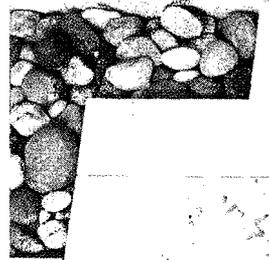


THESE DAYS, AMERICA SEEMS to breed highly polarized and fractious debates, particularly concerning moral and social issues. Witness the bitter political struggles about abortion, gay marriage, “family values,” teaching evolution, and even, during this last holiday season, the “war on Christmas.” Therapists are no less susceptible to taking sides than anybody else in the culture, particularly about controversies that cut to the core of their identity as mental health professionals. ■ The latest such issue, itself a kind of outgrowth

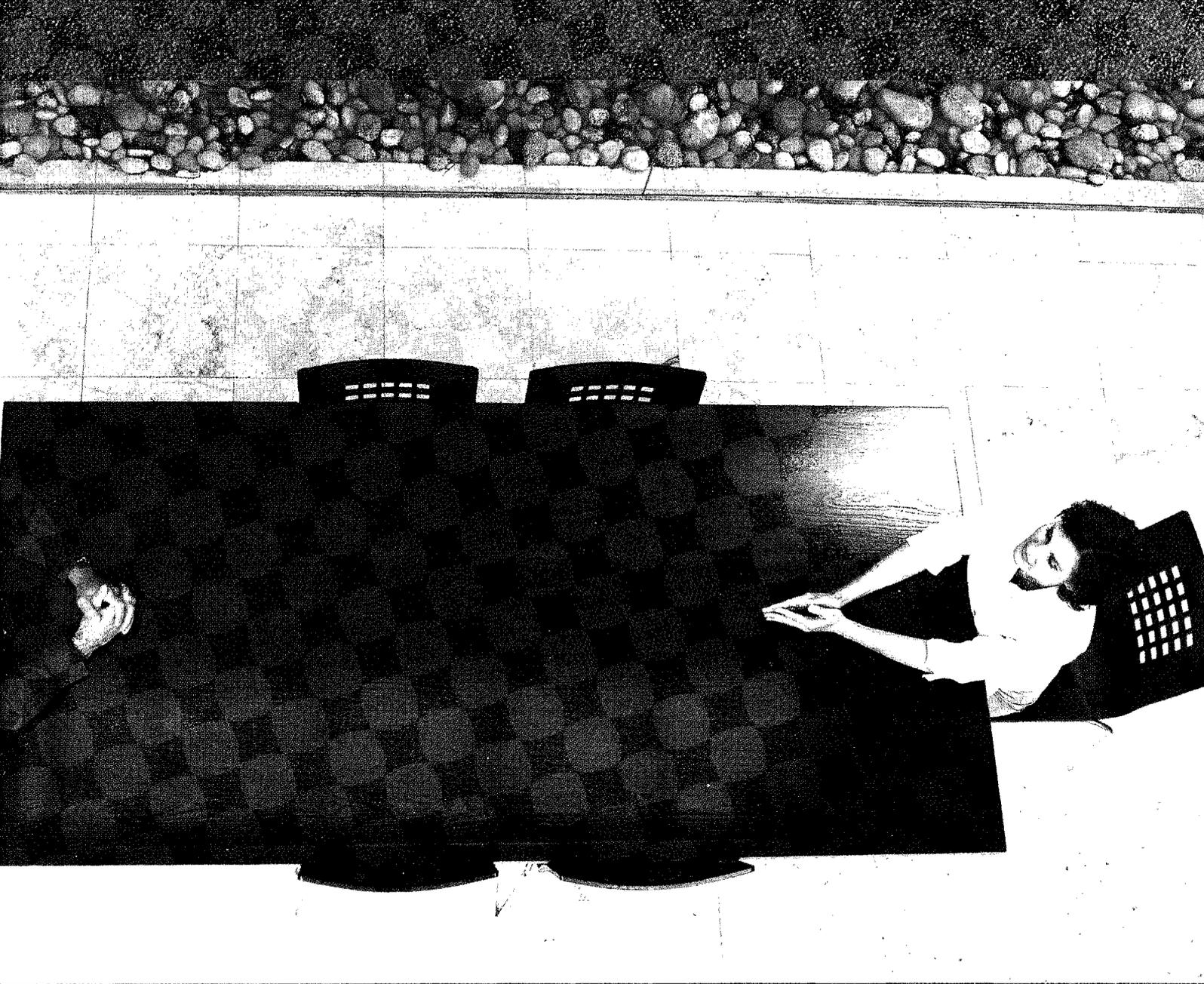
SOMETIMES IT'S of the family values debate, is how therapists should respond to marital problems:
WISER TO HELP pists should respond to marital problems:
COUPLES PART should they focus primarily on preserving marriages, or should they concentrate on enhancing the personal satisfaction of the individuals who are in the

