

THE TROUBLE WITH DIVORCE

By Diane Medved, Condensed from The Case Against Divorce, Reader's Digest, May 1989, pages 96-99

Marleen, a school administrator, is a handsome 40-year-old. Three years ago she walked out of her nine-year marriage. According to Marleen, her husband, Bob, was boring, uneducated and unmotivated. She wanted an intelligent dynamo who was successful in his career.

Instead, Marleen has found only unhappiness – and the humiliation that at her age not everyone considers her desirable. After a few flings, she fell in love with a co-worker, who then got engaged to someone else. Now she realizes that Bob has his virtues, and she yearns for the simple warmth of his presence. But he's found another woman and isn't coming back.

In my private practice as a marriage counselor and psychologist, I've helped plenty of struggling couples through separation and "liberation." I originally thought that staying together in turmoil was more traumatic than making the break, that striking down taboos about divorce was part of modern enlightenment.

I was wrong. As I shifted my professional focus to divorced individuals, the truth was difficult to avoid: treating divorce as "morally neutral" – an option no better or worse than staying married – was irreparably damaging to the very people I wanted to help.

Often in tears, the divorced people I talked with described fantasies of an ex-spouse returning or confessed guilt over abandoning a devoted mate. They spoke of being uprooted from their homes, of splitting possessions, of children changed from innocents to confidants or scapegoats. And they mourned a part of their lives never to be recaptured – the family unit now destroyed.

I'd ask, "Looking back, do you think you could have made it work?"

Women would respond, "He was not romantic. He thought only of himself and his career." Men might say, "She took all my money, and then wouldn't trust me when I was away overnight." But each side would then conclude, "Knowing what I know now, yes, we could have made it work."

Divorce is so disastrous to body, mind and spirit that in an overwhelming number of cases the cure is worse than the disease. Of course, there are exceptions. Divorce may be the only recourse in cases of drug or alcohol addiction, physical abuse, severe emotional cruelty or permanent abandonment. But on balance, people could spare themselves enormous suffering if they scotched their permissive acceptance of divorce and viewed marriage as a lifelong commitment not to be entered into – or wiggled out of – lightly.

The old wedding vows read, "For better or for worse, till death us do part." Today couples commonly intone "through good times and bad, as long as our love shall last." Until recently, I nodded at the 'improvement'; now I soberly acknowledge the wisdom of the past.

It's well known that half of all marriages today are expected to fail; equally well known is the financial suffering for men and especially for women who divorce. But less well known are the lingering effects of loneliness and depression for those who divorce.

In these days of disposable marriage, it's common for spouses to contemplate separation. It may happen in the midst of a shouting match or during a fantasy about a more perfect mate. Unfortunately, divorce veterans, like Marleen, soon learn they have been duped by myths that divorce can open new horizons, that the dating scene is exciting, and that bright, attractive people will always find new partners.

It's time to renounce the myths and look at the reality of divorce. We too frequently act as if every infirm marriage deserves to die. We sympathize with a divorcing friend when we ought to warn him that he might be making a terrible mistake.

Too many people think, "if only I could be out of this marriage"...and finish the sentence with their own private miracles. It's not their fault; they're victims of propaganda from slick magazines and business seeking shrinks. But after their divorce they remain the same people, with the same problem-solving skills, values and styles of relating to others. And so they shape new relationships just like the old. How can they be expected to see that, with few exceptions, divorce is the wrong way to improve their lives?

Divorce is hell. Divorced people everywhere are lamenting their plight – on call-in radio, on "Oprah" and Donahue." Magazines are rife with stories of latchkey kids, custody kidnappings, delinquent dads, single moms and offspring in shelters for the homeless. The horrifying news is out there. But the divorce rate is still high.

So what is fueling this divorce delirium? I suspect it's a drastic change in our values. Let me contrast four basic beliefs we shared years ago with those accepted today. You'll see how our present mind-set undermines marriage and fosters divorce.

"Marriage is for keeps" versus "Marriage until passion fades." Certainly every engagement ring carries the hope of forever. Yet everyone is conscious of, and often grateful for, the newly taken-for-granted option to leave. There are couples who openly plan for the eventuality of a divorce by paying a lawyer to draw up a prenuptial agreement. They pledge to stay together for life, but insist on acting "prudently" to protect their assets in case the marriage doesn't last. Some won't marry unless they know they can leave. But this attitude spins the vicious cycle: the more people accept the escape hatch, the more people escape – and as the whole widens, the easier it becomes for others to follow.

I try to impress on couples who come to me that passion fades. To many, this means love itself fades. Their expectations are twisted, and so they throw away something that is precious. They don't stick around to find out that their love can grow even as the sexual fireworks cool down.

"Work to build a future" versus "Live in the here and now." In our instant society, many tend to see only the short-term benefits of their actions, because the long-term is obscured by uncertainty. This cripples commitment to marriage. Why argue things through with your spouse, or worry about the kids' response to your discord, when you can tromp out the door and feel better right now?

People rooted in the here and now betray a pitiful lack of confidence in the future. They feel compelled to enjoy whatever they can this minute. Strangely, many of them

are able to look at the long-term in their work or investment portfolio, but not in their relationships.

“Divorce is a shameful failure” versus “Divorce is no big deal.” Until no-fault divorce, people were forced in most states’ divorce proceedings to confront the fact that they’d failed. They had to state under oath that their spouse was unfaithful or abusive. The judicial system magnified the public humiliation.

Thanks to recent reforms, we’ve adopted a different attitude. It’s no longer assumed that someone must be a “bad guy.” Law firms have set up storefront offices to glide customers along on the newly greased wheels of justice. Do-it-yourself books on filing your own divorce proliferate. It’s a snap, they insist. You don’t even have to appear in court.

Divorce also is no longer a social failing. A few years ago, a major greeting-card company marketed a new card bearing the verse: “You’re dee-lightful...You’re dee-lovely...You’re dee-voiced!” Frankly, I’m dee-sgusted. While the old attitudes may have been too harsh, divorce certainly is not something to celebrate.

“Affairs are wrong and should be concealed” versus “Affairs are okay, and honesty is the best way to deal with them.” The 1960s and 70s were a time of self-centeredness for many, and what better expression of that than to have the benefits of both marriage and single life? Under the noble banner of forthrightness-no matter how it hurt anyone else-many proudly proclaimed their extramarital dalliances.

Surveys showing that more and more men and women step out of their spouses serve to justify cheaters’ activities. And so a new mentality emerges: monogamy is passé’.

Wrong. Adultery leads to divorce. A Ladies Home Journal survey of 350,000 readers revealed that 83.4 percent of unfaithful wives divorced. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz in *American Couples* note: “Husbands and wives who had had extramarital sex were more likely to break up whether it happened at the beginning of the marriage or after many years. In marriage, nonmonogamy is such a trespass that even those in established relationships do not shut their eyes to it.

I don’t suggest that we return to the sanctimoniousness of the 1950s, when divorced people were often ostracized. But the knowledge gained during the sexual and social exploration of the 60s and 70s should have proved to us the sanity of many rules we’ve discarded.

There are sound benefits to the old-fashioned virtues that foster a faithful marriage and a stable family. And those virtues are now beginning to regain popularity. Let’s not ignore their lessons.