

# MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE: PART IV

## A NEW BEGINNING

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**P**revious articles in this series have focused on the divorce decision as well as the transitional problems facing those choosing to disengage from a committed relationship. All is not negative, however, and there does come a time when the details of divorce become history. Ultimately, all the aggravations pass and the pains, while always there on some level, diminish in size, scope and sensitivity. What was once an overwhelming, all consuming, 24 hour a day nightmare, fades into a set of poignant memories, musings, and misgivings.



### CAN IT BE OTHERWISE?

There is life after divorce. Though initially a shock to your security, self-confidence, and dependency needs, you can come to enjoy the freedom and opportunity to choose to engage in new situations and with new people. You can also come to see yourself in a more confident way, appreciating your capabilities and enjoying your autonomy and self-determination.

Realize that none of this comes easily or immediately and that it is important for you to see past the initial stages. Rarely do people remain stuck in them. Though we know that time doesn't heal all wounds, it does, when mixed with positive experiences and a little luck, help you to move past the rough spots.

Some divorce situations do not involve much of a fight. For whatever

complex of reasons the people involved deal with what they have to with few problems. They establish an agenda, agree on the basic terms and conditions, and move through the process reasonably. They remain friends long after they are no longer married; sometimes much better friends than when they were married. Others encounter more turbulence during their divorce experience. They push and shove their way to the finish line like bumper cars. Most of the time their post-marital relationship remains formal and stiff, filled with mutual angers and resentments.

Friend or foe, however, there comes a time when the process concludes and the ambiguities are defined. As in marriage, we must begin to accept this new reality for better for for worse, richer or poorer. It is unhealthy and wasteful to hang on to outdated dreams or historical hurts. Refusing to let go only perpetuates the pain and creates a seemingly safe but self-limiting prison from which it becomes more and more difficult to escape. While there may be additional skirmishes over money, visitation or the like, the major battles conclude and the divorce becomes finalized.

### BEGINNING ANEW

It is important to embrace a positive frame of mind as soon as possible. While not easy to achieve, it is an important goal toward which to move. This is especially true if you are the victim of divorce which leaves you flooded with failure messages and self-negating feelings.

Trauma can either be a negative or a positive motivator. We can channel our pain into constructive activities or we can drown in it. Witness the overweight people who shed many pounds as they shed or lose a spouse. While depression clearly suppresses appetites, this is not the only reason for the loss. Positive forces, operating unconsciously push people to adapt and prepare them for the future. Getting back into shape is one way of affirming oneself and taking an optimistic posture with regard to one's future.

In an analogous way, people divorcing need to work on getting their minds back into shape. Separation and divorce typically pummel one's sense of self. Though you may not be seen positively by your departing spouse, this "doesn't make you a bad person." Mostly it makes you not well suited for your ex-partner. Think about how many people in the world would be delighted by your company and desirous of being your friend or companion.

Except for a few in need of serious professional help, the majority of people have countless numbers of potential soul mates and regular mates. You have only met a handful of people relative to the population. Many of those you do know came from chance encounters based upon geography. If early in your life your family moved to a different place, the odds are you would have met different people and married someone else. While you may not have been any happier, your experiences would not have been the same as those you have encountered. Much of our lives are left to chance.

### INFLUENCING CHANCE EVENTS

In some respects life is a roulette wheel and we are the balls that are bounced around. Sometimes we land on our lucky numbers and sometimes we strike out. The key is to spin the wheel again. Important is that we not give up.



Believing we can change our fate is part of actually achieving that. Although much is relegated to chance, we actually have more opportunities to influence our fate than a roulette ball. We can move to another table or even change our game.

Once upon a time I met a woman from California who had spent the past year in Florida. She had hoped to shed the bad luck of her past by moving, but spent the year plagued by job problems, money shortages, and an out of work, out of gas boyfriend. Her previous marriages combined with her present reality led her to my office. Mine was her last stop. The next one, she said, was suicide.

I told her that was one choice she had. Another was to stay put and hope for better times. Yet another was to try another town or head back west to more familiar territory where she had friends and family. We spent about ten or twelve meetings looking at her life. We commiserated on the double zero's on which she had landed. We talked of better times and better choices. She left for home lifted and a little more lighthearted.

To make a long story short, she accidentally met the man of her dreams in a most unexpected way. He drove the city bus she took to work each morning. Her relative poverty and lack of a car enabled her to finally "strike it rich" in the romance department. They are married and still happy after four years. She sends me a birthday card each year filled with tales of happiness, contentment, and the love of a wide eyed seventeen year old. She no longer works, but often rides with him on his route. Otherwise she is happy and fulfilled in her domestic role. She hit her lucky number after too many years of not even coming close.

