

Chapter 3 – Gondola Grand

“In retrospect, I have confessed that I was not a good steward – but joined the ranks of the “DINKS” want-to-be. Still, finances (or problems) did not always coincide with our differences; but it was more about control and commitment”

Learning of a divorce as both a participant and a concerned party has invoked the repeated question, “Why?” Responding to the question (as a participant) has not been easy for me because, as I have already conveyed in large part, the divorce was **not** justified in my mind. Words such as commitment, covenant, and caring have been used frequently as the indicators of what marriage is or should be. In the mystic relationship or correlation between what the public wants and the courts offer, divorce has simply been made easier to process—though without much if any solace for the family that invariably suffers.

Among the chief causes of divorce is money or finances. The pressures of debt and the obligations of the family finances are clearly causes for problems; but I do accept that such was, in our case, the cause or justification for divorce. On the contrary, divorce (as a process) ushered us into the highest debt status due to the withdrawal of large sums from a line-of-credit or second mortgage account. Given that my ex-wife was (or is) an accountant, the excuse of ignorance cannot be used in this transaction; but could be instead, one calculated move in the master plan of *The Mess*. In the months leading-up to her divorce she borrowed (or withdrew) in excess of ten thousand dollars from these accounts and, besides the expenses of living at large and of attorney retainers, never accounted for the withdrawals. What’s worse is that following the divorce, I was charged with the liability for much of this debt.

“Gondola Grand” is largely about money and finances during the history of our marriage; but there will be some related commentary to discount the possibility of finances (or financial problems) being the cause for, but instead, the result (or an outcome) of the divorce. What is certain is that the relatively large degree of debt that she accumulated for the divorce was ultimately (and purposely) levied on me as part of the divorce judgment.

This amount, totaling over \$11,000 in final figures would be only a portion of the monetary “mess” that oozed out of the judgment and post-divorce proceedings. Besides this financing was child support, a joint-loan on a car, the individual mortgage, life insurance policies, health insurance for the children to include uninsured medical costs, and the unexpected tax liability resulting from an M-6 to an S-1 status on the W-4. Before addressing each and all of these items in full measure however, I began a brief detour down the road of depression.

Besides the mounting (and insurmountable) financial problems, the basic loss of my family was devastating for me. If I had to deal with the personal loss (and not financial loss), it was too much. During the months prior to and years following divorce, I was (and continue to be) affected in an adverse way.

To repeat the conclusion from the book entitled *Diffusing the High-Conflict Marriage*, “...**indeed everyone suffers in a divorce.**”

Looking back, and knowing or realizing my emotional health at the time, I should have gotten more help or counseling. I did enroll in the basic post-divorce counseling, as required, and even followed with the secondary course that lasted a period of months—but it was just not enough. I felt as close to death as I probably ever have. **I was desperate to be sure.**

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In such a frame of mind or emotion, I prodded-on—perhaps relying on the prayers of family and friends who had supported me during the process and remained concerned consequently. I cannot say enough about such support during the time except that, in general, it could have meant the difference between life and death in this world. Months of sleepless nights and incessant conversation (with myself) was immensely fatiguing. These late night and early conversations were a recurring review of the case and conditions that never came to terms with any answers for the question, “why?” On the basic

understanding of cause-and-effect, I could tell myself that she was wrong and that the children would surely suffer. But maybe I was to suffer for them.

In the book, *Second Chances*, Wallerstein and Balkelee devote an entire chapter to the subject (or assessment) of “winners and losers” of divorce; and with the study spanning over ten years (at the time), the assessment was conducted periodically. On the matter of “the decision” of divorce, they write:

In families with children, divorce is rarely a mutual decision. One person wants out while the other person goes along reluctantly or opposes it moderately or vigorously. In our study, 65 percent of the women and 35 percent of the men actively sought to end the marriage in the face of opposition. Only one couple decided to divorce by truly mutual agreement.

Thus, while everyone in the family suffers (post-divorce), the intention may be that that only one will or will not ultimately suffer.

In my experience—that is approaching a decade of this date—I can attest that everyone has suffered; but also, as may be evident from above, that one had bought into the notion of post-marriage happiness. As one fellow put it so wryly, “hey, if she isn’t happy; that’s a personal problem”—to suggest or affirm that happiness is not the complete responsibility of another. As I write this very paragraph, she is **not** happy and I wonder if she will ever be.

So she attempted to buy her happiness and she purposely made me pay for it one way and another. Finances can be a very real problem in marriage and after marriage. For me, this change meant: moving in with family while the house was signed-over to her in a Quit Deed; incurring the debt already mentioned while signing the paid-off vehicle to her; not yet even considering the monumental tax liability waiting to explode the following April. Yes, I was dumb, but sometimes the spouse (and parent) who opposes the divorce, will do so with mercy too.