The Fataally Flawed



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by

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Marriage

marriages? Ideally, of course, both goals would coexist in the same marital therapy. But, in fact, the two goals aren't always compatible, as any therapist knows who's had a husband or wife come into therapy with the express purpose of dumping the current spouse in the therapist's lap so he or she could decamp and pursue true happiness with a newer model. Today the debate between those who believe they should, whenever possible, save marriages and those who believe their first duty is to save individuals (sometimes from the marriages) has escalated into a virtual "marital war" about the proper ethical and professional role of the therapist.

Traditionally, therapists were assumed to be "value neutral" about the issue of divorce—they weren't sup-



In the rush to preserve **marriage**, we could swing to the other of trying to **save** even marriages that

posed to let their own morals and values about marriage influence their clinical work. The idea was that the clinician should stay above the fray, so to speak, only acting to facilitate communication in a way that would let the couple themselves decide whether their union was worth preserving. In reality, this approach, particularly as practiced by clinicians trained primarily in individual therapy, was subtly weighted in favor of individual satisfaction rather than marriage preservation. To put it baldly, if the marriage, even if potentially salvageable, didn't promote the greatest "personal growth" of one or both individual spouses, the marriage had to go.

More recently, a relatively new cohort of "marriage-preservation therapists" has charged onto the scene like a band of white knights, not even pretending to be value neutral. They forcefully advocate preserving almost every marriage that comes into their purview, including those of couples who may not believe their own marriages are worth

saving. This approach is growing in ascendancy, partly because of new data showing that married people, especially men, exhibit better health and functioning than singles. Furthermore, substantial research suggests that even a "good" divorce is hard on children, having long-lasting repercussions on their emotional well-being and ability to form strong marriages as adults.

The optimistic view, that most marriages can be healed and renewed if couples are willing to learn skills for getting along better, is intrinsically powerful. Some preservationist therapists claim that they can save 90 percent of the troubled marriages they treat. Compare that astonishing success rate to the abysmal 75-percent failure rate that other, individually oriented, therapists report at keeping couples together. Clearly, even if the 90-percent figure is much exaggerated, marriage savers do seem to have demonstrated that

neutral or individual-satisfaction therapists may have been a good deal too cavalier about letting marriages fail unnecessarily.

However, there's danger that, in the rush to preserve marriage, we could swing to the other extreme, of trying to save even marriages that shouldn't be saved. In this context, we believe it's important to understand the phenomenon of the fatally flawed marriage—a union for which divorce is found to be the preferable option, even though the couple doesn't present with issues of abuse or violence. Within the spectrum of fatally flawed marriages, the following three issues are most common.

A Broken Respect Bond—The bond of respect is destroyed when a spouse learns that the partner lied or misrepresented crucial facts or intentions in entering the marriage. Examples include claiming to have a college degree in accounting, but never having

finished high school; claiming to make \$80,000 when in reality having a \$40,000 salary; minimizing or hiding an addiction, incarceration, or mental health problem; claiming the current marriage is the second when it's really the fourth; stating a desire to have children, but having undergone a tubal ligation or vasectomy; agreeing to settle down with the fiancé in Seattle, while having already volunteered to serve overseas.

A Broken Trust Bond—The trust bond is shattered when the spouse realizes that the partner's stated beliefs about what marriage means, what marriage should be like, and why he or she wants to get married are false. Examples include claiming to have a strong religious affiliation (and, presumably, to be planning for a marriage and family life steeped in religion) when, in truth, being an atheist; continuing to engage

throws the partner for a loop. It's often the case that the offending partner isn't consciously lying or behaving falsely, or that he or she rationalizes the behavior by believing that the problem will disappear magically in the glow of a new marriage.

