

This book is dedicated

To my grandmother

To my children

To my many teachers and healers who have helped me
to discover and trust my soul.

Author's note

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Preface

It's my belief that a crisis is an attempt by the natural laws of the universe to effect change and bring us back into harmony with ourselves. While I also believe inner growth and harmony can take place without a painful crisis, the fact is that most of us are so out of touch with our real self that it requires a crisis to force us to take a closer look at what needs to be changed. Divorce or a significant breakup can push the growth cycle into motion and help us establish harmony. It is an intensive and accelerated process where we come face to face with ourselves and our lives.

No one wants to go through a divorce or a breakup. Bust research shows that many first-time marriages are ending in divorce and a high percentage of second-time marriages are less likely to succeed. Serious significant relationships are also breaking up in great frequency. Despite the odds, though, we don't stop searching for the perfect loving partner. The problem is that many of us do not understand what went wrong and therefore what we need to do differently.

As a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, my goal is to help every woman to find her body, mind and soul in balance following divorce or the collapse of any relationship. You haven't lost your identity—you're finding your true one.

I went through a gut-wrenching divorce myself; believe me, I feel your pain. I tumbled down the hill from a long marriage that I felt would last forever, fell to the ground and literally hit bottom during the divorce when I lost my health, my children and my work for a period of time. I had to pick myself up.

Living through my own painful experience and working with women from all walks of life and emotional situations, I have learned successful strategies for helping women to feel safe, whole and complete.

Your broken relationship is not a personal failure. I'm convinced that divorce or a major breakup is a call to heal old pain. We often bring unresolved traumas, hurts, losses and disappointments from our past to our relationships and marriages—and this pain lies buried within the subconscious, ready to sabotage a relationship even before it begins.

Instead of blaming yourself, learn ways to avoid repeating the pattern from one relationship to the next by reflecting on the cause, not just the symptoms. This vital step will help you to create a healthy, mature and lasting relationship.

Don't worry if you feel your situation is hopeless or you have sworn off men the rest of your life. Trust me: Follow the useful, practical techniques and exercises I've developed, and you'll be on your way to achieving—and enjoying—your body, mind and soul in balance.

Use this book as your guide. I can't promise our journey together will be easy: It will require trust, hard work and courage to investigate your total self—body, mind, soul. But I can assure you it will be worth it. You will emerge with more of yourself, not less.

You have journeyed through a marriage and a divorce or perhaps a significant breakup. Now journey with me and discover the way forward. I will first illustrate how a simple nursery rhyme called “Jack and Jill” can be a metaphor to help you understand how you have fallen.

THE WAY FORWARD

- **tips to help you banish negative self-talk**
- **guided meditations**
- **life-examining exercises**
- **mindfulness techniques**
- **moving personal stories**
- **helpful resources**

Introduction

*Jack and Jill went up the hill
to fetch a pail of water*

See the hill as the journey of marriage or any significant nonmarital relationship. See the pail as the longings, sadness, fears and hurts that Jack and Jill are “taking away” from their childhood home of origin and other important people in their lives. Together, they embark on their climb, thinking only of filling up the pail. The mission represents the need to “fill up” themselves, hoping to mend what is broken, to invent the family they always wanted and to find the comfort, love and wholeness in life they’ve never known before. Each has the fantasy that through the other they will be healed, nurtured, protected and spared the work of becoming self-responsible. Each looks to the other to fill up their pail. But in truth, their journey is burdened with the load of all their past disappointments, betrayals and doubts. The more they ignore these essential elements of themselves and pretend these unresolved historical wounds don’t exist or don’t matter, the more elusive “happily ever after” becomes.

What Jack and Jill don’t know is that if they start the climb together unaware of their own needs, unable to practice self-love, they will be incapable of truly loving and meeting the needs of their partner.

As a way of unlocking what’s been in conflict during a marriage or any significant relationship, I believe it’s necessary to discover and consider what qualities, characteristics and temperaments (both good and bad) your husband or partner and parents have in common. In fact, there’s an exercise in Chapter 3 that assists in doing exactly that. When we come to a better intellectual appreciation of these similarities—the limitations and wounds that were exhibited by partner and parents alike—we come closer to seeing the particular unresolved feelings, deprivations and needs we brought into our relationship, and how they played out with our partner.

