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Shine Through Your Brilliance and Transform Your Life Experience

How Losing my Marriage Saved My Family

By: Melissa Drake

From an outsider’s perspective, I was incredibly nice, giving and probably naïve. They saw me giving my estranged husband everything he wanted. Many pointed out that I was **too** nice — that I shouldn’t trust so much — that I would ultimately be destroyed in the divorce. I stood firm in my nicety and trust. I was keeping a secret though. What others didn’t see was the underhanded, deceitful, hidden agenda that ruled my interactions.

During the initial stages of our separation, fear ruled me. I gave, not from love — but from fear. I also gave with the expectation of getting something in return. I thought that if I gave my ex-husband everything he wanted, he would not fight for custody of our two year old son, Johnathan. My biggest fear was that I would lose my son in addition to my marriage. Mostly though, I feared that I would lose *what was left of me*. Strangely, this fearful scheme resulted in a fabulous growth process for our entire family. One that bore bountiful fruits of caring, respect, loyalty and love.

One week after my son Johnathan’s second birthday, my husband of five years announced, “I’ve fallen out of love with you. I love you as my best friend and partner in raising Johnathan,” He continued, “but I’m not *in* love with you.” Damn. That hurt. But his words dove deep within me where the truth had always resided. I’m wasn’t certain we’d ever loved each other as a husband and wife should.

This conversation, on the drive home from a “lovers get-away gone bad,” began the gradual separation of lives. Within minutes of pulling into the driveway, he packed his bags and said good-bye. As he was packing, my mind was racing. “What should I do? Is this really the end? What about our first counseling appointment scheduled for tomorrow?” Adding salt to the wound, my dad professed, “You lose the weight and he’ll be back,” moments after my husband closed the door.

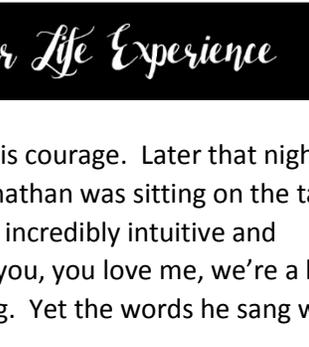
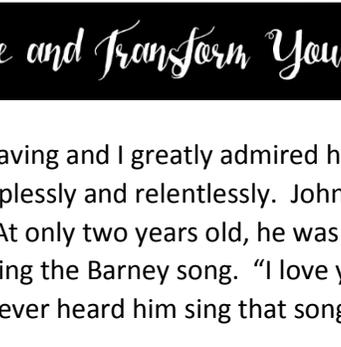
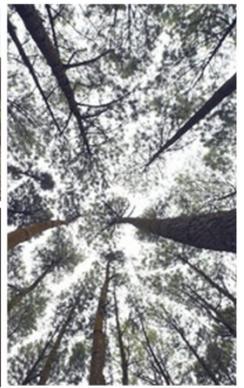
It was clear that we were separating, but the fog surrounding my thoughts left me wondering if there was anything left to cling to, any mustard seeds of faith that could see us through. I told my husband that I understood why he had to leave. I also declared that I would never forgive him if he left the marriage without making an honest attempt to salvage our family ties – for Johnathan’s benefit.

“It’s strange that the skills we need to carry out this give-and-take arrangement are suddenly adequate, when the inadequacy of these same skills led to our failed marriage.”





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Secretly though, I was relieved that he was leaving and I greatly admired his courage. Later that night, as I sat at the table with my family, I cried helplessly and relentlessly. Johnathan was sitting on the table facing me and could obviously feel my pain. At only two years old, he was incredibly intuitive and empathetic. Suddenly, I heard him begin to sing the Barney song. “I love you, you love me, we’re a happy fam-i-ly.” It was the first (and only) time I ever heard him sing that song. Yet the words he sang were so clear and so undoubtedly meant for me.

Later that night, I sat in my bedroom and talked to my sister. Fearful words and thoughts dominated our conversation. Questions bounced through my mind. My head was spinning as my thoughts spiraled out of control. “What am I going to do? How will I get through this? Am I destined to be unmarried forever? Who wants to date a single mom?”

The clincher thought I couldn’t get out of my mind was a statement my mom made while we were making dinner about one month prior. Out of the blue, she said, “I’m so glad you’re not a single mom; You’d never survive.” What the hell? I have no idea where that came from, and now those words echoed in my head. Even more frightening thoughts appeared like, “If I didn’t have my son, this would be much easier.” I even thought, “My husband and I would still be married if we hadn’t had a baby.” Nothing could be further from the truth, but my mind was playing tricks on me at the time.

Not long into the conversation, my sister brought me back to reality. “Melissa, it sounds like you resent Johnathan.” Resent? “That’s a strong word,” I thought. But, that accusation resonated with me. I certainly wouldn’t have admitted it had she not called me out on it. That statement, and the way it so clearly pointed out my tendency to play a victim, was one of many that strung together changed my entire life.

Later that month, I wept as I placed a long distance call. Those fearful thoughts governed again. “He left me. Our five year anniversary is coming up. We were supposed to be celebrating on a cruise.” My wise friend pointed out the way that fear was ruling my thoughts once again.

