

Surviving The “D-Bomb”

By

Terry Fraser

A Divorce Recovery Ministry Manual

McK Consulting Inc. © 2002

ISBN 0-9730931-2-9

Surviving The D-Bomb by Terry Fraser Family Heritage Resources ©1995
Page 1 of 114

Surviving The “D-Bomb”

By

Terry Fraser

Family Heritage Resources © 1995

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publishers, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews, and except as under the terms of a valid License Agreement.

Distribution through:

**McK Consulting Inc.
688 Sweetwater Place
Mississauga, ON L5H 3Y9
(905) 891-8778 Phone
(905) 271-8540 Fax
fhf@mckconsultinginc.com
www.mckconsultinginc.com**

We welcome your comments and feedback through McK.

Printed in Canada

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the many friends who have shared themselves with me during my crisis. Their support and encouragement have helped me believe that I can live again. Many friends have reviewed this book and have given helpful perspectives. Special thanks goes to Gary Carter, the Managing Director, and his team at Family Heritage Resources. My appreciation also goes to Lisbet, Peter and Sam for their work on the manuscript editing. As for my dog, Toffee, I refuse to give her an acknowledgment this time.

Preface

Divorce may be the defining experience for this generation as the Depression or a war shaped the worldview of other times. Talk to someone who lived through the economic devastation of the thirties and even fifty years later, it is often their major topic of conversation. World War Two, Korea and especially Vietnam changed those who went and those who stayed.

Divorce has become so widespread in our time that whether personally exploded by it or whether just a witness to others, it changes people.

It takes two to stay married, it takes one to divorce. In this book you will find the strange mix of humor and pain. This is a look at one family marred by divorce. The names have been changed to protect the innocent (and the guilty!) The perspective is from the one who was left and who worked for reconciliation. We were not on anyone's list of likely casualties: But after a year of separation, we are divorced. You will find visits back to happier times when we were married.

Even those who have had the benefit of a Christian heritage as we did are not immune to sinful choices. We both had grown up in a Christian home, had met at a Christian summer camp, dated for three years and married. Wedded for eight years, we had the joy of two children. I believed that our marriage was a gift from God.

I married for life and divorce was never seen as an option. We had together weathered tougher times and easier ones. But our basic commitment of love to each other was a choice we made for life. I loved her with all my heart. I had expected and hoped for a long married life with the woman I loved.

In these chapters, you will see glimpses of the lonely pilgrimage of divorce and the beginning of the rebuilding process. In spite of the horrible pain and devastation, the word joy is also appropriate. There is hope in the agony.

The choice of another destroyed what was. My choice has been to rebuild and to live again after this death. This book was written in the middle of the experience so you will hear the fresh echoes of the bomb exploding and you will feel the heat of the blast.

At the time of writing, it has been almost five years since she left. It is not a five year period I would like to repeat. But other than the ongoing custody concerns for the children, life is much better for me. There is good news in my life in a variety of areas. I am confident of more good news to come. But that's another story...

Here is the story of how I survived the "D-Bomb"

The D-Bomb

We were ready to have my birthday party. It was a couple of days early but since the children were here it was going to be special. After more than a year of separation, it was my second birthday in this broken state. But it was always so much happier whenever the children were with me.

This weekend, when the children arrived, they had baked a birthday cake and had a present for my birthday. With Ted being five and Michelle three it took Mom's help to bake that cake. There had not been many kind gestures like this since Judy left.

The candles were on the cake -thirty-three of them. The dinner was almost ready. Tonight was roast beef, potatoes and corn. I was in the kitchen finishing the last few tasks.

There was a knock at the door. Toffee the dog started to bark. Ted opened the door. A man said to my son, "Is your father home?" "Daddy.... "I walked over and Ted grabbed our barking dog's collar.

Toffee was usually right about people. I did not like the look of this guy or the papers in his hand either.

With my son and daughter standing there, the visitor said, "Terry Fraser, I am here to serve you these papers. Your wife is divorcing you. Please sign here to acknowledge receipt of the papers." It was the "D-Bomb."

My heart sank. My knees felt weak. Well, it had finally come. The dreaded day when these papers would confirm Judy's decision to end our marriage of almost a decade.

I looked over the papers and focused at the line for "Respondent" which awaited my signature. Separation had not been my choice. Since we were separated for more than a year, Judy could sue for divorce citing those grounds and I could not fight it. I signed the papers knowing that these words sealed the doom of our marriage.

The process server then said, "You are sure hard to find. I've been by here lots of times and can never find you --just your barking dog." I replied, "I don't spend my time sitting around here waiting for people like you. As for my dog, she does believe in killing the messenger so maybe you should take these papers and go while you can." The dog growled convincingly and off he went. (If he only knew what a wimp Toffee really was.)

I closed the door and sat down in the chair. Ted and Michelle came over sensing that all was not well. Ted looked into my eyes and asked, "Why is Mommy divorcing you?"

I wished that he were not so perceptive. Why was Mommy divorcing me? So much damage. If they only knew how different their lives would be because of their mother' s decision.

Before I could answer, he asked another question. "What is divorcing?" He asked good questions. All of my Christian Education and Bible courses couldn't prepare me to answer my five-year olds' questions about something of which I still could not make sense.

With the children on my knee and with tears in my eyes, I told these two joys in my life the best answer I could. "These papers say that Mommy and Daddy will not be living together again. It means that we are not married anymore. But Daddy will always love you. No matter what happens, I will always love you and be your Daddy."

We hugged as I cried. Michelle looked at me and said, "It's OK, Daddy. I love you." "Me too and Toffee too," said Ted. "God loves you too," added Michelle. Out of the mouths of babes.... It did not feel like God still loved me.

I hated that they were here for this. I had to trust that they would forget this moment of disaster. As much as it was a shock, I felt a strange peace come over me. Grace. My mind thought of all of the implications of this crossroad. She had just dropped the "D" bomb. I would have this bad dose of radiation sickness for a while. I would never be the same but I would choose to survive. As I hugged the children, I had the first hint that joy would come in my mourning.

The Funeral Train

Where was the old Judy that I had known so well? She was dead. Perhaps the old Terry was dead too. These divorce papers shouted that our marriage had died.

In the pastorate, I had spent time with the terminally ill and their families. I had watched and shared with them the experience of preparing for this slow-moving funeral train which was coming at the end of a life. The process and stages of grief were clear as that train came closer and closer to claim another passenger.

People handled their grief differently. Some tried to ignore the sound of the whistle growing louder and louder. Others kept checking the schedule to know how long before it would reach their station. To comfort those facing this, much of what I could do was to just sit with them and hold their hand while we waited.

It is so similar as I reflected on my separation period. From the moment Judy walked out, I thought I heard the sound of that distant whistle crying over the hills far, far away.

I thought it might just be my imagination -- my need to fear the worst. Try as I might to believe that it was on a different track going to a different home, it grew closer and closer.

I knew that one of the earliest times our marriage could be officially buried was after a one year separation. In our state, this would be sufficient grounds for divorce. There could be no defense against that except reconciliation. It took two to stay married. It only took one to divorce.

In my prayers, I had begged God not to allow that train to reach our station. I had called out to Him and others to pull the switch and send it on another track. I wanted to hear the sound of the approaching train with its whistle sounding higher and higher suddenly rushing past. The whistle would sound different because it had gone by. That Doppler effect would bring me a sigh of relief.

As I held my breath, the train did come on my track. Its wheels screeched as it came to a stop at my home. I opened my eyes to look at this black train with its crepe windows sitting in front of me. I watched as my marriage was carried on board. I stared at the papers handed to me as my receipt for the coffin which had carried the last illusions of "us" on board. It shouted that the "we" was now just a "me." We were greater than the sum of our parts. Now just the broken parts were left.

Others stood with me when they heard the train had come. Grieving with me, they watched the crew prepare to leave. All felt so helpless. For some it was a day long expected since Judy had left. For others, it was a macabre moment too unreal to believe.

I watched that train slowly pull out of my station. I stood on the tracks and saw the winding shape grow smaller and smaller. The whistle announced its location over a distant hill. It was on its way to another home -- so many stops these days.

Finally there were no more sounds. Then just the silence of teardrops landing on the tracks. My funeral train had come and gone.

Why Did The Chicken Cross The Road

There are many versions of the joke, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" One of the stranger ones answers, "To prove to the raccoons that it can be done."

If you have traveled in the northern U.S. where the raccoons are plentiful (or armadillos in the south and west) you soon see proof that this is their home. They are a frequent road kill in many places. I guess that they never learned about looking both ways.

I have watched many people go through separation and divorce. It is an all too familiar sight in our society -- even in our churches. Some people seem to recover while others do not -chickens and raccoons, if you will.

How would I get to the other side of this road in front of me? How could I avoid becoming road kill spiritually, mentally and emotionally? I could not stay much longer where I was. The divorce papers made that all too clear. Neither could I rush out in this rebuilding process to discover what was left in my life.

I was always and continue to be an unequivocal supporter of marriage as the best choice. People often walk away from their marriage for the 10% that they don't like. The illusion is that separation and divorce offer a new freedom. Any marriage provides a great deal of baggage to carry with you in life. These are not gym bags but steamer trunks. Lives intertwine and do not easily disentangle. Like a Rubik's Cube, it takes great concentration and a few flukes to come close to making the colors of our lives line up again.

There were certainly no illusions about separation and divorce being good options on my part. They were poor choices that ultimately created many horrors. Marriage for life is the best life can offer. But sometimes we are stuck with poor choices. Worse, we can be left with the results of another's wrong choices. I did not choose this separation or divorce. But here I am so I must make the best of this mess.

I looked for some positive role models of people who had "made it" in spite of an unwanted divorce. I was not interested in hearing the stories of the leavers who needed to continue to justify why they had made the right decision in quitting their marriage. I wanted to look for someone who had been left and who had recovered (as much as one can recover from such a catastrophe).

It was a greater challenge than I would have guessed. With so many remarried and with so few willing to revisit their pain, it was tough to find anyone. Ultimately, I found one person who had gone on to heal. He was honest about the scars and lifelong damage that his ex-spouse had caused. There was a deep grief caused by the wretched impact it had on their children. But he had picked up the pieces of his life and crossed the road.

"Getting on with my life" was a scary prospect. I would be chicken as I crossed my road but it would beat being a raccoon.

Hurricane Judy

The force of nature is awesome. One of the most incredible displays of that power is in a hurricane. There are so many aspects of the formation and course of a tropical storm which keeps even the national hurricane center guessing.

Satellites watch from above and special hurricane planes fly into the center of the storm to monitor and measure what is happening. As I watch the storm reports on CNN, it is hard to understand what it is really like. I can imagine it. I can watch film and tape of it. However, I cannot appreciate it like those who have gone through it.

I watched tropical storm Judy first form on my screen the night that she drove off. There were few obvious signs that this storm was brewing. Once it developed it picked up speed quickly. Judy's statements that she was "not really leaving -I just need some space" -- changed in a few weeks to "I am not coming back home." That' s when it changed to Hurricane Judy. In those early days, many speculated on the course of this dangerous storm. Some warned that I should get inland or risk the full force of her fury. Others said that it would lose strength and would veer off before hitting shore. Some thought it could go either way.

It took a little over a month to realize that the pessimistic view was the realistic one in this case. No, she was not coming back -- not this year, not in three years, not ever. It was hard to begin to board up the windows and pack up before this coming disaster. But gradually that is what I had to do.

The divorce represented to me the storm hitting land. It was the worst time. The immediate separation shock had been tough in a different way. At least then there was always hope. It was such a change of personality and values that whatever had snapped might snap back. By the time the divorce came, this was a person who had developed a new pattern of life. As she was, this was not a person I would choose as a friend -- much less a wife. But until the divorce, there was reason to hope that God would intervene to rescue our marriage. Divorce changed so much and made the possibility of ever reconciling so remote.

Those days brought many tears as the storm passed through my life. It ripped and tore at who I was and what I believed. Gradually, there was some relief. The storm was lessening. The winds were still blowing and the rain was still pouring but there was a growing sense that the worst was over.

Venturing out, I looked around and began to assess the damage. The children, our testimony for Christ, who Judy was, who I was, our families, our finances -- all devastated. Nothing was left untouched. Hurricane Judy had hit. There was a major clean up to do. I could begin now. I knew where I stood. It would be a lot of work but I could start. She had hurt me but she did not kill me. I wanted to get a T-shirt that said "I Survived Hurricane Judy."

More Pony Tales

In my earlier book, My Daily Dread I retold the joke which was a favorite of my former pastor, Bing. It described a family who visited a farm. Arriving at the barn, the little city boy immediately jumps into a huge pile of manure. His horrified parents ask him what he is doing. He replies that with a pile this big, there must be a pony in here. It was an apt illustration of my efforts to try to look for the good in the mess of a separation.

Post-divorce, I find myself reversing the joke. If I were to be shown a pony, I would start looking for the manure. It is hard not to be suspicious of good news. What's the catch? Bad news I can handle -- it's familiar. But good news -- that is stressful. When the kids bring over a birthday cake from Judy's I resist the temptation to get out a metal detector or to feed the first piece to Toffee. Divorce does make you cynical at times.

I used to be so optimistic about life. In my experience I was no stranger to problems or tough times but I would always rise above the present to face the future. Better times were ahead. It was very "Reaganesque." Maybe it was because I was aware how tough many people really had it and how small my big problems were by comparison.

In college days there had been two opportunities for me to visit some of the poorer Caribbean Islands where people really struggled. It was in the context of short term missionary experience. Cross-cultural exposure was very valuable for me as I prepared to enter college. I had also done some inner-city tutoring in my Christian college service which reminded me how many benefits I had received in my middle-class upbringing.

I worry now that these experiences will make me a suspicious pessimist. Duped by my ex-wife for many years (if I am to believe her current statements), what should I feel? She never really loved me in our years of marriage. It was only ever "a working relationship," She now claimed that from the first day of our marriage that she had made a mistake. How could I trust anyone again? How could you be optimistic about friendships and the future when life had turned so sour? I never believed there were any guarantees in this life.

Sin assured that this world will never know that kind of peace. My optimism in the past included a working assumption articulated so well by my professor/mentor at college -- "Life is a kick in the head." With that premise, when good happens -- we take great delight. Tough times or the biblical term "suffering" are so much a part of the Christian message and are normative for Christians. In our instant society designed to shield us from pain, it is such a foreign concept.

Yet, the best investors in the financial world are those who can assess the downside risk and then make their commitment. They sleep better at night and make more money because they have faced the negative possibilities and face those potential consequences.

