

Can This Marriage Be Saved?

The New York Times

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Published: August 12, 2007

“You ask me for intimacy,” Marie was telling her husband of 22 years, Clem — and, unavoidably, the therapist and four other couples in the room — “the same way you ask if I’d like croutons on my salad.” She spoke slowly, deliberately, each word chipping out of her mouth like an ax striking wood. “I don’t hear the difference.”

[Skip to next paragraph](#)



Nicholas Nixon



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Dr. Judith Coché, a therapist who leads group sessions for distressed couples. The photographs that accompany this article are of the couples it describes and were taken in Coché’s Philadelphia office.



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“I guess — ” Clem began.

“I don’t hear the difference in the question.” More sharp chips; Marie would not be denied. Seated next to her husband, she had turned to confront him, though, as usual, she was holding a large pillow in her lap — between her and him, between her and the rest of the group. Light dappled the walls of the Jersey Shore office, reflected sun off the bay three stories below.

“I guess I’ve tried different ways, and nothing seems to . . . to . . .,” said Clem, who stutters when he’s challenged, or trying to plead his case. He is the personification of mild: fit and trim, with cornflower blue eyes. “It doesn’t seem like you hear me no matter how I say it.” Later, he’ll say, even more plaintively: “It sounds like you want me to initiate sex, but it’s just hard to because the answer is always no, or ‘O.K.’ and that just doesn’t turn me on. It really takes all the wind out of my sails to know that you’re only saying yes to appease me.”

This was the fourth session of a yearlong couples-therapy group led by a Philadelphia psychologist named Judith Coché, and it had already been established that among Clem's major reasons for being here was the sexlessness of his marriage (once a month at best, though the couple would disagree about the frequency in a perversely predictable way: Clem, who missed it most, believed he'd had it the least, and vice versa). Resentment and anger, meanwhile, seeped from his wife, the mother of their two teenage daughters, which sounds like the oldest story of marital disenchantment in the book — and, to some extent, it is. But what I discovered sitting in on this couples group for a year is that every family is unhappy in its own way — its own peculiar, layered, internally contradictory, often surprising way.

Who would submit to a couples group? On the surface, a rather unprepossessing group of five men and five women, all of them intelligent, ranging in age from their mid-30s to early 60s, several with high-powered or high-status jobs, the rest working in retail and white-collar middle management. A few had been in some kind of therapy for years, but others were fairly new to the enterprise. Only one couple, Marie and Clem, began in obviously dire straits; another pair, often as not, were savoring the improvements they'd already seen in their marriage. This was their second year in the group, as it was for Marie and Clem; while the couples "contract" to attend a year's worth of sessions, they may sign up again at the end of that time. (I was allowed to attend the group, which started in May 2006 and met for six hours one day a month and for a weekend twice during the year, provided that I used only the middle names or nicknames of anyone I wrote about.)

Coché's groups are made up of clients from her conventional individual- and couples-therapy practice as well as referrals from colleagues. Groups are particularly helpful, she told me, for people who are rigid or keenly defensive, since the clamor of different voices is harder to dismiss than a single, ever-so-reasonable therapist. Couples in which one spouse can barely speak up for him- or herself are also prime candidates, she said: the meeker half will find a "subgroup" within the larger group to take his or her part. She excludes people who are severely mentally ill, are of limited intelligence or have some impediment to showing up every month. For those who are willing (and can afford the \$4,000-\$6,000 sliding fee), Coché maintains that being in a group is the swiftest, most potent way to affect marital "transformation." And the potential for change is, of course, why I wanted to spend a year with a group. How does marriage work to tear people down — leaving them feeling bitter or diminished, dulled or lost — and if that process can be interrupted, if a therapist and a group of other couples can lift spouses out of the muck of their own making, what does it look like?

Like the vast majority of therapists in the United States, Coché describes her therapeutic orientation as "eclectic." What's most prominent in her approach, however, is the influence of existentialist philosophy, a theoretical framework that assumes people are, above all, driven to find meaning in their lives. She also thinks "systemically," such that, among other things, she's attuned to how couples collude to create their own misery, often to insist upon it — because of some unseen comfort the ostensible misery provides. As the late psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell observed in "Can Love Last? The Fate of

Romance Over Time,” his 2002 book: “When patients complain of dead and lifeless marriages, it is often possible to show them how precious the deadness is to them.”

