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Lifestyle

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By Gail Sheehy

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How shocked we are when a silver-haired couple that has soldiered through three or four decades of marriage calls it quits. Al and Tipper Gore were different, we believed, never forgetting "the Kiss" at the Democratic Convention. When the silver frame around their 40-year romance shattered, we were shaken. "If it could happen to them ..."

The gray divorce shouldn't surprise us. It's been a growing phenomenon over the past 10 years. Even archconservatives who are the strongest advocates of family values have made personal exceptions. Karl Rove, the mastermind behind George W. Bush's presidency, shed his wife of 23 years last December. (He did not address rumors of an affair.) The self-appointed leader of the GOP, Newt Gingrich, has racked up two divorces, the second at age 56. He initiated the first when his wife was in a hospital bed. The second split was involuntary on his part. His wife of 18 years, Marianne, decided she had had enough of his infidelity. She was angry enough to smash his presidential hopes as well as their union.

Money and marriage are the bedrock sources from which we expect to extract our happiness. But romantic love, even if cushioned by material comforts, becomes harder and harder to sustain if not anchored by a much deeper attachment. My guess is that marriages that fall apart later in life suffer from a spiritual vacancy or the lack of a shared passion. If we don't become soulmates, we may end up as merely roommates.

The Gores' White House years were all about Al. When Tipper was liberated from the thankless role of second lady, she seemed determined to carve out her own identity. But her career path as an art photographer meandered. Meanwhile, Al channeled his disappointment at being denied the 2000 election by throwing himself into campaigning against global warming -- one of the great moral challenges of our time. He was assaulted by corporate-funded conservatives who denied the reality of imminent ecological disaster.

Entering their 60s, the couple appeared to share no common enterprise. I take them at their word that they grew apart. Their example may help to further loosen Americans' psychological restraints against the possibility of a late divorce: I can do it too. I don't have to stick it out, and I wouldn't be seen as a bad person.

In contrast, partners who share a larger sense of purpose generally grow closer as they age. They do good works together. Or they grow greedy and do bad works together. (Witness the inseparable bond between Bernie and Ruth Madoff. She worked happily in the office right next to his while he was running his \$50 billion Ponzi scheme -- until they were separated by his 150-year lease on a government residence.)

The lengthened life cycle is another significant engine driving the wheels of divorce. Back in the days when the tired workadaddy walked away with the gold watch at 65, he and the missus were content to take a cruise or two and rest on their nest egg, waiting to die. Today, Boomers reject being labeled elderly in their 60s. The majority of people in their 50s believe they won't be old until 75, and the vast antiaging industry promotes that expectation. Perhaps as a result, many spouses in high-conflict or alcoholic marriages who once would have hung on until the bitter end are more likely to break free.

I've lost count of the times I have heard people say, "If I have 20 or 30 good years ahead of me, I don't want to live them inside an empty marriage." But while the restlessness of the aging male is an old story, the boldness of older wives is a decidedly new one. According to a 2004 survey conducted by AARP the Magazine, two thirds of divorces are now initiated by the wife. Though divorce statistics like these can be unreliable, anecdotes I have gathered seem to bear out the pattern.

"There is no valor in staying in a long bad marriage," the psychotherapist Helen Kornblum tells her clients. She herself was a few years shy of 70 when she filed for divorce, worn down by living inside a shell. She married in the prefeminist dark ages, and her later professional success caused a slow burn of animosity in her husband. He'd say, "I want the old you back." And once he retired, he resented her growing friendships with other women. He began appropriating her interests. She remembers him saying bitterly, "You know how to live."

Though the divorce was brutal -- her husband sent appraisers to her house to count her every possession, spoon by spoon, only to haul her back to court less than 24 hours after their settlement -- Kornblum says she would do it again in a heartbeat. She finds single life exhilarating.

Seasoned men seldom ask for a divorce unless they have a potential replacement in the wings. But women who seek a divorce late in life often are prompted by a small event that causes them to realize they've been living in an unsatisfying relationship for many years. The fantasy of freedom they've been carrying around for a long time is suddenly stoked, maybe by a flirtatious conversation with a man on a plane or seeing an old girlfriend thriving on her own. Here I am, she thinks, only 60 and still feeling great. I have a chance for real love, or revived sex, or enjoying the opportunity to explore a new life on my own.

