

PS7- "WHY IS THE DIVORCE RATE SO LOW?: REINVENTING MARRIAGE IN ORDER TO SAVE IT", SNR, 8/99

(Note: Fred Branfman is currently remarried after a divorce in the mid-80s, and is living in Washington, D.C. He stresses that the focus of this article is on the quality of the relationship between married couples, which he believes is the key to successfully raising children. The piece does not explore children's impact on the relationship.)

I. THE "MARRIAGE TRANCE": DYING BEFORE WE MUST

"On an existential level, the couple bond (can) become a death pact ... The attempt to find security in an illusion of merging with another leads to an insidious and progressive loss of identity in each person. The individuals involved learn to rely more and more on habitual contact, with less and less personal feeling. They find life increasingly hollow and empty as they give up more aspects of their personalities.

"However, once the symptoms of ... addictive attachment between two people have been recognized and altered, a new type of relationship becomes a possibility. Freeing themselves from destructive ties and moving toward individuation opens up the possibility for genuine love and intimacy."

-- Dr. Robert Firestone, The Fear of Intimacy (to be published in September 1999, by American Psychological Association Books.)

Around 1980, as father was approaching 70 and I 40, I said to him one day "Dad, it seems like everyone I know has been divorced." "Son", he responded, "I don't know anyone who IS divorced. We all stayed married," - referring to the dozens of close friends a much-loved, suburban upper middle-class businessman like himself had accumulated over his lifetime.

Our societal myths about the nuclear marriage blind us to an astonishing reality: in just one generation an institution in which most of us still believe has been largely abolished in fact - even as we continue to marry and divorce, dutifully carrying on as if nothing had happened - like Pod People in a trance. "I believe in marriage and will keep doing it till I get it right," said a 50 year-old friend some years ago, his life in ruins after a disastrously unhappy 3rd marriage that had left him bankrupt, living in a tiny apartment, and with little reason to believe that he would get it right the 4th time.

This blind devotion to the institution of marriage and the nuclear family is, from a "rational" perspective, nothing short of amazing. We have accepted fundamental changes in dozens of other institutions and customs once thought immutable - slavery, Jim Crow, industrial labor unions, child labor, the horse and buggy, political bosses and smoke-filled rooms, virginity, a President's privacy, male-only suffrage and sports teams, world wars, European monarchies - the list is endless.

But we have been unable to accept the changes that are occurring in marriage. Our politicians, church leaders, and many parents continue to speak of the institution as it existed a century ago even though they themselves, not to mention most citizens, are no longer living it. That the head of the House Republicans attacking the President's sexual behavior, Newt Gingrich, was himself conducting a far lengthier adulterous affair throughout the President's trial and impeachment, and that both his successor and the head of the committee impeaching him had also committed adultery, symbolizes the REAL state of marriage today. Not only most of the population but our leaders themselves have voted with their feet about how well today's version of marriage meets their needs.

The failure of the conventional marriage has produced a curious paradox. Those politicians and preachers who speak most of preserving it are in fact its greatest problem — since the version they promote has become unviable. Only those willing to challenge the current orthodoxy and experiment with marriage offer any real hope of

saving it. Marriage will fundamentally change or die in coming decades, and only those willing to change it can hope to preserve it.

Conventional marriage's continuing "irrational" hold on our minds, even as it works less and less in our lives, is rooted in something very deep and very beautiful in the human psyche. The Romantic Ideal, Joseph Campbell reminded us, goes back to the Middle Ages and the tales of King Arthur's Court. Something deep within us longs to meet Our Beloved, who will complete, love, honor and care for us in sickness and in health till Death do us part. My Perfect Mate will understand and accept me: we will always be able to tell the truth to each other, make beautiful love, laugh, sing, and take long, romantic walks in the moonlight.

How beautiful it is for those couples who achieve these ideals! We all know a few. And yet, how very, very sad it is for the rest of us, the vast majority, who have not met that Perfect Mate and/or been unable to sustain a relationship with them when we thought we had.

