

girls of high intelligence, and a member of the Council of the National Association for Mental Health. Soon after the war he became a marriage counsellor and held this responsibility for training for ten years.

## MARRIAGE BREAKDOWN

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First I must offer a few general remarks about this morning's topic, by way of introduction.

Marriage disharmony or final breakdown is at once everybody's business, and yet nobody's. It comes the way of the lawyer, the clergyman, the family doctor, the psychiatrist, the health visitor, the probation officer and a host of others, including the income tax inspector, the dentist, the dermatologist and many others. Clients who are clinched in the vicious circle of severe marital discord make things difficult for the professional adviser or helper, for they often seem quite unable to avail themselves of professional help, even when they seek it, and yet, in terms of time and of training, how many professional people feel fully competent to handle these complex and sometimes urgent emotional problems that arise marginally or centrally in their normal work?

As the professions become more and more highly specialized and subdivided, the client gets more and more skilled and expert help with his problems but necessarily less and less time devoted to himself by any one individual. Technical advances are of immense benefit to most of us, most of the time, but the relationship problems of marriage are not, in the same sense, technical at all. The bewildered, frustrated or anxious husband or wife seems to be saying (and sometimes actually does say) "There are many experts who help with our problems, but no one to help *us*".

Perhaps we need a new profession. Perhaps we need auxiliaries within the existing professions. Meanwhile everyone copes as best he can for the sake of the client or patient and his family, and sometimes, of course, very successfully. But meanwhile we often see either or both partners of an unhappy marriage going the rounds to doctor, lawyer, social worker, clergyman or minister, getting relief for some part of their problem, yet not quite getting the help they are seeking for themselves and their marriage. In a highly-

organized society we tend to become increasingly problem-centred rather than person-centred. It is true that the Family Discussion Bureau at the Tavistock Institute has been and is doing pioneer work of a professional calibre on the study and treatment of marital problems and in training members of other professions. Yet there is only that one unit in the whole country. There are also two marriage guidance organizations, the Catholic and my own, the National Marriage Guidance Council. But with all deference to their workers it must be admitted that resources are at present spread so thin that much of their work can amount to little more than marital first aid. Against this rather gloomy background we can pass on to consider the problem itself and those who suffer from it.

### *Alike or different?*

When two young people get married, one commonly hears someone make one of two alternative observations. Either: "They are sure to be happy because they are so alike and share such similar interests and tastes". Or: "They are sure to be happy because they are so different. Each complements the other". But if, some years later, the marriage breaks down, we hear someone (perhaps the same person) say, "Ah well, it could never work—they were too much alike", or conversely (the most familiar diagnosis of all) "It is sad, but I always said they were incompatible". The truth is that the success or failure of a marriage has little to do with these factors. Some couples are indeed remarkably alike—sometimes even in looks. At best, their marriage develops into a relatively peaceful, contented, easy relationship; a comfortable, plodding, secure marriage. At worst, it may perish from boredom and routine, or erupt into infidelity. Other marriages do indeed seem to be compounded of opposites. We call them complementary if they succeed and incompatible if they fail. They are not likely to be dull—indeed they may move from one upheaval to another, all hills and valleys, storm and calm, bliss and misery—marvellously rich and rewarding or a desperate duel to the death of the marriage, by divorce. These extremes lead us to the important distinction between *disharmony* and *breakdown* in marriage. It is all too easy to regard marriage disharmony as a social disease or a moral fault, or a mild attack of breakdown. I think this view is incorrect and that, on the contrary, a fruitful, creative and lively marriage thrives and matures on its own disharmony. The Darby and Joan type of marriage (they may be only 20) does not evolve, though it may indeed form a comfortable and stable background for other more adventurous activities.

Marriage breakdown is not the direct result of disharmony but

results from an inability to use disharmony, to create from it a more diverse and richer relationship. What matters is whether the partners can adapt to the changing demands of an emotional relationship.

