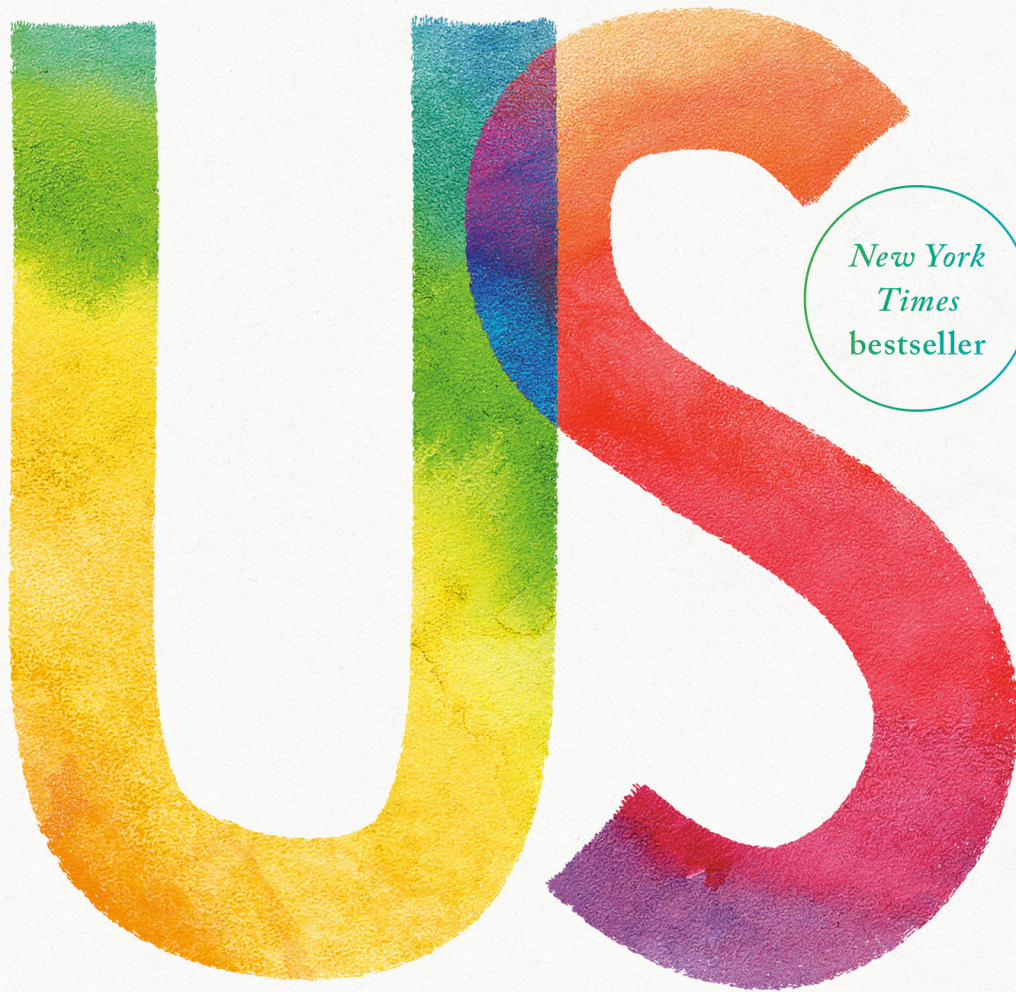


Excerpt
Booklet

Foreword by
BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

Getting Past *You & Me* to Build
a More Loving Relationship



*New York
Times
bestseller*

TERRENCE REAL

Bestselling author of
THE NEW RULES OF MARRIAGE

Becoming Whole

*“I have three chairs in my house; one for solitude,
two for friendship, three for society.”*

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *WALDEN*

One phrase.

I almost lost him over a phrase. It appeared to have been a great first session, our therapy off to a fine start. And then it came close to a crashing halt. Over what? Compact, with short gray hair and glasses, Charles, a Black man in his mid-fifties, looked every inch the distinguished academic he was. The dean of a highly regarded local college, he was used to cocking an eyebrow and then watching a student begin to stutter. From time to time, he'd be called upon to, as he once put it, “spread a little constructive terror.” Charles never raised his voice. He never had to. At work, he was a force. But at home, he simply collapsed. He was Eeyore in *Winnie the Pooh*. He was, as his wife, Diane, put it succinctly, “slouchy, grouchy, and pouty.”

“Could be a law firm,” I quip, to no one’s apparent amusement.

Diane, also Black, looks a good ten years her husband’s junior. Tall and fit, in a gray skirt and sleeveless gold top, she describes their life at home. Charles, she says, has slouched and pouted his way through the recent years of their marriage. He pouts if he is sexually “rebuffed,” as he puts it. He pouts if she ignores him too long while phoning her girlfriends. He seems to have the abiding relational stance of *disgruntled customer*.

