

# Taking It Home: Families and Faith

## Tools for Deepening Your Faith at Home

# Let's Talk About Divorce and Broken Relationships

by Colleen McDonald

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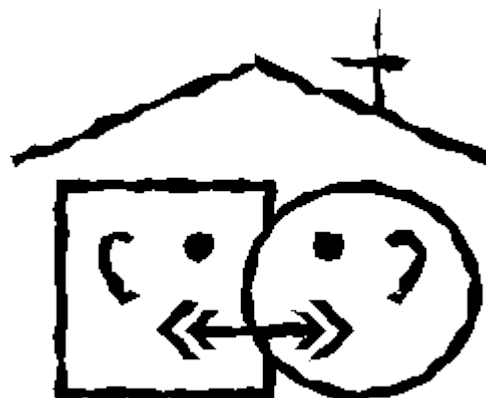
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*Is love an art? Then it requires knowledge and effort. Or is love a pleasant sensation, which to experience is a matter of chance, something one "falls into" if one is lucky? Not that people think that love is unimportant. They are starved for it; they watch endless numbers of films about happy and unhappy love stories, they listen to hundreds of trashy songs about love, yet hardly anyone thinks that there is anything that needs to be learned about love.*

*--Erich Fromm, The Art of Loving*

*Divorce is worse than physical death in many ways, because with death there is closure. It's the end, that's the funeral, that's the casket, it's over. With divorce, it's never over unless there's no money involved, no children involved, and both parties have found different mates.*

*--Earl Grollman, quoted in "Coping with Loss: Teachings from a Master" by Dan Kennedy*

*Grief changes your perspective overnight, but it can take two to five years to appreciate life from this new point of view. In the meantime you get through it the same way you get through anything else: one step at a time. The road is rockier, the stumbles are many, but one day you'll realize that the journey is done and you've won the marathon.*

*The pain you once felt is almost balanced by the satisfaction you feel now, for you have learned a great truth: if you can ... survive the ... divorce [of] someone you once loved, you can survive anything at all.*

*--Marguerite Kelly, Family Almanac*



## How to Use This Guide

Though it is common in our society, it is something we all hope won't happen to us--divorce or for gay or lesbian couples, the breaking of ties established through holy union.

Many of us can tell our own stories of divorce or broken relationships; we may have experienced this kind of disruption in our family of origin, broken up with a life partner ourselves, or begun to consider separation or divorce in our current relationship. Even more of us have watched friends, coworkers, or extended family members go through a divorce or the end of a holy union. And whether or not we are aware of it, we meet and interact with divorced, divorcing, or separated individuals in nearly every social circle in which we move.

This holds true for our Unitarian Universalist congregations, where divorce and broken relationships are considered one of the possible consequences of being human, as well as a reflection of the diversity of human experience. We believe congregational members and families who are in the process of divorce or separation need the support of their church and church family during this stressful time in their lives. We also recognize that the experience of divorce or separation can lead unchurched individuals to seek out a religious community such as ours for grief and healing, reflection and meaning making, social networking, acceptance, and belonging.

This booklet offers a UU perspective on divorce and broken relationships--how UU Principles inform our understanding about these events, how the ending of committed relationships affects individuals and families, and how UU congregations can offer support to people experiencing this major life change.

Families have differing styles of dealing with important topics like divorce. Some find that casual conversations offer surprising insights into their family members' deepest thoughts. Others enjoy creating a regular family ritual, perhaps one evening a week, when they can focus together on important events in their lives and share in a structured activity. Still others may want to gather with a group of families in their congregation, building a sense of community as they explore this topic together. You will find throughout this booklet sections titled ***What Do You Think?*** These questions can be used to spark fresh thoughts on this topic and to launch conversations at mealtimes, bath times, or bedtimes; in the car or on a walk; or even while shopping or watching television. The phrase ***Try This*** accompanies many of these questions and introduces an activity that will help make the concepts more concrete. For structured activities that build on each other from week to week, turn to the section titled [Activities](#); these suggestions can be used at home or with intergenerational groups in your congregation.

### How to Begin

Read through the two essays that follow, [What Is Divorce?](#) and [Divorce and the Unitarian Universalist Faith](#)-and note what thoughts, images, and experiences they bring to mind. [Divorce Across the Lifespan](#) looks at aspects of divorce relevant to different age groups, from preschoolers to elders. The information and practical suggestions offered here will help you focus on the dimensions of divorce most appropriate for your family. The [Activities](#) section provides curricula for scheduled times together as a family or with an intergenerational group in your congregation. [Resources](#) lists books and websites keyed to different ages that will take your

family's exploration of divorce even deeper. At the end of the booklet, you will find the [Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes](#) and

[Because Unitarian Universalists affirm the "right of conscience," we believe divorce or separation is a personal matter, a decision that can only be made by the couple involved, based on circumstances and factors that only they can judge. According to Unitarian Universalist Principles, each of us must be "free to search for what is true and right in life"-to find our own answers to the problems that life hands us. At the same time, we are accountable to others, and so we believe our "search for truth and meaning" must be responsible as well as free; the decisions we make for ourselves need to be considered and evaluated in the context of the "interdependent web" of relationships within which our lives as individuals are connected. Therefore, divorce must be a solemn decision that recognizes diverse attitudes and consequences for many family relationships.](#)