Coché, who has been running couples groups since the late 1980s in Philadelphia and Stone Harbor, N.J., where she has a second home, is a tall 64-year-old brunette with auburn highlights, a raspy laugh and a taste in clothes that is a cross between urban elegance and '70s earth mother. When Coché conducts the group — and “conducts” is her metaphor; she and her husband have season tickets to the [Philadelphia Orchestra](#), and she says they always sit at the back of the stage behind the players, so she can watch the maestro work — she is commanding, almost showily confident. “Creating a sense of performance, it’s really inspiring to people,” she says. “It gives them something to hold on to when everything is falling apart.” She displays so little vulnerability in the group, in fact, that traces of it are oddly riveting — like when she folds her 5-foot-10-inch frame into one of the modern leather chairs in her Philadelphia office and her awkward-adolescent self pops into view: one long leg splayed here, another there, her arms hanging loosey-goosey over the sides, fingertips grazing the floor. Or when she injured her hand in a boating accident and came to the group with a large white bandage wrapped around her authoritative index finger, chips in her wine-colored nail polish.

Her own life was badly shaken 16 years ago, when her first husband, Erich Coché, a Dutch-born psychologist who had a national reputation for research in group therapy for the mentally ill, died at the age of 49, less than a year after a melanoma was diagnosed. Judith was besotted with him, she told me one day, from the moment they met. “Will you have a hamburger?” he asked, accosting her on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, where they were both attending a professional conference more than 40 years ago. (A colleague had told him this was the best way to ask an American girl out on a date.) Only 23 years old, Judith was drawn to his European cosmopolitanism, his intellect, how different he was from anyone else she knew. “On our second date, we went to the zoo, and then we spent the next year talking about how it was impossible to get married,” she said. “How could a Main Line only child of Jewish parents, some of whose family had been killed in the Holocaust, marry a Dutch-German?”

Their careers were intertwined from the start — she had her first published article, about a girl she treated in a children’s therapy group in Philadelphia who chronically soiled herself, translated into German, which Coché likes to say she learned “to talk to her mother-in-law.” She and Erich wrote an academic book together about couples groups and led the group together until the very end of his life, when the [cancer](#) left him weak and muddled. He’s still a touchstone in her professional life — “according to Erich Coché . . .,” she’ll say to the group — but she remarried in 1994, to a C.E.O. in scientific publishing who is now retired. She and Erich had one child, a daughter, Juliette, a wife and mother herself who has recently joined the family business. She is scheduled to lead the 2007-2008 couples group with her mother, in addition to serving as a chief resident in psychiatry at the [University of Pennsylvania](#).

Professional-led groups for people with discrete emotional or physical conditions — Coché has run them for overweight adults and learning-disabled adolescents — have

become ubiquitous in the last three decades. More recently, couples education, especially the premarital sort, has taken off inside and outside of religious groups, spurred in part by federal financing from the Bush administration. But the type of ongoing experiential group Coché runs, which is heavily dependent on mining the interactions among the members in the so-called here and now (“Sitting here for six hours you just know what it’s like to be married to him,” Coché muttered to me once, out of earshot of the offending spouse), aren’t terribly common.

When Coché lists the virtues of the group over other forms of therapy, she cites the “Greek chorus” effect, a term that captures how members begin to harass one another, if politely, about the habits corroding their marriages. “In a group, there’s an experience of being held accountable for one’s own behavior,” Coché told me, adding that it’s more powerful to be called out — or cared for — by a civilian than by a professional. “I’m a paid consultant. I’m a nonperson.” Other benefits she cites are the often-silent products of group dynamics. No matter how ultimately prosaic their woes, members are startled to see reflections of themselves in the other marriages — My God, I do that, too — and if one person musters the strength or resolve to make a change, somebody else may consciously or unconsciously follow. The principle of isomorphism also comes into play, she said, meaning that as people forge intimate connections within the group, the enriching encounter in that system may spread to the other system: the marriage.

Finally, Coché extols the “community” in which the group envelops couples. As panoramically documented by historians like Stephanie Coontz, marriage used to exist in a web of extended-family obligations. For the upper classes, its purpose was to magnify wealth and power; for the lower, to choose a spouse who could contribute sweat or material goods to the small business that was each household. Gradually, with industrialization and the movement of jobs outside the home, love replaced communal economic imperatives as the glue between husbands and wives, striking two blows to the institution. First, romantic love isn’t known for its long-lasting adhesive properties; and second, no one is as deeply invested in a marriage as the two people in it.

The group is something of an answer to the latter problem, Coché says — the modern equivalent perhaps of the village that Michael Vincent Miller, a psychologist, depicts when lamenting the isolation of modern couples in his 1995 book, “Intimate Terrorism.” What would it be like, he writes, “if as in the Puritan villages of old, representatives from the larger community were to step in, calm the two down, stress the larger social importance of their well-being and offer support and help by redirecting the couple’s energies away from mutilating each other toward something more cooperative.”