After years of putting up with it, Diane is angry. Angry at his self-preoccupation; angry that no matter what she does, it never seems enough or quite right. Charles says he supports her career as a community organizer, but when it all comes down, if she isn’t immediately available when and how he wants, there’ll be slouchy, grouchy payback.

One afternoon Diane found herself enjoying early drinks with an art teacher Charles had hired, a handsome young man full of an ease that invited sharing. His ease almost, though not quite, led her to open up about her frustrations in her marriage. Sharing confidences, and then—what more? She’d decided on the spot that this was all starting to seem just a bit *too* angry at Charles. She took herself home to her husband, informed him of what happened, and added, “this boat needs a good rocking.”

Then she found her way to me. Charles didn’t know what hit him. Wasn’t he a good man? Wasn’t he a good husband? He really didn’t understand Diane’s problem.

Diane and Charles: Rocking the Boat

Diane rests her arm on the side of the couch they share and stretches her long legs. “The word for Charles that you may be searching for here, Terry,” she informs me, “might be *depressed*. As in chronic, low grade, lifelong.”

“Oh, please.” Charles makes a face. “Look at what I’ve accomplished. Look at where I came from.”

“That might be just what I’m talking about,” she persists.

“You grew up rough? Where?”

“North Philly,” he tells me.

“Hey, Camden, New Jersey.” I raise my hand, and he regards me anew.

Finding herself in the pull of a young man’s confidences, Diane explains to me, woke her up. Telling Charles about it made her realize that she wanted more: more from the marriage and more from Charles. He said he was game, but in this first session, his caved-in energy is not riotously convincing.

As he slumps out the door at the end, I barely resist the temptation to give his arm an encouraging squeeze. “Cheer up,” I say instead. “This can get better. Smile.”

And that was the phrase that almost drove him from the therapy: Cheer up, I had instructed him. Smile.

Charles does manage to come back the following week. But he is steamed and, I sense, under that, hurt. Before we are all even seated, he reminds me of what he calls our last session’s “part-

ing shot.” Then he stares me in the face. “Look,” he tells me. “I know you meant well. But do you have any idea how many Black men have been told to smile over the decades, centuries? Act like they were just enjoying the hell out of themselves?” His body vibrates slightly, and I can feel my face flush.

Enslaved people, as described by Isabel Wilkerson in her extraordinary book *Caste*, brought a higher bid on the selling block if they looked happy and docile rather than sullen or sad. Men were whipped into smiling, even dancing—their children and wives, their families, broken apart and sold while they watched.

“I can understand why that might have been triggering,” I begin.

“Triggering,” he stops me, no Eeyore now. “Now, don’t put this on *me*.”

“I’m sorry I was insensitive,” I continue. “I didn’t mean to be patronizing.”

“He’s just mad because you sounded like me,” Diane says, trying to come to my rescue.

“What’s annoying from her might just be prejudice when it’s coming from you, or ignorance,” Charles replies, not budging.

Was he saying I was a racist? Was I? Had that been a racist comment I’d made? Out of context, no, I wouldn’t call it racist on its face. The problem is that we aren’t stripped of context and can’t be. Given the racial history, my comment, while meaning no harm, was insensitive. Charles wasn’t my minstrel, and he could damn well feel any way he chose to.

“I don’t know, Charles.” I find myself growing defensive. (*Why? I think. What needs defending?*) “I’m not sure I’d go to ‘prejudiced,’ but it certainly was—”

“May I ask a couple of questions?” he interrupts. Before I answer, he asks, “You’ve read a lot of articles, books even, on doing therapy with people of color?”

“Well, I—”

“Sought consultation with someone who knows the issues?”

I find myself unsure as to whether I should feel angry or embarrassed. The truth is, I try to keep up, sporadically, but I would hardly say I’m an expert.

We sit together, the three of us, in rather uncomfortable silence. Finally, having gotten into trouble with one phrase, I decide to try another, a phrase I teach all my couples to use. A phrase I would like you, dear reader, to add to your lexicon.

“So is there anything I can do,” I ask Charles, “to move us toward repair?”

At this, Charles smiles.

“Uh-oh,” Diane groans softly as her professor husband withdraws from his inside blazer pocket a neatly folded paper and hands it to me.

“And this is . . . ?” I ask, unfolding it.