The issue isn't just the "divorce rate" hovering at 50%, but the "marriage satisfaction rate" among the 50% who remain married. I've asked hundreds of people over the years the same question: "think of the married couples you know. What's your gut feeling about the percentage who are truly happy?" The answer is rarely more than 10%-20% (my own instincts put the number even lower among those I know.)

Our society, in short, is promoting an institution that only works, to be generous, for some 10-20% of us.

The situation demands compassion more than anger or ridicule. Hillary Clinton was right when she said that people were "mean", not to mention hypocritical and self-serving, in how they treated the problems she and her husband were experiencing in their marriage. This reaction is, unfortunately, fairly typical. There is something about dealing honestly with marriage that triggers people's defensiveness and anger as do few other issues.

That something is suffering. Unwilling to face the pain in our own marriages and those of our loved ones, we often attack people and situations that evoke it. The widespread attacks on those who criticize conventional marriage are evidence of the unhappiness it is producing. For if our suffering is precisely the distance between our reality and our expectations, there is probably no institution that causes more pain in America today. We expect to meet the Perfect Mate. We encounter a far different reality.

And that gap between expectation and reality spawns more ills than one can bear to enumerate: first and foremost the sexual, physical and emotional abuse of children, the insecurity they are forced to endure as their parents spend much of their lives bickering, arguing, disagreeing and fighting, and/or living emotionally-deadened lives often resembling zombies in a horror movie more than humans, and/or wind up divorcing anyway.

And the toll on the adults: the constant lying, arguing, repressed anger, passive aggression, adultery, physical and emotional abuse, addictions to cigarettes, alcohol and drugs of all kinds including skyrocketing anti-depressant use, stress, workaholicism, obesity, health problems of all kinds and, most frightening of all: addiction to routines, television and emotional deadness that amount to a kind of death years before our physical death.

We have such a short time on this earth. There is perhaps nothing more poignant than how much of even this brief moment we live emotionally deadened lives. Marriage is not solely responsible for this, of course. But it plays a major role in perpetuating our greatest horror: the extent to which we so often die before we must.

Let's be honest here, dear reader, especially we baby-boomers who are, after all, approaching our deaths. No point in denying the truth anymore, at least to ourselves, even if we dare not speak it aloud to mates or children. Do you remember what you thought and hoped your marriage would be? Now, ask yourself:

10 How often do you and your mate genuinely feel and express tender love for each other?

o How often do you honestly communicate about your vulnerabilities, fears, and disappointments?

o How much genuine, heartfelt feelingfulness is there in your day-to-day interactions? How much time do you really spend looking at each other, crying and laughing together, genuinely "making love" rather than taking or avoiding sex?

o How much of your marriage consists of routinized, formulaic interactions, often delivered in a singsong voice, in which you and your mate tiptoe around "sensitive" topics like peasants walking through a minefield?

o How regularized has become even the times you see each other let alone communicate: maybe an hour over dinner if the TV isn't going, sex on Saturday night, a few hours together on Sunday?

o How much time is spent covertly or overtly trying to convince the other that they are wrong about key points you have been debating for years, and that you are right?

o What is the gap between the accommodation your marriage has become and your original conception of what it would be?

If most of us answer such questions honestly (full disclosure: I don't like the answers to such questions about my own marriage), we see that the wonder is not that the divorce rate is so high but that it is so low.

The greatest tragedy of all, however, is that marriage can be a source of aliveness and love and happiness - if we dare free up our minds and allow it to be transformed. The abolition of marriage is not a realistic solution. The Romantic Ideal, our genuine desire for affiliation, our dread of aloneness, the genuine good a happy marriage can do for children (not the myth that children are better off being brought up in unhappy marriages) are too deeply engrained for that.

What is needed is not abolition but a rebirth of imagination. Our society has engrained within all of us dozens of expectations, conscious and unconscious, about what a marriage "should" be: our obligation to visit our spouse's parents whether we wish to or not, the

notions that couples should share bedrooms and be sexually faithful to each other, that they should stay together "for the children" however miserable they may be, that living a deadened life together is preferable to taking a chance on spending significant periods apart -- the list is endless.

