

Children of Divorce: An Overview of the Recent Literature

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Susan Gregory Thomas, *In Spite of Everything* (Random House, 2011)

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Commitments to Marriage and Family Life* (Vintage Books, 1996)

Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce* (Mariner Books, 1996)

Judith Wallerstein, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: The 25 Year Landmark Study* (Hyperion, 2000)

Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (Three Rivers Press, 2005)

Andrew Root, *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being* (Baker Academic, 2010)

Every generation has its defining moment, Susan Gregory Thomas argues in her biting, but sweetly endearing, memoir *In Spite of Everything* (Random House, 2011). Some kids grew up in London during the bombings of World War II. Others grew up in sleepy American suburbia, with a bombing going on inside their own hearts. That, she claims, is the state of her generation – Generation X – whose childhoods have been defined by the experience of their parents’ divorce.

After her father leaves her mother to marry his secretary, Gregory Thomas’s world changes dramatically. She muses at length on the impact of her parents’ divorce – on everything from her safety as a child (she loses her innocence at the age of thirteen to the nineteen-year old son of the neighbors who are babysitting her) to her confused vision of love (serial casual hookup-ups co-exist with romanticized dreams of finding a soul-mate) to her frenetic search for the perfect home (the home she herself never had). Gregory Thomas has amazing pluck – she pulls herself up by her bootstraps, gets herself into Columbia University, and forges a successful writing career. She marries, has children, and “in spite of everything” strives to love her children even after her own marriage falls apart.

But a pervasive theme is the experience of loss, of the *void*, that opens up inside of her after her parents split. Early on, Gregory Thomas describes the strange disorientation that she experienced at the age of eleven:

After my parents divorced, one of the sad, weird things that happened was that I completely lost my bearings in the night sky. As a kid, I was the undisputed Pleiades and Little Dipper Finder. I can still find them, but it takes me forever. I can’t see Orion unless it is pointed out to me (p. 33).

The break-up of her parents’ marriage causes Gregory Thomas to suddenly become lost in space – literally and figuratively. Indeed, Gregory Thomas sees the *Star Wars* saga (which first hit theaters in 1977) – with its “archetypes of home, wounds, stars, ice, and fathers” – as emblematic of the

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entire generation of kids born from the early 1960s to the early 1980s that has lost its inner bearings because of divorce. In early adulthood, she says, she herself was like the “rogue planet” of the *Star Wars* saga, a planet lacking a navigation system, condemned to wander aimlessly through space. Gregory Thomas is stunned to discover in her husband-to-be, Cal – a child of an intact family – a stable center, a moral certainty, and a solidity that is beyond her own experience. Cal knows what he thinks is right:

It simply never occurred to Cal to allow his moral compass to be pulled in any direction other than his own. Me, I would have given anything to have a moral compass, my sentient planet’s missing piece of equipment. My center, to the extent that I had one, had never held. It was more like a hazmat container for high-pressure gas. Reading *Heart of Darkness* in my junior year of high school, I’d felt an instant, horrible sense of kinship with Kurtz. The wilderness had found me out early, too – and it echoed loudly within because I, too, was hollow at the core. The major difference between Kurtz and me was that I was too afraid to allow the horrifying nihilism that lived inside me to penetrate the membrane of my persona, which talked all the time and liked clothes. A line from a Billy Bragg song sums it up: “a little black cloud in a dress” (p. 79).

“Hollow to the core”, “horrifying nihilism,” a center that does not hold – Gregory Thomas’s testimony is stark and shattering. But it rings true to many children of her generation.

In his *Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being* (Baker Academic, 2010), Andrew Root, whose parents divorced while he was in graduate school, records a similar experience of insubstantiality afterwards, a feeling of being “undone.” Drawing on the testimonies of children of divorce, Root concludes that nothing of what a child is told about his parents’ divorce can touch the more profound reality of *who the child is* – the fruit of the union of a man and a woman, a union which the child relies upon for the foundation of his very being. When the union fails, the child feels the impact in a place that the parents themselves cannot. Strategies for improving the resilience of children through the divorce process cannot touch this place precisely because it is the divorce process itself, the dissolution of the marriage, that is the source of the child’s wound.

