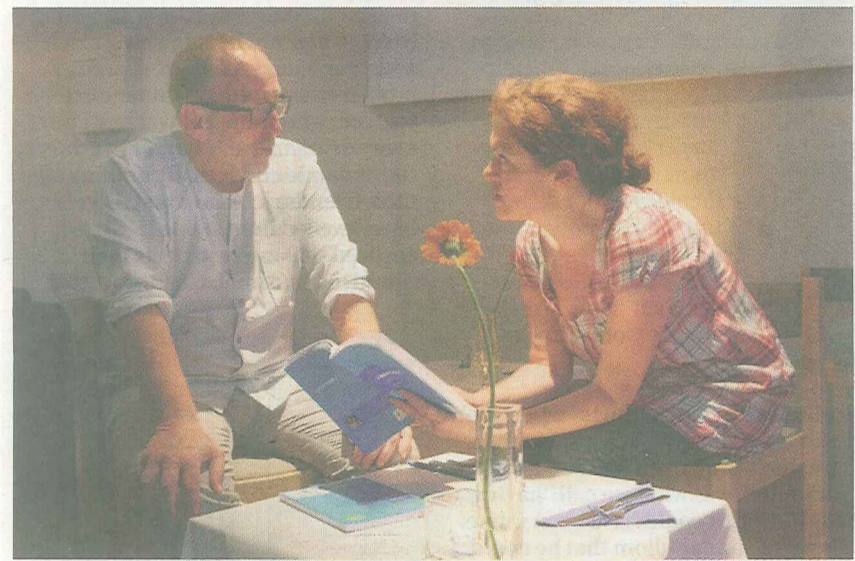


# Can you learn the secret of a happy marriage?

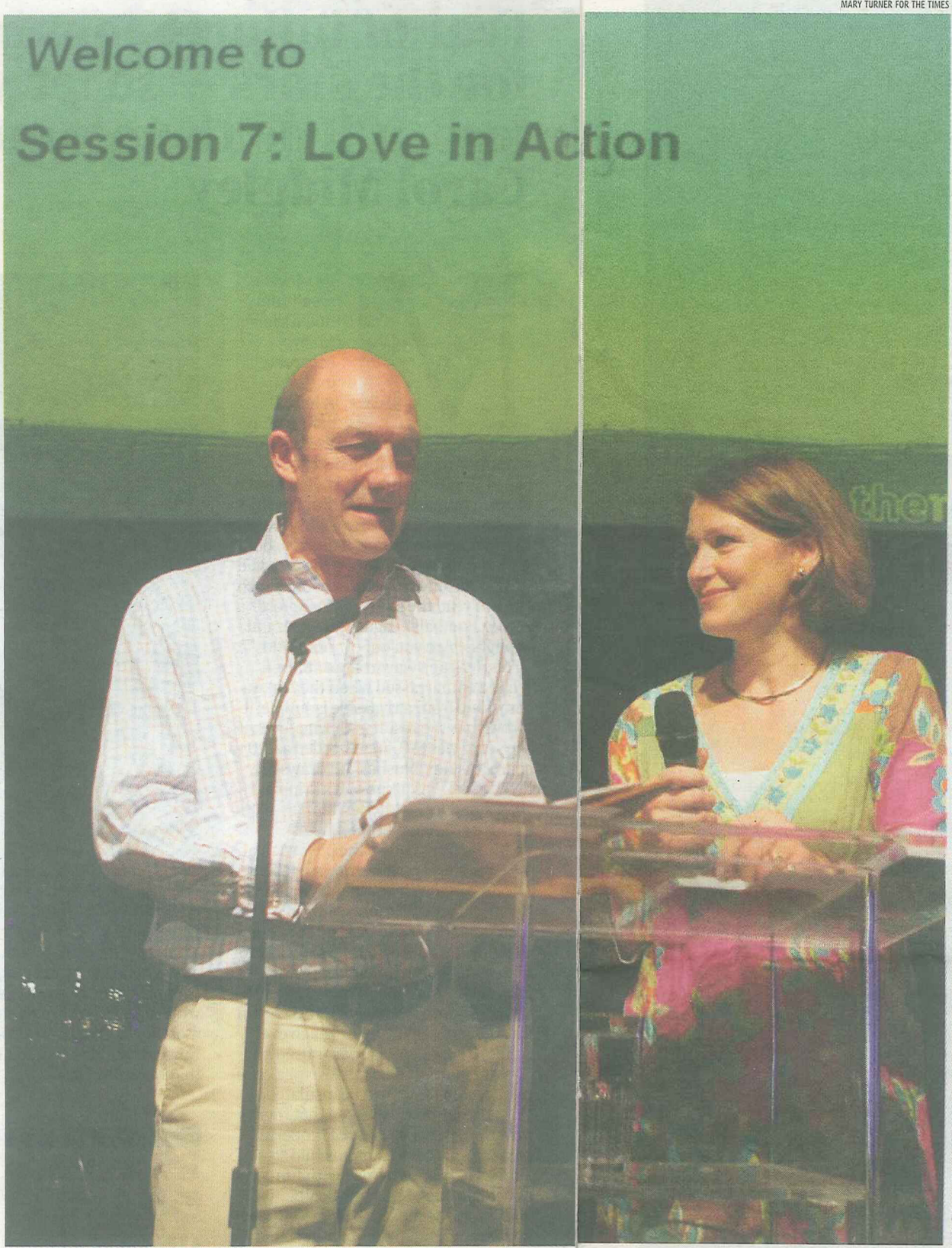
Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher are reportedly having marriage counselling while on a Kabbalah retreat. **Tim Lott** finds out what a religious course can do for his relationship