Each "should" is a brick in our prisons. If marriage is to be saved and reinvigorated as an institution, if our society is to be saved from the ills it spawns, each couple must be encouraged to invent their own version.

The strongest case for doing so is not only reinvigorating our own lives, but saving our children and grandchildren. One watches the nuptials of young people today with horrified fascination, as they ardently make vows statistics indicate they will likely break - after years of untold suffering for themselves and the children they bring into the world. Like lambs being led to slaughter, like buffaloes being marched over a cliff, our youth today are being subjected to a kind of brainwashing - caused by our failure to be able to imagine an alternative that works.

No more bricks. The only "should" that can work is that "there should be no shoulds". Those who choose to marry should be encouraged to create their own versions of marriage, based on their natures and needs, rather than societal prescription or unsustainable Romantic images from another era.

In a moment, we shall look at ways to re-imagine marriage or relationships. To really understand the imperative for doing so, however, it is first necessary to take a deeper look at why most marriages not only don't but can't work.

II: WHY MOST MARRIAGES CAN'T WORK

It is common to attribute the failure of marriage to societal changes since the end of World War II: rising expectations among the '60s generation for individual happiness, the impact of the Sexual Revolution and the Pill, growth eroding the economic imperatives that

forced many pre-war couples to stay together, women's liberation - both the movement and the Information Revolution's impact in reducing the advantages conferred by physical strength -, less willingness to delay gratification perhaps partly caused by growing up in the shadow of nuclear annihilation, and so forth.

These societal changes, however, primarily explain the skyrocketing divorce rate. They don't really explain why sustained "marriage satisfaction" is so low. Although my father's generation did not divorce, their marriages were surely no happier than our own. Yes they stayed together - but at what a cost!

Many experts suggest that phenomena like child sexual abuse, alcoholism and domestic abuse were as much or more than today - they were simply less discussed. The fundamental reason we had a sexual revolution was that people were so sexually frustrated in the pre-60s era - or forced to live lives of even greater lying and hypocrisy about adultery than today. Betty Friedan's call for the liberation of the American housewife would have been ignored if middle-class women were really happy doing the laundry and washing the carpets. And the repression of emotions, the lack of emotional honesty, the inability to discuss problems openly, the failure to even be able to say to kids "I love you", let alone live it, was far higher.

No, to understand why marriage so rarely works in our society one must go far deeper than bashing either the '60s or conservatives who are trying to close the barn door after the horse has left.

One thinker/practitioner who has gone deep enough to offer a comprehensive explanation for both the near-universality of our outward devotion to marriage and its inner dissolution is Dr. Robert Firestone, a Santa Barbara-based psychiatrist who has been practicing for nearly 40 years and written 7 books, including works on relationship, child-rearing, suicide and therapy.

His latest book, The Fear of Intimacy, tackles the issues of divorce and marriage head-on. To summarize, Firestone believes the following:

o we are all emotionally injured by our parents as infants (because they were injured by their parents), and to preserve our sanity develop defenses to protect ourselves. When we learn we will die, usually between the ages of 3 and 8, this knowledge reinforces our defenses as we must now not only protect ourselves against parental neglect but our deaths.

o our primary defense is the "fantasy bond", in which we form an illusion that we are bonded with our parents, that they will always give us the emotional love and security we desire, and protect us from discomfort and death.

o When we become adults, we carry this fantasy bond with us into our relationships, looking to our mates to provide the nurturance we wished from our parents. The most dramatic example is when we "fall in love" with people we barely know, clearly demonstrating the fantasy and emotional hunger that we bring into our marriages.

o While adaptive to us as children, these defenses are maladaptive to our marriages. Few mates can satisfy our emotional hunger and desire for unconditional love and protection - especially since they are seeking the same things from us.

o Marriages can become a source of happiness, but only if we are willing to first emotionally separate from our mate, learn to satisfy our own needs, and shift the goals of the relationship to honest communication and friendship. The early step of separation, however, causes initial anxiety. We must let down the defenses we developed as children that we believe are necessary to our very survival. It can be done. But most of us eventually choose instead to keep our defense systems intact and settle in to an emotionally-deadened mutual accommodation to our mate's defenses.

