Diaries of a Forgotten Parent

Diaries of a Forgotten Parent: Divorced Dads on Fathering Through and Beyond Divorce

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This book is dedicated to ten ordinary men who wanted the world to know that divorce doesn't end a father's love for his children. It is also dedicated to my son, Eric, who gave me a reason to look for the other side of the story and to my father, Donald W. Paterson Jr. whose exemplary role in my life I shall never forget.

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CHAPTER ONE

DIVORCED DADS: THE FORGOTTEN PARENTS

This is a book about Dads. Its intent is not to advise or guide men on being fathers, nor to offer practical advice on divorce. Believe it or not there are books available that are actually written for and about men! It was not written by a psychologist, sociologist, historian or family therapist. It was written by a single-parent mom who began to understand the struggles of single-parent dads as I came to know them through my friendships, my relationships, my workplace, my church.

In 1975, Yale psychologist Michael Lamb first called twentieth century fathers the "forgotten contributors to child development" (Warshak 1992, 37). In my experiences as a professor of education and now the companion of a divorced father, I have learned exactly what this means. Even thirty years after Lamb began to focus social scientists' attention on fathers, the contributions of fathers are still largely discounted by schools, courts, and worst of all, by their children's mothers.

I confess that I, too, ignored what one of the men I interviewed for this study reminded me, "There are always three sides to every story: yours, mine and the truth." In my first book, *Unbroken Homes: Single Parent Mothers Tell Their Stories* (Paterson 2001), I presented the collective truths about the lives of single-parent mothers from their perspectives and from mine. I was unapologetic about forgetting the men in my stories. Readers saw the men in that book only through the eyes of their ex-wives, and as one might guess, it was a less than complimentary picture.

When I was engaged in the doctoral research that resulted in *Unbroken Homes*, my dissertation advisor was somewhat incensed that the fathers in the book were portrayed solely by their ex-wives without any attempt to investigate the fathers' versions of their divorce stories. To me, that was just a typical male reaction to feminist research in general, and I explained in good critical researcher lingo, "That's because I am not interested in

their truths. I am only interested in the way these *women* see *themselves* and interpret their experiences." I guess I convinced him that as a woman, I knew more than he could *possibly* know about the lives of women, and I had both the courage of my convictions and the strength of feminist critical theory methodology to back me up. However, I never forgot his legitimate observation that the men in my stories were simply ghostlike images composed by their ex-wives from memories, feelings and regrets.

I knew better. After twenty years of living as a single woman with sole custody of my son, I knew in my heart my son's father was an important contributor to the successful and happy childhood of our son. At the time I wrote my first book, however, I conveniently forgot about him. I said, "I have been raising my son as a single parent for the past thirteen years [now going on eighteen]" (Paterson 2001, 2). This was just a statement of fact, wasn't it? It was *my* truth, certainly, but didn't that statement imply that my son's father wasn't an active participant in raising him? While he was clearly less involved than I was, now that I reread those words five years later, I can reflect that my son's father was indeed part of his life throughout his upbringing. However, my statement expressed my perceptions and feelings at the time when I had no interest in understanding a father's side of the story, let alone *telling* it.

Since I once accused my male professor of being unable to fully appreciate women's truths, what could I, a divorced *mother*, do to understand the intensely male experience of being a divorced *dad*? Writing about women's experiences with single-parenting was easy. The culture of women was familiar territory for me. As a female and a mother, it was easy for me to write about the experience of being a woman, a wife, a mother, and I understood exactly how to tell the stories of other mothers like me. Narrating the stories of other women was as comfortable as old slippers—after all, I "wore" the feminine experience my entire life. But where would I begin to chart the unknown territory of men, a culture I could never truly inhabit? I ventured into the research for this book as a colonist in a foreign land.

I knew about divorce—I knew *a lot* about divorce. I had read volumes about the subject in preparation for my first book, and I had my own personal vision of it from my own experience and from the shared stories of other divorced women I knew. Had I attempted to write *any* book about divorce or divorced parenting while I was in the process of divorcing, the end result would have been significantly different, and probably not very

readable, but twenty years post-divorce, I have learned much from my own experience and those of other women and men.

I knew about women. I knew about divorce. I knew how my mothering and my ex-husband's fathering were changed by our divorce, modified over time, and eventually became only a secondary part of our adult relationships with our son. Over eighteen years of being a single mother, I learned from men and women alike that divorce is both traumatic and liberating, but regardless of the outcome for its participants, the process almost certainly requires great personal upheaval. One cannot assess the damages and move on with life without significant second guessing, retrospective blaming, and mourning for what once was or could have been. While I knew that there were great similarities between mothers and fathers who endured the unsought, uncelebrated rite of passage in their lives that came with divorce, it was from living with and among divorced dads, that I truly began to take an interest in telling the other side of the story.