***What Do You Think?** If you were raised in a religious community, what did that religious community teach you about divorce? Are these the attitudes and beliefs you hold today? If not, how and why have they changed? Under what conditions would you consider, or have you considered, divorce or separation? How does one make this decision responsibly? How does it affect the greater "web of relationships?"*

***Try This:** If you are a parent of children or teenagers, talk to them about how your religious beliefs guide you in your attitudes toward and understanding of divorce.*

## **Preparing for Marriage**

*Supporting marriage for all couples, same or different genders, means supporting not only the marriage ceremony but their lives after it and in preparation for it as well.*

--Keith Kron, Director,  
UUA Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns

Stress, conflict, and change are part of the fabric of intimate relationships. They even make life more interesting! Engaged couples are wise to prepare for their marriage as well as for their wedding ceremony. The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations does not have a standard program or curriculum for premarital preparation, but most UU ministers engage with couples in some form of premarital counseling that encourages couples to explore together:

- the influence of their families of origin and what they learned from their parents about such things as married life, gender roles, money, and conflict
- marriage expectations
- similarities and differences in their personalities

- their strengths and weaknesses as a couple
- their communication styles and approaches to conflict
- any past relationships that ended in divorce or dissolution, and what was learned from these experiences
- childrearing (plans for parenthood, or current experience if children are already a part of the relationship)
- potential threats to the relationship (such as a history of violence or substance abuse)
- support systems

As a result of premarital counseling, some couples decide they are not ready to make a commitment to each other and postpone or cancel their wedding. Some do not engage in the process honestly and do not benefit from it. Ideally, couples conclude premarital counseling with increased confidence in their relationship and their decision to marry. They have gained a greater appreciation of the challenges as well as satisfactions that lie ahead for them, and they are more secure in their knowledge of the resources they can draw upon when they need guidance or support.

Many couples today are geographically separated from their extended families, i.e., parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles who are invested in the couple's relationship and who have wisdom to share through their own valuable life experiences. Being part of a UU congregation can help young or newly married couples find other couples who are seasoned marriage partners and can offer mentoring and encouragement. Some UU congregations and fellowships offer couples enrichment groups and/or retreats; these programs encourage couples to devote time to "being a couple" and provide them with opportunities to gain knowledge and skills and develop relationships that will strengthen their marriage.

Ministers, unlike most justices of the peace, have the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with the couples they marry. They may be able to take an active interest in the newlyweds and serve as part of their support system over time. If you were married by a Unitarian Universalist minister, or are currently part of a congregation served by a minister, you are encouraged to seek out that clergyperson if you have serious concerns about your marriage. It is likely he or she will be very willing to see you and your partner for a consultation or recommend a licensed counselor who can help the two of you sort out your issues.

The following is a true story:

D., a UU minister, was concerned that the marriage of W. and R. would be a serious mistake.

After engaging the couple in some informal counseling, he had them fill out a questionnaire that helped them identify areas of their relationship where they were likely to get into conflict.

D. did his best to talk the couple out of the wedding. They listened to what he said, but in the end, they told him their decision had not changed and that they hoped he would perform the ceremony. Confident that he had been direct and honest with them in his counseling, D. went ahead and conducted the ceremony.

Contrary to D.'s fears, the marriage has not ended in divorce. The couple has vivid memories of their pre-wedding sessions with D. In fact, when they find themselves in a conflict, one of them is apt to point out, "This is the kind of thing D. was talking about. So what are we going to do about it?"

***What Do You Think?*** Have you participated in premarital counseling? Was it helpful? Why or why not? What makes love "go away"?

***Try This:*** Imagine your only child is about to make a lifelong commitment to their chosen partner. What is the best advice you could give them? If you don't have children, use your imagination and answer the question anyway. If you are married, what advice do you wish you had been given? Write your advice in your journal and then discuss it with your partner and/or family. (Suggested by Rev. Mike Moran in "U & I Group," published by the UU Family Network.)

## **Marriage and Conflict**

*Counseling should begin long before you make the final decision to separate, to see if you can retrieve what you once had. Unless you do that, you and your child [if you are a parent] will always wonder what would have happened if you had just tried a little harder. Marriage counseling gives you that peace of mind.*

--Marguerite Kelly, *Family Almanac*

The candle-lighting ritual in some Unitarian Universalist wedding ceremonies concludes with three lit candles, one to represent the couple's union and unity and two more to symbolize each partner's separateness and individuality. The marriage does not eliminate this separateness. Conflict, then, is virtually inevitable in marriage, whether it is out in the open or underground, as each couple negotiates the tensions between connection and independence, common good and personal welfare. Our ways of dealing with conflict tend to have their roots in our childhoods.