This analysis clearly explains why the present form of marriage doesn't work for most of us. For marriage to genuinely succeed, each partner must be committed to the growth of the other. But most of us come into the relationship projecting our emotional hunger and need

for security on to our partner - a role he or she declines and in fact wishes we will play for them. It is clearly a recipe for disaster. Most of us have neither the training nor desire to provide the ingredients need to make the marriage work: a willingness of both partners to (1) challenge their own defense systems and support the other's desire to individuate; and (2) practice emotionally alive, feelingful and honest communication.

To Firestone's analysis we may add the delicate issue of sexual fidelity. We are the first generation to feel that we have a "right" to good sex, a view that is reinforced by our movies, TV shows, music, etc. Most couples, however, find that they do not remain attracted to their partners sexually over time, in part because of routine, in part because of the deadening effect of maintaining each other's defenses.

The Clintons, Gingriches, Kennedys, and Gary Harts are only the most visible tips of the iceberg that results. There may be no single issue causing more unhappiness, emotional chaos, deadening of genuine feeling, and "death before dying" among adults today than our difficulty in reconciling our sexual expectations with the reality of marriage.

Firestone suggests that the fundamental problem for our marriages is our "fear of intimacy". We fear the genuine intimacy that results from making oneself vulnerable. We are unwilling to challenge the defensive systems responsible for our psychological survival to date; to separate emotionally; to give our partner their freedom and pursue our own destiny without the false props of imagined security; tolerate the anxiety that comes with freedom; and, above all, to develop a simple, honest marriage that more approximates our relationships with our best friends than our fantasy about the Perfect Mate, Romantic Ideal, or Ultimate Rescuer.

Firestone believes that if we are willing to take these risks, to undergo this "Hero's Journey," it may well be possible to transform failed marriages into healthy and vital ones.

What he and others recommend as necessary to do so, however, amount to a virtual reinvention of the institution.

III: SAVING MARRIAGE BY REINVENTING IT

How might we transform marriage into an institution that works? What are the alternatives that we might want to experiment with? Nowhere is our failure of imagination about marriage more evident than in the lack of serious national debate on such questions. Most of our marriage counselors seek more to adapt people to a failed institution than create a new one. Prozac may reduce the pain of a difficult marriage. It is unlikely to stimulate the creativity needed to reinvent it. Given the lack of serious debate, none of us can claim to know what will work.

It is possible, however, to lay out a wide range of possibilities. If enough of us try enough of them, perhaps over time the institution can be transformed and saved. The following list is meant to be suggestive. It is obvious that such suggestions will not work for everyone. The point is to promote a spirit of experimentation, not to pretend to have real answers -which will only come if enough of us are willing to take enough risks for solutions to emerge out of practice.

A. COUNSELING: BEFORE AND DURING MARRIAGE

Although he said it with a smile, meditation teacher Jack Kornfield meant it: "the day to begin marriage therapy is the day you get married." And he was probably being too conservative. Couples could benefit by beginning the proper kind of counseling long before marriage, to see if they are willing to undertake the risks necessary to break defensive patterns and create alive, vital connections that can be sustained. It is clear that any relationship can benefit from counseling aimed at breaking fantasy bonds and encouraging couples to create relationships without "shoulds", based on their true natures. Such counseling could be received from a trained therapist or marriage counselor, co-counselors, or friends. The key aspect of any successful counseling is that it encourage close, loving and honest

communication about partners' fantasy bonds and emotional hunger, encourage healthy individuation and separation, and permit all feelings to be voiced while discouraging destructive acting out.

The key goal of such counseling is to break through the defenses that prevent genuine, honest, open communication about the core issues at the heart the marriage. There was nothing sadder in Hillary Clinton's attempt to defend her marriage than her statement that "we talk all the time". The issue, of course, is not simply talking about public policy or other externals but the internal issues that determine whether a marriage is alive or dead. Nothing symbolizes more the death of marriage today than the accepted assumptions that the President cannot engage in regular therapy because he is a politician, and that it is understandable and forgivable that he would lie to his wife.

