



THE  
Long  
Shadow of

BY TERRY REAL

*Couples Therapy  
in the Age of Trump*

**N**ot long ago, I used to joke that as a feminist family therapist I was obsolete twice over: once for being a family therapist and a systemic thinker—instead of being, say, a CBT practitioner—and then once again for being a feminist. I mean, who cared about feminism anymore? The points had been made, the lessons learned, and to some degree at least, the battles won—or at least on the way to being won. Feminism seemed to be old news. Gender issues in therapy? If anyone spoke about that anymore, it was to reenvision the whole idea—trans kids, gender-fluid kids, straight men sleeping with other straight men. As for the impact of traditional gender roles on couples, on society—as for conversations about patriarchy and its effects—psychotherapists seemed largely to have lost interest.

Then 2016 happened.

When I gave a workshop called “Working with Challenging Men” at the 2015 Networker Symposium, it drew an audience of about 50 participants. When I was asked this year to give the same workshop, it drew an audience of more than 250. What happened to swell the ranks of those interested? We all know the answer: Donald Trump.

might’ve thought disqualifying in a public official. Harvard President Lawrence Summers was ousted almost immediately for asserting that women may have less innate math abilities than men—gone, and for a good reason. But “grab ’em by the pussy” from the leader of the free world? Democrats certainly thought it wouldn’t wash, but their efforts to make Trump’s character the issue in the election didn’t work. Each time they were freshly outraged by Trump’s behavior, his poll numbers grew.

So here’s a sobering thought: suppose Trump was elected not *despite* his offensive, misogynous behaviors but, at least in part, *because* of them. Whatever other factors determined the outcome of the election, a significantly large number of Americans, both men and women, educated and less educated, appear to have wanted a bully—or, said differently, a strongman—to be their nation’s leader. In a time perceived as dangerous, a time when the government seemed too paralyzed to accomplish much, when conservatives portrayed Obama as weak, ruminative, even feminine, we turned to a self-stylized alpha male.

Trump is a type. He fits the mold of other uber-tough guys of either sex that he openly

# Patriarchy

No matter what your political persuasion, it’s hard to deny that we have a man in the White House who behaves in ways that are not only challenging, but atavistic, offensive, and often downright frightening. Trump has called women “fat pigs,” ridiculed their appearance on social media, objectified and mocked them in person, and in his most unvarnished moment, bragged about assaulting them.

He’s regularly displayed behaviors one

admires and emulates: Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary, the Brexit leaders and Theresa May in the UK, and of course, there’s his storied bromance with Putin. Rarely noted is the fact that not just in the US, but sweeping throughout the West, this new so-called populism is gendered. Its appeal doesn’t lie exclusively with men. Factions of men and women these days are feeling a powerful pull toward many of the notions of traditional masculinity—and not just those few that make for good

character, like real courage or loyalty. What we're witnessing is a reassertion of masculinity's most difficult and harmful traits: aggression, narcissism, sexual assaultiveness, grandiosity, and contempt.

And yet we psychotherapists, as a field, have remained largely silent about this resurgence, hamstrung by an ethical code that prohibits diagnosis or clinical discussion of public figures from afar. In our offices, we assiduously practice neutrality with regard to anything that smacks of the debates going on in the political realm, petrified that we might impose our values on vulnerable clients. But is neutrality in these times really in our clients' best interests? Consider a recent couples session in my office with Julia, a petite and straight-backed woman, who lost her customary poise as she recounted her troubled week with her husband, Bob.

"I'm shot," she confesses. "Frayed. Like a horse that shies away from the slightest sound."

"She's pretty spooked," the laconic Bob agrees.

Julia smiles ruefully. "My poor husband tried to make love the other night, and I practically bit his head off." What was triggering her so acutely? Haltingly, little by little, the trauma story winds its way out of her. First, she recalls the "ick factor," as she puts it, of feeling her selfish, boundaryless father notice her physical development as an adolescent. Then there was the time he danced with her and had an erection, and finally, the night he drank too much and out and out groped her. "No one stood up for me. No one protected me. And now, ever since the election, I won't let Bob near me," Julia cries. "Just here, sitting here with you two men, walking the streets, I feel so *unsafe*."

I take a deep breath and say what's hanging like a lead weight in the air. "Your father's in the White House," I tell her. She doubles over, weeping hard. But she also reaches for her husband's hand.

