

I grew up during the era when divorce was seen as a moral failure. In my working-class Irish Catholic neighborhood in 1950s Philadelphia, I knew only one divorced family, and they were a basket case of dysfunction. The single mother was overwhelmed, the boys out of control, and my friends and I knew the one day a year that the father came to visit his children. We all knew troubled marriages where screaming matches could be heard through the walls of our row houses—but divorce, that was serious stuff.

Much had changed by the time I went to graduate school in the early 1970s—divorce was a lot more common, even among people who didn't seem to have obvious moral failings—but I nevertheless assumed that my job

change in gender roles, racial politics, sexuality, religion, drug use, and attitudes toward authority and government. This was the dawning era of Divorce as Liberation. The new ease around divorce meant greater possibility for sexual expression, personal development, and a glorious flowering of, well, human potential.

In graduate school, we were eagerly reading books like *Open Marriage*, followed by *Creative Divorce*. A number of my friends were marrying under the spiritual philosophy enshrined on the famous Fritz Perls poster: "I do my thing and you do your thing." Within a year, I attended the wedding reception and then the divorce party of one couple. My wife of 18 months and I brought our new baby to the divorce party, and I remember feeling both admiration that this couple could celebrate the end of their time together and a vague anxiety about whether my own marriage was fragile. Was I settling for tame domesticity at a time of exciting creative upheaval? Nearly all my married fellow students eventually divorced. I felt like the last chicken in the pen with the python.

Although I wanted my own marriage to last a lifetime, I was an enthusiast for the new therapeutic culture of divorce. I thought we were helping to sweep away ill-formed marriages from prerevolutionary times and usher in a golden age of equalitarian, psychologically aware marriages. I remember feeling glad that the divorce rate was skyrocketing during the 1970s. It was proof that we had to reinvent marriage because the old regime was collapsing. I knew there were casualties, but that was the price

of necessary cultural change.

In my therapy practice, I learned to be strictly neutral about divorce. It was the clients' decision, not mine, and not much different from career choices and deciding whether to stay or leave a job. A senior therapist once told me what he said to the couples he saw: "The main thing is what you think will make you happier in the next phase of your life. If you think you'll be happier staying married, I'll help you do that. If you think you'll be happier getting divorced, I'll help you do that."

BY WILLIAM DOHERTY

# REFLECTIONS ON THE DIVORCE REVOLUTION

## *Assessing Our Impact*

as a therapist was to help couples stay together if possible. I figured a marriage therapist should "lean in" when it came to preventing divorce, although not blindly, because some marriages were destructive and beyond repair. After all, why go into this profession if you didn't see your job as helping most couples stay together and work things out?

But times had changed more than I realized. What political theorist Francis Fukuyama has called The Great Disruption was underway in Western societies, with unprecedented social

Another senior therapist put his motto more succinctly: "The good marriage, the good divorce—it matters not." I now cringe as I write these bromides because they don't reflect the anguish of the clients we were working with as they tried to figure out what to do with their marriages—not to mention the children. But at the time, I was impressed by the aura of worldly therapeutic savoir faire they conveyed.

Were there other voices at the time? None that I heard or read in the field, other than some religious-based counselors who occupied a different therapeutic universe. We secular types were to be value free and morally neutral, or at least to check our values at the office door. But I do recall a different message from Patrick Gordon Walker, former Foreign Minister of the United Kingdom and my friend's father. We were chatting in a living room, he in his three-piece suit and me in jeans, when he learned that I was a marriage therapist. "A frightful thing these young people are doing nowadays," he said, "throwing away a perfectly good marriage simply because they fall in love with someone else." I was taken aback. Actually, I was taken back to my Catholic roots, where marriage was like the Rock of Gibraltar, a foundation only to be abandoned in the most extreme circumstances. In truth, I viewed my own marriage that way, although I was determined not to let that private value enter my work as a therapist.

Another countermessage I recall from the early '70s was Beatrice Arthur in the movie *Lovers and Other Strangers*, when she responded to her son Ritchie's decision to divorce Diane Keaton's character because he said he wasn't happy. Waiving a kitchen pitchfork at him, she said, "Don't look for happiness, Ritchie. It'll just make you miserable."

