

GRADUATING TO THE EMPTY NEST:

YOUR MARRIAGE AFTER RAISING CHILDREN

By Chris Oldner | Contributor

There are so many positives to graduating to an empty nest:

No more bickering between siblings.

A deep exhale after the chaos and anxiety of adolescence.

Quiet satisfaction of successfully shepherding your offspring into the next phase of their life.

Freedom from the demands and the attention required to keep children focused and thriving.

Going to the bathroom without interruption.

Sending the last of the children off to college and the accompanying loss of being “needed” by your kids, can sometimes stress a shaky marital relationship to the breaking point. Your 20-something-year marriage that has been primarily focused on child-rearing now seems adrift in an ocean of uncertainty.

Before, you “had to” stay together for the children. But now that they are gone, why should you stay? Often the answer seems impossible to find. The transition from kid-focused parents back to husband and wife can be daunting. It is a period of life that, for most, requires getting reacquainted with the person you married; who they are, what they need, and what they want.

Often it also involves getting reacquainted with the person *you* are now; what you need and want. This reacquainting is not

easy. It can produce more questions than answers, and some of the answers you find lead to difficult choices.

You reach a place in life where the fruits of your labor should allow you to finally focus on yourself, on the one you love, and on pursuing what should be your mutual passions. Instead, you find yourself questioning everything, and the answers lead to a place you never anticipated.

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There you are, in a courtroom reliving every slight—every grievance—from the past several decades. Every forgotten anniversary, every unwashed dish, endless hurtful comments, the failure to take out the trash, his chewing with his mouth open, her failure to love you the way you “deserve to be loved.”

Kids suddenly choose “sides.” Social media drama wears out keyboards. E-Harmony profiles are created. Retirement accounts are liquidated to pay attorneys.

For almost 17 years, I sat in a black robe on an elevated platform and watched this scenario unfold time and time again. I started to believe that maybe it is little more than a fluke when a marriage lasts for decades. I mean, there is nothing easy about maintaining a relationship.

People change and today no one is the same person who we fell in love with and married all those years ago. It is hard work to stay tuned-in to each other’s needs, while also staying in touch with your own individuality.

Maybe being able to tolerate, much less enjoy, your spouse’s presence after decades of marriage is just a coin flip of fate.

Some find comfort in that predestination. We didn’t fail—it was just providence. Others find it terrifying. After deciding tens of thousands of divorces and hearing the unique life stories that accompany each one, I am unable to dismiss luck as a factor. But it is not the only, or even the primary, factor.

Common characteristics emerge when long-term marriages turn into midlife divorce, but no simple checklist can ensure durability. There are necessary elements. It does involve embracing the person your spouse has become, respecting their individuality (and your own), communicating honestly and, even with all their faults, continuing to choose your spouse.

If you find the matrimonial battle wounds are fatal and believe it is necessary to separate, seek the counsel of an experienced family law attorney and discuss your options. Do *not* make the mistake of believing that counsel is unnecessary because your kids are grown and flown. That mistake could be devastating.

The complexity of financial matters involved in ending long-term marriages requires a level of knowledge, understanding, and skill that only a family law expert can provide. In fact, if you are seriously considering a divorce, it may be wise to talk to an attorney before you confront your spouse so that you are aware of the implications of your decision. This is especially true if you have been the at-home spouse, or there is a large income differential. Divorce will greatly impact your financial stability and preparation for that reality is critical.

Each phase of marriage places unique demands on a couple, and these demands are unique to each family. The early intoxication of new love often sustains the morning; the common purpose and child-focus typically dominates the afternoon; with uncertainty and reevaluation possible in the evening. Ideally, it also brings recommitment, growth, and renewal.

When you find yourself devoid of the purpose you have been committed to for the past decades and in bed with a stranger, it can be frightening. It can also be an exciting opportunity to start the next phase of life with a fresh commitment to each other and a new understanding of yourself.

Editor’s Note: Judge Chris Oldner is a partner in the Family Law boutique Orsinger, Nelson, Downing & Anderson, LLP, assisting clients facing life-changing legal matters including divorce, child custody, parental rights, and property division. He can be reached at www.ondafamilylaw.com.

