

Breaking up is easier to do

- Sep 21, 2008 Updated Jun 6, 2019

A recent headline suggested there might be a new, peaceful way to divorce a spouse.

"Peaceful divorce" -- there's an oxymoron. Forget deception, desertion, abuse, adultery, indifference or any other of the devastating forces that destroy marriages. Even the no-fault divorce, with its irreconcilable differences -- a catchall term that can hide deep wounds -- can't exactly be considered peaceful.

But is there a way to, if not lessen the hurt, at least not pile it on through months- or years-long fights over money, possessions and kids?

Some Roanoke lawyers think so. Recently, they gathered to learn about a new, for our area at least, type of divorce gained through collaborative law. Rather than warring spouses each hiring attorneys to battle, they instead engage lawyers to act as counselors and guide them through a noncombative dissolution of their union.

It isn't idyllic. No divorce is or can be. But it does offer some hope that there would be no further casualties -- such as children forced to take sides.

Collaborative divorce offers, if not a peaceful end, then at least not a terribly unpleasant one. More couples, counsels and counselors (family therapists are sometimes called upon) should consider this process.

While collaborative divorce won't keep a family intact, it can keep the members from inflicting further emotional damage. This stands in stark contrast to legislative efforts proposed the last two sessions by the Family Foundation.

The organization aims to protect marriage by making it much more difficult for couples with children to obtain no-fault divorces. Instead, the foundation would rather Virginia return to the days when divorce could be granted only through an adversarial process in which warring spouses were forced to duke it out in court. These divorces take prisoners, often turning children into hostages.

The foundation seems to think this is how to save marriages -- by making people bitter, by forcing abused spouses to stay in dangerous marriages -- and plans to continue its push for legislation.

There are better ways for the state to involve itself in saving marriages: offering free or low-cost premarital counseling and family counseling.

But not all marriages can or should be saved. When they come to an end, the more peaceful the process, the better for all.

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