“A *preliminary* reading list,” he answers, amused. Suddenly I feel empathy for Charles’s stuttering students. The list is mostly literary, thank goodness: James Baldwin, Malcolm X. Some titles I don’t recognize. But there was more that Charles didn’t have on his list—articles and books on race and ther-

apy, particularly therapy across racial lines. I commit to pursuing these as well and tell Charles so.

“But,” I say, “since you raise it, I would like to ask. Tell me what it’s like for you to work with a white therapist.”

He shakes his head, glances at Diane. He asks me not unkindly, “And what do you think I’ve been doing?”

Daring to Name the Truth

Racism. The backbone of the American system. When I was a child in school, racism was about slavery in the bad Old South. Lincoln freed the slaves, and now all men were free! Let’s have a Thanksgiving feast with the Wampanoag and Pilgrims celebrating altogether! This is America!

Discordant evidence, however, lies in plain sight all around us. America was taken from the indigenous people who lived here, with bribery, guns, and germ warfare. The Thanksgiving story is one in which Native Americans generously taught white settlers how to live in the new world and then somehow graciously disappeared, peacefully ceding the land under their feet to the Europeans. In fact, a brief alliance between Pilgrims and Wampanoags in Plymouth deteriorated quickly to become one of the bloodiest, nastiest confrontations to take place between the two nations.

Having secured land through genocide, white America imported another group of people to work it. Slavery was not an aberration; it was essential to American prosperity. Ten of the first American presidents owned slaves. Racism is not an

anomaly in American history. Steeped in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, racism *is* American history. In today's America, slavery has morphed into mass incarceration. Two and a half million Americans live behind bars. Although Black people account for slightly over 13 percent of the general population, they make up just under 40 percent of the incarcerated population. And their labor? Inmate labor is worth \$2 billion a year. The Thirteenth Amendment grants freedom to all men *except* those found guilty of crime. What follows from that exemption is a shameful history of deliberate, pervasive attempts to equate criminality with color and law and order with whiteness. From the Southern Strategy to Willie Horton, America's right wing went from dog-whistle racism to virulent open white supremacy. Racism brought Donald Trump to power. Racism stormed the Capitol. Racism fuels sheer hatred in many right-wing conservatives.

From lynching and torture to everyday microaggressions, hypertension, and early death, the cost of racism to its objects is unspeakable. As a white psychotherapist, I am also interested in the cost of racism to the racist.

In *Dying of Whiteness*, Jonathan Metzl tells the story of two Southern states, Kentucky and Tennessee, the first with Obamacare, the second without it. In 2016 Metzl encountered a man he calls Trevor, who happened to live on the wrong side of the state line. Had Trevor lived a mere thirty-five-minute drive north, in Kentucky, he would have been eligible for life-prolonging drugs and a desperately needed liver

transplant. When Trevor was asked if he would now support Obamacare, he scoffed, “No way I want my tax dollars paying for Mexicans or welfare queens.” Metzl points out that Trevor preferred death to betraying his white cohort. Near death, Trevor is no doubt on disability himself, getting health care, Social Security, and perhaps food aid from the government. If I had been talking to Trevor, I would have pointed out that he *was* a “welfare queen.”

Racism lies in the poisoned heart of America. So does patriarchy. Both are children of the Great Lie, the delusion of individualism, that one can be essentially superior or inferior to another human being. In a brilliant article, the psychiatrist Heather Hall deconstructs the psychodynamics of racism as a narcissistic disorder. Narcissism, the disorder of our time, is rooted in a misunderstanding—the difference between real self-esteem, which comes from the inside out, and its reflection, the outside-in forms of self-esteem, like the value one derives from performance, or from one’s possessions, or from others’ esteem. In the myth, remember, Narcissus dies not from an overabundance of self-love but from its opposite. He falls in love with his reflection, over which he bends, sighing, until thirst and hunger slay him. Narcissus is an addict who kills himself.

Better than, less than. One-up or one-down. Superior or inferior—and inferior not just about one attribute, not an inferior farmer, for instance, or tennis player, or writer. No, you are inferior as a human being. This is how *you and me*

becomes *us and them*. Because in the toxic cult of individuality, it isn't enough simply to be an individual—like everyone else. No, one must distinguish oneself, one must be special, one must be above average in all things. How quickly and effortlessly that glides into holding oneself above not merely individuals but whole groups of people, whole swaths of humanity. Indigenous people, immigrants, Jews, Latinx, Asians, LGBTQ, the disabled, anyone of color. You assert your individuality by depriving others of theirs.

Upward Mobility and Damage

Charles, in his demands, particularly for sex, and in his consequent sulky retaliation, holds himself aloof and apart. As a Black man, he is the object of our culture's collective grandiosity through racism, while at the same time, in his marital relationship, he is a personal example of narcissism in his demands on and retaliation toward his wife. While at home he has a depressive, passive-aggressive style—he only rarely becomes overtly angry—he nevertheless punishes Diane with his moodiness and ill-temper.

