

INTRODUCING A NEW METAPHOR FOR SEPARATION, DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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"You do not perceive something until you have the right metaphor to receive it"
– Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

Metaphors are powerful vehicles of communication. They synthesize amounts of information into a single, unified package. Perhaps less obvious, they encourage us to SCREEN OUT aspects of a phenomenon that DO NOT FIT with the chosen metaphor. Such is the case with the metaphor we currently use to describe divorce and remarriage. The current metaphors prevent us from seeing important aspects of the divorce/remarriage process and discourage us from moving forward to a more sophisticated understanding of this intensely personal, yet very social, phenomenon of marital transition in the early 21st century.

In our culture today, we understand the nuclear or first marriage family as the “real” family. We describe this family form as natural, “normal”, or “intact”. Should Mom and/or Dad choose to end their marriage, it is popularly understood that their marriage “failed” and the children are now from a “broken home”. The presence of divorce in our society is considered evidence of the moral breakdown or degeneration of society. Thus, the metaphor communicated by our language is what I shall refer to as the broken/damaged/failed metaphor.

These metaphors describe divorce and remarriage as essentially a bad thing, i.e., a series of events that are evidence of problems within the individuals concerned or society in general. In stark contrast to the images of the first marriage family: the proud family portraits, Norman Rockwell dinners, and *The Cleavers*, images of the divorced family include the broken heart, shattered glass on the family photo or the photo torn down the middle. The divorcing couple is perceived as of the “Me Generation”, indulging in out-of-control conflict for selfish, petty reasons, out of touch with the impact of this conflict on their broken-hearted children. Images associated with the stepfamily include Cinderella and the wicked stepmother, the romantic new couple and the abandoned child, or suitcases at the bedroom door.

From this perspective, divorced families have somehow “failed”; they are broken, smashed, damaged beyond repair. They can never be as “good” as the nuclear family again. They have fallen from the moral high-ground to the moral low-ground. They cannot regain the moral “high-ground” no matter how well they navigate the divorce or how hard they work to create a successful co-parenting relationship with a former spouse. Further, this negative cloud follows the family into the next stage of the process, the creation of the stepfamily.

Although these metaphors are extremely negative, they are not entirely inaccurate. They describe well the damage to children, adults, and family associated with divorce. Thirty years of study on divorce has clearly identified risk factors: family finances may be seriously effected, parenting relationships may be stressed, damaged or lost, children may begin a series of rapid changes to include loss of family home, neighborhood, extended family. Creating a stepfamily can also include risks. Adjusting to new stepparents, stepsiblings, shared resources, shared parenting, coordinating family life with a former spouse, etc. can be stressful for everyone.

Nevertheless, however accurately the broken/damaged/failed metaphor may describe the difficulties associated with some marital transitions, it is far from complete. It does not allow us to consider many other critical factors in the divorce/remarriage domain such as the impact of no divorce on adults and children, the well-managed divorce, the successful stepfamily, and divorce and remarriage as partially a social phenomenon rather than solely a personal experience. In order to consider these other vital aspects of divorce and remarriage we must find another metaphor, one that allows us to see beyond the limitations of the broken/damaged/failed perspective.

A NEW METAPHOR FOR DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

To this end, I propose a new metaphor of health and wellness for family relationships using a continuum on which the left side represents relational illness, or unhealthy relationships including abuse or toxic forces in couple and/or parenting relationships. In the middle is neutral ground, neither toxic, nor extremely fulfilling. To the far right, high quality health in family relationships, experiences of loving fulfillment in the couple and/or parenting relationships.

The Health and Wellness metaphor allows us to see the aspects of divorce and remarriage that may put children and adults at risk. At the same time it allows us to consider the well-managed divorce and successful stepfamilies, two categories that by definition must be screened out of the broken/damaged/failed metaphor. By adding neutral to positive aspects of divorce and remarriage to our pre-existing view of broken and damaged, we can see the whole picture and acknowledge important aspects previously screened out.