Long before my divorce, I had heard in passing of the “Deadbeat Dad”; the ex-husband and/or father who has refused or shirked his responsibility for alimony or child support. I did not really consider the designation; I just simply went-on without an opinion one way or the other. If I was forced to draw an

opinion or come to some conclusion, it would have been that they deserve what they get whether it is isolation from their family or incarceration for arrears. I never considered the possibility that something deeper was at stake; and that they might have a solid, legitimate cause for not paying—or being able to pay. In *Fatherless America*, Blankenhorn devotes much commentary on the subject (or designation). He makes the following distinction:

The Deadbeat Dad has emerged as our principal cultural model for ex-fathers, for obviously failed fathers. As a cultural category, the Deadbeat Dad has become our primary symbol of the growing failure of fatherhood in our society...Consequently, we vilify him, we threaten him – we demand that he pay – largely because he so clearly embodies the contemporary collapse of good-enough fatherhood.

Yet the content of our demand illustrates both the depth of our pessimism and the lowering of our standards. We do not ask this guy to be a father. That would be utopian, impossible. We ask him to send a check. Instead of demanding what is owed, we demand money.

Like divorce, **child support enforcement is big business**. Since the establishment of a federal office in the 1970's, child enforcement has become nationalized with federal and state officials. James Johnston, writer for shared-parenting magazine, *The Liberator*, describes this nationally-based policy as the brainchild of Dr. Robert Williams. From his 2007 article, "Dr. Robert Williams and his 'income-shared' child support model", Mr. Johnson writes that:

Like divorce however, the Child Support Enforcement is big business...

Deemed the "father" of the current system, Williams "established himself as a chief consultant to the agency responsible for child support policy, and successfully manipulated his personal approach to the subject into nation-wide laws, and a huge personal fortune."

He concludes with a rather cynical undertone:

Thanks to this crazy social experiment we have increased juvenile suicide, teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, and teenage drug abuse. All of these ills share (most of the time) a common variable: **an absent parent...**thanks, Bob.

One of my favorite politicians (a medical doctor) says: **“anything the government subsidizes – you get more of it...”** Once again, an institution—not so far from “The League” already described—has joined forces to solve the marital problems of families. I will *shelve* this matter for now, but will return again as necessary in describing the lucrative divorce industry.

I have to stop or interrupt again for clarification at this time. My attention to child support and, in the bigger issue, the “Grand” or finances of divorce and its aftermath, is not in anyway to minimize the importance of financially supporting your family. To be insensitive to their (children and family) financial needs would be to **not** care...to **not** love them...and to **not** be what they deserve from a parent and care-taker. **My grief is not with the responsibility of this piece of parenting, but is with a system by which the regulating community has profited while divorce and its devastation has proliferated;** and of course, with the personal experience that my role has been little more than that of a debtor when what I want to be—and have always wanted to be—is a dad.

From the beginning of our marriage, the “Grand” or finances were periodically an issue and sometimes more. When we married, I learned that she had several thousand dollars of credit card debt—which we promptly paid off. During the fourteen years of marriage, I was laid-off a couple of times—and this too created some problems. But with these issues and problems, we seemed to work together and, from such concerns, could have grown or matured—though such is sometimes a matter of perspective and post-assessment.

During the longest period of unemployment that lasted about six months, we received an outpouring of help from our church and from others in the community. An older semi-retired couple let us live in their house for several months, while the church brought us a windfall of groceries. Having two children at the time, the blessings were many—and this alone would remind me of that love can glow (and grow) when conditions are sometimes dark and dismal. Sometimes the “dark and dismal” can result for good intentions.

Our first purchase of property was conceptually a good idea. Living in Savannah, we bought an old house that was a fixer-upper. Set on a square in a community called Ardsley Park, it was pristine and vintage. Shortly after we moved in, we learned that a movie had been filmed next door; and that Winona Ryder had shimmied-down a chalice to slip away in a VW Van. For anyone who knows Savannah, such trivia was nothing spectacular; but for us, the house was....

On the idea that we could re-model with some real sweat-equity, we embarked on the adventure of do-it-yourself. The trouble however, was that we were somewhat unskilled—and probably too young and excited to know it. *Where there is will, there is way*; better to do-it-yourself than pay; and so we did.

Less than a year later, we were expecting our first child, and at roughly the same time, she lost her job. With this set of circumstances, she moved back to Florida and I stayed-on to get the house in final shape for sell. It was never my intention to ready-the-house in such a short time period; but then, I did not anticipate the loss of job and the magnitude and difficulty of selling the house. In short, we probably made a bad decision for which we would pay.