He does that particularly male routine that my wife, Belinda, calls *putting out a stink*. You don't say a word, but the people around you wind up with a headache. Passive-aggression means punishing people by what you don't do, by how little you give. In his public life, Charles has been the soul of maturity, balance, and leadership. At home, as Diane puts it, he reverts from Wise King to Put-Out Prince.

I think to myself that it must be hard to be a Wise King all day long. And then I call to mind Charles's race and I amend that thought. It must be hard to be the Wise King all day, every day, unrelentingly, for how long?

I ask Charles about his meteoric rise from the streets of North Philly to the boardrooms of New England. Listening to his tale of academic achievement, excellence in athletics, and community leadership, I wonder where he ever got to be a big baby. It's an open secret among couples therapists that many powerful people regress in their relationships. President Ronald Reagan called his wife Nancy "Mommy." High-powered couples routinely have babytalk nicknames for each other, often secret words, even a language. Out in the world, Charles measures every word, always has, always needed to. So I wonder where he ever got to be a big old bratty boy.

"You remind me," I tell Charles, "of a famous session in the annals of family therapy." They both look up at me, cautious but open. "Paul Watzlawick, one of the creators of family therapy, was famous for his one-session cures. So here's the tale: A guy comes to him from D.C., African-American, about your age. Like you, this guy was a super-performer, up from poverty, straight As, merit scholar, the whole thing. He's now a highly successful lobbyist in Washington, has a loving wife, three kids in private school, fancy cars. His life is perfect, except for one detail. He suffers from debilitating anxiety attacks.

"'Of course, you're anxious!' Watzlawick is said to have exclaimed. 'You're haunted by your own imperfection, which even you cannot fully escape. There's a fundamental privilege,'

he told the guy, ‘that all through your growing up and even to this day you’ve never had. A privilege the lowliest white kid in town possesses in abundance. You know what it is? The privilege to fail, to screw up, to make a perfect fool of yourself.’” I look at Charles and Diane.

“I get it,” Charles tells me. “One false step—”

“And it’s a long drop down,” I agree with him.

“So?” Charles prompts.

“Okay,” I say. “So Watzlawick gives him an assignment. He has to know that he can fail spectacularly and still survive. There was a well-known watering hole of the powerful elite in D.C., a fancy steakhouse. Watzlawick tells this guy he has to go to this restaurant and insist on a cheese enchilada. Insist on it so vociferously that he gets himself removed.”

“And so?” Charles prompts.

“So,” I go on, “he does it. He’s so obnoxious he gets himself bodily thrown out the front door, where a small group of family and friends are waiting. Witnessing his ejection, they burst into applause and take him to lunch at the second most prestigious joint in Washington, to celebrate his liberation.”

Charles wrinkles his face. “So all I have to do is get thrown out somewhere—”

“And your wife will whip you up a great enchilada!” I say.

“Wife doesn’t cook,” Diane deadpans.

“Right.” I plow on: “Like I said. She’ll order you a great enchilada.”

“I’m not exactly sure what we’re saying here,” Charles starts.

"I'm saying everybody needs to be a kid somewhere," I tell him. "Did you get to be much of a kid growing up?"

He shakes his head.

"Your needs, your emotions, were all well-tended to?"

"My parents were dealing with one special needs kid and my brother on drugs. He's okay now," Charles adds.

"But you were the good one?" I ask, knowing the answer.

Charles nods.

Dean's list, football star, I recall him saying. What Charles is, in my assessment, is a lost child: hero type. After thirty-plus years as a family therapist, I find myself drawn to the simplicity of the three family roles first described in AA: hero child, scapegoat child, lost child.

I explain it to Diane and Charles. "The hero is the good one," I tell them. "The scapegoat is the bad one, or the sick one, the family problem."

"That's both my brother and sister in different ways," Charles allows.

"Your sister was the problematic one and your brother was the bad one, the rebel?"

"Pretty much," Charles agrees.

"And you were the one who was left on your own," I venture.

"Well," Charles corrects, "I was praised."

"Right," I tell him. "I subdivide the lost child into two types, depending on why the child is neglected. You can be left alone because you're bad, not worth it. That's lost child: scapegoat type. Or you can be neglected because

you're the good one; your parents are busy with something, or someone—”

“That would be my brother,” Charles interjects.

“—and, hey, you seem fine on your own. Lost child: hero type, the neglected good one.”

“I don't really like being pigeonholed—” Charles winds up.

But I interrupt. “How many games did your parents go to?” I hazard a guess. “How many teacher conferences?”