Her story with all its fairy taleness gives everyone hope. It says that fate can stick you badly for a long time and then reverse itself. It says there is hope for everyone. Counting oneself out prematurely is basically foolish and shortsighted. Small, seemingly minor actions can have dramatic and unanticipated effects that can change your life.

It is for this reason that killing oneself is too self-limiting to be a viable option. Rarely are things in our lives as hopeless as they might appear. Staying in the game and continuing to play increases our chances of improving our life. This is especially true if we learn from past misjudgments to make more appropriate and enhancing decisions.

### **DIRECTING THE FICKLE FINGER**

Wishing alone won't make it so. Key is your willingness to risk new situations. Ambiguity is a bummer, but there are no sure bets. It's important that you be willing to explore new territories and check them out. Equally important is that you learn from your experience. There is much information encoded into your divorce decree. Use it to avoid the pitfalls of repetition compulsion. Learn who you are as a person and what your needs are in terms of a relationship.

It is easy and quite natural to make the same mistakes over and over again. We seem to be programmed for that "Xerox like precision" I have spoken about. Much more difficult is changing direction in the mid-stream of our lives. Counseling helps us to do that by focusing us on our self-defeating ways and teaching us to look beneath the surface and beyond the moment. We can learn to compensate for our vulnerabilities and to make healthier choices. We can also learn to leave unhealthy relationships earlier and not get enmeshed in losing propositions. Two strikes and you're out is not a bad way to play the game of love. Three strikes is being too kind to others and too hurtful to yourself.

### **BEYOND THE BIG R**

Of the many lessons of divorce, the obvious is that a relationship in and of itself is not the answer. Part of your new beginning needs to direct itself to the other dimensions of your life. Although specific opportunities will be determined by the specific characteristics of your life (i.e., financial resources, parenting responsibilities, work, school, etc.) people have more degrees of freedom than they realize.

Learning that you have choices does not come easily. This is especially true if we moved quickly from parental dependencies to spousal ones. Yet freedom or at least more freedom is an inherent byproduct of divorce. Even a single working mother of two young children has some new found freedoms she can exercise. While not easy to fit in the middle of her multiple responsibilities, it is important that she make some choices on her own behalf.

Nurturing and giving to oneself is an important foundation of love which actually facilitates finding healthier, more fulfilling relationships. When we take ourselves for granted, we make it easier for others to do the same. Recently I met a person who, despite numerous

obstacles and limited time, decided to return to school to finish up her undergraduate degree. Her goal is a career change which will increase her responsibilities and remuneration. "It may take me almost forever, one class at a time, but I'm going to do it," she said to me one day. "When I was married, I always took the path of least resistance," she continued with a gaze of forceful determination, "but after going through my divorce, I know I can accomplish anything I set my mind to. I will finish this no matter what."

Such determination is necessary to accomplish almost anything in today's world. Life has become complex on every level. Despite technological innovations that have made life easier, more is demanded of us than ever before. Managing our lives requires a degree in administration, about twenty six hours a day, pounds of patience, and a large surplus of money. This is why there is so much pressure to find a partner. People need people to help shoulder the load and provide pleasurable times to justify and reward the effort. Loneliness added to the above list of struggles just does not seem fair.

Life, however you slice it, isn't fair. That's just the way it is. More unfair though is to force fit yourself into a relationship to avoid the loneliness. Nothing is ultimately more lonely than being with a person who doesn't meet your needs. Impulsively or compulsively choosing someone to help share your burdens becomes an additional burden when it doesn't work out.

As important as it may be for you to have another relationship, proceed slowly, cautiously and toward broader more fulfilling goals. In fact, due to the turbulence of emotion kicked up by the storm of divorce, it is sometimes helpful to put serious dating on the backburner for a while. Allowing the dust to settle helps to prevent rebound phenomena from adding more dirt. Focusing on yourself for a while is a healthy respite from the twisted lines of connection from which you just became untangled. Big R's seem to come at their own pace. Forcing them or prematurely choosing people to fit your dreams often times only adds to your nightmare.

### **WHY DO YOU TRUST?**

Trust is a rare commodity these days in all areas of life. The sacred halls of public trust — politicians, clergy, physicians, lawyers, police, etc., have been dirtied by too many sensational scandals. On a local level, families and com-

munities are abuzz with the latest gossip of s/he doing this and that, all of which hardly inspire trust in one's friends, family, or neighbors. Going through a divorce does little to inspire trust and confidence in the system in general, or in individuals. A person you once trusted more strongly than anyone else now stands across from you staring blankly or angrily or perhaps just looking away.