Another way of thinking about fatally flawed marriages is to define them as marriages threatened by core issues (one of the broken-bond issues above, or any other issue that one or both parties consider to be of vital importance and can't ignore), which one or both parties are unwilling to address. In other words, for a marriage to be fatally flawed, not only must there be an issue present that one or both parties can't accept, but there must also be a failure of motivation to deal with it. The elephant is seen in the living room, but one or both spouses can't muster up the desire and will to address it. Thus even a marriage marred by a fatal flaw can be salvaged and perhaps made whole, but only if both spouses are committed to do the hard work of confronting and repairing the damage.

If a couple lacks the motivation to address one of these core issues, regardless of what it is, the marriage will most likely fail eventually, no matter how long it appears to survive. If this is the case, early recognition and action is best, especially before the couple takes on shared lifetime commitments, like a home, children, and/or significant career alterations. In fact, the first four years of marriage provide the optimal time frame for a couple to recognize whether theirs is a viable marriage.

The process we suggest for the couple to decide whether or not to divorce is very different from the impulsive and dramatic split driven by hurt and anger. We advocate that each partner carefully and objectively assess their marital bond, while cautiously exploring the differences and issues at play.

A Precipitous Union

Faced with a fatally flawed marriage, what's the most ethical, effective, and helpful therapeutic strategy a marriage therapist can take? Consider Cal and Stephanie, an attractive couple in their early thirties who'd been married 14 months. This was Cal's first marriage

and Stephanie's second. They'd been introduced by friends who thought they'd be a "dynamite couple." Cal, who had an M.B.A., was vice president of a start-up company, and Stephanie was an attorney at a large firm. They were both politically conservative and born-again Christians.

Family and friends were very supportive of this marriage. Cal felt he'd found his "soulmate" and that it was time for him to "settle down and have a family." Their courtship had been very romantic—literally, filled with candlelight and roses and moonlit walks. They idealized each other and felt very much in love. In such a rapturous state, they saw no need to discuss complex or difficult life issues, such as careers, children, and individual goals, assuming they both felt the same way about them and wouldn't have any struggles.

Unfortunately the beautiful bubble burst two weeks before the wedding, when Stephanie had a panic attack and wanted to cancel the ceremony. Both families and Cal attributed this to "wedding jitters" and did their best to calm her. After all, the church and reception plans were set, and it would have been extremely awkward to delay the wedding. Even during this tumultuous time, neither Stephanie nor Cal discussed substantive relationship issues, or even suggested that such a conversation might be useful.

The honeymoon was a disaster, even though they were staying at a gorgeous, romantic, and expensive Hawaiian resort. During the two weeks there, Stephanie went from optimistic to woe-begone, Cal from reassuring to angry. While they had two satisfying lovemaking experiences, several other attempts to make love ended in failure, disappointment, and embarrassment. Cal tried to respond to Stephanie with empathy, but couldn't sustain it very long, and their exchanges quickly degenerated into angry charges and countercharges, mutual recriminations, tears from Stephanie, and angry reproaches from Cal. He accused her of a "bait and switch," while she accused him of being a "hypocrite" and "not a true Christian."

Two months after the honeymoon, they consulted a Christian marriage

extreme shouldn't be saved.

in a previous sexual relationship during the engagement and/or after marriage, while proclaiming a belief in marital fidelity; telling a fiancé that he's the father of the fetus, when the woman knows he isn't.

A Broken Intimacy Bond—The intimacy bond is damaged by engaging in a sham or alienated emotional or sexual relationship. Examples include pretending to have a strong desire for marriage and a stable family life when the true desire is to continue to be a "sexual player"; unexpectedly expressing a desire for triadic sex rather than couple sex; demonstrating a strong need to be emotionally rescued from loneliness or depression, but once married, becoming emotionally distant; not admitting to being gay or lesbian before marriage.

