

Governor Sanford – Give Marital Mediation a Try!

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Like many of you other mediators out there, I am always very pained to read accounts of our celebrity brethren who are struggling with their marriages. The media is insistent. The klieg lights focused on these people in distress are glaring. They are experiencing their own personal marital problems, but under a microscope of public view. The problems they face are identical to those of my mediation clients. The big issues are infidelity, money (too much or too little of it), perceptions of lack of contribution, boredom, lack of respect, spending no time together, and issues raised by difficulties with children or in-law families. They are all textbook issues, and they appear repeatedly, often ending in divorce.

Many of my law clients who are divorced and in second (or third) marriages tell me, "If I only knew then what I know now...my first marriage could have worked out." Sometimes it takes one or two "training marriages" to achieve the personal maturity and insight that permits a person to live with another for an extended time. Is marriage supposed to be forever? Is that concept reasonable? Ask a couple with a decent marriage of upwards of 30 years if they would trade their well-worn marriage for a new one. Most people would say they would not. The benefits of being with someone and having love grow, wane, and grow again far outweigh that new love, which will just become old with time. Maybe humans are monogamous but with a tendency towards sexual pleasure seeking which can strongly pull a good marriage off its tracks.

Governor Sanford's confusion and emotional pain were clearly evident in his press conference in South Carolina on June 24 upon his return from Argentina. My feelings towards him are those of pure sympathy. I view Governor Sanford as a very typical married person who is facing a chasm in his marriage and a huge decision on his life path. Will he return to his marriage, or will he stay on the side of the abyss with his Argentinian paramour? Will he choose to go off into the sunset with his "soul-mate" – a woman who not only looks very like his attractive and good wife, Jenny, but, in a few years, will *be* identical to her, because he will simply have traded in one marriage with a very good person for another marriage with a good person?

Marriage is marriage. We, as humans, are really all the same. It's what you do with your marriage and *in* marriage (and in your own life) that's the important thing, not so much who you marry.

One thing that people in affairs must do if they are to continue in their marriage is to give up the affair completely while they are working on their marriage. I'm a divorce lawyer and divorce

mediator (not a psychotherapist) and even I know that. Sex is a drug, and Governor Sanford is under its influence. If he wishes to work on his marriage, he will stop the affair, will work on ending all thoughts of the affair, and will take all steps necessary to reconnect with his wife and his marriage.

Struggling couples can find assistance in working out marital problems in many places. There are books, seminars, family advice, marital counseling, and pastoral counseling. Individual psychotherapy can also help. These are all very good tools in the marital toolbox. The Governor and his wife have had counseling, although we do not know the nature of this counseling. Perhaps the Sanfords need to try something else. Sometimes a couple has to try many things at different times to find out what works for them.

I have been practicing Marital Mediation (also known as Mediation to Stay Married) for some time now. This work came out of my experience as a mediator and lawyer. I am not a psychotherapist or couples' counselor – I do not have the training of a mental health professional, although I respect the skills and background of those professionals. My approach, skills, experience, and training are different from that of a marital counselor or mental health professional. It leads me to deal with couples with marital problems in a different way.

A Marital Mediator is generally an experienced divorce mediator or divorce lawyer, who is expert in the financial impact of the dissolution of a marriage. Therefore, in Marital Mediation, the couple can address, discuss and get feedback from the mediator regarding the financial issues that often trouble a marriage.

When I discovered that people were seeking me out to talk about their marriage, I found that as a neutral mediator, I could interact with them and provide assistance. I could help the couple “normalize” their feelings and their views on their marriage by sharing my experiences in dealing with other marriages, some of which have ended in divorce. Although I sometimes write agreements for my Marital Mediation clients, often I do not. As a mediator, I do not represent either of them, but help both of them to find solutions to the things that are bothering them.

I have been finding out in the course of doing this work that Marital Mediation is surprisingly effective for struggling couples. Short-term and practical, Marital Mediation works for people who are unwilling or uncomfortable with marriage counselors or therapists. It focuses on coming up with practical solutions that help a couple move to the next phase of their marriage rather than delving deeply into root issues.

Marital Mediation is limited in scope and does not aim to solve *all* marital problems. Sometimes that unrealistic expectation dooms marital counseling or just plain “working on your marriage” to failure. Marital Mediation stays with the presenting issues – money, contributions to the marriage, children, infidelity.

As a Marital Mediator, I help troubled couples by being a neutral third party, by being present for them as they speak, by providing reactions to what they say, and by helping them identify

issues and find solutions that work for them. A Marital Mediator can be a truth-sayer and can identify issues that the couple is not seeing. And because the background of the Marital Mediator is different than that of the mental health professional, the nature of the feedback given to the client is different.

The Marital Mediator can help the couple to overcome the view that their relationship is fatally damaged and lead them to the next step of continuing the marriage as a living, breathing entity. And often Marital Mediation can be a complement to some of the more traditional “tools” of maintaining and improving marriages. (Often the couple is seeing a couples’ counselor at the same time I am meeting with them as a Marital Mediator. Sometimes they will choose to embark on couples counseling later.)

For Marital Mediation to work (as in couples’ counseling), both parties to the marriage must truly wish to continue their marriage. They have to want to address some of their marital problems in order to go forward. This is a prerequisite. As difficult as it would have been for Governor Sanford, if he wanted to commit to his marriage, he should have said goodbye to his paramour in an email (or better yet, a snail-mail letter), rather than traveling to Argentina last month. Working on your marriage means going cold turkey on any extra-marital affairs.

We like to look up to our politicians and celebrities as leaders and teachers. When they rise to that level in their personal lives (as our new president Obama and his wife have done), they have tremendous power to model good behavior and influence an entire culture. I hope you, Governor Sanford and your wife, will rise to that level and build upon your marital struggles for your own good, and for the good of society.

So, Governor Sanford, I encourage you and your wife to give Marital Mediation a try. If you contact me, I will locate a marital mediator in your area for you to work with.

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Laurie Israel is a lawyer/mediator who helps clients resolve their disputes with a high level of dignity, integrity and creativity. Laurie works in the areas of collaborative divorce, divorce mediation, divorce negotiation, and prenuptial agreements. She also helps people who wish to stay married through providing marital mediation (“Mediation to Stay Married”) and negotiation of postnuptial agreements.

She is on the board of the Massachusetts Collaborative Law Council and the Massachusetts Council on Family Mediation. You can find out more about her work and read her articles on her websites: www.laurieisrael.com and www.mediationtostaymarried.com.

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