Growing Through Divorce

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Before we, as therapists, can help couples understand and approach divorce as an experience for growth, we must have a vision beyond "pro-growth" or "pro-marriage." Divorce is a process of transformation that inseparably includes both the individual and the couple—a process that long precedes the dissolution decree. It is important to understand and assist our clients during these antecedent stages, which, if worked through, can substantially lessen the painful aftermath. This article will outline that process and highlight the challenges to be faced in making it an experience for growth.

On closer examination, one sees several stages in this separation process: the cognitive, emotional, physical, legal and spiritual. Although this might be the most desirable order, it is not always, or even usually, what happens. This is why we see the "Divorce Court" melodrama—couples who are trying to make the legal separation while they are still emotionally caught up in the drama of their relationship, and haven't separated emotionally, though they may be physically apart. The emotional separation, discussed last, is the cornerstone for transformation, and is the point where the therapist most often enters the family system.

The cognitive separation is not so much a decision to divorce, as a setting of intention. It usually long precedes the actual decision, as well as the emotional and physical separation. Generally, people set goals or a course of intent, before they are emotionally and physically ready to carry them out, such as a job change, a move, or even getting out of bed in the morning. This intent sets the keel in a direction for events to follow. An example of this intent might be when a client is no longer interested in conjoint therapy to improve the marriage. The cognitive separation may seem relatively painless, but it usually follows a long period of frustration and unhappiness. The intent to separate may or may not be expressed, or even consciously acknowledged. Some will protest that they never wanted a divorce, blaming it on their spouse, all the while passively precipitating or allowing the marital break-up, and provoking or permitting the spouse to carry it out. In other cases, it is amazing to see the synchronicity with which couples agree to divorce; often each silently coming to their moment of resolve, only to hear the words uttered by a spouse. The open acknowledgement of this intention and the individual's and/or couple's decision to divorce mark the beginning of the physical and legal process of separation.

The physical separation is simply that. However, couples may continually reunite until the emotional divorce is complete. Although some couples separate with no intent to divorce, where the intent is present, usually physical separation is a necessary precursor to completing the emotional separation. In some cases, separation may be a defensive reaction to a need for connection—sort of cold turkey abstinence.

The legal dissolution is the socioeconomic and cultural separation. As a lawyer and therapist, it is at once apparent that unresolved emotional conflicts fuel adversarial posturing. The legal divorce can be a long, drawn out battle, in which couples stay connected through their anger by breaking agreements and violating court orders, or by taking either intransigent or ever-changing positions. Unfortunately, too often attorneys end up absorbing or acting-out their clients' rage, or become a pawn in their clients' inner conflict and inability to separate—trying to hold on, and at the same time let go.

The spiritual or soul connection a couple share is by nature ephemeral, without time or spatial reference. Some suggest that this connection once established, is never severed. Noted family therapist, Carl Whitaker, in referring to therapeutic and parent/child relationships, believes that once a transference is established, it cannot be undone. He states, "We don't fall out of love" (Whitaker, 1988). The spiritual relationship is what remains following the emotional separation. It is distinguished from the emotional bond, in that strong emotions, either positive or negative, are absent. Instead, it is marked by feelings of unconditional love and caring, and vulnerability to the other person.

The emotional separation is the painful period where we can most help our clients to grow. This process may commence prior to the cognitive separation, and may not necessarily lead to divorce. In fact, if these changes are worked through as a couple, they may actually result in a more healthy and

satisfying relationship. It is when the marriage is not flexible enough to absorb the changes, or when either or both partners discover that their needs will not be met by the other, that the unbonding process continues towards further separation.

The difficult task of emotional separation involves unbonding the romantic and dependent aspects of the relationship, and mourning those losses. This is the stage where the process of individual and systemic conflict resolution and transformation unfolds. It includes the disengagement of the couple's games, role definitions and trans-generational prescriptions, and the individual's retrieving of projections, differentiation and individuation. This means helping each partner, whether in individual or conjoint therapy, to comprehend why they selected each other, why they stay, and, in looking at the relationship systemically, to understand the footwork in the "dance" they both do over and over that doesn't work. Growth comes when they each take responsibility for their participation in the marital problems, rather than blame the mate or themselves, and, finally by changing their "dance." It may result in their seeing each other clearly for the very first time, risking new behavior, some of which may be very scary. This is partly because such change may threaten the relationship and will undoubtedly meet resistance from the mate. They are changing the dance steps, and refusing to do the old routine. It will be different for everyone, but some examples might be for a passive spouse to get angry, or for the more volatile partner to good humoredly walk away from an argument; for each to ask for what they really want from one another; to do something important for themselves, even though the partner is against it; to refuse to any longer tolerate some unacceptable behavior of the spouse that they've complained about forever; to take a solo vacation; or to refuse to do something they felt obliged to do, that they've always hated doing. So, in emotional unbonding, people really do become different, in the sense that they have a choice of new responses and behaviors.