In addition to Marie and Clem and the couple whose revived marriage was either inspiration or reproach (depending on how you looked at it), the villagers circa 2007 included another husband and wife who were group veterans and two couples who were participating for the first time. The two new couples were both in their mid- to late 30s, and each had been married about a year: one pair was there because they’d each been divorced before and feared replicating the ugliness that doomed their first marriages; the other began the group insisting that everything was copacetic between them but would

eventually find that their relationship had dismaying parallels to Marie and Clem's. "If in 20 years my husband feels like" Clem does, the young wife moaned to me, referring to how controlling and demanding her own husband perceived her to be, "that would be horrible for me. If that's where we're headed. . . ."

Perhaps because of what they shared, the young wife was the first member of the group to plainly criticize what she saw happening between Marie and Clem, although not until midway through the year. "As a person who's known you for six months," she told them wearily, and a little tearily, "it's brutal listening to you." She was intervening in another of Marie and Clem's repetitive dialogues about sex, explaining to the couple that the tension between them reminded her of her childhood. "My parents are still married, so it's not that it can't work out —"

"Remarried," Coché corrected. The young wife had seen Coché when her parents were divorcing; a decade later, she contacted Coché again, this time about her own marriage.

"Remarried," the young wife parroted, "but now my parents are, like, actually happy and able to talk things out and joke about their differences. But it's hard."

An extremely self-assured [Ivy League](#) M.B.A., she was what Marie might have been had Marie been well loved as a girl, her precociousness encouraged and nurtured. Marie grew up as the bookish only daughter in a household of small-town men: two older brothers and a father who, according to her and Clem, can be best described as bullies — physically intimidating, crude and derisive of the opposite sex. She graduated with honors from a small college (which was where she met Clem, who dropped out during his sophomore year) and went on to excel in her career as a medical administrator. But the job didn't offer the wide vistas, the intellectual challenges, that Marie relished, not to mention that her exacting standards didn't always make her popular at work. She tried to compensate with her own voracious reading — she liked nothing better than to hole up in her bedroom with her Civil War magazines and volumes of philosophy and history — but Marie had grown increasingly disgruntled and unfulfilled professionally, as well as in her marriage. Clem loved to boat and fish and body-surf but wasn't much into books or ideas.

Marie told me she felt a glimmer of a kinship with the young wife — they were both the uncontested captains of their marital ships, though Marie was far more brittle — and now in the sixth session the young wife was imploring Marie to recognize that the love between her and Clem was more important than the laying out of their respective "positions."

The young wife's choice of words was deliberate; she was jabbing at how Marie talked as much like a State Department bureaucrat as a wife, how she repeatedly invoked transparent "negotiation" as the cure for what ailed her marriage. Marie clung to this frequently cramped and cold way of expressing herself, it seemed, because her major complaint about Clem was that he obdurately stuck to pleasantries, leaving her wrapped in a lonely gauze, at best, and at worst bewildered by his sudden claims of injury at some

crime she hadn't known she'd perpetrated. Her fervent desire was for Clem to tell her exactly where he stood.

So as the couple again hashed out their differences about sexual frequency, it seemed less about the substance of the matter for Marie — less about a wish that her husband seduce her rather than offer croutons — and more like a set-piece for her to demonstrate to him that he never talked straight to her. “Some of it is getting to the point where we can compromise,” Marie told Clem and the group. “If he'd say something like, ‘Right now I'm lonely and need your company,’ it would give me the opportunity to put everything down and go with you, to show you how much you mean to me.”

“Why do you need to hear him sound like he genuinely wants and desires you?” Coché asked, trying to nudge things away from the realm of negotiation and instead get the couple to acknowledge that neither was adept at expressing tenderness.

“It lets me know his position, first of all,” Marie said — so much for Coché's nudging. “And it's a reminder to me that this may not be the natural way for me to go, but because it's Clem asking, I need to go that way.”

“Could it be because you love him?” Coché pressed.

“Yes, and, um . . . ,” mumbled Marie, for once at a loss for words.

“It's important to say that part,” Coché said.

“O.K., because I would love you,” Marie said, and then quickly, as if wanting to correct her cringe-worthy use of the conditional before Coché could, “because I do love you.”

At moments like these, the love between Marie and Clem seemed aspirational rather than actual. Coché's questioning underlined that, but it was the couple who'd both been married before who pushed the matter to what seemed like its logical conclusion. “I guess it just kind of brings back memories of my first marriage,” the wife said to Marie and Clem in her soft, melodic voice. “And the key thing on my mind is: Do either of you really see a big future?”

Clem's eyes flitted around the room, while Marie kept her gaze glued to her lap. Her long ponytail, which she wore on the side in a rubber band, blended in with the furry pillow she was stroking, so that her hair almost seemed to grow out of it.

The previously divorced husband broke the silence. He'd been having flashbacks of his first marriage, too, of having to “beg to go to the bedroom,” of his ex not saying hello to him if she was busy when he arrived home from work. “I agree. Should you two just say, ‘You know what, we should move on’?”