Do you remember the first "fight" you ever had? Probably not, since most of us begin experiencing interpersonal conflict around the age of two, when we start to distinguish ourselves from our primary caretakers and to know ourselves as individuals whose needs, wants, desires, feelings, and perceptions may be different from those of the people around us. Toddlers who reiterate, "No! No! NO!" are really saying, "You are you, and I am I, and you don't have power over me."

Our caregivers' responses to these initial efforts to assert ourselves provide important lessons in conflict management or resolution. Likewise, we learn a great deal about interpersonal tensions

and disagreements by observing the example of the adults in our homes. Is conflict loud and aggressive or something that simmers under the surface? Are feelings listened to or ignored? Do conflicts result in power struggles that end with a winner and a loser? Or are conflicts resolved through negotiation and give and take?

The lessons about conflict that we take away from our childhood follow us into marriage. We may subconsciously repeat the patterns and strategies we learned in our families of origin, or we may consciously make an effort to improve upon the examples we were given. Either way, it is not unusual for couples to discover that they have different feelings about conflict and different ways of handling it.

Educational and counseling resources can provide couples with tools to improve their ability to manage or resolve conflict. At the same time, it is important to be aware that: (1) The longer a relationship lasts, the more challenges and stresses a couple will face. In other words, the potential for conflict may not diminish over time, but a couple's skill at conflict management may increase. (2) Most couples have some conflicts that do *not* get resolved over time, even with concerted effort. Depending on its source and nature, one or more of these "irreconcilable differences" may lead a couple to seek a separation or divorce.

When, then, is a conflict serious, or relationship-threatening? If the conflict involves one or more of the following, it is important to seek help from a mental health professional:

- physical assault
- repeated verbal abuse (demeaning language, threats)
- untreated substance abuse
- untreated mental illness
- significant trauma (i.e., rape, infidelity, the death of a child)
- unusual life stresses (i.e., long-term unemployment, illness, or disability; life-threatening illness; a child with special needs; parenting "multiples"-twins, triplets, etc.)

These are "red flag" situations. But any conflict that touches upon one's deepest values, beliefs, and aspirations can cause significant stress in a marriage. The following circumstances are also common motivators for couples to seek counseling:

- conflict over whether to become parents

- disagreement over parenting styles and strategies
- conflict over money or time management
- sexual dissatisfaction
- jealousy
- personality clashes
- life transitions (pregnancy and birth, career change, return to school, empty nest, retirement, etc.)

Couples can obtain referrals to a counselor through a minister, employee assistance program, insurance company (if marriage counseling is covered by the couple's health plan), or local hospital, help line, or women's center. Gay and lesbian support organizations are another resource for same-sex couples who want to avoid unsupportive therapists.

Counseling is less likely to be effective if couples use it only as a last resort. Similarly, the benefits of counseling will be limited if only one partner is motivated to seek help. However, individuals who cannot persuade their partners to join them still have something to gain from a counseling relationship, including feedback from an unbiased source, tools and insights to bring to the marriage, referrals to other helping professionals if necessary, and support in the event that the marriage breaks up.

This is another true story:

B. and G. had been married several years and had one child when they called C., the UU minister who had performed their wedding. "We've had some ongoing conflicts," B. explained to C. on the phone, "and we don't know how serious they are. We want to make our marriage work, but we are really strapped for money right now. Would it be appropriate to set up an appointment with you, just to get your assessment of what is going on?" "Of course," C. responded. "I'd be happy to act as a resource and, if necessary, refer you to someone else."

B. and G. came into the church and met with C. for over an hour, talking about their feelings and concerns regarding their relationship. C., after confirming the couple's willingness to work on their marriage, identified several strengths she saw in the marriage. She also expressed concern regarding the wounding arguments they reported having with one another (sometimes in front of their child) and suggested that they pursue marriage counseling; she then offered them the name and phone number of a therapist at an agency that uses a sliding scale as the basis for its fees.

**What Do You Think?** *What are your attitudes toward counseling or therapy? Have you ever consulted a counselor or therapist? Under what circumstances would you get help from a mental health professional? How would you go about finding a counselor if you needed one?*

**Try This:** *If you are the parent of a child or teen, help her/him identify people besides you that s/he could go to for help with a personal problem (i.e., minister or director of religious education, teacher, coach, extended family members, etc.).*

## **Loss and Grief**

*Divorce is one of life's most stressful experiences. When people get a divorce, it requires a period of mourning, sometimes for a year or more, before they feel better. Some of the reasons the process is so painful are because it involves money, being alone, and sometimes children, property settlements, and an ex-partner's new romance.*

--Sharon Mader, Ohio State University Fact Sheet, Family Life Month Packet 2000

*The breakup of a marriage is a loss like the death of a spouse, and will often be mourned in closely parallel ways. There are some important distinctions: Divorce evokes more anger than death, and it is, of course, considerably more optional. But the sorrow and pining and yearning can be as intense. The denial and despair can be as intense. The guilt and self-reproach can be as intense. And the feeling of abandonment can be even more intense....*

*Divorce can also strip those who have been left, of their sense of self. The completion of mourning can be harder too, for the problem of divorce is that we are both alive although the marriage is through and "the bereaved" must mourn someone who has not died.*

--Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses*

Divorce is a process of loss and grief and healing that can last a surprisingly long time. Marguerite Kelly identifies four phases of divorce that are progressively more taxing.<sup>2</sup> The first she calls *intellectual separation*. This is a time when real intimacy between partners has become extremely limited, if it is present at all. The couple is functioning more like single units than as a partnership or a pair. Conflict may be escalating if there is a buildup of anger in the relationship, or it may be avoided altogether. Perhaps no one wants to rock the (unsteady) boat or disagreements no longer seem worth the energy.

