the discussion as much as he lets me. It seems to boil down to Henry getting hurt: hurt that the parking spot is blocked, that the dishes haven't been done, that the kids aren't in bed, or that there are scuffmarks on the floor.

"I ask only a few simple things of her," Henry tells me. "She knows they're important to me." Henry likes order, and unfortunately, he often reads disorder as an assault, a symbol of her lack of love for him. Though ultimately he's love avoidant, the pattern begins with his being as thin-skinned and love dependent as Jane had been before her therapy. He reads the garbage in his parking spot, Jane's absence, and the food left for him on the counter as Jane's lack of concern for him. He brought to the marriage a great emotional sensitivity; they both did. But if you're an unusually sensitive person, you need to balance that with unusually sophisticated relational skills, which neither of them had.

Instead of naming his feelings to Jane, giving her a chance to repair, Henry bottled them up—as he saw it—or acted them out—as Jane and I saw it. Henry was caught up in the losing strategy of passive-aggressive retaliation. By contrast, the old Jane wouldn't have bottled up much of anything, and there'd be nothing passive about her aggression. The new Jane, however, is contained—but she's less a wild card now because she's grown largely indifferent to the state of the relationship.

The problem with Henry's sensitivity is that it's a one-way street. He's enormously sensitive to what's coming into him, but can be quite insensitive in his behavior toward others, especially Jane. He'll say or do nothing overtly offensive, but sink into an unremitting withdrawal. He's complicated, with the sensitivities of someone who doesn't have boundaries, but whose stance in the relationship is one-up and walled off. "I turned my back to her," he tells me of that night. "I just wanted to go to sleep."

"Like she doesn't deserve you," I say to him. "That's the mark of being one-up and walled off. It's like *I'm not in connection to you because you're not good enough. You don't deserve me.*" Henry listens, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. "Henry," I say, "death to you in this relationship is withdrawal, particularly angry withdrawal. You've got to tell her when you're hurt or angry. Let her help you at those times. If you keep punishing her like this, you're going to lose her."

"I may have already," Henry says, managing somehow to sulk and be haughty at the same time.

"Look," I tell him, "this is the part where I say, 'I can be nice to you or I can try to save your marriage, which would you prefer?'"

"The latter," he says. "Obviously."

"Nothing's obvious to me," I tell him.

"Fine," he says, looking directly at me, tight lipped, a slight smile at the corner of his mouth.

"This is *mean*, Henry," I tell him, "Your behavior is mean-spirited. Your withdrawal isn't neutral—it's hostile. And it'll cost you your marriage if it doesn't stop."

At the end of that first session, I asked Jane if she'd give therapy three months. This is a contract I've successfully used before with highly ambivalent partners. "Three months," I tell her, "not to commit to the marriage, but just to see what happens, to evaluate whether to stay or go. In fact, what you have to do to save the marriage is the same thing you have to do to determine whether it feels salvageable: put your issues on the table, and see where, if anywhere, our work goes. But in the end, if the marriage is going to work, two things need to happen. First, within those three months, Henry must change—dramatically change. If he does—as hard as that is for you to imagine—the second thing that needs to happen is that you, Jane, have to warm back up to him. Not that you'll be saying, 'Gee, this is great. I'm recommitting to the marriage.' But just, 'Okay, this is interesting. I never believed Henry would be like this. Let's re-up for another three months and see what happens.' That's the best of what can occur."

TAKING SIDES

In that initial interview—because of their history, their children, and the fact that she'd once loved him—Jane agreed to this provisional three-month contract. Then it was time for Henry and me, in Jane's presence, to dig in and see to his dramatic change. You might be thinking by now that this is a pretty one-sided therapy. Let me be clear: it is! While I have compassion for Henry, I emphatically and explicitly take Jane's side. One of the unusual characteristics of the work I

do and teach is that I *do* take sides. Not all problems are 50–50. Some are 70–30. Some are 99–1.

Of course, Jane had had her part to play in this. If Henry has been one-up and walled off, Jane had been one-up and without boundaries. Throwing plates is not okay with me. But by both of their accounts, such behaviors from her had stopped. Now the issue was, having shaken herself free of the old pattern of complaint and rage, could she access any feelings of care and connection? And the best thing I could do, I felt, to help her in warming back up was to take her seriously and give her what she was asking for: a transformed Henry.

