

# The Silver Lining of Divorce

By Alison L. Patton

(Originally published on The Huffington Post, April 8, 2011)

Divorce is not a step most couples want to take. But when the papers are signed and the dust has settled, I have found that most couples ultimately recognize the insurmountable problems they had in their marriage.

Still, getting divorced is like going through chemotherapy to become cancer free. It can be a brutal emotional process with many stages of grief: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, and varying degrees of depression before you finally reach acceptance.

**Fortunately, this is not the whole story.** I've watched clients go through an inner transformation and a revamping of their lives, which I call the "silver lining of divorce." One client summed it up like this:

*"When I was married, my life looked perfect on the outside, but on the inside I wasn't really sure who I was and I always had that niggling feeling that something was missing in my life. The foundation of my marriage and my own life had cracks in it. After my marriage broke apart, I finally figured out who I am and what I want. Now the outside isn't the picture perfect middle-class family, but my foundation is strong and I'm finally the person I want to be."*

What is it, then, that brings about the silver lining? What makes these divorces different from the norm? Surprisingly, how the divorce played out was not the determining factor. Some of these clients went through mediated divorces with little conflict. Others had spouses who took them to court over everything and cost them a lot of time, money and heartache. All of them eventually found their silver lining.

What these cases had in common was how these individuals handled themselves during the divorce, the decisions they made and their commitment to staying true to their principles.

## Here are the keys:

- **Courage:** They faced their grief instead of hiding or running from the pain. They were careful not to get caught up in recreational drugs and alcohol, rebound relationships or other distractions. They found constructive ways to process their loss and the overwhelming emotions of divorce.
- **Self-reflection:** They took a good look at themselves during their divorce, admitted to the mistakes they had made in their marriage so they could learn from them, and they didn't get stuck in the negative cycle of "blaming" their spouse (even if their spouse deserved more of the blame).

- **Wisdom and Restraint:** They took the high road in their divorce case: They refused to fall into a pattern of revenge. They also wouldn't allow themselves to feel like a victim. They stood up for themselves in their cases when necessary, didn't let themselves be doormats, but they weren't greedy or vengeful even when the other side was.
- **Integrity:** Throughout the divorce, they remained committed to fairness and integrity in their actions and decisions. They didn't give up key legal rights, but at times they were a little more generous than they needed to be (because they valued peace more than the letter of the law).
- **Maturity:** Overall, they modeled maturity for their children, made decisions that were in their children's best interests, and generally did not drag the children into the battle.
- **Future Focused:** A final factor — and perhaps the most important — which these clients had in common was a commitment to moving on and healing after the divorce was over. For some, this was tied to their spiritual beliefs. For others, it was emotional/psychological work they did during and after the divorce was finalized.

Granted, these clients weren't perfect, they made mistakes, got upset, felt lost and confused, many went through periods of depression and self-doubt, but they didn't allow their negative emotions — anger, fear, revenge — to rule their legal case.

Ten years later, I still get Christmas cards from some of them. They've moved on with their lives in interesting ways. Some have a friendly relationship with their ex. Others don't. They speak about how crazy, out of their mind they felt during those years surrounding their divorce — and how it feels like a lifetime ago. They say what saved them was help from grounded and caring people in their lives: a skilled therapist, a support group, friends and family who kept them centered. Many found solace in their church or their spiritual beliefs.

When I ask them what good came out of the divorce, they speak of how they became their authentic self as a result of having everything secure stripped away — and how this led to changes in their outer life: new careers and jobs, becoming closer to their children, a current marriage or relationship that is much healthier than their first. Some found a deeper sense of spirit in their lives from going through pain and searching for answers. Many of them feel their life direction changed in unexpected but necessary ways because of what they learned about themselves during their divorce. No one enjoyed the process, but they are happy with the long-term results.

In contrast, the people I observe who have been the most scarred by divorce are those who got caught up in anger, revenge and feeling victimized. They often used the legal system or their children to strike back at one other. In the process, they bankrupted themselves emotionally and financially, and created significantly more pain in their children's lives. They also wasted the opportunity to examine their own lives, to grow and mature. Sadly, you can spot people like this fairly easily—years later, they are still bitterly complaining about their “bad divorce” and have not been able to put it behind them. For some, it has become their calling card.

So for those at the crossroad of divorce, the alternative is clear. Make choices — both in the legal arena and day-to-day — that will lead you to your own silver lining. Resist the urge to bury yourself in anger and blame. Although it's normal to want to run from the pain, remember that pain is often what causes us to grow, mature and re-think our lives.

[Azim Khamisa](#), a father who created a foundation after losing his son to gang violence, once said: "A broken heart is an open heart." Divorce cracks your heart wide open this same way, leaving fertile ground for new possibilities and necessary introspection. As many survivors of divorce will attest, something good will come from the ashes of your marriage if you do not encumber your future with hate, revenge and useless conflict.

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