If this state of affairs has come about gradually rather than as the result of a precipitating incident, the couple may not be consciously aware of the chasm that has developed between them. However, once they *do* become conscious of this fact, they will probably find it difficult to maintain their relationship on these tenuous terms. Instead, many will choose either to get help and make some concerted effort to turn things around or to pursue separation or divorce.

Without an improvement in the relationship, the couple generally proceeds to a *physical separation*, in which the reality of the couple's intellectual separation is matched by geographical distance. The couple sets up separate living quarters, usually in two households, and begins to



experience single life as a reality rather than a fantasy.

Like the first stage, this second stage in the process may be a positive turning point for the relationship. Otherwise, for legally married couples, the *courtroom divorce* follows. This is the legal severing of the relationship and the negotiation of property disposal and child custody arrangements, which finalizes the couple's split. In this third phase each person is now free, by law, to enter into another marriage as the previous marriage has officially ended.

But the end of the marriage is not necessarily the end of the relationship, particularly when children are involved. Divorced parents will be left to implement the legally determined custody arrangement, which may be a bumpy road. And most couples, regardless of whether they have children, will also find they need to work out additional agreements regarding situations that are not covered by the divorce decree: How will we relate to our former in-laws? Are "our" friends now "your" friends? Who "gets" the church?

These issues are negotiated in Kelly's final phase of divorce, the *psychological divorce*, which may be the most painful, challenging, and lengthy stage of the process. This is a time of radical shifts in the psyche, when images of the self, the present, and the future are remade in light of the divorce and the new stage of life it has ushered in. The work of psychological divorce is characterized by letting go of what has been and what will never be and working through residual feelings of anger, guilt, shame, blame, or betrayal that may interfere with the divorced person's ability to learn from the past and move on.

***What Do You Think?*** Does this outline make sense to you? Does it fit with your previous knowledge or experience? What would you add to this description of divorce as a process?

## Divorce Across the Lifespan

### Children and Divorce

*Children find separation and divorce a confusing and upsetting experience. They don't understand why their parents are unhappy, why they don't see one parent as often as they used to, and why they have to live in a different house or apartment. None of this makes any sense to them....*

*Some children regress. Some may grieve with a sense of loss. Children need to be allowed to share their reactions. Expressions of tears, sadness, anger, isolation, anxiety, and definitely confusion are all normal....*

*Parents need to be attentive to their children's behavior in order to help them with changes and transitions. Parents also need to provide ongoing reassurance and to allow their children's many questions as they attempt to take in and understand a difficult and confusing situation. Children need to feel loved, cared for, and above all, they need to see that their parents are there for them.*

--Cynthia Wagner, *Parent and Preschooler Newsletter*, June 1999

Children's experience of divorce is both similar to and different from their parents' experience. Like the adults involved, children will feel the painful mix of emotions that come with loss and grief. Because children and adolescents have less life experience, it may be more difficult for them to cope with these emotions and separate their own feelings from those of their parents. Similarly, young people may be unable to detach themselves from the situation and recognize that divorce stems from the parents' relationship with *one another*.

### **Infants**

Infants are insulated from intellectual knowledge of the family change or crisis. However, they depend upon the comfort of daily routine and the loving responsiveness of the adults providing for their needs. The consistency and predictability of their care, as well as the availability (psychological as well as physical) of their primary caregiver(s) are the most important components of their experience of divorce.

### **Toddlers and Preschoolers**

Toddlers and preschoolers will understand and internalize some of the dynamics that are going on in the family, but they will have a very limited ability to verbalize what they are observing and feeling. Fear and anxiety may cause them to regress to more immature levels of functioning, become clingy, lose their ability to use the toilet if previously trained, or act out. Children of this age who are not in daycare or preschool do not have the opportunity to "escape" to an environment where things are "normal" and where adults unaffected by the divorce can tune in to their needs. They need their divorcing parents to reassure them that they are not to blame for the divorce, that they are loved and will continue to be cared for, and that many important details in their lives will remain the same after the divorce. Continuity of routine during the divorce is also important for this age group (as it is for youngsters of all ages).

