


◆ TIMES OF CHANGE ◆
TIMES OF CHALLENGE



When
Your Son
or Daughter
Divorces



RON DELBENE

with

MARY & HERB MONTGOMERY



*Accept what is brought about,
and in changes that humble you
be patient.*

—Sirach 2:4

*All titles by the authors
in the
Times of Change, Times of Challenge Series*

When Your Son or Daughter Divorces
When You Are Living With An Illness Which Is Not Your Own
When An Aging Loved One Needs Care
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When You Have A Decision To Make
When You Want Your Wishes Known: Wills and Other Final Arrangements
When Your Child Is Baptized

When
Your Son
or Daughter
Divorces



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Although divorce has become commonplace in our society, it is still a painful experience when it happens in your own family. In my work as a pastor, I find that the pain most often overlooked is that of the parents of the divorcing child. They had hoped their child would find a lifelong partner and happiness in an enduring marriage.

Many parents who come to see me feel a sense of shame. "What will people think of me because my daughter couldn't hold her marriage together?" a mother wonders. A father who is full of self-blame says, "Maybe our marriage wasn't a good model."

Often I find that these and other parents want to "fix" the situation. They would like to make everything all right again—like putting a Band-Aid on a scraped knee when the child was small. "We worked out the differences in our marriage," they tell me, "why can't our kids do the same?"

Grown children have to lead their own lives, and we cannot spare them the pain that is part of living. We can, however, always give them our loving support. I hope that in this book you will find understanding for yourself along with ways to be supportive of your divorcing son or daughter.

Ron DelBene

Editor's note: The stories in this book are true. Personal names and some details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals involved.

A Time of Loss

*For everything there is a season . . .
A time to weep, and . . . a time to mourn.*
—Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4

The afternoon Susan came to see me, she was still shocked over the news of her daughter's divorce. "I can't believe it," she said. "*I just can't believe it!* When Amy called last night to tell us her marriage was over, I was so stunned I couldn't speak. My husband and I just spent a week with Amy and her family at Christmas, and we had no idea there was a problem. Even the kids didn't let on that anything was wrong."

Susan believed her daughter's marriage was happy, so news of the divorce was especially shocking. Amy later explained that she hadn't mentioned anything sooner because she didn't want her parents to worry. She and her husband had tried hard to keep their marriage together, but now they both accepted that it had to end.

Even when a child is in an obviously troubled marriage, the announcement of a forthcoming divorce is still a jolt. It sets in motion an upheaval of feelings that will probably take months, or maybe even years, to subside. Many parents don't realize that the distress they feel is grief, and that they are mourning much as they would if there were a death in the family.

Although grief is most often associated with death, we grieve whenever we suffer a significant loss. And when a son or daughter divorces, the losses are many: Lost is your dream of a happy marriage for your child. Lost is the illusion of a harmonious, intact family. Lost are relationships as you once knew them.

The greater the emotional investment in your son or daughter's marriage, the more intense your grief will be. Even though it is your child's divorce and not yours, you may be depressed, even tearful at times.

No two people experience grief in exactly the same way, but if you want to get beyond the pain, you have to acknowledge your feelings and find ways to deal with them. You must have an outlet for your sadness and ways to overcome feelings of bitterness and hostility that can be part of grief. Those who work through their pain eventually make peace with their child's divorce, or at least learn to live with it.

But what if your child was in an abusive marriage, and you are glad to see it end? Will you also grieve? No doubt you will because you, too, have lost the dream of a happy marriage for your child. As the divorce progresses, you are likely to find yourself feeling sad or angry or accusatory or bitter, all of which are feelings associated with grief. Your hope is that the next chapter in your child's life will be better; but before that new chapter can begin, the old one has to end.

Reacting to the News of the Divorce

Give me understanding.

—Psalm 119:34

At nineteen, Coralee was already facing divorce when she came to talk to me. "Even though my parents never came right out and said it, I knew they didn't like my husband," she told me. "I can see now that marrying him was my way to rebel . . . to say to my parents that I was my own person.

