
Psychology and Family Law

Lessons I Learned from My Parents

Part I of a Series

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Last weekend I decided to go through some of my mother's old photographs and it brought back a lot of rather painful memories; yet it also reminded me of many things that I learned from my parents. By coincidence, the following day I finally got around to reading a book titled, "Broken Circle – Children of Divorce and Separation." The Broken Circle Project gives voice to young adults talking about how their parents' divorce or separation impacted their lives then and now. The combination of these two activities caused me to experience what amounts to an emotional tsunami, which in turn yielded a number of potentially instructive points.

One lesson I learned from my parents is that you should not marry someone when you know even before the marriage that he or she is not right for you. This is true, even if the realization does not occur to you until after the engagement. Marriage is a very serious commitment, and when people exchange vows, they usually expect to remain married for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately for my mother, her parents refused to allow her to call off her engagement to my father because they did not want to suffer the embarrassment it would cause them. Thus, my parents' marriage was distressed from the outset, even though they would remain married for over 20 years.

It was so clear looking at my parents' wedding pictures that my mother was not in love with my father, and did not want to marry him. This became even more obvious to me when I compared those pictures with the pictures that were taken when she married her second husband. I am not suggesting that her second marriage was successful, but Mom was definitely happy when they married. By contrast, how happy can you be when you are marrying someone due to pressure from your parents, and nothing more?

My father was a cardiologist and in the Navy at the time they married. I was their first child, and I understood that they argued because he had the ability to come home more after I was born, but he just didn't want to be there. This story was recounted numerous times as I was

growing up.

This leads me to lesson number two. Children do not improve marriages. Sadly, like many married couples, my parents believed they would. They therefore had two more children together, and doing so most certainly did not improve their marriage. In fact, having children seemed to obligate them to stay in their unhappy marriage "for the sake of the kids." Furthermore, by having more children, they extended the length of their agony. They also made sure we all knew that they were staying together for our sake.

I cannot even begin to tell you the burden we carried, knowing that we were responsible for them remaining in such a miserable relationship. Lessons number three and four are that parents should not make children feel responsible for their remaining married, and parents should not remain in such terrible marriages for the sake of their kids. My brothers and I desperately wanted our parents to divorce long before they did, and I am certain that their divorce would not have been as destructive as it was, had they ended their marriage much sooner.

My brothers and I all knew how miserable our parents were together. They were always yelling at each other, and bad mouthing each other to us, among other things. We could hear the arguments, even when they weren't occurring in our presence. We also saw our mother immediately after our father would beat her. The police were called to the house on numerous occasions, and my father was arrested at least once. I very clearly recall our mother showing us the police blotter from our local paper, which mentioned his arrest. Unfortunately, this is not an unusual situation in destructive marriages.

Lesson number five is that children know when their parents are not getting along, even if it is not quite as obvious as it was in my situation. Children are much more intuitive than adults seem to believe. Lesson number six has to do with the fact that research shows that children are harmed emotionally by parental conflict, whether in intact marriages or post-divorce.

These are only a few of the lessons I learned from my parents and hopefully others can learn from their mistakes.

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