Coché had mentioned to me that near the end of last year's group Clem told Marie he wanted a divorce. When I asked her why he changed his mind, she replied, chuckling

fondly, Marie “told him she didn’t want to get divorced, so he said O.K.” That perfectly captured the dynamic between them in the group, but when Coché reminded Clem of his divorce threat and asked him to explain why he backed off, I was still taken aback at how baldly he stated it: Marie “was upset, and she wanted to stay together, and I guess I thought, If she wants to stay together, I’ll, I’ll uh, I’ll give it go.”

What every married person who has considered couples therapy wants to know is whether it works. But while there is a fair amount of research on the question, it isn’t particularly illuminating. Two years after ending therapy, studies suggest, about 70 percent of couples report being more satisfied with their marriages, citing lowered levels of conflict, for example, and better communication skills. Less encouraging, however, is the finding that the reforms don’t often catapult couples into the realm of the happily married, according to Jay Lebow, a psychologist at the Family Institute at [Northwestern University](#) who specializes in interpreting studies in the field.

What studies — pioneered by John Gottman, a psychologist and emeritus professor at the [University of Washington](#) — have rather convincingly shown are the marital patterns likely to result in divorce. In his famous “love lab,” the Family Research Laboratory, Gottman observed more than 3,000 couples during three decades of research, analyzing their discourse, including arguments, and recording their physiological responses. What he concluded is that it wasn’t whether people fought — 69 percent of his subjects never resolved their conflicts — but how they fought. The relatively happy couples did not escalate disagreements; they broke tension with jokes and distraction and made “repairs” after arguments. When wives raised issues gently, for example, neither partner’s heart rate exceeded 95 beats per minute and the ratio of positive to negative comments during a fight was an amazing five to one.

But how do couples become what Gottman calls “masters of marriage,” the most contentedly married couples? He and his colleagues are collecting data on a type of marriage counseling they designed based on the insights from the love lab, but the consensus of the research to date is that no single therapeutic model — for individuals or couples — outshines any other. Investigators have repeatedly tried to single out specific “therapeutic factors” that can distinguish good therapy from bad, and the only unequivocal winner is what’s termed a “positive therapeutic alliance,” meaning the client feels that the therapist exhibits qualities like empathy and support.

Jay Efran, a psychologist and emeritus professor at [Temple University](#) who surveyed the last 25 years’ worth of trends in therapy in an ambitious recent article in *Psychotherapy Networker*, has another idea about what makes for an estimable therapist. He suggests that therapy boils down to a facility for conversation and therefore is a creative and contingent act that does not lend itself to formulas. “The profession has gotten itself into a bind,” he told me recently, “because it wants to be seen as a science and it wants to collect money, and it has made this category mistake of thinking it provides treatments for diseases and not just conversation or community or human contact or offering new slants on life.”

Efran's notion is an appealing way to conceive of Coché's talent. Because while she has read and trained extensively in several schools of therapy, she was at her least inspiring when expounding for the group on big-picture theories of "coupling." She thrived in the moment — interceding in or interpreting the to and fro between a husband and wife, or pulling out unexpected common threads in the stories the couples were telling, giving the assemblage a whiff of fresh perspective.

Coché has a provocateur's bent, a spiritedness that is missing from what Efran calls the "lovey-dovey pablum" that usually characterizes the positive therapeutic alliance. And she knows this about herself: she once took a picture from her shelf that shows her grinning beneath a mass of black curls, her daughter's white Balinese cat draped across her shoulders: "I keep this here because this is what the job is like to me. I look a little mischievous, like I'm having fun." One of her basic tasks, she told me, is "titrating anxiety," challenging people enough so that they'll feel the pressure to change but not so much as to send them spinning off in alarm or confusion. As she put it another time: "Causing the right amount of trouble is an art form."

For the afternoon of the first weekend-long session last October, Coché invited a Pilates instructor to take the couples to her nearby studio and teach them some movement exercises, on the theory that much of the communication between couples is nonverbal. That this would be arduous for Marie was not lost on Coché. "She shrinks from physicality, so we prescribe it," she said, "and help her with her reaction when it occurs."

It occurred. About 45 minutes into the class, Marie fled. She could be heard blowing her nose outside the room — before leaving the premises entirely, not to return for the rest of the day. When she left, Coché hurried out after her to try to help, but Marie rebuffed her.

Back in Coché's office afterward, a jittery Clem told the group that Marie was infuriated because he'd broken a "no teasing" edict she'd laid down before they began. He did "the bump" with her during an exercise in which the couples were asked to lean into each other in various configurations.

That instigated a chorus of criticism — what's the big deal, what's wrong with her — until Coché stopped it: "Now, before we get into whose fault it is, it's totally unimportant. If these people want to be married to other people, then they can decide whose fault it was."

