

How to be broken

Observations and reflections on divorce

Jessica Smucker

My brother and I walked from his house near the Providence River up the hill to the Duck and Bunny, a row house with pink siding and white trim that someone had converted into a trendy pub and cupcake joint. We entered the “living room” and grabbed two seats at the bar, which dou-

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bled as the cupcake case. Through the glass beneath our drinks, we could see rows and rows of decadent treats in assorted hipster flavors: Honey Lavender, Guinness Stout, Maple Bacon Bourbon. These cupcake makers were not messing around, but neither were my brother and I. It was a weekday afternoon and we were there to drink.

“What should we do?” My brother asked me. “I mean, we can’t let him *do* this, right?”

I shrugged.

A few months earlier, on Easter Sunday, I had stood horrified on my aunt Carolyn’s back porch and watched my dad get down on his knees and propose to the woman he’d been seeing since

mid-January. I would call it one of the most uncomfortable moments of my life, but ever since my ex-husband impregnated and married my little cousin, my life is pocked with such uncomfortable moments. The more gracefully I handle them, the more points I feel I earn toward redemption for my own marital missteps.

This is when I confessed to my brother my belief that our parents’ split was my fault. He dropped his head down on the bar/cupcake case for a moment, and when he came back up, he was laughing. “What are we, twelve?” he said. “I’ve been thinking it was my fault.”

Navigating your parents' divorce should be easier when you are an adult. As an adult, you have the emotional resources to talk yourself through it, to better understand the boundaries between yourself and the people who raised you, to bypass all the clichés: feeling abandoned, feeling unloved, believing it's all your fault. Right? But no. There is no easy time to say goodbye to the first love story you ever knew. And none of the things you ever felt or believed about your parents go away as you grow old; every new piece of information, every feeling, every relic just piles on top of the last, layer upon layer, so that by the time you're fully grown, what you know of your parents is this mountain of sediment and snow you're trying to balance atop. One little shift—a melting drift, a rolling pebble—and you become your own avalanche.

My dad used to tell us kids about the moment he decided to marry my mom. What he described was never a story so much as a snapshot:

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him sitting alone on a black sand beach in Costa Rica, watching the waves collide with the sand in glorious monotony. My mom, ever mindful of details, would interject to inform us of what *actually* happened. When he got home from Costa Rica, my dad broke up with her and went on a weeklong bender with his buddy, Christy. *Then* he came back and asked for her hand in marriage. As with most real life stories, the romance is in the retelling.

Now that my parents have been divorced for more than a decade, I wonder what to do with stories like this. The picture in my mind of that black sand beach has changed over the years: what

I imagined as a sunny afternoon has become an ominous twilight layered deep with clouds. I didn't grow up in a broken home. For the duration of my childhood, I had two parents who loved and got along with each other. I never once considered the possibility that they wouldn't be together forever. Now I wonder how many years have to pass before I've fully accepted the alternate reality of their divorce. Will it ever stop being the lens through which I see everything? Or will every happy memory of my family be forever obscured by a retroactive cloud of sadness?

The church's take on divorce: Brokenness or sin?

I feel compelled to write about divorce, but the truth is, I don't want to. I'm now a happily (if harriedly) married forty-year-old raising two toddlers. My day-to-day life is a mess of toys and diapers and unfolded laundry and half-written pages and barely cooked meals. On a good day, I get to have one meaningful conversation with another adult. On a *really* good day, that conversation is with my husband. So I don't want to talk about or think about or write about divorce.

And yet, it's a subject that haunts me, that keeps demanding my attention. For better or worse, I've gotten used to navigating around hidden pockets of shame, swallowing feelings in order to shield myself and others. I withhold information from my church community by de-emphasizing—if not outright hiding—my past. Why do I withhold my pain from the people with the greatest potential to lift it? Because I've never known the Mennonite church to take on divorce as matter of brokenness, only as a matter of sin.

My mother's experience: Perpetual punishment. My mother's childhood was fraught with every kind of abuse. Her parents withheld their love, resources, and the true story of where she came from, and they forced her to marry a man who tried to kill her more than once in their first few months of living together. By her eighteenth birthday, my mom was pregnant, divorced, and already finished with the business of being a battered wife. The little bit of self-esteem that had propelled her out of that violent first marriage took another hit when she encountered the Mennonites (through my dad) a few years later.