More conflicted inside than I realized, I made my therapy work toward the happiness line by helping clients make divorce decisions strictly on rational-choice terms: what was

in it for them to stay versus leave. I sometimes had clients write answers to the following questions in four boxes: How might it benefit you to stay? How might it benefit you to leave? How might it disadvantage you to stay? How might it disadvantage you to leave? It was like an analysis-of-variance table. When clients inevitably raised concerns about the kids, my colleagues and I assured them that if the parents do what's right for themselves, the kids will be

automatically flow toward others. The cultural analysis really came home to me in the story of a therapist who had trouble explaining to the interviewer why she was committed to her children. She couldn't go beyond repeating that she'd personally feel bad if she abandoned her children, but that she wouldn't lay a guilt trip on anyone else by saying that all parents should faithfully care for their own children. As I finished read-

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fine. When clients "shoulded" themselves about being faithful to their marriage vows, we steered them on the more authentic path, in keeping with the second line of the Gestalt therapy credo: "I'm not in this world to live up to your expectations, and you're not in this world to live up to mine."

#### **GOTCHA MOMENTS**

Two experiences during the 1980s propelled me out of my denial about the seriousness of divorce. I still recall where I was sitting (actually, lying in bed) as I read *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* by sociologist Robert Bellah and colleagues. Through interviews and cultural analysis, they argued that both liberal therapists and conservative politicians espoused a trickle-down model, where if individuals looked after their own needs (economic or psychological), good things would auto-

ing this chapter in the book, the hair stood up on my neck with recognition of how impoverished my own ability to express social obligations had become. Thank goodness Bellah and his colleagues didn't interview me!

Reading *Habits of the Heart* was the biggest "gotcha" of my career because I realized how much I'd absorbed the culture of what the authors called "expressive individualism," which constrained me from engaging clients about the complexity of moral choices in everyday life. The most embarrassing part was seeing how my tribe of mostly liberal therapists were kissing cousins to right-leaning economists. When I told agonizing clients that their children would be fine so long as they, the parents, took care of themselves, I was Ronald Reagan in therapist garb.

In fact, I recall a client named Joyce who insisted that she wasn't going to take steps to divorce her

husband until the last of their five children had been launched to college (seven years in the future). She was married to a good provider (he owned his own business), who came home each night and drank alone in his study. She ran the family and kept his life otherwise stable. They had little conflict but almost no emotional connection. When the husband came in for a session related to problems with one of their children, he said he loved his wife and family, acknowledged that he drank too much, but wanted things to stay the way they were. I saw Joyce as living an inauthentic life, and I'm sure I communicated that to her as I challenged her about why she wouldn't leave her husband. She couldn't articulate much more than that she wanted to keep things stable for the children until they could leave, and I eventually gave up my efforts to help her see how she was letting herself down.

Looking back, I believe Joyce was calibrating her lack of personal happiness with her wishes to provide economically for the children (and herself) and to keep their father in their lives. (It's not clear that the father would've shared active parenting with the mother, and in any event, his drinking would've impaired his parenting.) I feel sad now that I wasn't able to acknowledge her sense of what was best for the common good while exploring her self-interest. This wasn't an easy decision for Joyce, although I thought it was because I was in my "go girl" phase when working with women whose husbands couldn't meet their needs.

Later, when I started to go public with my concerns about what therapy could do to marriages, people close to me started to tell me about their own stories. For example, a family friend named Marsha felt something was terribly wrong with her marriage soon after her wedding. When she and her husband, Paul, moved across the country following a big church wedding in their hometown,

she became obsessed with fears that she'd made a big mistake in marrying Paul. She focused on his ambivalence about the Christian faith, his avoidance of personal topics of communication, and his tendency to criticize her when she expressed her worries and fears. She sought help at the university student-counseling center where she and Paul were graduate students. The counselor worked with her alone for a few sessions and then invited Paul in for marital therapy. Paul, who was frustrated and angry about how distant and fretful Marsha had become, was a reluctant participant.

In addition to the marital problems, the counselor saw that Marsha was depressed: she couldn't sleep or concentrate, felt sad all the time, and saw herself as a failure. Medication began to relieve some of these symptoms, but she was still upset about the state of her marriage. After a highly charged session with this distressed wife and angry husband, the counselor met with Marsha separately the next week. She told Marsha that she wouldn't recover fully from her depression until she started to "trust her feelings" about the marriage.

"What do you mean, trust my feelings?" Marsha asked.

"You know you aren't happy in your marriage," the counselor replied. "Perhaps you need a separation in order to figure out whether you really want this marriage."

