

## On Splitting

**“As divorce becomes more common, the shame attendant on it dissipates. Some divorcés even argue that divorce is beneficial, educational; that the second or third or fifth marriage is ‘the best.’”**

ONE AFTERNOON recently, two unrelated friends called to tell me that, well, their marriages hadn't made it. One was leaving his wife for another woman. The other was leaving her husband because “we thought it best.”

As always after such increasingly common calls, I felt helpless and angry. What had happened to those solemn vows that one of the couples had stammered on a steamy August afternoon three years earlier? And what had happened to the joy my wife and I had sensed when we visited the other couple and their two children last year, the feeling they gave us that here, in this increasingly fractionated world, was a constructive union?

I did not feel anger at my friends personally: Given the era and their feelings, their decisions probably made sense. What angered me was the loss of years and energy. It was an anger similar to that I feel when I see abandoned foundations of building projects—piled bricks and girders and a gash in the ground left to depress the passerby.

When our grandparents married, nobody except scandalous eccentrics divorced. “As long as we both shall live” was no joke. Neither was the trepidation brides felt on the eves of their wedding days. After their vows, couples learned to live with each other—not necessarily because they loved each other, but because they were stuck, and it was better to be stuck comfortably than otherwise.

Most of the external pressures that helped to enforce our grandparents' vows have dissolved. Women can earn money and may enjoy sex, even bear children, without marrying. As divorce becomes more common, the shame attendant on it dissipates. Some divorcés even argue that divorce is beneficial, educational; that the second or third or fifth marriage is “the best.” The only reasons left to marry are love, tax advantages, and, for those old-fashioned enough to care about such things, to silence parental kvetching.

In some respects, this freedom can be seen as social progress. Modern couples can flee the corrosive bitterness that made Strindberg's marriages nightmares. Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths might have abandoned his Roberta instead of drowning her.

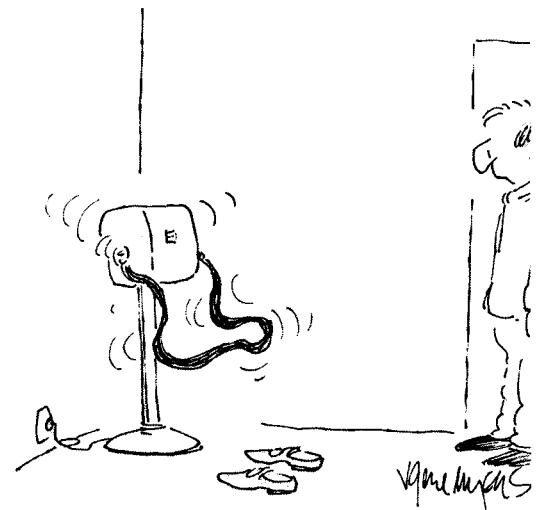
In other respects, our rapidly-rising divorce rate and the declining marriage rate (as more and more couples opt to forgo legalities and simply live together) represent a loss. One advantage of spending a lifetime with a person is seeing each other grow and change. For most of us, it is not possible to see history in the bathroom mirror—gray hairs, crow's-feet, yes, but not a change of mind or temperament. Yet, living with another person, it is impossible not to notice how patterns and attitudes change and not to learn—about yourself and about time—from those perceptions.

Perhaps the most poignant victim of the twentieth century is our sense of continuity. People use to grow up with trees, watch them evolve from saplings to fruit bearers to gnarled and unproductive grandfathers. Now, unless one is a farmer or a forester, there is almost no point to planting trees because one is not likely to be there to enjoy their maturity. People change addresses and occupations and hobbies and life-styles and spouses rapidly and readily, much as we change TV channels. In our grandparents' time, one committed oneself to certain skills and disciplines and developed them. Carpenters spent years learning their craft; critics spent lifetimes learning literature. Today, the question often is “What do you do?” but “What are you into?” One week, astrology; the next, health food; philosophy, history, jogging, movies, EST—from “commitment” to “commitment” like a flower among flowers because it is easier to test something than to master it, easier to buy a new toy than to repair an old one.

I feel sorry for what my divorced friends have lost. No matter how earnestly the former spouses try to “keep in touch,” no matter how generous the visiting privileges for the parent who does not have custody of the children, the continuity of their lives has been broken. The years they spent together have been cut off from the rest of their lives; they are isolated memories, no more integral to their past than a snapshot. Intelligent people, they will commit their next marriages—if they have them—to the future. They may even, despite not having a shared past, notice growth. What I pray, though, is that they do not delude themselves into believing like so many Americans today, that happiness is only a measurable moment to moment and, in the pursuit of momentary contentment, forsake the perspectives and consolation of history.

There is great joy in watching a tree grow.

—CARLL TUC



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