My choice would have to be to be ready for the negatives but still assume the best about others and life. Others will inevitably let me down as I will certainly fail them. But I will miss so much good if I am only open to negative experiences.

My divorce was certainly the worst news I could have imagined. How totally dependent on God and others we are in this life. The classic book *The Training of the Twelve* describes how Jesus related to his disciples. Christ knew how these individuals would fail him. He had a very realistic perspective on their limitations. But Jesus still chose them and entrusted the embryonic church to their care. If Christ could be so optimistic as to use them and generations later to love me, then there are some important reasons to be hopeful in my relationships. The next time I get some good news, I will not look the gift pony in the mouth.

The Bell Tolls for Me

As I approached what would have been our tenth wedding anniversary, I wanted to take charge of that day. I did not want to pretend that I could ignore it. That would not be honest. To heal, I need to face my pain honestly. Ten years ago. It was hard to believe. For so much of my life, a ten-year projection was such a long time away.

Now in my rear view mirror I looked back at that distant day past when we stood before God and asked Him to bless our marriage. The day was a day of great expectations and hope. A lifetime of experiences together awaited us. I was not naive that it would be problem free, but I never anticipated that my love would become my enemy. We had faithfully asked God to bless this relationship.

All of those prayers were in the aorist tense. The Greek aorist tense referred to a specific point of time but ongoing effect. Those people who had prayed for us then were not just praying for those moments in time but for our lives here on earth. Where were those people now? Were those congregations continuing to pray for us?

Could I call on God to even now answer those prayers sent to him so many years ago? Is there a reserve of prayer in our family account? So few seemed to be praying for us now. I called on God to honor those prayers offered in faith by His people gathered. I visualized those scenes when we stood together in prayer. Over and over, I joined their prayers and brought them into the present. But the divorce still came. Now I was facing our tenth. So many dreams. So many hopes. So much confidence. Now, just the emptiness of failure.

Jerry, my friend from business and ministry and I took a drive north. We arrived at the church where Judy and I were married and where we had served. The pastor, Phil, was there and welcomed us. I asked if I could use the sanctuary for a little while. He gladly agreed. I went to the tape room and put on the cassette. Jerry and I sat down in the front pew in the center.

The tape began to play. It was the beautiful sound of a special friend playing the piano and another college friend playing the flute. There was the sound of people entering and finding their place.

I closed my eyes and my mind drifted easily back to this place ten years ago. The processional began. I could see everyone watching the bridesmaids come up the aisle. Then Judy appeared and as the congregation stood, she came up the aisle. After a few words of blessing from her father, Judy's hand joined mine. We turned to face the moment of our marriage. We were to begin the lifelong process of two becoming one.

Then came the voice of the professor, Stuart, who performed the wedding. He had been such a significant influence in not only my formal education but in my development as a person. He had been a real mentor. Then came the special music. "Oh How He Loves You and Me" and "The Wedding Song."

At that moment Phil walked into the sanctuary. Seeing us at the front, he joined us and commented on the music. I told him that I was listening to my wedding of ten years ago and invited him to stay.

Finally, the vows began. As I heard Judy' s voice come over the speakers, it was as if we were there once again. I listened carefully to her words. Where was the Judy who had spoken those words? She had died.

The tape finished. The three of us who had all served God 's people in local churches sat in silence on that pew. What could we say? I got up and took the tape out of the machine and walked back to my friends. We stood together and Phil prayed.

We left and drove back. There was some relief. I had visited this place so full of memories and had faced my past without flinching. It would not have the same power over me in the future. The bell had tolled for me. I chose to respond. I was growing stronger.

Bears and No Honey

It is lonely to be single again. After many years of marriage and the security of an affectionate relationship, it is so long between hugs. It is tough to bear. No one calls me "Honey" anymore.

In a society with well established spatial bubbles around each person, there is so little physical contact. We are not a society that has encouraged touching. Even extended handshakes are uncomfortable. Particularly in the church, we are often suspicious of ulterior motives. This is especially true of the separated or divorced.

Sociologist Virginia Satir stresses the importance of affirming physical contacts to maintain emotional health. These are not just the intimacy of a marriage but a pat on the back, arm around the shoulder or the elusive hug. Part of being human is the need for human contact.

The deprivation of a separation and divorce is incredible. Quite aside from the loss of the sexual dimension of a marriage, the hours of being with someone else who accepted and loved you are suddenly gone. The customary hugs and kisses on arrival and departure are no more. Sitting and watching television together, giving a hug as you walk by, or spontaneously holding hands during a prayer in church are lost. While your emotions drain away through the bleeding amputation where a marriage used to be, nothing is replacing the loss. Few feel secure enough to offer a hug to affirm you as a person. Positive emotions wither. Even if someone does reach out, my responses feel so atrophied and unnatural.

So much of Jesus' ministry was to the outcasts, the despairing and the other "sinners." I have found it interesting to see how often he made physical contact with those he was with. So many miracles that did not require his contact did include the Master' s touch.

How do others cope with this long distance feeling? What about widows, widowers, singles, the separated, the divorced? How many of them end up in premature or unhealthy relationships because their souls cry out for some form of human contact? Do we, by fearing that all touching is sexually motivated, condemn others to find their only affirmation as a person with a sexual relationship? Sadly, even an unhealthy relationship is chosen to avoid emotional starvation. Others cannot and should not take the place of a spouse. But others can reach out with handshakes and other affirmations. It can help us who are alone bear the fact that no one calls us "Honey" anymore.

Shooting the Porcupines

In my earlier book, *My Daily Dread* I wrote a chapter about being "In a Very Small Room -Surrounded by Porcupines." The porcupines and their quills involved the pain of facing so many memories contained in the boxes of momentos from our matrimonial home. Everything was full of stinging reminders of the marriage that was. It was a marriage I wanted to keep for life.

Months passed and there were still boxes and boxes to unpack. I could rationalize it by saying how tough it was to move from a big furnished house to a small one. Why unpack when there wasn't much room anyway?

Of course, the truth was more than that. It was tough to face any of those boxes much less what they contained. I would have traded any of them for Pandora's Box. I was never married to Pandora, you see.

As time passed, I could rise to tackle a box every now and then. It would be a very draining experience. The box was not heavy but what I would see in it was. There were so many little reminders to me of my wife now deceased by divorce. She was a collector of Precious Moments figurines. As with everything that carried sentiment or that spoke of the marriage, Judy had left them. She only took those functional items which made her apartment convenient. She took the microwave but left the children's pictures. Now, I gazed at those little figurines bought in good times and bad as reminders of a love that was to last forever. O God, it hurts.

While visiting my parents with the children, we watched some old home movies. It was a strange experience to see Judy, me and the children together as a family and hear our voices. It was just a couple of years ago but it felt like an eternity had past. It even felt like it had never been. The Judy I loved looked happy.

She sounded happy. If she wasn't, these were Oscar winning performances over many years. Then there was a scene with Judy and my grandmother. This dear saint who had been such a special part of my childhood and adolescence had died a few months ago. The feeling of seeing both of them together was remarkably similar. Both were people I had loved. Both had been a part of many happy experiences in my life. Both were no longer alive. The present Judy did not resemble the loving person on that screen.

After the divorce, I decided that I would take control of those few areas left in my world. I decided that I would face all porcupines in those boxes. I would go on a porcupine hunt.

I sneaked up on them quietly. They had been sitting there undisturbed for more than a year. They did not suspect a thing. I already had a couple of empty boxes to trap the porcupines to save, those to give away and those to toss into the oblivion known as the landfill.

Carefully, I took one box into the living room. With gun pointed, I opened the top. The beggars started to jump out at me. Like John Wayne in True Grit, I let the guns blast away. Moving quickly through the pile I made snap decisions and put them into various categories. I had a special box called my "deep six" box where I would bury those especially important but painful memorabilia for the children to see when they are grown. That box was destined for my parent's attic.

To tackle the worst boxes including all of the many photo albums and scrap books I invited a close friend over. I wanted to keep the kids' albums available. Together we fought these foes. We suffered many cuts and lost a lot of blood. But in the end I shot the porcupines and it felt great.

Check-Point Charlie

Perhaps it is my paranoia but it that the sinners in a divorce have special inquisitions to face. We regularly encounter a "Check-point Charlie" interrogation from other Christians to see if we may pass into their lives. Some of the friendliest faces man our version of the Allied sentry post between the two zones of Berlin. In ministry areas there is a special desire to know "what skeletons are in the closet."

As a sinner saved by grace I live in the tension that God says that my closet is irrelevant because I am forgiven even though sin is not irradiated. From a human point of view, I started filling it with bones when I first told mommy or daddy "No," stole a cookie from the cookie jar and fought with my brothers. As a human being, I struggle not to add to the closet each day. Sometimes it is a tiny piece of cartilage while other times it has been a whole skeleton dancing and shrieking around.

Dealing with our past (real, imagined or repressed) is part of the human condition. But our relationship with God is the pattern for our relationship with self and others. When we accept by faith that God has forgiven us in Christ, we can forgive ourselves and others. Sin is always a horror directed against God first, often others, and us too. It is not to be taken lightly. The past does not have power over us if we have repented. Repentance means to "turn around." If we do not repent and "change our mind" about sin, then we are doomed to live in habitual sin.

I am not against accountability or authenticity but I am for the notion of forgiveness and restoration. I realize that at times it is a radical concept even to some believers. There is habitual sin of the unrepentant which does call for firm intervention to restore or treating that person as a non-Christian. I am not talking here about habitual sin.

Many of the ones purporting to describe what the skeletons in my closet look like have never visited there. In their need to discredit or destroy me, they have assembled the bones of my life into images which they find convincing and reassuring.

After all, their closets do not have anything resembling my skeletons. For the record, let me state it clearly. I am a sinner. I often feel I am a very poor reflection of Jesus Christ. But my goal has been and by God' s grace will continue to be to serve Him. In a holy life of obedience to His word and with love for others, I want people to benefit from my presence in their life.

Berlin's Check-point Charlie is now just a museum piece. Perhaps someday, we as Christians will dismantle our special version of it for the separated and the divorced too. Let's ask one another regularly and in love whether we are today striving for excellence in our relationship with God, other believers, and our world. Let's focus our attention on building each other up to avoid the pitfalls of future sin. Revisiting the sins of others who through confession to God are covered by the blood, misses the point of forgiveness.

By all means, challenge me about how I am walking with the Lord today. Inquire whether I have followed through in seeking the forgiveness of others. Ask me if my fellowship with God is hindered by unconfessed sin. Encourage me to be all I can be for Christ in the days ahead. But try to see my closet as God says He sees it. He says that my skeletons are as far as the east is from the west. God has forgotten about them. His forgiveness is designed to liberate us from those nagging fears about the closet doors that we hope no one ever opens. It gives us the freedom to face the future as we serve His will.

Pin Or Be Pinned

Hello, Father. It has been another tough day. There have been some good moments but still they are the exception. So much pain. And it keeps coming from so many places. It still feels like this struggle is never going to end. I need a pin, God."

"The pressure forcing my face into the ground was overwhelming."

"Do you remember when I used to be in high school wrestling, God? Those matches were the longest three minutes of my life. I can still see myself on the mat with 170 pounds of muscle on top of me. The pressure forcing my face into the ground was overwhelming. But I and my opponent were in the same weight class. We were in that sense evenly matched. I remember the moments when I would start to lift. It would be so hard to move. Then, somewhere from within myself would come a hidden strength. The inch would become two and then there would be some sudden momentum. If I could be quick, then I could do a reverse and sometimes even pin my opponent."

"I am just beginning to lift an inch off my emotional mat right now. For an eternity I have been under this horrible weight. O God, I feel so weak. It has been so long with so much bad news. Do I still have some of that inner strength left? Do I have enough faith left to allow your grace to do its work within me? It seems like it has been such a long time with my face being pushed into the mat."

"But the Bible suggests that you will not allow me to be out-matched. I am facing an opponent in my weight class. Could I make my spirit, mind, emotions, and body work in unison again? Do I have the will left? Why does someone win or lose a match? It is the critical difference of using experience, strategy, anticipation and especially guts better than your opponent."

"But who is my opponent, God? Is it just living in this sinful world? Am I wrestling against myself? Is it the Dark Lord? Is it all of these? The world, the flesh and the Devil. How can I fight what I can't see? It is so heavy. She has become my adversary by her choice. I am in a fight I did not choose which no one can truly win. The opposition is so unrelenting for these two years."

"Maybe, Father, the fact that I have not been rolled over yet and had the referee slap the mat for a pin is my hope. There have been moments when I have felt one shoulder blade touch. I can think how often in the separation I desperately stretched my one arm away so there was no pin. Now at least I am not on my back any longer. I am beginning to lift with my opponent still on top."

"I notice others outside the circle on this mat who are cheering for me. It has taken so much energy to avoid the pin that I had not been very aware of them. I sense they are encouraged to see me begin to get up."

"I am on my knees now. How am I going to get loose? Then, it happens. My opponent makes a bad move. It is a big mistake. More than the move it represents that my opponent is not invincible. I do a reverse. Then I try an iron sweep. It works. My opponent is down with one shoulder touching the mat."

"O, heavenly Father, I am so tired. I just need that little extra to finish this match. Help me, God. I can't do it. The ref is beside us with his hand up ready to slap the mat. Just a little more, God. My friends are standing now, shouting encouragement. I am so close. I need a pin."

Pinch Hitting

In the middle of my separation, it as difficult to imagine that I would ever be able to (want to?) preach another sermon. The idea of standing before a congregation and sharing God's word through my clogged filter felt like a contradiction. In some denominations, the divorced are damaged goods who were disqualified from most areas of ministry. Something about a "clear family background..."

After the divorce had happened, I resigned myself to the idea of not doing any public ministry again. My philosophy of ministry included the view there were many significant ways to minister both inside and outside the more recognized structures and more public positions. Besides, my perspective was while I had been effective in my more public roles, it was in the small group and interpersonal areas where I had been most beneficial. In any event, I would continue my lifelong pattern of not seeking ministry opportunities. If the Lord wanted to use me, I would respond to His initiative.

A couple of pastors called me a few months after the divorce. Each asked if I would be available to preach for them while they were away in the summer. I felt a peace about accepting their invitation though my mind had many questions. So I tentatively agreed.

I thought about what it would be like to stand in the pulpit again. It felt like it had been several lifetimes since I last preached a sermon. What would it be like? How would I sound? Would people only hear the sad drone of a person who could not get beyond his grief? Would I be real?

