


SAVE YOUR MARRIAGE SAVE YOUR LIFE

A needle and thread are positioned diagonally across the middle of the cover. The thread is looped around a torn piece of paper that features a black and white photograph of a broken glass ring. The text is arranged in a vertical stack to the left of the needle and thread.

**DISCOVER
THE TRAPS
AND PITFALLS
THAT RUIN
COUNTLESS
MARRIAGES**

21 DIVORCE STORIES that will help you avoid the mistakes of others and create a rich, rewarding life

JAMES BARDOT

**SAVE YOUR MARRIAGE
SAVE YOUR LIFE**

*DISCOVER THE TRAPS AND
PITFALLS THAT HAVE RUINED
COUNTLESS MARRIAGES*

BY JAMES BARDOT

Published by:
Nascent Books
Laguna Niguel, California
800.631.0406
www.nascentbooks.com

ISBN-13: 978-0-9755344-3-4

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First Printing, March, 2008

Printed in the United States of
America on acid-free paper

Cover by George Foster

To all those struggling in their relationships;
to all those who have suffered; to all those
who have wounded others and been wound-
ed; and to all those unsure of what their next
step will be, this book is for you. As long as
you are breathing, it is never too late.

Acknowledgements

Although a book commonly bears the author's name on the cover, the end product is almost always the result of many individuals contributing to the work. Even those who are hired to edit, format and produce the book often take a personal interest in the project that goes well beyond their requested fees. Behind these professionals lie rank upon rank of friends and acquaintances who support, encourage and contribute to the work, offering their input and giving freely of their time. But the real heroes of this particular book are those who have contributed their stories, most of whom were voices whose faces I have never seen, and whose stories I knew nothing about until we spoke. They gave generously of their time, not knowing me, and did it without compensation. Their reason for participating was clear: they wanted to help others. It is to these people that I am most indebted. Because of the anonymous nature of the book, I can not list their names. Thus, finding myself in the awkward position of being able to recognize some people in writing and not others, out of respect for those who must remain anonymous, I chose not to list any names. But to each who has contributed in story, suggestions, critical review and personal wisdom, I offer my heartfelt thanks. It is immediately obvious to everyone that without these people this book would have never been published. As such there is no modesty in saying that in the most real sense of the word, this is their book.

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Disclaimer

The stories and commentary contained in this book are presented for informational purposes only. Names, dates, ages and other details in each story have been changed to protect the identity of the contributor. Any resemblance to actual people, businesses, organizations, places, and events is purely coincidental. Nothing contained in this book should be construed as legal, medical, counseling or other professional advice. Those seeking such advice should seek the help of a qualified professional.

Author's Note

Why You Should Read this Book

Even the worst reconciliation is better than the best divorce.

Miguel de CERVANTES
(1547-1616)

The above quote, written over four hundred years ago, shows that problems in marriage are nothing new—nor are the destructive powers of divorce. The question this book asks is, if the relationship seems doomed, what can be done to minimize the damage?

Modern life does not make answering this question any easier. In fact, in many ways, it has made it more difficult. Only a few decades ago, life moved at a slower pace. Families and communities were closer knit and tradition, along with well-established social values, provided a framework within which couples could work out their problems. Surrounded by aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other family members, there was a wealth of trusted individuals they could turn to for guidance. Help came not only in the form of words, but through the examples set by others. Just being around those who had gone through difficult times and held their marriages together gave couples the insights they needed to work out their own problems. The advice may have varied from person to person, but it was usually founded on the same general set of principles. Options were fewer, but so were crime rates, substance abuse, stress levels and behavioral disorders. At least at the family level, the world seemed safer and more secure.