"My relationship with Mom and Dad had been rocky for a long time, and I dreaded telling them about my failed marriage. I expected they'd say, 'We're not surprised.' But to my amazement there was none of that. They were more understanding than I ever believed possible."

Telling parents about an impending divorce is a major hurdle for most children. They worry about how their parents will react and remember what happened during times of crisis when they were younger. Will you scold them? Will you give them a lecture? Will you reject them?

Grown children who have had a troubled relationship with their parents are especially uneasy about breaking the news. So, too, are children who have a history of making their parents proud by doing all the right things. Fear of being a disappointment often keeps them from asking for much-needed help.

What do divorcing children want from their parents? They want your love. They want your emotional support. They want a shoulder to cry on. And they want you to listen without passing judgement.

Most children find that their worries about being rejected are unfounded. They also underestimate the help and emotional support their parents are ready to give. When breaking the news about the divorce, children can sense warmth and caring or be put off by what they interpret as coolness and disapproval. The more critical parents are, the more upsetting the divorce is for the child. Comments such as "I told you not to marry him," or "I knew it would never work," are blows to someone who is already having a rough time.

Although children want your acceptance, they do not want your intrusion. Giving unsolicited advice to your grown children says to them that you do not think they are capable of handling their own lives, and that you have all the answers. What divorcing children most need from you is that you be there in ways that empower them to rebuild their lives.

What Is Your Child Feeling?

*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.*

—Psalm 34:18

One of the most difficult parts of being a parent is seeing your child in pain. I know this both from my own experience as a parent and from parents who come to me to discuss concerns about their children. When Joan came to see me, she was very distressed over her son's divorce. Joan was a single mother and her only son, Terry, was the center of her life. When Terry married, no one could have been a happier mother of the groom. And when Terry told her about the divorce, she hurt for herself, but she hurt even more for her son. He was a shy, reserved young man and Joan worried about how he would survive the trauma.

"When Terry's wife left and took the children, he was in so much pain I thought my heart would break for him," Joan said. "But if I was going to help him get through the divorce, I knew that I had to be strong and hide my own hurt."

Joan recognized that Terry was grieving losses even greater than her own. The intensity of your child's grief will depend to some extent upon who initiated the divorce, which in Terry's case was his wife. But virtually all partners in a failed marriage suffer a sense of failure, loss, and confusion. In addition they are vulnerable and frightened about the future. Depression—which is often described as anger turned inward—is perhaps the most common manifestation of grief. Children who are in the process of a divorce react in a variety of ways. Some overeat, some oversleep. Some accept

every invitation that comes along, and others withdraw from family and friends and perhaps even work.

As divorcing children struggle to find their identity as singles again, there is little you can do to take away their emotional pain. Sometimes grief continues long after the divorce is final.

It has been my experience that parents hurt more deeply for their divorcing children if they are dependent, non-assertive types, than they do if they are independent and resourceful. What these parents tend to forget is that their children are no longer little boys and girls but grown-ups who have survived other struggles in life. Often difficulties bring out strengths in children that their parents didn't know they had.

Sometimes children make it difficult to be supportive: They may be secretive and unwilling to share what they are going through. They may be fearful of becoming dependent on you. They may be in too much pain to appreciate any of your efforts to help them. Nevertheless, this is a time when they especially need your understanding and unconditional love.

What Could I Have Done?

*Do not let your hearts be troubled,
and do not let them be afraid.*

—John 14:27

“When my youngest daughter, Julie, was getting her divorce I kept reviewing her marriage as though I was watching a movie that I’d already seen a hundred times,” Sandra told me. “Always I kept asking myself, *What could I have done? What should I have done?*”

Feelings of guilt are common among parents of divorcing children. They torment themselves wondering if something they said or did—or didn’t say or do—caused their child’s marriage to fail. Would there have been less stress in the marriage if they had helped with the rent? Or babysat more? Or made a loan? On the other hand, parents who did these things and more, worry that they interfered too much.

When a daughter ends an abusive marriage, parents often feel guilty that she got into such a relationship. Was her self-esteem so lacking that she felt she didn’t deserve any better? Did she grow up witnessing abusive relationships and use these as a model for her own marriage?

