

THOUGHTS ON DIVORCE

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Divorce is a very controversial thing and I'm quite sure that many of the things I say will tread upon the sentiments of many people but that I guess is unavoidable. This can be seen as just a presentation from my experience of what's been happening. Because it's a huge topic I'll only be able to skim the surface.

Divorce today is striking into the life of an increasing number of people and families. Often it's described as a relatively recent development but it's important to realize that it is only the legal aspects that are new. In one sense it's a sign of our legalistic, righteous, contentious, culture. In another sense, it's really not quite a change, but only a more open manifestation of a thing we refer to as Emotional Divorce which has always and undoubtedly will continue to exist.

Emotional Divorce describes a situation in which people still stay together, and continue to live in the same place, remain legally married but really have very little emotional connection with each other. I've seen this go on in a family where the father and mother didn't talk to each other for 25 years and communicated through daughter and actually had separate refrigerators. That's a kind of refrigerator-differentiation from each other.

The legal aspects and the actual divorce do represent a change. On the positive side, they open up problems so that people become much more aware of the personal relationships that really exist between people and certainly it makes people clarify their positions, and makes them make clear cut choices. But on the negative side it fosters and encourages the notion that distance is the solution to the problem. And obviously it very often increases the negative feelings, the bitterness and resentment, that already exist between people.

It's always been my viewpoint that divorce is never the best solution to a problem but on the other hand, it may be the best thing that one can do at any given moment. I like to use the example of cancer surgery as an analogy in viewing this problem. People, certainly doctors, believe that the ultimate cure is to be able to cut out the entire cancer but that does not mean that if the cancer has spread, we end up doing nothing. We do the next best thing. In another sense however, a real divorce is

probably better than an emotional divorce if it is carried out properly. If a person uses the divorce as a learning experience and does not see it as a problem that is totally rooted in his partner and that he is getting rid of the problem by getting rid of the other person. If the divorced person can learn about his own part in bringing about the end of the marriage and institute appropriate changes in his own self, then he can be said to have learned from his experience. People rarely do this however.

The notion that there is such a thing as learning from divorce has become very popular and people go around talking about Divorce Therapy. In point of fact, Divorce Therapy is more an idea on paper than it is a realistic or practical way of dealing with these situations. People either come to a therapist at a stage when they are arguing violently with each other or one partner will come in and the other will leave, etc. So that Divorce Therapy is more of an idealistic concept that may be with us in another 30 to 40 years but certainly is not here today. People will not sit still long enough to look at any part of their fractured marriage but the part their partner has had in it.

Marriage traditionally has been viewed as a kind of a commitment but that idea really doesn't work very well because what marriage really is, is a commitment to quality. You cannot have a commitment to duration of time without also having a commitment to quality. That's what happens in many marriages because as the quality diminishes or is perceived to be diminishing, the commitment to time simply disappears. One thing about marriage is that it is not something that one does and then is finished with. Literally, you work on it forever. I have always been impressed by the fact that people get married and behave as if "I am now married and that's done with and now I can go about my real business which is furthering my career, or learning how to play tennis." If any businessman ran his business that way he would be bankrupt in-

side of two months. A person, for example would not open a new delicatessen and say "Now the damn store is open so I don't have to pay any more attention to it." A marriage should ideally be worked on forever. It should receive as much time and attention as a new business. A business or profession can not be taken for granted and neither can a marriage.

When in a marriage, one should continually define and re-define what he expects of it. The re-definition is necessary because change is a part of the evolution of any human system. For example, children don't remain children, they have a funny habit of growing up, grandparents have a funny habit of dying on us and we all know that whenever you add or subtract to a system you shake it up. So a system should be defined as something that has to be continually worked on, continually defined with different levels of expectation at any given moment.

The other funny thing about marriage is that it solves absolutely nothing. Marriage is really a test of what the two people bring to it. It does not in any sense of the word cause any new problems, although people who are married continually see it that way. i.e. "I didn't have this problem before I was married." The problem didn't show before they were married but it was there. What marriage does is bring out potential problems which were lying dormant. It's a kind of generational legacy that we can blame on Adam and Eve. But, with all the negativity that talking about divorce generates I must confess that I am continually impressed by the good judgment that people exert when they select a spouse. It seems to me that they genuinely do care about each other and select a marriage partner with exactly the right qualities.