### *Phases for reorientation*

Now we may conveniently consider three phases where a basic reorientation is demanded. First, getting married. Second, the birth of the first child. Third, the adolescence of the children. (There are others, but they lie outside our 20–40 limits.)

The joy and magic of falling in love and getting married may obscure the deeply challenging nature of this total involvement. At once all the romantic idealism of our nature seems to be impersonated in the beloved, in this “mortal Paradise of such sweet flesh”. Yet she is human too and may on occasion be churlish, bedraggled or irritating. The blending or harmonizing of the ideal with reality may be painful and difficult and it often produces the characteristic lover’s quarrel.

The sexual *freedom* of marriage makes its own demand. This is far more than perfecting a technique along the lines of the latest marriage manual. The development of sexual harmony depends on many factors, perhaps most significantly on the ability to integrate loving feelings with sexual feelings. Many parents, with the best intentions, brought their children up to believe that what mummies and daddies do together in bed is simply because they love each other or want a baby. If that is true, what is the mystery—why keep it secret? This in my view may lead to quite unnecessary bewilderment in adolescence, and uncertainty or guilt beyond it.

The daily and continuous sharing of life between two people requires innumerable adjustments. Such humdrum matters as furnishing a room, what to have for breakfast, the division of money, who does what in the home, are less simple than they seem. Such a new life is exciting and rewarding. It also challenges assumptions we have taken over into marriage from our own upbringing, and these may be held with quite irrational tenacity by perfectly normal people.

The old emotional ties of family relationship, going back to earliest years and to the depths of our unconscious attitudes, demand a gradual new definition. The familiar mother-in-law problem is one example. Usually the son or daughter is clinging unawares to the old and safer relationship. It is not *only* the mother. Comedians may help people to laugh-off these difficulties but they nevertheless have to be faced.

Equally subtle and important are the new adjustments of the two partners’ roles within the marriage. Which of them decides

what? Who takes precedence about what?

The giving and receiving of affectionate love requires a different orientation from what they had in the family. A new balance has to be found, in all its manifestations, between the need for novelty and change and the need for security, the need to be dominant and assertive in some ways and submissive in others. The ability to make all these adjustments will be limited by factors that are largely irrational and unconscious. Hence the obstinacy with which (even much later in married life) we still argue about some of them.

This first phase of adjustment in early marriage may take a long time to achieve—indeed some of it may never be achieved. Gradually the marriage emerges as an entity with a sturdy, robust and viable character of its own. Perhaps its most remarkable quality is the degree to which the two partners intuitively respond to each other's needs and the demands for any new situation. Friends and relations nearly always remark on how much they have changed since marriage.

#### *The marriage becomes a family*

The second phase of major adjustment arises when the marriage becomes a family. This will require a new orientation of every part of the relationship; making-do on *one* income, defining their respective roles as parents, and those of their in-laws as grandparents, adjusting to less leisure and different holidays, not to mention the absorbing adventure of looking after a baby. A specially important aspect of this phase is the reversal of the wife's role. Till now, she has achieved equality of status that women have struggled for, the virtual identity with man's role in modern industrial society. She and her husband have indeed been partners and equals. The emancipated young woman changes almost overnight into a domesticated drudge, tied to the home and financially dependent on her husband. She may well feel her hard-won equality was, after all, only a pretence. And her husband may feel guilty about her discontent. The excitement and fun of the new baby may compensate for much of this and many young fathers make excellent mothers—or at any rate mother-substitutes and mother's-helps (for short periods). But the degree of adjustment required of them both is considerable. Fundamentally their ability to cope with these changes will depend on their own deeply-held attitudes towards maleness and femaleness, once again irrational and partly unconscious.

This stage of adjustment is perhaps not made easier by the image of the young mother projected by women's magazines and the advice so lavishly distributed on bringing-up a baby. It all seems so excellent and yet somehow so unreal. Just think of those model girls,

elegantly posed beside lavish and impeccable cots or prams, or poised on stilettos by the central heating while the model baby plays daintily on the synthetic fibre hearth-rug. Or all that advice about anxious mothers being bad for the baby—surely the way to *increase* her anxiety, rather than help her to cope with it.