To relieve your guilt, you may want to discuss with your child what it is that is troubling you. But chances are that nothing you did or didn’t do caused your child’s marriage to fail. Likewise, there is usually nothing you can do to keep the divorce from going forward. When it comes to your child’s divorce, you are bound to feel powerless. Much as you want to “fix” the situation, you cannot. Grown children have their own lives to lead, and the parents’ role is to love and support them in the decisions they make.

Standing by Your Child

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

—Luke 12:34

When Dee announced that she was divorcing Jeff, her parents were devastated. Jeff was the son they never had, and Dee's father had grown especially close to him. They shared a passion for golf and often played together. During the divorce proceedings, Jeff invited Dee's father to lunch. This was an opportunity for each of them to express what their friendship had meant.

Dee was not told that her estranged husband and her father were meeting, and was furious when she found out. "How could you go behind my back like that?" she demanded of her father. "Obviously you're taking his side!"

"For months after that, my relationship with Dee was strained," her father told me. "She was so into her own anger that she couldn't understand how hard it was for Jeff and me to lose what we had together."

Every divorce has two sides, but stories like that of Dee and her father have convinced me that if families are to survive the trauma, the first loyalty of parents needs to be to their own child. Any contact with the divorcing son- or daughter-in-law should be with your child's knowledge and consent. If Dee's father had talked with his daughter and explained why the meeting with Jeff was important to him, perhaps she would not have felt so betrayed. As it was, Dee interpreted the meeting to mean that her father had turned his back on her.

In the first months of the divorce process, couples tend to be very self-absorbed. Consumed by their own feelings, they often react unreasonably to any contact their family has with the ex. I find that a good guiding principle during this

emotional time is *My child, right or wrong*. No matter how fond you were of your former son- or daughter-in law, your own child has to be Number One. This is for the sake of your child and the preservation of the family.

But what if your child appears to be clearly at fault? Even if you can't support a child's actions, you can still support him or her with your love. Scripture's story of the prodigal child is a parent's model for loving unconditionally. When such love is lacking, family relationships can be forever damaged.

Sara is a soft-spoken woman in her late thirties who told me that when she gave up custody of her two young daughters, her family was so appalled that they rejected her and sided with her ex. Sara lived hundreds of miles away from her family, and although they knew she was seeing a therapist, they did not understand the severity of her depression. Her decision to let her ex have custody of the children was based on what she thought was in their best interests.

After two years of treatment for clinical depression, Sara felt well enough to go to court and ask for custody, which was granted. She now owns a successful boutique and has made a good life for herself and her daughters. Although many years have passed since the divorce, Sara's relationship with her parents and three sisters is still strained. Being rejected by her family at such a critical time in her life put a distance between them that Sara does not think will ever be completely bridged.

Divorce Affects the Entire Family

Be at peace with one another.

—Mark 9:50

Brothers and sisters of your divorcing child may have many of the same problems and confusions that you have. Sixteen-year-old Joel told me that he thought of his sister's husband as a big brother. "When I heard that Beth was getting a divorce, I took it really hard," he said. "I'd like to be in touch with Rick, but I don't think that will happen. And even if we did get together, I suppose it would be pretty awkward."

When a divorce occurs in the family, brothers and sisters deserve to be talked to individually and have the situation explained to them. Honest sharing brings resentments out in the open. If the troubling issues are dealt with constructively, both you and your children will emerge with new understanding. This can be a significant help in uniting your family.

The stress of a child's divorce can create strife between the parents. Some parents blame each other for perceived weaknesses in their children: "He's irresponsible because you never made him accountable." Or, "You spoiled her by giving her everything she asked for." The divorce of a child sometimes triggers the breakup of the parents' marriage. Seeing their child get out of an unhappy situation often gives them the courage to do the same.

Other parents find that uniting behind their child strengthens their marriage. Parents who are able to provide a model of unity and strength make the whole family stronger and better able to deal with the divorce.

Helping Financially

Let us choose what is right; let us determine among ourselves what is good.

—Job 34:4

Even though it had been seven years since Gloria's divorce, I noticed that her face still clouded with pain as she talked about it. "My husband walked out on us when my sons were just toddlers," she said. "He had juggled our finances, so I didn't even have enough money to pay the utility bills. I've often wondered what would have happened if my parents hadn't helped me so I could become self-supporting."