It echoed something she said to Marie and Clem in a previous session, when he objected during a discussion of their sex life that it didn't seem "normal or natural" to ask his wife to sleep with him in the way that Marie wanted him to. "It's not a question of normal or natural," Coché said. "It's a question of healing and repairing a degree of damage that is so deep and so long-term that there's going to be a process of building that is going to feel very awkward." The damage to which she referred was both the years of alienation between them and the impact of Marie's girlhood. (Marie was careful to say that while her father may have punched her on the arm to show affection, or smothered her in hugs

until she cried and begged to be let go, no one in her family sexually abused her; she knew her sensitivity to touch aroused that suspicion.)

The next day, Marie arrived looking glassy-eyed and grim and announced, “I just sort of wanna get through the day.” Before the group began, while people were filtering in and picking at the breakfast of bagels and coffee Coché had laid out, the therapist took Marie aside to ask how she was doing. “I’m fine,” Marie said. Now she sat on the couch, eyes closed, holding her head in one hand, petting Coché’s Portuguese water dog with the other. Just before lunch Coché asked if there was any way the group could help. Barely looking up, Marie said that the only reason she’d returned was because of the “contract,” prompting Coché to ask why she told her she was “fine” before the group started.

“Because I wanted you to drop the situation immediately,” Marie said.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to discuss it.”

“Are you angry with me? Did I push too hard yesterday?”

“When I say I’m fine, that means just drop the subject,” Marie spat.

“Could you do me a favor,” Coché said, as calm and collected as if she were asking Marie for the time, “and instead of saying you’re fine, could you say, ‘I need to be by myself’?” Coché wanted Marie to see that when she was angry — at her husband or anybody else — she’d be better off stating it rather than withdrawing behind a froth of fake assurances.

“Um, no,” Marie said. “I find that when I say that the response is the exact opposite.”

“I see,” Coché said evenly. “So the only way you can get me off your back is to say you’re fine when you’re not.”

“I’ve found that’s the only thing that works with you, and with many other people,” Marie said, seemingly referring to the ghosts of her father and brothers that Coché believed were lurking in the room.

After lunch, Marie was again Topic A, prompted by one of the veteran husbands, who was the closest thing the group had to a traditional paternal figure. Earlier in the year, when Coché instructed each member to choose a few people to act out a childhood scene between his or her parents, everyone kept picking this man to play the volcanic father, until he had to stop. He was visibly shaken by having to thunder at one cowering child after another; while he and his wife had turned the corner in their marriage, they’d initially come to Coché because of the increasingly volatile arguments he was having with his middle son.

“Maybe you can help me with this,” he said now to Coché, “because I’m not feeling good about” Marie. He couldn’t explain his reaction to her behavior much beyond that, which was typical for him, and Coché intervened. This wasn’t just about Marie, she said. This was an opportunity for people to consider how they cope in their own lives with silent, smoldering presences who swat them back by insisting everything is “fine.”

The group had plenty to say, though nobody directly condemned Marie, despite palpable frustration at how she kept repeating “fine means fine.” The young wife who feared her husband might turn into Clem went so far as to thank her — and sounded as if she meant it — for helping her to realize how pained she was when she recently called home and her father picked up the phone and passed it wordlessly to her mother. (“He loves you even if he doesn’t always show it,” her mother stammered.) Her father had always retreated into silence when he didn’t know how to solve her problems, she said, and while she didn’t know exactly why he was upset this time, she thought that perhaps it was because, as she’d previously informed the group, she’d had a miscarriage and her father wanted her to wait longer before trying to become pregnant again.

As the colloquy ground on, Marie’s eyes just got narrower, her protestations more verbose, until Coché offered that maybe, just maybe, Marie was “transferring” onto the group members, transforming them into siblings, such that she could never be persuaded that the people surrounding her here 30 years later weren’t merely attacking her.

“O.K.,” Marie said, simply. It was as if she’d awakened from a nasty fugue. In the next group, she was practically cheerful — was it because she and Clem had had a good month, as they both said, or because Marie’s considerable pride had been wounded by the Pilates debacle and she wanted the group to know that she was still a force to be reckoned with — that she wasn’t going to stay in the role of traumatized victim? The respite was brief, however. Veiled belligerence toward Coché and indifference toward her fellow group members — many of whose names she told me near the end of the group she could barely recall — would continue to emanate from Marie. And every so often she’d say something that overtly betrayed her attitude, like when Coché asked whether she’d help the young wife with a difficulty the two had in common. Marie paused for what seemed like forever, before saying: If by help you mean letting her listen “as I explore this issue,” fine, I’ll help — but don’t expect anything more from me.