As hindsight is so often right, the experience was altogether **not** a good one. The house was too much for us; and though the concept seemed reasonable, it was **not** well planned or assessed. During this time, my stewardship as far as tithing had dwindled and, quite frankly, I was becoming a DINK (Duel-Income-No-Children) want-to-be—with some drive to *keep-up with the Jones*. The house was nice, but the purchase was not a good one. I never regretted moving from Florida and taking the charm and beauty of the Low Country, but I have often regretted purchasing that house.

What I was also not aware of is that, in the mind or heart of my wife, all roads ended at the state line (of Florida); or more specifically, she was a dyed-in-the-wool home-body who truly had not wanted to leave Jacksonville. Not once but twice, I made attempts to move north—all the way to Georgia; and both times, she

...in the mind or heart of my wife, all roads ended at the state line...

would go back against the flow of the St. Johns River. To clarify the saying, “nobody’s happy if momma isn’t happy”, the corrected saying in my experience is: “she isn’t happy if momma isn’t happy.” Yes, she was still attached to her mother and could not let go in spite of the fact that she despised some of her mother’s ways.

All those years in living with an addiction (the father) has got to either *make-you or break-you*; the addiction, the absence, and the abuse must take a toll on anyone and anything related to people, to families and children. In some counseling and correlated reading, I have come to believe that survival seems to be largely about either living around it or, to the extreme, getting rid of it. For this family, they somehow lived around it. With the uncertainty of the second parent the first (parent) must take *command and control* for the survival of the family. This condition can be applied to a team, an organization: **when the leader does not lead, someone must....**

And so she did and, working full time and parenting the rest of the time, she made a way to survive. Yes, she had help from the church—as did we—but she **had** to do it without him. With such a decision or lifestyle, how is the failed parent or otherwise addicted, absent and abusive treated? I don’t know altogether because I was not there and I have never been there; but what I do know is that she took control and would not let go. She took control of him, she took control of them, and she took control of the “second him” too (or the second husband).

When the “second him” stopped drinking, he stopped working too—but she did not seem to mind, as she kept working as always. When the children (now mostly adults) murmured criticism about this “second him” not working and such, she was quick to protect and defend him—which may have been true of the “first him” too (or first, biological father). When the “second him” was so divisive by criticizing the good brother-in-law among others, she did not seem to mind; but when he decided to evoke some semblance of authority on a rare occasion, she did much more than mind. Yes, on the rare occasion, when he seemed to be morphing into a man, her tolerance met its match. Once

command and control was taken as the role, it would not relent to him—whoever the “him” happens to be.

Command and control can sometimes be subtle: it can wear a hat of humility over a helmet of honed hardness; it can greet with a smile and shake on the one hand; but hold a death-grip with grinding and seething underneath it; and it can use self-loathing and pity as the means to form the made-guilty. These methods must have been learned by her, and I’m convinced, by at least one of them too (the children, now mostly adults).

Finances (or problems) did not always coincide with our differences; but it was more about control and commitment. Control could potentially operate in the subtle form, but if that didn’t work, than more overt outpourings were the course. To move back to Florida the first time was acceptable: she was jobless and expecting our first child, and I thought the move back as beneficial to her and to us; **but the second and third time were too much.** For her, this continued practice was about *command and control*—about carrying-out the time-honored tradition for the survival of the family. Taking an adage of the time-honored tradition with attention to the locality, I guess it’s true that *the orange falls close to the tree.*

A “Gondola” is not really a boat or other transport vehicle. My inserted use of the word is to represent something big—something very big—which comes from a childhood account where a big nose was nicknamed a gondola. The “Grand” or finances were an issue and sometimes more; but the post-marriage issues were a gondola...or very big. *Command and control* was the apparent cause however; and the finances were simply the effect and result. This control was manifest in two returns (or flights) to Florida where even following the second, she returned to our home in Georgia ostensibly to *patch things up*, again.

I do not think that *command and control* was alone as the probable cause for a few flights , but was joined by fear. Maybe you can imagine the dread of daddy’s return home, but I cannot. Somewhere in this arrangement, fear must have lurked along side of *command and control*. Maybe the fear was the sense

of being out-of-control or losing control; I don't know altogether, but believe that fear was near...as was control.

Fear is not something that I know beyond my own experience; in other words, I am not educated in the science or subject of fear. I have read and observed that fear can render a powerful force: it can turn a small-framed female into a *force-de-tour*, and it can render the best—with the natural instinct to protect and defend—or the worst in us. Fear and control can do much for us and it can do much to us...and to them too.

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