Charles bridles. “Hey, my dad worked two jobs so my mother could stay at home.”

“I'm not saying it's anyone's fault,” I tell him. “It just is. You were on your own, Charles. None of your emotional needs was met, particularly, not in that family. You grew up good, and you grew up hungry.”

Charles shifts in his chair.

“How old is that pouty boy? The one that drives Diane crazy?”

Charles shrugs warily. “I don't know.”

“Make it up,” I press on.

“Seven, eight, I guess.”

“In your mind's eye, when you look at him, where is he? What's he doing?”

“Nothing,” Charles says. “I mean, he's in his room most likely, studying. Doing homework.”

“Lonely,” I add for him.

“I don't know about that,” Charles objects. “Alone, perhaps but—”

“You didn’t feel lonely,” I posit.

“Not really, that’s just the way it was.”

“It was normal.”

“Yes.”

“Being alone.”

“I mean there were people—”

“Emotionally alone,” I correct. “Psychologically alone.”

“Well.” Charles takes his time, considering.

“You didn’t feel alone,” I guess. “It was just normal.”

“How it was,” Charles agrees.

“No,” I say, gathering momentum. “You didn’t feel lonely then. You pretty much never feel lonely.”

“Not really.”

“Until Diane does something you read as uncaring.”

“Oh, here it comes.”

“Isn’t it true, though?” I ask. “You hardly ever feel lonely, until Diane somehow turns her back?”

“It can feel that way.”

“Then it all comes out,” I guess. “All your loneliness. All his loneliness, that seven-year-old.”

“Which is about how old I act, according to my wife,” Charles agrees. He claps his hands together. “Okay, so go. Now what?”

“If I may, I want to tell you what Belinda and I used to tell our then four-year-old.”

Charles looks up.

“Use your words,” I intone.

“As in?”

“As in walking over to your wife and saying, ‘Hey. I could use a hug.’”

Charles sits back, amused. “Can you see me doing that?” He turns to Diane. “You’d like that?”

Diane smiles. “Better than flouncing around like a child,” she tells him, dismissive.

But Charles really looks at her. “You’d be okay with me being weak?” he asks with what seems real vulnerability—vulnerability I sense in him for the first time.

Diane picks up steam. “You don’t think I know that you’re weak already? Honey, we’re all a mixture of weak and strong. Who do you think you’ve been fooling?”

Charles seems unconvinced.

“You know,” I say, “the same guy who won’t ask his wife for comfort is the one who makes her pay when she doesn’t give it.”

Charles harrumphs without much conviction.

“Here’s a bitter pill for you,” I say to Charles. “You ready?”

He nods.

“You really can’t be mad at not getting what you never asked for.”

“But when I do ask—”

“I’m not just talking about sex,” I quickly add. “Charles, you have more emotional needs than just sex. A lot of men are a one-note song. You feel insecure, you want sex. Lonely? Sex. Scared about something?”

“Okay,” Charles says. “I get the drill.”

“So, baby,” Diane says, turning to her husband. “You’ll talk to me? Tell me who you are? What you’re feeling?”

“I *feel*,” Charles emphasizes, “like I’d like to get close to you, you know, physically.”

“*Other* feelings?” she says.

“There *are* other feelings,” I reassure.

“Yeah, like being ganged up on.” He asks, “Is that a feeling?”

“It *is*, Charles,” I mock-congratulate him.

He purses his lips, looks at Diane. “So if I come to you . . .”

“Yes, Charles,” she says.

“With real vulnerability . . .”

“Yes, Charles.”

“Sharing my feelings . . .”

“Yes, Charles.”

“We’ll be closer, I mean, more intimate?”

“Jesus,” Diane exhales.

“Well, wait,” I tell her, turning to Charles. “If you lay off. If you actually do the work of identifying other feelings and needs besides sexual desire. If you stop pressuring her through your nonverbal complaining . . .”

“Yes?” says Charles.

“You might be surprised,” I tell him. “You might actually render yourself more attractive.”

“Nothing promised,” Diane quickly interjects.

“It’s not a quid pro quo,” I tell Charles. “No more complaining, no pressure.”

“I got that part,” Charles tells me.

“But you never know,” I chide him. “Grown men are usually sexier than seven-year-olds.”

Charles takes a long glance at Diane. “You fell in love with my strength,” he tells her. “You told me so.”

“I fell in love with all of you, Charles. You’re not hiding anything from me. I see what you’re trying to hide, and I see you hiding it.”

“What do you see?” He bridles a little. “What am I trying to hide?”

She reaches over and grabs his chin, turning his head so he’s looking right at her. “I see you, you fool. I see that boy.”

Charles frowns.