### **School-age Children**

School-age children have more resources to cope with their grief. They are better able to express themselves, talk and ask questions, and communicate their feelings through play, artwork, and stories. They are likely to know others their age who have also been through a divorce. But because they are more self-conscious than preschoolers, school-age children may feel embarrassed by their parents' breakup. Many will blame themselves or one or both of their parents for the divorce, resulting in additional guilt and anxiety. They may be afraid they will be forced into choosing one parent over another, particularly in the determination of where they will live after the divorce. Children this age may also have persistent fantasies that their parents will get back together. Like younger children, school-age youngsters need honesty and reassurance from their parents, as well as support for airing their concerns and expressing their emotions.

### **Teenagers**

Teens have the greatest capacity to read interpersonal dynamics and understand the reasons behind divorce, but this knowledge can be a burden. If they perceive one of their parents as obviously "in the wrong" (perhaps due to a substance abuse problem or an affair), they may want to take sides. If the marriage seemed to be fine, at least on the surface, they may challenge their

parents' decision and question why the divorce had to take place before the teen was grown.

Teens often have strong feelings about their living arrangements after the divorce, but they may hesitate to speak up and rock the boat or risk hurting a parent's feelings. They may minimize or ignore other feelings about the divorce and assume extra responsibilities at home (standing in for the now-absent parent) out of a feeling of obligation to take care of their parents (particularly if the parents are in obvious pain or are having difficulty functioning). Finally, teens have the ability to envision possible long-term consequences of the divorce and may worry, "Will both my parents come to my graduation?" or "Will I be able to make a marriage work some day?" It is important for divorcing parents of teens to refrain from treating their teen as a peer; adults should also seek their teen's input into some of the decisions that are going to affect him or her, without stressing or overwhelming the teen with too much responsibility.

***What Do You Think?*** How do these descriptions fit with your knowledge or experience of child development and children and divorce? If you have parented a child during a divorce, what are you most proud of in your efforts to help her or him through the transition? What advice would you give to other parents confronting the same challenge?

***Try This:*** If you have a child currently coping with a divorce, offer art materials (such as clay, paints, markers, magazines for collage) for self-expression. In addition to encouraging unstructured use of the materials, offer suggestions: "Draw our family now and then. Use clay to show one of your feelings about the divorce and then let me guess what it is. Make a collage of words and pictures about the divorce."

***Try This:*** Tap into your youngster's right brain and encourage communication by asking him or her to complete sentences like these: If divorce were a color, it would be..., because.... When I heard about the divorce, I thought of this song:... When I think of the divorce, I feel like this kind of animal:...

## **How to Tell the Children**

*Children of divorce have the right to know, in general terms, why your marriage is ending, when the trouble began, and how you tried to fix things, even though it couldn't be done. This will help them believe that the marriage is really over, so they can begin to put their denials, and their dreams for a reconciliation, to rest.*

*Above all, they want to be reassured, over and over, that both parents will always love them, and they never would, ever could, leave them, and they need it in writing. A personal letter of commitment from each of you, to each child, spelling out exactly how much that child means to you will do much to rebuild their faith. They will read and reread these letters many times, and always believe what you've written, as long as you both give them time and affection and keep every promise you make.*

--Marguerite Kelly, *Family Almanac*

Here are some guidelines for parents on how to tell children about an impending divorce, adapted from the web site [www.divorcesource.com](http://www.divorcesource.com):

1. Wait until you are certain you are going to proceed with the divorce and can provide some details about how the children's lives will and won't change.
2. Pick a place where you have privacy.
3. Pick a time when you and the children can be together for a long period of time , so the children have a chance to ask questions and process their feelings without having to move immediately to another place or structured activity.
4. Do not ask someone else to intercede for you. Let your children hear the news from their parent(s).
5. If possible, tell the children together (both partners). If that is not feasible, try to make a plan about how you will convey the news (time, place, together or separately), using these guidelines.
6. Do not blame your partner for the divorce, no matter who initiated it or how the decision came about. Leave your children free to maintain loving relationships with both their parents, without having to pick up the burden of *your* baggage.
7. Reiterate that your children are not to blame for the divorce and that you are glad the marriage lasted long enough for you to become their parents.
8. Encourage the children to express their feelings and refrain from criticizing and intellectualizing.
9. Open the door for questions, immediately and in the future. Don't be surprised if questions get repeated over a brief period of time; anxiety, shock, and denial may make it difficult for your children to hear and accept your answers.
10. Make age-appropriate books on the subject of divorce available. If your children show an interest in reading them with you, do so, but otherwise, offer the books as resources for their private use.
11. Be aware that your children may feel the need to hide their true feelings from you out of a desire to protect you. Help them call to mind trusted people they can confide in

(individuals you've told or will tell about the divorce) and offer your children permission and encouragement to talk to these people as they deem appropriate. Recognize that most children will also benefit from professional counseling.

Here is another true story:

E. and R., the parents of twelve-year-old D., decided to get a divorce. They met with their minister to get help planning the conversation in which they would break the news to D. They also informed the congregation's religious educator, in addition to D.'s current church school teacher, of their decision, and told them that they would let D. know that these adults from his church were available if he wanted to talk with them.

The religious educator sent D. a note of support, and D. and his church school teacher talked after class. D. also told his church school class about what was going on in his family, and the teacher allowed class time for him to receive support from his fellow students.