In a scholarly sense, the very purpose of phenomenological research when human beings are the focus, is to explore and accurately portray the meanings *those* humans bring to their *own* lives, not so much the meanings others ascribe to them. It relies on the researcher's ability to engage the participants in meaningful, introspective discussion and to present their thoughts as a narrative, giving readers a glimpse of life as it was experienced and interpreted by those individuals, not dissected and deconstructed by an expert to prove a point.

What is neither desirable nor admissible in this type of research and narration is some sort of external validation for the truths discovered. Stories resulting from phenomenological research like this are validated not by statistical tests, but by the readers, themselves, who judge authenticity by how well or how poorly they can hear the voices of the participants without the interference of the "research-speak" of the author. A second, and perhaps more important validity comes solely from the reader—empathy. Because of their own experiences with divorce, divorced fathers will share an empathic understanding of the research participants because they will identify themselves in the stories these men related.

Having written the authentic stories about single parenting according to single mothers, I feared that I couldn't fairly represent a father's side of the story without compromising my convictions about the effects of

divorce on women. However, haunted by the case study researcher's standard apology, "that there is more to know is always the case," I felt a sense of urgency to level the playing field for both men and women who must learn how to co-parent through and beyond divorce. I would not wish to rewrite the women's stories I first researched because I believe I allowed them to speak the truths of their lives, but after many years of sharing in the lives of divorced mothers *and* fathers, it is time for me to remember "the forgotten parent" and tell the stories of ordinary, humanly fallible, yet intensely honest fathers who are parenting through and beyond divorce.

Fathering, Fatherhood, and Dads

I began my quest to portray divorce in men's lives by examining what it feels like to be a father in twentieth century America. To describe that vast uncharted territory, I will start with the obvious.

According to my dog-eared *Pocket Webster* (1990), the definition of "father" as a noun is exemplified by a whole host of characterizations: "the male parent or ancestor, God, anyone who acts as a father, a Christian priest, a Roman senator, and a community leader" (267). The verb use "to father" is given two definitions: one biological, one relational. The first refers to the biological act of "begetting." In that sense, fatherhood is a sort of passive endowment that comes with the act of procreation, but the second is, "to care for or take responsibility for." As a transitive verb, both definitions imply an object—namely, a child—yet there is a vast difference between the results of *insemination* implied in the first sense and the results of *nurturing* through the culturally, psychologically and spiritually situated enactment of fathering represented by the second. The dictionary gives this example, "He *fathers* his children with skill and compassion." Even the choice of that particular wording in my little *Pocket Webster's* implies much about America's preoccupation with lecturing fathers on how they *ought* to do fathering.

Fatherhood, as an abstract noun is *not* defined separately; it is simply tacked onto the definition of "father," but in a historical sense, the American enactment of *fatherhood* has been the subject of much interest and speculation. Robert Griswold's *Fatherhood in America* (1993) is perhaps the most commonly cited historical account of the enactment of fatherhood in America in the twentieth century. From his historian's stance, we can see the construction of fatherhood across one hundred years

in America, but Griswold cautions, "…this book is a history and not a personal testimonial…" (ix). This rings true in many of the texts that investigate the *concept* of fatherhood—historical, philosophical, medical, economic—but fail to provide an intimate portrait of the men who live it.

"Dad" on the other hand gets short shrift from Webster. There is one connotative definition for both "Dad" and "Daddy," and that is "Father." Yet this term, more than any other description of a male parent, adds an emotional tone to the list of qualities we might expect from a father. One of the dads I interviewed for this book set up the contrast well, "There's a distinct difference between being a father and being a Dad." That contrast is the root of men's personal struggles, and that is where my map of this unknown territory begins.

This is a book about *Dads*, divorced dads, to be exact, but dads nonetheless—dads in the sense of their intensely personal feelings about fatherhood, their introspective reflections on the process of raising children, and their sometimes desperate dedication to maintaining their status as "dad" in their children's lives, even after time, space, and a mother's anger separate them from their children.