“I like that little boy,” she tells him. “I love that boy.”

“But—” Charles coaxes her.

She leans back, quiet for a moment. “It can be tough.”

“What’s that mean?” he asks.

“It means you tell her what that hurt boy feels when she says no, Charles,” I interject, “but you don’t drop him off at her doorstep.”

Charles takes a long time to look at his wife. “You really do love me, don’t you?” he says quietly.

Diane nods. “Hard to take in,” she says.

“Sometimes,” he tells her.

“A lot of times,” Diane answers as they gaze at each other.

“Sometimes,” answers Charles, holding her gaze.

I register the soft way they look at each other. “How about now?” I ask Charles. “Can you take it in now?”

Charles looks for a long moment at his wife. When he answers, still locked on Diane, his voice is tender. “Now’s all right.”

Invulnerable and dominant. If that’s the pose all men adapt, for Black and brown men in this country, it may seem like a matter of survival itself. It’s easy for a privileged white therapist to say, “Go, be vulnerable.” Isabel Wilkerson describes a time when she was flying to a speaking engagement. She was due to sit next to a little white girl, no more than seven or eight. The girl was surprised to see a woman who looked like Wilkerson in first class. Her bewilderment escalated into consternation and then frank upset. “Don’t worry,” the mother soothed her daughter. “You take my seat on the aisle; I’ll sit next to her.”

Now, reader, I ask you to stop and think for a moment about what that would feel like. Cooties. Wilkerson has a whole section in her book on cooties. In the early 1950s, Cincinnati, under pressure, attempted to integrate its municipal swimming pools. Whites threw nails and broken glass into the water. In 1960 a Black activist attempted to integrate a public pool simply by swimming in it. After swimming his laps, as he toweled off, he watched the city completely drain the pool and replace it with fresh water.

How dare I, as a therapist, challenge someone to be more vulnerable, knowing that such humiliation or worse can erupt anywhere, anytime? And yet I do, indeed I must. Because

intimacy is intimacy—it requires vulnerability, it requires us to sort out and put out our wants and needs, our feelings. Even in resistance. Even in flight.

Over time Charles learned to be a gladiator when need be in the world and at the same time a lover at home. He learned to complain less about what he wasn't getting and, instead, to tend more to Diane's needs, what warmed her up, turned her on. Together, over time, the couple settled into a routine of sex about once or sometimes twice a week, which was "okay" for Charles and "plenty enough" for Diane.

They left therapy soon afterward. They thanked me. I wished them both luck.

As they stood to go, I thanked Charles for helping me "raise my racial consciousness" at the beginning of our work. He reached out his hand, and I shook it with that odd happy-sad feeling I often get when someone "graduates."

"You just keep smiling," he tells me.

Wiseass, I think, but don't say, ceding him the last word.

Grandiosity Damages the Grandiose

Apart and above. We define ourselves against the fantasied backdrop of the Great Lie, as superior to those we deem lesser than us. We assert our individuality by depriving others of theirs. The first act in marginalizing someone is to take aim at their identity as an individual. We deprive enslaved people of their names, we shave imprisoned people and take their clothes, we turn Jews into the numbers on their arms, we tell ourselves

that we are privileged, not Black, not poor, not gay, not female. We hold fast to our perceived rung on the ladder by stepping on the faces of those just below us.

And herein lies a huge cost, not just to those we step on but also to us. Because we do the same things to ourselves. We deem this part of us as okay but that part as revolting. We lash ourselves with negative self-talk when we don't measure up. We live harsh lives, both inside and out. Here is a difficult truth: although I want to be crystal clear that the toxin of privilege pales in comparison to the systemic torture, depredation, and humiliation of those who are not privileged, nevertheless, if we as a society are to move beyond these ancient fissures and wounds, we must come to realize that toxic individuality is a culture that flays everyone—those at the top as well as those at the bottom. Recent research indicates wealth impairs one's empathy toward others. Think about that. Would you consider that a favor? Maintaining the system requires blunted empathy, dissociation, compartmentalization, and even faulty thinking.

When I was in college, I was obsessed for a time with J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb. As I read about the Manhattan Project, I kept asking myself, How could this man have lived with himself? How could he have brought this atrocity into the world, knowing the planet-endangering consequences of his monstrous invention? The answer I came to, after plowing through several essays and biographies, was shocking: He didn't much think about the consequences. We were at war. He had a commission. Like

men for millennia before him, he had a job to do, and he did it. The cost to Oppenheimer lay precisely in what he would not allow himself to think about, in splitting himself through dissociation. Dissociation—the core motif of reaction to trauma. Trauma victims dissociate; in many cases, they must to preserve themselves. Could it be that perpetrators also must dissociate? That a whole, integrated human being cannot so easily harm another?