This can be an important first step toward a healthy understanding of the emotional and psychological dynamics we lived through as a daughter, wife or partner.

Jack fell down and broke his crown

Unresolved wounds plague Jack and Jill as they interact on the climb. Each becomes more frustrated or furious as their “pail” refuses to fill. Because each is unaware of their own private pain (let alone their partner’s), they stumble and falter, unknowingly inflicting injuries on each other, repeating the process again and again. The journey up the hill becomes increasingly miserable and impossible to continue. Inevitably, Jack falls down. He and Jill are separated, both emotionally and physically.

As children, we are innocent and vulnerable to the many influences that surround us. Like sponges, we absorb all that is said to us, about us and about the world that surrounds us. But in our innocence, we approach the world only with the desire to have our basic needs met and to love and be loved. It is in this early stage of life that we form our sense of self-worth, value and belief in our “lovability.” Together, these ingredients mix to create what’s often called self-esteem.

Our self-esteem is like a sculpture, shaped by the positive and negative messages we receive from our parents, family members, friends and society as a whole. Because children lack the intellectual capacity to judge or distinguish between the accuracy of these “messages,” they accept all input as equal, internalizing early information and labels. Generally speaking, parents who are emotionally mature, loving and caring will raise children with high self-esteem who, as adults, are able to love themselves and value their own needs.

But when children are not loved, feel unwanted or are regularly criticized, they develop low self-esteem, deny their own needs, judge themselves harshly and may even unquestioningly accept the belief that they are not “good enough” or “worthy” of happiness. These early, negative messages are often blocked because they are so painful.

While growing up, we may learn how to disguise, cover up or valiantly patch some of the cracks in our self-esteem. But make no mistake, it all goes with us up the aisle into our marriage, and we start the climb up the hill with our hidden cracks.

Chapter 3 presents several “Tuning-In” exercises that help locate where

the old pain has retreated or settled in, perhaps causing physical symptoms in our bodies. The chapter also offers techniques on what to do about it.

And Jill came tumbling after

Her wounds open and bleeding, Jill is having difficulty remaining on the hill by herself. She rolls down, shaken to her very core, unable to comprehend what has happened. She has physically, mentally and spiritually “hit bottom,” and begins to believe that without Jack she cannot stand on her own. When a woman loses touch with her sense of herself, it is not uncommon for her to fear being alone. Her self-esteem may come to depend completely on a relationship, and this dependency can erode her confidence, leading her to distrust herself and her feelings.

But then a strange thing happens.

With her physical and emotional armor and defenses stripped away, Jill is suddenly feeling her own real feelings. Her old, buried feelings, perhaps the feelings that somehow drove her to Jack in the first place.

She’s not breaking down after all. She’s breaking through.

That divorce or the breakup of a nonmarital relationship is a major life crisis that can cause a nosedive in our self-esteem is certainly true. But the question begs asking: Are the negative thoughts and self-criticisms actually a result of the breakup, or has the act of breaking up brought them out of hiding?

We are all affected by the negative messages our parents may have carelessly expressed to us. The vulnerable child inside never asks why her parents or others said hurtful or critical things to her; she never considers the possibility that her parents, or others, may be unable to give her the love and acceptance she wants and deserves.

Stored in her mind and stored in her body, the hidden pain and confusion set the stage for physical illness, emotional anxiety and spiritual loneliness. The little girl is “programmed,” if you will, by her early pain into self-critical thinking as she grows older. Unsure of her own worth, she compares herself to others—friends, siblings, celebrities, even strangers. In silence, she worries that she is not enough. Not smart enough, pretty enough, thin enough, talented enough, outgoing enough, happy enough,

good enough, friendly enough or whatever enough.

The bottom line is that she believes she is not entitled to be loved. And the silent suffering grows. No amount of money, clothes, education, fame or men can fill the pail from the past that she carried into her nonmarital relationship or marriage. Chapter 4 will help you to identify and examine your negative self-talk and provide you with techniques to replace critical thoughts with loving compassion.