Because I myself cannot wholly share the experience of maleness and fatherhood in modern American culture, I have listened intently, represented faithfully, and interpreted cautiously so other dads *and* moms *and* children can come to understand what it feels like to be a divorced dad. As my mother used to say about life in general, "It comes with all its warts." These are the stories of men "with all their warts"—not extraordinary men—just men whose lives were transformed when they became fathers and again when faced with constructing fatherhood through and beyond divorce.

The fathers in this book were not sampled from all possible fathers. They are not, therefore, a representative sample. They are known to me—some for many, many years. The strength of that acquaintance could naturally make me less than objective, but I do not claim to be objective. All that can be done to make these men's truths come forth with clarity and honesty has been done. The voices of the men whose lives are revealed here can be heard as if the reader is listening in on our conversations. They wanted me to tell their stories. They entrusted me with some very sensitive details about their thoughts and feelings, and they hoped that others who read this book will learn from their experiences, their agonies, their triumphs. These men very clearly demonstrate that second definition of

father, “one who cares and takes responsibility for” their choices, their confusions, their mistakes, their suffering, their wisdom, their love for their children and their commitment to help other parents (not just other fathers) who can learn from their narratives.

As a feminist writer and a single mom, I must admit I was amazed at the quality of trust these men granted me. Throughout their narratives they exposed some still raw nerves as they recalled their grief, guilt, frustration, anger, shame, failure, disbelief, loneliness, fatigue, and impoverishment. But they always balanced the negative with joyful reminiscences and laughter, admitting to me and to themselves that they were not always sure of themselves, are willing to change, are proud of the way they fathered—warts and all—and affirmed that they love their children, even the ones who resent them for “leaving.” They are honorable, self-sacrificing, loving parents and ordinary American men.

Methodology

Participants

The research began as I rounded up the men I knew had been divorced and who had fathered through divorce. Some had been custodial parents, raising their children to adulthood. Others were “weekend fathers” whose visitation and living arrangements left them varying degrees of contact with their children. All names have been changed, and some biographical details have been altered to protect their anonymity. All of the participants currently have or have had incomes that place them in the middle socioeconomic ranges.

Adam is an architect in his thirties. He was married to Jenna, the mother of three of his sons, in the late 1980s and was divorced in the mid 1990s (approximately seven years). His second marriage was brief (less than two years), and produced another son. His four boys range in age from ten to sixteen. He has a college degree and is employed as a consultant. He and his first ex-wife have joint legal custody, but after an unsuccessful residential arrangement with their mother, the boys have resided with their father for the past six years. The child of his second marriage lives with Adam with his mother’s consent.

Brian is in his mid-fifties. He has been married three times and divorced twice. His second marriage produced two children, one son and one daughter and lasted approximately ten years. He was in his twenties for his

first two marriages and did not marry again until his early forties. Both of his children are now adults. He has a college degree and is employed as a financial analyst. The mother of his children had sole custody, and he had visitation rights. He is happily married to Janean.

Chuck is in his late forties. He was married for nineteen years to Sharon. He has four children who range in age from thirteen to twenty—two girls and two boys. He is a skilled craftsman with some postsecondary education and considerable technical training. He has never remarried, but is currently in a committed relationship with Karen. He has joint custody and pays both alimony and child support.

Dennis is a retired blue-collar worker in his early sixties. He has been married three times and was divorced twice. He has two sons and two daughters from his first marriage, which was the marriage of his youth. They resided with their mother and step-father. All of Dennis' children are now adults with families of their own. His second marriage followed shortly after his first dissolved. That marriage ended as well, and he met his current wife, Nancy, shortly thereafter. They are happily married.

Doug is in his late fifties and has been married and divorced twice. His first marriage lasted only three years. His second ended after twenty-two years. He has three adopted children, a son and two daughters. He has a college degree and is currently retired from his job. He and his ex-wife have joint custody of the children who are all now adults. His third marriage to Maria is successful.

Jerry is in his mid-fifties. He was first married to Noreen at age nineteen and divorced after twenty-eight years of marriage. His children, a boy and girl were born long after he was married and were teenagers at the time of their parents' divorce. They are currently adults. Jerry has an advanced degree and is a professional. He is happily married to his second wife, Elaine.

John is the second youngest father in the study (Adam is the youngest). He married a girl he knew in high school when he was in his early twenties. A racially diverse couple, Pat and John had three children, two boys and a girl, and divorced nine years after they married. John maintained custody of his children. He has a college degree and is employed in the hospitality industry. John is happily remarried for the second time to Lori and they have one child together.

Liam is in his early fifties. He has been married three times and divorced three times. He has an adult son from his first marriage and two children (one boy and one girl) from his third marriage to Donna. He has a college degree and is an educator. He has joint legal custody of his children who reside with their mother. He is currently in a long-term committed relationship.