Firestone advocates that couples engage in both individual and group therapy aimed at (1) open acknowledgement of defenses; (2) honest communication, including open discussion of negative feelings one is experiencing toward's one mate; (3) giving up the fantasy that the other can satisfy our psychological needs; (4) pursuing one's own freedom and self-actualization, and supporting one's mate's efforts to do the same; (5) committing to remaining open and vulnerable throughout the marriage, which requires both that each mate express difficult feelings openly and that they not act them out in ways that restrict the other's honesty or freedom.

Interestingly enough, he does not recommend "couples therapy" per se. Believing that marriage problems derive from each individual's defense system, he emphasizes the need for both partners to take responsibility for their own emotional hunger and/or tendency to withdraw - rather than using techniques which encourage each partner to accommodate to the other's defense system.

If we are willing to do this work, he says, our reward can be vital, alive, and exciting marriages which are far more fulfilling than living alone. The key quality of such marriages, he suggests, is the

deepest sort of friendship and a basic simplicity and lack of drama. He writes:

"in therapy with couples, we attempt to inspire a noncritical, accepting attitude, a recognition of each person as a separate individual, and a concern and respect for boundaries and priorities. The sexuality and love between two people manifesting these qualities approach a spiritual level.

"It manifests itself in simple ways, in a thousand small acts of kindness and consideration and in behaviors that lead to a deep sharing of life experiences and a sense of kinship and companionship.

"It is important, however, that in being sensitive to the other's wants and needs, one does not compromise one's own integrity or personal freedom in an effort to maintain harmony. Both need to be wary of making fundamental concessions, because these compromises predispose resentment, disharmony, and conflict in the future."

B. EXTENDING THE MARRIAGE BY CREATING FRIENDSHIP CIRCLES

One of the most interesting aspects of Firestone's work is the extent to which it has been developed through a circle of friends that have known, lived near each other and worked together for more than two decades. He reports that they have found a key to improving their marriages has been having a network of friends who provide such vital functions as supporting each other's child-rearing and reducing the burden on one partner to supply all the emotional needs of the other.

It is clear that one of the major reasons marriage fails is that the "nuclear family" cannot satisfy either the child-rearing or psychological needs of most couples today. People often have children because they wish to perpetuate themselves, for example, not because they genuinely wish or know how to love or nurture them. And, working two stress-filled jobs, they are unable to meet their children's emotional, and sometimes even physical, needs.

If we are to save marriage and the family, we may need to explore ways of explicitly seeking to build such friendship circles, which are somewhere between the isolated nuclear family on the one hand, and the commune or extended family on the other. America has not had much success in creating communes that serve as models for large numbers of us. And the extended family is largely a creation of the agricultural era.

Given that isolated nuclear marriages are unlikely to thrive in the 21st century, consciously creating support circles based on friendship and mutual interests may be key to the survival of either marriage or the nuclear family.

Note: Most of the following suggestions are not derived directly from Firestone's work, but are based on successful couples I know fairly or quite well.

C. INTEGRATING SPIRITUAL PRACTICE INTO MARRIAGE

Spiritual teachers Stephen and Ondrea Levine put it thusly: when there were just the two of them, there were problems; when they brought God into their relationship, it worked. Leaving the issue of God to the side, there seems little question that a key to saving marriage can be both parties developing a spiritual practice which allows them to shift their primary identity from the marriage to something larger.

As we have seen, perhaps the primary marriage problem is conditioned behavior stemming from one's childhood. A spiritual practice can be an indispensable aid in reducing the impact of this conditioning on the couple's interactions.

The author, for example, finds meditation invaluable in his marriage. Functionally, when I find myself caught up in "relationship escalation" I am to break my conditioned responses by engaging in serious meditation, which allows me to stop being run by my primal emotions, and to try and look at things from both my wife's and my own "non-conditioned" point of view.