When you are involved in these difficult situations you don't see very much of the positive side and tend to forget this good judgment was ever operating but in a funny kind of way the intensity of bitterness that one observes during the process of getting a separation or divorce is directly related to the intensity of caring about, which was there when these people got married. They are obviously opposite ends of the spectrum. In other words, the commitment to leave a marriage equals the commitment to enter the marriage which was much in evidence at the beginning of the relationship.

One of the things that does a great deal to decrease the quality of a marriage is the unreal expectations that people have about marriage. These expectations are obviously based on how somebody

views his extended family and they are also based on notions that are encouraged often by religion or marriage encounter which state that marriage is and should be a fusion or a unity. This view of marriage causes a great deal of difficulty because it denies the intrinsic differences that are present between people, and in practice it becomes a kind of suffocating thing. You must be like me, or I must be like you. Well, if that is the way it is supposed to work then what in heavens name do we do when we are confronted with the fact that we are quite honestly different from each other and are likely to remain different from one another for the rest of our lives.

Another expectation that is unreal and also enters into marriage, is the fact that people tend to run away from the emptiness that is inside of them and they try to fill that emptiness up by trying to accumulate another person. So that a shy person will marry somebody whom they feel to be socially outgoing. Of course, two years later they find out that underneath it all their partner is as shy as they are. Then what do you do? You can bring a third person in who is really outgoing but that would cause other problems. So one has to continually define his expectations in terms of "What actually should I get from myself." "If I am indecisive by marrying somebody who seems to be very decisive, I am not doing anything about my problem of being indecisive."

What a family therapist should do is have people define what expectations they have around the key words, husband, wife and marriage. Does marriage mean unity? What is a husband? What is a wife? And then the next important question is, where did these notions or expectations come from? And this will always take us back to the family that the person grew up in. People enter marriage with a perception of their parents as individuals. They see their parents as a child sees a father and as a child sees a mother. If anybody surveys his experience, he will find out that it is extremely difficult to look at your father and to see him as a person who also happens to be a parent. A second perception that people enter marriage with is the perception of what went on between their parents, what their marriage was like. All of these perceptions are limited by many, many things and one of them is secret keeping. After all, if there are secrets kept in the family, assumptions tend to come in, in place of fact, and people begin to get unreal definitions of what marriage is.

Some principles also get in the way of these perceptions. A common one is, never argue in front of the children, so that people will continually come in and say, "I can't stand arguing in the family. My father and mother never argued." In fact if that father and mother never argued, it means that either they never spoke to each other or one was lying about the whole thing and becoming kind of a non-person. I always encourage people, if you are going to have an argument, you don't necessarily ring a bell and summon the kids but you do let them see how you get into an argument, what happens, and that an argument is not the end of the world.

Perceptions are also limited very much by the emotional siding that occurs in a family. By this I mean somebody who sees his mother as the very good one and sees father as the bad one. Somehow or other people must come to the place when they can see an equal sign between their parents. Not that one was all good and not that one was all bad, but that their level of maturity or immaturity kind of fit together.

Another limitation of the perception of the family one comes from has to do with the fact that often emotional problems are talked about in terms of right or wrong. This is a kind of a dead end to any conversation or whatever people can have with each other. Emotional systems really operate on the basis of function and they have nothing to do with right or wrong. The important questions to ask about them are, do they work or don't they work? If they don't work, what can a person change in himself which will help the system to work better.

Another thing that happens is that two people enter into a marriage with a desire to improve. They try to take the best part of the family system they came from and imitate that and take what they perceive to be the worst part and get rid of that. So obviously the perceptions of the family that one comes from are critical to your choice of spouse and to your choice of how you are going to set your family up.

People also enter into marriage with a variable amount of desire to accumulate. If one is unsure of his amount of self, he may tenuously keep people away so that they won't intrude on this self and take it away from him, so that the self does not erode. Other people try to get from the other that which will fill their own emptiness and their own completeness. Of course, to a large extent, this is impossible because there is a natural incompleteness in all of us. The other part of it is that if it takes some change in me to fill that which is empty in

me, I can quite simply never get that by trying to fill myself from you. Confronted with the varying degrees of emptiness that are in each person, people have basically two choices. They can sit in that emptiness and use it for a kind of a personal re-evaluation and develop a keen sense of themselves. That's a kind of a prescription for misery but probably it's the most important thing that anybody can do with his own life. Or they can make a desperate attempt to try and fill it from the other. If they choose to do that it creates a struggle and a very conflictual marriage, one that we are all so familiar with. Another solution is to become symptomatic and get into this thing called mental illness. In that case the world comes along and tries to fill in the emptiness.