A view of divorce and remarriage that does not get much air time is that it is a normal occurrence and important option for today's families, a social phenomenon that is reasonable given the social context of the late 20th century and not necessarily indicative of personal or social deficits. Unfortunately there are no images of "normal" or "goodness" for families post-divorce or remarriage that can match the power of the glow of the Norman Rockwell family portraits, the sharp pain of the smashed glass on the family portrait, or the sinister smile of Cinderella's wicked stepmother.

Other social phenomena that influence the likelihood of life-long marriage can also be considered using this metaphor. For example, our ever-increasing life

expectancy is profoundly changing our ability to remain in one marriage “till death do us part”.

The average length of a marriage in the late 1700s was only 7 years. As life expectancy in 1850 was on average, only 40 years, marriages were generally ended by the death of one of the spouses before the 10-year mark. As marriages were predominantly ended by the death of a spouse, the surviving spouse was not faced with having to work out custody and access, child support and co-parenting relationships with the deceased. Remarriage rates were very similar to those today. Furthermore, in the 1800s, 50% of children had lost one or both parents by the time they reached 13 years of age.

In the past 150 years, the average life span has doubled, thereby making a commitment to remain in one marriage “til death do us part” a much more challenging proposition. With an 80-year life span, we can consider the 40-60 year marriages as average. Never before have so many had the opportunity to be married to the same person for so long. Never before have we faced the challenge of continuing to be involved with a former spouse through a co-parenting relationship. However, the ever-increasing proportion of our that reaches 75 or 80 years of age is affecting more than just our pension plans and the need for understanding geriatric needs. It is changing the way we live our lives through all of our adult years.

For example, as adults in our society, we are exposed to rapid change on all fronts, and the pace of this change is steadily increasing. No longer do young people graduate from high school or a university and find the one job they will maintain for their working lives. Men no longer marry a woman who will stay home to tend the home and hearth; they do not envision themselves retiring with the gold watch at 65, leaving them both to rock on the front porch eager to see their grandchildren. Today, most women and most mothers work outside the home. Changing careers mid-life is no longer new for men or women. The Internet is steadily transforming the world of information technology. And even though some of our grandparents may have lived for 75 or 80 years, they did not have to deal with the ever-increasing pace of change that confronts each of us everyday.

The challenges associated with remaining in one marriage for a lifetime have increased dramatically. Perhaps our challenge could be described as how to chose a partner with whom we can grow and change in a compatible fashion through an ever-lengthening adult lifetime of unpredictable and rapid change. Perhaps it is becoming obsolete to consider romantic love as the main criterion for choosing a life-long marriage partner.

Finally, we must consider the “no divorce” option. Our current limited view of divorce seems to suggest that if only we can convince people not to divorce, all will be well. However, John Gottman’s research on marriage relationships should convince us otherwise. After twenty-five years of research attempting to predict which couples will divorce and which couples will remain together, Gottman has found that the relationship of couples that chose to divorce were characterized by

what he calls The 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and withdrawal/stonewalling. He further found an association between these relationship dynamics and physical symptoms four years down the road. What this research strongly suggests is that when relationships move into the “unhealthy” side of our continuum, they can become extremely toxic; resulting in substantial emotional and physical damage. As much as I believe in the power of couple’s therapy, I do not believe that we have the therapeutic technology to restore love and harmony to every troubled relationship. It would appear the “no divorce” option is no panacea.

Accepting divorce and remarriage as important options is not incompatible with supporting life-long marriage as a valid social institution. Initiatives such as, “The Smart Marriages Conference”, are essential to the growing challenges involved in lifelong marriages. However, to accept divorce and remarriage as legitimate choices is to acknowledge that lifelong marriage may be right for many people much of the time, but not for all the people, all the time. If a choice is made to end a marriage, this is not necessarily an indication of failure, or personal, social, or moral deficits. Equally, as the next section demonstrates, post divorce families are not necessarily broken/damaged/failed families nor are stepfamilies necessarily hopelessly chaotic or neglectful of children.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE KIDS?