All over America women like Julia, who have histories of molestation, have been triggered by the ascendancy of Trump. Julia is certainly in need of some trauma treatment, obviously; but to my mind, that comes second. The first order of business with her is naming the reality of what she's facing. There's a sexually demeaning man in the White House. This is real, not just about her sensitivities. For me to take a neutral stance on the issue, emphasizing Julia's feelings and deemphasizing the actual circumstance, comes too close to minimization or denial, a replay of the covert nature of her father's abuse to begin with. It was important, I felt, to speak truth to power; it was important for me as her therapist to name names.

### THE HAZARDS OF MASCULINITY

Let me be clear. I haven't been for 40 years, nor will I ever be, neutral on the issue of patriarchy in my work. Traditional gender roles are a bad deal for both sexes. And they're particularly toxic for men. The evidence couldn't be clearer. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) has issued a statement implicating traditional masculine values as inimical to good health.

Let's take a stark, bottom-line issue: death. Men live 7 to 10 years less than women do, not because of some genetic differences, as most people imagine, but because men act like, well, men. For one, we don't seek help as often as women do; it's unmanly. Indeed, as I once wrote about male depression, "A man is as likely to ask for help with depression as he is to ask for directions." And men are more noncompliant with treatment when we do get it. Also, we take many more risks. That driver without a seatbelt—odds are that's a man. Men drink more, take drugs more, are more than three times as likely to be imprisoned, and five times as likely to commit suicide.



**A** shame-based, outwardly driven man, coupled with an accommodating, inwardly aggrieved woman—why, that's America's defining heterosexual couple.

As Michael Marmot of WHO puts it, men's poorer survival rates "reflect several factors: greater levels of occupational exposure to physical and chemical hazards, behaviors associated with male norms of risk-taking and adventure, health behavior paradigms related to masculinity, and the fact that men are less likely to visit a doctor when they are ill and, when they see a doctor, are less likely to report on the symptoms of disease or illness."

Traditional masculine habits not only hurt men's physical and psychological health, but also produce the least happy marriages. Study after study has shown that egalitarian marriages—which often involve dual careers and always encompass shared housework and decision-making—unequivocally lead to higher rates of marital satisfaction for both sexes than do "traditional" marriages, based on hierarchy and a strict division of roles. Yet most therapists, even today, act as if these choices in marriage were simply a matter of personal preference, of legitimate, sometimes clashing values.

Where do we stand on issues like toxic masculinity and paternalistic marriage? For the most part, we don't stand anywhere. We blink. So let me ask, if we were a group of dentists, knowing that candy is bad for teeth, would we be silent on the issue? Would we consider tooth brushing a personal value, not to be judged, only a matter of preference to be negotiated between family members?

## PSYCHOLOGICAL PATRIARCHY

The men and women who come to us for help don't live in a gender-neutral world. They're embedded in, and are often emblematic of, a raging debate about patriarchy and a certain vision of masculinity. Trump appeals to a gender-conservative narrative, which holds feminists ("feminazis" as Rush Limbaugh calls us) responsible for deliberately attacking the line between

masculine and feminine, and for "feminizing" men.

In a recent *National Review* article on Trump and masculinity, for example, Steven Watts laments that "a blizzard of Millennial 'snowflakes' has blanketed many campuses with weeping, traumatized students who, in the face of the slightest challenge to their opinions, flee to 'safe spaces' to find comfort with stuffed animals, puppies, balloons, and crayons." And Fox News's Andrea Tantaros rails, "The left has tried to culturally feminize this country in a way that is disgusting. And for blue-collar voters . . . their last hope is Donald Trump to get their masculinity back."

The 2016 Presidential Gender Watch Report summarizes several surveys this way: "Trump supporters [are] much more likely than Clinton voters to say that men and women should 'stick to the roles for which they are naturally suited,' that society has become too soft and feminine, and that society today seems to 'punish men just for acting like men.'" But to understand fully the implications of this gender narrative, even the contemptuous nuance of a derogatory term like *snowflake*, deemed by the Urban Dictionary as "insult of the year," one needs to look squarely at the nature and dynamic of patriarchy itself.

