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Dishonest Marriages vs "Good Divorces"

By Kalman Heller

Elizabeth Marquardt presented her book, "Between Two Worlds" (Crown Publishers, 2005), as

based on groundbreaking research that provides new insights to the true impact of divorce on children. Her key conclusions are that there is no such thing as a "good divorce", that 75% of all divorces are from "low-conflict" marriages where parents should choose to stay together, and that divorce creates enduring, harmful effects because it forces the children to navigate the separate worlds of their parents. This allegedly leaves children feeling alone, spiritually, morally, and religiously lost.

As a psychologist who has worked with children and families for forty years, my reading of this book led me to conclude that Ms. Marquardt's research was quite flawed and that she appeared to selectively choose results to support her hypotheses while ignoring data that challenged her main points. Despite being quickly ordained by the media as providing strong evidence that divorce really is harmful to children and that it creates a lasting anguish in their lives, I do not believe the book actually makes such a case. In fact, I believe the book shows there is such a thing as a better divorce and that staying together for the sake of the children does not result in better outcomes for the adult children of these families.

The author's view:

Ms. Marquardt is emphatic in her belief that the majority of divorces are unnecessary. She blames this partly on the myth of the "good divorce" ("good" in this case meaning having little negative impact on the children) as the basis for those 75% of divorced couples whose marriage is defined as having been "low conflict" (essentially any divorce not based on a substantially abusive situation). The author states that parents in unhappy, low conflict marriages should have the resolve to stick it out, work harder on solving their problems, or just delay divorce until the children leave home. The latter is the familiar plea to "stay-together-for-the-sake-of-the-children."

This is what I describe as the dishonest marriage vs. the good divorce debate. Ms. Marquardt claims the myth of the good divorce is dishonest to the children and that it fails to appreciate their pain. But I think that making believe a marriage is okay until the children leave is a least equally dishonest.

Dishonest Marriages vs "Good Divorces"

Unless someone can prove that divorce is inevitably seriously harmful to most children, who has the right to tell married adults that they don't have a choice but to stay in an unhappy marriage? Ms. Marquardt appears to feel she has the right to do that. So her data must be compelling. Let us take a close look.

Examination of the data:

Ms. Marquardt contends that "We [children of divorce] might look fine to everyone else, but talk to us about our inner lives and you will find, just beneath the surface, a potent mixture of loss and confusion that haunts [emphasis mine] us to this day." (p.39) This very powerful statement of the destructive impact of divorce, in my opinion, is not based on the data but on the author's personal experience and the stories from the college students she interviewed in the first phase of the research (to create the questions for the survey). She refers to the latter as "profound and moving stories of confusion, isolation, and suffering." (p.32)

Such a negative view is especially striking given that the author describes her current life in rather glowing terms: a wonderful marriage and family and a very rewarding career. She indicated this is also true for many of the people she interviewed. But, in response to the question, "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?" 94.9% of the adults from divorced families gave a positive response compared to 97.6% of the adults from intact families. Not only does this fail to make the case for a significant difference, it appears to indicate that most of the adults from divorced families in this study are not suffering to the significant degree that the author claims.

The book is entitled "Between Two Worlds" because Ms. Marquardt contends that there is a harmful impact, emotionally, morally, and spiritually, from having to move back and forth between the homes of their parents. It is this issue of living in two different worlds, with different rules and complex boundaries, which the author stresses as the cause of most of divorce's destructive impact on children. I am not minimizing the traumatic impact that divorce has on everyone involved but I am going to select results from the vast array of Marquardt's data that does not appear to support a number of the author's contentions about this issue.

Ms. Marquardt concludes that divorce generates a sense of moral confusion in the children due to the lack of a unified parental guidance (the result of living in two homes) as well as the negative impact divorce has on children's spiritual development and religious involvement. Yet, in response to the survey item, "I think my understanding of right and wrong is cloudy.", there was virtually no difference in the responses by adults from divorced families and those from intact families. In fact, more than 95% of both groups indicated no moral "cloudiness" at all! Thus, one central hypothesis, that being from a divorced family undermines moral clarity, does not appear to be supported by the data.

Another aspect of the sense of being lost and confused that Ms. Marquardt contends to be the outcome of growing up in a divorced family is that it results in a sense of no home rather than a sense of two homes. Yet in response to the question, "After the divorce, which place felt like home to you?", 93% responded that they either felt like one parent's house, or both, felt like home. So this hypothesis of "no home" is also not supported by the data.

Dishonest Marriages vs "Good Divorces"

Nearly half the questions on the survey relate to religion and spirituality, which makes sense since this was a research project on the "Moral and Spiritual Lives of Children of Divorce." But the data doesn't support Ms. Marquardt's contention that divorce has a negative impact on the religious aspects of the lives of children from divorced families. A significant percentage of the adults from divorced families rated themselves as more religious than their fathers (47%) and mothers (31.4%). Perhaps even more striking is that 79.1% of those adults describe God as caring (versus 82.3% from intact family group) and 78.8% describe God as loving them unconditionally (versus 79.7% from the intact group). Thus the data does not support the idea that divorce results in the children becoming less religious adults.

Now comes the real stunner. In response to the statement, "My spirituality has been strengthened by adversity in my life." 43.7% of the adults from divorced families strongly agree! If you add in "Somewhat Agree" (30.5%), the message is that nearly three-fourths of adults whose parents divorced describe their spirituality as having been strengthened! This data is so powerful that the author does report it in the text (p.153) in a one sentence comment yet says nothing about the incredible implications of this exceptional statement of spiritual resilience. Why? Where does it come from? Perhaps this is a critical factor in understanding why most of the children from divorced families turn out okay. It deserves discussion and a recommendation for further research, but the author virtually ignores it. I see this as a particularly strong example of the author's anti-divorce bias.