Our current metaphor suggest that the “intact”, “natural”, “real” family is always the best for children and that the “broken home” of the failed marriage is always bad. There is, however, growing research evidence that for children, divorce and remarriage may not be the universally negative and damaging events they were once assumed to be. It is clear, however, there are risks for children in prolonged exposure to parental depression and marital conflict.

After at least two decades of research, Hetherington (1987) suggest that children may be winners, losers, or survivors of their parents’ divorce and remarriage. Issues of temperament, conflict, and resources may influence the divorce experiences so much that the issues of divorce itself tells us little. Many children do not appear to be negatively affected at all.

In a comprehensive review of the literature on the effects of divorce on children, Emery (1982) suggest that it is the conflict associated with the divorce that is damaging, not the divorce itself. He found that children in conflicted nuclear families were more likely to have problems than children from divorced, conflict-free homes.

In a review of more than twenty studies that compare the well-being of children in nuclear, sole parent, and stepfamilies, Ganong& Coleman (1993) found that while children in nuclear families tended to do slightly better, the differences between the types of families was so small as to be nearly irrelevant. These researchers recommended that comparing families by family structure was not useful. Asking

why some families and some children did so much better than others was a more useful question.

Finally, in another study (Fendrich et. Al. 1990) researchers found that psychiatric diagnoses for children were much more strongly associated with parental depression than with whether or not the children's biological parents were still married to each other, divorced or remarried. Children whose parents were not depressed were still eighteen times more likely to have psychiatric problems when they had been exposed to their parents' marital conflict over the long term.

These finds challenge two fundamental aspects of the "broken / damaged/ failed" metaphor. First, divorced families would be problem-free if only the divorce had not occurred. The nuclear family structure, i.e. biological parents married to each other, does not guarantee the emotional and social well-being of children, particularly in high-conflict nuclear families. Second, divorce and remarriage cannot be assumed to be either good or bad. It is not the structure of a family but rather the quality of relationships within it, both between spouses and between parents and their children, that are most important. Extending our metaphor allows us to focus on what really makes a difference in children's lives and adult's lives, rather than getting pulled into a political or moral debate on divorce and remarriage.

ADVANTAGES OF THE HEALTH AND WELLNESS METAPHOR

Using a metaphor that extends from the extremely negative, through neutral to the extremely positive has many advantages. To illustrate, let's think of divorce within the spectrum of all possible family relationships, like a surgery within all possible levels of health.

1. The quality of relationship health matters, just as the quality of physical health matters.
2. As a society we can direct resources toward the prevention of divorce, just as we work toward the prevention of surgery. We can do preventive work through education by teaching our children about relationships and addressing relationship styles with our teens and young adults. We can fund marriage preparation courses. Once married, we can take our relationship vitamins (couple groups, retreats). If we're not feeling well in our marriage, we tend to our relationship by setting some help (friend, mentor, elder, lay counselor). If our marriage gets really unwell or sick, we can keep trying with more intensive help (therapy) to get it back into a loving, fulfilling relationship.
3. If we have tried everything possible over a sufficient period of time and the relationship is still unwell, it is likely that it will continue to be unwell and/or get worse. We know that people cannot **NOT** change. Eventually, something will have to give. Physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual difficulties are likely to increase. Many times our parenting will suffer

because our children see us when we are tired, angry, despondent, and ultimately depressed. Perhaps more importantly, these elements cannot but influence our ability to show our children our joy and love for them, as the research on the profound effect of parental depression and marital conflict on children suggests.

At this point, separation and divorce may be best considered like surgery. It is a last resort. All possible avenues have been exhausted. Quality of relationships, spousal and PARENTAL are declining and will likely continue. Like surgery, the couple did not plan for this to happen. When they were married they did not intend to work toward divorce. However, as the quality of relationship continues to decline, perhaps the risks of divorce, like the risks of surgery, become less than the risks of no divorce. What is worse than heart surgery? No heart surgery! If we keep our focus on the quality of family relationships rather than on the structure of the family, we can consider the relative risks of different options from a much more sophisticated perspective. To reduce complicated situations to black and white or right and wrong options will not help us move forward in an intelligent and compassionate fashion.

