

# Divorce in the Present

## Five ways to Shed the Past So You Can Live in the Present.

Five years ago, I left my wife of ten years and my five month old son in a sudden explosion of emotion that included being unfaithful in the last week of our marriage. I wanted out and I was prepared to do anything to “escape”. I had tried to bury huge amounts of anger and pain, denying its existence. It was not to be denied. In that first year of my separation, I became highly committed to understanding and healing this pain, pouring hundreds of hours into healing myself, and working only two to three days per week.

I healed a lot of emotional wounds in that first year, though many more were to follow. I wrote down those lessons and I want to share five of them in this article. Each of them was instrumental in helping me discover the joy, the confidence and the peace that came to me through learning how to live in the present, free from resentments of the past and fears of the future. Each of them allowed me to rebuild my life, build a positive, civil relationship with my ex-wife, and open myself to having a more healthy second relationship.

### **1. Time doesn't heal. Looking in the mirror heals.**

I was often afraid to look in the mirror. How could I tell? Most of my thoughts and energies were on my ex-spouse - what she did to me and was still doing to me and what a bad person she was. My anger at her was my defense. It protected me from looking in the mirror. I also noticed that I felt threatened if

she tried to be nice to me. What was I afraid I would find out if I was no longer angry with her? That I was angry at myself. That I also played a role in the breakdown of my marriage. That I somehow failed myself. That I somehow blew the chance to have all the things I really wanted - a happy family, a full-time parenting experience, a blissful retirement, and someone with whom to share life's ups and downs. I didn't want to see that an even better version of these things was possible...but just not with my ex-wife.

If I acknowledged the possibility of my own role, the pain became too much to bear. So I continued to blame him/her. My experience, however, was that only by daring to look, could I heal myself. I met separated and divorced people who were still hanging on to their anger eight years after the divorce. They didn't want to look in the mirror. They were convinced that the on-going financial or children issues were solely the fault of their ex-spouse. They were convinced that they were innocent victims of the other person's actions, whose main goal was to “do it” to them. They were implicitly assuming that their ex-spouse was actually pre-occupied with them. The thought that they might not be was scary. Could they forget us that easily?

### **2. Every criticism and judgment about your partner is also true of you.**

This one was very painful to accept. I thought my ex-spouse was critical, controlling, fearful, stubbornly proud & totally focused on her own wants at the expense of mine. Month by month, I discovered that each adjective was also true for me. Each discovery was a major step forward in my own self-acceptance. This was difficult to imagine when I was busy consoling myself with words like, “*I always tried to do my best, to worry and care for her, to be the best I could be.*” Yet I found it to be

very true for me. In fact, I believe this is true when I have any judgment about any human being. This is what psychotherapists call 'projecting'. I call it, "*All I see is me.*" In other words, as human beings, we see the world through our own eyes.

In a marital relationship, the ways this works is that we are attracted to someone who has an emotional, childhood-based wound that is similar to our own. The bliss of romantic love comes from the feeling that we have found someone who understands this wound and will heal it. For me, the proof that this is how it works comes whenever I see a person marrying someone with a similar temperament to their first spouse.

This childhood wound comes from a lack of parental love and attention in some form. We reacted to this wound as children by proactively finding a way to attract our parent's love. Typically, one partner learned to be a 'victim' as a child. This attracts sympathy from one's parents. This manifests itself with an attitude of "they are doing it to me". The other partner learned to be a rescuer as a child. This attracts the pat on the back for good behavior. This manifests itself with an attitude of "I am responsible for everyone else's happiness".

These two attitudes 'marry' together rather well, at least in the beginning. One partner is a victim while the other partner is rescues them. Each needs to play their role in order to feel loved. The breakdown in the relationship comes when one or both partners no longer feel that their wound is being healed. Then they feel their partner is purposely withdrawing his or her love. This is when marital breakdown begins.

However, both partners have a similar childhood wound. It is the sameness of the wound that results in the sameness of the judgments and criticisms. However, they each learned a different set of coping skills. It is the difference in the coping skills that results in the *appearance* that they are very different people.

The reason this principle is so important is that it is the doorway to forgiveness. Once I understood that my partner also had a deep childhood wound that she was trying to heal, then I could let go of my belief that she was 'doing it to me'. This was extraordinarily liberating and empowering. It did not, however, change the fact that her behavior could be unsafe for me. This is where true healing must eventually come, so that each partner can feel safe with the other, even when the other is "doing it."

The best way I found to become aware of this powerful principle is to ask myself whenever I feel anger and judgment, "In what way is this true of me also?" In what way am I controlling? In what way am I using my child to suit my own purposes? In what way am I using money to "get" the other person? In what way am I dragging out the fight, even though I say I want it to end? My therapist gave me a powerful metaphor that I will never forget: Relationship battles are like a tug of war. I do not have to pick up my end of the rope. Am I picking it up and how is it serving me to do so?

### **3. Be true to yourself - don't attack, do defend.**

I struggled mightily with this one. In our anger, we want to 'get' the other person. Our self-talk goes something like this: "*They hurt me. They left me. They betrayed me. They failed to look after my needs. They controlled*

*me. They criticized me and made me feel worthless. They deserve to be hurt in return. My personal support group agrees that he/she deserves what he/she gets. Really, I have been remarkably self-controlled and I could have hurt him/her a lot more hurt if I had wanted to."*

Lawyers feed this in a big way. They tell us what's possible under the law to achieve, whether we want to pull the trigger or not. The temptation to attack is tremendous. Resisting this tidal wave of support that you have in favor of attacking is extremely difficult. However, it all comes at a price. Attacking takes time, emotional energy and money.