On a personal note, even though I had been in therapy during my marriage and was myself a licensed therapist, my divorce forced me to slowly face up to truths and events about my past and myself that I had avoided for a long time. This both surprised and troubled me. At first, I didn't want to do more "inner work." I just wanted to get through the divorce and have it over with as quickly as possible.

But times of stress, challenge and profound change have a way of triggering a loss of control that breaks open those buried wounds, old hurts and early disappointments. I began to seriously question: "Why do I think so poorly of myself?" "What kind of self-esteem did I have before divorce became an issue in my life?" "Why is my body in so much pain?" "When did all these self-doubts and the critical self-talk really begin?"

I retreated into an extended period of self-examination. At times I was confused, scared and doubtful I was making any progress. Over time, I uncovered many negative messages (both overt and subtle) I had internalized physically and mentally and hung onto from childhood without even knowing I had done so. Along the way, I began to listen very closely to the directions and courses my body was telling me to navigate.

Slowly I came to realize that divorce was the event that enabled me to come into direct reconnection with the child inside—her mind, her body and her soul—and use my adult skills to heal her. This entire process has led me to arrive at the philosophy and techniques contained in this book. With this growing awareness and understanding (knowledge really is power), I was even able to see my ex-husband and my parents in a different light. I could see their emotional wounds more clearly and recognize that their critical behaviors and difficulty in loving really came from their own unresolved pain.

It wasn't all about me. I was not unworthy of love.

The “Jack and Jill” rhyme is my metaphor for describing the problem, not the process for healing. I’ve mentioned the need to address the mental, emotional and physical challenges that arise upon the breakup of a relationship. But there’s another element that is equally (if not more) important, and that is the need to connect with our soul. If we are to find our way to life “on top of the hill,” it requires that we keep going deeper and connect with our spiritual self—our soul.

I believe we all have this place inside us. It is our authentic, divine and lovable self. It is the place where we know we are not only a mother, wife, friend or worker, but always a child of God, nature and the universe.

At the end of chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5, I have included a brief section named “Call of the Soul” to remind you along the way that your pain from the divorce or breakup has a purpose. There is something more and something very important happening during the process of healing your mind and body. You are finding your way back to your real self and spiritual essence.

It is my personal and professional experience that we all have an inner wisdom that guides us through the unknown, dark times in our life. If we persevere and give ourselves the opportunity to “sink in” and “drop down” into these depths, we can heal the earliest pain and reclaim our original joy, the kind that a child is born with. It is here that we begin to trust that we have everything we need to meet the challenges before us. It is here we can begin to forgive the unforgivable and accept the unacceptable. It is here we can find the wholeness to take into our next relationship, if we choose to have one. In Chapter 5 you will hear how other women have connected with their soul and how they express these experiences.

The importance of the soul connection to our well-being and happiness has been eloquently discussed in books such as Deepak Chopra’s *The Path to Love and Overcoming Addictions—the Spiritual Solution* and Thomas Moore’s *Care of the Soul*. Like these recent pioneers in the spiritual journeys of the 21st century, I have no intention or desire to articulate matters of the soul in a way that interferes with individual religious preferences or beliefs. You will put your own words and meaning to your experience as you connect with this deeper part of yourself.

The simple, boiled-down message of this book is that the stronger the

relationship we develop with ourselves, the healthier the relationships we can establish with others.

The more we understand ourselves, the more successful we can be in anything we do, in any role we choose to play. When we attend to ourselves in a caring, open and nonjudgmental manner and allow compassion to enter into our self-talk, we leave behind the hard truth that we have been abandoned by others and we are on our way to wholeness.

It's a journey that we will be on for the rest of our lives.

If you feel that divorce or your breakup has swallowed you up and spit you out into a dark well of hopelessness, then let me suggest that you pick up a pail. The new pail you're holding represents the possibility of having more of yourself available. As the filling-up continues, you will be able to experience more joy. Ultimately, the pail will ebb and flow with invisible waves that uplift the soul.

This book is structured so it will carry you on a natural wave of thought and action to examine your body, mind, soul. Chapter 6 will offer ideas on how to stay connected to your body, mind and soul as you move through the world. This will be achieved through exercises and techniques designed to stimulate a positive change of new thinking and behaviors.