4. If marital separation and divorce are chosen as the best option, then perhaps we as a society could offer the same resources as we would for someone undergoing major surgery. In the case of surgery, there is first a careful assessment of the problem. There is education about what to expect. The intervention is done professionally, in a caring environment with sterile equipment to reduce the possibility of infections. Post-operative care is provided until the patient is able to return to self-sufficiency. In many cases we do not have to evaluate the effectiveness of the surgery to improve a declining quality of life until well into the recovery process. Friends and family come in close to help. Sometimes they send flowers.

When we consider separation and divorce from this perspective, it is easy to see that as a society, we are not doing much to support families through this “surgery”. There is little support available when trying to decide if separation is the best option. There are few resources to help adults and children with preparation for or the actual separation. There is little or no concern about “infection” in the relationship between the adults, although we know it is in everyone’s best interests to establish a positive co-parenting relationship and stay out of court if at all possible. As a society we do not wait for a period of recovery before passing judgment on the adults involved, even though this surgery may leave them less than completely functional for a period of time. Friends and family often do not come in closer or send flowers. In fact, many who have separated feel just the opposite, that people withdraw until the dust settles, and even then, may not return.

5. Using this metaphor, we can finally set the place of remarriage within the recovery process. Most people who divorce will enter into another intimate relationship with another adult. From within a recovery metaphor, wouldn't we want this for them, given the long lives we are now projected to live? By keeping an eye on the big picture, we can see that families can navigate the end of the couple relationship, continue effective co-parenting relationships, AND create successful stepfamilies. Like recovery from a surgery, it is not always easy (though remarkably, sometimes it is, we just don't hear about it). However, compared to the actual situation prior to the decision to separate, the quality of family relationships may well have a greater likelihood of developing in positive directions than if the no surgery option had been chosen.
6. From a societal perspective, this metaphor allows us to acknowledge the importance of divorce and remarriage as honorable institutions within our society AND AT THE SAME TIME support all avenues that would steer us away from having to use them. We can appreciate having a hospital in our community and work toward good health. We can support divorce and remarriage as legitimate social institutions and still work toward strong, loving and fulfilling relationships.

THE CONSEQUENCE OF NOT EXTENDING OUR METAPHOR

1. Seeing post-divorce families and stepfamilies as broken, damaged, failed or wrong supports prejudice and bias by family structure. This may be the last "ism" – family structure-ism: a frame of reference in which divorce and remarriage are always considered bad no matter what. When we see the individual or family by virtue of the structure only, systematically not seeing anything else we are prejudiced.
2. To continue to focus on family structures hides the power of the quality of family relationships in our lives. For children, a more important question is the quality of parenting relationships they have, not the structure of their families. Although marital transition, like surgery, includes risks, no divorce cannot guarantee high quality home environment for children.
3. To maintain the broken, damaged metaphor keeps all responsibility for this massive social phenomenon with the individuals involved and allows social institutions like governments, schools, hospitals, churches, the legal system and even family therapy from dealing with divorced families and stepfamilies on a social level.
4. Finally, if we cannot see that it is possible to conduct a well-managed divorce, and to create a successful stepfamily, then we cannot hold individuals who make these choices accountable for how they conduct themselves through this process. There are many individuals and families who have survived divorce, and created loving stepfamilies. If

we cannot acknowledge them, we cannot invite them to be role models and/or mentors for those who are struggling. Equally, if we believe that attending parent education groups or support groups for separating parents or stepfamilies is valuable, then we must find a way to include the possibility of success in our understanding of divorce and remarriage. This is necessary for the individuals involved to be able to imagine getting through the process without irreparable damage to the quality of health in current family relationships and to create and maintain loving and fulfilling family relationships in the future.