

The Divorce Chronicles

It is excruciating,
life-changing,
and profoundly
emotional. But unless
you actually
go through the end
of a marriage,
there's no way to
know what it really
looks like.

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any years ago, I worked with a couple: The husband was a business owner, and the wife was in an artistic sector. They wanted to get divorced—that was clear when they came into my office. He, especially, was very hurt and angry.

They sat across from me, and the husband looked right at his wife and said: “You’ve ambushed me with this divorce. You planned it for a long time.”

She responded: “How could you not have known there were problems?”

Then she looked at me and said she didn’t trust him. As a divorce mediator, when I hear “I don’t trust,” I drill down. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“I think he’s hiding money,” she said.

When we fall in love and marry, we become enmeshed; our boundaries become elastic. In a good marriage, the two people will often use each other to work something out. They seek an emotional mirroring, a need to feel seen, heard, validated. A term I like to use is “to feel gotten.” We need that mirroring in life—and in a divorce, we need it desperately.

What often happens in divorce is people will continue to look to their partners for that emotional mirroring. It may come out as “You don’t understand me” or “You don’t hear what I’m saying.” There’s a desperation to be seen, but it’s hard to get that from a partner during a divorce; the other person is just as much in need of mirroring. A big part of the work I do is disabusing people of that idea. I encourage people to lean out and get that emotional need met outside of the partner—be it in therapy, in spiritual practice, through friends and family, or elsewhere. I work to offer that mirroring and validation, to help them understand that the truth is that they’re feeling hurt and betrayed. The best outcome when someone needs emotional mirroring is to help them identify the underlying emotion or need.

Of course, there are pragmatics when it comes to getting divorced—there may be a home, property, and other economic realities. Of course, people need to protect their financial future, which is why it is critically important to separate what is real from what we call an enactment. An enactment is a story or a set of behaviors used to articulate a difficult or emotional situation. It can be really problematic when the attorney buys into a client’s enactment. For

instance, if the husband says, “She’s trying to take advantage of me,” and the attorney believes it without questioning. That can lead down a dark path. It’s painful to see how being emotionally or spiritually unconscious profoundly hurts people going through a divorce. If you go into this unconsciously and start enacting your emotions—that is, the stories you tell yourself become the defining narrative of the divorce—yours will be one of those destroyed stories we often hear about. I can promise you you’re not going to get through this without a box of tissues. Enactments may feel like they help us weather this storm, but they do the opposite. Sure, you know this is going to be hard, but you have no idea *in what way* it’s going to be hard.

One of the greatest misconceptions about divorce is that the process will be different than the marriage—people don’t realize that all the same dynamics are there. There will be the same issues, the same fights. I’ve watched couples go back and forth at each other, and I’ll say, “I’m guessing that this has been going on for a long time inside your marriage.” And they say, “Oh my god, yes.”

A divorce is an emotional beast. Too many people focus on the “I hate him/her.” Or they just want their half and then they’re out. Too many people focus on the fight—they push aside enormous psychological stress of divorce. That means they also miss the enormous growth that can come from divorce. This surprises so many people: A healthy divorce can force you to look at yourself. That can be incredibly enlightening.

The divorce process is like dividing up the albums. If you sort it out right, you can take what’s yours and go forward. If you don’t, you could take a piece that isn’t yours, which you’ll have to work out later on. Or you’ll leave a piece behind that you should have taken, and then you’ll have to work that out. If the sorting out happens consciously, you both come out with your assets and your opportunities. You can see how your stuff has interacted with this person’s other stuff—and that can lead to true healing. A healthy divorce is a means to grow: Accepting failure and committing to becoming better is the most gratifying outcome.

And that couple in my office? In my line of work, if someone accuses someone else of hiding money, that is certainly an issue I have to look into. But for those two, we had looked at their financials; we’d done work in that area. I asked her to explain.

“When we were married, it all was great,” she said. “We were doing so many things with our friends. He was always telling people how fantastic the business was and how much money we were making. But now, he’s saying we don’t have any money. I don’t trust him.”

I looked over to the husband and saw he was near tears.