Root’s argument, which will be discussed in greater detail below, draws on the best of the research that has been done in recent years on the experience of children of divorce. This small but growing body of literature, based on the testimonies of the children themselves, tells a different story than the one we are accustomed to hearing – that, while divorce is hard on a child, he can overcome the difficulty with the right combination of social support and education. Indeed, the story of the children of divorce challenges us to think more deeply about what we mean by love, marriage, family.

A good starting place for understanding this story is Barbara Dafoe Whitehead’s *The Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Commitments to Marriage and Family Life* (Vintage Books, 1996).

Whitehead is interested in divorce as an idea, an “ethic” if you will, that is instantiated in literature and law, and, above all, in the hearts and minds of Americans.

Our country was born in political dissent, she argues, and it is no surprise, therefore, that since its inception American society has been more tolerant of marital dissolution than its European counterparts. But it was not until the twentieth century that cultural support for divorce exploded, fueled by a “psychological revolution” in which the sources of authority for Americans shifted from family members and clergymen to psychologists and therapists. Increasingly, the value of marriage was judged in terms of “personal fulfillment.” From the 1970s on, authors – specifically women authors – began to produce memoirs of divorce as liberation. Divorce rapidly became viewed as a necessary option for ending not only an abusive relationship, but also one in which either spouse felt “stifled” or “crushed.” This “expressive divorce” followed a capitalist logic: the individual “invests” in a relationship, hoping for a return. When the relationship no longer “pays,” one is free to invest one’s emotional capital elsewhere (p. 76).

Until the 1960s, Whitehead recounts, the majority of married couples believed that “you stay together for the children.” Divorce was considered a negative outcome for a marriage because it spelled the loss of parental unity and separated the children from their father. But “expressive divorce” inspired a different judgment. “In contrast with the earlier view which linked the children’s interests to the parents’ marriage, the new view tied children’s interests to the emotional well-being of each parent, but particularly the mother” (88). In other words, a divorce that freed a parent from an oppressive relationship ultimately liberated the children as well. A (relatively) peaceful divorce, therefore, was to be preferred to a conflictual marriage.

The “first wave” of thinking about the impact of divorce on children speculated about possible positive effects. These children would be survivors; they would evince a special maturity that came from living through a divorce. But by the mid-1980s, Whitehead argues, a “second wave” of researchers – armed with a dose of “hard” social science – implicated divorce as a significant cause of problems affecting children, among them being behavioral issues, dropping out of school, and poverty. The studies showed that the impact of divorce in the life of a child was often long-term, chronic, and persistent.

And yet, Whitehead says, the “second wave” of thinking on children and divorce has had little impact on the divorce ethic. Instead, a consensus has emerged that divorce is a necessary evil, a required “trade-off” between children’s happiness and the freedom and happiness of the parents. A brisk trade has developed in books that promise to help children regulate the loss experience, a sort of “biliotherapy” invoking reassuring mantras like “your parents still love you, even though they don’t love each other anymore,” while at the same time providing children with a new identity within a victim class. A significant societal shift has occurred, Whitehead concludes – from the idea that divorce harms children, to the idea that the harm is worth it. This is the foundation of the *divorce culture* – divorce as a way of life, an adult entitlement. “The culture of divorce recruits social support, compassion, and sympathy for the divorcing grown-ups and maintains a discreet silence about the plight of children”(p. 106).

Alongside the divorce culture, a new ideology of family has arisen: the “Love Family.” Before the divorce culture, Americans understood the family primarily as that institution whereby a man and a woman are united to their children through blood (or adoption), sealed by bonds of love. By contrast, in the Love Family biological bonds are insignificant, even irrelevant; the sole unifying force is *affection*. “Love makes a family” but not necessarily marriage and procreation.