The first Sunday came. It happened to be a weekend when I had the children with me. I wondered what they would think about Daddy being the preacher? Ted was four and Michelle was less than two when the separation occurred. Would Ted remember the little church Judy and I began with some friends the year before our family ended? It was a promising group. Now the children would see Daddy preaching. How would I feel as I looked at them from the pulpit? So much had changed.

The pastor of this church had been my grandparents' pastor for many years and had been the keynote speaker at my ordination years before. The church was a year old infant planted in a growing suburb and showing real signs of healthy development. I especially loved new churches. Like children, all was new and uncertain. The pastor was one of the most effective church planters around.

He had trusted that the Lord could use me in this important context. It was an interesting mix of emotions as I heard the hymns, prayers, and announcements. Then it came time for me to speak. With a warm introduction by the pastor I stood and looked at the faces in the group. They were there eager to hear about God. They engaged. With yet another silent prayer for the Lord to use me for His purpose, I began to speak.

By God's grace, I could share comfortably with that group. One of the remarkable sensations was that my preaching felt as it always had. There were flashbacks in a part of my brain to occasions in our own church planting experience. I recalled the church I had pastored after school, to ministry opportunities at Christian camps and to the church where I had grown up. I saw a continuity. I was the same as I had always been. The sermons were informed by my experience over the last two years but Terry was still Terry. I looked down into the audience and saw my two children there. They were coloring some paper, glancing up at Daddy every once in a while. Both were content to be there and were at ease with Daddy being the pastor today.

Later in the summer, I had the privilege to speak at an older church in one of the metropolitan areas. The pastor was an old friend. The occasion was a similar experience, although it was not one of my weekends with Michelle and Ted. This more mature congregation responded positively to the preaching as well. The Coach had called me off the bench to do some pinch hitting. I valued the vote of confidence those pastors and congregations gave me. "I'll pinch hit when you ask."

Moody Blues

I am sure that I had bad moods before. I know that I did. These days, it is difficult not to trace any moody blues to the pain and disequilibrium of my post-divorce life. The strangest forces can set the roller coaster on the downhill terror.

Michelle had left her tricycle out by the door. After driving them to Judy's, I returned and saw this little reminder speaking to me. It is not very big but it is easy to see Michelle (and Ted before her) peddling hard on these three wheels of childhood. That seat looked so empty now. Those grips no longer had little fingers steering the handlebar. Where were my children now? Who was sanctifying that home?

By the same token, euphoria can sweep over me. There can be a real sense of empowerment. I can feel like life is getting better. Judy is irrelevant. She has done her best to destroy me but I am still here. The power curve has changed. Life is better for me and she is facing increasingly tougher times.

Those feelings are too artificial in both extremes. The dread is much worse than the facts. The glow is more imagined than real too. (Although I tend not to question the euphoria, since I figure I suffer enough from my imagined worst case scenarios.) I have noticed that these mood swings are not so dramatic as they were in the separation period. There I could go from a laugh to a tear in moments. It's as if I am still lost at sea but now I can see some shore birds. There must be land around here somewhere. I'm still not where I want to be but my fear is more frustration and my hope is more confidence than not. My mind is beginning to win over the waves of feeling that had dominated me for so long.

As I was reviewing some computer disks, I found some unsent letters to Judy. I had written them as a way of dealing with the intense moods of those early separated days. It is a wonder that the words on my screen do not melt down the computer and make a hole in the floor. It reminds me of a time when I had drafted a letter to Judy's parents and Bing was reading it with me. He said that he should have brought his asbestos gloves to hold the letter. Ultimately, that letter was greatly toned down. The letters serve as a point of reference of how far I have come since the beginning of this mess. A quick look at some pre-separation notes or pictures assures me that I still have a long way to go. As they say in the stock markets, the trend is good.

Someday, I'll be able to enjoy a bad mood and not connect it to this breach in my life. In the meantime, I'll have to swing with the moody blues.

Speech Therapy

Our son Ted began speech therapy in the spring of his kindergarten year. He struggled with some of his letters and combinations. I was the parent who took him each week to meet with the therapist. Together, we played games which just so happened to deal with his speech. Marvelous coincidence. The therapist was very engaging for Ted. She made the tasks enjoyable. What was amazing to me was the process of making the sounds. One of his toughest challenges was the "diphthongs." These are combinations of consonants found in tongue twisters. The mechanics of the "SH" were natural until you began to think about how to make the sound. The shape of the lips, position of tongue and teeth, and amount of air passing all combine to make that sound. For greater certainty, you place your index finger in front of your lips in that universal "Be quiet!" message. Ted made excellent progress and really benefited from the experience. I became more conscious of how I spoke too.

Since the divorce, I have had to begin speech therapy. There are so many occasions when I would normally talk from the perspective of "we." There was never any doubt in my mind that I was a part of a couple. While I had my own identity and Judy had hers, it was very natural and enjoyable for me to be identified with my wife. It was "we" not just "me." "Married" does give you the opportunity to use the "royal we." It was a privilege to say to a hurting friend, "We will be praying for you -- call us when you need to talk." We were better than either of us alone. As a couple, we had more impact and were of greater benefit to others in our ministry and our lives.

The balance of our abilities was great. Judy was better than I was in some areas and vice versa. The relationship had been very complimentary. I drew strength from our oneness.

Now, I catch myself saying "we" which only can mean that I am schizophrenic since there is no longer an "us." (Unless it is Toffee and me -- and we seldom agree.) So many occasions where people expect me to be a "we" and presume that I have an easy answer. "Is your wife at home? What is your wife's name? Where is your family?"

When I begin my story they quickly wish that they never asked. I guess that I look like the "married type." They look incredulously at me. It is as if they keep waiting for me to crack a smile and say "just kidding." I have tried a number of different scripts. "I am not married." "I am single again." "My wife left me and we are now divorced." "I am the proud father of two children." "I am alone." I am tempted to say, "My first wife died of a bad heart." Ugh.

How do you quickly explain the essentials? The death of a spouse leads to a statement like "I am a widow." That evokes sympathy and support with usually very few questions. To say that I am separated or now divorced leaves many questions unasked but not unthought. Do we pretend that they are not asking? How much information is enough?

I will continue to struggle with my emotional tongue twisters to deal with this indescribable state. I'll continue my speech therapy.

Eight Again

One of the ways that I have used to rediscover who I am since the divorce is to revisit the past. Rather than an escape from the present, it has been a search for continuity. What was I like then? What was true of me? What is still true of me now? What are the consistent characteristics of Terry Fraser? What do the fingerprints of my personality look like?

The rejection by a spouse tears away whatever self-image you have come to believe. If the person who supposedly knew you best says that you are not worth keeping as a marriage partner, it breeds tremendous self-doubt. In my case, I have also had to endure characterizations of me and our marriage that were factually untrue as part of Judy's self-justification.

On a summer day, I drove with a friend, George, to the Christian summer camp where I had been a camper, later counselor and then director. It had been a special time for me as I grew up. Every summer had included at least two and often six weeks at camp. As well as the sports and waterfront, many of the friendships made there have lasted a lifetime. We walked down those many steps to the beach.

I stood there on that beach as I had for the first time twenty-five years before. I looked out on the lake and my mind wandered back to those many happy summers. I realized that I was still the same eight year old boy who came there that first summer. As we climbed the cliff stairs, George commented that those steps were still a bear to climb. I agreed when I finally caught my breath.

We visited some of the cabins, dining hall and other main buildings. Each place had its own smells and feel which flooded my mind with memories of people and events. Those were happy times. God had touched many lives at that place. God had worked in my life during those formative years. It served as an Ebenezer for me as I reflected about the continuity of my relationship with God which had begun so long ago.

It was a real benefit for me to grow up in a home with Christian parents. I chose to follow Christ at the age of six while at a Bible Club in one of the church homes. A simple act of faith was in response to the invitation of a loving God. I trusted God for my salvation through the death of Christ on that winter day. At twelve I chose to follow in baptism as a part of my growing commitment to follow Christ. Throughout my life, serving God was to me the obvious and best choice. I had experienced tough times and difficult situations, but my faith had never been in doubt. The trauma of the separation had challenged my relationship with God to the very core. In my pain and agony, I asked all of the tough questions about my faith and assumptions about God.

The smiling kid who had stood on that beach ready to face a new experience is still who I am today. The little boy has less hair and some scars from life but the eyes are still bright. I am ready to face this new life with all the good and bad that awaits.

I am eight again.

I'm Sick I Must Be Getting Better

I hate being sick. The flu is one of the more convincing experiences. It is a liberal arts virus. You have a little bit of everything, The aches, chills, fever, vomiting leave little to the imagination. It is such a helpless feeling. I had come down with the flu. I'm sick -- I must be getting better.

In the two years since Judy left, I only endured the occasional sniffle. I came to believe that I was such a mess that even the germs would not come near me. Perhaps it was all of those physical defenses during stress. The body copes in different ways with crisis.

When after an accident the body goes into shock, the blood goes to the vital organs to give the body the best chance of survival. In the separation shock and the divorce trauma, my body has ignored the germs while it focussed on just pure survival as a person. Who has time to be sick when your life has just exploded?

So with my face in the bucket, I started to smile. I was sick. I was finally sick. There was hope for me. It is tough to be alone again. There is precious little comfort in this world at the best of times and these were not the good old days. It is beginning to feel normal to be alone. Not my choice to be sure but it is now natural. I am not happy that this is my state in life. There are so few minutes in each life and to spend them alone is such a waste.

When the kids are here, it is so different. My world is so full when they are with me. It is so refreshing. But it makes the silence so deafening when this old house is empty of their energy. Even after they have gone to bed and I am downstairs working there is a sense of peace in the home. That's it. It is a home when they are here. Otherwise, it is just a house. Today they are not here. It feels like an eternity since they were here. So I sit here with my computer, my cup of tea and my bucket. I hate being sick. In a strange way, it means that I am now well enough to get sick.

Life is weird.

My Emotional Compass

The migration of geese and other birds are an amazing testimony to the marvels of creation. Their ability to return year after year to a particular pond after flying thousands of miles is incredible. I wonder whether they have a sense of peace and contentment when they arrive at their long-awaited destination. They have a built in compass.

I have places where my emotional compass points for me. Some of these are ponds where I can land in and find a haven during the storm. Some are distant places where strong memories stir when I arrive and where I experience a special kind of peace.

Locally, there is a couple who have been longtime friends. Bobby and Pam knew me when I began my ministry at their church. I was fresh out of college in a new community where I had no roots. Early on I found them to be the kind of caring and genuine people every pastor longs for in his church. Many a Friday night included sitting by their fireplace or walking together in their woods followed by ice cream and hot chocolate. It was one of those rare relationships where the friendship was natural and easy. They went on a sabbatical to a Caribbean Island for three years and I suffered a great loss of not only friends but of the peace that relationship brought. We had the opportunity to visit them there and I enjoyed the renewal of that special warmth.

Since the separation, their home has been a local refuge for me, Many cups of coffee with Bobby helped me through some very tough days. Gathering with their family of teenagers has reminded me of happier times and of the continuity of some special relationships.

Farther away is my alma mater. There the rich memories of such a happy (if busy) time of life surround me like a dream. The buildings with their unique smells and sounds echo of a different time when I was young and life was full of possibilities. None of the fortune cookies I had ever opened began to describe what would lie ahead for me. I often used to wonder what the future would hold for me. I have learned that the present can be terrifying enough without looking for more evil than this day contains.

At college, one of my professors had played a very pivotal role in not only my understanding of the Scriptures but also my relationship with Christ. Smart and his wife Beth had always opened their home and themselves to the students who passed through their lives. A special rapport developed as I particularly enjoyed their blend of academic excellence and an active faith that ministered to others. He became a mentor for me in both my ministry and walk with Christ. (Please don't hold my mess against him.)

Through the years since graduation and especially during this trauma, they have been consistent and unrelenting in their support and encouragement during the darkness. I am so grateful for voices like theirs who called out to me through the fog assuring me there was still a safe harbor waiting for me. Through phone calls, notes, and hospitality when I visited their home and in many other ways they displayed their commitment to me as a purpose. I could sleep better and longer. It was as if I experienced a great emotional sigh that allowed my tensions to leave for a while.

Those moments with good friends in the relief and hope -- were great gifts to a wounded brother. It gives me great comfort to know that there are places that the needle on my emotional compass where I could migrate and enjoy that special contentment.

The Dark Lord

Our world is primarily a spiritual reality. It may not be what we see when we look around us. We do not stub our toes on the supernatural realm. It is not as "real" to us by our conditioning in this secular society. However, the spiritual world is still the basic on which all else exists. Included in the spiritual world is the Dark Lord. When someone puts on a pair of glasses, many images that were blurry come into sharp focus. So our unaided spiritual eyes struggle to recognize the spiritual world around us. We are so familiar with the material world that our spiritual senses are often out of practice. At times we may be aware there is more but it remains an undefined sensation.

The measure of the significance of our life is found not in this moment or in this day but in the difference we make for eternity. That difference can certainly begin with reaching out to another in need in this moment in tangible ways. It is not in our self-interest that we truly find significance as people but the contribution that we make in the lives of others.

The role of evil in our world is a very complex issue with many facets to consider. Perhaps one of the most helpful texts addressing this area is found in the book, *The Church and the World* by Dr. Robert Webber. There are important distinctions between the sinful forces at work from within and without the individual. The Dark Lord, Satan, or any of the other names associated with the leader of the rebellion against God marshals a cosmic battle against those who would serve Jesus Christ. He has been the adversary of good and He who is Good.

There are a number of striking scenes contained in the biblical literature that reflect some of the war that is raging in this present evil age. The temptation of Christ and the last supper are important examples. Following the fasting in the desert by Christ, he confronts Satan who tempts him to disobey God. Christ is asked by choosing His well-being over the will of the Father. Satan appeals to self-interest. Though physically deprived, Jesus resists his adversary and overcomes the temptation.

At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus gathers with His disciples in the upper room. There He prepares them for His soon coming death and the separation they will experience from their Lord who has walked among them. Scripture records that Satan entered Judas. There at the table, while the other disciples discussed many topics, a cosmic moment where the wills of the Messiah and the destroyer are met. Jesus offers the sop to Judas -a gracious sign of love being offered to the enemy. The oblivious disciples probably did not recognize the significance of the moment as the gaze of Jesus and Judas met that night.

