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A divorcée's rite of passage

Psychologist Marilyn Beloff uses a divorce ritual to help people get over the breakup of marriage

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When Dr. Marilyn Beloff's marriage ended after 22 years, she had no clue how to move forward with her life.

Depressed, she couldn't get over it.

Even though she's in the business of counseling others to move through pain, loss and divorce, somehow Beloff couldn't do it herself.

"I met my husband when I was 15 years old. We married and had two children," Beloff says. "When we separated, I felt like I was in a fog ... I couldn't seem to get out of it. It was painful and I felt tremendous guilt.

"I had heard that in Judaism there was this ancient divorce ritual, so I decided I would look into it."

With nothing to lose, Beloff approached her rabbi and decided to give it a try.

Beloff, a psychologist, family mediator and collaborative divorce coach of more than 30 years, was blown away at how she felt after the hour-long rite.

"I found myself shockingly healed and transformed ... it was powerful and life-changing," says Beloff. "After the ritual, I viewed him (ex-husband) differently, not as a husband but as the father of my children. I was ready to view him in a new light and a new relationship."

So what is it about this ceremony that could move one from pain and loss to a sense of freedom and renewal?

"The divorce ritual is similar to a funeral, it's the death of a dream, of a marriage," Beloff says. "It is designed uniquely for the couple and uses symbols and traditions that work for them."

Calling upon personal religious beliefs, ethnic, cultural and family traditions that are significant to a couple, Beloff uses those to help facilitate the ritual.

"For a Catholic, it could entail candles or drumming for aboriginal people ... whatever would work for you," she says. "Then we go where you feel safe and contained, we call it limen (a Latin word meaning threshold)."

During the ceremony, family, friends, perhaps your clergy or rabbi, are invited, even encouraged to take part.

"You have witnesses to deepen the experience, similar to a wedding, people that are connected to you to help you move forward in your intention."

It's really about redefining your roles with each other after marriage. It's also about

treating each other with dignity and respect.

To be fully open to love again, Beloff says, you must let go of the past.

"To really heal, you must speak words; to say I let you go and the other person also needs to say words, vows," says Beloff.

Ideally, Beloff meets each person separately and once together (although she does say it could be done with only one individual if the partner doesn't wish to be involved).

"It's not clinical, it's sort of like birthing, it could be painful but it sets you free."

She points out that unlike the structured traditions we celebrate such as weddings, births, baptisms, graduations and deaths, nothing exists to mark the end of a marriage.

"We have even taken divorce out of the courtroom; now you get your divorce decree in the mail," says Beloff. "It's tragic because it's so solitary ... you are facing a profound death of a dream and I believe you need that sense of ritual, of finality."

Beloff decided to pursue the ritual when she went back to get her PhD. "I started reading about rituals and rites of passage for my PhD and I wondered if other people were healed like me," explains Beloff.

She completed her doctoral work in depth psychology, researching the potential for healing wounds of divorce through an ancient, 3,000-year-old Jewish divorce ritual called the Get.

"I use some of the principles of the Jewish divorce ritual and incorporate it for the secular world," explains Beloff.

People need to approach the ritual with a willingness to move forward with their lives.

"If people come into this with a loving, open intention of moving forward into a different life, it will change their lives," says Beloff. "I am forever different because I was able to let go completely and leave behind the pain from my marriage and to enter a new life, single and free to move forward."

Beloff has been invited to teach at the prestigious Harvard Law School in July 2008, on the use of rituals in healing people.

"I would like to make myself available to those wishing to create their own rituals of divorce with the intention of reducing conflict, releasing and being released, free to move on with their lives," says Beloff, who has curtailed her practice because she believes so strongly in the ritual as the path to healing and moving forward in one's life.

"I'm so passionate about this that I will do it at no charge as a study, so people would have to be willing to discuss with me how it helped them."

Beloff's book, *Moving Forward Using Ancient Rituals in the Modern World*, will be released some time next year. If you are interested in taking part in a divorce ritual, phone Beloff at 604-271-1946.

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