There is, however, one big problem: the children themselves. Children don’t fit well into the ideology of the Love Family. A Love Family is created by choice, and children are not choosers – they are not “players” in this game of build-a-family: they cannot choose their parents, they are dependent on them; they cannot initiate and maintain relationships, but are dependent on those who are bigger and stronger than they to do this. Nor can they “give back” in affection in a way that matches the investment of their parents.

What, then, is to be done in the face of the divorce culture? In her final pages, Whitehead argues that the best start is “recapturing a sense of the purposes of marriage that extend beyond the self” (193). Certainly much more could be said on this topic, but what Whitehead presents in *The Divorce Culture* amounts to a startling challenge. In its unflinching and persistent willingness to address the subject of divorce head-on, Whitehead’s book stands as a minor cultural classic.

One of the more significant pieces of “second wave” research on children of divorce that Whitehead highlights is psychologist Judith Wallerstein’s effort with co-author Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce* (1989). Beginning in 1971, Wallerstein initiated a landmark longitudinal study. Her novel approach was to go “beyond” the statistics in order to discover what is going on in the heart of the family through in-depth face-to-face interviews with spouses and children. She followed her subjects and interviewed them at five and ten-year intervals after the divorce. In *Second Chances*, she convincingly shows that, even ten years later, many children and their parents were still struggling to integrate the life-change of divorce.

In 1994, Karen, one of the original children in the study, made contact with Wallerstein and asked to meet. In this meeting Karen frankly and poignantly described her struggles to find happiness in marriage as she continued to weather the fallout of her parents’ divorce. As Karen told it, the divorce had changed not only her circumstances, but her way of viewing the world, effectively leaving her psychologically and spiritually handicapped when it came to love and commitment.

Hearing Karen’s story convinced Wallerstein to extend her previous study and to interview the now-adult children twenty-five years after their parents’ split. In *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: The 25 Year Landmark Study* (Hyperion, 2000), we learn that Karen’s story is far from exceptional. Divorce, it turns out, has far-reaching effects in the lives of all of Wallerstein’s subjects. Moreover, the inclusion in the book of the stories of adult children of intact families permits Wallerstein (with co-authors Blakeslee and Julia M. Lewis) to draw conclusions on the ultimate impact of divorce on

the *family as a whole*. “The post-divorce family,” she tells us early on, “is a new family form that makes very different demands on each parent, each child, and each of the many new adults who enter the family orbit” (p. 10). Wallerstein painstakingly paints the picture of the new family form in the words of the children.

Because of the lived reality of divorce, she finds, the children lose the chance to *be* children. Children rarely remember playing after the divorce. Forced to travel between two homes or be the emotional support for their own sometimes-devastated parents and siblings, children of divorce grow up more quickly than others. In contrast, in intact families, parents “create a safe and supportive place for children whose job... is to go to school, play, make friends, and simply grow up.” (p. 24).

The experience of divorce stands in the minds of most children as the beginning of a time of uncertainty and upheaval that ultimately marks their view of the world. The circumstances of divorce, with two parents trying to “begin again,” mean that family structure disappears. “[W]hen families come apart, the needs of every member diverge” (p. 221). The child is expected to “move on” just as his parents have, but this is not easy. The lack of structure is more difficult for boys than girls. It is devastating to a special-needs child.

Many children of divorce had little idea that the divorce was coming. Afterwards, “the world is newly perceived as a far less reliable, more dangerous place because the closest relationships in their lives can no longer be expected to hold firm” (p. 27). The experiences of repeated losses in the form of second and third divorces and the multiple sex partners of some parents only confirm this sense. Karen says: “Both my parents played around. I saw it all around me. They felt that if you are not getting what you want, you just look elsewhere”(p. 30).

In the minds of children of divorce, their parents’ marriage is a lost image which can never be achieved. Not surprisingly, children of divorce find it harder to find a mate than their peers from intact families. Indeed, Wallerstein argues, living in an intact family is a powerful education in courtship and marriage.

When children of divorce do get married they are more likely to divorce than children from intact families. Moreover, two out of three children of divorce in Wallerstein’s study chose not to have children themselves because they did not want to put their children through what they had gone through. Some admitted to not wanting to make their parents grandparents (p. 68).