Luke is in his early fifties. He was married to Kim in the 1970s and divorced in the 1980s. He has two grown children, a son and a daughter. He has a college degree and is currently a full time student, having retired following a disability. Shortly after his divorce, he obtained sole custody of his children whom he raised. He is happily married to his second wife, Lynn.

Walt is in his late fifties. He was married for fourteen years during the 1970s and 1980s and was recently remarried to Jane. He has two adult children, one son and one daughter whom he raised from a young age. He has a college degree and is retired from his professional position. He assumed sole custody of his children several years after they were unsuccessfully housed with their mother, Joanie.

Focus Group

As a foreign correspondent in this "new land" of men, I trusted its native inhabitants to tell me what they thought were the important questions to ask that might bring the richest information about the experience of divorce and fathering before, during and after divorce. For this reason, I chose six of the fathers I had known for many years to work with me in a focus group where they might assist me to construct a framework for their own interviews and future interviews with other dads who were not members of the focus group. For two hours they reflected on the following questions and I took copious notes:

1. From your perspective as a divorced or single dad, what are the most important things you can say about your experience? Consider your answer from social, emotional, legal, physical, psychological and financial perspectives.

2. What questions do you advise me to ask in my interviews?

3. What advice would you give someone who is or will be going through what you went through? You may focus solely on men, or add advice for women.

I then asked the men to describe their experience with fathering through divorce using just one word. The results poured out freely. The list below is in the same order in which they offered them:

- Guilt
- Frustration
- Anger
- Relief
- Shame
- Pain
- Failure
- Change
- Pride
- Honor
- Disbelief
- Sacrifice
- Love
- Poverty
- Loneliness
- Fatigue

From careful transcription and review of the focus group, I constructed eight major interview questions that reflected the primary themes and frameworks I discovered through the men's focused discussion:

1. From your perspective as a divorced or single dad, what can you say about your experience before, during and after the divorce? [Bullet points below were additional probes when needed]

- social [friends, family, stigma]
- psychological/emotional [pain, betrayal, anger]
- legal [bias toward mother, fair play, "bad guy", lawyers]
- physical [health]
- financial [settlement, custody, alimony]

2. What are your custodial arrangements?

- How do you feel about them?

- How has it changed your fathering of your children?
- What do you think about yourself as a husband and father?
- Describe how your relationship with your children has changed over time.
- How do you handle holidays and the children's relationship with the extended family?
- If you are the custodial parent, what were your greatest concerns?
- How do you feel when you hear terms like "desertion," "single mom," "deadbeat dads" or "absent fathers?"

3. If you could do anything over, what would that be and why? [e.g. save the marriage, stayed too long, custody, property, stay for the kids, legal help, counseling]

4. What are the challenges to new relationships because of your status as a divorced father?

- What's the impact of a new spouse (new family) on your kids? Your ex? Your new spouse?

5. What kind of support or help did you receive or do you now know you should have had?

6. Describe what life has been like after the divorce.

- Are your negotiations still ongoing? How so?
- At what point do you move forward and how does that look?
- What are your current challenges?

7. What advice would you give someone who is or will be going through what you went through?

8. What things need to be changed to make divorce a fair playing field for dads?

The Rest of the Story

Each volunteer was interviewed for one and a half to three hours. I typed out the transcripts of their interviews so that I could hear them one more time, then reviewed the transcripts to discover themes and to suggest elements that might be enhanced with other written research on men and

fathering. Through the recursive process of inquiry, validation, and reflection, I discovered the format that takes shape in this book.

Many of the men were surprised by the therapeutic benefits of the focus group, admitting that they had never before engaged with other fathers like them to share their feelings and expose their "warts." While they were much rarer ten years ago, men's divorce support groups and men's rights groups are now fairly easy to locate on the Internet, but one of the fathers explained why many men do not seek others to talk to: "This was *my* problem. I thought I was supposed to deal with it on my own."

It is my hope that this book will provide other divorced dads with the same benefits as the focus group provided for its participants: acknowledgement that their experiences, feelings and confusions are shared by *other* fathers. While each man's life is unique to him, particular in its context, and continuously evolving, I am already experiencing the benefit of sharing their stories with other men and women. No matter where I go, when I mention that I am writing a book that gives fathers' perceptions of life before, during and after their divorces, other divorced dads or those who know them exclaim: "Do you need a new subject?" "I know someone who would be perfect for that book!" or more directly, "I'd love to read that book!" This book is therefore dedicated to all those divorced dads who will see themselves in these pages.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BEST LAID PLANS: WHY DO MEN MARRY AND WHY DID THEIR MARRIAGES FAIL?