On a deeper level, regular meditation, prayer, yoga or other spiritual practices can shift our identity from the various roles we play in our marriage to our Higher Self which both wants to love and be loved, and is able to place the love of the marriage in the context of the Love of the Universe. If both partners are engaging in such practices simultaneously it can be critical not only to reduce the negative impact of childhood conditioning but, more importantly, to create the space and light and perspective necessary for genuine love to take root.

The aim of Buddhist meditation practice when applied to relationship by teachers like Jack Kornfield, for example, is moving in the direction of the goal of the Third Noble Truth: love without attachment. It is remarkable how much this focus on genuine love free from childhood attachments resembles the kind of love described by Firestone and other existential psychotherapists.

D. ACKNOWLEDGING THE DESIRABILITY OF SERIAL MARRIAGES

I recently had lunch with Mike*, a sixteen-year old whose mother has remarried, but remains good friends with his father whom she divorced 6 years ago. Mike said that he was far happier with the new arrangement than when his parents had been living under the same roof all the time, loved all 4 of his present parents and felt loved by them, and was particularly happy that his biological father and mother had remained good friends. All in all, he said, he preferred the way it had worked out than had his parents remained together, though unhappy, "for the children's sake."

Mike's story is atypical, as is the friendship between his parents. But it can become the norm - and indeed must be if we are to save marriage as an institution. The simple fact is that more baby-boomers have been involved in serial marriages than have remained married to one person their entire life. Serial marriages have become as much a norm as single ones.

There are legitimate as well as unhealthy reasons for this phenomenon. While many leave marriages because they cannot successfully individuate, many others simply find themselves growing differently from their mates. Just as we change our friends or careers as we develop new interests, many of us find that we also want to change our partners. We may well do better the second time around, knowing more about our true nature, what we are capable of in marriage, and better able to find a mate with whom we are compatible.

The argument against promoting serial marriage as a norm, of course, is that it is harmful to the children. But as the story of Mike indicates, that is a myth. There is no real evidence, and certainly no logic, to suggest that a child is better off living in one household with two unhappy biological parents vs. growing up in two households composed of four far happier parents. And, whatever one's beliefs on this question, the fact is that serial marriages have become far more prevalent than not.

There is much debate over the extent to which second marriages end in divorce as often as first ones. Whatever the case, much anecdotal evidence indicates that couples who stay together in second or third marriages experience far higher "marriage satisfaction" than during their earlier ones. They learn from their earlier experiences - about themselves, their mates, and the institution itself. The fact is that serial marriage is often as legitimate an option as single marriages.

Unfortunately, however, despite the facts on the ground we still believe and teach our children that the "ideal" is for them to marry and live with one person all their lives.

If marriage is to survive, the reality of serial marriages may need to be accepted not only as unavoidable but often desirable - something that naturally and healthily occurs among adults who are growing, developing, learning and changing.

If we can teach our children that people are as likely to have several marriages during their lifetime as one, we can both cushion the impact of divorce on children, and do far more to save marriage than if we continue to insist on an outmoded ideal. Accepting the legitimacy of serial marriage can lead to such beneficial results as:

-- reducing the fears on the part of children that they will be abandoned if their parents divorce;

-- encouraging people who do divorce to remain lifelong friends, to their benefit as well as their children's;

-- encouraging people and society to develop systems to support people during their transition periods between "serial marriages";

-- reducing the heartache, pain and often violence caused by separation and divorce: if children are taught that serial marriages often make sense and are to be expected, they will be far less traumatized by one parent or the other seeking to leave the marriage. And so too will their parents. Rather than being seen as a "failure", divorce needs to be seen as a frequent natural option in a person's process of individuation and growth.

E. FROM SEPARATED PSYCHES TO MORE INDIVIDUATED LIVES

Karen and Arthur are a vigorous couple in their sixties who have been together for more than 30 years. They say that they are now more in love than ever before, their sex life together is at its peak, and they feel closer and more intimate than at any time in their relationship - in large part because they now live on separate coasts 9 months a year, visiting each other frequently and spending their summers together. They say that years of fighting, breakups and near-divorce could have been avoided had they chosen this option far earlier in their marriage.