I wish I could tell you this would be easy; that your most sincere prayers and best intentions could make the judge see things your way, your ex-husband or significant other change his personality or Lady Luck let you win the lottery. But it doesn't seem to work that way.

Healing our body and mind and discovering our soul is a gradual process that must be undertaken as the changes in our life continue to whirl around us. It is like driving through a very thick fog, where we don't know if we are even on the road, let alone the proper side of it. We must trust that our intuition is guiding us instead of our eyes, and that the fog will eventually lift.

As we practice our surrender and learn to trust the call of the soul, we begin to see more clearly. There's a hill. We tumbled and hit bottom. Someone's gone. But there's life at the top of the hill, and maybe climbing it our way will be the most amazing and rewarding adventure of our lives.

Chapter 1

Tumbling Down My Hill—The Trauma of Divorce

I never thought I would be divorced.

At 44, I had been married nearly half my life. My husband had a good income. We were blessed with two healthy teenagers—a son and a daughter. Both of us were involved in the kids’ activities, and we took lovely vacations together once a year. The image of family bliss was completed by a comfortable home in an upper-middle-class community. And with my work as a psychotherapist in private practice, I believed that all the pieces were neatly in place to make me happy and to enable my marriage to go on forever.

I was sadly mistaken.

With the 20/20 hindsight of many years of struggle, self-examination and perseverance, I see now that despite my professional training, for years I had been denying important realities of my marital relationship and ignoring essential elements of my own identity.

I am not alone in making these mistakes.

Today, after working with hundreds of divorced and single women in individual therapy and leading many workshops on relationships, I am even more aware of how difficult it is for women—often trained from childhood to be selfless, good and responsible for other people’s happiness—to recognize and speak the truth about their own lives.

I have grown convinced that the crisis of divorce or the breakup of a long-term relationship and its seemingly endless pit of pain can spark the energy and provide the road map to guide women back toward true selfhood, a path from which they may have been sidetracked or derailed many years ago.

It’s my conviction that the human spirit prevails, even through the worst of pain. The fact that I have lived it myself and witnessed it in others is what compelled me to write this book.

While the particular details of my story may be very different from your own, you are likely to recognize the range of feelings that are bewildering,

terrifying and infuriating to women at various stages of the divorce process or a breakup. Although every relationship and every breakup is unique, I firmly believe that each one deeply affects your body, your mind and your soul.

It's then a matter of what you do about all three that determines the course and the quality of the rest of your life. And it is with that in mind that I have shaped this book: I want to pass on what I have learned and to offer support, ideas, instructions and insights to all the Jills who have tumbled. I hope to help them find their own way back, beautifully intact, to the top of the hill, fetching their own pail of water; and clearly seeing the gift in the fall.

My Story

I didn't have a lot of experience with men. I hadn't loved or lived with one before I got married. I was still at home with my mother and stepfather, helping care for my younger siblings, when I married at age 22. I was the third child in a family of six. My alcoholic father died when I was 14, and my mother worked two jobs and seemed to accept her role as a martyr. (Two years later she repeated her pattern and entered into another marriage with a domineering and controlling man who had alcohol issues. He was not a parent figure nor did he parent me, so I was able to remain emotionally detached.

I was raised in a working-class household and attended Catholic schools, and my graduation from high school already surpassed my parents' eighth-grade education. I burst into the "real world" at age 18 with high motivation, holding down two jobs and seeking to lift myself into more fulfilling, stable and happier circumstances than those I had known at home. Unknowingly, I was on a search to replace the love I never had. I was used to a mother who was silent, passive and appeared almost invisible and a father who was lost in alcohol and unavailable for any real and healthy connection. I did not learn what a healthy relationship was, and I only knew I wanted something more. I did not know what "more" looked like.

I met Jim in a dance club. He was clean-cut, average-looking and appeared confident. We exchanged phone calls and postcards before starting our courtship. He was four years older, an only child and far more knowledgeable in the ways of the world. He had a college education

(something foreign to me), traveled to many places I had not heard of before and was presently working for a large corporation.

