

SURVIVING MY DIVORCE

The End or breakup of a marriage changes not only your future but also your past.

By Chris Cox

From Asheville Citizen-Times

If marriage, as Woody Allen once claimed, is the death of hope, then what is divorce - the inevitable and sometimes unbearable pain? Or is it death itself, manifest in a hundred different ways? Is it a monument to personal failure, a symbol of your lack of resolve and character, a scrapheap of busted dreams? Or is it a fresh start, an opportunity for growth, an occasion for courage?

Having recently gone through a divorce myself, I can say in my own case it was a little bit of all of these. Or rather, a whole lot of each.

Divorce certainly is a destroyer. It is a bomb that blows to shreds your sense of who you are and what you have become. It is a series of land mines, going off in your face when you least expect, the shrapnel of memories searing your heart. The center around which your life has been defined is suddenly ripped away. It is as if someone has given you a jigsaw puzzle of your life, removed half the pieces and still expects you to form a coherent whole.

Marriage exists in a continuum, with time past and time future embodied in an endless present. You and your spouse move through life doing things, acquiring things, accomplishing things, but no experience and no possession has a meaning except as it reflects on your marriage and its evolution. You may think of the past, but always in terms of the present. Look at us then, and look at us now.

Divorce obviously transforms the future, robbing it of its eyesight, but it also, strangely, transforms the past. Suddenly old Polaroids of vacations and anniversaries take on the weight of historical significance. Ordinary household objects become animate creatures, fluent in the language of loss, alive with symbolic value.

This shirt represents that crazy day at the mall when we got harassed by that sales clerk who looked exactly like an Afghan hound. Here are the candles, half-burned and coated in light dust, that you loved to light on rainy nights. This is the drawer in which we hoarded coupons we would never use. This is the window that we looked out one cold February afternoon and saw a cardinal, its brilliant red color a frail complaint against the gray sky, and we discussed the end of our marriage with pretend matter-of-factness, like bad actors caught in the world's worst soap opera.

Separation is purgatory, of course. You are neither here or there. You no longer have any sense of where you're going, and very little of where you've been. Was it all a dream? Were those years really yours? Do they count?

Friends, relatives, other members of the awful fraternity of divorce try to help guide you through it. Letters, phone calls, visits, prayers, wishes. All precious. You're not alone. But you *are* alone.

This emptiness is a basement flooded with grief, and you spend several months up to your knees in it, bailing, trying not to drown. People want to help you - and they do - but you must do most of the work yourself. You find that you cannot escape the reality of loss. Rather, you must, for a period, soak in it, swim in it, absorb it even. You must endure the inevitable stretches of self-doubt and self-recrimination, as well as the platitudes of those who insist divorce has become too easy. From those lofty perches,

what can the suffering of others amount to but a glib analysis of statistics? Now you're a number, a troubling trend, a symptom of deteriorating "family values," all your pain reduced to sociology and political bromides.

All of this you must survive, in addition to letting go, once and for all, of the life you thought you had and the future that life implied. You must learn to wear that particular shirt, and light those candles, and look out the window at cardinals, whose bright colors may affirm the possibilities of life, the outside chance that suffering may one day be suffused with sweetness and new hope.

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For more information or help, please call:

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