All marriages start with varying degrees of limitations, potential dysfunction and emptiness. You can sit and talk to any young couple who are thinking about getting married, and they ask you should they get married. I have always found that an impossible question to answer because a therapist can easily see these potential problems. The real question is not are the problems there, everyone has problems, but what are you going to do about them? Are they going to be made into problems? Or are they going to be made into experiences? You see with one fell swoop, I have just abolished all emotional problems, much like the APA abolished homosexuality. I just changed the word from problem to learning experiences and no longer do we need therapy, but that's a whole other issue.

Let's go on with what happens in this whole situation. As time goes on, the pursuer tries to gain self from the other person. After all, for example, it's much easier to tell the other person to stop smoking than it is for me to stop smoking myself. The distancer protects his own turf and tries often to gain self from outside the family by learning how to play tennis, by becoming a psychiatrist, by becoming a very effective businessman, playing golf four times on a weekend, etc. Now, this isn't all a one way direction, this thing goes back and forth between the two marriage partners depending upon the issue that they are involved in at any given point in time. So, it is an alternating phenomenon and this is what's called the Murray Bowen two-step. Nobody ever knew that Murray Bowen was a great dancer.

As things get more upset, people introduce various stabilizers into the system. A common one is that mother gets over-involved with the children.

You can also have a triangle formed by affairs. You can have alcoholism. Therapy often enters into this also and instead of becoming a change agent, therapy can become a kind of stabilizer designed to perpetuate the dysfunction in the family. Various agencies from the community may hop in. Somebody can get involved in overwork or excessive community activity. In fact some of our greatest and most respected citizens involved in the community have the most dysfunctional families one ever saw. Another alternative is to become a family therapist and then to go home and therapize your own family which is a good way of avoiding change in yourself too.

As the negative emotional intensity increases and as the stabilizer and the adaptations break down, there is an increasing awareness in people of the emptiness that is inside each of them and that's also between them in the relationship. With the awareness of this emptiness, lots of things happen. Feelings are activated, such as anger, frustration, righteousness, blame, accusation, attack, defense, symptoms of mental illness, physical illness, resentment, bitterness, vengeance, hatred and last but not least, a kind of an emotional blindness ensues. At this point of emotional blindness, people in the two-some take things very personally. It's a kind of malignant sensitivity so that everything that the other person does is negatively directed to get at them, to hurt them, to shoot them down, to ignore them, to say I don't care. There is also an acute lack of the notion that when two people are in the room, there are never just two people in the room but there are probably 22 people in the room, ghosts from the extended family. What one person says to the other is often partly directed and motivated by a perception of his own extended family. But with this kind of emotional blindness people don't see that. They already have a fix on the other one and they say the other one did that to shoot me down. The fix precludes any kind of an open view of what is really going on in the system at that time. When the day of reckoning comes, ultimately the question arises, what am I going to do, am I going to work on myself or am I going to work on the system, on the marriage? A kind of an either/or situation ensues. He or she is my problem and therefore I must get rid of my problem by getting rid of my spouse. At this point, the pursuer who has been trying to gain self from the other person pulls back. The result of this is a revolution and as we all know, revolutions tend to go too far. The pull-back is as excessive as the move-in was. The distancer really begins to believe at this point that he is not such

a bad guy, that his distance is a reasonable approach to life, and that the most important thing for him at that moment, is for him to figure himself out. He becomes very self-centered. The situation has escalated and gotten out of hand and it is often too late for any kind of effective intervention.

The system is broken, but it is not dead, it is negative, not positive, it is repulsive, instead of being attractive. But it is not over, it is not over any more than it is over when death ends the system. In both death and divorce the other person remains in our heart and in our head. In a funny kind of a way, and I have heard people say this over and over again, death would be an easier situation to deal with because death involves, generally speaking, less regret, less guilt, and less negativity and it is not seen as a personal failure.

