

Thirty-Eight Years

I lifted this piece of dialogue from an English movie entitled *The Mother*, because it seemed incredibly sad.

“For 38 years I have had to put aside what I wanted, to do what is best for the children; for 38 years I had to put aside what I wanted, to do what is best for my husband; after 38 years I want to do what is best for me.”

Because of my own experience, this searing observation about the marriage state seemed to be stunningly truthful, especially for marriages which last until death do us part. It was certainly true for my mother. Not until my father died at age 56 – in his 37th year of marriage – did my mother no longer have to put aside what she wanted to do. Or in the case of my mother-in-law, who had to wait until her 26th year of marriage to do what she thought was best for her. And I expect it will be true for my wife, Bonnie, as we begin our 40th year.

Traditionally, it has been the mother, the wife, who has had to put aside her own preferred choices for the sake of keeping the family whole. Every unit of organization needs someone to bind it together, and in the case of marriage, this responsibility falls to the wife and mother.

Will the same be true for my own daughters, as mothers? They each have careers, but they have children, too, and their husbands have separate and independent careers. Has the marriage state changed enough in the last 70 years to permit the father to put aside for however many years the personal best choices he desires? I think not. True, the role of fathers has undergone some changes in the marriage state, especially with respect to assuming more household and parenting responsibilities – in my era, and that of my grandparents, husbands and fathers played almost no role on the home front, save for extraordinary disciplinary duties.

The modern-day 50% divorce rate offers the hope of relief to those mothers who no longer desire to put aside personal preferences, but such relief is often illusionary and transitory at best, because the mother, now left with almost complete responsibility for parenting and the additional burden of reduced

financial resources, is even more compelled to put aside personal best choices. Divorced fathers, it seems, generally pick up where they left off.

Is this putting aside – or this marriage state of constant self-denial– a fundamental part of what it means to be a woman? Though not much in vogue any more, society often refers to women as homemakers. Is homemaking part and parcel of being a woman, at least for women who wish to marry and give birth to children?

If women are hard-wired to put personal best choices aside for the sake of husbands and children, waiting patiently for that day, if it ever comes, of being free again to choose what is best for them, then why do I feel sad – incredibly sad – about this piece of movie dialogue.? The 38-year marriage observation from the movie mother turns out not to be a complaint after all; it is simply a statement of the marriage reality, not only for herself but for all mothers. Her forthright statement about her lack of choice is not an expression of anger or bitterness about her plight as a mother; rather, it is an announcement to her children and grandchildren that henceforth she is a free woman and will make choices that suit her, not them. Her marriage contract has been fulfilled.

How many times have we heard marriage ceremonies speak about the need for husband and wife to compromise, to meet each other more than halfway, to each give in for the sake of the other? Noble sentiments perhaps, but they do not reflect the blunt 38-year reality of putting aside personal best choices. Perhaps it is the lack of truthfulness in the platitude-filled ceremony itself that is at the core of my sadness.

How would the bride and groom and the wedding attendants, to say nothing of the assembled friends and relatives, react if they were to be told in the homily preceding the vows that this new marriage would expect and impose upon this woman here before us a lifetime of self-denial for the sake of her husband and children? For one thing, the presiding minister would forever be relieved of any duties relating to marriage preparation classes or wedding ceremonies. But even more significant, the bridal party and those in attendance would be outraged that the female marriage partner could be demeaned in such an insensitive manner, especially on the happiest day of her life.

Still, I find it sobering and immensely sad that the marriage state requires such a lifetime of imposed self-denial on the part of the mother and wife to make it successful. Even the annual commercialized Mother's Day cannot paper over this harsh reality. The only small piece of saving grace that emerges from the marriage imbalance is the evolutionary fact that women outlive men, which means that at some point in the latter part of their lives, mothers and wives receive permission to choose what is best for them.

Some consolation?!