Generally speaking, I start by being an agent for the person who has one foot out the door. That person gets my undivided attention for the simple reason that if I lose them, the marriage is over. Do I do this to try to save the marriage? Yes, if that's tenable. Am I convinced at this point in the process that the marriage will or even should be saved? No. It's too early to tell. But this is a good way to find out.

And so Henry and I go to work. I call this doing deep character work in the presence of the other. Even though the focus is on Henry, Jane's presence in the room reminds us why we're doing what we're doing, and as the sessions unfold, Jane gives us examples, stories, current reports. Additionally, it's far more impactful for her to see Henry do deep work than hear about it from him after the fact.

With my help, Henry drills into his childhood. Not surprisingly, it turns out that angry withdrawal isn't Henry's invention; he grew up with it. Henry's father gave next to nothing when he was sober and even less after a few drinks.

"It was clear that a good scotch and golf on TV meant way more to him than any of us did, and God help anyone who got in his way, including my mom," Henry says.

But if Dad was consistently preoccupied and mean, mom was just as selfish in her way. Henry remembers his mother locking him out of the house so he could "go play" and his wetting his pants when she wouldn't let him back in. "My father was a tight ass," Henry tells me, "but my mother could be an out and out bitch." Wounded by both parents, Henry adopted his father's distancing strategy to protect himself from his angry mother. "There were times," he says, haltingly, "when neither of them would speak to me, like, for weeks. All I could think was *What did I do wrong? What did I do?*" His eyes tear as he stares.

"Henry," I say, "if those tears in your eyes could speak, what would they be saying right now?"

"They'd say, I guess," he hesitates, "you don't treat a child like that."

"No," I affirm, "no you don't." I can feel his sadness. "Henry," I say, "Look at me." He lifts his head. "You don't treat *anyone* like that, understand?" He doesn't answer. But after a moment in silence he turns to his wife. He reaches out, almost touching her hand, but draws short.

"I'm sorry," he tells her. "I'm sorry I've been so mean to you." His voice trembles with emotion, vulnerability.

"That's good," Jane answers, not unkindly, but from far away. "I accept your apology," she says, but her eyes don't soften as she looks at him. "I'm glad for you," she continues. "For *you*," she repeats. "I want you to get better for your sake, no matter what happens to us." (*In other words*, I think, *she's saying, "Don't count on me."*)

As our sessions progress, Henry does get better. He understands that he needs to be different to save his marriage, and that there isn't a lot of time. We work intensively together on feelings, the world of emotions. With my coaching and encouragement, he begins to reach past his first response of anger and connect with the more vulnerable feelings, hurt and abandonment, underneath. He begins to realize that his chronic sense of being unloved might have more to do with his unloving childhood than with what he'd taken to be his unloving wife. Not meeting him at the door when he comes home because she's busy, not having food on the table—these disappointments no longer signify that she doesn't love him. For the most part, they stop being symbols and just stay disappointments. And then we work on cherishing, Henry's coming out from behind all those walls of anger and thinking less about what he's getting and more about what he needs to give.

Yet even as Henry begins to open up, Jane continues to maintain her distance. With a partner in Jane's position—the dissatisfied, held-back one—I consider two levels of wounding: the marital wound and, possibly underneath that, a family-of-origin wound. Here, the marital wound is straightforward: Jane's been hurt. She doesn't want to be vulnerable again. She's been through the wash-and-wear cycle with Henry too many times. I emphatically normalize her reticence to get back in the ring. But, unless she's ready to call a lawyer, she needs to conjure a little openness to give this three-month trial a real try. Hesitantly, she agrees to work on it.

She talks about her distant father and angry mother (no surprises in that dynamic). But her talking about them, even crying about them, does little to change her stance toward her husband. Finally, two months into our three-month trial, Jane tells us that she has an announcement. I watch as Henry, hearing this, puffs out his cheeks and slowly exhales.

