

Getting it together

Marriage scene is healthy despite high divorce rate

A few months ago, I was asked whether I was alarmed by the current divorce rate. I was not. I am not alarmed by the divorce rate. I am alarmed by the divorce scene.

What does it mean to the person who is contemplating marriage?

Unlike most people, I see today's divorce statistics in a positive light. To me, they indicate a healthier social and legal climate surrounding marriage rather than a delay of society.

I believe the same social changes that have made an increased divorce rate possible also have increased the chances that marriages can now fulfill their potential. They are becoming the rich source of personal happiness they should be.

This is not to say, however, there are no negative aspects to divorce. Many would quickly point out how disruptive it is to the husband and wife, to their families and friends, and ultimately, to the economic and social stability of their society.

The high failure rate of marriage is a serious warning to those who are considering candidates for that institution. As a way of coping with the apparent breakdown of marriage, more and more couples are turning to alternative ways of forming emotional partnerships.

SO THESE TIMES of climbing divorce rates also have become times when many couples have chosen to live together with out a license or a ceremony. Other young marrieds have responded to the living possibility of divorce by not having children. I've even seen some who have put their individual name on various pieces of property in order to easily divide them in the event of a break-up.

Now that may be going a little too far. A certain amount of fear for the fragility of marriage relationships is healthy. Far too often couples come for marriage or divorce counseling feeling surprised at how their "forever" love relationship has deteriorated. But it doesn't take much to realize that they hardly allowed it to happen, thinking all the time that they would live happily ever after.

For those who react to the destructiveness of divorce, I agree: breaking up can be devastating. But bad marriages that are kept together for the sake of children or because of rigid ethics are at least as devastating. Professional counselors see more casualties of bad marriages than of divorces, especially when those divorces have been conducted successfully.

THOSE WHO are dismayed by divorce statistics blame the new permissiveness of our laws and ethics. Marriages, they

argue, must have legal and moral protections against sudden, impulsive urges. Because divorce can be so costly, they feel, we should make it as difficult as possible to break up.

While I believe that families should be protected from impulsive endings, legal and moral obstacle courses are not the way to do this. Instead, this should take the form of a rational attempt at reconciliation, possibly using an objective friend or counselor. In fact, this is the way many judges and attorneys apply the new "no fault" divorce process.

Rather than forcing splitting partners to spend all of their energies bashing against each other in a legal adversary process, enlightened courts and lawyers encourage conciliatoriness. Before they allow the momentum of the legal procedures to sweep troubled partners to a hasty conclusion, thoughtful legal professionals try to help their clients determine whether they are really making the right decision.

A Toronto sociologist has said that marriage ought to be hard to get into and easy to get out of, not the other way around.

WHEN MORAL codes and impassable legal obstacles are used to make divorce almost out of the question, they backfire. What happens is rigidly imprisoned partners develop certain attitudes and communication patterns to cope with the finality of their partnership.

They avoid facing their differences because it is too painful to individuals who are stuck with each other. They follow rigid roles, because this increases harmony and reduces the chance of making their mutual captivity miserable. They become increasingly concerned with fulfilling their obligations to each other as husband and wife, for there is little room in a jail for free, spontaneous choice.

That many more couples are choosing to terminate marriages that have failed is not just a negative sign. It also means that there is a rising idealism about what can be expected from married life. No longer are couples satisfied if their marriage just provides a convenient way to raise a family and keep a home. They are coming to expect there ought to be continued love and intimacy in a marriage, that it should be a great source of personal pleasure, not just a set of obligations.

Newly married people are more aware than ever that their relationship doesn't just go on and on regardless of how they treat it. They are beginning to see that per-

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By
BOB TRENZ,
Ph.D.



marriage takes work, vigilance and priority.

Are these bad times for marriage? Absolutely not. In the midst of the greatest flood of divorces we have ever experienced, marriage has never been healthier. For the idealist who is ready to put his energies where his dreams are, marriage has never been as good an emotional investment as it is right now.

Bob Trenz is a Rochester psychologist and marriage counselor. Questions for Dr. Trenz may be addressed to Rochester Executive, 418 N. Main, Rochester 48603.

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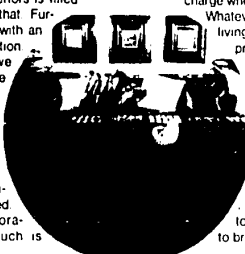
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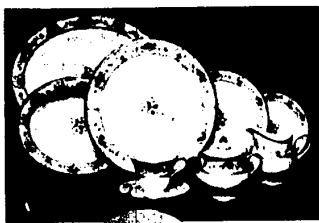


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