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Learning to live apart

by Vira Hladun-Goldmann

Separation is an important stage of the divorce process. This waiting period can be the perfect thing to calm your nerves and give you needed clarity. During this time, you must "cut the cord" to bring about a state of closure, because it's only with closure that you can begin a new life.

No two marriages are alike, but when they're coming to an end, all marriages finish in the same way: divorce. My contention is that this event, which is traditionally associated with the saddest, most tragic side of life, is anything but. It's freedom and light from where I'm standing. All people facing divorce have a period ahead of them not only of challenge, but of real possibility for growth. Positive growth. That's right, there is such a thing as a successful divorce, just as there is such a thing as a good divorce. Though people are unused to seeing those words together, I hope they become more commonly linked in the future. A successful divorce is one that is concluded quickly, fairly, and with a just distribution of the marital assets. A good divorce is one that allows you to drop old destructive habits and open yourself to a future bright with new potential.

A divorcing person has an opportunity to be "self-centered" in the best sense of that term. After a divorce, you begin doing things with a new respect for your own time and space. It's the beginning of privileging the "you" part of yourself, carving it out of your schedule. You have to be ready, of course. A lot of this begins with the process of listening to yourself. A lot of people don't listen to themselves, but as a divorcing or just-divorced person, you should have your ear cocked and ready at all hours. You should ask yourself:

- Where am I mentally?
- Where am I emotionally?
- What is the trail of breadcrumbs that brought me to this pass?
- Where do I want to be a year from now?

You have to not only talk to yourself but listen as well. Don't take yourself for granted. Don't demean yourself. You have to look yourself straight in the eye, look at the pros and the cons of yourself as clearly as you can, and decide what you want to keep and what to try to discard. Divorce offers the chance for that kind of thought process. And then you go from there.

The Importance of Separation

During this period -- this phase of marriage-ending -- you will be prey to flaring emotions. There's really nothing to be done about it, and it comes with the territory. Yet the fruit of my experience can be boiled down to this: try not to let yourself become a hostage to your feelings. Try not to let your emotions become a sled that carries you away to a place you don't want to go. Not only because it's bad for you personally and psychologically, but because when you enter the arena of a divorce, you enter a legal process that will be carried out according to precise -- sometimes obscure -- rules. Nothing will be gained by you being emotionally and mentally bogged down.

My advice, therefore, is simple: if you feel you're in such a state, you should let some time go. Achieve a separation.

A waiting period can be the perfect thing to calm the nerves and give you needed clarity. Take some time for yourself during this separation. Catch up on things you've neglected in the hullabaloo of finding that your marriage was concluding. Often this phase takes a year. It usually begins with one of the two moving out. The truth of the matter is that once this point has been reached, there is no turning back. That's why, during the separation, I would suggest that you not see each other any more than necessary.

Backsliding is so easy that it's a form of human nature, really. When the clothes are still in the same closet, and the question can still be asked, "should we go out to dinner tonight?" you're not separated. You may be playing at separation, but you are not separated at all.

So take a year, and live apart. It will not be an easy year. It will be a year of slow, steady clarification. During this year, you must "cut the cord." The point in all this is to bring about a state of closure, because it's only with closure that you can begin a new life. What you don't want to do, above all else, is fall into one of those states of limbo, a kind of low-wattage depression in which you're paralyzed and can watch entire years drift by in a state of inaction. No, this is a time for action, action, action above all!

Preparing for Divorce

Begin preparing the paperwork for divorce: gather the banking and legal documents, and the various financial instruments testifying to your shared holdings. Make copies and keep them in a safe place. And another thing: don't be shy. You're getting a divorce, not a

murder rap. Sometimes -- as in trying to kick cigarettes -- going public with your intentions makes it easier to follow-through. For myself, I'd have taken out an ad in the New York Times if I'd have thought of it.

Once you've decided to get a divorce, and have gone public with it, you will discover that divorce is a kind of social truth-test that will reveal to you who your true friends are. Don't be hurt by the fact that divorce polarizes the people around the divorcing couple. Expect it, if anything.

For a variety of reasons, many old friends will stop calling. They may feel jealousy, and they'll also be a bit uncomfortable at the way in which a divorce forces them to take a good hard look at their own marriages. Without intending to, you'll have become a bit of a stirrer-upper. Half the people you know are probably less than happy with their marriage, and so your action acts as an irritant of sorts, and for those people who can't face the truth, well, that's the end of what may have been, for you, a treasured relationship.

Then there's the Great Gulf situation. Often people feel they have to side with one or the other, Him or Her. They make their decision accordingly. In the long run, anyone who would turn on you in such a situation is someone you wouldn't want anything to do with. And remember: a divorce is not a closing-down so much as an opening up. So whatever friends fall by the wayside will be replaced by new people who will better suit your new life.

Yes, in the aftermath of a divorce, there is a void, but that void can also be pleasurable, because an unnatural situation has resolved itself, and there is a sense of new access and new possibility. In my case, there was no sadness. It was the threshold of my new life. The caterpillar had become the butterfly, leaving her cocoon behind. I was sitting at the edge of my own life, waiting to take off, and finally, with a flutter of wings, I did.



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