He said, "I worked so hard. I always expected the business to do more, and now I'm in the middle of my life..." He started crying.

At that moment, I was like I'd let all the air out of the room. It was a visceral moment.

I looked to her and said, "He's devastated. He's worked his whole life on the business, and he's forced to see that it isn't what you dreamed. And now he can't keep pretending."

Reality is what grows people. This couple finally saw this reality—it wasn't exotic. It was basic. If you have an eight-pound chicken, however you cut it up, you still have eight pounds of chicken. Reality, however hard it is, can be so helpful. For this couple, this reality opened up a greater truth. He wasn't doing anything to her on purpose. Nor was she doing anything to him.

I liken their story to the old Sufi tale in which the teacher Nasrudin had lost his key in his house. When his friend asked why he was looking for it outside, Nasrudin replied: "Because the light here is better."

People will often look—and do the blaming—where the light is better, which in this couple's case was the money.

This was their enactment. As long as they were fighting over money, they weren't dealing with spite and anger and hurt. They weren't dealing with the reality. But once we took money off the table, the light was on spite and resentment, which are two very hard emotions to live with.

What a lot of people want to do is they want to take their shadow, divorce it, and leave it behind. But where real opportunity comes is in a situation like this, with all three of us in the room at the same time. We're all emotionally available. And I include myself because I'm emotional, there in the room, too. Divorce is one-on-one therapy—with three people. I work to help each person feel seen, to feel gotten. I often say to couples: "How hard must it be to now resent someone you loved and had a child with?" Yes, we have to deal with the money; I'm not blowing that off. But deep down, there's hurt and love to deal with as well.

I wouldn't want to do this work if I weren't both a psychologist and a lawyer. Of course, no one wants to end up divorcing. No one wanted to be here. This wasn't the plan. You fell in love, you were in love, you raised a family, and now here you are. You once felt seen by this person, you were gotten—and now you're not seen anymore, and you're falling apart. But as I work with couples going through this, they're each looking for the truth that has to happen. I feel compassionate for the suffering, but now there's an opportunity to go forward and build a new life that's healthy and allows you to be more conscious, more mindful. It allows you to be better.

It also allows you to see the partner you're divorcing with much more compassion and understanding for who they are. Something I often hear in my sessions is, "Wow, I didn't know that about you," or "I didn't understand that about you." It's a conscious change that helps you upgrade your image of your divorcing partner and helps you leave with more understanding and a deeper consciousness.

Divorce is huge. It's one of the biggest, hardest, most painful things to go through in life. But it's also one of the greatest opportunities for growth. It's a chance for us to look at parts of ourselves that we normally wouldn't. And if we work at it, we come out the better for it. ●

—As told to Stacey Lindsay

▼ HOW TO SEPARATE CONSCIOUSLY

- Start on good footing by being transparent. People can go off the rails when one person has started thinking about divorce without telling their spouse. ("All my ducks in a row...") That can be seen as an ambush. You intending a conscious divorce doesn't get it done; you and your partner intending a conscious divorce gets it done.

- Listen. Let your spouse tell their story about the divorce, then you speak about yours. People often feel they have to set the record straight while someone's talking. If you can intend a conscious divorce, support that by consciously letting your spouse talk without correcting or editing them.

- Build a conscious team. Get assistance from people who support conscious divorce. Make sure you have mediators, lawyers, accountants, people involved in the divorce process who value amicable, collaborative, conscious divorce.

- Educate yourselves—together. Knowing all the ways the divorce process works (the legal steps, the law) as well as your financial situation can prevent misunderstandings. It's important to get the information together: Let's read this book on divorce, let's go to this professional together, etc.

- Practice self-care. This helps anchor the consciousness. Find something that is nurturing or supportive. Each person needs to find out what that is for them.

- Do not avoid challenges. Instead of seeing a disagreement as "Oh, here we go again," see it as "There must be information in here—why do we disagree?" That gives a better perspective.

- Manage negative emotions. Spend time with yourself or somebody who can identify the need underneath that negative emotion (shame? fear?). Then step back and see how that need relates to the conscious process. People come in with anger and lay it on their partner. Instead, lean out. Work on that outside the process.

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