

Such sweet sorrow rejuvenates

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS quite astounded at the response I had to the column I wrote a few weeks ago on marriage and relationships (Love has endings, not failures, Review, August 9-10). I'm rarely swamped with so many letters on any one issue and I'd like to share a few of the views I received.

To recap, I had argued that we are not failures when our relationships end; that the notion of "Happy Ever After" with one partner is outmoded given the chronic divorce rate; and that we should stop berating ourselves and our partners for what is often just a natural ending of love.

I wrote: "Therapy rooms are full of people feeling dreadful shame at their failed relationships rather than paying homage to the half-full glass -- that it lasted an amazing few years or decades, full of intensity, passion, pain, children, sex, love and lots of important lessons.

"It is a triumph in today's troubled and stress-filled world to master the compromise necessary to be with another human being for any length of time. "We don't say we had a failed car when it finally gives up the ghost, or a failed carton of milk when it passes its use-by date. We don't say someone had a failed life because they died. And equally, there are no failures in love, only endings."

There were many readers who appreciated my words, while others described them as unchristian, dilettantish or irresponsible. One moving letter came from a man named Peter who wrote: "I am currently going through the ending of my marriage. Our lives have, over time, headed in different directions, so much so that my wife felt she needed to move on without me. This decision has been extremely hard for me to deal with ... Your article made me question my emotions and forced me to look at things differently. We were married for 14 years and the first 12 years were fantastic. We have three beautiful children, who adore the both of us. I believe my wife is one of those special people who only come along every now and then. We are still friends.

"After reading your article, I focused on the many positives of our relationship and I thanked my wife for those. I will attempt to focus on the positives of my new life. I'm sure there are plenty, I just need to look harder. If I apply your philosophy, I should come out of this less scarred than if I let bitterness and self pity take hold."

Meanwhile, Tracy wrote: "How wonderful to find your article this weekend. I have lived outside the box and had six relationships.

After reading your article I've decided to look back on them and remember all the positives I gained from those incredibly wide-ranging experiences.

"I'm nearly 43 and still single but my path so far has been broad. It is time to celebrate rather than condemn myself for not having found the perfect relationship that would last forever! Thank you for being so accepting."

Roslyn wrote: "I am an author, educator and therapist. Your column made me realise that I've been feeling superior, as I've been happily married for 20 years with two children. I secretly looked down on other relationship therapists who had

been divorced. If they can't get their own life together how can they assist other people?

"I'll be working on this. Thank you."

Bianca wrote: "I agree people who move on from unhappy relationships, either by choice or not, will ultimately learn something positive from the experience.

"It opens us up to a whole new set of adventures which can make life full of angst, but at least never tired or dull.

"Maybe our darling children will grow up accepting the changes that people have to make as they grow, and these archaic views about relationships will shift."

Meanwhile, there were my critics: "Your article crystallised all that is uncommitted, dilettantish and wind-blown in the psyche of our culture. Persistence, strong will, commitment, acceptance appear passe. Much has been lost," complained Bob, who is worried about the effects of divorce on children.

Others were more spiritually disturbed: "In Buddhism [and] Judaic mystical understanding, man and wife are seen as mutual doorways to the Divine.

"Serial and multiple relationships, although capable of being based on love and understanding, are unlikely even to approach this [for often] as soon as things get difficult, the immediate response of each party is to disengage, seeking to blame the other for their own pain and distress," wrote Ralph.

Paul wrote: "Glorifying a life of multiple partners, at the expense of valuing loyalty and perseverance, unfortunately, is a mark of this age. To master the compromise necessary to be with another human being is not impossible."

The debate continues, heated and passionate. There is no right answer. But as long as we are beginning to discuss these things openly and not pretend that all marriages last forever, and that people who can't do "Happy Ever After" are failures, then we're at least on the right track.

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