I think it is no exaggeration to say that when I got married — even for the second time — I had little idea what being married meant. I knew what living with someone meant, I knew what having children together meant, but the institution of matrimony did not strike any deep inner chords. It was a public statement of commitment, a piece of paper, a memorable day, but nothing more. Four years into my second marriage (my first ended in 2000 after seven years and two children) I decided it was time to do some fresh thinking about what I was agreeing to when I walked up that aisle. I had been with Rachael for more than ten years and we had fallen into some bad habits. We were in no doubt that we loved each other and our two daughters. But we had trouble listening to each other. We bickered over trivia. And too often failed to understand one another, the blinding force of our own point of view obscuring the plaintive glimmer of the other's. A neighbour told Rachael about a marriage course that was being held at

St Paul's Church, in Onslow Square, South Kensington. They spoke of it in glowing terms. It sounded promising. I had only one reservation — it was run by the Alpha course, the Church of England equivalent of the evangelical movement, and I am an atheist. I was assured that the G word constituted only a small part of the seven-week course and there would be a minimum of prayer and no singing or clapping whatsoever. It was not for people whose marriages were "in trouble", but — according to the website — for any couple who "want to invest in their relationship, whether you have been together one or 61 years and whether you have a strong relationship or are struggling". The focus was on the practical, not the spiritual. There are apparently 1,038 Marriage Courses now starting across the UK. But does marriage counselling work? We decided to take the plunge: the whole course was only £85, which struck me as an extraordinary bargain, even if we took away only one useful lesson. The first night at the church we were greeted by the conveners of the course, Nicky and Sila Lee, 57 and 56

respectively, a handsome couple who have been married for 35 years and have four children. Nicky is a Cambridge literature graduate, and Sila a former student of fine art. They founded the course 15 years ago after Nicky was ordained at St Paul's and they both worked together to advise couples who were about to marry there. The floor of the church was laid out with scores of small candlelit tables for two. The room was packed with couples, mostly in their twenties and thirties. The atmosphere was pleasant and welcoming. We were each given a manual to refer to. At 7pm a meal was served and each couple enjoyed a candlelit dinner together. Given that there were more than 100 people in attendance it felt surprisingly intimate — and the food was pretty good. At 7.30pm the first session began. Nicky and Sila took the stage with a large projection screen behind them and a podium in front. I prepared myself for a barrage of Christian pieties. But nothing of the sort was forthcoming. After a brief opening address, in which Nicky and Sila explained the purpose of the course — to "help couples grow closer through choosing commitment... spending time together... increasing understanding of one another and developing good habits" — we were shown video footage of couples from around the world who were quizzed about the importance of marriage. They all stared doe-like at each other as they spoke — a marriage practice I remain peculiarly alienated by — and talked about what they considered to be the important elements of staying together. Then we went into into our first exercise: "Taking Stock of Your Marriage". This was a series of statements that we had to mark in gradations from "never true" to "always true". These included "we are able to apologise and forgive when one of us has hurt the other" and "my partner listens to my point of view even if we disagree" and "I am happy about the frequency of our lovemaking". There were 17 other statements to discuss. This pattern — an address from the stage, a film clip, an exercise and a discussion — was the shape of the course for the next seven weeks. The onus was on identifying the strengths and weaknesses within the marriage. You were taught not to make demands on the other party to improve the negotiating terms of your personal "marriage bargain", but instead ask what you could do for them. This principle lay at the heart of the course — that the person you were married to should be the most important thing in your life, more so than children, friends, family, work, or yourself. To some people that definition of marriage might seem uncontroversial, but to both of us, it was somehow inspiring. Rachael and I are me-generation people. I suspect that marriage for us, like many modern couples, was a means of approaching the lifelong goal of "self-fulfilment". To say, "it's not ourselves that are important but the other person" seemed a huge and challenging step. It was big for us for different reasons — me, because I am a typically selfish and self-absorbed writer, Rachael because she is a feminist who had always thought that putting your husband first was a kind of betrayal of female independence. If the first session was enjoyable, the following evenings were challenging,