Divorce, Wallerstein argues, leads children to conclude that “nothing is stable” and that nothing good can last. And the lack of stability and unity in their lives leaves a profound mark on their sense of self-worth. In a particularly touching passage, she speaks to this suffering:

The divorce disrupted your life. It came suddenly, unexpectedly, but you realized it was caused voluntarily by the people you loved best and trusted the most. You

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concluded again, logically and sensibly, that nothing is stable. Anything could happen and change is probably for the worse. Since your parents assured you that things would be better, but they weren't, you drove your feelings underground even more – where they became more powerful. Like most children, you kept all these terrifying conclusions to yourself because you loved your parents and didn't want to upset them. They were so upset already. And finally, like a child, you blamed yourself for the breakup. You must have done something bad to drive them apart. You thought you were the most powerful villain responsible for the family disaster. If your parents were fighting over you, and if you hadn't ever been born, then they wouldn't have quarreled. You don't deserve to have good things happen. You certainly don't deserve to love or be loved (pp. 62-3).

It could be said that with *Unexpected Legacy* Wallerstein has initiated a “third wave” of research that points beyond the measurable “negative aspects” to a deeper analysis of what divorce *is* – namely a *new family form*. Wallerstein's sensitivity as an interviewer draw us into the lives of the children of divorce and draws forth our compassion. A few of the stories she permits the kids to tell are so absolutely heartbreaking that it is hard not to conclude that something has gone seriously awry in our divorce culture.

Ultimately, Wallerstein wants to hold both things together: the advocacy for the child of divorce and the rights of the parents to choose divorce. Indeed, Wallerstein and Blakeslee, in addition to writing a book on how to make good marriages, have penned a more recent book teaching parents how to make a “good divorce” (*What About the Kids? Raising Your Children Before, During, and After the Divorce*). Nevertheless, Wallerstein's efforts with her co-authors have provided us with a treasure of research from which writers, researchers, parents, and children will be drawing for some time to come.

Elizabeth Marquardt confirms and deepens Wallerstein's research but draws a different conclusion. Only two when her parents divorced, Marquardt lived the life of a child of a “good divorce” – she continued to remain close to both her mother and her father, and she was certain that both parents loved her and wanted her. Entering adulthood, she appeared to have survived and thrived through the divorce experience, earning multiple degrees and forging a happy marriage. But Marquardt felt an inner gnawing that she could not categorize – she wondered whether others like her felt it. Marquardt's *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (Three Rivers Press, 2005) is the fruit of a controlled study that Marquardt conducted with noted family researcher Norval Glenn, aimed at understanding the *hidden* experience of children of divorce.

Between Two Worlds convincingly argues that there is no “good divorce” because “divorce powerfully changes the structure of childhood itself” (p. 12), rearranging the elements in the child's world so significantly that his very identity is affected. An intact family, Marquardt argues, is created through the intentional union of a man and a woman – and, throughout the life of the family, it is the continuation of this unity that provides the place where a child can be a child. Parents bear

the responsibility for bringing together their separate worlds – differing beliefs, traditions, and plans. Children remain for the most part unaware of the difficult work that parents do to maintain the unity and coherence of their relationship – but this does not mean that they do not benefit from it. Rather, it is the active and persistent melding together of the parents’ own two worlds into one – with its compromises, cooperation, and even disagreement and occasional dissent – that makes possible the coherence and safety of childhood.

When parents divorce, they stop trying to unify the marriage, but, perhaps not surprisingly, the work of unifying does not cease – it is taken up by another, namely the child, who is, after all, the fruit of the unity of the man and the woman. Forced to live “between two worlds” – a life exemplified most obviously in the necessity of the child to travel between the now-separate homes of mother and father – the child takes upon himself the work of uniting what now is, in fact, not possible to unite. Whereas before the divorce childhood is mostly carefree, after the divorce the child, with his meager resources (he is a child, after all), must function in two separate places with two different sets of rules and expectations. He becomes a chameleon and a champion at keeping secrets. Marquardt summarizes:

When a cell divides, it creates two new cells, each with its own nucleus. Likewise, when a divorce divides a nuclear family, it creates two new families, each with *its* own nucleus. But divorce does something strange in the process of family cellular division. In intact families, the children are the nucleus and the parents protectively surround them. After a divorce, newly apparent adult vulnerabilities have a way of turning the family structure inside out. Each parent moves to the center of his or her own new world, and it’s the *children* who are now on the outside, keeping a wary eye on them, even trying to protect them (p. 37).

