“D” is for Divorce: An Autoethnography

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this is to critically examine the author’s adult experience of her parents’ divorce. Through the use of reflexive authoethonography, she details the event of the divorce and the feelings and emotions experienced as an adult, only child. Furthermore, she offers her inner thoughts and observations about how to comprehend and live through a permanent, unexpected change. Findings may assist others with divorced parents, the grieving process, and how to cope with life altering events.

Key Words: divorce, life change, family dynamics, only child, autoethonography

**Introduction**

This story is a compilation of different thoughts and emotions caused by what I consider a traumatic event. It is a story many may relate to, if not directly because of the content itself, but from the feelings and emotions involved. According to Patton (2015), “In autoethnography, then, you use your own experiences to garner insights into the larger culture or subculture of which you are a part” (p.102). In the following section, I pull from my experience and how it relates to various statistics of culture. While it was not easy to write, I tried my best to be authentic and unafraid. What follows is more than just a story, it is my heart.

**How it All Began**

Thousands of millions of questions swirled in my head as I began: Who cares? Why am I writing this? What do I have to offer? My lack of confidence in my ability to write such a piece deflated me as well. This piece was freeing and numbing at the same time, as I had to pull from my deepest insides and revitalize feelings and emotions I had once tried to keep hidden. My thoughts were like zombies, once dead and slowly creeping back to life. Being a child of divorce was not a club I wanted everyone to know I was in, and at the same time, a club I will always be part of. This piece is my decision to come out of hiding and embrace what is. My hope is that my experience may help others who have gone through, or are currently going through, divorce as an adult.

Before I began a qualitative statistics course in my graduate program, I was unfamiliar with the term autoethnography. According to Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011), autoethnography seeks to describe and analyze one’s personal experience as it relates to cultural experiences. While I learned about different types of inquiry, I found autoethnography to be extremely personal and almost intrusive. Why would anyone put so much of themselves on paper for strangers to read? How do you find a balance between sharing enough versus too little? I shuddered at the thought of my parents or my family members reading this piece. Would they be mad at me? Being a strong introvert, I was never one to expose too much of my heart to anyone, let alone total strangers. Susan Cain (2012) writes how even though introverts do not share their thoughts as openly, they still have a lot to say. As an introvert, my mind tends to work faster than words can come out. Deep, internal reflection was necessary for me to create this piece and tell my full truth.

I barely spoke of my parents’ divorce when it happened. I did not even tell my friends initially because of personal embarrassment and also disbelief. Things could change, I would tell myself. Nothing is ever permanent, right? I only wanted to keep this news close and hidden away, door locked and the key thrown out. I feared if I opened up and spoke about it to others, it could never be reversed. My words would permeate into the atmosphere and forever be a part of its existence. Talking about it made it much too real. In the beginning, I hung onto the false hope things could change. Was this the best solution? Of course not. But at the time, it gave me a sense of normality and peace. In the back of my mind I knew I would not feel this again for a long time.

My childhood before my parents’ separation is a happy memory. Both of my parents are extremely dedicated, loving individuals who put family first before anything else. My mother, an extremely smart, intelligent women with a law degree, and my father, an English teacher with a heart for helping others and working with students, both influenced me in different ways. As an only child, my parents very rarely went anywhere without me and we did things mostly as a family. We were a tight-knit group. I distinctly remember all my toys and stuffed animals being in groups of three: a mom, a dad, and a baby. I never felt lonely as an only child, as many non-only children tend to speculate. I still hate being the center of attention and enjoy times when I can truly be alone. I did, however, always feel a sense of responsibility, not only for myself but for my family. If we did not look out for one another, who would? I never thought to look out for one of us.

**The Event**

On April 27, 2011, I headed home to visit my mother. I lived close by with a friend of mine and I usually stopped home once a week. I enjoyed this time with my mother. We would catch up and sit in the kitchen, surrounded by natural light pouring in. As I walked in the house, I can still picture her standing in the kitchen with a yellow piece of paper beside her. Visually distraught, I went over to see what this little piece of paper could possibly say to make my mother so upset. Little did I realize, this note would change my existence as I knew it. I picked up the paper and my father’s handwriting appeared. After 30 years of marriage, he was leaving my mother and wanted a divorce. While divorce rates had been dropping since 1996, it appeared to be alive and booming in my life (“McKinley Irving,” 2012). I was 22 years old at the time.

Time between this discovery and the word “divorce” coming up more often in conversation is a blur. The separation moved fairly quickly and I became the unofficial sole caretaker to my mother. I made sure I was home as often as possible to be with her. I cooked dinner, mowed the lawn, grocery shopped, and took care of any other general errands of the house. When I was not with her, I thought I should be and a big part of me felt anxious and guilty. I was always conscious of my mother’s schedule and her whereabouts, and tried to base my plans around her. Did I ever struggle with this? Yes. Did it cause internal stress? Sure. Although it was natural for me to want to be there for her, I was not able to heal myself. My personal, inner emotions were pushed further and further away, as I felt it was my only option was to help her.

