

Chapter One

Getting Ready to Love: Discovering the Best Version of Yourself

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

—Jeremiah 29:11

A great adventure awaits you, and I say that with confidence because I've walked in your shoes. I know what it is like to go through the process of rebuilding your life after divorce, wondering what the future holds. I know what it is like to sift through the debris of your former life and discover the truths, learn the hard lessons, and look to the future with resolve to make it better than the past. But make no mistake . . . despite all that, you are still positioned in a special and unique place in life.

In this new chapter, your life is like a block of clay, ready to be fashioned into something amazing, simply by seizing the opportunity. This time of being single is a gift from God to you. It may not feel like it is a gift at times. Rebuilding after divorce is hard work and it requires patience and persistence. But nevertheless, it is a wonderful opportunity to refine yourself emotionally and spiritually in a way that many people miss out on.

You might think of it this way: If you break a bone, the healing process that takes place actually makes your bone stronger than it was before. Homebuilders often use wood planks for framing that have been cut up into small pieces and adhered back together to make one long plank because that process makes the plank stronger. The same holds true for healing from a traumatic life event such as a divorce. The break is painful beyond words, but the healing process strengthens you in a way you had not been before. This will be an amazing time in your life if you open yourself to it and embrace the opportunities for change as they present themselves. In doing so, you will experience the joy of finding your new role in life and happiness in God's plan. How would I know? Allow me to share my story with you.

Hello, My Name Is "Divorced"

"What is your marital status?"

I stared at the impatient woman sitting behind her desk. *Marital status? Really?* I was opening a checking account, for Pete's sake. Why did she need to know that? Why did the bank need to know? Would they refuse my money if they didn't like my answer?

I was sensible enough to recognize I was over-reacting to a standard application inquiry but, frankly, at that moment the question felt like an open assault on my broken heart. I felt extremely defensive as my breath dissipated and my

throat tightened. To Valerie, the young banking associate assisting me with this transaction, it was a simple question that required a simple answer. But to me, it was complicated.

Technically, the State of California had officially ruled my marriage was indeed null and void, and my ex-husband had sealed that deal by marrying someone else. Yet in my heart and according to the Catholic Church, I was still very married.

I was reluctant to answer this woman's question for another reason as well: I knew that, when I did, I would suddenly become less of a person in Valerie's eyes. Not married. *Divorced.*

She would never know that I had fought valiantly to save my marriage. No, she would never know how I begged my husband not to go, or how I swallowed my pride weeks later and asked him to consider reconciliation. She would never know how I prayed incessantly for God to bring him back and restore our marriage. She would never know these things because it wasn't part of her job to know or care, and it was inappropriate for me to tell her about them. Those details were not important; only my marital status was required.

"Divorced."

There, I said it. And I nearly choked on the horrible, nasty word. Valerie continued typing on the keypad, maintaining her poker face, and continuing on with her questions. A few minutes later we shook hands and I left, a new account owner. But I felt I had been stripped naked.

Obviously, I was having difficulty accepting my new social status. I didn't want to accept it because, no matter how bad things had become with my spouse, I married him with the expectation and the hope that we would be together forever. But now, my life had taken this unexpected turn and I had to start finding my true north again.

So now, I was being forced to affirm my new position in society through normal, everyday events such as filling out forms that required me to declare my social status or meeting new people and having to identify myself as “divorced.” Attending family functions or Sunday Mass along with other happy families was a painful reminder of my failure. Even browsing the parish bulletin and reading about all the family activities being offered had its own special sting. To compound the fracture, by the time my husband had filed for divorce, I had suffered three miscarriages. These circumstances left me feeling somewhat cursed because at the age of thirty, I was divorced, childless, and without the hope of having children due to a surgery that, according to the doctors, had rendered me sterile. I felt completely alienated from the one thing in life I valued most . . . a happy family.

I share this story with you because I want you to know I understand where you are coming from. My guess is you can definitely relate to my story about having to publicly declare my divorce to others and no doubt have your own stories to tell. I was no different than many others who go through a divorce and wind up forgetting they are precious in God’s sight. It is so easy to lose sight of the fact that we are loveable, valuable, and God still has great plans for us.

There is more life—exciting and happy life—waiting for you. Things have changed dramatically in my life for the better since that time in 1993, but it didn’t happen quickly by any stretch of the imagination. It was a gradual, eye-opening process. At that time, I couldn’t have imagined the kind of future I have now, but God is the most faithful Companion and the most loving of Healers, and it was through his grace and guidance I realized happiness was to be found in his plan, not in clinging to things that were dead and gone, things that were truly holding me back.

You are probably wondering what all this has to do with dating. Maybe you're not thinking about marriage yet, and are just wondering how to know when it's the right time to stick a toe in the shallow end of the dating pool. You want that happy and exciting life, and maybe even to get married again one day (or not)—but right now you just want to go out and have a little fun.