"But I love Paul and I'm committed to him," Marsha said.

"The choice is yours, but I doubt that you'll begin to feel better until you start to trust your feelings and pay attention to your unhappiness," the counselor told her.

"Are you saying I should get a divorce?" Marsha asked.

"I'm just urging you to trust your feelings of unhappiness, and maybe a separation would help you sort things out," the counselor answered.

A stunned Marsha decided to not return to that counselor, a decision the counselor no doubt perceived as reflecting Marsha's unwilling-

ness to take responsibility for her own happiness.

During this crisis, Marsha also talked to her priest, who urged her to wait to see if her depression was causing the marital problem or if the marital problem was causing the depression. It was a prudent bit of advice, but a few minutes later, the priest added that if it turned out the marital problems were causing the depression, he'd help Marsha get an annulment. Marsha was even more stunned than she'd been by the counselor. Fortunately, Marsha and Paul eventually found a good marital therapist who helped them straighten out their marriage. Marsha's depression then lifted, and many years later they're still doing well—no thanks to the counselor who saw her job as promoting Marsha's "happiness."

Now, I'd known Paul for years. He was a nice guy, but was emotionally young for his age and didn't know much about feelings. (In fact, I didn't know much about feelings at his age either.) Paul was just truly befuddled that his new bride was suddenly depressed all the time. I'd been to their wedding six months before and was appalled at this turn of events while my friends were in the hands of the fellow therapist they'd reached out to. *How did we get here?* I asked myself. It's not that therapists or pastoral counselors are out to hurt people or deliberately undermine marriages. What was going on?

As I dug deeper into critiques of the therapeutic culture by Philip Reiff and other social critics, I came to see more clearly how therapy had been implicitly liberationist even from the time of Freud, focusing on how to live an authentic life, rather than one of imposed obligations. But therapists in the past could count on clients' having an internalized sense of obligation to their marriage and family that we could help them look at from other angles. If clients had too much ying (what are my obligations to others?),

we could safely work the yang side (what do I need for myself?). But when the culture of obligation eroded during The Great Disruption, we lacked ways to work both sides of the human experience—in the case of divorce decisions, the longing to get free of pain, pursue happiness, and start again versus the sense of responsibility to one's spouse and children. When we assume that the great enemies of personal wellbeing are guilt and conformity, then that's the battle we learn how to fight. The other enemy—the unfettering of commitments in a me-first consumer culture—is harder to address, even in family therapy, which was created to treat centripetally enmeshed families of the mid-20th century, not today's centrifugally disengaged families. Like individuals, models of therapy are stamped by their culture of origin and then augment its effects.

### A RUNAWAY FATHER

My own turnaround case on dealing with obligations in therapy was one in which the divorce had already been decided and I was confronted with a potential runaway father. It was the late 1980s and I'd absorbed the culture critiques but hadn't changed my practice yet. My client was Bruce, a 40-year-old man, whose wife, Elaine, decided to end their marriage after we'd done several months of couples therapy.

Bruce returned from work one day to find that Elaine had tossed his belongings onto the front porch in the rain and changed the locks on the house. Overwhelmed and depressed, Bruce skipped work for several days and lost his job. He then came to see me for an individual session, saying that he couldn't face the thought of going back to his house to pick up his children, 3-year-old Karen and 6-year-old Scott, for a visit. Even more intolerable was the prospect of returning alone to his apartment after taking them back to their mother. Tearfully, he said he couldn't face Elaine after what she'd done to him,

although he still loved her and wanted to salvage their marriage.

The more Bruce talked, the more he began to sprinkle in comments such as "Maybe the kids would be better off if I just stayed away" and "I think I might need a complete break. Maybe I should just pack up and move far away." I shuddered inside when he said, "Nothing is keeping me here now." In fact, a decade earlier, Bruce had lost contact with a child he'd fathered with a woman he didn't marry. I felt dismayed, but my training had only equipped me with responses like "What do you need to do for yourself right now to get through this?"

The most challenging statements from the traditional therapy paradigm I could offer a client like Bruce would be something like "I wonder if you've considered the regret you'll feel if you take yourself out of your children's lives" or "You may not be in a healthy enough frame of mind right now to make long-term decisions." Of course, there's nothing wrong with these statements. In fact, I did use them in my work with Bruce, but I decided to add something decidedly nontraditional: challenging him in explicitly moral terms. (What I mean by *moral* here is behavior that has consequences for the wellbeing of others.)