I use the word *patriarchy* synonymously with traditional gender roles—misguided stoicism in men, resentful accommodation in women. As I tell my clients, an inwardly shame-based, outwardly driven man, coupled with an outwardly accommodating, inwardly aggrieved woman—why, that's America's defining heterosexual couple, successful in the world and a mess at home. Certainly, 50 years of feminism have changed most women's expectations for themselves and their marriages, and Millennial men, for all their vaunted narcissism, are in many ways the most gender-progressive group of guys who've ever existed. But Baby Boomer men are often a mixed

bag, and Boomer couples are in deeply conflicted distress. Divorce rates among this group are alarming, and climbing, causing some to write of a "gray divorce revolution." We can reliably attribute many factors to this trend, but here's the one that strikes me: many men in their 60's are cut from the old patriarchal cloth, while many women in their 60's are now having none of it. Have we therapists tuned in to what's changed and what hasn't in our gender attitudes?

Frankly, most of us in the mental health community thought that the old paradigm was on its way out—and indeed it might be. But not without a fight. The old rules, and the old roles, are still kicking, and many of us progressives have just grown complacent. If anyone overestimated the triumph of feminism, the past election has to be viewed as a stinging rebuke and rejection. To this day, like it or not, we're fish, and patriarchy is the tainted water we swim in.

But let's get specific about patriarchy. For most, the word conjures up images of male privilege and dominance, and a resulting anger in women. I call this level *political* patriarchy, which is, simply put, sexism: the oppression of women at the hands of men. *Psychological* patriarchy is the structure of relationships organized under patriarchy. It not only plays in relations between men and women, but undergirds dynamics on a much broader level—among women, mothers and children, even cultures and races. The men and women who seek out therapy most often arrive at our doorstep saturated in the dynamic of psychological patriarchy, and I think it yields extraordinary clinical benefit to know about and work with this dynamic.

I see psychological patriarchy as the product of three processes, which you can imagine as three concentric rings.

**The great divide.** The first of these rings renowned family therapist

Olga Silverstein, author of *The Courage to Raise Good Men*, refers to as “the halving process.” With this process, it’s as if we gathered all the qualities of one whole human being, drew a line down the middle, and declared that all the traits on the right side of the line were masculine and all those on the left were feminine. Everyone knows which traits are supposed to belong on which side. Being logical, strong, and competent is on the right, for example, and being nurturing, emotional, and dependent is on the left.

**The dance of contempt.** In traditional patriarchy, the two bifurcated halves, masculine and feminine, aren’t held as separate but equal. The “masculine” qualities are exalted, the “feminine” devalued. What does this tell us? That the essential relationship between masculine and feminine is one of *contempt*. In other words, the masculine holds the feminine as inferior. As feminist psychologist and sociologist Nancy Chodorow pointed out, masculine identity is defined by *not* being a girl, *not* being a woman, *not* being a sissy. Vulnerability is viewed as weakness, a source of embarrassment.

If you think this dance of contempt doesn’t affect you, I suggest you take a look at Trump’s budget. Here’s how Erin Gloria Ryan put it in *The Daily Beast*: “The President’s budget, like everything he talks about, play[s] into his conception of over-the-top manliness. Cuts to education, the environment, are cuts to feminized concerns, really. After school programs and meals-on-wheels, those are caretaking programs. Education (and really, all childcare), also the purview of women. The arts, not for men like Trump.”

**The core collusion.** I believe one of the greatest unseen motivators in human psychology is a compulsion in whoever is on the feminine side of the equation to protect the disowned fragility of whoever is on the masculine side. Even while being mistreated, the “feminine” shields the “masculine.” Whether

it’s a child in relation to an abusive parent, a wife in relation to a violent husband, a captive who develops a dependency on those who took him or her hostage, or a church that protects sexually abusive ministers, perpetrators are routinely protected. One dares not speak truth to power. Every day in our offices we bear witness to traditional hetero relationships in which the woman feels a deeper empathic connection to the wounded boy inside the man than the man himself feels. If she could only love that boy enough, she thinks, he’d be healed and all would be well. This is the classic codependent, a prisoner of what psychiatrist Martha Stark calls relentless hope. It’s an intrinsic part of trauma that victims (the “feminine”) tend to have hyper-empathy for the perpetrator (the “masculine”) and hypo-empathy for themselves. I call this *empathic reversal*, and it’s our job as clinicians to reverse that reversal and set things right, so that the perpetrator is held accountable and the victim is met with compassion, especially self-compassion.