Fair enough. The fact that you are picking up a book about dating tells me that you want to go about this the right way, so that no one (including yourself) gets hurt. You've had enough heartache for one lifetime, and you are just starting to rebuild your sense of confidence and self-esteem. You want to know about those five qualities that free you to love—those "attraction factors."

But before we start looking at those five factors, we need to start by acknowledging where we are right now. I want you to feel assured the entire purpose of the discussions in this book are to help you move away from the negativity as you rebuild your life, start looking forward, and rediscover the incredibly attractive things about yourself that may have gotten lost as you went through your divorce.

Let's Talk about Dating

Dating is a process to help you recognize your new calling after a divorce. For many, dating will lead to a new relationship and ultimately to marriage. But, does this mean you should begin dating again as soon as the ink has dried on your divorce decree? Is it that assumed and automatic?

Re-entering the dating scene after going through a divorce can be an exciting but tricky process. The thought that someone might consider you attractive and worthwhile after enduring the soul-crushing ordeal of divorce may tempt you to short-circuit the healing that needs to take

place before you are ready—emotionally, spiritually, or in any other way—for a dating relationship.

Dating as an adult after years of marriage and family life is a different experience from dating as a never-married adult. I have no doubt your goal in dating is to meet new people, enjoy new experiences, and move forward in rebuilding your life. These are all excellent goals and I would like to help you achieve them. But first let's take some time to talk this through before you make a move or accept an invitation to go out.

A Time to Build Up

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

—2 Corinthians 5:17, NASB

The first time I reflected on this simple scripture passage I was on a silent retreat. As I read those words, it was as if scales fell from my eyes and I finally recognized what had to be done. I had to let go of the past, forgive the hurts, and start moving forward. But the real epiphany came when I discovered I didn't have to do it all myself. I could start fresh, become a new creature in Christ if I let go of the old things and allow God to work things according to his plan. Those beautiful words from St. Paul became my life preserver and my inspiration in forging a new path. Over the course of many years, I became a completely new woman.

After going through the annulment process and experiencing an incredible level of healing along with receiving a decree of nullity, I moved forward and began dating. For a long period of time, I never found the right one. I then spent a brief period discerning a vocation to religious life, and soon after, I met the man to whom I am married today. We have been married nearly fifteen years and have

three beautiful children despite the fact the doctors told me I would not be able to conceive a child. Yes, God truly does have his plans for our welfare!

You may already feel hopeful about finding a solid relationship that leads to a second marriage, and that is wonderful. But, maybe you are not quite to that point and this is fine, too. Either way, rest assured now is a great time to consider the ideas in this book. If you take them to heart, they can help you become a better person; someone who stands out and is noticed because of *who* you are, not simply because you might be physically appealing.

Whether or not you choose to enter into a new relationship, you want to feel as healed from your divorce as possible, no doubt, and as confident in yourself as you can. My goal is to help you rediscover yourself in ways that will elevate your level of attractiveness and give you confidence in your future. I hope the elements of my story I share with you will add to that sense of hope, regardless of the direction your life will take. I hope it will encourage you to trust God to lead you on the path to a happy life, no matter what has happened to you up to this point.

Letting Go of "Divorced"

Years ago on a Saturday morning, I spotted something that drove this point home for me. I was walking out the front door of St. Mary's Catholic Church where I had stopped to make a little visit before I headed off on my busy day, and driving past the church was a massive, muscled dude on a Harley Davidson motorcycle. And, he definitely fit the part: long hair, goatee, lots of leather, and tattoos. But what really caught my attention as he motored loudly past St. Mary's was that he made the Sign of the Cross. He was acknowledging Christ's real presence in the Eucharist contained within the tabernacle of the church, something my

own parents had taught my siblings and me to do while we were growing up. He didn't seem to care in the least what an observer might think.

I was tickled at being able to witness that moment as I left the church. Who in the world would have thought some big, burly biker dude would be reverencing the Eucharist in public as he roared down Main Street?

No one would have expected that from a guy like him. And that is my point. People are far too quick to make blanket judgments:

"He's a biker, so he can't be a good Catholic." Or, "She's a single mother, so she can't be a good Catholic." Or, "They are divorced, so they can't be good Catholics."

Of course, none of these things are necessarily true, but the weight of these unjust judgments can cause great anguish that is even harder to bear when you are already feeling fragile and unlovable.

Ignoring the judgments of others who do not know your circumstances can be one of the most difficult aspects of rebuilding after divorce, but certainly one of the most important ones. That shameful, pernicious label of divorce can make you feel as if a rather conspicuous scarlet "D" is emblazoned on your chest and even people you meet in passing can tell just by looking at you that you are divorced. Any divorced person, especially a Catholic, will likely tell you this is one of the most painful aspects of losing a marriage and is most commonly experienced by the spouses who did not want the divorce to begin with. Despite their desire to make the marriage work, they are presumed to be "bad Catholics" by others because of the divorce.

It is true; people tend to judge what they do not know, which is not only uncharitable; but it is a slippery slope. But because we are not perfect human beings, we are all prone to making judgments at one point or another. The key to

overcoming these judgments is to focus yourself on how God sees you.