How does a family therapist enter into this picture? Well, actually, I suppose there are infinite numbers of ways to handle these situations and I would like to give some examples of them. One is when one or both people talk separation off and on and they come in kind of wanting marriage. To keep that thing going, one will say I want the marriage and then the other will say I don't want it, then this one will want it and the other one will not want it and you can go back and forth with that kind of thing and it's really a dead end. I have tried identifying to people that I am not a marriage counselor but they don't believe it. However, I do have a test. I talk to them about perhaps getting a separation and maybe getting a divorce and then I watch what happens. People with this kind of a situation, will then take an anti-divorce position and they'll say "well, we don't have the money," or "we can't do that to the children," what they are really saying is "we have enough going between the two of us to make it but for one reason or another, pride, or anger or whatever, I am not going to tell my husband/wife and let him know that." Another way that people tend to deal with this is that over time, they quite simply don't move towards a separation or divorce.

Once you get that notion of marriage out, you can begin to really get down to work by having people try to understand themselves and understand what they came from and get them to stop this impossible business of trying to change each other. Another common situation is where one wants a divorce and the other one wants the marriage. This one wants to move out and the other one wants the marriage. The one who wants to leave often wants to do this without feeling guilty or bad and that

is obviously impossible because even if he leaves the system, especially when there are children, it is an on-going system. Often this partner wants no therapy at that point. He may have wanted it five years before but now he wants none. Actually, he may be involved with a third party and thereby be making one of the biggest but most common mistakes a person can make in the process of getting a separation. It is also one of the biggest problems I have in getting people to understand what I mean. You simply cannot be in two systems at the same time and get anything out of it. You cannot be working for IBM and Xerox at the same time. By doing this, one avoids the emptiness, the misery, facing up to his own part of the problem. No matter what a person says, what he is doing is leaving because he thinks he has something better somewhere else. He is basically denying the notion that he has 50 % of that problem and that he must change before he moves into another system. You can do two systems in sequence but not simultaneously.

The person who wants to leave is very often pre-occupied with himself. He is often in the aftermath of a revolution having tried for many years to get this thing, whatever it is, that will fill his emptiness and make him feel complete. But now he moves away from that thing that he has pursued fruitlessly for a long time. What interests him most in that moment is talking about himself. That is all he is interested in. He is a good candidate for psychoanalysis, except that he could stay in that position for the next 20 years. To talk to him about the marriage is to him to miss the point.

The one who wants the marriage is in a totally opposite position. This person is other-focused, focused on the spouse that is leaving and loses total concentration on himself. Often these people have ignored their spouse for many years and have taken them for granted but now with that spouse leaving they are actually interested in preserving the marriage. A classic example of this is the mother who has been over-involved in the children. Suddenly father isn't there anymore and now she begins to appreciate him. She has been more mother than wife. What his leaving does is begin to bring out the wife in her. At this point, she will do anything to get him back. She becomes a non-person in a sense. She is paralyzed by the fear of losing him. She is obsessed with him now, not in love. There is an old saying that if you put somebody up on a pedestal and if you are obsessed with them, worship them, but don't marry them. So, with a person like this what you actually have to do is talk to them about the marriage because that's where they

are at emotionally. You must actively coach them on how to pull back because the more they pursue the distancer at that moment, the more the chances are that the marriage will break up. So, you coach them on how to pull back, on how to leave empty spaces between the twosomes so that the distancer may come back. It is important to teach this person how not to pursue the distancer, and how to become some kind of a person. The analogy I frequently use here is that children don't run away from chocolate cake, so this person has to learn how to become a chocolate cake.

Another kind of a family situation is the open scoundrel who wants to come back. Now he is met by a self-righteous person. This is one spouse who has had an affair or maybe drank too much or maybe punched his wife in the mouth or something like that or maybe he just left. But being out there he found out it wasn't quite what he wanted and now he wants to return. He is met by self-righteousness on the part of the other person, who was desperate for his return while he was out there. This is a version of the two-step. Now that he wants to come back, she kind of wants penance from him and she doesn't know how she feels about him. You can laugh a bit about this, but it is a very difficult situation to deal with because one lies and the other swears to it. He says that, "I am the scoundrel," and she says, "you are damn right you are." We of course, are trying to get into this twosome, the systems notion that each one was responsible for 50% of the problem. What you can try to do is, pay some attention to the scoundrel's scoundrelity, if I can coin a new word, but you try to de-focus that if possible. You try to tell the self-righteous one that she can't forget or forgive but that the only alternative is to re-understand the problem in a different way, so that she can see that she played a part in that problem with her husband. Not that she was responsible for what she did but that she played some kind of a part in it. One can also try to get inside that self-righteousness and get at the deep hurt that's inside of it if that's possible, but as I said, it's a very difficult thing to do. When you see a scoundrel moving back in towards his spouse and you realize that he is going to kind of want to be on his best behavior and do everything that will impress his wife, one thing to teach him is that she is not going to be very easily impressed and he is going to alternately get very discouraged and blow up and get furious and then she will say "see you are a scoundrel again." What I try to get him to do is make a different approach. Every time his