In the technological world we live in today, however, the mores that once guided previous generations have been largely replaced by special interest groups, each with their own set of values, and often delivering conflicting messages. At the same time, marketers infiltrate almost every aspect of our being, promising us happiness if we buy their product, yet leave us feeling empty, while print, film, and TV programs shower us with images of famous personalities and over-the-top lifestyles that make our own lives seem dull by comparison. Add to this an almost endless number of lifestyles to choose from, with magazines, websites and chat rooms to support each one, and you begin to see why life sometimes feels as though it isn't giving us what it should. And when our unhappiness mounts, marriage becomes an easy target.

This does not mean that marriage cannot cause us unhappiness. Like any major undertaking in life, marriage will have its share of problems. But it is the goals of this book to show that divorce may not only *not* solve those problems, but actually make them worse.

One study examining five thousand married couples found that of those couples who described their marriages as unhappy, the ones who stayed together ended up happier than those who divorced, when surveyed five years later. Thus, it behooves us to consider our options carefully, lest we end up creating a situation even less desirable than the one we are in presently. But where do we turn for guidance?

Bookstore shelves abound with titles telling us how to rekindle love and keep our marriage alive, while next to them sits another group of books promising us happiness after divorce. We know that each view is biased, as are often the opinions of therapists, ministers, and other professionals. Friends and family members may try to help, but their views can be as limited as ours. They may help solve our

immediate problems, but how well equipped are any of these to project our happiness five years from now? Ten? Twenty? This is no small question. The rest of your life hangs in the balance.

What we need most at this time is perspective, a way of looking beyond our present state to see how the decisions we make today might affect us tomorrow. That is what this book is about.

Imagine you had a friend who could provide you with this kind of information, someone who once stood where you are standing now and was willing to share with you everything he or she has learned. Imagine if this friend could, through the telling of his or her story, alert you to the dangers that lie ahead, point out the mistakes he or she has made, and help you lay out a healthier, wiser course of action. Better still, imagine having a whole roomful of such individuals, each with a story to tell, to give you an even broader perspective. Think of how grateful you would feel for these voices of wisdom that guided you and helped you make the right choices.

This concept forms the basis for *Save Your Marriage, Save Your Life*. Following are twenty-one first-person accounts of divorce. The first fourteen stories are told by men and women who describe their marriage and divorce, how the divorce has impacted their lives, and what they have learned from the experience. The remaining seven stories are told by adults who witnessed the destruction of their families as children. Some stories may offer you more insights than others, but in each one you will likely find a nugget of wisdom, something you hadn't thought of before, an "Ah-ha!" Together with the statistics, quotes and commentary in the book, they should give you a broad understanding of divorce and its consequences, and, hopefully, the tools needed to apply these lessons in your own life.

Although divorce is a life altering experience, not all of the stories in this book involved intense, vitriolic battles at the time of separation. In fact, some had relatively mild initial partings. But divorce does signify failure, the final decision at the end of a long line of internal and external struggles to save the marriage, and out of that failure arises a whole litany of feelings of guilt, shame, hurt, outrage, and other emotions that leaves many couples deeply scarred, not to mention the physical, mental, social and financial havoc it wreaks in their lives.

Further, studies have shown that even when couples part on good terms, their hostility towards one another often increases as time wears on. It is worth noting that despite the small number of people contacted in the writing of this book, not one said, "Yep, the divorce went well. We all turned out fine." Or anything remotely resembling such a statement. In fact, some people were so devastated by the event that years afterwards they were still unable to speak about it.

Because divorce encompasses such a wide range of human behavior, in order to keep the discussion at a manageable level, I have imposed two limitations on the types of divorce covered in this material.

First, this book assumes that most readers either have children or intend to have them. This is because research has now shown that divorce negatively and strongly effects the couple's children. To insure that these risks are recognized by spouses, a significant portion of this book has been set aside to address this most important issue.

Secondly, it assumes that there are no addictive, abusive or other forms of highly destructive behavior in the relationship that necessitate divorce for the safety and well-being of others. Included in this category are relationships compromised by mental illness and/or situations where the

antagonism between spouses is so great that the damage caused by divorce would be less than if the couple were to stay together. These are extreme situations that are beyond the scope of this book, and they are rare.