After listening at length to Bruce's pain over the end of his marriage, I asked how he thought his leaving would affect his children. He said it'd bother them for a while, but they'd get over it and be fine. That was the crucible moment for me. I gently but forcefully told him that I was concerned his children would be damaged if he abandoned them. His reply—"I'm worried about that too, but what kind of father will I be if I'm an emotional wreck?"—gave me an opening to continue on the track of moral discourse.

Throughout the conversation that ensued, I emphasized how important he was to his children, even if he didn't think so and wasn't emotionally at his best at this time. I

told him I could understand that he might need a timeout to collect himself before going back to his old house and facing Elaine again. But he was irreplaceable to his children, and, in my judgment, they'd carry a lifelong emotional burden if he simply disappeared from their lives. Finally, I reminded him that his children weren't responsible for the marital breakup, and that it wasn't fair that they should be its casualties.

I knew that to some therapists my words to Bruce about parental commitment no doubt would sound starkly moralistic, but I wanted to make two things crystal clear to him: I wasn't neutral about his staying committed to his children, and I was giving priority to his children's long-term needs over his short-term distress. He quickly grasped my point, and moved from whether to stay involved to how to accomplish it. In the end, despite lapses, he remained a committed father to Karen and Scott, and later reconnected with his child from the previous relationship.

### WHAT RESEARCH REVEALS

Once I began to talk about write about my work with Bruce, I was out as a therapist who's willing to challenge psychological individualism and engage clients' commitments. But at that point, I felt secure only when it came to parent-child commitments, that unassailable bedrock of human society. I remember being skittish in 1990, when Michele Weiner-Davis gave her famous "Divorce Busting" speech at a national family therapy conference. I agreed with her critique of neutrality in couples therapy, but realized I hadn't moved to a place of clinical comfort in dealing with marital commitment. Also, I was worried about losing membership in the tribe of enlightened therapists who believe that it's our job to neither prevent nor encourage divorce. While therapists generally believe in parental commitment (because of vulnerable children), many see marital commitment as a matter of contractual relationship between independent adults.



change. *The Atlantic*, a quintessential liberal magazine, published the provocatively titled article "Dan Quayle Was Right," a journalistic summary of research showing that the former vice president was correct in worrying publicly about the effects of the decline of two-parent families on children. I recall an angry colleague canceling her subscription to the magazine, but I found myself agreeing

single-parent families, and not family structure itself. Instead, these highly respected Princeton social scientists found important and enduring negative consequences of growing up in a single-parent family in psychological adjustment, educational attainment, and many other indicators beyond the effects of sociodemographic factors. In other words, family structure matters—an idea anathema to many respectable social scientists and therapists at the time.

In the past two decades, the academic literature has arrived at this consensus: children do best in stable, reasonably low-conflict married families. Family breakup is associated with a decade or more of difficult transitions for children, meaning relocations, new schools, and new partners moving in and out of their lives—what sociologist Andrew Cherlin calls the "churning" of family arrangements. Recently, the historically conservative view that stable marriages are best for children, now supported by good social science, has ironically been a compelling argument for legalizing same-sex unions: marriage promotes stable families for children.

In a way, therapists and social scientists are just catching up with the lived experience of our fellow citizens. Clients have always told us about their painful soul searching in deciding whether to break up their marriage, especially when they have children. Few people end their marriage without considerable pain, and many people don't want the divorce that their spouse is insisting on. (Divorce is rarely a consensus decision, at least at the beginning.) Surveys consistently find about 40 percent of divorcees eventually have regrets about their divorce, including whether they and their partner worked hard enough to prevent it. And most initiators of divorce experience a moral dilemma: whether to keep their commitment in the face of personal unhappiness, how

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But I knew I had to face the therapist I was becoming and pay attention to how the world was changing around me. A new cultural era was dawning, one I'll call The Great Misgiving (or It's More Complicated than We Thought). The bloom had come off the divorce revolution, with divorce rates having stabilized in 1980 and then beginning a slow, steady decline, which still continues for college-educated people (but not for people with less education). The research on the effects of divorce for children, which in the 1970s suggested a year or so of turbulence but then recovery, was much gloomier. Two landmark publications in the early 1990s marked the

with the gist of the article, even though I didn't like Dan Quayle's politics. In the wry aphorism veteran clinician Frank Pittman was fond of quoting, "Even a blind pig can sometimes find an acorn."