In short, Marquardt forcefully argues that for a child of an intact family, childhood is all about *me*. For a child of divorce, it is all about *them*. And *that*, Marquardt shows in her study, is no sort of childhood.

Marquardt’s study probes the *inner* states of two sets of adults – children of divorced families and those of intact families. The families are further divided based on whether the divorce was good or bad and whether the marriage was basically happy or conflictual. In *Between Two Worlds*, Marquardt weaves the results of her study and her personal story with the narratives she gleaned from seventy-one interviews with adult children of divorce. Although some of the conclusions that Marquardt draws parallel Wallerstein’s, her work is uniquely forceful because it is grounded in her own experience as a child of divorce; she writes with the authority of an “insider.”

It is the details that reveal the difference. Like the doctor who discovers the hairline fracture that is causing the patient constant pain, Marquardt discerns the hidden dilemmas that haunt children of divorce and continue to challenge their sense of identity. From the outside, these may seem unremarkable – something as simple as a child resembling one spouse more than the other, or mom’s house being stricter than dad’s. But Marquardt shows us that the first case signals the loss of identity and the threat of being rejected by the parent one does not resemble, while the second

provokes a deep moral drama that leads the child to assume different personas in different places.

It becomes particularly clear that the need to be a different person in different houses – a task that few outsiders recognize as the hallmark of the divorce experience for children – causes children of divorce to be more cautious, less trusting, and less morally and personally coherent than their counterparts from intact marriages. Divorcing parents lose their ability to work together in presenting a coherent view of the world. As a result, children of divorce find themselves adrift.

Marquardt, who holds a Masters in Divinity, is particularly interested in the spiritual dilemmas in the heart of the child. From her we learn that children of divorce tend to be more spiritual and less religious than children from intact families; deep spiritual longing stands alongside a distrust of “organized religion.” One particularly poignant picture that Marquardt paints is the single child sitting at the back of a religious service, while the children “with parents” are in the front pew. The child of divorce, robbed of the chance to approach God through the natural means of the family, remains guarded and distant. As Allison, one of Marquardt’s interviewees, frankly admits, “[I]f the most important relationship in your life, which of course is the one with your parents, is irretrievably broken at a young age, and one of the defining components of your life is that that core relationship was not there, you have to have fundamental trust issues” (149). In short, children of divorce find it harder to feel “at home” in church.

In her conclusion, Marquardt spills quite a lot of ink critiquing the false premise of the “good divorce” which, she says, resounds with “happy talk” engineered to make something that is never “good” at least palatable. Not surprisingly, Marquardt is not too interested in giving advice on how to make a better divorce. She is focused on helping parents make marriages last. Divorce, after all, is a choice of the parents; it is also their choice to stick it out.

Like Elizabeth Marquardt, Andrew Root in *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being* is concerned with the profound inner damage inflicted by divorce. A professor at Luther Seminary and himself a child of divorce, Root argues that society has yet to grasp divorce’s true effects:

We have assumed that if cushioning social structures are in place, the impact of divorce is nullified or at least greatly diminished. But divorce is more than an issue of social capital or simple psychology (like self-esteem) for we are more than our place in the structures and knowledge of society. Even if young people preserve their social capital and understand why their parents split up and what the divorce means it still leaves a mark that cannot be erased by retained social capital or correct knowledge. And these are marks that last well beyond the age of custody, for divorce is ontological (p. 46).

To support his thesis that divorce affects a child *in his being*, Root invokes a range of sources, from

Heidegger to Barth to “object relations psychology,” all the while remaining consistently grounded in the concrete testimonies of the children of divorce. His work helpfully explains the inner dilemmas that Wallerstein and Marquardt have uncovered.

