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Divorce and Realism

Is one mate for a lifetime realistic? I mean, does it make sense to stay with the same person all of your life simply because this is the person that you chose to marry when you were, say, 20?

With an opener like that, I am sure more than a few people will curse me. But, instead, I hope that you will read and think objectively about the concept that I'm about to present, then decide if you agree or not or believe that I'm totally out of my mind.

I have been wondering if some of our beliefs are archaic and just do not fit today's reality any longer. Perhaps at one time there were reasons to hold certain beliefs. For example, long ago it was necessary to split the labor based on which sex you were. There were no modern conveniences such as washers and dryers and supermarkets. So, the natural division came with women doing those things associated with the home and child care. Men did things that required more physical strength and the necessity of being away from home for hunting. Then, out of this grew a realization that it made more sense for a woman and man to pair for life.

Most societies accepted this type of arrangement. It was also incorporated into many religious beliefs. However, many of the needs for those beliefs have changed, but our beliefs have not. Maybe it is time now to look at our belief systems and test them against today's reality.

What are the reasons for our beliefs now? What are the needs of today's society?

After all, if people change, it seems logical that society's needs would change, too.

At this kind of midway point in my life, I've finished raising my children. So, I now have the freedom to do things that I could not do with the responsibility of child rearing. I mean, just simple things such as eating cereal for dinner, dropping everything to get out of the house for no particular reason, leaving the TV off for weeks at a time, or painting a picture the whole weekend without even stopping to cook. My needs have changed, and I now have new reasons for what is important. I've also realized that this change in my life has affected the way I view the world.

At 40-something, I've lived long enough to observe many different couples throughout the years. I've seen marriages terminated by divorce, by the death of a spouse, or by old age and death. But beyond that, I've seen many (dare I say, most) couples whose marriages that have survived as a legal unit but have died internally. The marriages exist only as hollow facades. The people who live with and support these hollow facades are themselves shaped or distorted by them.

From these observations, one thing has become eminently clear to me: If in old age you feel that you married the "right" person when you were young, it was only due to chance and pure luck. Unfortunately, most of us were not blessed with that kind of luck.

I maintain that, at the age of 18 or 20—even 20-30, it is impossible to make an informed decision about the kind of person who would be good for you for the rest of your life. We're capable then of deciding what kind of person would be a good for us during the young phase of our life. But it's a long time from 20 to 40 and even longer from 20-80.

Our exposure to people and our life experiences were very limited then. But, as we go through life, our experiences increase. We're able to be more discriminating and can begin to form a clearer picture of what is important to us regarding a partner.

As I see it, there are three significant phases in our lives. The first is the early childhood years that last through the teens. Then comes the early adulthood years, lasting until about age 40, which are the child-rearing years for most of us. The third phase is from about 40 onward, what I call the "freedom years." That's because our children have grown and are no longer our major focus. We can now take the time to do the things that, up until then, we have only dreamed about.

In the second and third phases, most of us live in some kind of marital state: married, divorced, or widowed. If we live until we are 80, those years represent about ¾ of our total lives. This is a long time to spend with someone whom we chose at 20 and now at 40 would be better suited for someone else. In short, the vast majority of people in a marriage have outgrown the needs that they had at 20. Their needs at 40 have changed and are much different. But, over the years, have they both grown and changed the same way?

Like it or not, our society has changed radically during the last 100 years. Today, prospects for along and healthy life are excellent. People can reasonably expect to live to 75 or 80. One hundred years ago, most people were expected to die by 40.

Our sexual awareness has changed also. Women, especially, are becoming more in tune with their own sexuality. A woman's sexual enjoyment had never been considered before. As a result, sexual compatibility is becoming a bigger focus in today's relationships. And, our personality differences certainly do not stop at the bedroom door.

After having given all of this a great deal of thought, I have decided that perhaps it makes sense to view our adult lives as two separate and distinct entities. The person you chose to marry at the dawn of your child-rearing years may

have been a good choice then. But what about after the kids have grown and gone? You still probably have another 40 or 50 years left. Do you have much in common anymore with this other person? Do you see things the same way? Do you share the same energy levels, body clocks, and interests?

I've witnessed a lot of nice people grown bitter over time because they outgrew a decision that they made when very young, when their hormones were raging. They just could not conceptualize then what life could be like with this other person after the hormones settled down.

After the children have grown, what harm is there to recognize that you are both unique and nice people but that you've changed and grown in different directions? Do we really need to suffer and make this other person the enemy? Does it make sense to shut off our sensitivities to enable us to struggle along in an unfulfilling relationship or to deny our own desires and needs while resenting the relationship that we feel forces us to do so?

Should we be embarrassed about divorce and seeking a more gratifying relationship later in life if we made a decision earlier that was not appropriate for the long term? Perhaps as our life spans increase, it makes sense to adjust our view of relationships and marriage and their significance. Our lives are much longer and healthier now. I question, then, if the same two people can spend 60, maybe 80, years together, content with their choice of partners and feel fulfilled.

One mate for a lifetime—a lifetime that is now twice as long as it ever was before—is it realistic?