Then in 1994 came a bombshell book from Harvard University Press, *Growing Up with a Single Parent*, by sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur. Pooling data from several major national surveys, the authors expected to find support for their assumption that the negative effects of divorce and unmarried childbearing can be explained by socioeconomic factors like lower educational and income levels in

much weight to give to the children's needs versus their own, how hard to work before feeling justified in ending the relationship, and in recent decades, whether they have a duty to try couples therapy before making a final decision. Indeed, divorce may be the most significant moral conundrum in adult life, and the one we see most often in therapy, but we dress it up only in clinical clothing because that's what makes us most comfortable. We're like physicians who make everything biomedical because that's what they're prepared to respond to.

The problem isn't our lack of moral sensibility about life's dilemmas. It's that we're not sure how to engage clients' self-interest and their responsibility to others in therapy, the former being well codified in our techniques and the latter being, well, vastly underdeveloped. We have a hundred ways to ask "What would be right for you?" and hardly any to ask "What would be right for others in your life?"

Here's the irony: while therapeutic language is libertarian at the personal level, most therapists believe in social responsibility at the community level. Talking about interpersonal responsibility hangs us up, and it's hard for many therapists to believe that it's possible without lapsing into shaming clients and driving them away. So we stay in our safety zone, coming out only in cases of abuse where we're mandated reporters and upholders of legal and ethical norms.

### **BECOMING MARRIAGE FRIENDLY**

I have to admit that I didn't get much traction with colleagues on articulating these issues until I coined the term *marriage friendly*, around 2005. It was a way to signal to one's colleagues and potential clients that the therapist leans toward restoring marriages to health rather than divorce, when that's feasible, and doesn't hold onto the 1970s pseudo-neutrality about divorce. The term

also connotes that some therapists aren't marriage friendly, which many members of the public had suspected. But that's just a term, not a set of craft skills. For me, those skills come in the form of something I call discernment counseling, an approach I developed for working with couples on the brink of divorce where one spouse is leaning out of the marriage and the other is leaning in—which, of course, is a major challenge for couples therapists.

spending time (up to five sessions if necessary) to explore which path to take. I want to avoid both precipitous decisions to divorce and precipitous decisions to try reconciliation.

A central strategy of this work is that although the couple comes in together each time, most of the work goes on in separate conversations with each spouse. In the first 40 minutes of the initial two-hour session, I see them together and get both their per-

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Discernment counseling is a short-term process with the goal of creating greater clarity and confidence in the decision about whether to try to restore the marriage or continue toward divorce. I don't frame the immediate decision as whether to divorce or stay married for life, but whether to carve out a six-month period of all-out effort to restore the marriage to health, with divorce off the table during that time. At the end of six months, the partners can return to the decision about divorce, based on what they've learned about the prospect of successfully rebuilding their marriage.

I know many experienced therapists use a similar approach of recommending a number of sessions of therapy before a final decision. But I've learned to be cautious about a quick decision from the leaning-out spouse to try couples therapy: the result is often half-hearted therapy. Instead, I suggest slowing down and

spectives on the marriage. After asking what they hope to get from seeing me, I inquire about their divorce narratives (how they got to this point), their repair narratives (how they tried to solve their problems and what outside help they sought), a question about the best of times in their relationship history, and a carefully framed question about the children ("What role, if any, do your children play in your decision making about the future of your marriage?"). I then spend over an hour, split between each of the partners separately, focusing on each one's agenda (leaving or saving the marriage) and trying to open up a deeper understanding of each one's contributions to the marital dynamics.

The main way of avoiding doomed, half-hearted couples therapy is that I don't claim to be doing couples therapy until I have an informed agreement with both partners to work on the marriage. That way, if a leaning-



out partner says that the marriage counseling isn't working, I point out that they haven't tried marriage counseling yet. Discernment counseling is helping them decide whether to try marriage counseling. I tell them it's like taking an antibiotic: you can't say that the antibiotic isn't helping if you haven't taken it yet. We're working on a decision about whether to try the medication or let the disease take its course. It's also important that this be a short-term process, ensuring the discernment counseling doesn't seem like endless couples therapy.

Discernment counseling is designed to create an environment that brings out the best self in both parties in mixed-agenda couples. I help the leaning-out partners in the marriage see their own contribution to the problems in a more complex way, and if they're dealing with abuse, ongoing affairs, or other serious irresponsibility from their partners, I help firm up their resolve that the situation must change. Leaning-in partners get to do something more constructive than just waiting for the other to decide the fate of the marriage: they can try to reboot the marriage by making constructive changes in themselves.

