

BAD BREATH—BAD MARRIAGE

Remember all those ads for tooth paste, mouth washes, lozenges, mints, sprays and gum, designed to scare people about bad breath? I suspect most Americans were convinced that they were offending everyone they came close to with bad breath, and had to do something about it. Until some clever person noted that bad breath is better than no breath at all. There may be no connection, but this thought occurred to me when I was feeling unhappy about my marriage. After still another argument with Fran, and thinking about disagreements with my first wife, I wondered if my first marriage was a bad marriage and if my second marriage was a bad marriage as well. But does it follow that a bad marriage is better than no marriage at all?

Looking back over the bickering, I realized that there were also fun times. And as a result of the marriages, I am the father of four wonderful children. And they have given me a world of pleasure, joy, pride, and nachas. Thinking about the “bad” part of the marriages is what led me to wondering: was the unhappiness, rather than the happiness, what my children saw?

It is better to be happy than unhappy. Is it better to be happy and single than unhappy and married? I always rejected such choices. As I used to tell my children: “It is better to be rich and healthy than poor and sick,” However, when the marriage gets increasingly unhappy, as was the case with Sylvia and me, perhaps it was better to end it. At the time, I thought it could be “saved,” but that might have required major transformations on the part of the parties. I am not sure the parties could have, or even wanted, to transform.

Why all this introspection? I have been feeling guilty, thinking that my “bad” marriages influenced the way my children saw marriage, and how husbands and wives related. Did they assume bickering came with the joining of two people? Once you marry, the arguing begins, the frustration and anger erupt, the yelling and slamming of doors become the natural order of things. Who would want that? If you enter into a relationship with someone, and you love that person, and if you enjoy that person’s company, will all that end when you formalize the relationship by getting married?

The idea of “no marriage” as an example for the children is a bit weird. What immediately came to mind is my own circumstance. I was the son of a widowed mother. There was no father in the picture. I had no role model, good or bad. However, examples of marriages were all around me: relatives, my friends’ parents, books, movies and radio programs. Most important, everyone, when they reached their early 20s, were doing it. I don’t remember books about how to make a successful marriage, but we were intelligent, we were college graduates, we could figure it out. Turns out we didn’t.

Would it have been better if the marriage ended sooner, so that the children saw “no marriage” rather than a “bad marriage” when they were most impressionable? I guess not. It would have involved shuttling the kids between the two parents, which strikes me as worse. There are a few couples that I know who are doing it currently. We will see how it progresses.

It seems as if I am leaning toward a bad marriage in which the parties do their best to make it the best marriage they can, with help. That’s what I thought 40 years ago. I haven’t made much progress.

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