

Prologue

Why I Am So Committed to Divorce Rituals— A Personal Story

I left home one morning at 8 a.m., told my mother, who was vacuuming, goodbye on the run, and when I came home at noon, found a note on the kitchen table: “I’ve gone to think things out. Mama.” Her clothes were all gone from her closet.

I called my dad at work; he came home. We searched through the house for clues, but found only the house empty of my mother’s belongings. My dad sat stunned at the kitchen table, looking at the note over and over. I sat in Mama’s closet, smelling the faint scent of her perfume.

Soon it was time to pick up my sister, who was barely 13, from junior high, so I went to get her, to tell her Mama was gone. I called the dorm director late that afternoon, at the university where I was a sophomore, to say that I wouldn’t be moving in—I’d be staying at home to take care of my dad and sister—my mom had left suddenly. She said,

“Thanks for letting me know.”

That evening I also called my major professor, the woman I now call “my matron saint,” told her I would be living at home instead of on campus so that we’d need to work out another pick-up place for papers I’d be grading for her. She showed up an hour later with a box full of paperback mystery novels. As she got back in her car to leave, she said, “I figured you would have need for escape, my dear.”

Days and weeks went on, we had no idea where my mother was. She made no contact with my dad or with us kids. Friends (our friends, my mother’s friends, dad’s friends, family friends) called, came by, as shocked as we were. Some people dropped off food, as they would for a funeral. A few of my father’s colleagues invited us over for dinner; conversations were stilted.

There were no calls to or from my mother’s extended family (who knew where she was), none to or from my father’s family either. After almost a month, Mama wrote a short note to my sister and me, told us she was in Las Vegas and that she was going to divorce Dad. She didn’t ask how we were doing, or give a return address or a phone number. She asked us to try to understand.

It was on Thanksgiving Day that the divorce papers were served. Right in the middle of dinner, the doorbell rang, and when my dad answered it, there stood the sheriff. He handed Dad the papers, who took one look at them, threw them down on the entry table, shut the door on the sheriff, and

walked down the hall to his bedroom.

Everyone at the table was frozen: I got up, looked at the papers in the blue envelope, walked down the hall to his room and then didn't open the door because I heard him weeping. I went back to my sister and our guests, sat back down in my place, and reported, "Divorce Papers."

I can't tell you much of what happened after that, but I have retained a few images: my grandmother going down the hall to talk to her son, my sister and I clearing the table, doing the dishes, and making small talk with the others. Eventually everyone except my grandparents left. My father never came out of his bedroom.

Of that Thanksgiving Day 1967, I don't remember if my sister Debbie and I looked at those papers again, talked with each other about our shattered lives, or wept. I don't know if we asked aloud why Dad didn't come out of his agony long enough to check on how the two of us were doing. I don't know if our grandparents offered any comfort, or if that was the moment they began acting as if my mother had never existed. I just know that I hated Thanksgiving for 25 years after that, and could never figure out why.

The divorce became final. Although we never discussed it, I believe my father felt broken, probably embarrassed, humiliated and angry. He was incompetent to run a household. He did not know how to cook, run a washing machine or dryer, iron his own shirts or handkerchiefs. I taught him.

But mostly I took care of all housekeeping chores since he worked all day every weekday and sometimes on weekends at the university where he was a professor at the seminary. And I was still a college student at that same university, carrying 21 hours a term in course work and working three work-study jobs.

We two girls, who had been abandoned, were left to ourselves to try to keep some semblance of normalcy in our lives, to heal individually and together from this sudden-as-a-stroke death of family as we had known it all our lives.

Looking back, 40 years later, I am still shocked to realize that while family members and old friends called off and on, beyond the generic “How are you holding up?” there was never any talk of how tenable this situation was for either of us daughters—the 19-year-old or the 13-year-old. No one ever asked if I needed help, if I wanted to consider how Dad and Debbie might get along if I returned to the dorm to continue my college years with some modicum of freedom. While it’s still true that I would never have left my sister at that time, or my father to try to care for her alone, the issue is this: there was no conversation about it. What I can tell you is that no adult from our entire community of family or friends ever called, came over, asked us to come to their home, or took us somewhere beautiful in nature with the expressed intention of giving us a chance to talk freely and openly about what we were going through.

I do need to say that the two professors who knew me

best certainly asked me periodically, “How are you doing, Monza?” but I’m quite sure I most always answered, “OK, thanks for asking.” And I also need to say, those mysteries my major professor brought me that first night served me well; hers was a profound kindness, the most practical I can remember from that year.

Life *did* go on. Debbie and I played games on some evenings, as we always had. We went to the movies, took camping trips and road excursions, we had parties. Sometimes Dad joined us. We had friends over for dinner.

I finished college and went on to graduate school. Dad and Mama both got re-married. Debbie graduated from high school and college and went out on her own. My sister and I are profoundly bonded, like war veterans. She tells me now that I’m more like her mother than Mama ever was after she was 13.

Both my sister and I are in long-term committed relationships. We love our work and are grateful for the happiness in our lives. We’ve come through that ancient, soul-shaking storm.

I wish there had been a book like this that *someone* might have handed to my father. Or to the therapist that Dad, Debbie, and I finally consulted. Or to our pastor. Or to one of our teachers or friends. I know it would have been deeply useful as a guide for knowing how to talk about the divorce and how to ritualize our loss and hopes, our regrets and

intentions. After helping hundreds of people who have come my way asking for help in their efforts to heal from divorce—a fact I consider a gift of Divine design—I knew, finally, that I had to write the book myself.

Note to Divorcing Individuals or Couples without Children

If you are a divorcing individual or part of a couple who either have no children or whose children are adults, off on their own, perhaps even with children of their own, this book is also for you! Although I have focused on families with children in the following stories, the fact is that many of the formats the adults use in the rituals here are totally applicable to adults for whom sharing a Divorce Ritual with offspring is not an issue. You can find tools for doing a ritual with the person you shared marriage or a primary relationship with. You can also find ideas for doing a ritual *without* your ex-partner, either by yourself or with friends.

The format Roger and Andrea used—sharing affirmations and letting go of old angers and hurts—for their part in the ritual in Chapter 1 offers a model for anyone divorcing who wishes to focus on re-valuing what good has been gained and is being taken from the relationship and/or letting go of the past. Couples can share an experience that makes way for them to forgive each other, find a constructive path to freedom, and, in some cases, lay a foundation for transforming a committed relationship into a friendship. Essentially, such rituals can offer couples a rite of passage for beginning their separate lives.

There is another form of Affirmations in Chapter 7 (p. 118) you may use as a model. Another form of affirmations may be seen in Chapter 9 (pp. 148-149). You may also find the Statements in Chapter 3—Setting Intentions—a useful tool (see pp. 64-66). You may also want to consider writing a letter to yourself, as in Chapter 11 (see p. 179-180). If you read the ritual a divorcing woman shares with her friends in Chapter 4—in which she states regrets, what she still values, and what she intends to do and be in the future (pp. 76-79, 81-82)—you may find several or all of those parts to be adaptable to your circumstances. Or, you might wish to write vows to yourself, if you want to focus on moving forward in newly empowered ways, as you might see in Chapter 5 (p. 95-96), Chapter 10 (pp. 169-170), or Chapter 12 (p. 192). You may, in fact, want to adapt portions of a number of rituals in this book's stories—if they suit your needs and situation.

Perusing the Guidelines at the end of each chapter may provide you with a number of valuable suggestions, which you may use as springboards for your own creative diving into your truths.