## DISCERNMENT COUNSELING IN PRACTICE

If I'd seen Melinda and Jacob as a younger therapist, I'd probably have been neutral about the prospect of their divorce. Married 10 years, they had no children and a flat, inexpressive relationship without any real sense of emotional connection. As Melinda put it, "We got married but never merged." After years of coasting along as conflict-avoidant roommates, they'd been propelled into coming to see me after Jacob discovered his wife's three-month affair. Although Melinda had ended the affair, it had stirred her desire to discover an aliveness she hadn't experienced with Jacob and believed he could never give her. While she was close to a deci-

sion to divorce and didn't think that therapy could really change anything, Jacob very much wanted to stay married.

A case like this is clarifying for us therapists. Why try to salvage this kind of marriage? After all, there were no kids involved, both adults could function independently if they divorced, and the relationship had never been particularly good, even before the crisis. Most therapists would probably support a divorce decision for this couple, or at least suggest that there's little chance the marriage could be made to work, given their history and Melinda's leaning toward divorce and reluctance to do therapy.

Earlier in my career, I'd have suggested we try couples therapy for a period of time to see if it might work. But even if I'd managed to convince Melinda to try couples work, she most likely would've held back from being fully engaged while waiting to see if Jacob would shape up or get frustrated after a few sessions because he was doing all the work, thus pushing her away even further. When the therapy stalled and Melinda announced that she was done with the marriage, I'd help Jacob accept the inevitable—and tell myself that this marriage had been dead on arrival. Then I'd refer them to a good mediator or collaborative lawyer, and move on to couples I could actually help.

Yet nowadays, rather than feeling fatalistic with the Melindas and Jacobs of the world, I feel confident that I can offer them a process that pulls together the three strands that had been separate for me in the past: taking the moral commitment couples once made to each other seriously, helping them grow as individuals through examining what they've each brought to the marital table, and being open to whatever choice they make.

What I offered Melinda and Jacob was a holding environment—no immediate decision asked for and no expectation of relationship change

in the short term. Discernment counseling is an intense process because it's time-limited (no more than five sessions), the sessions are longer (1.5 to 2 hours), and each person is held accountable for personal soul searching instead of spouse blaming. The safety of not having the other spouse in the room offers the possibility of greater intensity in the one-to-one conversations and in the sharing of personal discoveries with the spouse, who's not expected to respond. With the stakes so high and the clock always ticking, there's an urgency and focus to this work that I don't often experience in my regular therapy session.

Some people are emotionally flat when their spouse is in the room and then liven up when our one-to-one time begins. Melinda stayed flat with me, sitting low on the sofa. Unlike some leaning-out spouses who disclaim much responsibility for the marital problems, she readily admitted that she'd held back from conflict in her marriage, didn't open up with her feelings, and instead tried to parent Jacob, nagging him frequently about taking better care of himself after he returned to smoking cigarettes and failed to follow up on a medical referral after having a seizure. Even though she felt great guilt over her affair, it had propelled her toward divorce because she'd learned that she could feel a kind of passion she didn't think she'd ever be able to feel with her husband.

At first, I gently mirrored back her loneliness and discouragement with the marriage, and I acknowledged that the affair, although against her standards for herself as a person, had awakened something in her that needed attending to as she faced her future. I then shifted to the alternative paths ahead: stay on course, divorce, or commit to six months of effort in couples therapy based on an agenda for change. Like most leaning-out spouses, Melinda said she was leaning toward path two (I

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use path language to indicate that whatever they choose, it's a journey), because she was skeptical that they could ever have a strong emotional connection to her husband.

As is my custom, I first summarized the reasons I'd heard from her to go the path of divorce. She nodded that I had it right. This part of the craft is important because it avoids later "yes, but" exchanges when I broach the reconciliation option. Then I asked if it would be okay if we talked about path three—therapy.

Melinda responded with words I hear often in discernment counseling: "The list of things to change feels too long. I worry that the spark isn't there anymore."