Even when financial needs are obvious—as they were in Gloria's situation—it is a good idea to let your divorcing child bring the matter up. Jumping in and taking charge tends to foster dependency. Often the subject of money comes up indirectly. A daughter mentions the need to get a loan, or a son says he is looking for a second job. If you are financially able, you might then want to pursue the matter and offer assistance.

When helping children over a financial rough spot, the following questions need to be addressed:

- What are your child's financial needs?
- Is your help wanted?
- What are your resources?
- What are you willing to loan or give outright?
- What are the terms?

Some children assume that because their parents provided for them in the past, they will also help them out in the future. But your pockets may not be as deep as your child thinks they are, and a frank discussion about money is called for. A son might not know that you took a second

mortgage on the house to pay college expenses or a daughter may be unaware that you borrowed money to pay for her wedding. Perhaps you are having to take retirement early or are contributing to the support of your own parents. Money is a sensitive area in all relationships, and being forthright with your child reduces the chance that tensions and misunderstandings will develop.

Whatever help you give, the terms need to be clear. Is the help short or long term? An outright gift or a loan? If it is a loan, will there be interest? When will the money be repaid? As with any loan, a promissory note should be signed.

Whether giving or loaning money, it is a good idea to designate it for a specific purpose. Gloria's parents paid her college expenses so she could complete her degree and get a job as a teacher. Other parents might agree to give six months of rent money or pay off credit card debts. Earmarking money in this way has an advantage over giving it in a lump sum to be used at the child's discretion. If a lump sum is given and you learn that your child took a vacation or did something else that you consider a frivolous use of money, you are likely to feel resentful about the help you are giving. Whatever you decide, it is important to remember that giving or loaning money does not entitle you to control your child's life or impose your values.

Moving Back Home

*Let us then pursue what makes for peace
and for mutual upbuilding.*

—Romans 14:19

Kay came to see me after receiving a phone call from her angry daughter-in-law. "She called to announce that she was getting a divorce and had told Greg to move out," Kay said. "All I could think was, *Oh, no! he's going to come back home and live with us!*"

Greg was the youngest of Kay's four children and the last to leave home. Kay and her husband had quickly adjusted to their empty nest. After so many years of parenting, it was finally *their* time and they were thoroughly enjoying it. But then came the bombshell about the divorce. "It was even hard to admit to myself that I dreaded having him back home," Kay said. "Inside me a small voice kept saying, *Mothers aren't supposed to feel that way. They're always there for their kids.*"

Greg did come home, but only for a few nights. Right away he informed his parents that he had no intention of living with them. He was renting an efficiency apartment as soon as possible. Within a week, that is what he did.

For many parents, Kay's reaction was understandable, yet she said she will probably always feel a little guilty about it. "It makes me wonder what kind of mother I am," she said.

Although you want to keep your door open to your children, divorce adds some complicating factors. Rather than your extending the invitation, it is best if your son or daughter asks to come home. If the marital conflict ends in reconciliation, your welcoming gesture might later be remembered as interference.

Having a child move home again should not mean total sacrifice on your part. The new living arrangement needs to include plans for your life as well as for your child's. Issues have to be confronted, rules established, responsibilities made clear. How long does the child plan to stay? Will payment be made for food, lodging, laundry, utilities, phone calls? What trouble spots might there be and how can you deal with them?

Good communication is a must. When people share the same living space, inconsiderate behavior and petty annoyances are bound to occur. Unless all members of the household are open and honest with each other, grievances accumulate and eventually erupt.

Responsibilities need to be clearly understood. It is not enough to say that household chores are to be shared. Everyone needs to know precisely what the chores are and who is responsible for seeing that each gets done.

A divorcing child with children adds another dimension to coming home. Youngsters tend to get up early, live in every room in the house, and leave a trail of clutter behind them. To maintain harmony and keep relationships from breaking down, parents and grandparents need to agree on rules. One rule that many families have found workable is that when grandparents are alone with the children, they are in charge, just as a sitter or other caregiving person would be. But when the child's parent is present, he or she takes over.