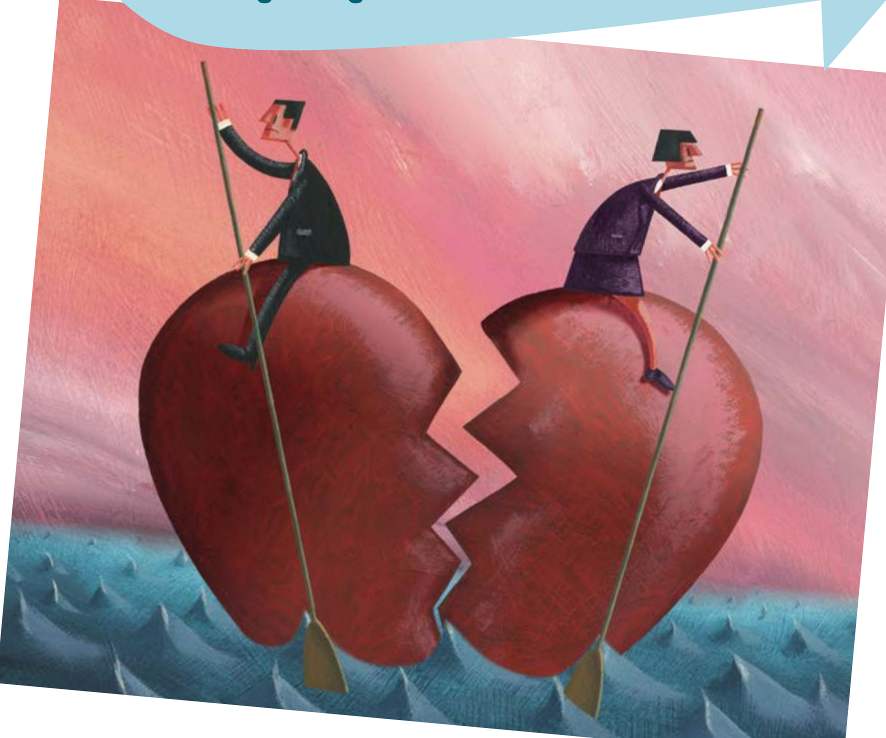
"I want a trial separation," Jane tells us. "I need some space." Henry pales quietly. "I'm afraid I can't make it for the whole three months. I'm sorry," she says.

"Are you saying this is the end of the marriage?" I ask, at which point she turns to me, looking very vulnerable, stripped of defenses.

"You tell me," she answers. "You tell me if you think I'm making the biggest mistake of my life or if you think I can be happy with this man."

I know that Jane means it: she wants my opinion, and it matters to her. I could try to hide behind something like "Well, that's really your decision," but we'd all know I was

There are people who've struggled to improve their marriages and—at a certain point of frustration, weariness, and loneliness—have earned the right to get out.



dodging, and they both deserved better than that.

As one might imagine, I'd been thinking about this all along. How far would Henry really be able to go? Would a more open Henry be open enough to satisfy Jane? After all, even the new Henry was still somewhat constricted. Yes, he could name a feeling or two, but with the same monotone voice, impassive face. Over the years, I've worked with many shut-down, emotionally cut-off men, helping them open their hearts. My best guess was that Henry, if he continued working as hard as he was, would *eventually* be a different guy than the one who first walked in my door. But that *eventually* was a big word. It would take time—more time, perhaps, than Jane was willing to give. And would the finished product, improved as it was, be improved enough?

At this point, many therapists would lean toward helping Jane stay. To corral her back into a livable compromise, they might reminded her of her marital contract, her promise to Henry. They might bring up the potential damage to their children. But would that really be fair to her? Or would it be throwing her under the bus? Where did my obligation lie? What was I to tell her?

TO GO OR TO STAY

There are two impulses, two voices if you will, in couples and family therapy these days. One speaks for the collective, the conservation of the family, and a kind of status quo; the other speaks for individual fulfillment, the right to have pleasure and freedom to express oneself—in short, the good of the family or the good of its individuals. This is where we therapists must take a hard look at the values we hold, our biases, our own family histories. I grew up, for example, with feuding parents in an emotionally violent household. Would I have been better off if my parents had given up and divorced? Was my own family history affecting where I stood in that moment with Jane? And what about the children? Would trying to cobble together a couple like Henry and Jane really be doing their kids such a favor?