Marriage counselors, family therapists, lawyers, clinical psychologists and even talk show pop-psychologists have written hundreds of books that contemplate why some marriages survive and others fail. In the books I have read, each and every one begins the discussion by raising alarm over a statistic that is recognized more than any other concerning the American home: consistently over the past twenty years or more, census figures show that all marriages have a 50/50 chance of succeeding or ending in divorce. Given this well substantiated baseline, it is hardly ironic that my library research revealed just about as many books on the shelves that offer advice on when we should marry, why we should marry, and how to keep marriages together as books about when to divorce, why we should divorce, and how to do a "good divorce."

Why Do *Men* Marry?

In searching for the perfect book that would concisely explain why men marry, I found two with exactly the same title, *Why Men Marry*, one by Russell Wild (1999), journalist, researcher and veteran dad and the other by A. T. Langford (1999), a thrice married woman with a degree in personnel psychology and experience applying that knowledge to her work with men at the Port Authority of New York. Both authors interviewed men to craft a "definitive" list of reasons why men marry. Wild interviewed eighty married and engaged men from a range of professions and compiled data from questionnaires of seventy more from around the world. Langford conducted in-depth interviews with sixty-three men ages 24-68 who were in various stages of marriage, divorce, remarriage and cohabitation.

Both authors introduced their books with the usual interesting statistics about the documented benefits for men in marriage. Wild began his

"demystification of matrimony" with this statistic, "More than 90% of all men marry. Of those who lose or leave their wives, 80% marry again" (ix). Langford added that men remarry more quickly than women, live twice as long when married and earn more than unmarried men (xvi). Having an immediate affinity for authors whose work is based on interviews with real human beings, I found both books to mesh very well with each other and with the stories provided by the husbands and fathers in this book.

Wild admits that despite his efforts to categorize his participants' responses, the only common observation is that "No two husbands' stories were the same" (xi). Langford agrees that even within a single case, men do not point to a single reason why they marry, but that given the combination of all responses she received, she was fairly certain she had identified all of the major ones (xvii).

While these two authors—male and female—portray the reasons why men marry through different writing styles—he, with a tongue-in-cheek journalistic humor, and she with an ordered list of the reasons most commonly cited by her respondents—they agree that men marry for one or more of what Wild calls the four "P's": "pleasure, pragmatism, procreation, and purpose" (177). To address the margins of uncertainty, Wild adds two more catch-all categories: "Who the hell knows?" and "Why in the world not?" These reasons, says Wild, cover all the bases from the instinct to pair off with females that is as old as our mammalian ancestry to the unshakable statistical evidence that shows that men are happier when they are married.

Whether they were marrying for the first time or after divorce, the men in Wild's study identified the following primary motivators to marry:

1. Friendship/companionship (66%)
2. Children (32%)
3. "Just the thing to do" (16%)
4. To end the agonies of dating (16%)
5. To gain social acceptance (15%)
6. For personal growth (14%)
7. To escape loneliness (12%)
8. For sex and romance (12%)
9. To gain a free cook and housekeeper (only 8%--thank heavens!)
10. In response to the bride's ultimatum (8%)
11. Fear of old age and dying alone (6%)

Since these are the results of men's responses and perceptions, it is also necessary to look beyond what men might consciously name into the deeper, more subconscious reasons why they marry, reasons that they cannot or do not necessarily recognize or admit. For these considerations, Wild asked "experts" from psychology, anthropology, sociology and religion whose explanations were not surprisingly congruent with each expert's particular way of explaining human behavior.

Social psychologist David M. Buss suggested evidence that men are drawn to younger women with symmetrical features and attractive shapes that promise their potential fecundity (in Wild 1999, 19).

*Anthropologi*st Helen Fisher added that brain and hormonal chemistry plays a part, since there are emotion-based chemical responses engendered by love, lust and the propensity to mate (20).

Marriage therapist Peter Sheras explained that social approval plays a role in the context of marriage, "Married men in our society are seen as more reliable, stable, and beneficial to society" (21).

Freudian psychoanalysts maintained that men may have an unconscious need to form deep and lasting bonds with women that replace the bonds they once had with their mothers or to fulfill some deep-seated sexual fantasies (23-24).