When there's a divorce in the family, welcoming a son or daughter back home is a generous and loving thing to do. But making the living arrangement harmonious requires effort on everyone's part.

Relationships with the Ex

Lead me in your truth, and teach me.

—Psalm 25:5

While the divorce proceedings are in progress, loyalty to your child may demand that you have nothing to do with the soon-to-be ex-spouse. Such contact could even affect the proceedings. At some point you might want to get in touch with the ex, but before doing so, see how your son or daughter feels about it.

Lois was widowed at an early age and raised her only son Frank alone. Frank's divorce was especially traumatic for Lois because his wife Connie was the daughter she always wanted. "I felt this terrible need to meet with Connie and see how she was getting along," Lois told me. "After the divorce I mentioned this to Frank. He wasn't enthusiastic about our getting together, but he wasn't totally against it either. Connie and I met a couple times, and I know our relationship will soon be a thing of the past. Even so, I feel better because she knows I still care about her and want her to be all right."

The more affection you have for a son- or daughter-in-law, the greater your sense of loss will be. If you felt you could retain your deep attachment, your pain would be eased somewhat. But I find that this usually doesn't happen. Divorce creates a barrier, and the relationship breaks down. Sometimes the parent ends the relationship and sometimes it is the former spouse.

During her marriage, Jill had an especially warm and caring relationship with her mother-in-law. After the divorce she tried to hold onto the bond they had. "For over a year I visited her every week," Jill said. "I always took an interest in her and her welfare, but that wasn't reciprocal. Never

once in all the contacts I had with her did she say, 'How are things going for you, Jill?' My visits grew less and less frequent, and now we only see each other on holidays when the family gets back together. On those occasions there is definitely a distance between us."

When the divorcing couple has young children, more is at stake. If your child is not the custodial parent, fear of losing contact with your grandchildren is reason enough to stay in contact with your child's former spouse, even if the relationship is strained. Parents who remain on friendly terms with the ex are likely to find that the relationship changes when a remarriage occurs. In a desire to leave the past behind, grandparents are often shunned by the ex. Courts are full of cases in which grandparents are fighting for the right to see their grandchildren.

If a divorced child remarries—which often happens within three years—the parents typically lose interest in the former son- or daughter-in-law. They see it as a time to close the book on the past and turn to a new chapter in the life of their family.

“But There Was Always Grandpa and You”

I have loved you with an everlasting love.

—Jeremiah 31:3

Carolyn and Fred's son had a wife who abused alcohol over much of their nineteen-year marriage. The third time she was in treatment and went back to drinking, their son filed for divorce and got custody of Megan, their teenage daughter.

Carolyn and Fred had always been loving grandparents to Megan and anguished over her troubled family life. When Megan graduated from high school, Carolyn told me that, in a private moment, she told her granddaughter how proud she was of her. “I know you went through some really difficult times at home,” Carolyn said, “And yet you turned out to be such a fine young lady.”

“Sure it was rough sometimes,” Megan admitted, “but there was always Grandpa and you.”

“And then,” Carolyn related, “Megan wrapped her arms around me in a long, hard hug. It gave me an opportunity to blink away the tears in my eyes.”

Not all grandparents are alike, of course, and many are separated from their grandchildren by distance. Even so, the bond between grandparents and grandchildren tends to be second in emotional power and influence only to the relationship between parent and child. The praise and unconditional love of grandparents builds self-esteem and helps children feel secure. Grandparents also give children a sense of life's continuity—of one generation giving birth to another. As one ten-year-old girl wrote in a school essay, “I love my grandma

very much and one of the reasons I love her is because she made my dad."

It is very difficult to watch the struggle and sadness of grandchildren. They, too, grieve for the breakup of their families, and their grief is revealed in different ways. Some talk about their feelings, but many others are withdrawn or become aggressive and get into fights. Although children may appear to get over grief more quickly than grown-ups, this is not the case. Generally they grieve longer, but their feelings come and go because they cannot sustain long periods of stress.