Some therapists might think that a marriage-friendly stance would mean they'd now have to give Melinda a moral lecture about commitment. But, to put it mildly, that would be bad craft. Melinda was in my office and not a divorce lawyer's office because she took her marital commitment seriously and wanted to look at her decision carefully. Instead, my "lean toward commitment" stance came out in how I tried to blend her goals for herself and the possibilities for her marriage. "Melinda," I said, "I agree that you can't go back to the marriage as it was. You have to start living differently. What I want to ask you is this: what's the downside of trying a course of therapy to see if you both can change into the people you want to be, especially since you've never done couples therapy before?"

Slumping further into the sofa, Melinda said meekly, "It seems like a lot of work."

Leaning forward, I said, "Melinda, if you're serious about changing your life, you have a lot of work ahead, whether you stay married or you divorce."

"True, I can see that," she replied.

"And in this marriage, you have a husband who says he loves you and is ready to roll up his sleeves to make

things better for both of you. If you divorce and want another relationship, you'll have to do the same work on yourself. After the honeymoon stage of any new relationship, you'll have to find a way to declare yourself and your feelings, not hide out when there's conflict, and not confuse loving a spouse with parenting him. Those are the things you've said you want to change. You can decide to give it a shot in this marriage, with this man, or can take your chances in the future."

This exchange opened up what Melinda hadn't revealed before: her guilt and shame over the affair, and how their silence over it as a couple was eating her up. I said I was glad she got that out, and assured her that the affair, and both of their feelings over it, could be worked on constructively in therapy, if that's the path they both decided to take. Forgiveness, self-acceptance, and learning were possible.

As our conversation ended, Melinda was sitting up taller on the sofa. I asked her what she wanted to say to Jacob about what she was taking from our conversation. Part of the power of discernment counseling is the element of theatrical ritual, with spouses shuttling back and forth from the therapy room, and with orchestrated moments of sharing after each entrance. I spend several minutes having sharing partners prepare and recite to me what they want to say to their spouse, followed by my suggested script edits (such as focusing more on self or adding more feeling).

When Jacob returned, Melinda faced him directly and said, "I need to look at myself more, and not try to be your parent. I love you and I can't walk away without some effort." I didn't ask Jacob for a response, but he was clearly moved.

Yes, I pushed harder on Melinda to agree to couples therapy than some therapists might, but that's partly because of the value I place on the marital promise to stay together through good times and bad. Unless this is just a pious saying, it means

going all out when things are bad; and in the modern era, going all out involves a good dose of couples therapy, with both people fully on board for the effort. There are no guarantees that the treatment will work—sometimes one or both partners can't or won't change enough to have a good relationship. May Fritz Perls forgive me for using the s-word, but I believe that a decision to divorce *should* come after couples have exhausted their options to work out their problems within the marriage.

Another reason for my conviction that people should work on their marriage before splitting (except in risky situations) is that staying and trying creates richer possibilities for human flourishing, both as a couple and individually. If well used, a marriage in trouble is also an opportunity. For one thing, confronting uncomfortable issues in a marriage, rather than just stuffing them, and then facing up to your own contribution to the problems, requires summoning up courage—always a bracing exercise in what Virginia Satir called the task of people-making. Working at their marriage, even if it fails in the end, helps the spouses grow up, and maybe discover something invaluable about their relationship and about themselves that they might otherwise have missed. Carl Whitaker, one of my therapy heroes, used to say, "People marry each other for profoundly important reasons, and no one should divorce until they deal with those things that caused them to marry and then want to divorce each other."

When I talked with Jacob alone, he said he was thrilled that Melinda was more open to working on the marriage, and that she understood how parental she'd been toward him. I then asked him my standard discernment counseling questions for the leaning-in partner. Did he want to save his marriage? And if so, did he want my help in doing that? When he replied in the affirmative, I told him that meant I'd have to be hard



on him because he wasn't seeing enough of his part in the problems. As most leaning-in spouse do, he signed up for my tough love because I was aligned with his goal of creating the possibility that his marriage could be saved.

After Jacob complained about Melinda's nagging him over both his health and his apathy toward his career, I skipped the standard therapist paraphrase of his frustration and instead went directly to the heart of the matter. "Jacob," I said, "you're very much an adolescent to her parent. You smoke, sit around a lot, don't check out worrisome health problems like seizures, and then you complain when your wife nags you. What's more, you don't tell her that you're actually worried about your health yourself, because you don't tell her much of what goes on inside you, which encourages her to worry for both of you."