These old behavior patterns and the emotional conflict between the spouses can also be viewed psycho-dynamically, as representing unresolved intra-psychic conflicts that each one carries from childhood, that get played out between them. Hence, changing old patterns of responding is also frightening to the client, because these behaviors were survival skills learned at an age when they believed their lives depended upon them. They may be fueled by a struggle to separate from one's parents—an uncompleted earlier task, or unresolved pain and anger towards an abusive parent that keeps a spouse tied to a similar mate. On the other hand, adults previously abandoned by a parent, by death or divorce, may find themselves leaving the marriage and abandoning his/her child at the same age it happened to them. One man so idealized his father, who died when he was only 4 years old, that when his son reached 4, he not only divorced, but moved out of state. The proximity to his ex-wife was not as painful as the hidden painful memory of his father's abandonment and the prospect of tarnishing his father's reputation by meeting his own son's needs. Another couple had no complaints until the children arrived, when the father began abusing the children, repeating the abusive parenting he had received. One woman kept marrying men who had affairs, until she was willing to face her unresolved feelings towards her father, who had been unfaithful to her mother.

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I am not suggesting that a client needs to work through the pain of family history in order to successfully separate from a spouse, which can be accomplished more systemically and behaviorally as noted above, but often the emotions generated by the unbonding process present a ripe opportunity to do so, and may be of assistance in freeing the client from having to repeat these conflicts in another relationship. It is also useful for the client to view his/her family-of-origin conflicts systemically, which can ease the client out of a victim position.

If the unbonding process is not successfully traversed, the emotional connections will undermine the couple's attempts to separate. Without the emotional separation, a premature physical and/or legal separation is no growth at all. I have seen many couples still "married," years after the formal divorce, if only to maintain contact through court battles, or alternatively ritualistically celebrating holidays together ("for the children's sake"). One such couple, divorced many years, lived in separate houses on the same property, but maintained sufficient distance through legal hostilities. Another lived as neighbors, but could not separate too far from one another, because she needed to rescue him from his depressions, and he needed to drive her around.

On the other hand, when a couple consciously works through the emotional divorce and unbonding, the drama subsides and marital structure gradually falls away, although they may still esteem one another, or love each other in the spiritual sense. Ideally, the physical

and legal separation can then follow more smoothly.

The second part of working through the emotional divorce is helping the family to mourn and accept the losses that accompany divorce, through the Kubler-Ross stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Not mentioned above is fear, which is a predominant emotion in times of transition. All change is stressful, and facing the unknown is fearful. Divorce represents loneliness, change of lifestyle, imagined losses of what might have been, and of memories of what once was; as well as real losses on every front, such as home, family, children, financial, and often friends and in-laws. It may entail a move to a different city or school, a job change, or a homemaker going back to school or entering the work force for the first time. It also involves loss of identity, as a wife, a husband, and possibly as a father or mother. To successfully move on, each fear must be addressed and each loss mourned. Much of the grief work can precede the physical and legal divorce and smooth the way.

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But what about the children in all of this? They intuitively know that there are problems in the marriage, sometimes despite their parents' best efforts to hide them. They may even believe divorce would be a welcome relief from their parents' hot or cold war. However, since they do not share their parents' need to unbond, but on the contrary, need both parents, their emotional needs often go unmet. Too frequently, the parents, who are preoccupied with their own unresolved pain, are unable to properly care for their children, and instead allow their children to take care of them. They do this by sharing their troubles with their children; by monopolizing their time; by using them to communicate with an ex-spouse or by expecting them to take on age-inappropriate chores or other responsibilities to pick up the slack of the absent partner. They may also project their separation needs onto their children, alienating them from the non-custodial spouse. Amidst this role confusion, the children's pain goes underground, and their emotional development is arrested until years later.

This is a common and unfortunate consequence of the couple's failure to emotionally separate. "Pro-growth" therapists may unwittingly promote a premature separation, leaving a major clean-up operation. For these reasons, whenever possible, it is preferable to have conjoint sessions to resolve unfinished business and gradually transition the family to a new structure. If only one spouse is in therapy working on separation, he or she may be further along in this transformation process; however, frequently, the partner may be carrying many unresolved and disowned feelings of the client, which is an additional reason to see them as a couple. Where children are involved, they should be included, as appropriate, to talk about their fears, their anger and their losses. Older children can also participate in the process of negotiating what the new family configuration will look like.

In working with families in major transition, it is helpful to contemplate the Chinese ideogram for crisis, which represents both danger and opportunity. Loosening our attachments to the things we hold most dear allows for more space and flow within us, the possibility of new experiences, and the opportunity to meet as yet unknown parts of ourselves. Carl Jung is reported to have congratulated his friends when they were fired, saying "Let's open a bottle of wine; this is wonderful news; something good will happen now!" (Bly, 1990).

References

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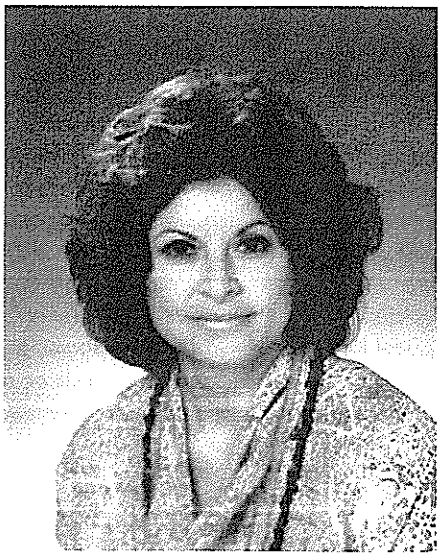

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