



Confessions of an Unabashed Marriage Saver

Originally published by The
Family Therapy Networker 1987

by Michele Weiner-Davis

I have a confession; I am a psychotherapist who is an unabashed marriage saver. But it wasn't always that way.

When I began doing marital therapy in the late Seventies, I was a newlywed, twenty-something therapist charged with helping couples who were usually older than me and grappling with issues I had yet to face in my own life.

They spoke of parenting conflicts, career disappointments, money problems, aging parents and infidelities, and though I was in

way over my head, I gamely tried to apply what I had learned in graduate school about marriage therapy.

This “expertise” consisted mainly of teaching couples to understand how they might be repeating patterns in the past in their own marriage, and encouraging them to fully express their feelings toward each other.

Most of my couples left my office full of insight and still mad as hell at each other—often angrier than when they had walked in.



But when couples failed to improve, rather than look at my own lack of experience, I assumed that the impasses in their relationships were due to their irreconcilable differences.

So I shifted gears. I began to question the wisdom of staying in unsatisfying marriages.

“Have you ever wondered whether you might just be incompatible?” I’d ask. “Are you really happy with her? Have you considered a trial separation?” When my clients wondered about the impact of divorce on their children, I was emphatic: “You can’t be a good parent if you’re not happy. Don’t worry, your children will be resilient.”

My advice, of course, was perfectly in tune with the times. This were follow-your-bliss Seventies recommendations that passed for therapeutic wisdom.

But my philosophy of marriage and divorce had also been shaped by my own family experience – more profoundly than I then knew.

One evening when I was 16, my mother called my two brothers, my father and me into the living room. Because impromptu family meetings weren't the norm, I sensed that something was wrong.

My heart started racing. My mother took a deep breath. "I've been really unhappy for the past twenty-three years of my marriage, she announced. Your father and I are getting a divorce."

Her words took my breath away.

Unhappy? With my father? How was that possible? In my 16 years on the planet, I couldn't remember my parents having a single fight. As far as I was concerned, I had been raised in a New York City version of the Walton family, wrapped in the safety and security of a warm, close-knit clan.

"You have to keep trying!" I pleaded. "I've tried enough," answered my mother quietly, resolutely. "I've seen a psychiatrist for three years about this. There comes a time when you have to throw in the towel."

The pain in my father's eyes was more than I could bear. As my brothers and I scattered to our respective bedrooms to grieve, my older

brother screamed at my mother, "If you divorce Dad, you are not my mother!"

For several weeks, I persisted in the belief that my parents simply could not split up. I wrote my mother an impassioned letter, literally begging her to reconsider her decision.

When she lovingly but firmly explained that it was too late for second thoughts, I threatened to run away.

When that ploy also failed to change her mind, it began to dawn on me, ever so slowly, that my family was not a democracy and that I would have no vote in this matter. I could cry, plead, threaten, or dance on the moon, but my parents were going to come apart.

So I turned my energies to accepting what I could not change.

Because I adored my mother, I tried hard to understand how she must be feeling. Even as a teenager, I could see big differences in my parents' personalities and ways of looking at the world.

My mother had always been a lover of ideas, spirituality, and deeply intimate conversations. My father is from the Old World, a traditional man who believes that good husbands provide well for their families, come home at the same time every night and fix things when they break.

Although I loved and admired my rock-solid,

handsome father, I had to face the fact that my mother felt something was missing. She told me that to stay in her marriage was to give up any hope for real happiness.

Naturally, I didn't want that. Over time, I came to feel that the divorce was sad and unfortunate but ultimately understandable, given the huge gap between my mother's and father's visions of a fulfilling relationship.

So years later, when so many couples in my practice seemed worlds apart, this was the bottom-line philosophy that increasingly guided my work.

Divorce is distressing and regrettable, no question, but often it's simply the best available option. People have a right to follow their dreams. Everybody copes, more or less. Kids bounce back.

After my parents split, I left home and attended a small, nurturing college, that I loved. After leaving college, my life continued to fall into place. I married my husband, Jim, began to grow my therapy practice, and gave birth to two children.

Our children taught us the meaning of unconditional love and showed us what is really important in life— family. I cherished these lessons every day. But ironically, during this period of deep contentment and gratitude, something else began to stir inside me.

I began to experience unexpected feelings of loss about my own childhood family. Increasingly I found myself searching for a way to understand what seemed like an inexplicable underlying grief.

Although I thought I had made my peace with my parents' divorce, I was coming to understand that my pain wasn't just about the demise of my parents' relationship. It was about the loss of my family.

Although I adored my two brothers, after my parents' divorce, I had less and less contact with them. I had never before recognized how much my mother had held our family together.

It was she who made holiday dinners and birthday cakes. It was she who filled my father in on our daily lives. It was my mother who was the hub of the wheel for my extended family and when she gave up that role, no one else stepped up to the plate. My father, traditionalist that he is, simply wasn't prepared to take over my mother's role as family magnet.

The loss I felt wasn't just for myself.

As a child who had been tucked in at night by both my mother and father, I never dreamed that my children would never see my parents as a couple. I couldn't anticipate that when my kids were little, they would wistfully keep asking me whether "Omi" and "Pappy" would remarry each other someday.

I never imagined that I wouldn't have a comfortable, rambling family home that I could return to anytime to visit with my parents, show off my children, touch base with my grown-up brothers and their families.

I never knew that my father would never again be able to attend anything but major family events such as weddings because he found family functions too painful to bear. I simply never knew we'd never be together as a family again.

Once this awareness set in, I became determined to help the couples in my practice improve their relationships, remain married and keep their families together.

Ultimately, I developed a couples approach called Divorce Busting®. I teach couples skills that combat hopelessness, which I'm convinced is the number one killer of marriages.

I've learned, over time, that hope can grow in the most unlikely situations – when only one spouse agrees to come to therapy, when one spouse claims he or she wants out or has already filed for divorce, when people seem more intent on being right than on being happy, when infidelity dampens trust.

The capacity of people to reopen their hearts to each other never fails to humble me. When I help couples find their way back to each other, I feel I'm infusing life and spirit into a

marriage, and a family, that might otherwise have died.

In those moments, I feel truly blessed.

Michele Weiner-Davis

Since this article was published -

Our children have grown into amazingly accomplished and loving adults. My husband of 40 years and I have two grandchildren who fill us with joy and wonder every day.

My Mom was killed in an automobile accident a few years ago; my Dad still lives in New York, as do my brothers. Ever saddened, I still long for the family as I knew it so many long years ago.

I continue to be passionate about my mission to help couples keep their marriages and families intact. It is my life's work.

With offices in Colorado and Illinois, I have assembled a team of dedicated Divorce Busters®. We counsel and coach, produce marriage saving programs, train other therapists and continue our dedication to strong marriages and families.

Since this article was published I have written 8 books including the best-selling "*The Sex-Starved Marriage*" and "*Divorce Busting*" and most recently: "*Healing from*

Infidelity, The Divorce Busting® Guide to Rebuilding Your Marriage After an Affair”.

The Divorce Busting® Center
PO Box 1053 Woodstock, IL 60098
PO Box 271 Boulder, CO 80306
303.444.7004
michele@divorcebusting.com