Although it sounds like a corny romance novel, he introduced me to new kinds of people, took me to restaurants of a quality I hadn't known before, recommended books for me to read and seemed to have all the right moves to feed my hunger for a normalcy and desire for attention I hadn't experienced in my years growing up. He was also a charmer, someone who could say just about anything and you would believe him.

I loved him as only a naive 22-year-old woman can love and was both thrilled and frightened when he asked me to be his wife. He was not hesitant. There was no ring—just a charming proposal over dinner and many promises. A date for the wedding was set six months after we met. He was an up-and-coming executive with a major corporation, and by then I had been promoted to executive secretary at another large company.

Jim wanted to be in charge of everything. At the time, I didn't see it as controlling. He didn't show his emotions or openly demonstrate his affection with words, hugs or gestures, either. Nonetheless, I thought I had chosen well. There was no outward abuse, but there was emotional neglect, controlling behavior and lying I would come to learn about.

We were the young golden couple. It was a fairy tale come true.

Thrust into the role of the corporate wife, I did whatever it took to master what I thought would please him, whether it meant learning to cook gourmet meals or staying up all night reading Goren in order to play bridge with his colleagues and their wives. There was pressure all right, but I accepted it because I wanted to please. This was my pattern, pleasing to the point of ignoring my own feelings, wants and desires.

My belief that I could actually go to college came late in my life and was encouraged by a very close friend. Jim supported my decision to enroll in college, still remaining in control of the rest of our lifestyle, and I managed to space our two children so they arrived between semesters. His career prospered, and even though he brought home more money than I ever imagined, the anxiety of never having enough continued to haunt me from my childhood. It took half a dozen years to rid myself of the fear that my job and my income weren't necessary for our survival. He did not want me

to work, but it was the only thing I felt I had complete control over, and I was always used to working. In addition, I tremendously enjoyed what I did and felt it was an important part of who I was.

All during those formative years of our marriage, I acquiesced to his needs and wishes, neatly placing my own personal preferences and desires in the backseat. He chose the places we lived, the vacations we took, the lifestyle we had and how the money was to be spent.

He was in the driver's seat, and I simply did what had to be done to make it easy for him to get where "we" were going. Whatever personal power and satisfaction I felt from my accomplishments at school and work slowly diminished as the marriage continued. Now I see that I never fully recognized my strengths.

In our 12th year of marriage, we moved from our secure Midwestern suburb to southern California, where Jim started a new business of his own. For me, this was the first real test of leaving home. As long as my geographic and family surroundings were familiar, I felt in control and that I was managing my life.

California was like another planet coming from a small town in Michigan. Not long after we arrived, so much of what I had denied, hidden, buried and stifled my entire life began to explode in a myriad of chronic physical pains and behavioral changes. The move triggered a series of stressing challenges. There was the job of setting up a new home, helping my daughter and son adjust to their new life, new school and new friends, and preparing for my exams to pass the California Board of Behavioral Science so I could obtain my license and launch a new private practice.

Until that point, my drive to be perfect had never seemed a problem; it was simply what I had always tried to do.

But now I was getting weird symptoms. I had difficulty breathing, muscle spasms frequently racked my body and many other mysterious physical symptoms suddenly appeared. I had difficulty sleeping, and my emotional state became as fragile as my physical condition. When I wasn't anxious, I was depressed. Eventually I reduced my workload to save energy for my children's activities and tried to determine what would help me get well. I couldn't run or play any sports. This was the first time in my life that

I was not able to keep up my activities and my high level of energy. I was also not able to manage our lifestyle and the demands of married life.

Jim didn't know what to make of me. And he certainly didn't like these changes: The changes in me were changing *his* life, and he could not "fix" me or my health. He was frustrated and powerless. Over time, he began to withhold any compassion for my physical problems and grew intolerant and critical. He would absorb himself in real-estate projects, one of many side interests, and on several occasions I would come back from vacations alone or with the kids because he was angry. Things were not happening the way he wanted.

Starved of emotional support my entire life, I needed his willingness to be available and patient as I struggled desperately with the fear that my body was "giving out on me—that I was growing too weak and too sick to cope with "normal" life. I had never felt so vulnerable, scared and out of control. I desperately needed his help to get through the confusion and pain. Without it, I didn't think I would survive. I had trouble driving my daughter to her activities, fixing dinner, hiding my physical symptoms and going out socially. My body was trying to tell me something, and I did not know what.