We live in a time when the forces of good and evil remain locked in combat. We live behind enemy lines. While the outcome of the war is certain, there continue to be many casualties as the battle rages. The closer our activities take us into the flow of salvation history of God's work in this age, the more vulnerable we are to the attack of the forces of evil. Christians who have already chosen to sit out the war pose little threat to the Dark Lord. Those who are willing to enter the fray do become more vulnerable to the crossfire.

We often defeat ourselves because of our disobedience and choices to serve ourselves rather than God. We should not discount that we can also experience opposition from the enemy of our souls. My choices certainly have contributed to my present disaster. But at least the timing represents a tremendous gain for the Dark Lord. So many were mutilated when Judy nuked our family in her decision to leave. At times, I feel like an animal caught in a leg trap. My choices are to wait for my captor to arrive or chew off my leg to have a chance to survive. I am busy chewing. I know how the battle of salvation history will end. I know what my spiritual destination is despite my current agony.

As I wait, I must keep my spiritual eyes clearly focused and ever vigilant against the next move by the forces of the Dark Lord. I do not want to be another notch on his gun. By God's grace, I will not.

Social Insecurity

It is interesting to see how easily some of our strengths can become our weaknesses. So many areas of life where I was safe and assured now became tough experiences. Social settings are now often awkward. This is a strange feeling for someone who never found it threatening to meet new people either one on one or in large groups.

Now there is that same hesitation as when your mind wonders if you remembered to lock the door at home or if your socks match. Your mind argues back that of course you did and they do. Having these mental conversations is a concern. Is it early Alzheimer's? The only good thing about your mind going is that you meet someone new every day. You are just a little distracted for no good reason. Call it social insecurity.

So much of our conversation revolves around public information. In exchanging pleasantries with acquaintances or new contacts, we have some basic categories of safe questions to ask to keep talking.

Topics like where you work, what activities you enjoy, what town you come from all help us to break the ice. For me, the broken ice freezes solidly when someone inevitably asks about my marital status. How do you talk about divorce? It says so much about you just as an occupation like a doctor or a pastor creates a very clear picture for someone with just a word. I am not comfortable saying that I am single because before long the children are bound to come up. Then it can get really complicated.

We understand people as married after a certain age. In spite of the many singles, widowed, separated and divorced we have not mastered how to relate to people who are unmarried. Perhaps Miss Manners should offer some tips.... The real struggle in all of this seems to be my own identity.

While it clearly existed during the marriage, I chose to include my marital status as a key part of who I was. I am obviously not thrilled about including my divorced status as part of my current self. It forces me back to the essentials of who I am. In this transition time it is hard to get a fix on myself. Since so much of what I thought was true during the marriage has been cast into doubt, it is difficult to believe my own perceptions of who I am now.

In college, I had a lava lamp. The wax in the liquid would lay at the bottom until the light bulb below heated it. Then it would gradually bubble up like a volcano. In its final form, it would rise and fall in an ever changing shape. The philosopher Hericlitus had as his maxim "all the world is in flux." I called it my "Hericlitus lamp." Management consultant and writer, Tom Peters would call it Thriving on Chaos. My life feels like that lamp sometimes.

How do I relate to people when so much of who I am appears so unsettled? I am reminded that for all that is going on in that lava lamp, there are some consistent elements. The glass doesn't change. The mix of oil and wax is constant. There is motion when the heat is turned up but it is within limits. As God has allowed the heat to be turned up in my life, I remember some of the constants that He has promised to me. God is faithful. His love is unconditional. God knows the end from the beginning in my life. I am being conformed into the image of Christ.

My salvation and fellowship with God doesn't hinge on how others perceive me. God hates divorce. I do too. God still is there to reach out to me. He has always accepted me as I am. When I thought I had my life together, it was still a long way from God' s ideal.

Now perhaps, I am more aware that while we walk on this earth we do come so far short of the glory of God. I take heart that God wanted me knowing what I was like from my birth to my death. Grace is amazing. As for my social insecurity, I will have to remember that my primary identity is in Christ.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson

I was moved as I read a copy of the letter from my college roommate and best man at my wedding and longtime friend, Charles. The letter was to the psychologist doing our family assessment. In it Charles recounted our relationship together from freshman year to the present. As I read this beautifully crafted description of our lives, my mind flooded with memories.

In college, I often thought of our relationship as another pair of characters. I was Watson to his Holmes. My Dr. Watson was the Nigel Bruce version opposite Basil Rathbone in the popular 30's and 40's movie versions of the Arthur Conan Doyle classics. I was the bumbling extrovert who was often oblivious to the detail around me. Charles had an incisive mind that was able to focus on the big picture or the smallest point.

The confluence of life experiences which brings us into contact with other people is amazing. As you think about all of the people God has used to shape who we are today, it is a reminder that each person we might meet in the future could be very crucial. As I began at that Christian college which was hours away from home, I knew no one at the school. Like so many students, I would develop lifelong friendships from those earliest days at college. Charles was from the south and I was from the north. He was from the reformed tradition and I grew up in a dispensational church. We were very different. Our friendship grew in spite of (because of?) some of those differences. His letter reminded me of some of the passages we had shared together as our college times challenged us to define who we are and expand our experiences.

He is one of those rare people you have the privilege of meeting only occasionally in this world of gray people. Sadly most people seem to be two-dimensional. They exist from day to day with very little color or vigor. They are consumed with the business of eating, drinking, working and sleeping. Their lives are bland and uneventful. How often in the last two years I have wished for a two-dimensional perspective on life.

Less frequently, you meet someone with an extra spark. They possess a third dimension which gives them a reality that is as different as a person is to their picture. These people have an active spiritual dimension to their lives. They not only understand that this world is not all that exists but live accordingly. Our time here on earth is but a statement of the theme of a much greater symphony in eternity.

One of Charles' greatest acts of faith was to become my roommate in our sophomore year. I have never been accused of being neat. In those days, chaos would have been a kind description. Charles had always been very tolerant. But at one point, I had gone too far. In the small dorm room, he needed to pole vault to get to his desk. Understanding that I might understand an object lesson, he piled my mess under a sheet and put my desk flag on top. I got the message and a laugh.

We together did our share of college pranks and enjoyed many happy times. We often sat around musing over a cup of tea. We became connoisseurs as we learned to appreciate the many flavors and varieties available. He had a recipe for Russian tea that was a special treat. Care packages from our parents were shared. (His mother made some marvelous cinnamon rolls, the memory of which still evokes fond images of the south.) I even learned to enjoy grits (although some of his variations on pancakes are still a challenge.)

Since so many of our college students came from all over the country and the world, we knew that many of us would again disperse to the four winds until in eternity God would reunite us all. I regret that so many of these great friends are so far away. I would love to have a cup of tea tonight with my friend Sherlock and explore our latest adventure together -- The Strange Case of the Shredded Life.

What's in a Name?

As the divorce was finalized, I received a school note for Ted which needed my signature. Beginning to sign it, I noticed that Judy's maiden name appeared as her signature. As usual, she would communicate indirectly. What's in a name, I thought?

At first this seemed to be but another way for her to express her rejection of me and her new life. It was another stab in a long year of wounds. In another way, she had made clear that our relationship not only had died but never even existed. She is certainly not the Judy Fraser I had known as my wife. The name change was actually a relief because it stated clearly that she is not the same person. But maiden names are tricky things, though. She had reverted to the name given her at birth but this is not the Judy Arnold I had met thirteen years ago. It was not the Judy Arnold who as a little girl had made a profession of faith. It was not the teenage friend that others had known and loved. No this was a different person. On that point all are agreed.

I doubt that she intended it to go so far so fast. But sin doesn't come equipped with brakes. You must use the ejector seat. It is tough to sin just a little. When our hearts harden against God and others, we find ourselves careening down a mountain road with hairpin turns. Without brakes, our rebellion accelerates our choices until we do not resemble our former self. Our sin diminishes and marring us as people.

When we reject those who reach out to us in love in God's name we begin a process that limits our opportunities for restoration. God's grace received brings more grace. God's grace rejected brings sin. More must be justified. Our thinking soon must accommodate our choices or we must reinterpret our values. Ultimately we begin to define what is sin. Our definition usually validates what we are not prepared to change.

While we all do this, the risk that the First Epistle of John highlights is that if sin becomes our pattern of life, it calls into question whether we really are children of God. Does two years constitute a pattern of life? The Judy Arnold I met fifteen years ago would not have been able to imagine herself doing what she is currently doing. The Judy Fraser I had the privilege to be married to all those years would have been mortified. I want to say again to her incredulously, "This all makes sense to you?"

Her choices announce that it does. She calls herself Judy Arnold again. Maybe she should have chosen a new name to reflect that she really is a different person. Perhaps she will. But, what's in a name?

Kangaroos & Emus

One of my best friends is from Australia. We met at college during freshman year and I have enjoyed hearing an Australian accent ever since. A few years back I visited the land down under and fell in love with that country. Sydney was such a beautiful city and the Aussies were such interesting people to experience.

The trip included a visit to one of the zoos near the city. The usual assortment of animals was present including of course koalas, kangaroos and the ostrich-like bird called the emu. I will never forget being given a bag of puffed wheat which we were to share with the kangaroos. These kangaroos had learned how to deal with the silly tourists. They would hop gently toward you and then grab the bag from your hand. Who is going to argue with a kangaroo? I've seen cartoons where they box Sylvester the cat....

I learned that the national symbols of the country are the kangaroo and the emu. They were chosen because they inspire progress. Apparently, neither animal can physically go backwards. They can only go forward. For the Australians, it is an inspiring message.

The transition from separation to divorce has been one of being able to look forward rather than back. The choices of another have made it impossible for me to go back. The person I used to know as my wife no longer exists except in memory. It is a fond memory but increasingly a distant one. The new Judy is not someone I would like to be with. She has become repulsive to me. You can't choose your ex-wife but you can choose your friends.

Moving forward becomes a more natural motion. In the beginning it seemed impossible to look away from the marriage that was. Now it takes effort to look back. Even to say "I am getting on with my life" is to say that I have not really done so yet. I have found myself transformed from a lethargic koala sitting in my eucalyptus tree with mournful eyes to the forward hopping kangaroo. But I am still working on the accent...

Me and My Shadow

On a snowy evening I went for a walk in a local park. I stood with my frozen breath rising into the air. In the distance was the sound of a train making it's lonely 3ourney on this dark night. The lake was frozen but a few persistent ducks huddled together against the wind. As I looked down at the glistening white around me, I saw my shadow that grew from a nearby street light. Me and my shadow. You're still here. You have witnessed some incredible changes in my life.

There are times that I wonder which of us is more real. Plato talked of seeing the shadows on the wall. What of you, my friend the shadow? What of all of this is real? What is just a bad dream? How am I really doing these days? Are my dreads worse than my destiny? Have I bottomed out yet or is there more bad news to come?

I am searching for reasons to get up for the next round of the fight. It is cold out here tonight. It is cold in here tonight too. So little progress made in more than two years. What are the positive elements in my world? The teeter-totter of my life has dropped so low and lacks upward momentum right now. Is my only hope found in eternity?

I stomp my feet as I feel the cold creep into my boots. The snow has that squeaky sound to it tonight -it's cold. The train is coming closer now. It is on a track. It has a beginning and an end to its journey. Someone could describe for even a new engineer what the journey will be like. Where are my tracks leading?

Some ducks begin to stir. The train is causing them some stress, I guess. Stress means different things to different people. As I had sat on a park bench in this park earlier in the year, I overheard two older women talking. One was having a canption because her daughter-in-law did not follow her advice in preparing a turkey dinner. I wanted to shake her and tell her how small her problems really are. If Jerry had been there, he would have. (We call him "the mongoose" since he is fearless in confrontations -- even with cobras.) Further along the path, I see the leafless trees reaching up against the black skies. I feel like those trees with my barren soul stretching up to God in my emptiness.

I find myself in prayer so often these days. My spirit aches. I have always been a sprinter not a marathoner. I could run a great 100, 200 or 400 meters race. Anything more than 400 meters was to be avoided unless it was a soccer game. There the running was unconscious. This has been an emotional marathon. It is a marathon without a finish line. I keep wanting to have that kick for the last 100 yards to get the race done. Won't someone tell me where the finish line is? (Please note: eternity is not on the list of possible answers.)

Back under the light, my shadow reappears. So much has changed by the choice of another. Even my shadow looks tired now. My shadow is just a shadow of its former self.

WYSIWYG

In my Christian Education program, one of the goals of the courses was to facilitate our self understanding and personal growth. That would better enable us to share our lives with others we would serve. One of the exercises was a test called the Johari Window of Self (put together by a guy named Joe and a guy named Harry). Its purpose was to measure how open you are as a person, that is how much of your personality is hidden from others or from yourself. It measured your degree of WYSIWYG - What You See Is What You Get.

I always valued WYSIWYG in others. This does not suggest that others are so shallow or uncomplicated that you understand or completely know them when you meet them. It does talk about masks. As you peel away the layers of insulation that people use to keep their privacy, you do see a consistency with what you first saw and what you later saw. There are no masks that look different from the person underneath. My scores on WYSIWYG type tests suggest that I am an open person.

I suppose I would not be writing this kind of book if it was not true. (Of course, there will be those who will say that this book is full of truisms but no truth -- I don' t understand the comment either.) This is the stuff of what I am. It is not all that I am but it is consistent with the core of my personality -- as much as I can know myself. Openness has a price. In my marriage, I was totally open with Judy. Two becoming one was not just a theory with me. It was my life' s work. A big part of the betrayal of the leavers or initiators of a break-up is the breach of trust. They know the most intimate aspects of your fears and hopes as a person.

Judy 's rejection of me assumes that she had all the information of whom I am in evidence. It does not help there are others who say they would have voted for me rather than against me. She was a jury of one. As time has passed, I have gone on from my early self-doubt and self-recrimination to a conclusion that the choice to end the marriage was Judy's. It was the wrong choice. She had the right to choose to leave. The divorce documents were accurate as they reported that she made "no effort" at reconciliation. They are words that will come back to haunt her either in time or in eternity.

What about WYSIWYG? It is tempting to withdraw and to hide myself from others. Judy and some other close friends in all this have betrayed me. True friends are a great gift from God. They love unconditionally. They accept you as you are -- warts and all. That requires self-disclosure and risk-taking. True friendships are tested in the battles of life. Those who have abandoned me disclose much about themselves. Others who have hung in and hung on with me have been risk-takers.