That said, the process of divorcing is never enjoyable. It is surprising, therefore, to hear a discarded spouse come to see the rupture, in retrospect, as a gift. One friend of mine has a name for his particular type of failed marriage: the Madoff. "I invested everything I had and got nothing back," he says with a laugh. He was a good-looking 52-year-old computer programmer who had just completed his master's degree when he remarried up. He moved into the world of a well-educated woman from a distinguished Philadelphia family. In his version of their marriage, he gave all his heart and money to fix whatever was broken in her life.

A decade after their marriage, things began to fall apart when she came into a substantial inheritance. By then, he was 62 and she was 65. The windfall put pressure on their relationship, and their arguments grew heated, even over such trivial matters as landscaping choices. After one particularly dramatic blowout, she called 911 and he landed in jail.

Reflecting on the episode, he realized he had lost his sense of self in the course of the marriage. He thought he would never come out of the devastation. But seven months later, when we met on a boat trip, he was buoyant. "She did me a favor," he said. "I've moved back to my hometown, where I have family and hundreds of people who know me, and I'm happier than I've been in years."

I expressed more than surprise. How did he transform his anger so quickly? He acknowledged that for the first two months, he was a basket case. He lived with his best friend's family for several weeks and wore them out with his neediness. Desperate for a safe harbor, he looked up his first wife. By the third month, however, he had moved back to his hometown

and was talking to his sibling and a therapist. "My first forward step was to forgive myself. I hated to go home with no one waiting for me, but gradually I began to accept the reality. The third step -- the big one -- was when I could forgive my wife for the violence she had done to me that night."

So can divorce be good for you? Divorce is always destructive to some degree -- both to parents and their children -- though some of them are less damaging than others. In 1994, when the psychologist Constance Ahrons published her famous book, *The Good Divorce*, she wasn't prepared for the backlash that she received from readers. Many TV interviewers lit into her, assuming she was promoting divorce.

Ahrons's own first divorce occurred in 1967, when it had to be somebody's fault and Mom always kept the children. She knew about the bad divorce. It took years for her and her husband to stanch their anger. But at 49, she initiated her second divorce. The difference was night and day. By then, many women worked and earned their own income, and the no-fault divorce was well established. That trend has only multiplied worldwide. "In China, the divorce rates in the cities have skyrocketed in recent years," Ahrons says. "Women there have told me that now that they have good jobs, they no longer need to accept the bad behavior of their husbands."

That personal discovery prompted Ahrons to research the defining features of a good divorce. After interviewing 98 pairs of ex-spouses, she came to the conclusion that it doesn't destroy children's family bonds and relationships.

But Judith Wallerstein, a psychologist and coauthor of the influential 2000 book *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*, has argued that divorce's damage to children may not appear for a decade or more; when the adult children of divorce attempt to bond with their own partners, past experience creates an inner struggle.

In response, Ahrons went back to her original research panel to interview their now adult children. Surprisingly, three fourths of them thought their parents' divorces were a good idea and that both parents and children were better off than if they'd stayed together. In her follow-up book, 2004's *We're Still Family*, Ahrons concludes that it's not the quantity of time given to co-parenting by a mother and father now living in separate households, it's the reliability, consistency, and genuine interest in their children's lives that matter most.

An amicable gray divorce may in turn make adult children more confident that they too can thrive after leaving an unsatisfactory marriage. One week after Al and Tipper Gore let it be known that their partnership of 40 years was being dissolved, it was reported that their eldest child, Karenna Gore Schiff, and her husband had been separated for several months. Furthermore, middle daughter Kristin Gore filed for divorce the year before. The timing of these breakups suggests that the women may have reinforced each other's decisions.

In any case, young children of graying parents are much savvier these days about arguing their own case. In this summer's film *The Kids Are All Right*, the teenage son sizes up the dissension between his middle-aged lesbian parents. He delivers the kicker line: "I don't think you guys should break up. You're too old."

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