But Jim wasn't there. In fact, he grew more irritated and eventually started to turn on me. He started to call me sarcastic names, putting me down when I would refuse to go to a party or social outing. I was frantic to clarify my physical and emotional issues and find my way back to strength as an individual and as part of a relationship, but my husband's cold behavior only made me feel worse about myself. I felt invisible and alone—a pain that mimicked my childhood. As we failed to "fill each other's pail," not only did I feel worthless, I felt headed toward a complete breakdown with no possibility of recovery. The negativity and judgment I was getting from my husband was making my health worse. I had gone to many doctors who could not find the reason for my physical pain, so I felt more anxious and helpless. I suspected my nervous system and immune system were being compromised.

There were more disagreements than ever as we climbed the hill of what would be the last few years of our marriage. While I was assertive in

the workplace, I had never learned how to stand up for myself with Jim. Now I could no longer even maintain my habits of overcompliance and overflexibility. He was not used to me taking a strong position or standing up for myself. His frustration and criticism turned to withdrawal. We interacted less and less.

With too many childhood memories of feeling helpless around my father's alcoholic rages, I remained only mildly aware of how much I feared Jim's unexpressed anger and potential rage. Not fully making this connection greatly inhibited the honest expression of my negative feelings. The unresolved issues from my past were once again affecting my ability to stand up for myself or communicate with him openly in ways he could understand. I was doing the best I could. There was no acknowledgment on Jim's part of taking any ownership of his negative behavior or his unresolved issues from the past. In his world he was always right, there was little compromise.

While living in this emotional pressure cooker, my own behavior and responses would vary. I would alternately withdraw and say nothing, or make pleas and insist on couples' therapy. I tried to change myself, explain myself, analyze myself, and then I would try to get *him* to change. Nothing worked, and I became increasingly miserable as the distance between us grew and my physical and emotional state continued in a reckless up-and-down pattern.

Unable to reconcile the unhappiness, I began to live with it—silently in voice, but loudly through physical symptoms. I often pretended that my pain was less severe than it was. I wanted to protect my kids so they could have a normal life. But that was not the answer. I was afraid of medication since my mother was addicted to prescription drugs, so the suffering became constant.

I have since learned that illness in women is a common red flag of problems in a marriage or significant relationship and sometimes a predictor of a breakup. It also suggests that unresolved issues from the past may be breaking through. When we suppress our feelings from childhood, they stay buried in our body, ready to erupt, until we resolve them. Our bodies talk to us through the language of physical symptoms, trying to tell us that

our feelings need attention.

But in spite of the problems, and even though the notion of divorce had run through my head for several years, I could not imagine myself unmarried. After all, we still had the bond of our children and our shared history of 20 years together. No matter what, we had made the commitment “Until death do us part.” I relied on these basic truths, assuming they had established and would sustain a mutual loyalty.

So I tried to quiet my inner self.

One day, Jim simply announced, “I think it’s best that we get a divorce.”

I was in our backyard just doing some writing and thinking about dinner; the kids were not there, so we were alone, face to face, with no distraction. I tried to be calm. I was a professional. Certainly I could remain steady and mature at this unreal moment. Through my shock and disorientation, I even managed to agree he was probably right, although the words seem to come from far away.

But inside, a volcano was erupting deep down in the core of my body—at the very center of my breath and life. Thus began the intense roller coaster of feelings, fears, depression, doubts, disappointments and physical reactions that would dominate my life for the weeks, months and years to come. The emotional and physical walls I had built up around all my feelings, for all my life, were collapsing for good.

From a clinical standpoint, I could understand each reaction; but no matter how much theory I had in my head, my insides were breaking into pieces. I could not control the waves of utter loss, confusion and abandonment that swept over me. It was like a churning tide, tossing and carrying me out on a stormy sea alone.