***What Do You Think? What advice would you add?***

***Try This:*** *If you are a parent, make a list of questions about divorce your own child(ren) might ask and come up with age-appropriate answers.*

***Try This:*** *If you are a parent of a young child, talk to your child through a puppet. The child may feel freer to communicate honestly with the puppet than he or she would having a face-to-face conversation with you.*

## Activities

The following section offers some suggestions for further exploration of divorce issues for families and congregations. Let these ideas inspire your own creativity. Build on them and adapt them for your particular needs. Let the changing needs and constant UU values of *your* family be your guide.

### At Home

Ending a life partnership through divorce may be the best choice in a devastating set of options, but failure in a committed relationship can be a crushing experience. Some people may wonder why the UUA publishes books such as *Great Occasions* with services to mark the ending of a marriage covenant.



We do this in part because we choose to stand in solidarity with the broken-hearted. We want to

help those living this terrible passage to land on their feet and know that life is still worth living.

Times of transition and chaos can also be times of creativity and growth. Even betrayal gives people the opportunity to recreate their lives if they can find in themselves the courage to fully engage their experience. In her book *The Good Divorce*, Constance Ahrons notes that people going through a divorce list a variety of feelings, not all of them negative. They may feel pain, loneliness, anger, stress, grief, stigma, and failure, and freedom, relief, strength, hope, courage, happiness, and dignity.<sup>3</sup>

**Try This:** *To process your grieving, write daily in a notebook or journal. Mornings are often a good time to do this. Start to write as fast as you can without editing, writing anything that comes to mind. The idea is to pour everything out on the page. The writing is for no one's eyes but yours, and even you should not read these pages for at least several months. Although this may not seem like a very significant exercise, the fast, unedited writing can help people name their experience and make some sense of their loss.*

*Keeping a journal can be a wonderful way to release emotions and deal with loneliness. Writing down what you feel can help you create a little distance from those feelings that allows you to look at their situation differently. For those who are not writers, recording thoughts with a tape recorder can be equally helpful.*

*Along with expressing grief, anger, fear, and loneliness, you can reflect on milestones in your journal. Some find it helpful to set aside a day like a birthday or Thanksgiving to list all the things and people who touch their lives and for which they are thankful. On a day when you hit a low point you can go back and read the blessings, which may offer some comfort.*



### **Families Experiencing Divorce**

Family rituals are important. They create stability and safety for younger children, a sense of belonging for older children, and a feeling of connection for everyone. They come in many sizes and shapes, from Sunday morning breakfast to annual vacations. A family ritual involves a spiritual component as well as routine actions. It is something to feed our spirits and connect us as family.

Spiritual and emotional nourishment may not happen every time the family gathers for its ritual, but the opportunity for connection exists. And in the best of times, rituals cannot be rivaled by any other activity.

Here are several suggestions to help families cope with divorce. Grieving persons have an inner sense of wisdom about what they need. Encourage your family to listen to their hearts.

*Sacred Loss Space:* Set up a private place in your home where you can place symbols of your inner state—symbols of grief, loss, forgiveness, anger, memories, etc. These symbols can change

and evolve from week to week. Invite the gathered family members to place a candle among the symbols and then light the candle. During this time family members can just sit quietly, pray silently or aloud, or share when the spirit moves them to speak what is in their hearts.

*Ethical Will:* Ethical wills are a Jewish tradition in which a person writes a simple document summing up what he or she has learned in life. You may wish to record what you learned in your life with your former partner. Ask adults and elders what wisdom, spirit, memories they want to pass on to younger family members. What do they hope for their loved ones?

*Mandala:* Artwork is often a powerful way to draw people into the present. A mandala is a circular piece of art that radiates out from the center. Creating one is a simple, focused activity. It is the process, not the product, that is important. Usually mandalas are satisfying because they evolve into something beautiful. Try making mandalas with grieving family members. Each person takes a large sheet of paper and crayons, pastels, or paints. Put on relaxing music. Then draw a full ring of pattern around the central circle. Add more rings of pattern one by one, like the rings of a tree trunk that tell its age. There is no theme or purpose; everyone should do what feels good, appropriate, and healing.

## **Divorce and Your Congregation**

*The pain of a divorce (or a death in the family) is real and lasting, but you can get through either one with reasonable grace, not because other people have done it, but because, in a sense, you have been preparing for these upheavals all your life. Every time you handled a challenge well, you were teaching yourself to cope with these crises. You will survive, because you always have.*

--Marguerite Kelly, *Family Almanac*

Many of the **Try This** suggestions in this booklet can be adapted for use in religious education classes or in family gatherings at church. The following are additional ideas for creating intergenerational opportunities to cope with divorce situations.

*Joys and Concerns:* UU congregations are places where we can share the sorrows as well as the joys of our lives. Church couples and families coping with divorce are urged to share this news with their minister(s), and if there are children involved, with the director of religious education and/or the appropriate church school teachers or youth advisors. Most congregations also have a public forum for communicating joys and sorrows, such as voluntary announcements during the church service or in the church newsletter. Religious education classes usually include an opportunity to share personal news as well. This is a fairly painless way of getting the word out to a large number of people fairly quickly and attracting their support; in a congregation of any size, there will be quite a number of people who have "been there."

