



THE 25-YEAR ITCH

Empty nesters and the second half of marriage

The following article by Wendy Donahue appears in the August 2012 issue of *U.S. Catholic* magazine.

Divorce has doubled for couples over 50. Empty nesters share tales from the brink.

Even before Dick and Irene Reibold's younger daughter left for college, they were living what they call "the married single lifestyle" in Macomb, Michigan.

They owned a tax preparation business together. They attended Mass together. They slept separately and scarcely spoke, even at work.

"We went for over seven years without physical, sexual relations," Dick says.

"There was nothing dramatic or traumatic," Irene says about the deep disconnect. "It was a slow bleed."

Now, having launched their children, they were supposed to be entering the second half of marriage with a second wind. Instead, their marriage was crashing. They pondered a do-not-resuscitate order.

They're not alone. Although the divorce rate for the general population has held steady since the 1980s, it has doubled for older adults over the past 20 years, a bombshell finding from a study co-authored by Susan Brown, co-director of the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University.

The research paper, "The Gray Divorce Revolution," evolved from a casual chat about Al and Tipper Gore's split in 2010. Brown and her colleague I-Fen Lin crunched marriage data from the American Community Survey and were shocked to find that of all those who divorced in 2009, one in four was age 50 or older, compared with one in 10 in 1990.

"When its one in four, it's a trend we need to pay attention to," Brown says. A recent study by the American Association of Retired People, she says, also suggests that in this age group women initiate the divorce two thirds of the time.

"There are a number of factors. Many of these couples are experiencing key turning points. We have longer life expectancies, and many of these people can expect to live another 30 years."

That prods couples such as the Reimbolds to take stock of their marriages. "We weren't going to mess up our

daughter's years of high school with separate living," Irene says. "But it really explodes at that point when you turn around and there's no one there tying you to your decision to stay together."

Both cradle Catholics, the Reimbolds felt bound by their faith but also conflicted. "I wanted God to be sure that I didn't want to spend my eternal life with this guy," Irene says.

So Dick moved out of the house and into a rental property that they owned. "Although I wasn't happy about the separation," Dick says, "at least I didn't have to hide this pain anymore."

A time of reckoning

For many couples, the second half of marriage packs a 1-2-3 punch of physical, social, and emotional change, says Mary Jo Pedersen, author of *For Better, For Worse, For God: Exploring the Holy Mystery of Marriage* (Loyola) and a national leader in Catholic family ministry.

Health problems, medications, and menopause can sour moods and wither the libido. Once reliable social circles may disband as children graduate and spouses approach retirement. Crises may arise with elderly parents or with grown children.

"And then you have the issues of unresolved losses and disappointments in the first part of the marriage—the child who was developmentally disabled, the kid who got pregnant, the job that didn't work out," Pedersen says. "You can deal with a lot of hurt and loss when you're busy with kids or working 12 hours a day. But in the second half all of these ghosts re-emerge."

To endure, couples must reckon, renegotiate, and sometimes recover from bad habits. Pedersen says they should discuss hurts and differences proactively—saying, for example, "We're not intimate in the way I'd like us to be; let's talk about it or get a book or talk to someone about this"—rather than arguing, hurting, avoiding, and seething.

"If you have not established a way to deal with conflict, it will really blow up in this second half," Pedersen says. "The big 'R' emerges: resentment. It's like a poison. You swallow it and expect the other guy to die. But you die."

Fifteen to 20 years of dysfunction blinds a partner to the good in her or his spouse. A husband may be an accomplished professional or selfless volunteer, says Pedersen, but what the wife sees is, "That bastard! He is still watching TV, and we haven't spoken in five nights!"

“Marriage is a partnership. It’s a team,” she says. “You’re supposed to be on each other’s side. If you’re going to be on opposing teams, then you’re in the divorce category.”

The Reimbolds lived as a team in the early years of their marriage. They’d ride the train together to their jobs at different offices, meet for lunch, or go out for dinner before returning to the suburbs.

After their first child was born, they were unable to have a second. Twelve years later, they adopted a baby girl.