When I was down and out with little reason to hope, there were others who hoped for me. They helped me to believe the unbelievable -- that I would have life after this disaster. At times, I have had to live through their hope when mine disappeared. Those true friends who have been faithful in faithless times have proved to me the value of WYSIWYG. Anyone with one true friend is wealthy in this life. While I am now poor in so many ways, I am a millionaire who is rich in faithful friends. I'll keep striving to be an open and consistent person.

WYSIWYG lives.

A View from the Basket

Heavenly Father, it's me again. O, I am so tired of it all right now. It has been so long and I have a lifetime to go. How about letting me in on a secret, God? How long is my lifetime? I guess I should ask first -- will this get any better? That would help me decide whether a long life left is the good news or the bad news. If it is going to be like this, forget it. I have had enough, thanks. As you already know, God, this is a view from the basket from one of your most persistent basket cases.

The kids are missing again. My life swings up and down so dramatically when they are here or there. I can imagine what it must be like for them. Give them grace, Father. How should I have answered Michelle' s question yesterday? "Is God mad at Mommy?" It's a tough question when you are doing dishes. When I asked her why she asked, she explained that she wanted to know if God was mad at Mommy because she was not living with Daddy anymore.

The children have seen so many changes in her. They have to deal with her new boyfriend while they are there. They are torn between two homes. What do you feel about Judy, Father? I know that I have such a range of feelings toward her. I can be so angry with her. She has become a black hole that absorbs all the joy and light around her with none reflected out in my galaxy. While she is busy taking care of herself, she has created a rip in the fabric of the universe. The anger is not constructive.

I can still miss her (oops --I am not to admit that -- haven't got on with my life). I left out that important qualifier -- I miss the old Judy. But that needs a further qualifier -- the Judy I thought I knew. Too much time spent with lawyers and psychologists -- it leads you to only tentative statements about everything.

The best I ever am able to do is a neutral response toward her. It sounds something like "She has made her choices -- I am no longer responsible for what happens to her." I do not wish her well in her new life. Is that because it would feel like she was right, Father? There are many psalms to remind me that how life appears to be going is no indication of the quality of our relationship with you, God. Does she qualify as an enemy for me to bless?

What do you think about her, Father? I told Michelle, "God is not mad at Mommy but he is sad when we do things that hurt other people. That' s why we love other people and try to help them. God loves us, Michelle. God loves Mommy. God loves Daddy. God loves you Michelle. God always loves us no matter what we do but it makes God sad when we hurt other people." I do not want Michelle to grow up feeling that you are an angry God. She sees so much pain. More than half her life has been in a broken home. At three years old, she has no memory of what it was like to be in a home where her parents loved her and loved each other.

Our divorced state is an ongoing statement of rejection. Perhaps that is what can zap me so easily. Is that how You feel, God, when we are out of fellowship with You? Do You sense each moment that in our focus on self first that it is a rejection of Your love? Is this what it is like as You deal with a planet of people who have rejected the gospel of love? I think I would have been willing to die for the Judy I knew and loved. While it seems that I have already died a thousand deaths because of the new Judy, I doubt that I have the mercy to die for her now.

Your grace is amazing, Lord. You died for me while I was Your enemy. I have never been in a war, Father, so perhaps enemy is an ultimate term. Your love speaks to me as I think that You died for me while I had divorced You by my choice to sin. Paraphrasing, "while we were still divorced from Him, Christ died for us." That is powerful to me, God. In spite of our life of rejection of You and Your love, You gave Yourself for us. As I live my life in Judy' s rejection, I begin to appreciate how deep love can be. I need Your grace, Father. I am not only not up to the battle, I am not up to the moments. Please help me, Father. I do not like what I see. It is still a view from the basket.

Applying the Tourniquet

I have been hemorrhaging emotionally for two years. My strength just keeps flowing out as I have struggled to survive. At times I feel so weak there is only an awareness of being conscious but everything else is hazy. I am not dead but I am not alive either. Time may be the great healer but the bleeding must stop before I begin to stabilize. I have to apply the tourniquet before it is too late. How do I stop the bleeding when there are so many holes?

Some people who go through great pain ignore it or deny it -- at least to themselves. When I talk with them and see how much damage has been done, I grieve for their pain, but also for their way of coping. It is like the old cartoon characters who when shot by a machine gun profess that they are fine. They then drink a glass of water and you watch the water pour out of all the bullet holes in their body. I suppose that it is a way of coping. Maybe that is how they stop the bleeding, by wishing it away.

There were many days and nights spent in prayer asking God for some release from the bond that is now bondage between the wife I had and me. But still the links remain. Others have reassured me that with time I will find release. I wonder if it really happens or whether people just stop talking about it. I know I hate this emotional stutter where I find myself repeating my pain over and over. My friends are no doubt tired of hearing me revisit my wounds again and again.. At times I feel like the old relative who wants to show everyone the scar from their surgery. It is a little much when they want to show it each visit.

Does it help to count my blessings? There are certainly many people in much worse shape than I am. Many are suffering persecution, starvation, disease, and other tragedies. By contrast spending time and energy on my problems is a luxury. This may be a speck in my emotional eye from someone else 's perspective but it is so close to who I am that it is a beam to me.

It' s a curse. I keep bleeding but not fast enough to die. It just keeps going on and on. Where are the positive aspects of life to allow me to focus on the future, Lord? Right now, my life categories clog with bad news. This is an amazing statement from one who was optimistic enough to be satisfied that if I could find out there was a lining in the next cloud, I would find silver eventually.

Would it help for me just to stop talking about my feelings? Many people do not ask how I am doing anymore. Is it because they do not want to open my can of worms? (Open is the wrong verb since the can has not been closed for two years -- yuk.) I have had to be increasingly selective as I share with others. Do they really want to know how I am doing? I ask others to find a tourniquet for me. I beg them to tie it on for me to stop my bleeding.

How do you stop caring? Does my heart have to be removed? Perhaps as the Tin Man was told as he received his wish, the human heart will never be practical until it is unbreakable. Where is that tourniquet? I'm too tired to look for it right now. Maybe I' 11 have some more energy to try again tomorrow.

Local Heroes

In my newly adopted town, some local heroes and heroines shared my sackcloth and ashes experience. These people welcomed and cared for this strange person wandering in his pain.

They each played a different role, consistent with their gifts and personalities. All combined to make an emotionally foreign town a little more comfortable for me. The pressures of being alone again in this less than desirable condition brought me comfort in some uncomfortable times.

Mr. & Mrs. Burns are a senior couple who warmed my heart as I would join them for dinner or an evening cup of tea. Mr. Burns was an elder in my first church and now in retirement they had moved to this nearby community. As a pastor, they were one of the visits where I always felt that I received much more than I gave. Their hospitality and breadth of conversation were very refreshing for a young pastor who missed rich conversations from college days. Their grand-parenting skills continued to benefit me as I visited them after the separation and the divorce. I was treated like family and gleaned many valuable perspectives as the storm whipped and tossed me.

In our church, another couple made a special effort to befriend this new member. Their home became a place of solace as I enjoyed their hospitality and their genuine care for me. Jim and Shirley extended themselves to me in my broken state. They did not know me when all was well in my life. (Yes, Virginia, there really was a healthy Terry.)

As my financial noose tightened, they allowed me to consult for their business in a way that allowed me to contribute as well as receive some money. I valued their sensitivity to allow me to maintain a little dignity in this very undignified state. Their home was a safe and happy place for me to enjoy. With my parents a number of hours away, these dear friends have added stability to my life.

Early in the separation, the multitude of boxes and emotions made the move to this smaller house a real nightmare. While finances were better, I decided to invest in a local cleaning service to once a week bring some order to my chaotic world. It was excellent therapy to walk into the house after they cleaned it. The nooks and crannies that I did not notice when dirty announced how clean they now were. Judy had been a very excellent homemaker who kept our busy world ordered. A less than "Judylike" house was another reminder of loss for me.

The cleaning service allowed for some relief. But it was always embarrassing when they arrived because the place needed so much work. The crew was very understanding. I had not met the business owner but had spoken to her by phone many times. I thanked them for their patience. I was also thankful for my anonymity. Then one day, the cleaning service owner said that it was nice to see that I became a member at the new church. I gulped hard. "How did you know that?" I go to your church. Oops ! There goes the anonymity.

Humility is such a wonderful thing but ugh! Lord, I can imagine you're smiling now, right? The cleaning service owner goes to my church. This would be the antithesis of Gordon MacDonald' s book Ordering Your Private World. My version was Keeping Private Your Disordered World. My cover was blown. But I learned that God had given this wonderful cleaning service owner both grace to endure my mess and a sense of humor. Most amazing, she came back!

The pastor and his wife have also shared heart and home with me and the children. With a great blend of sympathy and humor, church became a comfortable place to be because of their support. I previously enjoyed his ministry in other leadership positions in our denomination. It was some comfort to me that he and his wife knew me before my personal hurricane struck. Their encouragement and my mentor Stuart kept me in the denomination when the impulse was to disappear and resurface in another group for a "fresh start." I am glad I hung in for this phase of my recovery as tough as it was.

I am not sure many others realize how much encouragement people in my situation need not run and hide when the crisis strikes. I am thankful for those local heroes and heroines who encouraged me to keep believing in me.

I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy...

It is somewhere here. Where did I put it? Under this? No, how about over there? Maybe... Yes, there it is. It is tough to find sometimes. Keys? Matching socks? A pen? No. I was referring to joy. (Sanity is a close second.)

Joy is one of those unique words suited best to a faith context. You do not often hear the general population or media use "joy" except at Christmas. The word brings many pictures to mind. As a boy, I had learned that joy was somehow different from being happy. Joy was deeper and could be there even when you were not happy. Being happy did not mean that you had joy. Pretty confusing stuff for a kid to sort out. There were some great joy songs. Joy to the World. I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Down in My Heart. Christmas and campfires are two great "joy" images.

To my surprise, experiencing a divorce has had its moments of joy as well. I now began to understand what those definitions were talking about. This has not been a happy time. But there definitely has been joy. In a way it has been like the beating heart. Day after day, our heart keeps beating whether we think about it or not. When we are exercising or sick, we become more conscious of it. The heart is always there working in us taken for granted when all is well. My life has been filled with many joyful experiences when life does go well. A literature professor at college used to call it "high heartedness ." Those moments of exhilaration when your spirit reaches up to heaven and touches eternity are marvelous. They are the mountain-top experiences.

For me joy has been present in the deep, barren valleys as well. Like the mountain stream that cascades down and becomes the river in the valley, joy sustains life in the most lifeless places. The joy like a river contains a promise of hope to those wandering in their pain and despair. Many times I have been in the middle of this crisis and found myself smiling. It might be just more evidence that I am nuts (not much more was required), but I think it was more. Surprised by the smile, I would find myself sensing that there really was hope. Life would be better. Who would have thought that I would have done this well? How many would have guessed that I would have lasted this long?

The psalmists often talked about joy. It was not uncommon to find them talking about joy in psalms of pain or opposition. There was a deep sense of God' s presence and peace in the middle of the storm. Joy bubbling to the surface is an unusual experience when the rational response would be to find a very tall building with an open window. Perhaps it is part of God' s sense of humor to send us a giggle or a smile in the heat of the battle. I find myself pausing now from time to time to do a joy check. Sometimes I have to look for a minute but eventually I find it is there. I've got the joy of the Lord.

The Flip Side

George MacDonald in his book Lilith says through one of his characters, "Doubt, I said to myself, may be a poor encouragement for doing something but it is a bad reason to do nothing." One of the risks of my divorced state is paralysis. With so much stress in so many areas, I must not freeze. Pausing is OK but freezing could be deadly. I have played the record of this loss over and over enough times. It is time to turn over to the flip side. My life has been very proactive. I'd prefer to go down swinging rather than wasting away in handcuffs. My present crisis has presented me with a plethora of doubt. Self-doubt. Other-doubt. Faith-doubt. All-doubt.

This combined with my distrust of my judgment makes it a real challenge to decide which clothes to wear today. I'd pick myself up by my bootstraps but I can't find my boots. It makes it impossible to make some of the macro decisions that will impact that I and my choices will have. Especially, what will my choices do to the children. So much warped for them.

Some of the new limitations of this life are beyond my choices. I need God to grant me the serenity. I need a very large dose of serenity these days. I can no longer wait in stasis. The children's future needs a Dad who is all that he can be. It is time to improvise with this new set of variables. The Chinese character for the word "crisis" combines the ideas of danger and opportunity. This crisis has had some obvious dangers but a more subtle one is to allow this cement bath Judy has dumped on my life to harden around me. Like the person who has had a concussion, I must stay awake and keep moving.

Judy and the circumstances of the past two years have had me on an emotional yo-yo which she could pull at will. I must now make a choice to reach up and cut the string. She will try to reattach it to serve her ends and I may be tempted to do the same from time to time. But I do have a choice. I can just say no. Just say no... hmmm... that's an interesting slogan.

As my life is reduced to the essentials of who I am and who God is, it does provide some interesting possibilities. My relationship with God is the best place to start the rebuilding process. God has proved faithful to me in these dark times. Like the blind who must develop their sense of touch and hearing to compensate for their loss, I must continue to develop my spiritual and emotional senses. My ability to see the world as I did is changed. Some innocence is gone. In a trade I did not choose to make, I now find myself with a new set of circumstances.

I am less confident about relying on whatever my present circumstances and relationships may be. But I am more confident in my relationship with God and with the presence of true friends in my life. It has been a great gift to learn that such people do exist in my life. In the good times that lie ahead, I can take great comfort from this fact. It is also a reminder of the great opportunity that I have to be there for them and others when they face dark times.

What songs are on the flip side of my life? I do not know yet. There will be a mix of themes and styles. Are those songs already written, waiting for me to play them? Or is it my role to create the tracks? The first side will still be there -- scratches and all. It is time for a new sound.

Live Long and Prosper

Mr. Spock, the Vulcan of Star Trek would salute others with a raised hand with a gap between his middle and ring fingers. (It takes some practice to master.) His greeting would be a very Hebraic-like blessing, "Live long and prosper." For most of the last two years, it was hard to imagine prospering again in any area. With all of this pain, I was sure that I did not want to live long.

In one of the Star Trek adventures, Spock's half-brother, Sybock, can release the deep, hidden, inner pain in people. He could draw them back to some incident in their life that they then relive. His goal is to remove their pain. Released from this they sense a great feeling of euphoria. But the process affects their judgment and they follow Sybock's leadership. Captain Kirk refused the invitation to participate. He did not seek this release. In an insightful speech, he reminded his friends that he needs his pain. Those painful experiences are a part of who he is. Pain is a sign of life. God's comfort is very different from an analgesic.