The third phase in which new adjustment is implicit arrives with the adolescence of the children. The marriage again changes radically, and the influence of the social environment is different. The marriage was surrounded by a euphoric ‘happy ever after’ aura: of limousines, button-holes, champagne, fairy-like bridesmaids, photographers, church bells and cutting cake, speeches and confetti. The birth of the baby (particularly the first) was heralded as an achievement (which it is) although surrounded by much of the routine associated with illness. It was an occasion for congratulation and rejoicing and every woman within reach peered into the Moses basket and made gurgles and compliments.

The onset of puberty, just as natural as family development, has a very different feeling about it. Our society has no initiation ceremony—and one rather trembles to imagine what it would consist of if it did. Filling-up forms, probably. The aura is now of the teenage world which many adults regard with a bewildering mixture of envy and disapproval. The daily press plays up every piece of rebellion or destructive behaviour, every excess of adolescent exuberance and affluence, every suggestion of sexual licence. And it plays down or ignores their generosity, their idealism and concern for the misfortunes of others. I once heard an adolescent girl who had been reading a magazine say to her brother ‘We are supposed to have problems—do *you* have problems, Peter?’ Society just cannot allow them to be normal.

There is, I believe a good case to be made out for regarding middle age as comparable in many respects with adolescence—there are physical changes, a new orientation of sexuality, a concern with the problem of authority, a sometimes sudden outburst of the idealistic, romantic or religious part of life; a new adjustment of role, a new assessment of values, a sensitiveness to the magical, poetic, aesthetic experience.

Many of the uncertainties of middle age are, I believe, projected onto the adolescent. Sometimes this occurs individually, in the family upheavals of this period; sometimes collectively by means of sweeping generalizations about ‘young people nowadays’. Many middle-aged or even elderly people suffer from a delusion that the young (that is, the adolescents) look to them for a moral lead. I believe this is wishful thinking; the equivalent of the adolescent belief that they have nothing at all to learn from their elders.

Within the family, this new orientation demands new adjustments between husband and wife. The rivalry between child and parent of the same sex reoccurs now that the child is sexually mature. Its roots lie in infancy but the conflict is fought out afresh in, for example, disputes about staying out late, about dress or money or hairstyles—his or hers. It is no wonder many marriages go through a difficult phase at this time, the conflict between the partners being obscured as the sole problem of their difficult adolescent son or daughter. I once heard two adolescents working this out together. The girl began by saying to her brother, “I think it’s amazing the things you say to Daddy—I would never *dare* to.” To which he replied, “That’s nothing to the things you say to Mummy; to me, Mummy is a kind of luxury”.

And now to turn to the problems of marriage breakdown. At whatever stage it may occur, we can generally recognize three components. First, an inability of both husband and wife to adjust to new demands, an inability based on deeply-held and largely unconscious attitudes and stereotypes about oneself, one’s partner and marriage. Second, a vicious circle produced by this stalemate, in which each partner may be the cause of the very quality they complain of in the other. Third, the *eruption* of these conflicts into areas that have special unconscious significance for both partners. The apparent ‘problem’ may be financial, sexual, connected with the children or the in-laws, with the home—or indeed, with anything; for the so-called problem is the expression of the conflict and is not the cause of it.

Marriage problems of whatever kind seldom lie wholly within the one partner but are usually caused (at least partly) by the other, for they are relationship difficulties. Yet sometimes it is very difficult to recognize this interaction because the conciliator himself finds it hard to be objective. Do we not, all of us, complain bitterly of those faults in our partner that we ourselves provoke? Do we not tend to project onto our partners those aspects of our own personality that we cannot accept?

The therapeutic task is not to try to eliminate differences between the partners but, on the contrary, to face them realistically in an atmosphere of acceptance, to help free them from the tyranny of the normal, from shame and guilt and a pitiful need to be given directions or techniques: to help them become more fully and freely themselves, to give and receive love. In marriage as in music, harmony is made up of differences and even discord may sometimes have its place.