It is clear to me now that every aspect of my being was under assault. My intellectual, emotional, social, physical and spiritual selves screamed out in pain. As my world turned upside down, I moved around with the sense that I was turned inside out. This was the original shock and reaction to the thought of being divorced. But I could also tell at that moment that wounds of my childhood were rising up once again. My inner child, whom I had tucked away long ago, was emerging on the scene. And I didn’t know what to do with it all. There seemed to be no safe place—or no safe part of

me—where I could retreat to feel even mildly okay, even for a little while. I had studied and worked with the inner child therapeutic process, but now I knew about it from the inside out, not from a book.

And the questions that ricocheted off the walls of my head were relentless:

“What went wrong?”

“Why is this happening to me?”

“What could I have done differently?”

“How could *he* do this?”

“How could I stay so long in a bad marriage?”

“What will happen to the kids?”

“What will it be like without him?”

“Why couldn’t I make this work?”

“If I couldn’t be successful at this, what *can* I be successful at?”

“How will I survive?”

“Why doesn’t he still love me?”

“Will I ever trust and love again?”

Does anything sound familiar?

Then confusion would give way to anger. The unfairness of it! I was a *good* person. I took care of others. I had put others first all my life. My husband’s needs always came before my own. As a young girl, *I* was the one who mothered my five siblings and felt responsible for meeting their needs. I didn’t deserve this! Where was the justice in the universe?

So, of course, my brain shifted into the “blame” gear. I went back and forth, first blaming him and then blaming myself. *He* didn’t try hard enough. *He* wasn’t willing enough, sensitive enough. No, wait! It was me. *I* was not enough. Not good enough, worthy enough, whatever enough.

The way I looked at it, we had embarked on this journey together, so someone must not be enough. I determined to find the reasons and faults for what had happened, why we had fallen down. I searched for answers that made sense to my rational mind. But at the same time, there was a familiar resonance to this pain: Something I had felt before, something old and raw within me and something from my childhood. But for the time being, I ignored this important signal and continued in my chaos.

Pride would come into play. I was experienced at hiding physical pain, so, despite the loneliness and fear, I proceeded (with few exceptions) to also cover up this new emotional pain—particularly from my friends. I had been taught not to complain, so like a good little girl, I would try to rise above the misery and pretend I felt fine.

But the flip side of pride is shame. And shame has a power all its own. I isolated myself from all but a few close friends. Moving through our small, affluent community, I worried about what people were thinking. I was aware I felt different, distant. Divorce was not something that happened to together people. And as a professional, shouldn't I have been more aware and skilled as a marriage partner? A divorce meant I was not "perfect." I felt worthless—as if my identity had disappeared and was now replaced with utter shame.

But where was this self-doubt, self-loathing and need to appear perfect coming from?

The people and activities that had made up my world were slipping away. Seeing myself as someone's wife was over. Knowing myself as part of a family was over. Seeing myself in this house, this town, this way of life was no more.

As I ran into people at the supermarket or post office, I would feel my stomach tighten and my body stiffen. I'd plant a fixed smile on my face to hide the shame, and while this defensive posture might have helped me appear "together," inside I felt as if I was being fed through a paper shredder. There was no way to know which of my friends would be there for me. After all, most of them were friends to both of us. The truth is, I did lose some friends, most notably a married couple who were therapist colleagues of mine and who continued a relationship with my husband while never once checking in with me.

This social aspect of the breakup was exacerbated by the fact that my husband seemed to be zooming around the community, starting a new life, dating, buying a new house and joining new social groups. He appeared to exhibit no feelings, no embarrassment and no worries whatsoever where our divorce was concerned. My reaction to this was that he was moving on so much faster than I was. Dating did not ever cross my mind. He was so much more ready, in charge and doing it his way. Had he no pain, no

shame, no remorse? Why, I asked myself? Was he feeling anything?

Then there was another shock. My siblings, mother and stepfather were siding with my husband. My mother, emotionally weak and still playing the martyr, had given herself away years ago to become a puppet to my stepfather's demands. My stepfather and husband were like two peas in a pod, and my husband had emotionally adopted my family and now with his money was buying their loyalty. My siblings were emotionally weak and did not want to hear anything that shook their inner world and their hidden childhood pain. And during troubled times in my marriage I was learning and becoming aware of the truth of my family of origin and our not so perfect parents. My siblings at the time wanted to keep pretending, and they attached to my husband out of their own need to stay emotionally asleep. All but one of my siblings automatically aligned with the one who had power and could help them stay asleep—and that looked like my husband.

