

Essay: “Moving Through Divorce: The Power Of Positive Images”

CPW: 13th Annual Conference: March 5-7, 2020

-Wk-Shop: “You Make Sense” : The Power Of Empathy-

(Written by a client nearing the end of a collaborative divorce) Shared By: Jeff Shushan, MA, LMHC: Legacy Counseling, Coaching & Training

When I began moving toward ending my 20 year marriage, negative visions of divorce overwhelmed me, and were one barrier for me in proceeding. I wondered, how am I ever going to be able to do this?

--Would I become one of those people who asked her friends to choose which one of us they could remain friends with—me or my husband?

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Would I constantly corral friends and family into hearing tales of how awful my husband was, and how it was “all his fault”?

--Would I wage legal battles with my ex-spouse over child support and custody issues long after the divorce was over?

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Would every post-divorce encounter between me and my children’s father, even in service of our parenting responsibilities, be underlaid with animosity and hatred?

--Would my kids graduate from college years later and still have their warring parents unable to come together in a civil way to honor their accomplishment?

--Would I be one of those divorced parents that adult children write to Ann Landers about? “Dear Ann, I am getting married, my parents are divorced and not on speaking terms. How can I invite them both to my wedding?”

This wasn’t what I wanted—it was so not me. And this wasn’t what I wanted for my children. How could I divorce and still be me, still be a good mother, still raise healthy, happy kids? How could our family get through this and not be destroyed? All of these negative images made me scared to go through divorce, even though my marriage was dead. I needed *replacement* images.

Divorcing couples who don’t want to end up as enemies and who want to create two separate, healthy and harmonious homes for their children need positive role models and images. These help them construct an optimistic vision for their post-divorce family and make it easier to proceed through the divorce. They learn that a positive outcome *is* possible.

Most people have never encountered positive images of divorce and so have trouble constructing this vision on their own. Our divorce coach kept offering us alternatives,

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slipping them in here and there—snapshots of possible futures that were not disastrous. Somewhere I’ve heard that you have to hear something 8 times before you really get it. Our coach made sure this quota was reached.

Positive images can also inspire the courage to do things differently. Our coach had a stash of these images that he pulled out when we needed them. For example, he told us about the divorced couple who kept up their family tradition by barbecuing with their kids every 4th of July. And he asked us to picture the future—what would happen when one of us dies? Would the other parent be able to go to the funeral with the children and support them? Or would the family have been so damaged by the divorce that this wasn’t possible? What legacy did we want to leave to our children?

As we moved into separate homes and continued through the divorce process, even though I didn’t realize it, we began adding our own experiences to this catalog of positive images. There was our daughter’s high school graduation. We drove there together in the family car, the two parents in front, the two children in back, just like countless drives when we were still together. Members of each of our extended families came too, and we all sat together.

Later, we collaborated to throw my daughter a graduation party. The party was held at his house, I prepared most of the food, he grilled the burgers and chicken, and the kids were in charge of decorating. All my daughter’s friends came, and they got to see her two parents getting along, working together, sitting and talking.

Later, it hit me. Wow, we are doing something important here! We just provided a positive image of divorce for 50 high school students. Maybe one day it will be helpful to some of them.

My daughter had told me before that she’s talked to her friends about her parents splitting up. Her friends asked how are things going, was it awful? My daughter told them it was hard but could be a lot worse. My parents get along, she said, they’re cool.

I began to realize that our divorce was not just our own. It was touching other people in a positive way.

Earlier, I had sent my mother-in-law a letter. She lived far away and it made me sad to think I would never see her again. I sent her some recent photos of the kids and told her that the transition was going well, that we were all getting along, and the kids were adjusting to traveling back and forth between two homes. She wrote back and said she

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was so *relieved* to hear that. She had been worrying about us, wondering how we were doing, and remembering the difficult aftermath of her own first marriage.

After the graduation, my sister-in-law expressed something similar. She took me aside and told me how glad she was that we were getting along, and that the kids weren't torn between us. She contrasted our divorce to her other brother's divorce, which ended in animosity, constant fights over child support, and the children's loyalties split between the two parents. Like her mother, she was *relieved* our marriage was not ending that way. It was as if our experience was helping heal some of the hurt she still felt from the break-up of her brother's marriage.

My mom told me later that my husband had spoken to her very kindly at the graduation. They had done a bit of reminiscing about their own relationship over the last two decades. It meant a lot to my mother that this conversation took place.

So again, our divorce was not just our own. It was sending out ripples that touched many—our parents, our siblings, our children, their friends. Maybe some of these positive images we had created would even affect people we didn't know. Perhaps our divorce coach would use our daughter's graduation party as a positive image to inspire next year's clients. Cool!