spouse enters his mind and he feels like moving toward her, what he ought to do is move toward the children and not toward his spouse. People who have been able to accomplish that have literally been able to accomplish miracles. Because the self-righteous spouse has been more of a mother or a father than a husband or a wife and what will impress that spouse more than anything else is seeing that a person who was a scoundrel is now making a real move, a genuine move, an emotional move, towards the children. So the idea is, anytime your spouse enters your mind, if you're a scoundrel, move toward the children and remember folks, we are all scoundrels to some extent!

Another type of situation is where the separation is actually pending. It's important here to figure out if this is a ploy on the part of one of the married couple, who is really just pulling back and getting a message across to the other that says "look I'm finally believable, I have gone to an attorney, there is an empty space in there now if you want to jump in, jump in." This is important because that is an extremely good move for that spouse to make. It is a good way of getting to a distancer. It's an extremely effective way and you don't want to stop it. But, if it's not a ploy or a move and the separation is really going on, one must basically deal with it as if it were an on-going system because that's all it is. It really is just a distant system. As we said before there is no such thing as a complete emotional divorce, just distance. So one introduces all the functional principles that we know about, like each one assuming responsibility for his own feelings, one not telling the other what to do, avoiding triangles, etc. You try to do this kind of thing but in fact it probably won't work because what basically happens is that you usually end up with a portion of a system. Very often you end up with the parent who has custody and one of the children. Or you end up with one of the parents or you end up with a spouse and his or her boy friend or girl friend. That's where the whole notion of divorce therapy simply breaks down.

An important aspect here is to emphasize the importance of the clarity of the legal terms. The only purpose that a legal document serves is to give conflictual people who have trouble negotiating and solving their differences, some document out there which they can refer to. A legal process is a very simple one. It involves custody of the children, which the woman invariably gets. That's changing a little bit today, as women's lib raises its head and man's lib is beginning to raise its head, but still women basically get custody of the children

and the man gets visitation rights and then you get into the question of support. Visitation is just as important as custody because it is critical for the kids when they have grown up to be able to say I know my father and I know my mother. Another interesting thing is that sociologists have known for a long time that the family was, at least in the beginning, basically an economic system where people would help and support each other. Today we talk about families as being a kind of a personal system but when it gets down to the nitty-gritty of a legal document, it's amazing how many people who said the economics of this separation are not important, find it to be acutely important and they get into a hassle about what's yours and what's mine. I think in such situations, many of these broken families have basically tried to maintain themselves as an economic system although they are not aware of it. They have certainly left the emotional aspects of it out.

Other issues will arise, which are basically the issues of a single parent family, which I won't go into here. In general the parent who has custody should not try to be both a mother and a father. Being either one of those is a full time job. The one who has custody, or the one who doesn't have custody for that matter, should not try to blacken the reputation of his ex-partner. It may make them feel better, but don't forget these are problems that span generations and there is a price and a consequence to be paid for all of your actions. Each person should work and try to change his own self and develop a keener sense of self than he ever had. Because, obviously his previous sense of self was not enough to sustain his system. So it is very important for people to begin to expect more from themselves, not as a mother, not as a father, not as a lover, but as a person, who happens to be a mother, a father, a lawyer, a tennis player, etc., etc.

This point also accentuates the importance of the extended family and the network. Because, although you may be losing a portion of your system by the process of divorce or separation, we all have a system that we come from, the extended family. It is important at this time to perk up those relationship systems if you have been letting them lag.

I would just like to put out a summary of some significant points, kind of general guide lines that I have used in dealing with these situations.

The first thing is, if I am talking to one person and the other person wants a separation, I always advise my client not to fight the separation, because if the other person wants a separation from you, and you try to fight it, sometimes you can prevent

it, but you end up with a very hot, conflictual situation or an emotional divorce. On the other hand, if you don't want a separation, don't activate it or help it along. It is the responsibility of the one who wants it to go to the lawyer. The second thing that I try to get across is that hatred and bitterness kill the person who possesses them. So that if you have anger, hatred, bitterness and resentment towards your mate, who maybe leaving you, or whom you are leaving because of what this person did to you in the past, in some way you have to come to a different understanding of that whole thing. If you carry that hatred and bitterness around inside of you, it will kill you emotionally.