Root has given a name to the nameless terror that engulfs the child when faced with the divorce of his parents, a terror that Root knows all too well. He describes the feelings that gripped him and his fiancée, Kara, on the eve of their marriage, as, incredibly, both learned that their parents were heading to divorce court.

Kara often wakened in the night to find herself overwhelmed by fear. There was never anything specific to the fear, no fright of something supernatural like a ghost, no worry that an intruder had picked her apartment lock. It was just blind fear, fear she could articulate only as fear of being alone. I understood this, because I myself was feeling it, sleeping most nights on the couch so that when the fear enveloped me I could try to escape it by turning on the TV. It was an odd kind of fear, for it had no form, no rational categories to talk myself beyond it. It simply felt like I was losing my being, as if in the midst of my sleep I could simply disappear, fade away into nothing. It was the fear that now that the union that created me was dissolving, I might dissolve with it (p. 44).

Such a fear arises in the heart of the child of divorce, Root argues, because, in modernity, the *being* of the child is at odds with the future-oriented self that realizes itself through choice. Drawing on the work of object relations psychology, Root argues that the child derives “ontological security” from the reliability of the bonds that he has within the family. The child depends on the bonds with mother and father in order for him to act with confidence in the world. But the parent considering divorce sees these same bonds as limitations that close out the possibility of a brighter future. When the parent chooses to divorce, he or she makes a move to grasp this future for himself; but the child, who is linked to the parents not by choice, but by a biological past, is “left maneuverless” (p. 33). He who *cannot* choose is now at the mercy of his parents’ choice.

Since this choice destroys the bonds upon which the child necessarily for his ontological security, he faces the world with new-found uncertainty. If the relation of mother and father, which is the bedrock of a child’s life, can disappear, it seems that anything can happen. A void opens within him. The child is threatened by non-being and God becomes untrustworthy. As Root says, “Divorce smothers the holy.” At the same time, the child feels as though he *ought not to exist*. The parents’ choice to divorce throws the original validity of their union into question, striking at the heart of the child’s being. “I am not sure I ever loved your mother,” becomes to the child, “I wish you had never been born.”

The philosophy of Heidegger grounds Root’s explanation of the ontological insecurity that afflicts children of divorce. For Heidegger, our being is more than what we know; it is embedded in our day-to-day life, in particular, in our relations. We are constituted in such a way that we are unable to simply extricate ourselves from those with whom we are related. *Our being is being-in-relation*.

Heidegger's account helps us understand the disintegration that Marquardt describes in the child of divorce. When the family falls apart and mother and father separate – founding different homes, different lives, and often embracing different values – the child, whose being depends on this lived unity, struggles to retain a coherent sense of his own self. No amount of “happy talk” can erase the impact of the divorce, for this impact is deeper than the “reasonable” explanations given for the divorce.

Being as “being-in-relation” is further deepened by Root through the thought of Karl Barth, who develops the biblical teaching that man is made “in the image of God” (*imago Dei*) with specific reference to the Trinity. For Barth, we image the God who is eternal relation in our own relationships, in and through communion with others. Relation constitutes our being; “without another with whom to be in relationship, there can be no me,” says Root (p. 73). Where this is most evident, of course, is at the origin of a child's being in the one-flesh relation of a man and a woman. And this original relation continues to constitute the child's being, as parents continually act to create a family through their love – a veritable image of the Trinitarian God of Love. When a marriage ends, it is impossible for the child, whose being flourishes in and through the relation with his parents, simply to “move on.” As Root says, when reflecting on the implications of his parents' divorce for his own family, “As painful as witnessing the last act of my parents' marriage was, the problem with divorce, for children, is that its ending is never an ending. It instead becomes a more complicated way of being-in-the-world” (p. 88).

