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The 40-Year Itch

By DEIRDRE BAIR

New Haven

THERE'S an old French expression I found useful when I wrote a book about couples who divorced after long marriages: "I wasn't holding the candle." It means that I couldn't know what happened between the two people in a marriage, so how could I possibly know why they split?

That hasn't stopped speculation about Al and Tipper Gore, who are behaving with grace and dignity as they keep to themselves their reasons for ending 40 years of marriage. **Public reaction** has followed a pattern, beginning with shock and disbelief: "They seemed like the ideal couple, so perfect together." Outrage came next: "Was it all a sham, especially that kiss on the convention stage?" And finally fear: "Are all marriages doomed to wither and die — and will mine be among them?"

But such questions expose just a few widespread but unrealistic assumptions about late-life divorce. Divorce lawyers tell me the fastest-growing segment of their clientele is the middle-aged and elderly. And their divorces do not all that often involve husbands running off with someone new, leaving wives alone and bereft. A 2004 AARP survey of 1,147 people who divorced in their 40s, 50s or 60s found that **women initiated late-life divorces more often than men did**, and if the divorced women wanted a new partner, they usually found one.

For my book, I interviewed 126 men and 184 women who divorced after being married 20 to 60-plus years. And what surprised me most was the courage they showed as they left the supposed security of marriage. To them, divorce meant not failure and shame, but opportunity.

"People change and forget to tell each other," Lillian Hellman said. Still, many couples seem to have an "aha!" moment when they realize that it's time to split up. No matter how comfortably situated they are, how lovely their home and successful their children, they divorce because they cannot go on living in the same old rut with the same old person.

Men and women I interviewed insisted they did not divorce foolishly or impulsively. Most of them mentioned “freedom.” Another word I heard a lot was “control”; people wanted it for themselves for the rest of their lives. Women had grown tired of taking care of house, husband and grown children; men were tired of working to support wives who they felt did not appreciate them and children who did not respect them. Women and men alike wanted time to find out who they were.

One spouse might have wanted to keep working while the other wanted to retire. Often, there was an emotional void; one would say that the other “doesn’t see me, doesn’t know who I am,” while the other hadn’t a clue: “I thought everything was just fine; we never argued, we don’t fight.” One grew disenchanted with the wrinkled person across the dinner table and wanted someone new and exciting.

I talked to men who were serial marry-ers with trophy wives they abandoned, as one of them put it, the minute the woman “got broody and wanted babies.” And I found women who wanted a man who would take them dining and dancing, but then go home to his own bed and leave them alone until the next party.

Many stories ended with some rendition of, “It’s my time and if I don’t take it now, I never will.” No matter whether they had spent years gearing up for divorce or decided on the spur of the moment after one minor disagreement too many, few had regrets. Men who wanted new companionship easily found it, and women who wanted new partners had them within two years.

Divorce is easier now. Our retirement years are longer and healthier. Both men and women often have enough money to make changes. And the stigma of divorce has long since faded. A century ago, Elizabeth Cady Stanton called it a “social earthquake.” But several decades later, Margaret Mead thought every woman needed three husbands: one for youthful sex, one for security while raising children and one for joyful companionship in old age. In the 21st century, Margaret Drabble, the British novelist, calls life after divorce “the third age.” The heroine of her novel “The Seven Sisters” says, “Our dependents have died or matured. For good and ill, we are free.”

So let us not feel shocked or sad about the end of Al and Tipper Gore’s marriage. Let us instead wish them well, and hope that they might enjoy their third age, individually and in peace.

Deirdre Bair is the author of “Calling It Quits: Late-Life Divorce and Starting Over.”