### CUT FROM THE OLD CLOTH

Just observing the way 53-year-old Bill sauntered over to my couch, clearly owning the room, I was tempted to label him an Old-School Guy. Lydia, his wife of 20-plus years, who was on the verge of leaving him, had another label for him. “Basically,” she tells me right off the bat, “he’s been a dick.” She bends down to scratch her ankle. “A real dick,” she reiterates. “For years, decades,” she sighs. “And I took it. I loved him. I still do. But, well, things have changed.” They’d come to my office in Boston from their home in Texas for what Bill described as a Hail Mary pass.

Here’s the story. Bill is a type: driven, handsome, relentless, utterly perfectionistic, and vicious to himself and others when a benchmark isn’t cleared. As their kids were growing up, there wasn’t much Lydia could do right: the house

**T**he way Bill had routinely controlled and savaged his wife, and the way she’d reacted, with distance and occasional rage, were right out of the patriarchy playbook.

wasn't picked up, the kids were too rowdy, the food was late or bland or both. Bill was both controlling and demeaning.

Lately, he'd become obsessed with physical performance, and he wanted to share his passion with his wife. Unfortunately, the way he invited her to the gym with him was to tell her how overweight she was. "I'm just attracted to fit women," Bill says, shrugging.

"Yeah," Lydia adds bitterly. "He thinks it'll motivate me when he says, 'That fat hanging over your belt disgusts me.'"

"I don't have a very high emotional IQ," Bill confides to me, his expression bland, untroubled. I'm thinking that I agree with him. Lydia, by the way, had been a competing amateur tennis player, with a figure many women would envy. I turn to Lydia, raising my eyebrows in a question.

"I'm no doormat," Lydia asserts, stretching each word in her slow Texas drawl. "Sure, I took up at the gym again, but I also started spending more time with my girlfriends—I have a lot of friends—and I started my own business."

I'm impressed. "Okay," I say. "You're no doormat."

"Right," she says.

"You didn't just sit there and take his mistreatment."

"Right."

"You, uh," I continue, "you gathered up your courage and confronted your husband on how. . . ."

"Well, no," she smiles shyly. "I suppose I fell short on that one, until now anyway. Now I do."

"What changed?" I ask, although I'm pretty certain I know the answer from their intake write up.

"Marylyn is what changed, Terry," she says. And then, after a pause, she adds, "Eighteen months with Marylyn behind my back is what changed." Bill sits beside her stony. "And there were others. I'm not sure of them all. Call girls when he traveled." Letting out a sigh, she turns to her husband.

"It's true," Bill finally says, shaking his head. "I don't know what I was *thinking*."

"Well," I say, "what were you *feeling*?"

"Not much," Bill tells me. Not satisfied, I press again, but he turns it back on Lydia, saying, "Well, you *did* pull away. I mean, between redoing the house, your business, your friends."

"I pulled away because you were impossible!" Lydia wails in a quivering voice. "You kept harping at me about the damn gym!"

"Look," he responds, more to me than to her, "I like the look of a fit woman. Shoot me. My parents were old in their 50's, dead in their early 70's. That's not for me. I want to compete in triathlons in my 80's. And I want my wife competing right by my side when I do."

I'm starting to feel claustrophobic just hearing this. "Well, that's fine, Bill. That's what you want," I tell him. "But have you ever asked Lydia what *she* wants?"

"I want you to talk to me," Lydia finally screams, losing composure. She bends over and cries. "Jesus, just sit down and talk to me."

"Okay, honey, I will," Bill says to soothe her. But whether he will or won't, he certainly hasn't so far. "I'm just not good with emotion," he tells me. "I just try to find a path and go forward. That's my usual approach. Like the other night she woke me up in the middle of the night, crying, and I asked her if there's anything she wanted, but. . . ."

"Just *hold* me," she cries, "Just tell me you love me and that you want me!"

He turns on her, an accusing finger close to her face. "But you didn't ask me for *that*, did you?" he says, making his point before some imagined jury. "Did you?" Now I can see the dripping condescension Lydia spoke of.