My relationship with my father was different. He came around only to pick up his clothes and the furniture he wanted, but not before he checked with me to make sure my mother was not home. He never said much, but his actions spoke more than he could ever say. It seemed to be almost effortless for him. I struggled with the lack of emotion he carried every time he came by the house. He had no interest to try and make things work or keep our family together. My heart sunk a little deeper every time I saw him and sometimes still does, even to this day. I knew deep down there was no hope of reconciliation. This was not a stranger who did this. This was my father. Once he made a decision about anything, big or small, he stuck with it and never looked back. His mind, heart, body, and soul were made up and to him. Regardless of what I wanted or hoped for, I was on this train of chaos with no exit sign in sight.

The entire divorce process lasted from 2011 to 2013. So much took place over those two years. My childhood home went up for sale, was prepped and cleaned for showings to potential buyers, and furniture slowly began to be sold. I distinctly remember the day when my father came and took the heavy, brown credenza once situated in the living room. It was a piece that once held my favorite movies, pictures, and toys. While he moved, he never muttered a word about how sorry he was or how he would make things better. He almost seemed calm and content. How could he move something so big and heavy without hesitation or struggle? How did he make it look so *easy*? The sense of effortlessness will forever be imprinted in my head and in my heart.

**The Aftermath**

Thirty years in a committed relationship is a long time. In my mind, once a certain age is reached divorce is not even an option. Interestingly, LaPonsie (2015) reports the divorce rate for couples 50 years old or older has doubled since 1990. I did not understand how it was so easy to let it all go, after so much time, emotion, and energy was invested. In my experience, time and years committed did not seem to make the slightest difference. I grew afraid to think about marriage in my own life, as my feelings and perceptions of men shifted into a more negative light. My father had always been such a positive, adult male role model. It was from him I learned how to be a strong, independent woman and to never depend on a man for support or survival. His recent actions made me reconsider the idea of marriage and if trust and commitment really exist. If my own father could do something so dramatic, any man I was emotionally involved with could do the same. There was no way to know. An array of thoughts never seemed to stop swirling, around, around, and around again. In this puzzle, my scattered mind seemed to be the most difficult piece to put back together.

The question of ‘why?’ was one asked so many times by others. Dr. Pepper Schwartz (2012) writes long term-married couples tend to split up for various reasons. Infidelity, along with lack of communication and trust, are all reasons why couples tend to split up. Many times, couples struggle in their relationships for quite a while before one person takes the next step and considers divorce. I do believe my parents had been unhappy for many years and did not communicate well. Within the last five to seven years or so, they were often separate from one another and we rarely did things the three of us. As crazy as it sounds, this slowly became our new normal without me even noticing while I was in the moment of it. As I look back, I wish I had made more effort for all of us to be together when this was happening. I wish I could have saved my family.

The official divorce in writing did not mean the pain was over. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my father had met someone else and was remarried one month after the divorce was finalized. According to Rose Kreider (2006), “Most men and women marry within five years of divorce. Generally, a higher percentage of men remarry within five years than women” (p.7). This statistic turned out to be true in my situation. As thoughts of the divorce moved around in my head, a brand new wave of thoughts, feelings, and emotions entered when my father remarried. Of course I was upset, but there was something comforting in the fact he had met someone else. It was something concrete I could hold on to, in order to understand what brought on such a sudden change. There was less to question or speculate.

There was no grace period to get to know this new person my father had chosen as his partner. Initially, I was not able to meet his wife, for fear that even just one glance would bring me to my knees. The image of them holding hands produced anxiety in my every being. I never heard my father yell when I was a child, at me or anyone, but as an adult his voice was clear: he would be absent in my life until I was present in hers. I had to figure out how, at the very least, exist in her presence. At this point, my psyche was frayed and so the best I could do was be tolerate. I did not necessarily have to feel any emotion towards her, or even like her, but I could not stay in the same place of pain I was in. I had to learn how to best move forward within this new dynamic.

**Final Thoughts**

Anyone who has went through, or is currently going through, a divorce in their family knows the pain. With any life-altering event, adjustment is never easy. There are a lot of tears, yells, and screams. Numbness overcame my body for a period of time, and almost like death, I grieved over a loss. I think time is a powerful force in this process, but nothing ever gets forgotten. It has been five years since my world exploded and even to this day, I wake up with thoughts of what my family once was. I am grateful my memories will always be my memories and I am stronger than I ever would have been if this had not happened. Informal learning, or learning outside of the formal, traditional academic setting, can be extremely powerful (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Parents are supposed to set a positive example for their children but sometimes they teach more when they are the opposite. What matters now is to take what I have learned and maybe help others going through something similar. I must move forward in the most positive away possible.

This experience taught me that nothing is permanent and anything can change in a split second, even when you think you are just driving home to have lunch. The best anyone can do is live in the moment and enjoy what is. I never thought I would be an only child with divorced parents. I never thought I would still struggle in my relationship with my father or how drastically relationship dynamics can change. But I have learned the best and only thing to do is take everything day by day, moment by moment. It is amazing what we, as human beings, can endure emotionally and yet continue to survive. From my story I hope to provide what might be an uncommon perspective from someone who experienced divorce as a young adult. There is limited research on the effects of divorce on children over the age of eighteen, and I hope my story can add to the discussion. Writing this piece has lessened my fear of the “d” word. I feel as though I finally let out a secret I had been holding onto for years. I am not sure what the future holds but from what I have learned and experienced thus far, I believe my mind and my heart will be well-prepared.

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