“When children appear on the scene it’s almost natural that the energy and attention is to the kids as opposed to the spouses. And so we trundled along,” Irene, now 65, says. “We’d go to a counselor every five years. We knew that something was not right, not that it was terribly wrong, but something wasn’t right. Communication is so key, and it’s so easy, and you’re a step away, and you just never get there.”

Society’s definition of a “good marriage” has evolved and expanded in the past 50 years. Pop culture has created a “you complete me” ideal, and spouses who subscribe to it despair if their marriage doesn’t measure up.

“Our expectations of marriage are so out of line,” Pedersen says. “Marriage isn’t supposed to make you happy, it’s supposed to make you married. Marriage creates an environment in which you can choose happiness and you can create a wonderful home and friendship that will bring you happiness. But the institution itself—like everything, it’s what you do with it.”

Fantasy vs. reality

Even long-term marriages succumb to the myth of a mismatch, says Diane Sollee, founder of smartmarriages.com and the Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education. “It doesn’t matter how young or old you are, there’s this romantic fantasy that if you’re just with the right person, your life will be wonderful,” Sollee says.

Empty nesters might protest, “No! I don’t want a replacement! I just want to live alone,” Sollee acknowledges. But, she says, it’s still a romantic fantasy to think they would be better off by themselves.

Sollee cites University of Chicago research on marital happiness, analyzing data from more than 5,000 couples interviewed in the 1980s and again in the ’90s. Among couples who called their marriages unhappy in the first round but stayed together, two out of three said their marriages were happy five years later. Spouses who divorced and remarried were, on average, no happier than those who stayed married.

Research on the consequences of late-in-life divorce is scarce, Brown says, because it has been uncommon until recently. But she ventures that the economic costs intensify for this age group because their working years are dwindling; ex-spouses have less time to recover financially.

Cost kept suburban Chicago couple Phil and Helen Kornick, both 51, from divorcing about six years ago. Their marriage began unraveling in the ’90s when Phil, who owned an IT consulting firm, was working long hours.

“He would come home, eat dinner, and then I would see the back of his head for two, three hours,” Helen says. “Then he’d finish working and just diddle around on the computer because I wasn’t talking to him because he had ignored me for a few hours.”

Then the Internet bubble burst and his business failed. “A series of things occurred—that I’m ashamed of—that happened within my depression and the financial stress,” he says. “My shutting down was really the crux of the marital breakdown.”

Preparing to separate, Helen went back to school to earn her master’s degree so she could support herself. She also prayed and searched online for help and found Retrouvaille.

An offshoot of Worldwide Marriage Encounter, Retrouvaille evolved into a distinct Catholic ministry to heal marriages in crisis. The Kornicks are Jewish, but Retrouvaille is open to anyone. They completed their first retreat in 2006.

“What Retrouvaille did was give us the tools to reconcile the hurts inflicted during the time when we weren’t paying attention to our marriage,” Helen says. “If you’re not communicating what you need, there’s no way you’re going to get your needs met.”

One tool was “to create that marital moment,” Helen says. “When a spouse walks in, you greet them and say, ‘Hi, how are you?’ and give them a hug and kiss. It took me a very long time to accept a hug and kiss from Phil. I was very hurt and angry.”

Phil persevered, and so did their marriage. They went on to become Retrouvaille program coordinators.

In 2008 their grown daughter was diagnosed with stage IV cancer.

“If we hadn’t gotten centered as a unit, our daughter, who was 21 when she was diagnosed, would not have had the benefit of our team support,” Helen says. “Even as we continue to face her treatment challenges and her needs, we’re able to do it together.”

It’s often reported that the divorce rate is roughly the same for those who have a religious affiliation and those who don’t. But research indicates that those who actively practice their religion can reduce divorce risk. W. Bradford Wilcox, a director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, has found those who regularly attend church are 35 percent less likely to divorce than those who do not regularly attend.

Remarriages are at a greater risk of divorce than first marriages, according to “Gray Divorce.” Of those over 50 who divorced in 2009, 53 percent were in remarriages. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to divorce than whites.