Her life was decidedly better after meeting my dad. For the first time, she had security; she had unconditional love. But she also had bouncers at her wedding to keep the church pastor away. The man who was supposed to guide and welcome her into a new faith instead refused to grant her church membership. For years, he made a point of visiting my parents in their home the week before communion Sunday for the sole purpose of reminding them that they would not be permitted to participate in communion because they lived in a perpetual state of adultery. Although my mom's relationship with the church improved over time (most notably with the retirement of that pastor), she was never allowed to feel like that first awful marriage was safely behind her. She continued to pay for her "sin" in large and small ways for the next thirty years.

My experience: Acceptance as avoidance. Just one generation later, I left my first husband—rather frivolously, to be honest—and have never

had to answer for it to anyone in the church. I was not a member of or actively involved in a Mennonite church at the time of my divorce, but I am now. And while I do not wish to be forced to dig into this issue with my current church community, I can't help but find peculiar, even jarring, the difference between my mother's experience and mine. Perhaps there are still pockets of the church that would continue punishing a woman indefinitely for the sins of her past, forcing her to relive ad infinitum her most tragic and vulnerable moments. For the most part, I think that is no longer typical of the Mennonite church of today. We have moved on. We are more progressive, more inclusive, more evolved. And that's a good thing, right? But what does it mean for the future of our institutions—for the institution of marriage (is divorce “okay” now?), and for the institution of the church itself? More importantly, does taking a more progressive/ permissive stance mean we've actually done the work and dealt with the issue in all its nuances?

How does the church engage with broken relationships, with broken people? I suspect that when the church declared my mother's divorce an unforgivable sin, it did so because engaging with her brokenness was too awkward, too ambiguous, too hard.


Can the church find better ways to engage with our brokenness?

I suppose this is the point where, in a conventional essay, I would lay out my three-point hypothesis. I'd diagnose the problem, identify a winning solution, and propose a plan for getting us back on track. If that's the essay you were hoping for, I'm sorry to disappoint you. Like many others from my generation,

I distrust answers, especially unearned answers that attach themselves to easy questions with neat dichotomies. (Is divorce a sin? Yes or no.) I want to ask a difficult question: How does the church engage with broken relationships, with broken people? I suspect that when the church declared my mother's divorce an unforgivable sin with a thirty-plus-year shelf life, it did so because engaging with her brokenness was too awkward, too ambiguous, too hard. And I suspect that when the church passively overlooked my divorce, asked me no questions, and made no demands, it did so for the very same reason. Not wanting to be that cruel church of the past, it became the fully accepting church of the future, offering a blanket of

forgiveness without really looking at the underlying bed of pain and loss. How's that for a messy dichotomy?

For me, the most alarming and alluring aspect of divorce is what it does to the human story. The act of divorce not only crosses lines; it also severs and redraws them. It annexes small or large sections of lives. It separates



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What happens to a story when its basic suppositions stop being true, when its narrative arc has to contort itself to line up with a new reality? The present, in its determination to pursue the future, outgrows the past. Old stories are sloughed off like the dead layer of skin that trips up the snake as he slides through time. My memory can no longer distinguish between the mom who

loved my dad and the mom who left him, between the dad who loved his life and the dad who has to keep running hard and fast to forget he is broken. Every story from my childhood has been rewritten to reflect the current facts. Now, my lifetime of memories with my brother—all the playing, plotting, fighting, making each other laugh and cry—is weirdly organized around this one brief moment at the Duck and Bunny, when we couldn't come up with a single idea that would prevent our dad from breaking our hearts even further. It's as though we've spent our whole lives together drinking wine and eating cupcakes, trying and failing to save our family, screaming and silent at the same time.

About the author

Jessica Smucker is a writer and musician whose work has been published in *CMW Journal*, *The Mennonite*, *Mennonot*, *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, and numerous literary journals. She lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with her husband and two sons. She is a member of East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church.