

Breaking up isn't so very hard to do for graying generation

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By Mackenzie Carpenter, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



John Heller/Post-Gazette

Anne Franks and her ex-husband, Peter Gillespie, in the backyard garden of her home in Highland Park.

When they first met decades ago, it was love at first sight, she said. They married, had children and then -- after long and careful consideration -- divorced late in life.

No, not Al and Tipper Gore, whose announcement last week of their separation after 40 years of marriage prompted much anguished media coverage -- "like watching our own parents split up" (Los Angeles Times) to "Al and Tipper Gore's separation makes us fear for our parents, ourselves" (Washington Post).

Anne Franks and Peter Gillespie, both of Highland Park, ended their own 20-year marriage six years ago. There were no headlines -- only quiet pain, resentment and resolve.

Today, though, this couple, sitting in her garden on a recent evening, may be exhibit A for 60-somethings who survive "gray divorce" and emerge the better for it.

"I didn't want to get divorced," said Mr. Gillespie, a 67-year-old English instructor at the University of Pittsburgh. "But I have since had a really happy relationship with her, and we're still able to be parents even if we're not living together."

"It was a shock to the system and it took a period of time to understand that there could be another way to live," added Ms. Franks, 61, executive director for administration at the Office of Institutional Advancement at Pitt.

"The good news is that both of my children have a good relationship with their dad, and I do, too."

Will the Gores end up like Mr. Gillespie and Ms. Franks? No one knows the circumstances surrounding the Gores' split, announced last week. In an e-mail to friends, the former vice president and Nobel Peace Prize winner and his wife called it "a mutual and mutually supportive decision that we have made together following a process of long and careful consideration."

That precisely phrased announcement, in its very lack of messy emotion, dismayed some marital experts.

"I do not accept the baby boom divorce mantra that 'these things happen to the best of marriages; let's be civilized and not show how we feel about the end of a dream,'" said Bill Doherty, a Minneapolis-based marriage therapist, who called the Gores' language "evasive BS."

"People break up with their literary agents with more passion than that," he said. "After 40 years, that's the best they could do?" Other experts say that the Gores are simply acting their age.

"This is the divorcing generation, indeed the greatest divorcing generation in our history," said Betsey Stevenson, an associate professor of business and policy at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. She noted that one notorious statistic -- one out of two marriages end in divorce -- can be laid directly at the feet of restless, fulfillment-obsessed

60-somethings who married in the 1970s, rather than those from generations following them.

While the national divorce rate is higher today than it was 100 years ago, it has been steadily declining since the 1980s. Those who married in the 1970s divorced at higher rates than any other group before or since then, Ms. Stevenson said, citing census data in which she calculated that 27 percent of them had split by their 10th anniversary, 43 percent by their 20th and almost 50 percent by their 30th.

Late-life divorces are still rare -- most divorces occur within the first decade of marriage -- and ending a 40-year union is rarer still.

While the U.S. Census Bureau does not provide data on divorce rates for specific age groups, in 2008 it performed an "American Community Survey," which asked people if they had divorced in the past year and broke down categories based on the length of their marriages. Of the pool of people married for four decades or more, 0.5 percent or less had divorced in the last 12 months.

Still, of those who did get divorced in the past year, more than a quarter had been married for more than 20 years. And those numbers may go up.

Changing roles, partners

"There are some things we know about divorces in later life, and one of them is that they're going to become much more common," said Stephanie Coontz, author of "Marriage, a History" and professor of family studies at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash.

Why?

Most of these late-life divorcees married young, like the Gores (he was 22, she was 21), she said, and are living longer. Moreover, they married during a decade when the institution of marriage was undergoing dramatic revision. Young couples may have thought their marriages would resemble the one their parents had -- he the breadwinner, she the homemaker -- but by the mid-1970s, with women flooding into the workplace, that particular marital paradigm began to dissolve.

So did the marriages.

Technically, Mr. Gillespie and Ms. Franks aren't part of that 1970s marriage cohort -- they met in 1980, and married in 1984, later than many of their peers. But they are close in age to those in the group defined as the "divorcing generation," even though they married later than many of their contemporaries.

She was working in the anti-nuclear movement, he was running a dance company at the Lion Walk in Oakland.

"I was looking for a venue for an event, and a friend suggested I meet with him," she said. "I saw him across the room and I knew, instantly, that was it. We were never parted from that moment."

They moved in together, married and had two daughters. He taught at Pitt, she did community liaison work at Peabody High School. Then in the fall of 2002, their older daughter left for college, "and that's when it all began to fall apart," Ms. Franks said.

The reasons, to outsiders, were unfathomable yet all too familiar: He strayed, she found it harder to get his attention, the emotional distance widened.

"I always believed with the kids out of the house we'd have time to repair things, that we'd have the privacy of a couple to work it out. But the patterns that had gotten us to where we were we couldn't get out of," she said.