Still, Coché believed that the group had Marie to thank for amping up the level of intensity and frankness in the room. The group was a little low on the “affect side,” she told me, meaning for quite a while people seemed stuck in the superficial “joining stage,” unwilling to feel, never mind express, much emotion. Marie got their “juices flowing,” as one of the men put it, if only because she stoked their ire. For instance, during the Pilates weekend that I came to regard as “Marie’s Insurrection: Part I,” the young wife and her husband had their first honest, heartfelt exchange about how divisive and frightening it had been to suffer a miscarriage. Until that point, the woman had alluded to the loss only in abstracted psychobabble: “I’ve been trying to honor the missing.” Or: “I feel very healthy about not worrying about not being sad.”

As locked in her ways as Marie could seem in the group, she and Clem reported an upswing in their marriage during the second half of the year. Several times, Clem said he was realizing that he'd contributed to their knot of unhappiness by repressing his own anger and dissatisfaction and was trying to be more vocal and assertive. The group noted that his posture seemed better; he'd stopped slumping on the couch like a teenager being scolded by his mother. Marie, who went for years believing she didn't have "the right" to expect anything from a man other than what he decided to bestow, was asking for what she wanted from Clem and doing so more considerately, they both agreed. Her so-called submission didn't work, anyway, she acknowledged, because her fury just festered (and was hardly hidden). The couple were having sex a little more, Clem said, and once he went so far as to say he felt "lucky" to be married to Marie.

But the progress was fitful, and the group observed how defeating it would feel to live with someone whose main weapon was to become more passive, more (spitefully) a good guy. Clem and Marie got into a protracted debate about why he had "disregarded" her and taken a basket of clothes to the basement, when the previous night she unambiguously stated that she wanted to do the laundry herself. For at least an hour, the group batted around how Marie could have made the request more gracefully — with Clem chiming in to say he was just trying to help out.

Finally, rather suddenly, Clem conceded that in this instance Marie had made her preference known civilly, that she had thanked him for taking sole responsibility for the job while she was taking a class related to her work. He'd picked up the basket to "poke back" at her, because he felt demeaned by her disdain toward his laundering methods. Moreover, he knew he was taking the same put-upon, saintly role as his father, who was constantly hectored by his mother, and then a little later, he blurted: "I think some of it might even stem from a week ago when you said I didn't work that hard in the group, and . . . and that really insulted me." Which he hadn't told her at the time.

Marie concurred that her comment sounded insulting, in retrospect, but she was despairing over how to get her point across, how to be heard by Clem. Eventually she started to sob, which she'd never done.

"I can't make things clear enough," she cried.

"And gentle enough," Coché added. She — and everyone else in the group — regularly pointed out to Marie how harsh she sounded.

"And, yeah, if I make it more gentle, I'll dilute it even more."

"For those of you who are passive," Coché said, shifting from Clem's point of view to Marie's, "who control by withdrawing, this is what it feels like to your partner. This is why they try to boss you around, because they don't know what else to do."

Coché later explained to me the dance she was doing with Marie and Clem. On the one hand, she was teaching them the steps that are these days associated with the ur-couples

researcher John Gottman: behavioral fixes, like advising Marie to speak more kindly to Clem or suggesting that he ask her to go for walks on the beach. If relatively happy spouses say and do a lot of nice things for each other (creating the “positive sentiment override” that allows them in fraught moments to avoid demonizing the other and instead give the benefit of the doubt), Gottman’s thinking goes, then coach the unhappy ones to do the same.

This may sound obvious, but anyone who has been married for a long time knows that gestures of affection and regard don’t come easily in the domestic fray. Yet when one spouse manages to rise to the occasion, the good will that ensues usually seems of a much greater magnitude than the puny act of kindness that precipitated it. As no less a twisty and penetrating thinker than Adam Phillips, a London psychoanalyst, muses in his 1996 book, “Monogamy”: “What if our strongest wish was to be praised . . . not to be loved or understood or desired? . . . What would our relationships be like? . . . We might find ourselves saying things like: The cruelest thing one can do to one’s partner is to be good at fidelity but bad at celebration. . . . Or it’s not difficult to sustain a relationship but it’s impossible to keep a celebration going. The long applause becomes baffling.”

Coché seems to instinctively grasp the value of wild clapping for one’s spouse. The group could overhear her on the phone calling her husband “my hero” for helping to fix the office plumbing; she bragged about his various accomplishments to me, which could be construed as a bid for reflected glory but was also a way to keep the celebration going. Nonetheless, Coché said, if a couple piles up enough grudges, then building “a culture of appreciation,” as Gottman calls it, can only be one part of the therapist’s repertory.