I would have dispensed a very different prescription for my life than God has selected. We live in an age which works very hard to avoid pain. Consumer products feature comfort and ease. These and pain killing drugs certainly are a great benefit. But as a way of life, I am not sure we have measured the side effects of living in a comfort driven society. I am beginning to understand how important our pain is in our growth as people. Through the silence, I have come to recognize God's presence in different ways more subtle and real than taking away my pain.

In a strange way, the ability to feel pain is a gift to warn of greater danger. A frog would jump out of hot water if dropped in it. The pain would warn him. The risk for the frog is to be in water which gradually warms until it boils. The changes are too subtle to notice. Death follows. I never imagined that pain could be a friend. But it is. No I don't need to go looking for any pain -- it will continue to find me. Life in this present evil age will assure that. What injury others do not inflict, I'll be sure to create much of my own.

Surviving the "D" Bomb

The same goal of painless comfort that pervades the advertising of our world has also crossed over in many presentations of Christianity. So many people hear a message which implies a problem and pain free experience if they become disciples of Jesus Christ. Ethnology was the term in sociology that described how society influences us as we read and hear Scripture. Why has the Christian message been so effective in countries where persecution and deprivation are the norms? Certainly the blessed hope that this life is not the final chapter but God and His justice will triumph in the end is part of the appeal.

The Christian message does speak directly and strongly to those in pain. The promise is not an escape from pain in this life but God's faithful presence as we suffer. I wonder if in an attempt to make the message appealing to a consumer society the reality of the gospel for people who must live life in pain is lost. The Christian message is a powerful message precisely because it does not deny that this life is troubled and broken.

Our faith is that Christ will sustain us through our trials which will be used by God to refine us into people of great value. Are there fewer males in our culture who respond to the message because Christianity appears to be for the weak? The themes of the Bible are very powerful ones. Love, sacrifice, faith, hope, perseverance, joy, conflict are all strong issues. The gospel is not for the weak but for the broken. Many who are weak are never broken and therefore never choose salvation. Strong people usually are that way because of their responses to painful experiences. The Christian message is our only hope for wholeness. Pain points us to our need.

My preference has not changed. I still hate pain. I'd vote against it any time. But as with many things in life, I will not be asked whether or not I want it. I do understand it a little better. I do not fear it the same way anymore. Perhaps I'll be around for a while longer. Maybe life will be much better for me soon. I know that this will mean that pain will never be far away. But I cannot live long and prosper without it.

Who's That Knocking At My Door?

I believe that God has a sense of humor. (To confirm this, I need only remember that He created me.) One of the ways that God has used to remind me of His presence has been in the area of finances. I have had to laugh in the middle of my pain as God has kept me aware of how utterly dependent on Him financially I am. It has been a George Mueller type of existence for the better part of two years. Money has arrived at the very last minute in only the necessary amounts. It has been full of many terrifying moments. It has prompted many agonizing times of prayer. Like the early Christians gathered to pray for Peter in prison, I have to ask, "Who's that knocking at my door?"

In the account in Acts, Rhoda went to the door. The prayer meeting was continuing asking God to intervene for Peter. I have spent many hours praying about many needs. Like many Christians, I pray by faith but I still startle when God answers. For whatever reason, I have had to relive this experience over and over. Each time, I am at the edge of the financial abyss where I must face real consequences because I lack money. Yet, each time God has provided. It helps for me to reflect that last month I faced this crisis and God met my need. Over and over this lesson is replayed in my rent, groceries and other bills.

The many ways that God has met those expenses have been faith stretching. Like those Christians in prayer, many times I brought my needs to God. The answers amaze me even though it was my request. They could not believe Rhoda's report. One actually found it easier to believe that it was Peter's angel rather than Peter himself. When Peter enters the house, they rejoice but are still amazed.

One of the typical consequences of separation and divorce is financial crisis. The legal bills, division of assets, increased expenses of supporting two households, and loss of productivity all make it worthy of a disaster movie. As if there were not enough personal stresses, the money crisis drains the emotional bank account which was already overdrawn. Different people have been prompted to share amounts large and small which usually coincided with the urgent need of the moment. It has been remarkable for me to observe. Usually, they did not know the need. It has reminded me how sensitive I should be to God's promptings toward others in my life. We do not know how vulnerable others are or how much of a blessing we can be to them.

It has been a strange experience to be so vulnerable for so long financially. Being so dependent is one of the faith lessons in this semester of my life. This is still a very uncomfortable position. I enjoyed it much better when I was in a position to share with others. Like so much in this unreal experience, there are many times when I must pinch myself to see if this is real. When I begin to pray, my finances are a reminder to me to be ready for an answer. God still delights in surprising me by using some unlikely people who have sacrificially shared with me at a time of great need. You never know who will be knocking.

Crushed But Not Conquered

Reading Solzhenitsen's accounts of the horrors of the old Soviet gulag is a reminder of the extent of suffering people sometimes must endure in an evil context. Hostages, political prisoners and prisoners of war have too often known the extents human cruelty can devise. The tales of the survivors speak of great courage and a deeply held will to live. In some cases, everything that they had or knew was stripped from them. Often, the only way that their captors could succeed was to kill them. Yet stumbling and devastated they walk or are carried on crushed, but not conquered.

Crushed in every category of my life in this unwanted experience, there have been moments, days and even weeks when I have been ready to hoist the white flag and surrender. But I learned early on that no one was waiting to take my surrender. (I couldn't find a white flag anyway.) As it has been said, it is not how many times (or ways?) that you are knocked down, you just have to get up once each time. In the end, you must get up once more than you are knocked down to be standing at the end of the battle.

But I have chosen to start the process of rebuilding. I have no illusions that it ever stops but that was true whether or not I ever faced divorce. The divorce presents me with some very tough changes. The movie *Kramer vs. Kramer* was on television recently. Bravely, I forced myself to watch it. It is a measure of my progress that I did not turn it off. Many of those images were very real as I related it to my own tale and the pain of our children. I wonder if those who thought Judy's separation was a good alternative have any idea what our children have endured? Two years later, do they believe that Judy is better off than before the separation? How do they support her in her current lifestyle which is such an antithesis to basic Christian values? Are they reaching out to her as a non-Christian? What is their responsibility to my children exposed to this morality where each one does what is right in their own eyes?

Ironically, my greatest source of pain and my greatest motivation to persevere is the children. My future choices assume my relationship with the children and I will continue to face their pain with them. For their sakes, I need to be healthy and hopeful in spite of the pain so they have an alternative value system to Judy's.

The process of rebuilding for me began with choices. I had to face the fact that Judy could make choices that would revolutionize and reshape all of our lives. But I could also make choices. I could choose not to buy into her revision of our history together to gain sympathy for her decision to leave. I would choose to stand against her assumption "Judy knows best" and no longer put up with her attempts to control. I would choose to confront her behavior in front of the children without apology or reservation.

The Judy of today is not the Judy I knew and respected so I would choose to deal with her as she is, not through the lens of sentimentality. My choices would not be easy ones but they would be the best hope for my future and that of the children.

I had begun my life as a divorced person feeling like things could not get any worse. On the floor prostrate in prayer and tears to God, I asked for His mercy and His intervention. I wanted God to prove His faithfulness to me. What I learned was that in the dreadful circumstances, the issue was not the faithfulness of God. God had given me a lifetime of experience and the opportunity to minister to others that have proved the Father's love for me and others. God was saying that this was not about His faithfulness to me but my faithfulness to Him. I was to learn that my faith ultimately did not rest on the good aspects of my life. It did not even depend on the dearest human relationship I knew in this world.

By God's grace, I have continued in faith in spite of the pain and broken dreams. The enemy tried to conquer me. But I could not be conquered because I had made a previous commitment. I had already surrendered myself to a greater power, Jesus Christ. Greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world. I had been crushed but not conquered.

Top 10 Music

For most of two years, all my emotional and mental tapes played Top 10 numbers as selected by Judy. She wrote some of the songs while others wrote themselves.

The Top 10 for the year of separation included:

"Loser, Loser, Loser..."
"Why Did She Stay As Long As She Did?"
"You'd Leave Too, If You Were"
"Married to You"
"Reconcile Is Not a Word"
"Love Is an Illusion"
"God Agrees With Me - He Left Too"
"You'll Never Survive - If We Are Lucky"
"Friends Are Running for Cover Too"
"You're Only Worth Hating."

These were acid talk songs that ate away my soul and quenched my spirit. It was heavy metal to have wrapped around your brain.

Then came the year of the divorce with a punky sound. on the charts were:

"Marriage Is Death, Divorce Is Freedom"
"It Was Only Ever a Job"
"God's Got to Bring Him Down"
"I've Got the Kids -- You've Got the Dog"
"How Low Can You Go"
"Pick a Fault -- Any Fault"
"Anger Is Your Friend"
"I Chose Him over You -- What Does That Make You?"
"God Got You Real Good, Huh?"
"There's Nothing Wrong With You Death Can't Cure"
"Hate Yourself, She Does"

With the perspective of more than two years, I now see so many gifts from God to me. Many family and friends faithfully offered me new songs to play in my mental and emotional tape player. The experience has upgraded me emotionally and spiritually to a CD and the new music sounds great. I can hear and feel a much wider range than before. There is a new appreciation for music I had ignored during my life.

My songs now include a new Top 10 billboard as suggested and performed by my friends and family:

**"You're OK, She Didn't Take The Real You with Her
"You've Still Got a Lot to Give"
"You Made A Difference In My Life
"I'll Sort The Trash with You"
"Sackcloth & Ashes Are for Sharing"
"God Didn't Give Up on You"
"You're the Same Friend I Remember from Ten Years Ago"
"You Can't Help Someone Who Doesn't Want It"
"God Loved You Knowing All of This"
"Lots of Warm Fuzzies Here for You ."**

I am now able to choose from this playlist and enjoy the new songs. There is still a range of moods, but I like the upbeat tempo.

Love Those Warm Fuzzies

Many times over the last two-plus years, I asked myself, "What did I ever do to deserve this?" So much pain on top of more pain. Unrelenting waves in a never ending storm with no land anywhere. My ship of state without rudder or sail tossed by forces too great to resist, too awful to imagine.

For the first time since the separation, I ask the same question from the other end of the spectrum. "What did I ever do to deserve this?" An acre of warm fuzzies was mine to enjoy! I have not felt this good in more than two years. Like Ebenezer Scrooge after he awoke on Christmas morning, I laugh and giggle. If I had a maid as he did, she too would be quite certain I have taken leave of my senses. A spirit of mirth and a glow from within now bubbles up from my heart. As though enchanted by joy there is a great sense of release and freedom.

Some of my dear comrades in pain who are practiced at mourning with me are quite concerned. He didn't have a breakdown... he had a break-up. With so much experience mourning with those who mourn, some are reluctant to rejoice as I now rejoice. They need to remind me that this is only temporary. Of course it is. So is life. So is my mourning. Skeptics away! I'll not temper the exhilaration of the great moments to strike an imaginary balance of moods. Maybe we all rejoice so rarely that we do not know what to do with it when it happens!

My warm fuzzies have an explanation at least. My collection of miserable external circumstances has not changed. But there is a change within me and my self-perception. A confluence of ideas and people at the right time have delivered me from some of the "emotional demons" that have plagued me for more than two years. There is a new level of closure on the past and a new optimism for the future because of a renewed sense of who I was and am.

Beware of encouragement. If you get too much of it, there is a very real risk that you might be... encouraged. Worse, you might start laughing and feeling great. Couple it with time among great old friends and you risk the big GOWYL (Getting On With Your Life). I have at this moment a severe case of GOWYL. I blame all of the family and friends who have stood with me, sat with me, prayed with me, and cried with me. In so many ways, they have supported me when I had no hope. Now, there is some internalized hope. The scary part is that I may even have some surplus hope -- hope to spare!

I know, at this point, some of you are saying, "Poor Terry, he really is living in denial. Can't he see that his problems are still the same? It's so sad to see him happy again. He was doing so well."

Well, usually we are our biggest problem. Other people contribute more than their fair share but the first and last battle is usually within self. Most outcomes are decided by our view of who we are in relation to God, others, circumstances and self. We tend to find evidence to support our preconceived notions.

Throughout the experience of spending time with friends brought a great sense of encouragement and relief. There are no illusions about an easy immediate or long term future but a new perspective on the past.

For the gray pilgrim and elf-friend, these were hearty rimes that warmed my soul. How we need the alliance of all good friends to stand against the foes within and without. So many orcs about --too many, too close for my liking. But it was high-heartedness. A great turning was under way. A new peace was upon me. Hope grows anew.

Or back in a less mythical context, lots of warm fuzzies from good friends sure feel great.

Cutting The Yo-Yo String

Throughout the more than two years of devastation, I made a conscious effort to forgive. As specific events happened or as I just waded through the day to day mess, I practiced forgiveness. At times, it was with clenched teeth but I would express it anyway. It is the only way to cut the yo-yo string.

But forgiveness is not only a response to a request to forgive by one who has wronged or hurt us. Forgiveness, by God's grace, can be an initiative too. I can choose to forgive another person who may not ask for or feel the need to be forgiven.

The surprise in forgiveness is that those who initiate forgiveness are the greatest beneficiaries of their choice. Forgiveness is liberation for the one wronged as well as the one who caused the pain. How many people are trapped by pain caused by another and then are trapped again by being unwilling to forgive them. The second snare is worse than any damage another can do to us.

Knowing this, I practiced forgiveness toward Judy. I use the word practiced because it is a very imperfect exercise that must be repeated again and again. Perhaps because of the intensity or the wide spectrum of damage done by her and repeated by her ongoing choices, forgiveness is especially tough. I usually do not struggle with forgiving others. I do not hold grudges. There are no illusions on my part that I have hurt others over my lifetime. I am very aware of that so that forgiveness is something I need from others. It makes it easier for me to forgive them when I remember that fact.

In the loss of a marriage and children with all of the depression and anger, it is tough to forgive. I said it over and over again. There were times I would say the words when my heart and mind shouted "NO WAY!". But often, God's grace begins with our will while our minds argue against it and our emotions don't feel like it. I WILL FORGIVE are not easy words to say. It is the will to forgive that gives us the freedom to live. Without forgiveness, we are bound to those who hurt us. Forgiveness does benefit the one forgiven but as with so much in the Christian life, the one who gives receives much more in return.

