

Tackle your fears head-on, and embrace the challenges and opportunities divorce is offering you

By Pat Pearsall

I was asked by Trey Yates, my former divorce attorney, to provide my divorce story for women who are considering or going through the divorce process. Trey was kind enough to refer to me as ‘inspirational,’ with regard to how I managed my divorce. To me, I simply got through my divorce, it seems, by leaping over one mine field after another. I tried very hard not to step on any, and if I had to land on one, I tried to minimize the damage. In my view, my story is more about survival than inspiration. But, I am pleased that Trey has been so kind as to call it by a more positive name.

I believe it is important to say a few things about my divorce, in particular, and about myself, as background information only. I was divorced a few years ago, after having been married for 25 years. I am, by nature, a very happy and positive person, who just happened to be unhappily married. This is not uncommon, I believe. I also tend to have a natural inquisitiveness about all that life has to offer, and sometimes what it has to offer can be quite trying, to say the least.

I also remain a trusting person, and I say this to make the point that one needn’t lose the willingness to trust just because one’s marriage fails. And because the tenure of my marriage was over 20 years, I had the opportunity to ponder my choices and sort through my feelings about my relationship and its demise for many years. I believe that this period of time spent in reflection enabled me to proceed through my divorce with a clearer sense of where I might end up. In hindsight, many people who find themselves in divorce proceedings simply don’t have the benefit of this bonus. For this, I am exceedingly grateful. And in the end, I had what I would term, a very friendly divorce, if there is such a thing.

This assignment, of sorts, asked me to look back on my divorce, identify a few of the challenges, and share my insights with women who find themselves either in, or contemplating a divorce. Many of these insights are non-gendered, and I wish to include and acknowledge men who find themselves in the same circumstances. Being a woman who has experienced a divorce, though, means that much of what I say may ‘speak’ more to a female point of view. There are many challenges associated with a divorce, but for the sake of this particular request for my insights, I will confine my observations to just a few that I found particularly stressful.

To me, divorce is many things at once. It's long, it's expensive, it's a loss, it's liberating, it's life altering, and it's just a little scary. It is also the perfect opportunity to become a better version of yourself, if you are so inclined. Divorce does, however, come with a few challenges that I think are unique to this process. The biggest, and for me, the first challenge was the fear. The very moment that divorce was a certainty, was the moment that the fear appeared. I don't scare easily, but I will admit that the intensity of the fear got my attention.

The way that I dealt with it was to sit down and try to identify exactly what the fear was and then decide how to manage it. I began this process immediately, actually within hours of realizing that I was going to go through a divorce. Even the wording 'go through a divorce' sounds a little like the process of being put through a grinder, or a sieve. Neither of which gives one a sense of comfort.

A big part of it had to do with money. Was I going to have enough to live on? Would I have to supplement my income from my business, which had just undergone a transition to a more serious enterprise and was still in the 'regrouping' stage? Would I get an equitable share, or would this become a bloody battle played out in the courts? Or worse, would I end up with the short end of the stick and feel completely wounded by the process?

Some of it had to do with my 'identity.' Another thing that occurs the moment you know you are getting a divorce, is that your status, in your brain, immediately changes. The signing of the decree, which legally names you as 'divorced', is months and months later.

I had many years before deciding on a parallel life; one where I went on with the business of raising children, running a household and building my business. So, I thought that this issue of 'Who was I now?' would be a question that I had already answered. Not so fast. Curiously I had the strange sensation that something had been amputated from my life. It was disconcerting, surprising, but somehow not painful, thank goodness for small favors.

I remember that within a few hours of the decision to proceed with a divorce, I removed my wedding ring. Life is full of symbols, I find. The other fear that I experienced was the almost universal fear that, I think, all human beings share and that is the fear of 'change.' You may have no control over the loss associated with your divorce, but you certainly have the power to decide how to handle it. I

know I am waxing philosophic now, but we deal with change and the fear of change many times in our life. It is more prevalent during a divorce. But, there is always change in life and there is certainly more to come. Once you deal with the fear of divorce, it will help, in some small measure, with your ability to handle other changes that will inevitably occur in a lifetime.