What these sometimes overlapping issues have in common is a misrepresentation of self or of intentions and a failure of honesty and integrity that

counselor for six sessions, and then a psychiatrist, who medicated Stephanie for depression. Finally, they visited a pastoral counselor for marriage therapy and an intensive, Christian couples weekend retreat. Cal was convinced that since they were smart, accomplished Christians, they'd be able to resolve their problems. He was sure that a pregnancy would cement their marital bond and solve all their problems. However, Stephanie was feeling increasingly alienated from him, depressed about the state of her life and marriage, and increasingly stressed at work.

They were finally referred to Barry because their sexual life seemed to have permanently stalled. In the first session, Cal made it clear that he'd relished the "rebel, bad boy" aspect of his life before marriage, but now that he was married, all he wanted to do was settle down and raise a nice, normal family. He was bewildered by Stephanie's emotional outbursts, frustrated and exasperated by her sexual avoidance, and completely baffled by the inexplicable derailment of their marriage.

In an individual session that's a regular part of our assessment process, Stephanie was tearful, emotional, and afraid she'd chosen the wrong man to marry. She felt Cal had no interest in getting to know and understand her, and that he was callous, unsympathetic, and demanding. During this session, she dropped several bombshells about her own life: she revealed that her gynecologist had told her that she'd have a difficult time becoming pregnant and should consult an infertility specialist. She'd contracted a sexually transmitted disease from her ex-husband, who'd caught it during an affair with a woman from a strip club, and it had scarred her fallopian tubes. She'd shared none of this with Cal. She also hadn't told him about an affair she'd had with a minister as her first marriage was breaking up, or the fact that she'd received a \$400,000 divorce settlement from her first marriage, or that she'd had breast implants. She hadn't told Cal any of these things because she didn't think he'd accept her if he knew about them. But despite the fact that, at present, she neither loved nor liked her husband,

she desperately wanted this marriage to succeed. This was her second marriage, and she couldn't face the prospect that this one, too, might end in divorce.

Clearly, this marriage had gotten off to a calamitous start and wouldn't seem to have had much going for it. However, every therapist has probably seen committed and determined spouses who manage to salvage some real gold from what at first appears to be a complete shipwreck of a marriage. Certainly, this marriage was dramatically flawed from the beginning. But were the flaws fatal?

Barry received Stephanie's permission to share the information and concerns about her probable infertility in a feedback session with her and Cal. Not only did Cal need to understand the actual facts of the situation—that Stephanie would probably have a very

the positive features and vulnerabilities of the marriage, and then discusses the list with the partner, remaining open to the other's perceptions and feedback. One point of this exercise is to help couples learn that mutual respect is based on a realistic understanding and acceptance of the other, not, as in Stephanie and Cal's case, blind idealism, which almost inevitably leads to bitter disappointment, feelings of betrayal, and mutual blame. To establish trust, both partners must convince the other that they each have the other's best interests at heart and wouldn't intentionally hurt their spouse or the marital bond. In addition to positive features and vulnerabilities, each spouse lists sensitive issues that would subvert the trust bond for him or her. They also discuss specific ways to reinforce emotional and sexual intimacy.

What makes a **marriage** **fatally** flawed is that one or

difficult time conceiving—but he also needed to understand her troubled emotions about this issue, and how it affected their sexual relationship. Barry hoped that if Cal and Stephanie could deal with this issue, it would increase their ability to trust and respect each other.

Cal was clearly taken aback by Stephanie's startling revelations about her potential infertility, but he pulled himself together and said he better understood some of the reasons for the rocky beginning of their marriage. He also seemed willing to continue exploring the possibilities for making the marriage work, in spite of the substantial glitches to his expectations for his marriage and family life his wife's revelations presented.

The couple's homework assignment was to talk about the feedback from this session and engage in an exercise to enhance mutual respect, trust, and intimacy. In this exercise, each spouse lists

Over the following weekend, Barry received a call from Stephanie saying the session had been helpful to her and the exercise made her aware of what she needed to do to improve the marital bond. However, after this call, the couple went to a party and later had a horrible fight, during which Cal called his wife brutal names and said she wasn't at all the Christian woman he thought he'd married. All the positive feelings created by the feedback session and homework exercise evaporated during that one fight.