As time ticked down on the yearlong contract, it sometimes seemed as if the group had been reduced to a battle of wits between Coché and Marie. Which is not to say that the other couples weren’t benefiting. During the Talmudic laundry inquiry, for instance, the young wife’s husband smacked his forehead with his palm. “Oh, for the love of God, I’m doing it too!” he exclaimed, wondering at how intently but unknowingly he’d put his own wife in charge. Like Clem following in the footsteps of his beleaguered father, this husband was recreating his parents’ marriage, he said: his mother constantly ordered his father around, and his father was “one of the most immature, irresponsible people on the planet.”

In the ninth session, anticipating the end of the year, Coché asked everyone to consider whether they planned to continue on in the group, which would culminate in her asking the couples to make recommendations to one another. Before they got that far, however, Marie volunteered that it was over for her. “Not that you aren’t all lovely,” she said, a thin smile on her lips. The group was too slow for her, and she needed to “pursue other avenues,” she said — seemingly individual therapy, though she wasn’t spelling anything out.

Clem, meanwhile, wanted to enlist for a third round; he thought they were doing better. Coché kicked up her Greek chorus, and the group asked Marie in a dozen ways to reconsider: Maybe she was resisting Clem’s new forcefulness? (No.) Maybe the couple

was “splitting the ambivalence” — given that the year before, it was Clem who wanted to leave the group and the marriage and Marie who wanted to press on? (Absolutely not.) Maybe her discomfort with what she called the “fluffy, ‘Kumbaya’ ” aspects of the group reflected her discomfort with expressing warmth in her marriage? (No, no, no.) “Don’t you think I’ve considered and reconsidered all these possibilities?” she asked, incensed.

The two young couples had decided to come back for another year — two of the veteran couples were “graduating” — but Marie wasn’t committing to anything. It was “Marie’s Insurrection, Part II,” and she’d never seemed more bitter.

In “Intimate Terrorism,” Michael Vincent Miller theorizes that marriage, like childhood, has developmental stages, the most dangerous of which, following the heady romantic period, can be summed up as: This person, or this union, isn’t at all what I imagined. What can easily happen at this point, he writes, is that because modern marriage is “under so much pressure to provide so many levels of fulfillment,” because “love and sex are so thoroughly . . . bound up with one’s sense of identity as a man, as a woman,” people become consumed with feelings of failure, feelings that are so unbearable that spouses lash out at their partners rather than apprehend their own panic or contribution to the decline.

The core problem, he goes on, is that our culture doesn’t teach us “to fail gracefully or fruitfully.” Instead, “our notion of the comeback is an attempt to recapture original glory.” The husbands and wives who can move beyond terrorizing each other, or avoid doing so in the first place, he speculates, are those who can first acutely experience their profound disappointment in their inevitably changed circumstances: “Unlike jealousy, cruelty, or boredom, disappointment contains secret hints of mutuality. . . . It is not such a long stretch from disappointment to empathy.”

Disappointment — a sort of rueful recognition of the limits of her marriage and compassion toward the people she and Clem once were — was what Marie, almost incredibly, brought to the last two groups (the first by herself, since Clem could not reschedule an out-of-town work trip). Instantly, it was apparent something was different. She was wearing light makeup and was holding peoples’ gazes long enough that you could see she had sparkling hazel eyes.

When it was her turn to say what she wanted to address, she said she’d been reading a spectacular book about the Holocaust and recognized that it wasn’t something Clem could relate to. “Clem was one of the first men that I didn’t feel humiliated by, so he really met a need,” Marie said, and you could see the Clem she was conjuring, the sweet Clem tending to the bruised Marie, the Clem who noticeably shored up the other women in the group. (“When I look over I see a bright, young, attractive woman, and you’re gonna do fine,” he told one of them.)

Marie went on: “I felt comfortable with Clem and not judged and found wanting in all aspects. And had I not changed, Clem would have kept meeting that need.” But Marie wasn’t the same damaged creature anymore, she said. “And I desperately want to figure it

out so that it feels authentic, at some point in my life, with Clem; but if the feelings aren't there, I need to figure out how to create them," or even if she could.

Another of Coché's techniques is what she calls "seeding." She floats an idea and then backs away, lets it sit if people aren't ready to assimilate it. She'd done that a few sessions before when she remarked on what everyone had noticed, which was that one of the veteran couples seemed to "share a great love," notwithstanding 27 years of marriage and some serious unrest. But what if you don't have that? Coché asked. Or never had it? Coché bowed her head, her lips pressed together. Can you generate some of the "tsunami quality," or is that not really attainable or even necessary? "There has to be a way to acknowledge what is and work with what is," she concluded, saying she didn't want to take it much further. "There are many, many models of marriage that are viable."

Now, it seemed, the seed had taken root for Marie, and the group heaped praise on her for the change. "I've never heard you speak this fully or with this much caring in your voice," one of the husbands marveled. Coché added: "What I'm appreciative of is that you sound philosophical and thoughtful," which, the therapist said, made it much easier for the group to help Marie get wherever it was she wanted to go. Because in essence, Marie was casting about for what her second marriage to the same man might look like: her remarriage to Clem, the metaphorical version of what the young wife said in an earlier session her parents had done.