As couples learn to separate psychologically and stop looking for their mates to satisfy their emotional hunger, they will likely want to experiment with leading more separate lives. The key principle: to spend time together voluntarily, when both parties choose to do so.

They may decide, for example:

- to spend free time with others, of either sex, rather than their mates;**
- to sleep in separate beds or rooms;**
- to take separate vacations;**
- to pursue separate interests;**
- to live in separate homes.**

Once again, this may not work for everyone or even most. But if we are to save marriage, it should not be assumed that couples "should" live together in any particular way.

F. SEPARATING ROMANCE AND CHILD-RAISING

A good friend of mine, Jerry, decided to have a baby with a lesbian psychologist shortly after breaking up with his girlfriend. They drew up a contract and, using artificial insemination, conceived a boy who is now 8 years old. They live within a few blocks of each other, and Tom spends half a week at each home. He now has 4 "parents", his father and mother having both entered new relationships. Jerry reports that the arrangement has worked extremely well.

There is a strong case for separating romance and child-rearing. The simple fact is that the people we fall in love with are often not necessarily the best parents we would choose for our child. While it can be argued that the "ideal" is a child conceived by two loving parents, life as we noted is far different. There seems no question that Tom is far better off than had he been conceived by two parents who subsequently went through a bitter divorce - as is the lot of tens of millions of children in America today. And, with 4 loving adults with a direct interest in his well-being, he is undoubtedly better off than the average child of a marriage between partners living out their fantasy bonds.

We need also to give thought to creating child-raising ceremonies and legal contracts, which are far more important than today's often naïve marriage ceremonies and arrangements. Marriage

vows are kept less often than they are broken. We need child-raising vows that cannot be broken, whatever happens to the marriage.

G. MAKING MARRIAGE HARDER AND DIVORCE EASIER

Dennis Rodman and Carmen Electra's marriage appears not to have produced progeny during its several day duration. And not everyone who goes through a divorce winds up homeless like the distinguished-looking, white-haired former millionaire too proud to borrow money from his friends whom I once picked up hitchhiking through Florida. But nothing illustrates the sheer idiocy of our present attitudes toward marriage more than the fact than it takes little more than \$10 and shrieking hormones to get married, while tens of thousands of couples are forced to go through horrible experiences in order to dissolve marriages that have made they and their children miserable for years.

Our politicians and preachers preach the "sanctity" of marriage while dishonoring it by making it so easy to get married and so difficult — through property laws and guilt-tripping — to terminate unhappy unions that should never have been entered into in the first place.

A visitor from another planet would be stunned to discover that we require our youth to study subjects like geometry and algebra that most will never use, but do not insist they courses on marriage and child-rearing - among the most important functions they will perform as adults.

Given the high societal cost of unhappy marriages, and the pain it causes children, a sane society would obviously make it far harder to get married, e.g. through steps to:

- require students to study realistic courses on marriage and child-rearing throughout high school and college;**
- require people to undertake relationship counseling if not therapy before they were married;**

-- encourage couples to live together before marriage to find if they are in fact compatible, while discouraging them having children until the trial period had been successfully traversed.

We would at the same time move to make divorce far easier, e.g. through steps to:

-- encourage all people, not just the rich, to sign binding prenuptial agreements, including prenuptials accepting the principle of joint custody for any children born during the marriage;

-- discourage the practice of couples jointly buying homes - e.g. by having each individual put up an agreed-upon share of equity which automatically reverts to them upon dissolution of the marriage;

-- encourage support systems to single parents raising children on their own.

Although it is unlikely that society will act in the near future, there is nothing stopping farsighted couples from taking such steps on their own initiative now.

Parents, clergy, political leaders, and others can begin encouraging their teenage or college age kids to take courses on marriage and child-rearing, and engage in counseling or therapy if they are involved in serious relationships.

And couples can calmly and frankly discuss the possibility that their union may not turn out to be permanent, and take steps to ensure that if they are forced to separate it will be as painless as possible.