Judy had me on an emotional yo-yo for more than two years. When she wanted something, she got it. She was empowered; I was compliant. At times, I would be so angry because I knew that she was pulling my string and "walking the dog." As I would spin and reel, I felt helpless and out of control. Occasionally, I would be able to cut the string. She would reattach it. There were times when I re-attached the string -- it was at least a connection.

My GOWYL moment very much related to forgiveness as well as the insights of others. A sense of personal wholeness gave me the courage to repeat the forgiveness process. This time, more than any other, my emotions and mind caught up to my will. A string is cut and pulled back further from her reach than ever before. I have a renewed sense of freedom and joy beyond the circumstances.

Forgiveness is understood by the model of God' s attitude toward us. There is a need for forgiveness of self as well as seeking the forgiveness of others that we have wronged. For me, those were easier. The real challenge was to forgive Judy and her allies.

I' m glad I practiced forgiving her all of those times when I did not feel like it. There are no illusions that no more injuries will come from her -intended or not. But I am liberated from the past events in a greater way now than ever before. I cut the string on the yo-yo. It' s nice not to have that dizzying feeling any more.

It's a Wonderful Life

Jimmy Stewart ranks as one of America's best loved actors. In many different roles, he has represented slices of life with which many can identify. At Christmas, one of the regular special reruns a thousand times a season is It's a Wonderful Life. It's a movie that warms the heart no matter how often it is watched.

The story involves a conversation between two angels who observe a human, George Bailey, in dire circumstances. Glimpses of his childhood and youth speak of a life of concern for others. With so many problems, George considers jumping in the cold river. Suicide was the only way out, he thought. The guardian angel, Clarence Oddbody, intervenes by jumping in the river first and George -- true to his nature -- tries to rescue Clarence. With a successful rescue, Clarence tells George that he is his guardian angel. In his despair, George wishes that he was never born. Clarence grants his wish and allows George to see what the world without him was like.

Anyone going through great trauma is tempted to question whether life is worth living. In despair our emotions can convince our mind that death or never being born are the right answers. The pain can be so severe and so relentless that death makes sense.

It takes great courage and great faith to believe there is life after your love leaves. Anger, guilt, sadness, grief, and depression are not easy foes to face. Suicide was a reasonable way to respond. But last I checked, I am not dead. (Although I have not read the morning obituaries yet.) I did not fulfill my wish.

In my walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I borrowed hope from others. When I could not hope, they hoped for me. It was enough to make me wish I was never born.

I did not meet a Clarence Oddbody. But there were other ministering spirits who spoke and acted on God's behalf in my time of great need. Some shared their time. Some shared their prayers. Some shared their energy. All shared their love.

While there were times when I felt all alone, I learned again and again that God had not orphaned me.

There were brothers and sisters in Christ who reached out to me in ways that kept me alive spiritually, psychologically, and physically. Often it was the smallest of gestures that kept me going. I will never minimize the power of a word of encouragement, a cup of coffee, or a note in the mail. (For the divorced, it is often only bills or airmail -- nothing but air in the box.) All of us have the power to do good if we are able to look beyond our own busy lives. Many people share in the credit for my survival. (My ongoing challenge is not to make them regret it!)

Who are the people that have invested in your life? Have you told them what a difference they made for you.

Like OSCAR night, "I would like to thank...." That speech would take many hours for me to complete but I' 11 work on thanking my family and friends on the list individually.

For Jimmy Stewart' s character, he saw enough to believe that his life was worthwhile. His very real present problems were so much less than the real joy of being alive. He stood on that old bridge and in tears spoke to God. He said, "Dear God, I want to live again. I want to live again."

It is the prayer of the divorced soul passing out of the valley. Still a zig-zag experience, it is now three steps forward and one step back instead of the reverse. "I want to live again!"

George Bailey got his wish. He was alive again. He ran home to face his problems with an overcomer's spirit that rose above the circumstances.

I didn't choose the pain I've suffered but I am far enough along to say, "I want to live again!" too. There is much to live for. Many real problems await me. But as I look around at my faithful friends, I realize that like George Bailey, I'm the richest man in town. That movie ends with the singing of the traditional Scottish classic, Auld Lang Syne. The words of that song remind me of the inestimable value of my friends and family. It's a Wonderful Life.

Epilogue

The fact of divorce is that you will always be "divorced from someone" for the rest of your life. That is regardless of whether you ever remarry or stay single again. It even applies whether your former spouse dies before you do. Somewhere in the universe there is your ex-spouse.

Being divorced is easier to put behind you if there are no children in the marriage. The children make contact, decisions and news inevitable. You can never fully cauterize those relationships despite how hot it gets.

But when you have shared a life, there is a sense of loss and betrayal. In some ways it is easier if the person has a radical change of lifestyle -- as in my case. Those changes announce that she is different. A person in her lifestyle could not continue in our former life.

For others where there are no real differences between the former and present personality, the closure can be very difficult. If only the marriage has changed then there is a great struggle with "Why?"

Whether or not you took the initiative to end the marriage also influences the course of recovery. The ones who are left face the toughest initial period. By being left, they must confront their pain immediately. For the one who is left cannot rely on a new sense of freedom. The leaver can focus on his initiative and executing what may have been a long and well planned event. If the leaver does not face the problems in his life that contributed to his choice to leave, he will carry them into the rest of his life. It is often later that the leaver must face the ugliness of his life to which he has added great guilt.

But life does go on. As trite as all of the sayings about time are, it is your best friend in the healing process. From the Christian experience, the basics of faith, hope and love really do sustain you and keep you.

The difference between those who have healed and those who have not is not remarriage. Many dysfunctional people remarry and many healthy people do not. Remarriage will not fix any basic problems. It will just add a new relationship with all of its commitments and stresses to be included in your list of unfinished business.

If you want to heal, it is up to you to take the initiative. There are many people who are divorced, bitter and enjoying it. If you ask them, they will tell you how their ex-spouse is ruining them. You may also find out that there were no children and they have not spoken or seen each other for twenty years. We all can choose to head forward or back. How fast we move in either direction does depend on those who are around us and the life skills we have acquired. But we choose which way we are going.

To the degree you must continue in contact with your ex-spouse, you will continue to be vulnerable to the anger and pain. The feelings are never easy but they are familiar. That familiarity includes knowing that you will be fine again after a period of time. In the earliest phase of a separation, an ex-spouse can throw you off for a week with a simple act or conversation. As time passes, you are less affected and the recovery time gets shorter. Eventually it can be just uncomfortable at the time you communicate. That is part of the hope that those who have survived the "D" Bomb can communicate to those in an earlier phase.

You can survive too. You can go on to be a person who is an effective friend, parent, employee and even spouse. Regardless of your present finances, employment or other circumstances, you can be a better person than you were before. Keep focused on making yourself your best you. Measure yourself against yourself. Develop the whole person ~ body, soul and spirit.

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we are becoming more like Him. No matter how tough or ugly life has been for you, it can get better with God's help. Focus on your primary relationship with God and you will have something to share with the others in your life. I survived a high-yield "D" Bomb that destroyed my life. But my life is now better because I am a better person than before. With the will to recover and God's help, you can survive the "D" Bomb too.

The "D" Bomb

- 1. Why was the receipt of papers so difficult for the author?**
- 2. How was it a different experience because the children were present?**
- 3. What did it feel like when you saw the papers for your divorce?**
- 4. How do you think God viewed your divorce?**
- 5. What was the source of hope for the author?**

The Funeral Train

- 1. Why did the author feel that his old wife was "dead"?**
- 2. How did you handle your grief experience?**
- 3. At what point did you feel that your marriage would end in divorce?**
- 4. Who gave up first in your marriage? Why?**
- 5. What did it feel like when you realized that you were now "single again"?**

Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road?

- 1. How do you feel about humor in a book like this?**
- 2. Who do you know that has "recovered" from their divorce experience?**
- 3. Why do you think they recovered?**
- 4. What about those who did not seem to manage well? What were the differences?**
- 5. What are the challenges to your recovery?**

Hurricane Judy

- 1. Why does a hurricane fit as an analogy for a marriage break-up?**
- 2. What were your warning signs that your marriage was struggling?**
- 3. What were the predictions of others in your life about whether your storm would "hit"?**
- 4. How was the initial shock period different from the later stages of the divorce?**
- 5. What are you doing to rebuild your battered shoreline?**

More Pony Tales

- 1. How has your optimism been affected by your divorce?**
- 2. What good news have you had lately?**
- 3. What can rebuild your ability to trust?**
- 4. What role do tough times have for the Christian?**
- 5. What is the risk of becoming a pessimist?**

The Bell Tolls For Me

- 1. What tough anniversaries have you faced?**
- 2. What is the connection between healing and pain?**
- 3. What were your dreams when you were married?**
- 4. How have people in your life reacted to the end of your marriage?**
- 5. What do you feel as you read the author's account of listening marriage tape?**

Bears and No Honey

- 1. What are the changes in "spatial bubbles" around you since the separation?**
- 2. How do you cope with the lack of contact?**
- 3. What do you miss in the routines of your married life?**
- 4. How are you vulnerable to an unhealthy relationship because of your needs?**
- 5. Who in your support circle can you talk to about your struggles?**

Shooting the Porcupines

- 1. How have you dealt with memorabilia from your marriage?**
- 2. What were some of the difficult moments?**
- 3. How many boxes of porcupines do you have left to shoot?**
- 4. How did the division of property affect you?**
- 5. Who can help you face your porcupines?**

Check-Point Charlie

- 1. How have people in your life treated you since your divorce?**
- 2. How do you deal with your part in the marriage failure?**
- 3. Why do you think that people have the reaction they do?**
- 4. What was your reaction to divorced people before it happened to you?**
- 5. What role does the forgiveness of God have in dealing with our skeletons?**

Pin or Be Pinned

- 1. What has your communication with God been like since your divorce?**
- 2. How do you deal with the feeling of pressure?**
- 3. In what ways do you feel weak fight now?**
- 4. What opponents do you face in your struggles fight now?**
- 5. How does our feeling of desperation prepare us for God's grace?**

Pinch Hitting

- 1. Why did the loss of ministry seem to bother the author?**
- 2. What caused the author to believe that he was no longer qualified?**
- 3. How did his philosophy of ministry help him to keep serving?**
- 4. What risks did the pastors who invited the author to speak take?**
- 5. What effect did these preaching opportunities have on the author?**

Moody Blues

- 1. What differences have you noticed in your moods?**
- 2. What kinds of things can shoot you down?**
- 3. Name some examples of moments of euphoria?**
- 4. Why do you think there are such mood swings in divorce recovery?**
- 5. What do you find helps you to survive the mood swings?**

Speech Therapy

- 1. What do you miss about being a couple?**
- 2. In what ways did you identify yourself as a part of the couple?**
- 3. How did you and your ex-spouse combine your strengths?**
- 4. How do you explain your divorce?**
- 5. What do you wish people would say to you when you meet them?**

Eight Again

- 1. How does the author use the past in rebuilding?**
- 2. What effect did the rejection of his ex-spouse have on the author?**
- 3. Where would you visit to see your old self?**
- 4. Have you visited any of your past places? How did it feel?**
- 5. In what ways are you still your old self?**

I'm Sick I Must Be Getting Better

- 1. How has your health been since your separation began?**
- 2. What does physical sickness suggest?**
- 3. What do you do to keep well?**
- 4. Have you reached the point where it feels normal to be alone?**
- 5. How do you deal with the silence?**

My Emotional Compass

1. Where does your emotional compass point?

2. What have your friends done to make you feel safe?

3. Why do you need a safe haven?

4. Who is your mentor?

5. What could others do to help you?

The Dark Lord

- 1. What do you believe about the supernatural?**
- 2. What do you think eternity will be like?**
- 3. Where are you contributing to the lives of other people?**
- 4. How did Jesus deal with spiritual conflict?**
- 5. What risks in your life do you need to beware?**

Social Insecurity

- 1. How has your social confidence changed?**
- 2. In what ways do others treat you differently?**
- 3. Who has made you feel comfortable? How?**
- 4. Who has put you in an awkward position?**
- 5. How do you define your identity?**

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson

- 1. How can old friends give us perspective?**
- 2. Who are your old friends?**
- 3. What makes them so special?**
- 4. How have their lives changed over the years?**
- 5. When will you contact your old friends again?**

What's In A Name?

1. Have you or your ex-spouse had any name changes?

2. If so, what effect did it have on you?

3. What value changes has your ex-spouse had?

4. How have your values changed?

5. What role does God's grace have in your restoration?

Kangaroos & Emus

1. In what ways are you like a kangaroo or a koala?

2. What are you looking forward to?

3. What would you like your future life to be?

4. What choices can you make about your future?

5. How far are you in "getting on with your life"?

Me and My Shadow

- 1. Where do you do your thinking?**
- 2. What gives you stress?**
- 3. How do you cope with your stress?**
- 4. Are you a sprinter or a marathon runner emotionally?**
- 5. What changes have surprised you the most in your new life?**

WYSIWYG

- 1. How transparent are you as a person?**
- 2. Do you feel that your ex-spouse was transparent with you?**
- 3. How has your ex-spouse treated your trust since the separation?**
- 4. Why is the rejection of a spouse so potent?**
- 5. How have you tried to rebuild trust toward others?**

A View from the Basket

- 1. How do you cope with the long-term stress of divorce recovery?**
- 2. How do you continue to be optimistic during the dark rimes?**
- 3. If your ex-spouse is in another relationship, how do you feel about it?**
- 4. Do you still miss your ex-spouse? If so, in what ways?**
- 5. What do you think of the author's comparison with the rejection Christ experienced?**

Applying the Tourniquet

1. How long have you been separated? Draw an emotional graph of how it has felt over the time?

2. How has time been a healer for you?

3. How connected do you still feel with your ex-spouse?

4. What are some of the positive blessings in your life?

5. How are others dealing with your updates on your feelings?

Local Heroes

- 1. Who are some new friends who have helped you?**
- 2. What kinds of things have they done for you that have made a difference?**
- 3. How can older Christians play a special role in your recovery?**
- 4. What are the areas that you find toughest to keep up?**
- 5. Who can you tell that they have made a difference for you?**

I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy...