Marie's new outlook lent a degree of hope to the proceedings, a bit of sun. What had inspired it? Coché often met individually with group members between sessions, and that month she and Marie got together for several hours. Moved by the therapist's explication of how alterations in one system can be imperceptibly absorbed by the other, Marie decided to give the group another year. If she could learn to relate to the other members more constructively, Marie told me, maybe she could bring that to her marriage and family in general — and ameliorate the legacy of "hostile dependency" that Coché said she'd imported from childhood.

The extent to which Marie had aggressively, if unintentionally, cast herself as the villain in the group and her marriage was evident in her reply to the compliment about her new demeanor: "Well, Clem comes off as such a great guy that I feel very defensive in the group, because if he's such a great guy and we're here, then there has to be a bad guy. I'm the bad guy."

Remember, Marie, Coché lightly chided, everything is not black and white: "It would be simpler if some of us had white hats and some of us had black hats, but in fact that's not the way we are." Marie nodded.

Also, all the time Marie had been coming to the couples group, she'd been grappling with her stale professional life, and her efforts had been rewarded; she'd recently been selected for a special international project. "People have different styles of changing," Coché told me. "Marie, she's a bit of a dramatist about it. She has a temper tantrum, fights it off, has a temper tantrum, fights it off. And then she slides through."

During the 11th session, the one in which Marie opened up, Coché remarked that couples often can “bond within wider ranges” than they believe possible. Perhaps, then, she said to Marie, Clem could become more of an intellectual partner for her than she assumed? “I don’t think it’s in him,” she said, “and in a way, if it were in him, I’d lose Clem.” This was touching, because Marie sounded as if she cherished what was in her husband, but it was also an example, perhaps, of her extreme, black-and-white thinking.

One of Marie’s troubles, the psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell might have said, is that she seemed hooked on safety. Marriage typically meets our sharply felt needs for security and predictability, he argues, but in those relationships that last well, people take the leap of believing that they actually don’t know exactly who the other person is or what he or she is capable of — the absolute knowingness is a fantasy, anyway — and that there is new terrain to be discovered. So, out of deference to Marie’s fascination with the Civil War, Clem was planning a summer trip to visit some battle sites with her. And maybe, if Marie would dare risk it, Clem could get caught up in the history of the era, too. And maybe, after watching her husband traverse the grassy fields of Antietam, she’d even want to sleep with him, if she could bear him being anything other than dependable old Clem. (Not incidentally, Clem was as enamored of stability as his wife. When I spoke to him outside of the group, he told me one moment of his yearning for Marie to “roll over and kiss” him in bed. The next, he said that she met perhaps his top requirement for a wife: She’d never “stray or look at other men or have an affair. Marie’s true to me, and that’s one of the things I wanted, and that’s what I got.”)

One late-spring evening before the final session, I met with Marie and Clem at their home. As we sat on their screened-in front porch watching the light drain out of the sky, I saw how right Stephen Mitchell was, how precious deadness could be. Marie was barefoot, wearing one of what I considered her “group dresses,” a smocked jean jumper with a short-sleeved yellow polo shirt underneath; Clem had on a polo shirt, too, one that matched his blue, blue eyes. They’d invited me to visit them at their lovely mint-green-shingled two-story home, which they’d bought as a falling-down wreck and worked to make livable through the succeeding 20 years, while raising two daughters and working full-time jobs (except for a demoralizing period when Clem had back problems and couldn’t find steady employment).

After all those years of sawing and scrimping, there was this sturdy house with shelves built by Clem, a vase of daisies on the kitchen table and white wicker furniture on the porch. There were the beautiful, smart girls, one of whom darted through the kitchen in shorts and headphones, headed out for a run. There was the garden that Clem showed me — “Marie’s pride and joy” — and the shiny used Mercedes that Marie said Clem had “always wanted” and recently managed to buy. There was the one thing that had always been good in their marriage, they said, as we sat there drinking Coors from frosty mugs, as the seagulls squawked and the dusk turned to darkness: No matter what, they could count on each other for advice and support when either was battered by the outside world.

Would anything truly and irrevocably change for the better between Marie and Clem? Maybe. They both still said that they wanted it, and Coché would later tell me she was

thrilled with the strides that they were continuing to make in the new group. But if nothing much changed, they'd still have this house, those girls, the way they cracked up at the same old family stories, her memory of how handsome he looked when she first laid eyes on him in a crowded lecture hall, his of the lingering kiss they shared on her 19th birthday, of the single rose he'd given her. They'd have this house, those girls and the memory of how they'd once been each other's best or only answer.

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