H. SEPARATING MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL FIDELITY

The most sensitive, difficult, and potentially most important, step to saving marriage is to separate it from the issue of sexual fidelity. This obviously will not work for most, and for the record this author is not there himself. But it seems obvious that marriage can only be saved over the long run for many couples if they are willing to permit each other sexual freedom. Sexual jealousy is incredibly painful. But the "death compact" that requires many young people accept sexual

frustration for decades on end in order to remain married has proven even more fatal to the institution.

Reliable figures do not exist, of course, but let us estimate generously that 1/3 of couples are capable of monogamously achieving sustained sexual satisfaction throughout the course of their marriages. And let us assume, again generously, that although another 1/3 do not enjoy sexual passion in their marriage after an early phase, they are able to accommodate to it because of a low sex drive and/or the satisfaction they receive from other aspects of the marriage such as children and security. That still leaves 1/3 of the married population forced to choose between varying degrees of sexual frustration and remaining married.

The classic solution for this group, of course, has long been adultery - as much or more for our parents' generation as ourselves. But, as the example of the nation's First Marriage so dramatically illustrates, covert sex is often incompatible with vital, healthy, alive marriages. The benefits they provide in reducing sexual frustration tend to be canceled out by the dishonesty and deceit involved. It can't be emphasized enough that honest communication and deep, soulful friendship are keys to a good marriage. It is hard to have such honest friendships when one party is lying directly to the other, or bottling up healthy but frustrated sexual desires or jealous emotions that poison them from within.

Joan created an interesting alternative, however unusual it may seem to the rest of us. About 15 years ago she decided that she really did love her husband and, knowing him as well as she did, that he would be far happier in life if he had the option of sleeping with other women. They agreed that they would give it a try, with two basic conditions: everything would be aboveboard and open, and Joan would know and approve of the women involved. This solution has worked for this couple, as have variations of such arrangements for a half-dozen other marriages of my acquaintance - including women who have various sexual partners. In each of these cases, by the way, sex happens to be one-on-one, is simple, friendly, satisfying and devoid of the psychodrama that characterizes so many adulterous relationships.

It is hard to imagine not loosening the societal prescription that marriage requires fidelity if we wish to save the institution -- at least for the significant portion of cases where one partner or the other is experiencing significant sexual frustration that they find it difficult to control. Working through sexual jealousy is painful. But the alternative is often worse: a slow-growing cancer that destroys the marriage from within, whatever the external shell that is maintained.

CONCLUSION: MARRIAGE, DEATH ANXIETY AND THE COURAGE TO TRANSFORM

The deepest question concerning the future of marriage and family in our society relates to the question of death anxiety. If Firestone and other existential thinkers are correct, death anxiety is one of the key underlying causes of failure in marriage. We partly pull back from investing too much in the marriage because the loss of our spouse or children then becomes even more difficult to contemplate. And genuine love can trigger painful feelings about our own deaths that we have been repressing from early childhood.

If this is correct, it may be that there can be no genuine way to build healthy marriages unless individuals - and eventually society - are willing to address the issue of death anxiety more directly.

To imagine genuinely challenging our own defenses against death anxiety, and those of the pooled individual defenses we call society, is to fully appreciate how much courage it will take to transform marriage into an institution that genuinely works.

Maintaining a family structure built around two biological parents will likely continue as long as people continue to want to have babies at least partly to perpetuate themselves - which will likely be true for many years to come. The kibbutzim and many similar social experiments indicate that biological ties run deep indeed. Given this reality, transformation not abolition of marriage is our challenge.

Having transformed so many other institutions and customs over time, it is time now to take on the matrimonial bond. Enough pioneers have already showed the way, often at great personal cost. It is now appropriate for the rest of us to show similar courage. There is no formula. But each of us can demand something better for ourselves, our mates, and our children -- and in doing transform marriage the way social revolutions have always occurred: person by person, family by family, year by year.

*** All of the people mentioned in this article exist, and live the way described. We have given them other names, however, to protect their privacy and respect their intimate sharings with us.**