In divorce, all of the shared intimacies, private moments, and secret dreams collapse. Distrust rushes in to complete the shortcircuited connection. Nothing remains sacred nor is anything to be believed. What was once so close is now so far away. In many instances, the reasons for divorcing and the process itself tear at the foundation of your ability to trust. Feeling foolish is a common experience as is a sense of having lived a farce. Having trusted and been deceived in some way leaves a bitter aftertaste that interferes with future relationships.

Many are so scared as to run from closeness for fear of being burned by the same fire another time. Others dance around the flames but never quite get close enough to satisfy their partner's needs. Given that we arrive into adulthood with only some basic trust in tact, the trauma of divorce wrecks havoc with previously developed sensitivities.

Hopefully some trust will remain and some more will return. Early experiences with new companions will play a major role. Repeated instances of being treated hurtfully will keep bruising your trust centers. At some point the system freezes and most situations are seen as not worth the risk. Choosing safe people with whom to engage can help control this factor. Moving slowly along a continuum of intimacy helps protect from additional feelings of foolishness.

Accelerated sexual expectations have done much harm to the healthy development of relationships and to enhancing trust. It is o.k. to define your own pace even if you lose a few people along the way. It is better to have waited and lost than to lose anyway. As we were told as kids we must "Stop, Look and Listen" before crossing. Whether it be the highway of our neighborhood or our hearts we must proceed carefully. Seeing

yellow lights flashing overhead is better than seeing green ones that lead you right over the cliff. It is important that you not fall over the edge again. Each crash landing wears you down in many hurtful ways.

Similarly, if you do choose to throw caution to the wind, accept that as such. Don't delude yourself with romantic fantasies and exaggerated expectations. Whatever you do, know what you are doing. Accept your behavior and yourself without harsh judgment or self-deception. With some luck and selectivity, your trust will return. With that trust your goal is to invest it in people and situations that will not cause further erosion. Clearly, you would not risk limited financial resources in highly speculative ventures. Hopefully you can think of your trust and yourself in the same way. Proceed conservatively, assess the situation clearly, and in this way increase the probability of receiving a reasonable return upon your investment.

#### **THE MORE IMPORTANT R'S — RECOVERY AND RENEWAL**

Recovery from physical or emotional trauma is always slow. It is never as quick as we would like. We always want it now. Our patience has been reduced by living in the age of instant results and gratifications. T.V. compresses time unrealistically as do computers, space shuttles, airplanes, fax machines, and the like. Our sense of urgency adds to the weight of our load.

We can positively influence the recovery process. Important is what we believe. If you harbor a view that dooms you to an eternity of aloneness, you actually increase the likelihood of that occurring. If everything feels overwhelming and more than you can handle, it probably will be. Nothing negates like self-doubt and self-betittlement. Let go of these lines as soon as you can ride the waves of positive prophecy and allow them to carry you back to shore. Accept that at times you will feel adrift without dwelling on it. Most people recover from their pain. Why won't the same be true of you?

Beyond positive expectations lies a positive sense of oneself. Work to keep

that at a high level. Seek out positive activities and friendships to sustain and reinforce your self-esteem. Avoid toxic people and/or situations. They distract and detract from your goals.

Participate in counseling or support groups. Read books that focus on personal growth, relationship issues and wellness. Attend lectures or take classes or mini-workshops run by reputable organizations. Exercise and eat healthily. Don't let your pain justify chemical abuse of any kind. Recovery is facilitated by healthful balanced conditions. Choose them for yourself to empower your adult parts to be in the dominant position. Be aware of the silent saboteurs of your child parts. They will try to undermine your goals. Fight back constructively.

Accept that at times your child parts will temporarily win out. They are very clever and they know your secret hideouts and your vulnerabilities. For complex reasons built into the nature of our personhood they will keep pushing you toward the cliff. They will not, however push you over. Accept that you won't always be able to follow the rational advice of others much as you agree with it. Struggle toward your goals as best you can, recognizing in advance that they won't always be achieved as soon as other parts of you would like. Allow your adult parts to help you hold onto the edge when things become difficult.

In general, try to see your past relationship as an experience. There were some good times and some you would have preferred to avoid. Take from your experience what you can. Apply that to future encounters. Use what you've experienced to enhance your understanding of your style, needs, expectations, sensitivities, etc. If there were times you could have been different, look at that with an eye toward your growth and change. Work on yourself. Try to be objective. Very little is as black or as white as you make it. Reality for the most part is in the eye of the beholder. So is love. There are many beholders out there in the world. One will be there for you when all of you is ready and able to be there for yourself.

Good Luck!