

### **New Life After Divorce**

*Rediscovering self-worth when a marriage dissolves*

I left my marriage in 2007, but it's safe to say that love had left the building years before. I had hoped that things might change before we decided to split—that my husband and I were simply going through a season of discontent. I didn't want to be a divorcée: My marriage was bad, but I saw divorce as a lasting public and private admission of failure.

I was at least 50 percent responsible for the end of our marriage. I let my relationship with my husband edge out everything else. He told me it was annoying to hang out with my friends, so I withdrew from them. He didn't like my music, so I listened to his when we were together and confined my love of pop to the car radio. He got a good career opportunity thousands of miles from my beloved East Coast, so I agreed to uproot. His relatives put me down (it wasn't personal; they put everyone down), which didn't help since they were the only people we knew at first in our new town. I grew progressively numb, dissociated, and dysphoric—dependent on wine with dinner, thick escapist novels, and cliff-hanging cable TV series. Our sex life was rote, a mixture of dissatisfaction (his) and disinterest (mine). Inertia ruled, except for when our mutual unhappiness erupted into ugly, knotty fights.

In the moment when the timber raft of our marriage was rushing downward to frothy dissolution, my friend Kimber asked me to go to a Nia class—a form of dance that blends movement, martial arts, and healing arts into a holistic, emotional experience. She was a spry yogini, a kickboxer, a groovy chick. I felt like the Queen of Dork next to the High Priestess of Cool.

I'd spent my life believing I was uncoordinated, the kind of person who could dance only after a drink or two. I avoided mirrors, never mind the entire mirrored wall of a dance studio. I thought I had a terrible voice and sang only when alone in the car. But heck, I was getting divorced. Everything was up for reevaluation. I said yes.

In the dance studio, I literally couldn't think about how miserable my life was. Instead, I had to focus on the combinations of step-ball-change, cha-cha-cha, grapevine, and spin. The teacher's music happened to be made up of my favorite divas: Annie Lennox, Sinéad O'Connor, Macy Gray. When I could catch a breath, I sang along. I ended the class drenched in sweat and determined to master the steps. I knew it was hard, but it didn't compare to the difficulties of unraveling my life from my husband's and explaining it to our two children. And our parents. Our friends. Ourselves.

Kimber was better than me at Nia, but so was everyone else. Duh. They'd been going for weeks or months. It was my first class (which soon became my first week, third month, seventh punch card, etc.), and I embraced the permission to be a novice and a bumbler.

After the divorce, another friend invited me to chant at a local meditation center, which threw me into the very uneasy feeling of not knowing. Where did this chant's words begin? Why did everyone know it by heart? What was I supposed to do? I was uncomfortable, but my distress was dwarfed by the joy that surged through me as I threw my voice into the group's rushing, undulating chants. My divorce sadness poured out of me in a river of tears and countless nose blows. But I left lighter, unburdened.

One of the most surprising things when my marriage finally ended was a sense of elation. So much was possible; so much was unwritten. It was a rite of passage that had nothing to do with the knee-jerk "divorce is bad, sad, tragic, and awful" expectation I'd learned growing up. I cried my share of tears, and then I cried more. But I also felt hopeful, excited, and optimistic. I could decide so much more than when I was married, without consulting anyone—how to decorate my new place, what to have for dinner, how to spend New Year's Eve—and that felt good.

Then I began to wonder: Which parts of divorce are unavoidably sad and which parts are up for grabs by other emotions? Can divorce be a positive thing—a stimulus for reawakening and reclaiming? Wanting to know how other divorced women felt, I posted an online request for their stories. Within weeks, I received a deluge of responses, which I compiled into my book *Ask Me About My Divorce: Women Open Up About Moving On* (Seal Press, 2009).

Still, from time to time, I felt as if I were just making it up—that my strength, confidence, and newfound jubilation weren't real. I wondered if I wasn't really free, but just at the end of a long, elastic tether that would eventually snap me back into my old life. Was I strong enough? Was I giving up something I would one day want back ferociously? How dare I rock the boat when so many women hunker down and white-knuckle through empty marriages?

Then, every several days, I received another submission from a triumphant woman who had made it to the other side. Reading their stories was strong medicine, and it carried me.

What I learned from my divorce and compiling the anthology is that happiness is not compatible with fear of change or the unknown. Staring into the mirror in Nia class while I jumped, kicked, and whirled gave me valuable self-knowledge about my boundaries and the limits of gravity, and how much power I have to transform both. Forgiving and accepting myself for being human and not perfect nurtures my own growth.

Once I made this commitment to myself, it organically extended to the people around me, which in turn has made me a more patient, mindful mother and a better partner, one who can recognize the petty stuff as just that and let it go. Reading story after story by women who accepted divorce as a necessary and beneficial step in their personal journeys—rather than a "D" scrawled across their foreheads—helped me do the same.

Candace Walsh is the features editor at *Mothering* magazine and co-editor of the Seal Press anthology *Dear John, I Love Jane*, which is scheduled to be released this fall. Learn more at [askmeaboutmydivorce.com](http://askmeaboutmydivorce.com).