I lean toward him. "What are you so mad about?" I ask him, knowing that anger and lust are the only two emotions men are allowed in the traditional patriarchal set-up. But

much male rage is helpless rage. Burdened with the responsibility, and the entitlement, to fix anything that's broken, including his wife, Bill sees Lydia's unhappiness as an insoluble problem he must master, a rigged Rubik's Cube with no winning moves. He describes his feelings as many men in his position do: frustration.

"I'm *tired* of being held responsible"—he takes a breath, visibly trying to regain his composure—"when I have no idea what she wants."

"Oh," I say. "So you feel helpless." That brings him up short.

"Well," he mutters, "I'm not sure that I'd. . . ."

"Right," I say, heading him off. "You don't do helpless, right? You don't do feelings at all, except anger perhaps."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Like most hurt partners, your wife needs to get into what happened, and like most partners who've had an affair, you'd like to move off of it as quickly as possible."

"I don't think wallowing in it. . . ."

"She wins," I tell him.

"I'm sorry?" he asks.

"The hurt partner wins. She gets to talk about it. She needs to talk about it."

"And what do I do in the meantime?" he looks at me, jaw stuck out, angry, a victim.

"Well, would you accept some coaching from me at this juncture?" I ask. He nods, though skeptically, and Bill and I begin to break down the idea of masculinity—or his stunted version of it.

For his entire life, Bill credited his success in life to his fevered drive for perfection. He thought his harsh inner critic, which he never hesitated to unleash on others, was his best friend, holding up the standard, goading him to achieve. I tell Bill that like most of the men I treat, even like Icarus winging it toward the sun, he thought it was the achievement of glory that made him worthy of love. And like Icarus, he was about to fall, and fall hard.

“But my drive is my edge, my equalizer. I may not be as smart as some of the boys in the office, but, man, I can work.”

“Let me help you out here,” I tell him. “I promise you that as we work together, you won’t lose your edge. All the guys I see worry about that. But you can be just as tough and, at the right times, just as driven.”

“So what will be so different?” he asks.

“You,” I tell him. “You’ll be different. Radically different if you want to save this marriage. You’ll have *choice*.”

Like most feminist therapists I know, I don’t want to “feminize” men any more than I want to “masculinize” women. I want *choice*. When the moment calls for combat, I want men to be ferocious. But when the moment calls for tenderness, I want men to be sweet, compassionate, soft. Mostly, I want men to be able to discern which moment is which and behave accordingly. I want men to hold fast to those elements that are good and right about the traditional male role—courage, loyalty, competence—but men like Bill also deserve to have access to emotion, particularly the vulnerable emotions that connect us to one another. He deserves to have more empathy for himself first of all, and for those he loves.

By the end of our long session, we all agree that Bill—or “the old Bill,” as I begin to call him—was selfish, controlling, demanding, and unhappy. He based his shaky sense of self-worth on his performance, on whatever he’d amassed materially, and on his wife’s nurture. Although he’d have been loath to admit it before, Bill needed an overhaul.

“You’ve been acting in this marriage in a lot of ways as though you were still single,” I tell him. “Six hours a day at the gym, 10-hour bike rides, call girls when you travel. You need to learn to become what I call a real *family man*,” a term that deliberately harks back to some of the positive ideals contained in traditional notions of masculinity.

Contrary to what gender conservatives claim we feminists are after, I don’t want the men I work with to discard every aspect of masculinity. Rather, I talk to Bill about the differences between living life as a self-centered boy and living it like a family man. It’s not “repeal and replace” the entire notion of masculinity so much as “sort through, use the best, and transform the rest.”

“You played the old game: the competitive, don’t-rest-till-you-kill-them, grab-the-brass-ring game. Okay, you won at that one. Congratulations,” I say to him. “Now it’s time to learn a whole different game, different skills, different rules, if you want to stay married at least.” Bill’s nodding. He loves his wife, feels awful about how much he’s hurt her, would move mountains to keep his family intact. “Good,” I tell him. “Because it’s mountains you’re going to have to move. This is about cultivating that wildly undeveloped part of you that you’ve actively tried to get rid of. It’s about redefining what you think constitutes “a man” and how he’s supposed to act in the world. You’ll need new skills that stress receptivity over action, like being curious about your wife, learning to be quiet and leave space for her, drawing her out, truly negotiating.” He seems game as he listens. “I’m happy for you,” I tell him. “May this day be the beginning of your new orientation, your new life.”

“Okay,” he says, a little skeptical still.

