

R E F L E C T I O N S O N D I V O R C E

Divorce has become very common—ordinary, in fact. We all know people who have divorced, some of us are divorced, members of our family divorce, and our children hang out with kids whose parents have divorced. Newlyweds divorce and aged adults divorce. With so much of it going around, one would think that it must be easy or at the very least, not that bad.... Not True. Divorce is hard. Divorce is still a major crisis in the life of an individual and the life of a family. Consequently, it is a decision to be made thoughtfully, carefully, and compassionately.

Divorce, furthermore, is not a single event. It takes years for individuals and a family to go through all the “divorces within the divorce.” There’s the physical divorce, the legal divorce, the emotional divorce, the financial divorce, the extended-family divorce, and the social divorce, to name a few. Recently a mom and dad came to work on some post-divorce issues and when they were done I congratulated them on how well they worked together. They smiled somewhat ruefully and informed me that it had taken them six years to get to this point. Another client’s 16-year old daughter, two years after her parents’ divorce, refused to go down the street where she once lived. She said, “No! I don’t want to drive by our house and see someone else in it.”

Given how difficult divorce is and how long it really takes, it may well be worth the investment of time and money to get help for your marriage before it is too late. When I say this, I am suggesting a pro-active strat-

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egy. That might mean finding a time to tell your partner in no uncertain terms that the relationship is not working for you and that counseling is necessary. It might mean saying it more than once—many times in fact—because it often takes many times before it sinks in. If the therapist or counselor you are seeing isn't helping, find another. Investigate the growing number of weekend experiences for married couples. Marriages are hard work. Remember, the divorce rate for second marriages, especially those with children, is even higher than first marriages. In other words, divorcing your partner and finding another is not necessarily the answer to your problems.

It is surprising how many individuals are shocked and hurt that they never had a chance to save their marriage. Many don't understand "why this is happening." So at the very least, counseling can sometimes help the other person understand why the marriage failed. This "work"—the work of understanding and making sense of what is happening in one's life—is of the utmost importance to each of us in our life. In a divorce, it is extremely important to facilitate the "divorces within the divorce." Keep in mind that it is very hard to co-parent and negotiate such issues as custody, property, and support when one partner is still wondering, "What happened?" And it is almost impossible to begin to move a family toward healing.

There are many things to be said about extra-marital love affairs, but I will offer only one reflection. If you have chosen to become involved emotionally and/or physically with someone else, your wife/husband will be devastated. Their anger, hurt and feelings of betrayal will significantly impact the entire divorce process. It is to be expected, so expect it. And give them credit, ultimately, for coping with it. If the affair is with a family friend, you've upped the ante exponentially.

In most cases, divorce is a giant step backwards financially. The challenge is to maintain two viable households. When there are children, the challenge is to maintain two households in which the children can play, have

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overnights with friends, watch TV, do homework, play a musical instrument, and so forth. This is true no matter how much time the children spend with one parent or the other. “Do both of us earn enough money to do this?” is a question to ask. Divorce often means that both parents must work full time in order to pay the bills, and even then it is often not enough. For many of the children from divorced families, college is out of the question.

Family decisions made early in a marriage get twisted and can turn ugly in the divorce. For example, if one parent stayed home to care for the children when they were small, that stay-at-home parent may have an edge in the legal system regarding custody/visitation, especially if the children are still young. On the other hand, the parent who has been working full time outside of the home has the greater ability to earn a good living and the other parent can probably never earn as much. Are these outcomes “fair”?

I believe that part of the problem is that we live in a society that values certain work over other work, including the work of raising children. But it is more complicated than that. It has to do with all the choices that are part of the fabric of our life as a couple/family. For example, how does one address the family decision to move far away from extended family for the professional needs of one spouse, with the mutual understanding that it is only temporary, and then the couple divorces far away from that extended family a few years later? How does one address the family decision to use one spouse’s early inheritance to pay off their debt and many years later divorce before the second spouse receives an inheritance? These kinds of dilemmas exist in one form or another in almost every divorce. It is hard to deal with these issues in the face of financial pressures/shortages, broken dreams, an uncertain future, lost time with children, and so forth. Fairness is difficult to define and hard to create. Many look to the legal system to right the wrongs—an impossible task.

Time can help the divorce process. Marriages are not like cars—a turn of

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the key in the ignition and the marriage is “off.” Many issues that seem to be life/death issues at the beginning of the divorce can look different several years down the road. Going slowly makes a lot of sense. And think about “timing.” Moving out of the marital home on your spouse’s birthday or asking for a divorce immediately after your second honeymoon or on your anniversary will feel like a slap in the face. The person who chooses to leave the marriage has usually been thinking of it for several years and perhaps longer. S/he is in a different emotional place than the spouse who is just beginning to deal with the issue. The years together deserve respectful timing and patience.

Lastly, no one can change who it is that you married and who it is that you are divorcing—not you, not your attorney, not a mediator, not a therapist or a coach. Our lives are by and large a reflection of our choices. So don’t expect magic. The team of professionals involved in your divorce will be trying their best to help you through the crisis, but the responsibility ultimately is yours.