No one, not even the most conservative researchers, argues that divorce is worse than staying for the sake of the children when marital hostility is acted out, when there's open fighting and oppressive misery. Perhaps marital euthanasia would've been the best thing for me and my family growing up. But what about couples like Henry and Jane, men and women of quieter desperation?

I don't want to minimize the ill effects of divorce on kids, but I believe that unhappily staying together most often bequeaths to the next generation a template for intimacy that's neither satisfying nor functional. Both Henry and Jane came from parents who modeled the same pattern—of distance met with anger—that was eating up their own marriage. Is that what they wanted to hand down to the next generation? And even if we were to decide that divorce would indeed hurt the kids more than an extremely compromised coexistence, we therapists need to ask ourselves how much unhappiness we should ask our clients to bear in the name of avoiding damage to their kids. Where's the line between selfishness and immoderate self-sacrifice?

To me, these are deep questions, only to be decided, with my help, by the clients themselves. In our heart-wrenching desire to spare the children, we can act as though years of marital misery, loneliness, bitterness, even despair count for little so long as the couple can remain reasonably civil for the sake of preserving the family. Of course, preserving the

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family is preferable if it can be made to work. But what if it can't? Or what if the relationship's transformation remains only partial?

I have a saying I teach my students: don't ask your clients to do what you wouldn't do. Where's the fairness in that? Specifically, when one partner is teetering, don't pull toward preserving a union if it's not a relationship you'd stay in yourself. As therapists, we've all encountered relationships that we wouldn't necessarily want but that seem to work for the people inside them. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm referring to that moment when a client says, "I don't think I can stay and be treated like this," or "There's nothing horrible happening here, but I'm dying of loneliness," and our honest response as we listen is "Yeah, I'd feel that way too." If that's our experience, we should indicate it somehow and stop trying to hide behind the mask of neutrality.

I look at Jane, her face turned toward me, waiting, sincere, vulnerable. "I honestly believe, Jane, that Henry is on the path," I say. "He's already a different guy than the one I first met, and I think that progress will continue. But," I take a breath, "if you're feeling, for whatever reason, that it's just too little too late, that you don't have it in you to stick around while Henry does this, or that no matter what he does, this just isn't a match that will make you happy, I, for one, wouldn't judge you for it."

"Then it's not a mistake to leave?" she presses.

"A mistake would mean to me that you were acting out some pattern of avoidance, some unfinished business from your childhood, rather than making a sober decision as an adult living in the present. If I thought that was the case," I tell her, "I'd be saying so, and I'd be urging you to stay."

"Which you're not?" she asks, needing me to spell it out, to give her my permission to leave.

I look at them, my heart aching for them both and say, "Which I'm not."

"Thank you," she says, looking deep into my eyes. "Thank you for that."

Here's the bottom line. There are people in bad marriages, people married to difficult, unrepentant spouses, or spouses who don't repent enough, or ones whose repentance comes too late. There are people who, I believe, have struggled to improve their marriages and—at a certain point of frustration, weariness, resentment, and loneliness—have earned the right to get out. I also believe it's our birthright to be in intimate relationships that are essentially cherishing—and that to be in a fundamentally uncherishing relationship is bad for the uncherished partner, bad for the children, and even bad for the uncherishing partner as well.

I remember once talking to a friend who considered firing someone to be a positive experience. "How so?" I asked him.

"I tell the person what I believe," he responded. "I say, 'You're a talented person, a good person, but that isn't showing up as it should in this setting. The fact is that you don't really belong here. I want to free you up to go find a place where you truly belong.'"

Could breaking up this couple be a similar experience? Jane had fought for connection with her husband for years. She was a loving, emotional, high-contact partner. Her marriage to Henry may not have been a relationship in which the best of her could flourish and thrive, and it wasn't my job to press her into thinking otherwise. Again, as I told Jane, if I believe the client is primarily acting out some unresolved family wounding, I'll be forceful in saying so. But if there's been years of abuse or neglect, then really, who am I to insist that the impulse to leave is immature, selfish, or pathological?

WHAT ABOUT US?

