



## The 27-year itch

I have unabashedly borrowed the title of this editorial from the cover story of *Maclean's* magazine (January 29, 2007). What is the 27-year itch? No doubt you have heard of the 7-year itch. I am not sure how far this expression goes back, but in 1955 Marilyn Monroe starred in the comedy, *The Seven Year Itch*. This film satirized the tendency of men to "stray" from their wives after seven years of marriage. Keeping this in mind, the expression "27-year itch" seems an improvement – twenty years improvement! But that is not the point of this expression and it is certainly not the point of Anne Kingston's article in *Maclean's*. The 27-year itch indicates a growing trend of late-life divorces in the fifty to eighty-five age group. In fact, the fastest-increasing divorce rate in our country and throughout the world is among marriages that have lasted twenty to sixty years. Once it was only the rich and powerful that divorced and remarried, but now it is a cross-cultural phenomenon.

### Why?

Anne Kingston interviewed Deirdre Bair who has just come out with a new book, *Calling It Quits: Late-Life Divorce and Starting Over*. Kingston makes clear that Bair is a well-respected and accomplished researcher. Kingston asked Bair whether she observed any patterns among late-life divorces. In other words, was there a pattern in the reason for divorce at this stage of married life? Here is Bair's response:

*A growing apart. I used a quote from Lillian Hellman to introduce one of the chapters: "People change and they forget to tell each other." An indifference comes to pass, a lack of communication, a non-sharing of anything on any level. That seemed to be what inspired so many people to say, "There has to be something better, there has to be something different." Of course, infidelity was a very large component, but mostly in the upper classes. And the reason that it was possible for these people to divorce rather than to just end their lives living separately within a dead marriage, I think, was the feminist movement of the 1970s. Many women either worked or they had the experience of knowing that they could make it on their own, that they were entitled to a portion of their husband's pension or whatever if they had not worked outside the home, so they felt that financially they would be able to survive. People in their 60s are saying, "I could have 20 more years of life and I don't want those 20 years to be what I'm living now, I want something better." I think having more opportunities for financial survival, and leading long-term healthier lives, has inspired many people to make this really astonishing step.*

In her article, Anne Kingston points out that in place of traditional commitments to marriage and family, people are putting more value on individual freedom, self-identity, starting over, and the pursuit of happiness. It is an ironic twist to what is considered one of the "unalienable rights" of the United States Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Basically in our modern society divorce has lost its stigma and therefore if one marriage partner feels stymied in any way by the other, then divorce becomes very attractive. In fact, Kingston shows from one survey that one in four divorced men and women stated that there were no major problems leading to divorce. People had fallen out of love and had grown apart and they believed that a greater satisfaction beckoned them once they were free of their marriage partner.

### The norm

A family-law conference in Chicago held last year suggested that in fifty years the average person will be married three times. The first marriage will be a starter marriage; the second marriage will

be for procreation and raising children; the third marriage will be for companionship. Considering contemporary trends of marriage and divorce, this is not an impossible scenario. A more likely scenario, however, is that people will engage in multiple cohabitations without the bother of marriage.

### **Any advice or hope?**

Neither Kingston nor Bair give the impression that they like or are strongly promoting divorce. Both warn against overly romanticizing divorce. Bair warns that divorce is *“such a drastic action”* and *“it should be your last resort. It should not be something you go into lightly.”* They warn against dangers such as loneliness, depression, and poverty which can be the fallout of divorce. But in the end, the message is this: if you need to divorce, then do so with your eyes wide open and turn this failure into the beginning of a new and successful endeavour.

I suppose that this is what one can expect from a secular publication. The dismantling of marriage and family, and the acceptability of divorce and remarriage is a way of life in our world. The 7-year itch or the 27-year itch is not going away. It extends to all age groups and to every corner of society.

### **What about us?**

In the pages of our little magazine, *Clarion*, there have been plenty of warnings against the spirit of individualism or narcissism which is the very thing that puts self-expression ahead of commitment to others. We also are well aware of the biblical mandate to remain married *“till death do us part.”* Commitment as husband and wife to the marriage bond is sacred. Understanding this and remaining committed to one another protects us from the lackadaisical attitude that so many have toward marriage. Of course we cannot be smug or complacent: we are not immune to the attitudes and lifestyles of our world. We may think of the Book of Revelation, which consistently warns the church living in the end of times that compromise with the world is our biggest threat. We are to stand on guard, holding to the Word of God and being obedient to Jesus Christ.

### **Something further?**

It is, however, simply not enough to resist the spirit and practice of our modern age and avoid the pitfall of divorce. Marriage is not simply a matter of staying together no matter what! When God instituted marriage, husband and wife were designed to be each other's helpers. In passages such as 1 Corinthians 13 and Ephesians 5 it is clear that husband and wife are to blossom in each other's love.

Two things should happen in marriage: first husband and wife are to build each other up in every possible way and secondly they are to help each other live to the praise and glory of God. A marriage is to be typified by such things as love, respect, tenderness, empathy, and caring. If there are wrongs, they are to be forgiven and forgotten. Husband and wife are to be each other's confidant. That is a very important component to marriage: our spouse should be the one person in our life with whom we can be completely open, relaxed, and comfortable. This is our bosom friend. This is the one person we can trust, with whom we can share anything and from whom we can expect complete support. A marriage partner is a wonderful gift from God to be appreciated as long as we have life together.

At the beginning of this article, I quoted Bair, *“People change and they forget to tell each other. An indifference comes to pass, a lack of communication, a non-sharing of anything on any level.”* While I don't like where Bair ends up with her research on divorce, I do appreciate this insight into a fundamental problem with marriage. A fundamental problem is a failure to communicate. When husband and wife do not talk to each other, sharing their struggles, their fears, their dreams, their hopes, and when they no longer listen to each other and therefore know each other, then marriage becomes an empty shell. Husband and wife can become like two strangers under one roof. How important it is that every day husband and wife talk openly and tenderly with each other. It is not uncommon to see in a good marriage that a couple spend at least two hours a day in good

conversation with each other. If there are any struggles or concerns, husband and wife can show support for one another, forgive one another if that is necessary, and most importantly, bring that together to the throne of God's grace.

Marriage is an amazing and beautiful relationship. It was designed by God to bring two people closer to each other and to God. With his grace and blessing, husband and wife can walk hand-in-hand through this life, even for many decades, going from strength to strength, leading each other to eternity and the great wedding feast of the Lamb.

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