



On marriage, divorce & teaching

Cathal Walsh reflects on his parents' marriage and how it stood the test of time.

He says a teacher's passion for the profession can be subject to myriad emotions, too ... but sometimes a divorce from bad practice can lead to a renewed professionalism.

My parents were married 59 years when my father died (my mom died four months later). We all know or have heard of similar couples who share a familiar story; they have managed to somehow “reinvent” their marriage to stand the test of time.

However, not all marriages tell the same story. Jackie Kennedy is quoted as saying, “the first time you marry for love, the second for money, the third for companionship.” Her tongue-in-cheek reflection on her relationships echoes 20th Century anthropologist and feminist pioneer, Margaret Mead, who asserted that everyone should marry three times: once to leave home, once to have children, and once for companionship. Similar thinking has been espoused by scholars and philosophers from a variety of cultural references; the notion that there is a desire for differing fulfillment (and perhaps even different relationships) as we mature into and through our adult lives. A 20-year-old's entrenched idealism and passionate naivety differs greatly from the typical life views, passions and pursuits of most of us past 40. Though core values may remain constant, many other aspects of one's self change over time. Our needs change. Our interests change. Our priorities change. New passions emerge and “personal awakenings” often call us to walk down new paths. It is no wonder that more than 50% percent of all marriages end in divorce. One could argue that if it were not for the financial shackles, perceived moral implications, and parenting responsibilities, divorce rates would likely be much higher.

So, how does this treatise on marriage and divorce relate to education? Incidentally, the journey to becoming an effective and fulfilled life-long educator shares numerous similarities to the conundrums of marriage (and divorce). After all, there is the exciting courtship (university experience), the engagement (practicum), and the blissful anticipation of the first year; quickly followed by reality (first teaching assignment). The new teacher bride or groom is often overflowing with conviction, passion, ideals and hopes for their vocational choice. Over time these ideals can be beaten down with cynicism and experience until pragmatism rises up as the preferred pedagogy over the ever-emerging research and trends that hammer at classroom doors each September. Some teachers simply call it quits. According to a 2011 study released by the *National Commission on Teaching and America's Future* (NCTAF), 46% of new teachers will leave the profession within the first five years. Really bad marriages I suppose. Those teachers, who make a decision not to leave the profession, find themselves following one of three paths.

The Perfect Partner Path

Just like those couples who find renewing happiness in a 60-year marriage, some teachers have the ability to “reinvent” themselves throughout their careers. They have an uncanny ability to morph their practice; holding on to long-established skills while constantly embracing emerging best practices. These teachers are as rare as those 60-year marriages but they exist and they influence and inspire their colleagues with their apparent unending love affair with their vocation (even if they have the same assignment each year). Teachers on this path do not allow themselves to be stuck doing things the way they have always done them. Rather, these teachers begin each school year with the same enthusiasm, open mindedness and determination as their first year counterparts.

The Awakening Path

Sometimes, no matter how hard a couple tries, their marriage dissolves. For many, this is a good thing as it allows them to start anew. Some teachers also do this within their teaching lifetimes. They “divorce” themselves from long held ineffective instructional practices and enter into a new, healthier relationship with their profession. They experience an awakening of sorts and connect with teaching in a new way. These teachers will often lament on the many ill-conceived things “they used to do” not unlike the way people reflect on a past marriage. They don’t regret their life experience but they have learned their lessons and are committed to the next stage of their journey. These teachers often become leaders and mentors at the school or district level. Although they may bring “edu-baggage” from

their years of struggle, they also bring a clarity to the challenges of teaching. It’s their second marriage after all and they better understand who they are as teaching professionals. They know themselves as educators and have chosen to start anew.

The Roommate Path

Some couples in bad marriages remain together. Maybe it’s due to financial need or to honour perceived expectations of others. Nonetheless, the passion and happiness has disappeared and they live as roommates; remembering an embellished happier time. In the world of teaching, some teachers find themselves in this unfortunate place; habits of time making it seemingly impossible to reinvent themselves or to divorce their ineffective practices. They grow more cynical each school day and shift their focus to a life outside of their school. They will often speak about the “good old days” when their profession was problem-free and “staff and students loved being at school.” They have become roommates to their profession. The years pass and what was once a chosen vocation has be-

come a needed job. These teachers won’t quit nor change their ways. Divorce is not an option. They will stay the full course but will do so absent of the love, joy and fulfillment they once sought.

As is undoubtedly apparent, I am not a marriage counselor. Nonetheless, the teaching profession is indeed rooted in self-reflection and complex interpersonal relationships that mirror other social constructs such as marriage, parenting, and family dynamics. Both Margaret Mead and Jackie Kennedy cited companionship as the emerging need of a third marriage. Similarly, my father sought early admission to a complex care facility to be by my mom’s side. Merriam-Webster defines companionship as, “the good feeling that comes from being with someone else.”

I suppose one measure of “where teachers are at” in their marriage to their profession could be “the feeling” that comes when they arrive at school each day in the presence of students and staff. Is it a perfect partnership or is it time for an awakening? ^{bcp} ^{vpa}

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