Religious leaders pointed to the holy books and dogmas of all three major Western religions—Christian, Muslim, Jewish—to declare that marriage is a natural and holy state blessed by God. Families, too, rely on religious and moral imperatives to convince young couples to get married, especially if the woman is pregnant. Cultural heritage plays a strong role in establishing and enforcing the mores and values that influence men's expectations to marry—stronger in some cultures than others (25-26).

Psychotherapists add that the last and least often expressed reason why men say they marry is that women push them into it. Female compulsion to marry may stem from their biological timelines whereas men do not have the same constraint on their potency for procreation. These differences in male/female *biological* urges, particularly regarding the pressure to procreate, are questioned by other analysts who take into account the *social* construction of gender and the influence of nurture over nature (26-27).

Langford categorized the reasons men give for marrying that she gleaned from her interviews in order of the frequency of answers given from most to least frequently named by the men she studied. They were: love, equal partnership, family, life commitment, trust, same values, best friends, loneliness, social acceptability, freedom and turning points (i.e. precipitant events).

While Langford admits that "for love, of course," was the most popular reason cited by the men she interviewed, she adds that it was not easy for them to talk about what constitutes that sort of love. The best explanation they offered was: "It worked. You meet someone and everything jibes, you don't want to be apart from her—she becomes a part of everything you do, all your thoughts" (3-18).

For Langford's men, the desire for an equal partner was the second most cited motivation for marriage (19-35). It only takes a quick perusal of the "classified" columns in a typical newspaper to learn that different men mean different things by "equal partnership," and some descriptors (sex partner, homemaker, good cook, companion) don't sound very equal at all, but the men in my study claimed that finding a woman who could be an equal partner—intellectually, emotionally, personally—was the reason why their second and third marriages succeeded when earlier attempts failed.

Third on Langford's list was family. Whereas most of the reproductive hoopla of fertility clinics, artificial insemination, and surrogate motherhood is focused on women's life clocks, Langford's men expressed that they, too, felt both social and internal pressure on them to procreate. Langford said it amazed her to know that men actually wanted children. I suppose that is a view of masculine culture that is not usually borne out when we actually *talk* to men who are or wish to be fathers (36-53).

Life commitment was the fourth reason for marriage named by Langford's subjects. Stereotypical portrayals of commitment-phobic men just don't hold up when we actually ask them. The high rates of marriage among men would seem to testify to their willingness to commit. In my study, Liam joked that his three failed marriages could be considered testimony to an over-willingness to commit! No one enters any marriage with the certain knowledge that it will end in divorce, but men, says Langford, fully expect that a decision to marry should involve an *expectation* that they have found a life partner (54-70).

Trust is not only an ingredient necessary for marriage, but Langford's men indicated that it is a "primary reason" for marriage. They want a life partner they can count on for better or worse and whose loyalty and honesty helps them overcome their fear of betrayal. For men whose marriages have ended in divorce, this reason may move up to number one (71-90).

When I asked the dads in my study what advice they'd give others going through or coming out of marriage and divorce, they often suggested that men should seek women with similar values. Langford explains that means more than cheering for the same sports team: it means similar values in childrearing, finance handling, and a sharing of common goals. Other differences may not have as much impact as those that separate and divide any couple as they make their day-to-day decisions and choices. For example, couples from widely differing religious faiths, political allegiances and cultural practices do not necessarily face insurmountable odds if they can work together to solve problems, set goals, and support each other with mutual respect.

If you ask women to name their best friends, most of them will name other women—the "girlfriends" closest to their hearts, but when men are asked the same question, they most often name their partners and wives. For men, friends are "mates" who are acculturated to a supportive camaraderie and sense of team membership with other males. Women, who are acculturated to *be* best friends for each other can offer the kind of intimate support that provides what men consider a safe stage for emotional release that is comfortable, relaxing and liberating. Langford found it hard to understand what difference there was between seeking a life partner and finding a best friend, but the men she talked with explained that couples do better when they are best friends because the intimacy and trust of a close friendship adds even more to self-fulfillment than other feelings of familial affinity (109-121).

Loneliness made both Wild's and Langford's lists at approximately the same level of priority. Langford says simply, "Men admit to hating solitude." Age contributes to an escalating feeling of need to have a companion to see one into the golden years. Considering that male life expectancy still lags significantly behind female longevity, facing old age without the physical and emotional support of a partner is a haunting fear for men. Said a single copywriter in his mid-40's, "I understand more why people decide to marry: so they can grow old together and take care of each other" (122-137).