In subsequent couple sessions, Cal said he couldn't forgive Stephanie for not telling him about the potential infertility problem. From Stephanie's perspective, her husband's most dramatic and devastating admission was that had he known about the infertility problem, he never would have married her in the first place. These admissions reinforced Stephanie's growing fear that Cal didn't and



vidual responsibility, we firmly believe that a blanket condemnation of divorce is harmful to individuals and to society at large. Divorce provides a viable option for those individuals involved in an abusive, destructive, or fatally flawed marriage. Being promarriage doesn't mean being antidivorce.

When a Partner Opts Out

In some respects, Cal and Stephanie's union was a textbook case of a fatally flawed marriage, with so many strikes against it from the beginning that it would have been a challenge to even the most dedicated marriage preserver. Furthermore, though the unraveling of the marriage was undeniably wounding to both parties, there were no children

Catholics, and both families attended the ceremony, though each family felt uneasy about the marriage. Jan's parents felt she was "marrying down"—Jan had an M.B.A. and a job as an executive, while Pablo hadn't graduated from college and worked as a government contractor. His family had wanted him to marry a woman of Hispanic origin, who was likely to be a compliant, traditional wife for their son. Nonetheless, both families rallied to the support of the couple once they learned a baby was on the way.

The couple came in for counseling at Jan's urging. In the first session, they sat stiffly in their chairs, spoke hesitantly, and glanced nervously at each other from time to time. During that session, Jan told Barry how much she was enjoying her childbirth classes. Pablo, by contrast, had dropped out after only two lessons. She added that the more she tried to get her husband interested in becoming a family man—trying to convince him to go shopping with her for baby clothes, planning a possible move to a bigger place, reading books about child rearing, even talking about what they were going to name the baby—the more he avoided her and the subject. Jan had hoped the marriage and the child would cement their bond, but now felt more alienated and alone.

In an individual session, Pablo disclosed that he'd accepted a well-paid job for a private contractor in Sudan two weeks before, but hadn't told Jan, explaining that it would "cause her too much stress" at this late stage of her pregnancy. He felt this was a financial opportunity he couldn't pass up, and was convinced that Jan wouldn't really be too upset by his departure because she'd be so focused on her new baby.

As a Hispanic man raised in a traditional household, Pablo felt humiliated because his wife had the professional status and brought in the lion's share of their money. In his view, by going overseas to a new job, he was only righting the imbalance—demonstrating he could be as smart, successful, and independent as she was. Furthermore, he'd be fulfilling his role as a man by working overseas and sending money to the family—the way men from many coun-

both partners aren't motivated enough to **struggle** with hard issues.

couldn't accept her as she was and that she'd never be able to trust him, even if they stayed married.

What actually makes a marriage fatally flawed is that one or both partners aren't motivated enough to grapple with painful disclosures and struggle with hard issues. The marital bond between Cal and Stephanie had been contingent upon certain expectations about intimacy, starting a family, and living an idealized Christian life, and when they weren't realized, the bond was implicitly broken. Therefore, Barry suggested that the next step was divorce mediation. Stephanie reluctantly agreed, and Cal said he was ready to move toward separation and divorce.

Although we aren't advocates of divorce, especially not divorces that are impulsive or serve as a way to avoid indi-

vidual responsibility, we firmly believe that a blanket condemnation of divorce is harmful to individuals and to society at large. Divorce provides a viable option for those individuals involved in an abusive, destructive, or fatally flawed marriage. Being promarriage doesn't mean being antidivorce.

When Jan and Pablo came into therapy, they'd been married for seven months. However, they'd been a couple for four years, and had been living together nearly that long. They'd decided to marry because Jan had become pregnant—her baby was due any day—and because their best friends, another couple, were getting married.

It was Jan's first marriage, and Pablo's second. Though the relationship had always been stormy, Jan hoped that the marriage and her pregnancy might increase Pablo's somewhat wavering commitment to her.

They'd both been raised as Roman

tries do—while she stayed home with the baby.

Jan approached the marriage and baby from a totally different perspective. She wanted and expected a marriage in which both spouses were deeply involved together in creating a family life. Pablo's refusal to take much interest in their forthcoming child puzzled and hurt her. She didn't want to divorce her husband and become a single mother. But she was beginning to think that if Pablo wasn't willing to step up to the plate and join her fully in the job of being married and starting a family, it would be better if she knew that now, rather than discovering it later.