“The next time your wife wakes up in the middle of the night because she’s a wreck and she needs to talk,” I start.

“I know,” he interrupts.

“Listen,” I tell him. “Here’s your new compass. When in doubt, I want you to pause, take a breath, and then picture yourself as a generous gentleman.” Like the term *family man*, the opportunity for Bill to see himself as a *generous gentleman* offers him a model, a reference point, for giving more to his wife without feeling



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like she's won and he's lost. I repurpose a familiar ideal—gentleman—to inspire flexibility in Bill, a willingness to yield that doesn't shame him. "The next time she wants something from you, ask yourself, *What would a generous gentleman do at this moment?*"

Becoming a generous gentleman requires Bill to move beyond his self-centeredness into compassion and bigheartedness, moving beyond sheer logic to feelings, both his and others. It's a good example of using a mostly abstract ideal contained within the patriarchal lexicon to help a client move beyond patriarchy itself. Did I have an in-depth discussion with Bill about Donald Trump? No, though I certainly would've been open to it had Bill seemed interested. But did I talk to him about patriarchy in general? About women's changing demands for more sharing, more intimate, more connected marriages? About the state of manhood in transition, from the old to the new? And was I clear with Bill about where I stood on these issues and why? The answer is an emphatic yes on all counts.

"Bill," I tell him. "You're a statistic. All over America, men like you are being dragged off to people like me so that we can help you learn how to be more relational, more giving, more empathic, more vulnerable—just a more thoughtful, connected person. There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Bills in offices like this one. We can't make it all about personal failings; there are too many of you."

Bill looks at me. "But when we go home," he sighs, trailing off. "It's just hard to know what she wants from me."

"I know," I commiserate. "This isn't easy. But you have a wonderful source of information sitting right next to you." Then I turn to Lydia. "Of course, you'll have to do things differently, too," I tell her. "At this stage in the game, you're more comfortable giving Bill feedback about all he does wrong than vulnerably

asking for what he might do right." Like many of my female clients, Lydia had spent most of her marriage vacillating between stuffing it and losing it. For the most part, she was silent and resentful, so Bill brushed off her occasional rants as hysteria. "You told your truth when you were ready to fight with him, but you did it in a harsh, critical way, which people in general, and men in particular, won't listen to."

"Listen," she says, rewinding, "I tried everything under the sun to get him to hear what I was saying."

"I'm sure that's true," I say. "But Lydia, that was then, and this is now. I have a saying: an angry woman is a woman who doesn't feel heard. But pumping up the emotional volume doesn't work. However, I think I have good news for you. I think you've been heard today, by Bill and by me. I understand what you're saying. I get it, and I'm on it. I want you to let me work with Bill now. I can get through to him in ways you're not positioned to be able to do. I'm an outside party; you're his wife."

Over the years, I've found this to be an enormously helpful position to take in therapy, no matter if the therapist happens to a man or a woman. I often say to female clients like Lydia, "I've got him. You don't have to be his relational coach or teacher anymore. Give that job to me. You can afford to relax and start enjoying him again." By stepping in, acknowledging the asymmetry in their relational skills and wishes, and explicitly offering myself as her ally, I hope to help women like Lydia resign from their role as their partner's mentor. "I'll coach Bill," I tell Lydia. "You breathe, relax, let your heart open up again."

Earlier in the session, I'd said I was excited for Bill. But with Lydia at the threshold of her own relational learning on how to break the traditional feminine role of silence and anger, I'm thrilled for her, too. I'm eager to teach her how to stand up for herself with love, how to switch

from statements like "I don't like how you're treating me!" to ones like "I want to be close to you. I want to hear what you're saying. Could you be kinder right now so I can hear better?"

Both partners need to learn how to be more skilled. But moving each toward increased intimacy requires leaving behind the old roles for them both. Real intimacy and patriarchy are at odds with each other. To the degree that a couple approaches the former, they move beyond the latter. As the old roles seek to reassert themselves in our society, it seems more important than ever to take a stand in favor of new ones, new configurations that provide more openness in men like Bill and more loving firmness in women like Lydia.