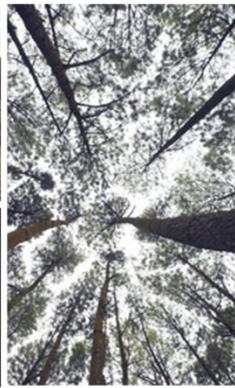
She empathized, yet gave me a better focus. “Can you see that by speaking and acting out of fear, you are simply a victim of circumstance and no longer have any control?” “Hmmm,” I thought. She continued, “Wouldn’t it be more empowering to look at this situation as an opportunity?” “An opportunity for what,” I wondered.

She lovingly explained my new *opportunity*. “Look at your current situation, **with love** — for yourself, for Johnathan and for your husband. If you trust that “everything is happening perfectly, it is easy to see the possibility of an even greater future.” I thought, “You’re kidding, right?”





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A year later, the future was still looming with few marital ties left to sever. My husband and I had systematically separated our lives, our futures, our belongings, our liabilities and our memories. We had slowly dismantled the life we built together. But, married or not, there is one tie that will never be broken — our love for Johnathan. This sweet, innocent boy was conceived in love and will forever be the focal point of our family. We may not be a traditional family, but we are a family nonetheless. It would take courage and strength to ensure that as a family, we continued to grow with the primary focus centered on Johnathan’s needs.

With empowerment, and more importantly, control in mind; I continued my deceitful plan by cooperating, negotiating, planning and rearranging to meet everyone’s needs. What I found was that the more I gave (of myself, my time and my resources) the more my husband gave in return. The real benefit though, was Johnathan’s happiness. It wasn’t long before my secret plan with a hidden agenda became a way of life — **without the fraudulent intent**. The more I acted out of love — rather than fear — the more genuine and peaceful the environment seemed.

I also began to direct this loving attention to taking care of myself, instead of other people. Many say, “The kids come first.” In fact, before divorcing, I argued this point with my husband many times. “We should stay together for Johnathan’s sake.” In reality, this was a front, a cover-up, an excuse to avoid the truth and the real work that was waiting ahead.

I now know in my heart that the individual parents should come first. In doing this, parents create a loving environment for their children. Parents don’t have to live together to be good parents. I don’t believe it’s better for children to live with two parents who are unhappy and unwilling to work out their own issues. Parents in failed relationships are so caught up in their own sadness that they can’t see their children’s needs clearly.

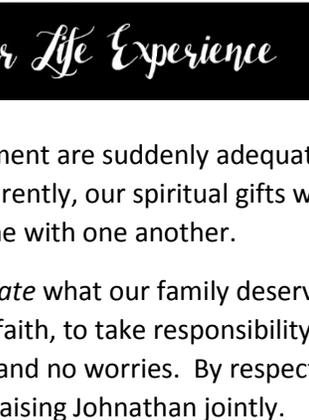
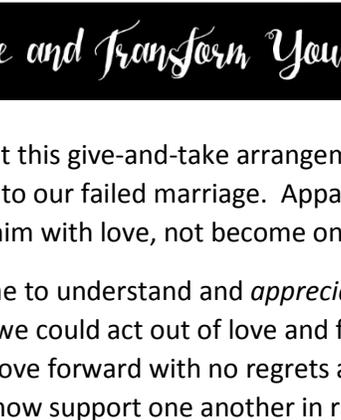
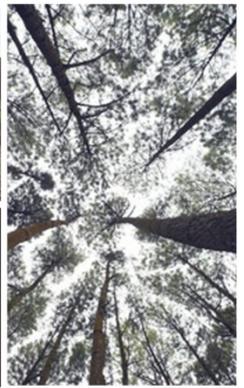
I believe my husband and I became better parents living apart. Because of our dedication to meeting our own needs and respecting ourselves, we can support each other — in the way that true *partners* should. In our separate homes, we are free of the negative attitudes, actions and words that lurked in our failing relationship. Johnathan never has the opportunity to experience silent treatment, passive-aggressive behaviors, sexual tension and unexpressed hostility between his parents.

Instead, he gets to experience, associate and learn from the way his parents talk, negotiate, plan, rearrange plans, cover for one another, look out for each other, agree on disciplinary actions and share the joys and hardships of his life. He now sees the way partners and parents truly care about, respect and love one another.





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It's strange that the skills we need to carry out this give-and-take arrangement are suddenly adequate, when the inadequacy of these same skills led to our failed marriage. Apparently, our spiritual gifts were meant to raise a beautiful son and surround him with love, not become one with one another.

Separating and eventually divorcing helped me to understand and *appreciate* what our family deserves. It cleared away our personal sadness so that we could act out of love and faith, to take responsibility for the situation we created. We were able to move forward with no regrets and no worries. By respecting and caring for ourselves individually, we can now support one another in raising Johnathan jointly.

Update: This article was written in October of 2000 when my son was five years old. My son is now 20 years old. He recently read this article and said it was the most beautiful thing he's ever read.



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