Once I had made my list of 'things that may be causing this enormous amount of fear,' I set about deciding on the best course of action to deal with them.

To address the fear about the money issue, I made a conscious decision that I would do the very best that I could to ensure that I got everything that I was due by law. I didn't want any more than my fair share, but I absolutely wouldn't take a penny less. This meant that I had to completely understand the financial part of our community property. It is so important to do this. I cannot say this enough - you must get your arms around every aspect of the finances and money in a divorce. I have a saying that my children are sick of hearing. There is always a lot of 'eye rolling' when I say it, and they always finish my quote, in unison. 'No one cares about your money like you care about your money.' With all due respect, not your family, not your friends, not your divorce lawyer, not even your financial advisor, if you have one, cares more about your money than you.

I spent hours and hours at night and on weekends reading financial statements, digesting ownership percentages, looking at EBITDA evaluations. I had some accounting experience in my past employment, but this was WAY outside my level of expertise. I enlisted the help of a family member who had experience in 'present cash valuations' of a business, to walk me through some of this process. I could barely say some of these terms coherently, much less understand them, at first.

I read and reread financial documents until I would fall asleep with them still in my hands. I knew that I didn't want to get to the end of this divorce and regret not having done this work to completely understand the money part of the agreement. I found that in the end, when you are talking about your money, it is much easier to understand than one would imagine.

The identity issue was actually about confronting some of the cold, hard facts about the person I was at this point in my life. I had spent 25 years neglecting certain aspects of my life. We neglect ourselves emotionally, physically, spiritually, financially and sartorially. I tried to remember when I felt like the best version of myself. What was I doing with my life then? What did I look like? What

did I like best about my life? Well, I had longer hair then. I really liked my hair a little longer - it was just a personal preference. This one was easy. I simply decided to just let it grow. I used to enjoy running. I realized that I missed that. Now I was out of shape and hadn't run in years. But, I started running on a treadmill that had been sitting idle for an embarrassing amount of time. This, by the way, was easier than I thought it would be in one way, and harder in another. I had to eat better and count some calories to get the results I wanted from the running. This had an immediate benefit: I felt better, I looked better, I slept better and I dealt with the stress better. So, the 'take away' here is to find some physical outlet - some form of exercise that you enjoy and then add it to your life.

Some of the other things on my personal list were: playing the piano again, meditating again, spending more time with good friends and reconnecting with some I had lost touch with. I updated my wardrobe. This one was a little more challenging. Obviously, if I knew how badly it needed updating, I would probably have been working on it already. It's easy to overlook what an impact your wardrobe can have on your state of mind. I have two girls who gently suggested that I could use a little help with this process.

I am a costumer, of sorts, by trade and I understand that in some cases, when I am unsure about a 'period' piece of clothing, a little research is needed. Nobody does costuming or 'dressing the age and part' better than Hollywood, so I watched a few movies where the female lead was a woman about my age, with a similar position in the business world and studied what she wore. You can learn a lot about dressing appropriately for your age if you're close to 60, by watching Meryl Streep in 'It's Complicated.' I had already seen it, so I watched it with the sound off so I could concentrate on the clothing. For me, this made it much easier to make some changes.

In the end, dealing with the 'fear' and the 'unknowns' was accomplished the old fashioned way - addressing each one individually and then moving on. I am one of those people who believes that what you dream and envision can and does come true. My divorce turned out to be exactly what I had hoped for - a new beginning, a positive change, a chance to direct my future in the best possible way.

You have the power to decide how you deal with this turn of events, this change in your life. You must find a way to navigate the journey that produces the best possible outcome for you. Decide on your path and follow it.

I was asked once what I would say to someone about to enter a divorce, if I only had one piece of advice to offer, it would be one message that I wish I had heard more often during my own divorce. So, to anyone reading this who is about to embark on this journey, imagine that I am standing in front of you. I am smiling. And I would say simply: “You will be just fine.”