Although you want to lessen the pain of your grandchildren, you probably aren't sure what to say or do. A starting point is to ask at least one parent, but preferably both, how they have explained the separation. If the parents have not done this, it may motivate them to do so.

Children have a right to their privacy, so instead of initiating a conversation about the divorce, simply respond to what they have to say. Often children feel that they caused their parents' divorce. Being assured by a loving grandparent that their family did not break up because of anything they said or did could lift a heavy burden of guilt from them.

When a divorce occurs, children like to feel that they can count on their grandparents. But sometimes their behavior is puzzling. Divorce tends to make children suspicious of all relationships, and they might even reject the comfort you offer. They may feel that by turning to you they are being disloyal to their parents or that it looks like they are choosing sides. Whatever the reaction of your grandchildren during this difficult time, your patience and understanding are important. In time your loyalty to them will strengthen the bond between you.

Grandparents Have Rights Too

Do not refrain from speaking at the crucial time.

—Sirach 4:23

Sharon's only grandchild was three-year-old Emily, a child she adored. Before her son's divorce, Sharon and Emily had developed a close, loving relationship. Sharon's daughter-in-law got custody of Emily, and after the divorce she allowed Sharon to see Emily and have her to her house for short visits. In telling me her story, Sharon said she was always careful to observe all the rules set down by Emily's mother so as not to lose the right to see her granddaughter. But all of a sudden her ex-daughter-in-law told her that she wasn't allowed to see Emily anymore. The reason? Emily's mother was expecting another child, and she said it would be too confusing to both children to have different sets of grandparents. When Sharon came to see me, she was understandably devastated and wondered if there was anything she could do.

Most grandparents continue to have access to their grandchildren, especially if the relationship was good before the separation. But even then grandparents are sometimes denied the right to see their grandchildren because of misunderstandings or misplaced anger. In Sharon's case, it was a change in circumstances that caused her ex-daughter-in-law to deny her visitation rights.

What can grandparents do to protect their rights? When the divorce is being negotiated, I suggest they request that their rights be included too. This needs to be done even if your child has custody, because if he or she dies, the ex could

have sole custody and deny you contact with your grandchildren.

When an ex-in-law has custody, it is important to remain on speaking terms and maintain as cordial a relationship as possible under the circumstances. If communication breaks down, a friend, someone in the family, or a member of the clergy may be able to help you reconcile your differences.

All fifty states have statutes granting grandparents the right to petition for visitation rights to their grandchildren, even over the objection of a parent. But this is a last resort. Going to court is costly both financially and emotionally. When the matter becomes a legal battle, the best interests of the children are often lost. One positive benefit of going to court is that at least the grandchildren know you care enough to fight for your right to see them.

If grandparents win their rights in one state and their grandchildren are moved to another, they may have to start over. State laws vary, and in most cases grandparents must abide by the laws of the state where their grandchildren live. Although Congress passed a Model Visitation Statute, it is up to each state to adopt it. So far this has not happened. Even if the law were uniform throughout the country, it would still not guarantee automatic access to grandchildren. The burden of proof is on the grandparents to show why they should see their grandchildren, and why it is in the best interest of the children to see them.

Revising or Writing Your Will

Wisdom is with those who take advice.
—Proverbs 13:10

Revising your will is something that needs to be done soon after a divorce in the family. Ellen discovered the importance of this after her husband died of a sudden heart attack. When his will was read, she was stunned to learn that his valuable coin collection was going to their ex-son-in-law. Ellen knew that her husband would not have wanted him to have his prized coins, but he just hadn't gotten around to changing his will.

Whether revising or writing a will, certain factors need to be considered if there is a divorce in the family. This is especially so if there are grandchildren. To ensure that your money and valuables go to the people you want to have them, you need to consult a lawyer. The following questions raise issues you may want to discuss.

- How do I ensure that the ex-spouse is excluded from my will, if that is my choice?
- How can I leave money for the grandchildren and ensure that the ex will not get control of it?
- If grandchildren should die, what do I want done with the money intended for them?
- How do I write my will to protect any grandchildren born after the remarriage of my divorced child?

Each family's financial situation is unique. The important thing is that all the issues relating to your circumstances be taken into account so that whatever you leave behind is distributed according to your wishes.

