

Loss and Gain

John and Fiona Earle

You can be an optimist and say that 70% of first marriages succeed (i.e. end on the death of one partner), as do 60% of second marriages. Or you can be a pessimist and say that 30% of first marriages and 40% of second marriages fail.

Two sides of the same coin. Either way divorce is a shattering experience – though it may also be a release. The problems of marriage don't just go away. They may re-align themselves and may involve future partners, access to children and so on.

The two most common causes of marriage breakdown are adultery and debt; of these debt is more likely to provoke recurrent quarrels and anger.

The government has recently taken steps to make it easier for us to get into debt. Last year plans for a super casino were cancelled, but, more recently, the go-ahead has been given for sixteen new 'medium-size' casinos. In terms of 'gambling power' expressed in numbers of 'one-armed bandits', and roulette tables etc, surely this will attract more gamblers than the original 'super-casino.' No doubt successive Governments will be happy to cream off money from them too.

Loss

Some 250,000 people in the country are known to have a serious gambling problem. The amount Britons gamble on-line and in casinos has risen from £7 billion to £48 billion in the past decade (Source: *The Week* 16/2/2008). We do not know figures relating to the lottery, nor for the number of houses being possessed by mortgage-lenders, but it is too many.

Let's leave facts and figures for a moment and pass on to another topic that may well have some bearing on this.

A small group of volunteers was placed in a small dark quiet room devoid of all stimuli for 48 hours. Each person was alone. Two

slept well and were merely bored, but others came out unable to think clearly. The psychologists who conducted this experiment have continued their research and found that people with few human contacts and little control over their lives also tended to lack the ability to think through a subject clearly (and the various Big Brother TV programs clearly exploit this).

Such a person might get deeper into money problems and think of "a little flutter" as a means of escape.

The trouble is that there is only one long-term winner. Of course it is possible to win in the short-term. Imagine six or seven gamblers at a roulette table; two or three – maybe more – may bet successfully, on one evening. Even so, the total they win will probably be less than the amount the losers pay to the banker. Someone always has enough to pay the staff, run the premises etc. And of course, at roulette there is the zero (which the French call the *cagnotte* – the pool or kitty). When the ball lands on the zero the banker takes all, which gives 'the house' a small but definite edge over the long-term.

Knowing this, a sensible person will only take 'free' money to the tables. That is, money that is not already ear-marked for something else – money that can be lost without causing a commotion in the family – a loss that can be admitted to.

Do you think that all the people who play in these new casinos will have that sort of money?

Gain

The idea of plate-tectonics came into geology about 40-50 years ago. If this is unfamiliar to you, think of a land mass as something flexible, like a piece of carpet, floating on warm, black treacle. If two pieces of carpet collide then one may slip coyly under the other. Alternatively, the two carpets (land masses) may buckle upwards.

So, when the Indian plate moved north and struck the Eurasian plate, the Himalayas were formed and are now the highest mountain chain in the world. The Hindu Kush in Afghanistan, a continuation of the Himalayas, was formed in much the same way. Since mountains are formed from the earth's crust, the mountains contain all sorts of mineralssomewhere.

Before the Russian invasion (1979), subtropical fruits were one of the main sources of revenue for Afghanistan. These included mulberries and orange groves. The orchards and forests were destroyed by the Russians as they might conceal guerrilla fighters.

We wondered where the next source of income might be.

People mention tourism, but we've seen how fragile that is in Nepal. Whilst there is on-going conflict between the Maoists and the Government, most tour operators feel that they cannot put Nepal in their brochures and the Foreign Office issues regular warnings about the risks.

We wondered about mining (all those minerals!). After all emeralds and lapis lazuli are regularly found in the Hindu Kush. Just a few days ago a report in *The Times* mentioned a vast find of copper just south of Kabul and other minerals such as coal and oil were also mentioned. Alabaster (the second most important economically) is also in the mountains.

We read that the Chinese are funding the road-building, the mining and so on. The question is "who will get the jobs?" We remember a New Zealander telling us how he had visited a saw-mill in South America and found that the manager employed very well educated people – up to PhD. When questioned about this, the manager said "I must do this. The machinery is very expensive and our staff must be able to keep it running properly."

So, no doubt some of the Afghans will get some of the jobs (with attendant language problems). Yet if pollution in China is

anywhere near as bad as is reported, no doubt there will be plenty of Chinese willing to go and breathe some fresh mountain air!

All this makes it all the more important that Afghans reach the highest level that they can.

Mammals of Hertfordshire

On Saturday 5th April, Audrey Randall will be back at St John's hall, to give us another illustrated talk in aid of ASCHIANA. Following last year's very successful talk on Badgers she will this time be talking about and showing us the Mammals of Hertfordshire.

Doors will open at 6.30 for a 7.00 p.m. start to the talk. Supper will follow. A glass of wine or a soft drink will be provided.

Tickets, £7.50 for adults, £5.00 for 18 and under, are available from Denise and Brian Dilley (587113) or Fiona and John Earle (462467). Please buy them by 2nd April so we know how many to cater for.

As most of already know, Aschiana provides half a day's education and a hot meal for street children in Kabul. Every penny raised goes to the children's welfare.