Since the child becomes who he is in and through the loving action of his parents, when the parents *choose* to end that action, when they cease to make a family, the child finds himself unable to understand his own being. This highlights a common refrain of children of divorce – that they would rather have lost a parent to death than their family to divorce. For the death of a parent (except in the case of suicide) does not happen as the result of a deliberate act, and thus the child does not experience it as direct threat to his own being. Only when the parent directly acts *against* the relationship that constitutes the child – undoing the marriage and thus the family – does the child experience the attack on his being. For the child, being begins in love. When love becomes hatred, animosity, coldness, and finally *non-existent*, then the child's sufferings become profound.

For Root, the “good divorce” is based on the premise that happy parents make happy children. But the point of marriage is *not* to make children happy, he counters. It is to create “ontological security,” to ensure, that is, that a child knows who he is and where he has come from. This security comes from a shared environment, involving rituals that enable the child to come to know himself in and through the relations of the family.

Having discussed the ontological impact of divorce, in his final chapter Root gives concrete examples of the kinds of help that the church can give to children of divorce. The church offers not a program, but “its very life, its community of fellow sufferers” (p. 122). The church offers to the child new and certain bonds on which the child can rely. “Love” makes this community, the new “family” that Root believes the church can be for the child. But the church does not create community through the love of its members (as in the “Love Family”). Rather, it is the love of *an Other*, the one who made them, redeems them, and calls them to himself, that makes the church. What the church does is radiate this love, the love that they have received.

Key to the church's ministry to children of divorce is providing opportunities for the child of divorce just to "be" in relation with others. Root, who is himself a professor of youth ministry, emphasizes the need for open time and space in the midst of planned outings and opportunities, since it is in these unstructured moments that the child of divorce has the chance to recover a sense of his self through the tenderness of others. "Being with others provides us our being because to be, to discover ourselves as real, we must experience ourselves through the gaze of others" (p. 124). In the church the child can encounter the relation that constitutes him, that grounds him in reality. He finds a center; he discovers the ground beneath his feet.

We may wonder, however: will congregations that are come to be through choice (the choices to be in this congregation rather than that congregation, to embrace this creed rather than that one) finally support a sense of the family as rooted in being? Can Americans, who value mobility over place, action over contemplation – as evidenced in the abundance of "programs" at many churches – provide opportunities for children just to "be"? Root candidly admits that this is not the "normal" focus for most Protestant churches. But it is certainly a worthwhile – indeed, a necessary – goal.

Reading Root, with his compelling sense that the child of divorce continues to need a *home* – where he can simply "*be*" and *discover himself through the love of others* – I could not help recalling the "ache" of Gregory Thomas, who, after the rootlessness of her youth, spent a large chunk of her adulthood remodeling (and then losing) her dream home, the perfect little nest for her and her babies. Elizabeth Marquardt also records the intense desire of the children of divorce to create a safe haven for their own children – something they have not had themselves.

But making a home for one's own children is an uphill climb for children of divorce. As Wallerstein convincingly shows, they have few resources on which to draw for the creation of a stable marriage for themselves. The journey that can be done only perilously in adulthood is made more surely in the *intact family* as the child comes to be who he is amidst the love of mother and father.

If the being of the child is served best by *marriage*, then it is imperative that in our quest to help children of divorce we discover *what marriage is*. Marriage, it is true, begins in the consent of the spouses – and so it hinges on human freedom and choice. But in marriage human choice touches something beyond itself. By receiving a child, a man and a woman find themselves – quite unexpectedly, perhaps – at the origin of a new person, who will first discover his place in the cosmos, the meaning of his very self, in the welcoming embrace of these two people. If we take the experience of children seriously, are we not led, somehow, to the threshold of the *sacramental*, to the idea that the marital union itself ought to signify and make present a *love that does not end*? And, at the same time, doesn't this reality, finally, correspond most adequately to *who we really are* as expressed in the longings of the children of divorce?

We need something far better than a good divorce. We need to discover what it is to be "in relation,"

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to live *being as gift*. As Root says, “In the logic of a relational *imago Dei* we find our freedom, not away from others, but in giving ourselves to others” (p. 93). Could this freedom be experienced even in the midst of the intolerable marriage? It is a far cry from “expressive divorce.” But it is what the reality of the child cries out for.

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