Once we allow ourselves the privilege of not thinking, we become dangerous. Thirty-eight-year-old Rudy had unprotected sex with prostitutes during the COVID epidemic and then went home to dine with his family. In our session, I asked him, did he not realize the risk he was exposing his wife and kids to? He shrugged. “I told myself I wouldn’t get anything.” *Sheer grandiosity*, I reflected. “Truth is, I didn’t really think about it.” We are sickened sometimes by what we can’t stop thinking about, but we can be even more damaged by what we refuse to think about.

Superiority Operates in the Dark

“Stars, hide your fires,” Macbeth prays before murdering his king; “Let not light see my black and deep desires.” Superiority operates in the dark. Grandiosity rarely sees itself. Holding oneself apart and aloof has consequences to others, of course, but it also does damage to the grandiose individual. The field of trauma psychology has recently articulated what it calls *moral injury*, a particular—and quite virulent—form of PTSD

that assaults the psyche of the perpetrator. For example, a soldier who commits atrocities, behaving in ways that fall outside the scope of their own morality, will experience moral injury. In war, men rape, murder, and kill innocent people.

In those who commit such criminal acts of grandiosity, healthy guilt is replaced by dread and power. They assuage their guilt by dehumanizing their victims. The psychiatrist Heather Hall writes, “The most malevolent perpetrators insist that the victim admit that they deserve the abuse. . . . The victim realizes that the only way to minimize the pain’s intensity is to help the perpetrator assuage the guilt by saying that yes, I did deserve it. That is the final soul-crushing blow to the victim.”

Such are the lengths we go to, but the guilt still haunts. In 1997 the psychologist Na’im Akbar coined the term *post-traumatic slavery syndrome* to refer to the adverse effects of slavery transgenerationally on the children of slaves, and their children, and theirs. In recent years, we have begun to learn more and more about epigenetics, the way trauma affects the DNA of the next generation and perhaps beyond. Can I wonder about the legacy of moral injury to whites without somehow minimizing the unspeakable criminality of our actions? Could it be that white Americans collectively carry in our bodies the shame, the psychic injury, that previous generations did not feel but passed on through generations of denial and reenactment? Can I say, without minimizing the atrocities leveled by whites, that the intrapsychic costs of racism to the racist lie precisely in the tortured mechanisms of denial

and distortion that attempt to dehumanize the victim but that in fact dehumanize both?

When it comes to gender, I ask men and women to unite, despite the damage men have inflicted on women for thousands of years and still do. Nevertheless, it is in our interest, all of us, to understand the system of patriarchy. It is in everyone's interest to dismantle a superstructure that holds both sexes hostage. In the same way, I believe it is in everyone's interest to remember that we all make up the relational biosphere we inhabit. It is in everyone's interest to once and for all step beyond the Great Lie of superiority and inferiority, shame and grandiosity, victim and perpetrator. We live as a culture with unhealed collective trauma.

We will never experience collective healing until we undo the dissociation and compartmentalization that is required of us to do collective harm.

In his classic 1991 work *Faces of the Enemy*, Sam Keen detailed the process of *otherization*, the methods and tropes people employ to leach humanity from depictions of the enemy, whoever that might be. A body of literature details what it takes to get soldiers to empty their bullets into human bodies. Each war seems to do a better job at otherization and yields a broader percentage of combat compliance. But the question remains: Can a person kill another while feeling their humanity, maintaining an empathic connection to them? The jury is out.

Internally, many of us engage in a somewhat analogous process directed to parts of our own psyche. We otherize parts

of our own selves. We banish, fight with, and torture the parts of ourselves we deem unacceptable. Traditionally patriarchal women otherize their self-assertion or selfishness. Traditional men otherize their vulnerabilities. The field of psychology was born from Freud's discovery of repression, the means by which we humans exile that which we deem uncivilized. It is time to pull back the curtain and embrace the untouchable, both in others and in ourselves.

Individualism asserts itself through disassociation. Oppression is omnipresent to the oppressed and lurks in the shadows for the oppressor. How many of us are racists to ourselves? A 2020 study showed that people who admitted to behavior they labeled racist nevertheless denied that they were racist. I'm interested in the psychological gymnastics these subjects went through to acknowledge their behavior and, at the same time, deny the attribute. Individualism exists through disconnection, and the cost of disconnection is disconnection. Virtually everyone in the West feels superior to someone and inferior to someone else. Virtually everyone in the West sees the group they belong to as superior to some other group and inferior to another. None of this sees air or daylight, while in reality, the pain of disconnection sweeps the Western world in an epidemic for all to see. We have never been a lonelier people.

