

### **We need a Palliative Care of Families.**

It is a tragic reality that social institutions do not help marriages and families to die with the care and dignity they deserve. As someone who has worked with ailing marriage for the past 20 years, I see the abject failure of the legal profession, family law procedures, and the courts to provide the necessary institutional supports essential for the effective care of the families involved. There is no palliative care for these families. Instead many families have to go through the traumatic and de-humanizing process that attends the blunt instrument that is family law.

Anyone who has had someone close to them die and has experienced the healing hands of a hospice, daffodil nurses, and a family doctor that leads a family through this difficult time, knows that there is a time for a special kind of assertive care and guidance. Couples and children going through separation and divorce need these kinds of interventions and need confident guidance on how to go through this process with courage and dignity. This is vital to them so that they can understand what is happening to them and learn to make the right decisions.

Marriages and families can be stuck at various stages in the process of breakdown. Using the medical analogy, they may be in need of emotional life-support and intensive care. The marriage may be in acute distress, traumatised, and dying. Or the marriage may be long since dead but both partners may be caught in an angry post-mortem searching for who is to blame. This latter scenario is a common one and often involves children in a never-ending battle between the parents for status, safety, dignity, and freedom.

In these situations we need to think of the family as having its own separate integrity and identity in need of palliative care with strong supports and interventions that guide families through the process. The responsibility for protecting the children, and couple themselves, from the ravages of bitter divorce must be carried not by the individual family members themselves, but by the social institutions involved.

At present our legal system traumatises and at times abuses families going through these changes in ways that are deeply wounding and destructive for children and all of the extended families involved.

I have seen many cases where a controlling and abusive partner leads the entire judicial process through a process of degradation for everyone involved. There is very little assertive leadership and guidelines provided by the legal process. A defiant partner can take control of the breakup without any meaningful assertive intervention by the courts, whose reaction time, reflexes, and ability to assess a situation is as slow and awkward as the proverbial bull trying to guard the family china.

Though a marriage may have died, couples will often sit around its deathbed engaged in the unseemly and at times obscene row over who is more responsible for its death. Couples get entrapped in bitter exchanges while the relationship they had loved, and more importantly, the relationship their children still do love, is now dying before them. In the absence of any road-map for change most couples and their solicitors get involved in jockeying for control, safety, and credibility.

Despite the usefulness of counselling and mediation, it is still left to the traumatised parties themselves to take responsibility for how the families or marriage comes to an end. Imagine how you would feel if you lay distressed in the ICU, after a major trauma, and were approached by a surgeon seeking your advice and guidance on what kind of treatment, surgery, medication, you think you might need.

Whatever the situation, what happens around the death-bed of the marriage during its final months before and after its death is critical to the emotional and psychological health of the partners and children. The proper palliative care of marriage would demand that our social institutions take full responsibility for providing structures, models, remedies and supports that make certain that parents are forced to handle these traumatic transitions effectively. In these times couples need strong supports, clear information, and a guidance that is rarely offered by helping services.

Each child in a breaking family needs to know that there is nothing wrong with them, that Church and State provide paths through which the reformation of their family can be transformative and redemptive. Each child needs to know that who she is through the process of family grief can be heroic, meaningful, and given significance by the larger society. I cannot overstate how critical this is for modern children. The only way this can happen is if the responsibility for ensuring this happens is carried not by the traumatised family, or their solicitors, but by a new service, which has a legal and social-care authority to instruct couples on what they must do to protect their children. This is one more thing on a long shopping list of family-focused responsibilities all our political parties fail to see, not to mind tackle.

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