## AGENTS OF CHANGE

For years, I quipped that, as a couples therapist, I was a medic in the vast gender war, patching up men and women in order to send them back out into the fray. But in the age of Trump, I don't want to be a neutral medic anymore. I'd rather take a stand for healthy marriages. Pathology is rarely an aberration of the norm so much as an exaggeration of it. The way Bill had routinely controlled and savaged his wife, and the way she'd reacted, with distance and occasional rage of her own, were right out of the patriarchy playbook. Could I have done the same work with them without ever referencing gender roles, or masculinity? Perhaps, but why would I want to, when silhouetting a couple's issues against the backdrop of gender roles in transition makes so much sense to people?

In 2013, sociologist Michael Kimmel wrote *Angry White Men*, about a group of people many now claim make up a large part of Trump's base. Central to Kimmel's findings was a sense of what he called "aggrieved entitlement," which, from a psychological perspective, looks

CONTINUED ON PAGE 58




to leave the person they're with as much as they want to leave the person they themselves have become. And it's not that they're looking for another person, but another self. But even happy people cheat, and affairs aren't always a symptom of something wrong in the marriage or in the individual.

So I'm willing to entertain the idea that good can come from an affair—which is far from saying affairs are good for your marriage. Many people grow from a life-threatening illness, but that doesn't mean that I'd recommend getting cancer as a path to growth.

**PN:** I imagine people are quite curious about how you personally address the issues you talk about so boldly in your work. What do you tell them about the rules you follow in your own marriage?

**PEREL:** You're right. I'm frequently asked to talk about my marriage, and I say, "If I talk about my relationship, I have to talk about things that belong to my partner, which he may not want me to share." When my children come to live events, they have no interest in listening to me talk about my intimate life with their father.

My professional life is about helping other people think about their lives, not about imitating mine. I have a lot of aspects of my life that I share with the public, like the fact that I'm the daughter of two sole survivors of Nazi concentration camps, which I guess puts me in close proximity with Eros and Thanatos. But what I do in my bedroom is something that belongs to my husband and me. 

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a lot like the fusion of shame and grandiosity, a perpetual sense of angry victimhood—in a word, patriarchy. In a new work, Kimmel looks at four organizations that help deprogram men who leave hate groups like white supremacists and jihadists. What he found implicit in all these hate groups was traditional masculinity: the more rigid the vision of the masculine, and the more fervently the man held onto such rigid beliefs, the more vulnerable he was to extremist politics and violence. Countering this vision of masculinity was key to the deprogramming.

With this as our cultural context, what we therapists are being called upon to do is what the WHO has already done—explicitly declare traditional masculinity a health hazard, not just to men, but to the families who live with them. We should continue to develop techniques for openly challenging toxic patriarchal notions like the one that says harsh inner critics are good for us, or the one that says vulnerability is a sign of weakness. We need to invite each gender to reclaim and explore its wholeness, as sexy, smart, competent women, as well as bighearted, strong, vulnerable men. We must check our own biases so as not to sell men short as intrinsically less emotional, for example, or to sell women short by not explicitly helping them find a voice in their relationships that's simultaneously assertive and cherishing.

In these troubled times, what do we clinicians stand for if not the plumb line of intimacy? But we must remember that intimacy itself is a relatively new, and contentious, demand. Marriage wasn't historically built for intimacy in today's terms, but for stability and production. Under patriarchy, emotional intimacy itself is coded as "feminine," as is therapy, for that matter. The intrinsic values of therapy—communication, understanding, empathy,

self-compassion, the importance of emotion—these are all downplayed as "feminine" concerns in the traditional masculine playbook.

I want us therapists to put these concerns on the table, and stand up and be counted as agents for the historically new idea of lasting, long-term intimacy, and with it the increased health and happiness that study after study has shown it leads to. I want us to be more explicit—both in public discourse and in the privacy of our offices—in articulating the painful psychological costs of the old, patriarchal world order, which is asserting itself again in our lives. Democratic relationships simply work better than hierarchical ones in marriages, and both sexes are better off liberated from the dance of contempt. It's healing for all our clients to move beyond the core collusion and speak truth to power. It's healing for us therapists to do the same in the presence of those who want our guidance.

We're the people who are being turned to for help when the old ways no longer work. We can merely patch things up, or we can aim our sights on transformation and offer an entirely new vision. The path toward sustained intimacy can't be found in the resurgence of a patriarchal past. It's part of our job and responsibility to point our clients toward the future. If we therapists are to be true agents of healing, we must first be true agents of change. 

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