We will not heal as a body politic until we remember what we have dismembered—the despised inferior, in ourselves and in others. All around us, community fractures, as individualism rallies to protect its freedoms and entitlements. In the demands of some for the right to go maskless during a

pandemic, or in the strong voice of a left-leaning woman so liberated from accommodating others that she's now abrasive, or in the claims of a therapy patient rounding his fifteenth year of self-improving treatment—individualism thrives. We have never held ourselves as more apart and above, while our epidemic of loneliness, like a rising tide, threatens to engulf us all.

Studies reviewed by Vivek Murthy, the surgeon general of the United States, in his sobering, inspiring book, *Together*, indicate that 22 percent of all American adults say they often or always feel lonely or socially isolated. One in three American adults over the age of forty-five is lonely. In one national survey, one-fifth of respondents said they rarely or never feel close to people. And studies in other countries echo these findings.

“Individualism,” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of America in the 1830s, “is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into a circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.” But almost two hundred years later, in today's atomized culture, one's small circle of family and friends may be neither rich nor stable. These days, as the sociologist Robert Putnam discovered, we bowl alone.

Racism may be the Great Lie at its purest—superior and inferior, white and Black. But the same dynamic manifests as masculine and feminine, straight and gay, wealthy and poor.

Poison privilege, like the knife that is all blade, cuts the hand that wields it.

The first step in recovery, coming into right relationship with our privilege, is to see it. To feel its near ubiquitous protection. To acknowledge whatever racist, misogynist, prejudiced views we've internalized. To be willing to confront the unconscious biases we carry. But more than all that, *we must come to understand that holding oneself as fundamentally superior to another is sickening to both parties.*

A driver cuts me off on the road, then reduces his speed, making me slow down. I instinctively hate him: "Who the hell does he think he is? Boston driver!" But then I catch myself. I breathe myself down from the contempt that courses through my body, down from superiority, from grandiosity. I don't do it for the sake of the other driver. I do it for me. I remember that I grew up in a contempt-drenched family. I internalized contempt and turned it on myself for years; I played it out in relationships and made a mess of things more than once. But not now. Today I don't need contempt in my life. I try to practice democracy in my day-to-day life, *same-as*, neither better nor worse. Neither apart nor aloof.

Individualism stands on the backs of its exiles—the chronic, pervasive guilt that haunts the privileged, coupled with the degrading oppression of those without it. To work, individualism requires repression. We tell ourselves that the other is less human than we are, and we behave in ways that suggest that we ourselves have lost our humanity. Not content

simply to turn the Great Lie on others, many of us turn it in on ourselves as well. We spend our days habitually tugged by better-than-less-than, harshly judging our own imperfections.

The Great Lie is a frightening, nasty dream from which we might awaken. Emerging from the dream of shame and grandiosity, we come into connection, *same-as*. Just like you. We come into intimacy. Personal democracy. We come to ourselves. And the possibility of lasting, sustained relational joy.

The Everyday Practice of Love

Remember, intimacy—the thing we all long for, if we’re really honest with ourselves, the touch of human connection that heals, that fulfills, the only thing in our lives capable of rendering us truly happy, intimacy is not something you have; it’s something you do. And you can learn to do it better.* You can learn to do a better job of asserting your rights with love, cherishing the relationship even as you stand up for yourself. You can learn to let go of the trap of “objective” reality and tend, instead, to your partner’s subjective hurts or longings, listening, really listening, with compassion and generosity rather than defensiveness and self-centeredness. “I’m sorry you feel bad. Can I say or do anything now that might help?” will often point you toward repair instead of escalated distance or warfare. Self-protection; self-assertion—there is a golden door to

* For anyone who wishes to learn more about relational skills to see the new rules of marriage and my online course *Staying in Love*, they are available on my website, TerryReal.com.

walk through that takes us beyond me, me, me. Not that there shouldn't be a me. Traditionally, women have been taught to submerge their me to the we. But we is not relationship. Intimacy is not some blended egoless amalgam. Intimacy is an endless dance of I and US, the needs of each vital part of the relationship called myself or yourself as those individual wants filter through the needs of the relationship itself. In this moment, perhaps my individual assertiveness takes precedence: "No, please stop treating me like that. I much prefer it this way instead." Other times, you yield, giving your partner what they desire. You ask yourself, "Why not? What will it cost me?" You remember that generosity pays off. As you think more and more ecologically, it begins to appear self-evident that it is in your interests to behave skillfully in, to be a good steward of, your own relational biosphere. Why? Because you're in it, dear reader; it is the air you breathe, the atmosphere you depend upon. Wake up. Wake up and take care.

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