Thus the author's own data does not appear to support her conclusions that adults from divorced families are emotionally distraught, morally lost, less spiritual and less religious than adults from intact families.

These more positive results around spirituality, religion, feeling understood and having a home are very consistent with the research by Dr. Mavis Hetherington. Her research is longitudinal, not retrospective. She has followed hundreds of families of divorce, many for as long as three decades, periodically re-evaluating the impact of divorce on children and their parents. Data obtained at each stage of life is much more compelling than data obtained in a retrospective survey. Also, the research was extensively published in peer-reviewed professional journals over a period of years before the author summarized her findings in a book. Dr. Heatherington concludes that 75% of the children from divorce do not develop any serious psychological problems (compared to about 90% of the non-divorced groups). In addition, she reports that six years post-divorce most children have adjusted to the changes in their lives imposed by their parents' divorce and are more concerned with typical developmental issues in their daily lives. This is in stark contrast to Ms. Marquardt's much more negative conclusions but is consistent with the positive results of her own data that she chooses to ignore.

Finally, I want to address what in many ways is the true core issue of this book, that there is no such thing as a "good" divorce and that it is better for parents to stay married even if there is conflict (low as opposed to high).

Appendix A presents the results of 33 questions for the five subject groups (the identifiers refer to the parents of the adults interviewed). Three subgroups are from Intact Marriages: Very Happy/Low Conflict; Not Happy/Low Conflict; Not Happy/High Conflict. The final two groups are from Divorced Marriages: "Good Divorce" and "Bad" Divorce. The data clearly shows that children/adults are very negatively impacted by high conflict divorces (scores are nearly all far worse than any other category)

Dishonest Marriages vs "Good Divorces"

and that children/adults from happy, intact marriages have the best lives. I'm sure most everyone knew this without reading the book.

But it is critical to emphasize that on 29 of the 33 statements summarized in Appendix A, the "Good Divorce" group has more positive results than the "Bad Divorce" group and the majority of those differences are quite substantial. What this implies very clearly is that what is being done to teach parents how to divorce in a more child-sensitive way is actually helpful. Children of these "Good Divorces" end up in a much more positive place, suggesting all those books, workshops, and therapies which the author belittles as creating a false myth that the "good divorce" may have real value.

What does the data say about the author's primary thesis that it is better for parents who are in unhappy, low-conflict marriages to stay married rather than try to have a "Good Divorce"? Most dramatically, on what I consider the two most critical statements, the results strongly suggest a more positive outcome for the "Good Divorce" group! 57.1% of the adults from that group describe themselves as "very happy" compared to 47.8% from the unhappy marriage, low conflict group. Similarly, 62.3% of the adults from the "Good Divorce" group describe themselves as "very satisfied with life as whole." compared to 56.2% from the unhappy marriage, low conflict group. In the face of just these two items, how can the author conclude that it is better for unhappy, low conflict couples, after having tried their best to resolve their differences, to stay together instead of working out a healthier divorce?

I am not trying to deny that there is nothing to be gained from low conflict couples trying to work out their problems and stay together. The main point here is that I do not believe the author has the data to

make her case that when these unhappy, low conflict couples decide to divorce they are being selfish, putting their own needs ahead of their children's needs, and condemning their children to a life of profound confusion, isolation, and suffering. Such a contemptuous attitude toward couples who choose to divorce is not disserved.

Dr. Heller is a clinical psychologist, now retired, who specialized in providing services to children, families, and couples since 1968. He has written over 150 columns about parenting and marriage which are available on his website,

<http://www.drheller.com>

. He is a frequent media resource.

Causes Of Divorce

By Rene Graeber

Back in the old days in Mesopotamia, marriages do exist in a different form such that divorces were documented because they happen. Some causes of divorce at these times take account of adultery. Though since polygamy was a standard practice at these times we can only speculate the reasons for

Dishonest Marriages vs "Good Divorces"

adultery in divorce.

While early forms of marriage and the causes of divorce did exist even in the cradle of civilization, the practice carried on until this century. The causes of divorce is still the same though recent additions to its grounds have made marriage a rather easy exercise that can be cast and shape and die at will, especially by those abusive and deceitful spouses.

The most abused option, the one most recognized and tarnished ground is the No Fault Divorce. The no fault divorce allows either party of the marriage to sue for a divorce with reasons like irreconcilable differences as the grounds. By reading the decree alone you can see a great deal on how such loopholes can be abused. For instance: a husband can file for a divorce without letting the wife know, citing irreconcilable differences. It would be approved and the wife will be forced out of the home and closed from all the family finances. Likewise an adulterer wife becomes pregnant in an affair, and before the husband can mount a legal action, she mounts her own divorce that will allow her to take a portion of the properties owned in marriage, custody plus child rearing expenses of the children, and a portion for herself from the spousal support. To combat such abuses, some state allow no fault divorces only after when the couple has been living apart for several years and have been in marriage for a set period of time.

No fault causes of divorce had been a classic tactic for a deceiving spouse seeking financial advantages since its implementation, also known as "character assassination with a lawyer". And due to its easy nature to pull of, no fault divorce had been a factor for the increased rate of divorces in the US alone.

The opposite for no fault is the Faulted Divorce which causes of divorce includes extra-marital affairs, strained relationship (which can also be a ground for No Fault), emotional and physical abuse, middle life crisis, several types of addictions including alcoholism, gambling, and substance, and severe workaholic attitude.

Unlike in the past when the churches hold the authority to null a marriage, causes of divorce are very few and at most strict. Since the inception of liberal ideas and the propagation of open-minded ideals and values, the causes of divorce have become more plentiful than the causes for marriages can ever be.

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