The types of divorce covered in this material are the most common ones, the 70 percent described in legal parlance as “low conflict,” meaning that they contain none of the destructive elements listed above. They are tales of everyday people who struggled under life’s pressures and, for varying reasons, chose to divorce. Many realized only afterwards that many of the decisions they made were mistakes, sometimes including even the decision to divorce itself.

This book, however, is not just about saving the marriage. Marital relationships are far too complex for any one book to hope to solve every couple’s problems. Rather, its goal is to create a broad understanding of divorce so that the reader can determine if separating is truly in his or her best interest, and if it is, how to limit the damage. Simply put, it’s about risk management, which is nothing more than studying your situation and choosing a course of action that promotes a favorable outcome.

As to the source of the stories, people from around the country were contacted through ads, referrals and other means. After an initial screening, a phone interview was conducted which began with a standardized list of questions. The information was then transcribed into a story format and sent back to the interviewee for review. To compress decades of people’s lives into a few short pages, some less important details were left out. Names, locations and other story elements were also changed to protect the contributor’s identity. However, care was taken in this process to preserve each story’s critical elements and message.

To create an organizational framework and logical flow to this material, I have divided the book into five parts.

Part One begins with a discussion on the art of remaining calm in times of crisis, after which follow fourteen first-person accounts of divorce. Part Two describes the wide range of psychological, physical and social risks children face in divorce situations, and addresses parental conduct. It concludes with the seven stories of adults who grew up in broken homes. Part Three takes a look at the new challenges facing couples in the 21st century, and ends with some thoughts on what it takes to build and maintain a healthy relationship, whether the couple stays together or separates. Parts Four and Five contain, respectively, the closing words and a list of resources.

Although this book takes no strong position either way, it generally favors keeping the marriage together, if possible, because statistically it has been shown to be the least damaging option for all concerned, particularly for the children. It addresses the present, but looks more towards the future, because that is where the consequences of today's actions unfold, often leaving couples regretting the decisions they made years earlier. That is the essential message of this book: assess your options carefully, because they will affect you for the rest of your life. No one would deny that the future contains uncertainty, but that does not mean that we are helpless to alter its outcome.

Lastly, although this book was written for couples struggling in relationships, it was written equally for those not yet married, and newlyweds, whose future still looks promising. If you belong to one of these two groups, this book can save you tremendous amounts of future grief by alerting you to the tragic mistakes of others who, like you, were also once deeply in love, and whose most cherished dream on the day they married was to remain together for the rest of their lives.

Introduction

What Is Your Happiness Worth?

But love is blind and lovers cannot see the
pretty follies that they themselves commit.

William Shakespeare
The Merchant of Venice

Marriage. It starts like a fairy tale and can herald the beginning of many wonderful years together. Some couples remain happily married for the rest of their lives. Many, however, do not. Over half of the marriages in the United States turn sour, and when they do, they can create a living hell, a psychological prison from which there seems no escape.

It may come first as a feeling. You begin to notice less and less joy in your life, but divorce is so far removed from your thinking it doesn't even enter your mind. Sure, there are problems in your marriage, but every couple has those and one way or another you'll find a way to work things out. As time goes on, however, your situation doesn't improve. Instead, it gets worse, and the dissatisfaction you feel in your life starts bearing down on you with ever increasing force.

Then one day it happens. It might be the result of a seething unexpressed anger that finally erupts, the arguments that continue without resolution, a talk with a friend, or the final inexcusable transgression committed by your spouse, but at some point the scales tip. The emotional dam

breaks and all of your pent-up feelings of anger, frustration, and hopelessness rush out in torrents. Something changes inside you and, almost as if by revelation, the unthinkable suddenly becomes thinkable, not only thinkable, but desirable, even attractive—divorce! Of course it wouldn't be pleasant you tell yourself, but the marriage and any happiness you ever hoped to find in it seem doomed. Something has to be done and divorce appears to be the only answer.