Clearly there were flaws in this marriage, but were they necessarily fatal? What would determine the "fatality" of these issues was whether the two were sufficiently motivated to deal with and try to resolve them. In their joint session, Pablo's opening salvo wasn't promising: he made it clear to Jan that if she wanted to stay married to him, she'd need to accept his plans and priorities. And neither she nor the baby was his first priority, he added. Jan was understandably shocked and wounded. She said she'd hoped, in spite of evidence to the contrary, that Pablo would somehow be moved to settle down for a life together with her and the baby.

From this point, the discussion could easily have degenerated into an attack/counterattack cycle of mutual blame and recriminations. Instead, Barry urged them, for the moment, to simply take in what each had said as practical information and separately write down which of their own positions they considered to be resolvable, modifiable, or unchangeable (the other would either have to accept it or give up the marriage).

At the follow-up session five days later, Jan had done her homework and seemed more confident that the marriage could work. Pablo was also calmer. In a quiet but determined voice, he announced that he was leaving in two weeks to begin his overseas job, and that his parents and sister had committed to helping Jan with the baby for three months. He told his wife that he was willing to stay married to her, but

that it was ultimately her decision. Jan then asked Pablo a question that showed a lot of insight: "If I say 'no' to the marriage, will you be relieved?" Pablo replied he'd feel both disappointed and relieved.

Pablo and Jan left counseling at this point, giving the impression they might try to work things out. But three months after the birth of her daughter, Jan decided to file for divorce. In this, she had the support of her family and friends, as well as of Pablo's sister, although she went against the wishes of his parents. Pablo himself affirmed the decision, telling Jan that if she wished to remarry and the new husband wanted to adopt the child, he'd give his consent.

A hard-core marriage preserver might wonder why we didn't work harder to "save" this marriage. After all, a new baby had been born whose mother would be single—red alerts to many zealous marriage savers. Furthermore, with the exception of Pablo's delay in revealing his career plans to Jan, there wasn't the sort of flagrant dishonesty apparent in Stephanie and Cal's marriage. Neither infidelity nor addiction were an issue, and both spouses seemed willing to remain married. So, why didn't we, as some marriage preservers do, take the "side" of the marriage, even when one of the participants wasn't particularly enthusiastic?

In our opinion, this marriage was fatally flawed, though in ways that were more subtle than those afflicting Cal and Stephanie's union. While the earlier couple had married happily in a haze of romanticism, Pablo and Jan hadn't even gotten that far. Perhaps the most important motive for marriage, at least in our culture, is the sincere desire of both parties to get married and to be married to each other. That said, it isn't a good sign when, instead of marrying in happy expectation of sharing their lives, their futures, and their fortunes, the couple backs into marriage, as Pablo and Jan did.

Jan wanted and, in our opinion, had a right to expect a marital bond comprised of respect, trust, and intimacy. But it appeared she'd be getting none of these. Instead, Pablo was grudgingly offering a marginal marriage that

might well have broken up eventually anyway, perhaps when their child was 5, 12, or 15—a much harder age for a child to experience a divorce than birth is.

We are solidly promarriage, but this doesn't make us antidivorce. Sometimes we believe that divorce can be a better, wiser choice than staying married—a choice that forestalls more difficult, complicated, and emotionally costly breakups later on. It's our cardinal belief, however, that the decision to divorce should never be made impulsively and hastily, in an emotionally aroused state of rage, betrayal, yearning for freedom, or lust for a third party. The choice to recommit to a marriage or to terminate that marriage is a major life decision, which deserves the time and attention necessary to make it a wise one, both for the adults and the children involved.

When we can help troubled couples step back from their emotions, get some perspective on themselves, and take a look at all the short-term and long-term issues involved in the options they have, we enable them to make decisions that they're less likely to regret later. We also help them find a sense of peace and acceptance from knowing that they've done their best to think things through and come up with the best decision possible.

We believe that the clinician's role is to help each partner of a couple considering divorce to reach a wise decision, whether it's a decision to stay married or to divorce. Our feeling is that it's not only possible to be both promarriage and accepting of divorce, but that, in most cases, this is the optimal value stance for marital therapists. ■

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