*Support Groups:* Some congregations sponsor ongoing groups (educational, support, and/or social) for parents, singles, or divorced persons, and some offer periodic workshops or worship services on the theme of loss and grief or private "rite of passage" rituals to mark a divorce. If programs of this nature are not offered by the UU congregation nearest you, you can communicate your interest to church staff or lay leaders or even ask for the go-ahead to initiate a

gathering yourself.

*Regular Attendance:* It is tempting for divorced individuals to use church as a place to meet prospective mates. This attitude is reasonable, since church is a place where we tend to find people who share some of our most important beliefs and values. The caution, however, is that church members who date and then break up may feel less comfortable in their church community afterwards.

It is a sad reality that when a marriage between two church members ends, one member of the couple may wind up leaving the church. If there are children involved, shared custody involving a parent who does not attend the church may restrict the youngsters' church school attendance. When communication between divorced parents is strained, the minister or director of religious education might serve as the child's advocate and make a case to the non-UU parent about why the youngster would benefit from a particular church program (such as our sex-education curriculum). And UU parents whose children aren't always with them on Sunday mornings can look for opportunities for family involvement in the church at other times during the week (like a bowling party or service project on a Saturday) and use religious education materials developed by the Church of the Larger Fellowship for parents to use with their children in the home.

The best investment for the future that any church family can make is regular Sunday morning attendance and active participation in the life of the church. This consistency of presence will build relationships. Children and teens, while developing same-age friendships, will also expand the circle of caring adults in their lives, and adults will broaden their network of support.

Consider the true story of J. and T.:

J. and T., both single parents by divorce, were sitting next to each other during the Sunday service. During the announcements time, a member of the Church Activities Committee reminded the congregation that everyone was invited to participate in a trip to the roller rink later that afternoon. T. turned to J. and asked, "Are you going?" J. said, "I'm going if you're going." And so they went. After dating for a year and a half, they were married at the church.

J. and T. don't know if they have found their soul mates in each other, and they don't expect that their relationship will always be smooth sailing. But they are about to celebrate their tenth anniversary, and they are grateful for the friendships and support they receive from their church family and the resources that are available to them through their church.

### **The Lessons of Loss**

*Despite its universality, most of us shy away from openly acknowledging loss when it occurs, and then deny the intense and unsettling emotions that frequently accompany loss.... Because we have not developed a common language of loss, and are not comfortable sharing our feelings with others for fear that we will lose control, we often end up feeling isolated or abandoned. This isolation further intensifies the anguish and pain of grief.*

*As we parents reflect on our own responses to loss, we hope to help our children develop better strategies for facing life's inevitable challenges.*



Examining one's beliefs and values around loss can be a tool for coping with divorce and its aftermath. Here are some key concepts about loss adapted from Carol Galinaitis's lifespan religious education curriculum, *The Lessons of Loss*:

1. Loss leaves the door open for gain.

You may be aware that the Chinese character for "crisis" means both "danger" and "opportunity." Divorce feels dangerous because it is usually frightening and painful, involving a move from the known (which is comforting in its familiarity, even if there are serious problems in the marriage) into the unknown. Divorce is not an experience we would wish on anyone, but if that's the path we are walking, we can look for the knowledge we gain and the new possibilities that open up along the way. And we can recognize that each crisis we pass through increases our confidence and our ability to meet the next one.

2. Significant losses get processed over and over again over time.

As we mature and gain life experience, we gain new perspectives and fresh curiosity about significant losses in our lives. The child whose parents divorce when she is five years old may ask the same questions, over and over, throughout the years, trying to integrate her knowledge of the past with new understandings about herself, human relationships, and the world around her.

And predictable and unpredictable events in our lives can reopen old wounds, causing us to revisit our history and its impact on who we are today.

3. Children and adults grieve in different ways.

Children generally cannot sustain intense grief and may be more likely than adults to show extreme mood swings. Adults are more in touch with the permanence of loss and its potential impact on the future as well as the present.

4. The experience of grief varies from person to person, and that is normal.

5. Support during times of grief aids the healing process.

J. was six years old when her parents divorced. Her mom and dad, both mental health professionals, took time to talk to her about their decision and to answer her questions. Over the years, as J. continued to grow up, she would bring up the divorce periodically and want to talk about it some more. As a recent newlywed, J. approached her father again and asked, "Why did you and Mom get a divorce?"

**What Do You Think?** What would you add to this list, based on your own experience? What have been the significant losses in your life? What gains have you experienced in loss? If you are divorced or divorcing, how is this loss similar to and different from other major losses you have experienced?

**Try This:** If you are a parent, talk to your youngster about the meaning of grief. Then complete the following sentences together in as many different ways as possible: People grieve when... When you are grieving, it's okay to...