With that shift in thinking, a whole new world opens up, a world of which you were previously unaware. Divorce becomes not only a way to rid yourself of an impossible situation and a spouse you can no longer live with, but a chance to start life over again and find the happiness you so desperately crave.

Once viewed as something to be avoided at all costs, divorce now becomes your friend, your ally. Half-shocked, half-heartened, you file the papers, knowing that it is simply an unpleasant step you must go through in order to get to the "other side," where a new life awaits you. You might even see it as a chance to "punish" your partner for all the wrongdoings he or she has committed. Justice will finally be served. The battle begins.

But as in all battles, there are casualties. Cherished dreams are laid to waste. Families are torn apart. Bank accounts are drained. Careers are decimated and children, dazed and confused, are used as ammunition. The casualties mount. But you press on, knowing that the point of no return has long since passed. You are now engaged in the most important battle of your life and it must be won at any cost.

Few events can turn your life upside-down like divorce. The loss of a job, your home, your fortune, even the loss of a limb, or the death of a loved one may all be easier to bear than divorce, because they are all singular events.

Once they happen, they are over with. In time we accept the loss, close that chapter in our lives, and move on. But with divorce, particularly those involving children, the day the papers are signed is often just the beginning of a long, drawn-out battle that can continue for decades and weave a path of destruction of staggering proportions. The relationship that divorce was supposed to end is anything but over.

Each time new issues come up that force you to deal with your ex, painful wounds are reopened, often with new insults, transgressions and mistreatments heaped on top of the old ones. You struggle to build a new life, but your capacities feel stretched to their limits and the specter of new events making it worse looms always in the back of your mind. Back and forth you swim in a sea of conflicting emotions; remorse, anger, guilt, acceptance, rage, depression, sadness. What should you do? Attack? Defend? Forgive? Punish?

These feelings descend upon you without warning, invade your thinking, interrupt your sleep, and influence everything you do, from buying clothes to your performance at work. No aspect of your life seems immune from the ravages of divorce. At times you may feel relieved, even elated, that the troubled union is finally over, but more often than not you feel swamped with feelings of anger and bitterness, and a deep sense of personal loss that won't go away.

As you work your way through this vast, dark jungle of emotions, the important thing to remember is that you are not alone. Half of the married population in the United States has either gone through, or will go through, divorce. How did others survive this trying time? What mistakes did they make, and how did it affect the final outcome? And if they could do it all over again, what changes would they have made? Most importantly, how will these changes affect you and your children in the years to come?

In divorce, we often become so consumed with the battle that we fail to see the long-term consequences of our actions. The anger you feel now will fade. At some point, it will be desirable, even necessary, for you to “let go” and move on. But the decisions you make today will affect you and your family for the rest of your lives.

This is no small matter. There is a tremendous burden of responsibility resting on your shoulders. A good exercise, after finishing this book, is to step back and try to imagine how your present circumstances, or the actions you are contemplating, will affect you, your spouse and your children years down the road, after the assets have been divided up, the emotions have calmed, your hair is gray, and your children are now living on their own. How will you be remembered? What will be your legacy?

This responsibility extends far beyond legal ruling handed out in a courtroom. Regardless of how justified you may feel in your actions, it matters little to a child whose life was turned upside down because of it. “I did it for your own good,” may sound reassuring to a preschooler, but may later turn to rage when the child who was forced to grow up without a father or mother later discovers that the “irresponsible parent” removed from his or her life was caring and loving to children in another marriage. Seeing the divorce through the eyes of your children ten and twenty years from now may be one of the healthiest exercises a parent can do.

In the end, you and your partner will decide the fate of your family. But because of the enormous responsibility resting on your shoulders, it is in your own best interest to act with the greatest amount of awareness and foresight possible. The stories and commentary that follow will assist you in that process. If you haven’t already done so, you may want to take the quiz on the next page before continuing.