As is common in most divorces, she initiated it. Working without a lawyer, they drew up papers.

"On my lunch hour one day, I went down to the courthouse and filed them myself, for \$15," Ms. Franks said. "It was just staggering. I went back to my desk, sat down and started to work again, but my hands were shaking."

It was a relatively simple ending, and because Ms. Franks had worked for many years, she didn't suffer the financial privations so many divorced women once did.

While the wage gap still remains, and while many women do still stay home and take care of their the children, the playing field in the workplace has leveled considerably, Ms. Coontz said, unlike in the 1950s and 1960s, when women in many states weren't entitled to any of their husbands' assets.

When no-fault divorce laws first passed in the 1970s, ending alimony, many marriage settlements split property equally but failed to take into account a husband's future earnings potential, creating a generation of women with few job skills, living in dramatically reduced circumstances and becoming cautionary tales for their married female friends contemplating a split.

These days, property settlements are more equal, and for women, especially, there are more chances for "repartnering," Ms. Coontz said. Gone are the days when older women -- remember "divorcees"? -- sat on the sidelines while their exes romped in a seemingly endless dating pool. According to a 2004 study by AARP, 75 percent of women and 80 percent of men reported having a serious relationship after their divorce -- often within two years.

Unwilling to settle

Then, too, there's that sense of entitlement for which baby boomers are famous.

Indeed, in the Internet age, "it's 'give me mine now' -- the hedge-fund mentality, the 'I-want-it-all, I want-it-now' mentality," said Lois Greenberg, a Mt. Lebanon-based family psychotherapist, who's seeing more and more older couples coming in to talk about divorce.

"What I'm hearing over and over again is this malaise, this sense of, 'I'm not satisfied with what I've got.' "

These days, she said, people "don't live in the moment but for the moment, like hedonists, and older people who are settled in their marriages are looking around and seeing all this focus on new exploration and discovery, and reconsidering their own lives."

That attitude drives Mr. Doherty, the Minneapolis therapist and professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, absolutely crazy.

An outspoken proponent of marriage, he divides divorces into two categories: necessary and unnecessary.

The first, he said, is triggered by chronic infidelity, substance abuse, domestic violence; the second by lack of communication "and not feeling in love."

He is less happy about the second category, where, all too often, marriage seems merely a blend of "the individual fulfillment culture and the consumer culture, yet another consumer lifestyle where we are now primarily customers. And customers are inherently disloyal."

There is little research out there on why 40-year-old marriages fail because so few of them do, he added. In his experience as a marriage therapist, Mr. Doherty has found that men initiating a split usually have someone waiting in the wings, while women generally stay quiet about their unhappiness until it becomes intolerable, and then, "Boom! She's gone," he said.

"She'll turn on a dime, often never realizing that her husband may still love her and would have been willing to change if she talked turkey to him before she turned cold."

To some degree, that was what Ms. Franks and Mr. Gillespie experienced.

Stung by his extramarital affair, she pushed to end the marriage, while Mr. Gillespie said, "I didn't really want to be divorced," and felt lost and unhappy afterwards. Ms. Franks did, too, in that first year by herself, living in the house "he and I had raised our family in.

"The ghosts were everywhere," she said, and she was stressed and anxious. "I felt like a dried up old leaf floating around in this house that was too big for me."

Mr. Gillespie "went through a period of horrible loneliness," he said. He missed his family and his house and resented that she was living there, but when she moved into a smaller place and he moved back to their home, everything changed.

"As soon as I moved back in, all that resentment went away," he said, even as Ms. Franks found relief in therapy.

Their daughters suffered, as all children of divorce do.

"My youngest was very angry and would speak to me only in monosyllables for a few years," Mr. Gillespie said, but both parents say relationships with both daughters have healed and family relations are good.

Both of the former spouses are in relationships, but Ms. Franks said remarriage is not something she wishes for in this final chapter of her life.

"There is something liberating about living on your own, making your own decisions," she said. "I like not having to negotiate everything. I like being able to stand in front of the refrigerator and drink orange juice out of a container.

"I have lots more time to spend with my women friends. There is a man in my life, but it's not the same as it was and it never will be. The basis of the relationship, after you've done all the child-rearing and all that sort of stuff? When you're young, it is all about raising children, building a life together. Now I find my needs are very different.

"I still love him, and I will until I die," she said. "But it's not the same. A lot of people say, 'I hate my ex,' but I don't. We just didn't make it, that's all. He's still the same person I fell in love with, but now he has the life he needs and wants. He's at peace and so am I."

That doesn't mean she wasn't shocked, like everyone else, so many others, when she first heard about the Gores.

"I thought, 'What in the world are you guys thinking? Forty years and you can't get it together?' Then, I realized, they're not that old, there's so much more ahead, and we just need to make sure we don't waste it.

"There are times when I feel very homesick for that old life, but I own this life more."

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