The social pressure to marry is such a potent force in people's lives that it pushes men and women toward marriage and children, even against their better judgment about their compatibility with the potential mate. While these pressures tend to oppress women, men are not immune. Langford's men and my interviewees related the importance of social acceptance as a reason for getting and staying married. Both males and females lamented, "We live in a couples-oriented environment" (138), a force so strong that individual men and women are reluctant to dine out alone, go to movies solo, or come to parties without a date.

Freedom to be oneself is the tenth reason Langford names for why men marry. Despite the anti-marital cliché of "the old ball and chain," or the many tired old jokes about the tyrannies of "the little woman," Langford's men explained that marriage can be liberating: "Marriage can release men from their isolation, from constantly being on the hunt, from too much self-involvement" (155). The men she talked to saw marriage not as a prison, but as a base of support that gave them the security and grounding to allow them to grow and change as they progressed through the life cycle (154-169).

The last reason Langford offered involved turning points, those life events that propel men to marry such as the accomplishment of career goals, the feeling of impending age and the need to set up a family, the death of a parent, the loss of a job, or even the failure of another marriage (170-190). In my study, for example, Doug bemoaned that his reason for marrying his second wife was simply because it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Similarly, Langford's subject, "Mark Galeano" commented, "I married the first time because it was what you did. Quite frankly, I didn't know any better" (171). Like the men in my study, Langford's men often named earlier unhappy marriages or failed relationships as great motivators to "do it right" the next time.

Why Do Marriages Succeed or Fail?

Women and men travel through stages of development and change, liberation and oppression. Despite those men and women lucky enough to have those "Aha!" moments when their paths suddenly become clear, when marriage is considered, it is wise to remind couples that "those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it."

Having denuded my local library's shelves on the topic of marriage and divorce, I was faced with the daunting task of weeding through the many

volumes written about divorce over the past twenty years to find some new insights that might give a more generalized perspective on the conditions of the failed marriages represented by the ten men I interviewed. Readers of self-help literature on marriage and divorce should be wary. Before accepting an author's interpretation of the complex data on marriage and divorce, readers should take note of the author's background, expertise and theoretical allegiance. After all, as is true for this book, readers must judge for themselves whether the author is presenting a version of the world that makes sense to them. While most authors of marriage/divorce texts bring their unique spin to the topic, there are some insights each may provide that connect the local experiences of individual men to the wider world of divorced men and women in general.

Whether to participate in self-exploration or to know more about how external forces act on individuals and marriages, reading more about what others have endured, thought and felt is validating and at the very least comforting for men and women who have survived the pain of divorce and continue to experience its after- effects on their current relationships and family structures. This book is meant to provide men with that opportunity to read, reflect on and relate to other men's stories so that they might make some sense of their own confusing feelings fathering through and beyond divorce.

A Theory of Choice

World-renowned psychologist William Glasser, author of the *Control Theory of Human Agency and Volition*, describes the state of American marriage thus:

> Almost all of us fall in love, usually several times in our lives. Many fewer of us succeed in staying in love for any length of time. It is the same with sex. We find an exciting partner, but we cannot maintain the excitement. A good marriage (or long term relationship) is the most difficult of all affiliations to maintain. Less than half of us are able to stay married for life. And of the half that do, few achieve the storybook "they lived happily ever after" ending (1995, 5).

Because it is the nature of humankind to seek solutions to problems, we spend much time, effort and money trying to learn how to produce the desired fairytale, but Glasser reminds us that so-called "experts" are really no more successful in helping us find the answers than we are ourselves. He maintains that "no matter what shape our relationship is in, only we

can change" (6), but he cautions couples that they should not make the mistake of thinking that changing their partners without changing themselves will make them happy. Glasser explains that "we can change only our own lives, we cannot change what others do" (7). He applies control theory to marriage in his book *Staying Together*, and so encourages each member of a couple to learn more about themselves in order to learn more about themselves in relation to others.

Marriage Fails Us More Than We Fail It

Social worker and family therapist Betty Carter disagrees with individual choice as the primary dynamic at work in a marriage. She believes that too much emphasis on the person and not enough on the institution is a common flaw of the literature on divorce:

> Many people point the finger of blame at our culture's lack of family values or at women's 'selfishness' or men's 'irresponsibility.' The flaw in such thinking is that it's based on the assumption that something is wrong with men and women today. No one ever blames marriage itself. Yet that is exactly what logic and my experience as a family therapist lead me to conclude. Such high divorce rates must mean that something is wrong with marriage, *not* the people who marry (1996, 16)

According to Carter, lack of self-knowledge and self-efficacy is not at fault when men and women who enter into marriage believing that feeling good about oneself and loving one's partner well enough are the ingredients for a happy marriage are bitterly disillusioned. She reminds us that the institution of marriage is a social construction, and thus the enactment of marriage is shaped by forces outside the couple's control. "Too often nowadays people will leave one marriage and then try another, only to fail in their next attempt. Yet all too often, neither their personal failings nor their choice in partners turns lovers into enemies. It is marriage as we know it that is failing them" (3).