even traumatic. The week we had to focus on "The Power of Forgiveness" had us both in tears. We realised how many hurts each of us still harboured, and how many of them remained unforgiven. Every week we were given homework to accomplish. Other sessions included The Art of Communication, Resolving Conflict and Good Sex (surprisingly for a religious organisation, this was both frank and practical: suggesting, for instance, that you try different parts of the house in which to have it off). For us without doubt the most important lesson was a listening exercise in which one of us was required to listen to what the other person was saying, without interruption and always making eye contact, then reflecting back what the other person said in order to understand that you had got the message. This is now a device we use routinely and it has helped our level of understanding greatly. At the end of the course, we felt genuinely sad to be finishing. As promised, although prayer was sometimes prescribed, God was largely

Above: Nicky and Sila Lee hosting a marriage counselling session. Left: Tim Lott and his wife Rachael taking the Alpha course. Right: Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore

## “We had trouble listening to each other. We bickered a lot

a peripheral presence on the course. We had come to look forward to our Monday nights. It had put the idea of marriage on the agenda above and beyond what our personal desires were — as something separate, out there, that needed to be nurtured. And Rachael had felt transformed by the experience, saying: "I feel evangelical about it. Understanding that people express their love in different languages, learning to listen to one another and put one another first — these have all been revelations." Other couples we spoke to on the course felt similarly positive. Kerry Lacey, who attended with her husband Euan, says: "It will completely blow you away whatever walk of life you come from. I found the course painful, but I was surprised how incredible and successful it was. I found it extremely reassuring that others had similar issues to us." Richard Foster, who attended with his wife Yvonne, said "It would be difficult to find someone more sceptical about the Marriage Course than me prior to participating. It was only through my wife's persistence that I finally agreed to attend. I was surprised by the openness and actually found it refreshing and stimulating. For us the key message was the need to devote time to each other with no distraction." I had a brief chat with Nicky and Sila after the course was finished and they

claimed they were still using the course themselves, even though they were teaching it three times a year. "It's incredibly useful to be reminded time and again of the principles of a good marriage," Sila says. "It's easy to forget them, even for us." I asked Nicky what the most important part of the course was. "Spending time together as a couple and learning to communicate." What was the difference between their course and, say, a marriage counselling service such as Relate? "Relate has a very difficult job," Sila says. "They are seeing people already in crisis. We are trying to be proactive in preventing people getting to that place. It's about prevention rather than cure." It's keeping that work going that is probably the most fundamental challenge of the course. At the beginning, we were shown a diagram rather like a Trivial Pursuit wheel containing the seven segments of the course. The rim of the wheel, which held it all together, was inscribed with the single word "Commitment". And perhaps this is the most vital message for both of us. Rachael and I understand now that keeping a marriage going requires something abstract, a principle rather than a set of competing individual desires. To commit to one another, we have to stick to the powerful lessons we have learnt. For ourselves, and our strident individual egos, that's going to be a struggle — but I can truthfully say that it feels like the start of a journey, not the completion of a course. relationship central.org



## What else might help...

### Beg forgiveness at Yom Kippur

Ashton Kutcher, 33, and Demi Moore, both Kabbalah devotees, are said to have used Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of repentance, to fix their marriage. Amid speculation that he cheated on Moore, 48, on the day of their sixth wedding anniversary with Sara Lee, 23, the couple retreated to the Cachuma Lake camp ground in California, with Kabbalah instructor Yehuda Berg.

### Sex each night for a year

After eight years of marriage, Charla and Brad Muller's love life was pretty dreadful, so as a 40th birthday gift, she gave him sex every night for the next year. It revitalised their marriage and led to a book: *365 Nights: A Memoir of Intimacy*.

### Surrender control

Laura Doyle decided to solve her unhappy marriage by not telling her husband what to do and how to do it. And it worked. "The union I'd always dreamt of appeared. The man who had wooed me was back," she wrote in her 2001 book, *The Surrendered Wife*. The principle is that the control women wield at work and with children must be left at the door of any marriage to revitalise intimacy.

### Have an affair

Cheating on your spouse may not be the obvious way to save a marriage, but Iris Krasnow, who spent two years interviewing happily married women for her book *The Secret Lives of Wives*, says it could be. From a male flirtation with no sex to decade-long affairs, the women in the book say relying on one person to make you happy for life is a one-way ticket to divorce.

### Love retreat

Living from the Heart runs a retreat in the Italian hills that specialises in couple psychotherapy, physical activity, yoga and rest, all designed to reconnect you with each other. Daisy Greenwell