What we therapists must manage in such instances as this one, along with the couple's raw emotion, is our own. When a marriage is sinking before our eyes, whatever unsettled wounds and unfinished business resides within us will invariably get stimulated. We may feel overwhelmed with sadness. Or we may, in denial, compulsively pound on the chest and breathe in the mouth of the still, cold marriage. We may be swamped by feelings of inadequacy and shame, or helplessness—especially those of us who come from unhappy families we couldn't help when we were 6 or 12. We might find ourselves struggling in the contradiction between our own closely held moral values (divorce between parents of young children is bad) and our deep empathy with one or two perfectly nice people stuck in a marriage that's destructive for one or both of them. Or we might turn away, implicitly contemptuous, deserting couples who desperately need us to help them through their final transition.

For me, the locus of my feelings of worth as a therapist resides in how well I present what I know in a way that maximizes the possibility of being heard. I tell the truth of what I see to my clients, including what I see as their potential next step, or repair if they chose it, as well as my truth about potential negative consequences if they don't choose to repair. But at the end of the day, while my voice matters, and while they deserve to know my true thoughts, the choice to stay or go is theirs. The failure of their marriage is not my failure as their therapist.

Also, just because a couple's dilemma won't yield to me doesn't necessarily mean it won't yield to anyone. "Not every therapy works well for every client," I've told many clients before sending them for at least a consultation with someone who has a different orientation than mine.

From a family therapy point of view, both transformation and dissolution begin with crisis: they start off looking the same. As a couples therapist, I wish first for marital transformation, but dissolution provides opportunities for positive change too. We've all known couples who end their marriages because of intractable fights and negative relational patterns, only to continue the same chronic battle after their divorce, but now coparenting arrangements provide a whole new *casus belli.*

In contrast, some divorcing couples believe, from misguided optimism or denial, that once the marriage ends they'll magically become best friends—having Sunday dinners and family outings together. Very doubtful, I tell them regretfully. They may become friends at some point, but only after a long and decent mourning period has passed.

In the meantime, they must be allowed the space and time to face their new reality. My job as their therapist is to help the couple release their old pattern, help them end their dance as they end their union. Even here, one might say, especially here, their job is to rise to the occasion: to put aside their hurt and anger, behave like rational adults for themselves and their children—if there are any—and put their grievances to rest so they can face their great loss and allow it to penetrate. My goal is to help them accept and grieve as cleanly, as heroically, as they can. Even in facing the relationship's demise, there can be growth.

THE LAST SESSION

The session following Jane's announcement turned out to be our last. Once we talked about the postdivorce arrangements they'd already begun to make, I reach into my therapist's bag and pull out a format I learned years ago.

"Turn your chairs back to back," I instruct them. "Now imagine that enough time has passed—weeks, months, years maybe—so that the first waves of grief, hurt, and anger have subsided. Each of you is firmly ensconced in your new life without the other. Now, from this reflective place, speak out loud a letter you write to your ex-partner.

Hesitantly, Henry begins, stopping for tears from time to time. Our efforts in therapy over the last two months, the books Henry's read, and the heart-opening crisis he's faced have all made him more soft, open, and connected than he was when I first met him. In his letter, he tells Jane how much he misses her, how filled he is with regret, what a different man he's become. "I know I've been mean to you," he says, "even cruel in my way, all the while disowning it, blaming you for everything. I want you to know you didn't deserve it. Not that you need me to tell you this, but you didn't. It was me, honey. I wish I could take it all back."

"If you would," I tell him when he's done, "add a PS. PS, what I wish for you is . . . ."

Henry squares his shoulders and looks deep into the distance confronting him. "What I wish for," he tells Jane, "is that you find happiness. I really want you to be happy, sweetheart. I want you to find someone who will be with you in the ways you deserve, and in the ways you feel I couldn't, and didn't. I hope you find love."

And now the stiffness and constraint that has held Jane throughout our sessions releases, and she collapses in tears."That's the most amazing thing I've heard you say in years," she tells him in her letter of response.

Like a fog, the feeling of regret enwraps all three of us, fills the room. Looking at Jane's pained face I imagine her thinking, *If only Henry had been in the last 10 years what he's been in the last 10 minutes.* But sometimes the past is relentless, irrevocable. They'll always share their children, and, in their own way, they'll continue to love each other.

Having been through what they've experienced together, especially at the end, I believe Henry will be a better man and Jane a stronger woman in their next relationships. But now it was time for them—and for me—to let go.

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