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: The Demise of a Marriage

Perhaps the most obvious title among the marriage/divorce literature was *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, by John Gottman, Ph.D., a Professor of Psychology and recipient of the Distinguished Scientist Award from the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. From over two decades of work with married and divorced couples, Gottman believes that he has "charted the invisible emotional currents between husbands and

wives, underground streams of feeling that can burst to the surface either as a spring of harmony or a wall of discontent" (1994, 15).

Everyone who weighs in on what makes a good/bad marriage wants to solve an old problem in a new way, so it is no surprise that Gottman decries what he calls the "conventional wisdom" on marriage as "misguided or dead wrong" (15). He explains that much of the research on marriage is flawed because it either asks the wrong questions or makes invalid conclusions. To avoid these pitfalls Gottman's research teams constructed "experiments that examine stable and troubled marriages, systematically tracing the emotional currents that lead one couple to drift apart and another to flow through life together" (16). He makes the claim that his conclusions can predict with 94% accuracy which couples would be divorced based on the couples' perceptions and observations about their marital histories—truly astounding, if somewhat difficult to accept, given that the divorce rates have remained stable or even climbed a bit since the publication of his book in 1994.

Despite the optimistic rhetoric, Gottman offers some solid observations that inform the study of men and women in marital strife. First, he explains that many of the reasons offered about marital discord are really surface issues that do not probe for the underlying relational failures that they represent. For example, while money conflicts do not make or break a marriage, the existing strengths or weaknesses of a marriage are amplified by external forces involving how money flows in and out of a family.

Similarly, sexual discontent is not sufficient to break up a good marriage. He explains that how much or how little sexual satisfaction remains in a marriage is less relevant to its demise than how well the couple handles the "inevitable differences that arise whenever two people form a partnership" (22). That goes for "compatibility" as a chief factor in couple harmony, as well. Gottman warns that an overemphasis on the importance of compatibility masks the more important dynamic of how the couple actually works out their *differences*.

Gottman proposes an "ecology of marriage" that balances negativity and positivity: "There seems to be some kind of thermostat operating in healthy marriages that regulates the balance between positivity and negativity, preserving a sound emotional ecology" (64). When the "thermostat" fails, however, the couple "spirals" into a "cascade of interactions, emotions, and attitudes" that brings formerly "happy" families

to disintegration or worse—a life of misery living alone while together (71).

Gottman names the risk factors that destabilize a marriage metaphorically, calling them "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." These risk factors, presented in order of escalation from least to most dangerous, are: *criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling*.

The danger in *criticism* comes from one partner's attack of another's personality or character rather than their specific behavior, usually accompanied by blame and guilt.

Contempt raises these stakes to intentional insult and psychological abuse—negative words and negative thoughts about one's partner replacing respect and love. Contempt is evidenced in name-calling and insults, hostile attempts at humor, mockery and body language.

Defensiveness is a countermeasure to contempt. Defensiveness effectively blocks meaningful communication and can result in a "victim mentality" that does little to resolve power differentials. Warning signs include denying responsibility, making excuses, disagreeing with "negative mind-reading," cross-complaining (retaliatory complaints), reflective attacks (accusing the other of the behavior s/he finds fault in you), "yes-butting" (always having a response or excuse), repeating yourself (like the childish "did not, did too, did not, did too"), whining and body language (84-89).

The fourth "horseman" of marital discord is *stonewalling*. At this stage, partners simply stop listening to each other or stop responding to the other. It sends the message "I am withdrawing, disengaging from any meaningful interaction with you" (95). Gottman observes that stonewalling tends to be more of a masculine phenomenon than a feminine one. His research indicated that men were more likely to be physically and psychologically overwhelmed by marital conflict, and thus obey their instincts to flee by avoiding or blocking further tension.

At least in part, and sometimes entirely, readers will recognize all of these apocalyptic signs in the stories of marital dissolution offered by Adam, John, Brian, Liam, Luke, Walt, Chuck, Jerry, Dennis and Doug.