## Footnotes

1. Rudolph Nemser, "A Rite of Divorce," in *Great Occasions*, ed. Carl Seaberg (Boston: Skinner House, 1998), 413-414.
2. Marguerite Kelly, *Marguerite Kelly's Family Almanac* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1995), 540.
3. Constance Ahrons, *The Good Divorce: Keeping Your Family Together When Your Marriage Comes Apart* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

## Resources

### For Adults

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## For Children

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### **Articles**

- Mader, Sharon. "Children and Divorce: Telling the Children," and "Dealing with Change: Divorce and Children," Ohio State University Fact Sheet, 2000.
- Wagner, Cynthia. "Children and Divorce: An Issue That Touches Everyone." Cynthia Wagner, *Parent and Preschooler Newsletter*, June 1999.

### **Curriculum**

- *Lessons of Loss: A Lifespan Curriculum on Death, Dying, and Loss for the UU Community* by Carol Galginaitis. This resource is lifespan curriculum that engages participants with concepts and activities dealing with loss, change, and grief. Five age levels: Primary (Grades 1-3), Elementary (Grades 4-6), Middle School (Grades 7-9), High School (Grades 10-12), and Adult.

### Videos/Feature Films

- *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Columbia Tri-Star, 1979), 105 minutes. Older but relevant movie in its exploration of the failure of marriage and the often stressful shift of parental roles.
- *Story of Us* (Universal, 1998), 94 minutes. Explores what drives a marriage apart and what keeps it together; good conversation starter.

### Websites/Organizations:

- [www.divorcesource.com](http://www.divorcesource.com) Resources for vital divorce-related information, including financial/legal/emotional tools and services, professionals directory and support chat rooms, research, and archives.
- [www.parentswithoutpartners.org](http://www.parentswithoutpartners.org) A nonprofit organization focused on helping children and adults through divorce. Provides online resources as well as workshops in the San Francisco area.
- [www.saafamilie.org](http://www.saafamilie.org) An organization for single parents, created to provide support, friendship, and the exchange of parenting techniques.
- [www.divorcehope.com](http://www.divorcehope.com) An organization devoted to stepfamilies, which provides educational resources, support groups, and legal information.
- [www.uua.org/families](http://www.uua.org/families) Unitarian Universalist Family Network
- [www.uua.org/obgltc](http://www.uua.org/obgltc) UUA Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns

## Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes

We, the member congregations of the UUA, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person

- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men that challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love
- Wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life
- Jewish and Christian teachings that call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves
- Humanist teachings that counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions that celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature

Grateful for the religious pluralism that enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations, we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

## Principles in Language for Children

- Every person is important and valuable.
- All people should be treated fairly.
- Our churches are places where we should accept one another and learn together.
- Each person should be free to search for what is true and right.
- All people have the right to speak out and vote on things that matter to them.
- We should help build a peaceful, fair, and free world.
- We need to take care of the earth, the home we share with all living things.

From *We Believe: Learning and Living Our UU Principles* edited by Ann Fields and Joan Goodwin

## About the Author

Rev. Colleen M. McDonald has served the Unitarian Universalist Church in Rockford, Illinois, since 1989. She has a BS in elementary education and a graduate certificate in occupational therapy and worked with psychiatric patients for three years. Colleen is the author of *We Are Many, We Are One*, a preschool religious education curriculum, and the editor of *What if Nobody Forgave?*, an anthology of stories related to the UU Principles. She has been married for twelve years and has two nearly grown daughters, adopted through the foster care system. Colleen's parents divorced when she was a young adult.

## About the Family Matters Task Force

The mission of the UUA Family Matters Task Force is to transform Unitarian Universalism into a community of families empowered through faith, celebration, support, education, advocacy, and service. Visit their web site at [www.uua.org/families](http://www.uua.org/families) for more information about their

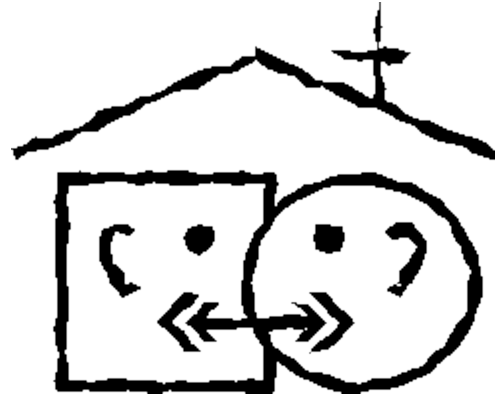


endeavors, programs, and resources in the service of ministry with Unitarian Universalist families.

### About the Series: Taking It Home--Families and Faith

The booklets in this series provide the Unitarian Universalist community with resources to support families in deepening their faith, expanding their future, and supporting their love. The other booklets in this series are

*Let's Talk About Respect, Let's Talk About Interfaith Families, Let's Talk About Marriage and Committed Relationships, Let's Talk About Divorce and Broken Relationships, Let's Talk About Families and Loss.*



This booklet series is sponsored by the UUA Family Matters Task Force.

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[www.uua.org/families](http://www.uua.org/families)