Love is the only mirror we must use to judge ourselves and others.

—Bodie Thoene

An interesting twist in this dilemma is that many of us do not always receive these burdens from others; we often place our own judgments on ourselves. Why would someone who has been through the agony of divorce do this? Well, we know marriage is designed to be a permanent, life-long, exclusive relationship; when it falls apart, “failure” becomes the distinctive mark with which we brand ourselves practically by default. For this reason, primarily, it is easy to *assume* others are judging us because we are divorced.

Why Not Start Over at Another Church?

Any Catholic who has gone through a divorce is certainly aware of the Catholic Church’s condemnation of divorce, which is based on the teachings of Christ regarding divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19:3–9. Most Catholics are raised to regard marriage as it was meant to be from the beginning: a permanent, exclusive, life-long union. So, it is understandable that someone might become so fearful of the judgment and reproach of other Catholics that he or she would give in to the temptation to avoid the source of the scrutiny altogether, to shy away from parish functions, attending Mass, and receiving the sacraments—the very source of healing and grace they need most.

Sadly, far too many divorced Catholics are living under the false assumption that Catholics who are divorced—even those who live an exemplary life—are not welcome at Mass

and cannot receive the sacraments once they are issued a civil divorce decree. The truth is a civil divorce decree in and of itself does not prohibit one from receiving the sacraments. What does prohibit them from receiving is getting remarried without going through the annulment process and receiving a decree of nullity. But this misunderstanding and the harsh judgments that come with it cause them to leave the Church altogether. This is a crisis for two reasons. First, it is a crisis because generations of faith are lost when divorced parents leave the fullness of the faith and become members of Protestant churches, taking their children with them. But more than that, divorced Catholics who leave the Church are walking away from the very thing they need to heal: the sacraments. All the graces they need to get through their trials, rebuild their lives, and find happiness again are contained in the sacraments.

No matter what reactions you may have encountered from other people or what you think the Church teaches about divorce, you must remember you still are a significant and important member of the Body of Christ, and the place you will find the most healing is in your home, the Catholic Church.

You Are Not Alone

The first step in overcoming the burden of the label “divorced” is realizing you are not the only one it has happened to. There are many Catholics who have suffered the agony of divorce yet have gone on to live very happy lives. In my video documentary, *Voices of Hope*, more than twenty-five men and women from all walks of life and varying lengths of time being married spoke candidly about their experiences with the challenges of being a divorced Catholic. Here are a few of the things they shared about the assumptions they made and judgments they received:

At first when I was going through my divorce I thought I couldn't go back to church. So not only was this the worst part of my life, but the thing I needed the most was not available to me. That was *really* hard.

-Gianna

There was a sense of shame and I felt like a failure. I didn't want to share what was going on with me with anyone. I didn't even tell my family what happened until about three months after it happened. I felt very alone. I felt discarded.

-Kara

It was particularly hard for me to continue going to Mass after my divorce. The people there knew me as a family man and judged me even though none of them knew my circumstances. A lot of our friends began avoiding me and the neighbor across the street forbade her son from playing with my son, which was all very hurtful. People who aren't divorced don't understand how difficult it is, especially when it's something you didn't choose.

-Leo

All these hurtful experiences cause many divorced Catholics to flee their parishes in search of another church they can call home, usually one that will allow them to worship God in an environment that accepts them and their divorce without question or hesitation. Often they wind up joining a different parish from the one they attended before the divorce. Why? For some, their parish "home" is just a painful reminder of their divorce, and the last thing they want to do is go to church and feel alienated.

So they find another church. Sadly, in most cases they are merely compounding the losses they have already experienced with the loss of their parish family. If they have children, this compounds their sense of loss and insecurity as

well. Merely escaping the discomfort and finding acceptance in a “non-judgmental atmosphere” can be a bit like slapping a Band-Aid over a deep gash: It is a temporary solution; it is not the recommended course for healing.

So, what’s the solution to overcoming the stigma of divorce? This healing comes from remembering the truth about ourselves: We are precious in God’s sight, and he longs to be in relationship with us. By embracing our faith and staying close to the sacraments, we can rebuild our self-worth and self-esteem, simply by staying close to the One who loves us perfectly.

Let’s hear what Leo, Kara, and Grant had to say about this later in the *Voices of Hope* video:

I have found that the Church is open and receptive to Catholics who have been through a divorce, even though I didn’t think so at first. They are especially receptive in encouraging a divorced parishioner to continue coming to Mass, receiving the sacraments, and serving in the same capacity they had before. In my case, I continued to be an Extraordinary Minister of the Eucharist, a lector. By doing this, I was able to feel accepted by those people who knew me and knew my circumstances. I found that very comforting.

—Leo

My family was a huge support for me. . . . My mother helped me to see I was still important despite what had happened, and that God had chosen me as a tool for him to help other people. Through my pain, I was serving a purpose bigger than anyone knew. It made me realize the blessings I had been given, especially being chosen by God to help others. These things made me feel special, not forgotten.

—Kara