- 1. What does the word "joy" mean to you?**
- 2. What does the Bible mean when it talks of joy?**
- 3. What has your joy supply been like?**
- 4. Have you had any smiles lately?**
- 5. Is your joy any different now than before?**

The Flip Side

- 1. How do you face the feeling of paralysis?**
- 2. What does the divorce side of your "life album" sound like?**
- 3. What would your flip side sound like?**
- 4. Do you doubt yourself and your judgment more than before?**
- 5. What are the building blocks for your rebuilding?**

Live Long and Prosper

- 1. What role does pain have in our lives?**
- 2. In what ways does our pain protect us?**
- 3. What does the message of Christianity say about pain?**
- 4. How do we achieve wholeness as people in this life?**
- 5. How does surviving our pain make us stronger people?**

Who's That Knocking at My Door?

- 1. How have your finances been?**
- 2. In what ways does our financial dependence turn us toward God?**
- 3. What prayers have you seen answered?**
- 4. How does our faith help us to grow through the difficult times?**
- 5. Who are some people who have reached out to you financially?**

Crushed But Not Conquered

- 1. Do you have the attitude of a survivor?**
- 2. What do you need to survive?**
- 3. In what areas have you been crushed?**
- 4. What helps you to keep going?**
- 5. What choices can you make to help you rebuild?**

Top 10 Music

- 1. What were the dominant feelings you had during your separation?**
- 2. Which of the Top Ten titles would apply to you?**
- 3. In the context of your divorce, how do you see yourself?.**
- 4. What will give you some positive titles for the future?**
- 5. What can you do to improve your future?**

Love Those Warm Fuzzies

- 1. What positive things are happening in your life right now?**
- 2. In what ways are you feeling some relief?**
- 3. What did the author find encouraging?**
- 4. What do you think of the author's idea that "usually *we* are our biggest problem"?**
- 5. Do you feel like you can enjoy yourself yet?**

Cutting The Yo-Yo String

1. Who do you need to forgive?

2. What do you need to forgive them for?

3. What is keeping you from forgiving them?

4. Why is it important to understand forgiveness as an act of our will?

5. Do you feel that you have cut the yo-yo string yet?

It's a Wonderful Life

- 1. Have you felt like you wish you were never born?**
- 2. How have you dealt with any feelings of suicide?**
- 3. What should a new "positive tape" say in your rebuilding?**
- 4. What efforts have people made to encourage you?**
- 5. Are you at the point where you by faith can say, "I want to live again?"**

Ministering to the Divorced

In your ministry role, you can touch the lives of the divorced in significant ways. Your direct involvement with the divorced is a lifeline for these persons. In the larger context of your ministry, you can both model and inform your ministry group on what they can do to reach out to others in your group, friends or family who are going through this all too common experience.

Reading the book by Terry Fraser will give you a window on the kind of experiences and struggle that we find resonate with all who are in a divorce. It can provide you with a way to tune into these people in need.

Make Contact

The first need of the divorced person is contact. With the loss of a spouse and the accompanying rejection, the divorced need contacts. These contacts can be simple, like a cup of coffee, or more formalized like a support group. But keep them from feeling isolated. In their overly sensitized state, they will tend to interpret many unintended cues as rejection. They are in an "I'm a reject so go ahead and reject me too" state of soul. Being there -- even with no "answers" -- confirms to the person that they are still valued. Make the contacts regular. It gives the person something to look forward to. Weekly contacts at different times with individual members of a personal support group is ideal. As a church leader, your personal contacts may be much less frequent but give the divorced person a sense of your commitment to regular contact. Then keep that commitment. Don't state it if you might not perform it.

Allow For Repetition

As the person is processing a ton of new feelings and thoughts, the need to talk and sort through conversation is very important. You will find yourself wanting to move them on to what you have not heard before but the repetition is crucial to their healing.

Create A Circle

These people will be very needy in the initial shock period of a divorce. Most will need a close circle of friends and supporters for at least three years of recovery from the initial separation. If they do not develop an identifiable circle, they will quickly burn out their one or two close friends or family members (or you!) with their great need to talk. Those burnouts will reinforce their world view of rejection. Help them identify (or create) a circle of at least eight people as a personal support group. These are people who are not going through their own divorce at present. It can be friends, family or people in their church

who play this role. They should be asked by the divorced person to be part of this group knowing that the need to talk and be in contact will be there for a period of time. Assure the friends that they are one of a larger group so that they do not panic. Ask for regular contact.

Network The Divorced

Put the divorced person in contact with others who are divorced. This is best achieved through a support group specifically for people who are recently divorced. (The needs of persons who have been divorced for more than three years and the recently divorced are quite different. Longer term divorced persons are best handled in a general "singles again" ministry .) If possible, connect the person with people who have gone through a divorce before and have survived. The main ingredient the divorced need in their new world is hope of survival.

Sensitize Your Sermons

In your preaching and teaching context, do not lose sight of the role you can play in comforting and challenging the divorced. Acknowledging their category from time to time announces that the church knows that they exist and that they belong in spite of their circumstance. They, like everyone else in your congregation, have needs. When mentioning families, throw in the single, single again or single parent families as part of the list. Do not feel the need to preach a watered down view of marriage. Most divorced people will be some of the strongest advocates of marriage because they know first hand the pain of losing a marriage. Be especially sensitive during holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving when the traditional nuclear family is pictured and the divorced feel their loss intensely. On occasions such as Father's and Mother's Day, recognize that there are divorced persons who are missing their children because of a broken home. Don't ignore their presence in your church or they will not be present for long.

Communicate Acceptance

You do not minimize the ideal of lifelong marriage by accepting the divorced person as they are with the love of God. During these times when they believe that God is silent, your voice and those of other loved ones may be the only echoes of God's voice they hear. Assure them of unconditional love in spite of their present circumstances. This is the essential message of Christianity that these people need to have repeated often. Expect their tough questions about God' s fairness. Just keep loving the divorced.

Legal Advice

When reconciliation seems unlikely or if one spouse has retained a lawyer, encourage the divorced person to get legal advice. Especially in custody cases, early decisions are crucial.

The person who is working toward reconciliation is very vulnerable to long-term damage by their spouse's lawyer who can take advantage of the pain and confusion. Generally, the one who has been left will need to be empowered more than the one who left the marriage.

Counseling

Everyone who is going through a divorce needs counseling. It is a life changing experience. Refer the person to a counselor who will help them with the sorting and provide a more formal outlet for issues to be addressed. There will be initial resistance by most people because the counseling process will force the person to visit the present and the past in the marriage. Everyone has moments and issues from their marriage that they would gladly relive and others they would rather forget. The issue is their growth as a person in whatever their new life will be regardless of plans for remarriage or not.

Challenge the Divorced

Give them the challenge to keep going in spite of their pain and despair. Assure them that there is a life for them after this tough time. Encourage them to eat properly, exercise, socialize and develop themselves as people. Suggest they journal their experiences and feelings. It will be a chance for reflection, a way to measure progress and another outlet. Lend them some hope.

Vulnerability

Assume they are vulnerable. During the early stages of separation, the shock usually reduces the sex drive with the accompanying depression. As the separation and divorce stabilize, the return of the desire for sexual activity and the crying need for intimacy makes the divorced person vulnerable. Discuss this with them and provide some accountability to strengthen their resolve to not lose perspective.

Encourage Patience

As tough as it is, encourage them to delay another relationship until there has been time to cauterize the old marriage. For most people who actively work on their healing and growth, the minimum time is three years. A relationship begun in less time is very vulnerable to the time-bombs carried in from the previous marriage.

Focus on the Future

Encourage them to move on in their life. After the hard work of self-evaluation and counseling, help them to turn their eyes toward the future. There is a risk that they will stagnate in their obsession with a lost marriage. Encourage the baby steps on a future path.

Finances

Be alert to finances. Money is usually a problem during a divorce. Fire sale values of a home, the need to create the other half of household furniture and appliances eliminated, and the cost of litigation drain the bank. It is especially true if the break-up comes during a recession (finances are a major stressor in ending a marriage.) If the person is self-employed or in a sales type job that demands concentration, they may hit the skids quickly. Many divorces result in bankruptcy. Monitor the financial needs of the person and encourage counseling in this area early.

You are in a strategic position for these people who are very much "wet cement." During a divorce, they are open to growth and God in very special ways. They are also vulnerable to abandoning their faith as they question God' s love in allowing them to experience this intense pain. You do not need to have all the answers. Just be a steady source of God's hope and love for them regardless of their marital status. As they survive, you will be one of those special people who was there during their Great War. It is a high honor. God bless you for your willingness to serve these walking wounded.

Group Leader's Guide

Leading a group of people in divorce recovery is a great challenge. Here are the types of members your group will probably include.

The Beavers

These are people who are making great progress and who use the experience as an opportunity to grow. Like beavers, they work along and make the best out of even a bad experience. Beavers see this as an opportunity to get busy getting better. They are stronger for it.

The Zombies

Others will appear almost catatonic as they sit detached and listless. Like a zombie, you guess that they were once alive although you could not prove it right now by their actions.

The Volcanoes

There will be those in the group who will spew out their hot lava of rage at every opportunity. Anger can be the middle, first and last name of other members as they fill the air and the group with their rage.

The Pinballs

Those I call the "pinball members" will act like a pinball game where they bounce all over the place emotionally. Expect them to be anywhere except the last place they were.

The Lemons

These bitter members will add a yellow tinge to the group discussion. They will successfully find the negative side of all experiences. They have hardened like concrete and need the pneumatic drill of the love of Christians to break through.

The Rafters

Finally there will be the lazy river members who will just float along making slow but sure progress. They are in no hurry but they are heading in the right direction. Expect them to get caught in the occasional side current but with a nudge, they will be back on course.

Helping people who are divorced takes the ability to be sensitive without being a chameleon. Understanding where your group members are without becoming like them is important for the group to stay productive and for you to protect your sanity. If you become trapped in their emotional black hole you will find it difficult to come along side them to minister effectively.

Expect the constant repetition of the big question, "Why me?" As with most aspects of the divorce experience, you will find yourself giving the only answer, "I don' t know." If you are a person who is used to knowing the answers, you will find that their questions do not have many answers. You don't need to have either a magic wand or book of easy answers. There aren't any.

Focus on the big issues and on the primary relationship of the individual with Christ. Expect many questions about God that will probe the essence of your theology. Once again, do not feel intimidated by this process but join them in the exploration as a fellow traveler.

If you have experienced a divorce yourself, think carefully about what you could or should disclose about your experience. In general, stating that you have an appreciation of their feelings is probably as helpful as dredging up your own pain.

If you have never experienced a divorce, you still have the same basic ingredient to offer the group. You are someone who cares and who is willing to be there. Your group will respect that.

Either way, use the Fraser book which is uniquely transparent to give the group a sense of shared experiences. This is valuable because it reassures the group members that what they are feeling is not unique or unusual. Use the book as the touchstone.

Following are some possible ingredients for you to help identify your group's purpose and to deal with some of the issues.

Ministry to the Divorced

Purpose

The ministry is to assist those who are recently divorced to develop an understanding of their circumstances and how to begin the recovery so that they may move on into a healthy new life.

Focus

This ministry is to provide a nurturing environment for people who are recently divorced. It is intended to be a short-term group. This is not a counseling ministry. Individuals are encouraged to seek individual counseling separately from this group. A combination of group support, teaching and introspective exercises will be the major activities. Meetings are in a home for one and one-half hours on a weekday evening.

Goals

At the end of the quarter, each member of the group should be able to:

- 1. Reflect an increased self-awareness by writing their personal strengths and weaknesses.**
- 2. List the typical emotional stages in a divorce.**
- 3. Identify needs as a person which have contributed to problems in their marriage in a workbook.**
- 4. Name members of their individual support system and their role in the recovery process.**
- 5. List activities and concepts being used to improve as an individual to make them a better person.**
- 6. Identify what change they should make in themselves prior to dating and possible remarriage.**
- 7. Create an action plan to strengthen existing friendships and build new networks.**

The Leader's Role

The leader's role is to act as a facilitator to encourage a nurturing environment conducive to the group process while addressing basic life issues. These issues grow from a healthy personal relationship with God, self-understanding, the needs of their children, other family members, friends, church, employer and community.

There is a delicate balance in your role as a leader where you want to encourage openness without creating a dependence from members of your group on you. At this vulnerable early stage of divorce, there is a great need to latch on to anyone who cares. Your effectiveness will come from caring with some clear boundaries that your group members will need to know and respect.

The support group will function with a growing sense of trust between the members. Since the group will be talking about very personal experiences, the early task for you is to create a sense of rapport and unconditional acceptance. Here is some understanding to include as part of your group's beginning.

- 1. This group is for people who are recently divorced (less than 5 years).**
- 2. The role of the group leader is to assist the group in discussing the issues and experiences of a divorce.**
- 3. The group is not intended to replace the need for individual counseling.**
- 4. While a member may not agree with another's point of view, members of the group will treat each other with respect.**

The group is not a place to air intimate details of the marriage or an ex-spouse's life. The focus is on what the divorce experience is like for us and our response to it.

You may want each member to sign an agreement that outlines these basic ideas and which clearly says that this is not a counseling group with the potential liabilities.

Short-term groups work best both to keep the members focused and to prevent a dependence on the group. I would suggest a thirteen week approach that could be renewed if it is valuable or could move on to another group context.

Using the Terry Fraser book with the accompanying Resource Questions will give a structure to the group meetings. Most of the aspects of a divorce are covered in the book. The questions are designed to give the members prompts to talk both in general terms about the writer's experiences as well as their own. That will help each member to participate at their comfort level. Once the group gets comfortable, your greatest challenge will be to keep them within your time frame.

Try to keep opportunities for all to participate. Like most groups, you may find it difficult to keep one or two from dominating the rest. Use the occasional "Thanks for that" interruption and immediately ask a new question or direct the conversation to a different person.

Finally, beware of the tendency of members to tie you up with extensive phone calls and cups of coffee. Encourage them to develop their own support network or you will be vulnerable to burnout. As hurting and needy people, they will try to make you their rescuer.

As someone who is willing to lead a group of people in pain, your role is very much that of the "emergency room" doctor. What you are doing is to try to stabilize their vital signs and reassure them that they will make it. Any major surgery and long-term rehabilitation will happen in another context. But in a supportive and accepting group, they can keep breathing. As they move along their journey, you will be one of the people that they can look back on as part of their survival story.

In conclusion, remember that the final responsibility for the individual members of your group lies with their relationship with God. You cannot solve their problems for them. Their responses are not your personal responsibility. Do not expect that everyone will heal at the same rate or while in your group. Think of yourself in baseball terms where batting .400 (getting a hit 4 out of 10 times at bat) is great rather than a gymnast who is looking for a perfect 10.0.

God bless you in your efforts to be there for people who are in recovery.