

Moving Forward: Using Ancient Wisdom in Our Modern World to Heal the Wounds of Divorce

Rituals are . . . bridges—reliable doings carrying people across dangerous waters. It is no accident that many rituals are also rites of passage.

—Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual*

We participate in many rituals, but when we face the profound death of a marriage, we offer no ritual for the divorcing couple to grieve. The individual experience of becoming a single person after being part of a couple is a deeply solitary one. When the process becomes too much to handle, individuals turn to consolation of friends and family or, if necessary, seek professional legal or therapeutic services, mediation, or collaborative practice as a way to cope.

As professionals working with divorcing couples, we put our arms metaphorically around the entire family. However, we fall short of the final support. Often, the “divorced” person is left seething with resentment and, tragically, the children too often become the recipients of the pain that adults have had no way to discharge together.

What can we learn from the ancient sages? Ritual and rites of passage can heal, transform, and change the internal experience of the ritual participants, both instantaneously and permanently. Archetypal ritual and rites of passage can support us through the most difficult and meaningful transitions in life.

The ancient Jewish sages knew that divorce, although a great tragedy, is a sacred obligation and not just a remedy when a couple has lost the sacredness of their marriage. The ancient Jewish divorce ritual (the *Get*) involves elders and witnesses as essential components of the process.

The ancient wisdom found in all mystical traditions also teaches us that it is only through death that rebirth can occur and that we may find transformation through suffering. Of course, in order to heal and transform, we require loving support and a safe space in which to suffer and move through it to the other side.

Most important to note is that it is exposure to conflict, not parents’ marital status, that causes the most difficulty for children. Both children and their divorcing

parents require clear boundaries, a greater degree of closure, clear role definition, release from guilt, and forgiveness of the self and others in order to let go and move forward.

By combining the information and understanding gleaned from the present with the wisdom mined from the past, we may become the ritual alchemists of the future. As the new “elders,” we may begin to create rituals for families going through the turbulent waters of divorce.

Several factors would be helpful to consider when creating new, healing rituals of divorce with our clients:

- *Intention* is the most significant part of the process: set the conscious intention to create and enter the process with a loving heart, being fully present, for all participants of the ritual, in order for spouses to release and be released.
- Create a safe, sacred space in which the divorcing spouses can mourn their loss and move forward.
- Involve elders and witnesses who are well known by, supportive of, and share the pain involved with the necessary ending of the marriage.
- Incorporate tradition, symbols and ritual embellishments that are meaningful for each person.
- Focus on redefinition of the boundaries and roles in the newly formed relationship.
- Consider vows for continuing coparenting.
- Have participants share what they have honored in the marriage.
- Make use of music, poetry, prayer, dance, or reading that will bring participants fully into the moment.

Imagine, as the concluding piece of our mediation or collaborative work, guiding our clients as they create their own healing divorce rituals. Imagine gathering, in silence, lighting candles, or intentionally placing meaningful items within a peaceful garden or in a private setting by the sea. Imagine taking your place as the “elder” along with witnesses made up of significant family members and friends. Imagine witnessing as the divorcing spouses share “letters of truth” about what went wrong as well as what was honored in the marriage. Imagine standing alongside the divorcing spouses as they enact the end of their marriage, through words and symbolic enactments such as removing wedding rings and burying them. Imagine divorcing parents reciting vows of continuing parenting or speaking directly to their children the reassuring words that so badly need to be heard. Imagine joining with other witnesses in community as they share words of a poem, prayer or personal wishes for the future, releasing them to be free to fully love again. ♦



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