Reaching Out

*Learn where there is wisdom, where there is strength,
where there is understanding.*

—Baruch 3:14

“When my daughter was getting her divorce, you would have thought I was the one divorcing,” Anna told me. “I was in such distress that I wasn’t eating or sleeping and finally went to my doctor. She suggested I get counseling, and that is what I did.”

Parents who are distressed over a child’s divorce need to find ways to help themselves. By taking care of yourself, you will be the most help to your child.

- Eat nutritious foods and get enough sleep.
- Exercise as a way to reduce stress.
- Share your story with friends who have gone through a similar experience.
- Talk with your pastor.
- Get professional counseling if you feel the need for it.
- Join a support group for parents who are experiencing a divorce in the family. If such a group is not available, consider starting one. You may be able to use your church or community bulletin to announce its formation.
- Pray regularly and often. Tell God what you are feeling and what your needs are.
- The internet has additional resources and information providing emotional support, legal assistance and a voice for grandparents seeking to care for their grandchildren.

If God Were to Ask, “What Do You Want?”

Be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

—Romans 12:12

During times of stress, we long to feel God’s comforting presence. But often our thoughts are scattered and it is difficult to pray. If this is true for you during the time of your child’s divorce, the breath prayer may be a help. It is a simple way to pray that speaks from the heart and lets you feel the nearness of God. The breath prayer does not use other people’s words. Rather, it is a short, personal prayer that lies within you, a prayer you discover for yourself and say as easily and naturally as you breathe. Saying the prayer lets you know that you are not alone in the midst of your hurt and confusion. God is there to comfort, guide, and sustain you. To discover your breath prayer, follow these simple steps:

Step 1

Sit comfortably and relax. Close your eyes and remind yourself that you are in God’s loving presence. Recall a passage from scripture that puts you in a receptive frame of mind: perhaps “The Lord is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1) or “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

Step 2

With your eyes closed, imagine that God is calling you by name. Hear God asking, “(your name), what do you want?”

Step 3

Answer God directly with whatever comes from your heart. Your answer might be a single word: *peace* or *insight* or *guidance*. It could be a phrase: *to feel your presence* or *to find my way*. Your answer might be a sentence: *I want to make a wise decision* or *I want to see the way clearly*.

Step 4

Combine your name for God with your answer to the question, *What do you want?* and you have your prayer. Typical prayers when you are concerned about divorce could be: *Let me know your peace, O God* or *Jesus, let me feel your presence*.

Some prayers are more rhythmic when God's name is placed at the beginning of the prayer; others require it at the end. When your prayer seems right for you, begin to use it throughout the day: while driving, combing your hair, preparing a meal, waiting in line. Use it every time you reflect or think about your divorcing child. With continued use, your prayer will become as much a part of you as breathing.

Because so much of your concern is focused on your child just now, you may feel inclined to pray in his or her name. For example: "May Cody know your peace, O God" or "O Jesus, let Jane feel your presence." Although the breath prayer can be used in this way, I encourage you to pray it for yourself. The inner peace and sense of God's presence that comes from saying the prayer will be a witness and source of support for your child. Using the breath prayer to express the deepest desire of *your* heart helps you stay focused on God and attentive to the many ways that God is speaking to you in the everyday circumstances of your life.

About the Authors



Ron DelBene has been doing spiritual direction and leading programs in the areas of prayer, spirituality and personal development since 1963. Ron holds a Master's degree in Theology and a Doctor of Ministry in Spirituality and Organizational Systems. He has done additional post-graduate work in education, psychology, and counseling. He is an author, poet, artist and Episcopal priest. He was an assistant professor of theology, director of a campus ministry center, and national consultant in religion for an education division of CBS.

Since 1980, Ron's organizational system's leadership has been primarily in churches, empowering them in understanding their mission, goals and structure for effective and creative ministry. Ron and his spouse, Eleanor, reside in Trussville, Alabama, and have two grown children and two grandchildren.

Mary and Herb Montgomery are full-time writers who have created numerous books and educational projects to help both children and adults grow in faith. The Montgomerys live in a Minneapolis suburb.

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