Of course, what I said isn't uncommon in therapy land, but because this was discernment counseling, I moved much more quickly than I would in regular therapy. In fact, I said these things to Jacob within the first 10 minutes of my first one-to-one time with him. The two areas that I press hard and fast on with the leaning-in spouses like Jacob are personal accountability and listening more deeply to the pain of the leaning-out spouse. These aren't distinctive emphases in discernment counseling, but in comparison to how most warm, supportive therapists conduct themselves, this challenging moves at warp speed. Nevertheless, leaning-in spouses almost always accept it because the therapist is allied with their goals and the situation is urgent. When they don't accept the challenge to look at themselves and listen to their partner, the result is almost always the other spouse soon choosing the divorce path.

Just as with Melinda, the breakthrough to deeper emotion with Jacob was over the affair. He confessed that he couldn't stop thinking about it, wanting to ask for all the details, physical and emotional. But

he was afraid (justifiably) that if he challenged her to open up this way, it would drive her farther away from him. He accepted my input that full work on healing from the affair, for both of them, would have to wait for a decision to do couples therapy. In the meantime, I could help him tell her that he has feelings and questions that he can wait to explore. This is another key element of discernment counseling: not to offer therapy-like healing work without an agreement to start therapy. Without a commitment from both partners to stay on course during these potentially turbulent exchanges, the couple risks getting overwhelmed and deciding that any reconciliation is impossible.

In his sharing with Melinda after our conversation, Jacob showed more emotion than she'd seen in years. With tears, he said, "I want to connect with you and not pull away from you. I want to put issues out there for us to talk through, including the affair. And I want to be close to you and for you to be close to me." It took two more discernment counseling sessions before both Melinda and Jacob were ready to start couples therapy, with a key moment coming when Jacob told Melinda that he felt partly responsible for her affair because of how distant he'd been from her.

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Jacob and Melinda's therapy is still in its early stages, with predictable ups and downs. But if there's one thing I've learned over the past few years of doing discernment counseling, it's that I can't predict outcomes for couples. Some couples that I'm confident will make it soon crash and burn, while some long shots manage to rise from the ashes of their miseries and reconcile. Some couples achieve the kind of marriage they longed for, while others settle for something good enough.

For couples who go on to divorce, my impression is that most benefit from this deep dive into the subterranean passages of their relationship. Their initial divorce narratives

become a lot more complex, their individual roles in the marriage drama more nuanced and clearly drawn. Almost always, they feel they did right by themselves and their families by slowing down and entering the moral crucible of divorce decision making. Is any of this different from what they'd have achieved in regular psychotherapy or couples therapy? I believe that discernment counseling offers something distinctive from individual therapy, because both partners go through it together, and from couples therapy, because the focus is on soul searching and learning without the added pressure of working on change in the face of ambivalence.

There's also a cultural reason why I lean toward people making an all-out effort to preserve their marriage (except in dangerous situations). Through our work as therapists, we influence the values of the world around us today, just as we when we championed divorce as liberation. We now live in a turbocapitalist, consumerist, disposable society. Studies show that the children of Baby Boomer divorces aspire to lifelong marriage but fear it's impossible for them. This wish for a permanent mate isn't surprising, given the perennial human longing to know that someone is there for us as we age, whatever happens—and that means there are no quick, guilt-free exits. Life is complicated, and divorce is sometimes necessary, but why not, in the words of poet Dylan Thomas, "rage; rage against the dying of the light," instead of simply moving on because the current marital house would take too much work to restore and the one down the street looks better? Without losing compassion for those whose marriages end in divorce, isn't it our professional responsibility to be on the side of attachment and commitment in an era that needs both?

Many decades into my own marriage, conceived in that turbulent decade of the 1970s, I confess to being somewhat of a romantic about the quest for lifelong marriage in

today's throwaway culture. I like to think of marriage as coming with the conviction that nothing will break us up; that we'll fight through whatever obstacles get in our way; that if the boat gets swamped, we'll bail it out; that we'll recalibrate our individual goals if they get out of alignment; that we'll share leadership for maintaining and renewing our marriage; that we'll renovate our marriage if the current version gets stale; that if we fight too much or too poorly, we'll get help to fight better; that if sex is no longer good, we'll find a way to make it good again; that we'll accept each other's weaknesses that can't be fixed; and that we'll take care of each other in our old age.

This kind of commitment isn't made just once, but over and over through the course of a marriage. We cling to it during the dark nights of the soul that come to nearly every marriage, times when the love is hard to feel but the promise keeps us together. ❀

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