The next thing that I go over, and over and over with these people is that distance never solves the problem. It's useful to get your head clear but eventually you must move back in. One must change himself during this process of separation or the next system will be a big disappointment. It will turn out to be either a ditto mark, a re-duplication of the one you just left or a mirror image where you end up with the same kind of difficulties that you thought you got rid of when you got rid of your spouse, but now you have the same difficulties he once had. Remember, people of the same level of maturity/immaturity marry each other. My favorite story about that is, Woody Allen got married, and then got divorced after so many years, and he said "the trouble with my wife was she was the most immature person in the world, you know what would happen? I'd come home, I'd get in the tub, I'd be running the water and you know what that immature so and so would do, she'd come in and sink my paper boats."

People, in a sense, emotionally deserve each other. I know that's a hot statement that people take moralistically, but what I am trying to say is that they mesh into each other. It's like a hand and a glove. If the hand is squeezed by the glove, then the glove is stretched by the hand and in that sense they fit into each other, so one must learn to put equal signs in between them. Now, this is absolutely critical for the family therapist because in a large number of situations in a family relationship system that's going towards divorce, you will be talking to just one of those members and unless he disciplines himself to put in equal signs he will eventually end up siding with one of them and re-duplicating the kinds of problems he should be trying to solve. It is also important to remember that there is no such thing as an emotional problem in a person. There is only a component of that problem in that person. In a sense, it does take two to tango.

I have talked about this before, but it is important to emphasize that one should never get into two systems at the same time. One can do these simultaneously, and if they do, then, the divorce and the separation will represent pure distance and will not be a learning or changing experience.

Another point I would like to make is, don't buy the phony masquerade of everything is fine, since the divorce. I know there are many books published about all of this and there is a lot of blotto stuff about how great it feels to be free and what freedom is. Well, this may happen in rare situations but unfortunately in many situations is only a question of going from greater misery to less misery. Now, this may be a relief but it often leaves the two people with a sense of failure. There is also an onset of different problems, so that a wife who had trouble with her husband now has trouble with her children. There are economical crunches, loneliness and emptiness are accentuated, sometimes with desperate efforts to fill them in. There is disappointment and bitterness and often this is covered with an air of bravado.

The worst situation of all, and this is equally recognized by an experienced marital attorney is the custody suit. In most situations the kid will say, when asked what parent he wants to live with, that he wants to live with both of them. The legal system for handling this is to say, to put it in its kindest context, ridiculous. I don't think there are any real answers. However, one could build a case that whenever there is a custody suit, the children should be taken away from both parents and the parents be ordered to put them into the finest home and the finest school situation that is available, and then the parents must earn their right to the custody of their children. Now, I don't know if that would work but that would certainly be an improvement over what happens in the present situation.

An important thing for the therapist to do is to watch the attorney who is involved in this situation. There are many, many, many, capable attorneys. This is a big subject that I don't really want to get into. Except to say regretfully, that there are some attorneys in my experience who are absolutely malignant. They just don't represent the best interests of their client. It seems to me, in some way, they represent their own bitterness, and their own resentment and the situation is certainly full enough of that. Basically, an attorney, from my view point, is there to facilitate the legality of this person's petition and I tell people that. Some marital attorneys, and I know several of them whose names I won't

mention because they are not allowed to advertise, are specially trained people and they know how to deal with marital situations and I certainly encourage and welcome their assistance in moving things in different ways.

I would like to emphasize to the family therapist that in dealing with these situations it is absolutely critical that he follow the flow of movement and what happens between these people over time. Watch what they do, not what they say. With all of my experience, with hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of these situations, I cannot to this day evaluate how much emotionality is left in that rubber band connection between people.

It simply must be tested out, to see how viable it is. Avoid making a decision about that until time and movement have documented that the system is dead because this is an extremely important decision.

One last comment: every marriage, functional or dysfunctional should be able to absorb a discussion of what it would be like to be separated. If people can't bring this topic up and discuss it with each other then it means that they are over-protecting something or that there is an exquisite sensitivity or something like that. There must be something that ain't kosher with that marriage. So I guess in summary, I would like to say that it takes two to tango, three is a crowd and remember that the leading cause of divorce is married people.