Supply and demand

An “unhealthy economy of relationships” in the black community lowers the tolerance for imperfect unions, says Andrew Lyke, director of the Office for Black Catholics and former coordinator of the marriage ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

“As the marriageable black male, I’m in demand, so I really don’t have to suffer for my partner,” says Lyke, who is married with grown children. “That’s a major factor for why the marriage rate is so low and the divorce rate is so high in our community. Once you’re beyond the early stages of a relationship when you’re mostly intoxicated with each other, why would you stay? You look for another and stay drunk for the rest of your life.”

Or there’s this alternative course of action, he says: “We can soberly embrace each other in all of our wretchedness and flaws and be that wonderful reflection of the paschal mystery.”

Lyke is not advocating a lifetime of suffering. “Sometimes in marriage, the heaviest cross you’ll carry is each other,” he says. “But our faith tells us something about the cross—that the story doesn’t end there. If we remain faithful through those times when we don’t like each other and we love each other out of a promise, our love begins to reflect God’s love. And God does some wonderful things to us, in us, with us; we rise up and become. There’s a resurrection that happens.”

Lyke, 59, and his wife Terri, 57, draw from that mystery when they face big challenges—his wife’s recent diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, for example—as well as when they negotiate small differences.

“Thank God we have this rhythm in our lives of reconciliation and we know how to forgive each other, we know how to begin again,” Lyke says. “And those little things, instead of finding forgiveness sometimes we just give each other room. I’ve given up on trying to change her, and she’s given up on trying to change me. And we just live with it—and you find you can live very well.”

As their children have grown, Lyke and his wife have taken their union out of the home and into mission, inspired by the Sermon on the Mount.

“We need to take our marriages and put them on a lampstand so it gives light to the whole community, so people can see what real love is all about. Real love is sometimes about love that is very hard to give. If I love my wife because of all her wonderful traits, what credit is that to me? Anyone can do that. If our love is going to be that extraordinary love we claim it to be, then the most important time of my love is when it’s most difficult to give. That’s when my love is transforming, that’s when my love really, really makes a difference, and that’s when I become who I need to be.”

A second chance

The Reimbolds craved that resurrection. “At one point, there was something right in the relationship,” Irene says.

Like the Kornicks, they found it through Retrouvaille.

“It’s a very interesting story how we decided to go to Retrouvaille,” Dick, now 70, says. “I went to church. I stopped by at our house afterward and dropped off the bulletin and asked if she would read the article on page so-and-so.”

“I’ll preface it,” Irene says. “On our 30th wedding anniversary, friends threw us a party, but in 1997 I had already decided this marriage was over, within the house. I said to Dick at that point that I was tired, I had done the counselors and trying to change and I wasn’t doing it anymore. I saw a Retrouvaille article. I thought, if Dick would just say he’d go to that, I’d go to that. I wasn’t about to tell him about it. Now we get to this weekend and he has the bulletin on the table in my house, and I opened it and the Retrouvaille article was there. I know now what it means to have a heart leap. I called him and said, ‘Dick, if you want to go to Retrouvaille, I’ll go to Retrouvaille.’”

“I said, ‘What’s Retrouvaille?’ Dick says. “I wanted her to read the article about helping El Salvadoran children.”

Irene explained the program to him. They called the contact number on a Tuesday in 2003. The next Retrouvaille weekend started that Friday.

They attended the weekend and six follow-up sessions. “It wasn’t until the following August that we got back together,” Irene says. “I didn’t want to get together to go through that separation again.”

On a vacation together later, “something clicked,” Irene says. “It all made sense again.”

“We both had made changes for the good of the relationship,” Dick says. “Prior to that, it was a lot of words, but there was no concrete evidence that we were willing to change.”

“And keep it going,” Irene says. “The rest is happiness,” Dick says. “We share our feelings, we do things together, we don’t surprise each other by, ‘Oh, I did this,’ and not asking. We share decision-making.”

And, once again, they share a bed.

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Have a blessed week,

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