

KILROY CAFÉ

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The Fallacy of “Commitment”

Young people often mistake imprisonment for commitment. Commitment isn't real if it is enforced by outside chains.

By GLENN CAMPBELL

On the subject of marriage, a correspondent writes:

“Once someone marries, there is a high cost for divorce. Accordingly, one is willing to work harder to solve problems resulting in a better marriage via effort.”

This is a big, fat fallacy, perhaps the most common one cited when young people get married or bind themselves to any extended contract. It's the equivalent of saying “I don't trust myself to do the right thing unless I am forced to.”

If this were true, then we would always choose prison over freedom. Prison forces us into a single path, and, yes, we are going to have to make the most of that path, but that's still not better than having many paths available.

Indeed, there are many happily married people who have made their relationships work. The question is whether it's the hard-to-get-out-of element that makes it happen or something else?

Do you make your life better by locking yourself into a certain path and throwing away the key? Does lack of choice improve your life or make it worse?

The issue here is free will. Are you staying with your partner because they are the best one for you, because you are

constantly testing the relationship and proving yourselves to each other every day, or are you staying together merely because the cost of breaking up is too high? In the first case, you are staying together freely; in the second, you are not free at all. You can't say for sure that your choice is best when you don't have a realistic option of choosing another.

Locking yourself up with someone is not the recipe for vibrancy, creativity or motivation. Instead, it's a plan for entrenchment. Battle lines will be drawn, and they won't budge for years. You'll learn to survive by recognizing fragile boundaries and never stepping over them. Over time, you inevitably become mutual enablers, carefully avoiding and thereby implicitly reinforcing each others' weaknesses and sensitivities.

The essence of any relationship is negotiation. Each partner is always struggling to get what they want from the other, and love alone can't solve anything. It would be nice to think you could talk every problem out, but with entrenched and emotionally driven behaviors (which we are all composed of) words just don't work. To get what you want, you also have to have an element of power at your disposal, including the ability to withdraw at will.

Everyone has “issues”. Everyone has problems integrating themselves with the outside world, and these things are bound to interfere in a relationship. Let's say your partner drinks more than you'd like him to. If you are imprisoned with him, than you have little leverage to change his behavior. You probably have to accept it as it is.

If you are not imprisoned and are

free to come and go, then you have more weapons at your disposal, including the ultimate one. You can say, “This behavior is too much for me; I have to pull away.” Then your partner will either change or he won't, and the relationship will either last or it won't.

Is it frightening to know your relationship could dissolve at any time? Darn right! But that's the cost of freedom. Nothing is really solved by neutralizing choice and forcing people to remain together. Prison doesn't resolve problems as much as it pushes them underground, where they fester for years and may eventually explode.

The theory of the correspondent is that if it is painful to withdraw, you'll have to make the relationship work, but the way you'll probably do it is by accepting a mediocre relationship that is no longer growing.

People say they are getting married to express their love and commitment to each other, but really they are doing the opposite. Once you lock yourself in, love and commitment are no longer a choice but an obligation. Yes, married couples say they love each other. They say they wouldn't want it any other way, but how can they really know? It's more of a religious belief at that point. You believe because you have to believe, because the alternative is simply too painful.

Religion works for most people, but it's not the same as free-will choice. Face it, most relationships don't last forever, and you can't make the magic last simply by taking away future discretion.

Personal growth is, by definition, unpredictable. If you are truly alive you are bound to go through many unanticipated changes, and your partner may or may not be able to follow. By making it harder to withdraw from a relationship, you simply slow down growth for both of you, not encourage it.

—G.C.

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