Yet not defending is to give yourself away. It's the flip side of the same coin. The thoughts around giving yourself away are: *"I'd rather not fight. I hate the hassle. I just want it over with. Really, I did hurt him/her, so this is a way to make up for it."* The long run consequence of this course of action is to also carry a time, energy and monetary burden. It manifests itself in the form of a deep resentment that just doesn't go away. Years later, the person is still making cynical, victim-like remarks about his/her ex-spouse.

You must learn how to be assertive if you want to heal yourself from this burden. You must become very clear about what you want for you and you alone, without the intention of gleefully inflicting pain on the other person. Former U.S. President George Bush gave us a good example of this in the 1991 Gulf War. He declared that he wanted Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. Once Hussein left Kuwait, Mr. Bush ended the war, despite many calls to hunt down Hussein inside Iraq. He drew a "line in the sand". I also wanted to do that. Go after what I believed was mine. Do not go after

those things that were not mine, but were simply acts of punishment. When I punish my ex-spouse, I punish myself. As that great man of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, once said, "Both the jailed person and the jailer are imprisoned." You can choose not to do that yourself when you defend without attacking.

#### **4. It's all about consciously "Letting Go".**

This was the most powerful lesson I learned. I expect to struggle with it for the rest of my life. But every time I let go of something to which I formerly felt was important to my happiness, I became a bit more free. I felt fortunate in that I had one cathartic moment at about the eight month mark where my ex-spouse refused to let me take my son out two hours earlier than scheduled. He was with a nanny and her only reason to refuse me, I felt, was her desire to hurt me. I spoke to my lawyer. I spoke to my therapist. "What can I do," I cried in despair. "Nothing," came back the reply. "You can pound pillows," my therapist said in a consoling voice.

For reasons I'll never know, I decided to immediately go out and rent the movie, Gandhi. I knew him to be a man of peace and I really wanted to find a way to accept this injustice, and not feel the urge to 'attack' via the legal system. As I witnessed the incredible injustices that he was experiencing in South Africa as a non-white person, I suddenly felt a huge wave of sobbing, racking tears take over my whole self. I had a sudden and powerful vision of how all the things that I had thought would make me happy were illusions - the house, the wife, the money, the career. I just let them go. And I felt joy. I was also overwhelmed that I had deeply cried for the first time in twenty-six years. I also felt a great sense of connection with God and that no matter what happened in my life, I felt loved

by God and I would be okay. Even if penniless and alone, I would be okay.

It didn't work out quite like a fairy tale. I struggled to let go of my desire to see my son more often than the legally allotted two weekly visits and every other weekend. I struggled to let go of my desire to be punitive financially to my ex-spouse. I struggled to accept my aloneness and to be happy and trusting that someone may come along who is a good fit with me and my wants and values. I struggled with my fear of making commitments for fear of being hurt.

Every struggle became a matter of facing my fears. I asked myself, "What am I afraid would happen if I didn't feel angry or frightened at each of the above possibilities?" And this always led to seeing my truth, my inner belief that lay underneath each fear. And I learned that I could choose to let it go...or not. Whenever I did, I felt a great sense of liberation that stayed permanently on that issue. And I knew it, because when I was caught in a similar situation again, I no longer felt emotionally triggered. I became capable of staying in a state of calm and peace until the next trigger came along. But at least to that point, I became willing to face each fear with a certain knowledge that if I could let it go, I would heal another layer of myself. Ironically, it was only in letting go that I am able to see how my judgments of my ex-wife were indeed also true of myself.

**5. Healing yourself is a gift to you and to those you love.** These wounds are as much a part of us as our genetics. It is impossible *not* to hand them down *unless you heal them*. If we hand down our childhood wounds to our own children, then healing these wounds must surely be a tremendous gift to them. This was all incentive I needed to pursue self-growth

and personal happiness. I did not want my son to go through what I went through, to experience the cutting off of my capacity to experience deep emotions, because of my fear of the pain.

But there are more winners than just your children. My parents and I have had some amazingly, open talks about our relationship. One time, my dad and I sat down and talked about four or five major incidents from when I was a child. His view of each situation was shockingly different from mine. It really reinforced lesson number two for me - *all I see is me*. He had no awareness of how I felt and neither did I of him. Because we never dared to speak our true feelings, we hung on to jaded memories that hindered our relationship for many years. But it was not too late to give myself the gift of having a warm and open relationship with my parents. I simply had to face the fear that if I told them how much I loved them and how much they meant to me, that they would not reject me or ridicule me. That was my fear. Facing it was among the scariest, most powerful moments in my journey. I thank God for persistently building up my courage to do it.

Paradoxically, many people see the pursuit of personal happiness as a selfish thing to do. My experience is that it is the opposite. By healing yourself, you will learn to be a much more loving, accepting and non-judgmental person. Every person you touch will feel this at some level. Your heart will feel more joy and more love than you ever felt before. This alone will give you an ability to give back to the world a gift of love and service unlike you have ever felt before. ♣

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