Supporting me and my feelings (or even showing interest in my perspective) would force them to look inside themselves—and they didn't want to face their own ghosts. They never knew how to be supportive, they only knew how to shut down. This was another trauma for me on top of the grief of my pending divorce and all its losses. At the time I did not know how I would deal with it all, recover from it and forgive. I did not know what was worse, the divorce or the betrayal of my siblings. I told myself I would take it one step at a time, but it would be part of the grieving process. Intellectually, I understood; but nonetheless, I was in shock over this for years. I won't even begin here to express the pain that this caused me.

More loss, more changes that were beyond my control and not a clue what the future might look like.

I felt paralyzed, my mind cluttered with ruinations of the events of our 20 years of marriage, and my childhood insecurities nagging in the background. I was sucked into the "what if?" game: "what if" I did this and "what if" he did that and "what if" everything could be just as it used to be? Mentally, I was beating myself up with two-by-fours.

In those early months, the intellectual, emotional and social impact of our impending divorce threw my self-esteem into a tailspin, and nowhere did my pain surface in a more distressing way than where our children were

concerned.

Even now, after many years, it is hard to write about the kids. I always wanted to protect them, and I still do. I wanted always to spare them from hurt and keep their dreams, their security and their home intact. I insisted that I be the one to tell them we were getting a divorce.

I called them together, we sat on the floor in a living room and I did my best to ease their minds, assuring them that the divorce had nothing to do with them and was not their responsibility. Their dad and I would always be a constant presence in their lives and would never stop loving them. Trying to convey these thoughts and feelings was one of the most difficult things I have ever attempted. Their reactions, however, and the events that followed are still painful for me to relive in memory.

Nicole, 13 at the time, grew physically stiff and seemed to retreat to an unknown place: “I thought you were going to tell us you had cancer,” she said. Eric, who was 16, choked with shock and surprise. His eyes welled with tears and he did not speak.

My heart broke even more. A mother’s greatest nightmare is to see her kids suffer and be helpless to relieve it. In telling the children, I thought I had faced the worst moment of the divorce, but little did I know there were darker moments yet to come.

My husband developed a sudden, fierce possessiveness around the kids. I now think that his inability to see what was in their best interests was born of his own desperation and fear of losing control. So he hung onto them in a way that would help *him* cope, not thinking about what was good for the kids. He would not co-parent with me and set up a schedule where the kids would spend time with both of us. Instead he bought my daughter many gifts and allowed her to do what she wanted to do. The result was that my lovely, headstrong, willful daughter was persuaded to move in with her dad as *her* way of handling the divorce. She wanted only one house to live in and not go back and forth. And her father’s persuasion made it easy for her. My son, on the other hand, tried valiantly to take a stand he believed was fair, even though his pain was causing him to act out in other ways. He insisted on dividing his time equally between my husband and myself, and I was grateful to have him with me, even part-time. I confess that my despair

with this overall arrangement has never been fully resolved.

But the loss of my daughter was more than I thought I could endure. It left a hole in my heart that I thought would never be filled. As I saw it, my husband had taken her away from me. The anger and rage I felt toward him was all-consuming. I believed I would never get her back, emotionally or physically. I knew it was best that I not pull her into a court drama. Later that night, after announcing the divorce (and for many nights thereafter), I prayed for my son and daughter. The only way I could cope with the pain of my daughter not living with me was to trust that I was doing what was best for her and to deal with the hole in my heart by praying and trying to stay connected whatever way I could.

I soon found that praying was my only real relief, so praying for their protection became a daily practice. It seemed to be the only action that kept me from feeling totally helpless during the times we were apart. My prayers took the form of spontaneous and sometimes rambling stream-of-consciousness communication to an entity or power that I could only trust existed outside myself, who returned a loving influence. I would pray and talk out loud to Jesus, Buddha, nature and sometimes my beloved, deceased grandmother. My grandmother was the only adult during my childhood I felt safe with and who I felt loved me. She was always with me in spirit. I prayed to angels, saints and every holy figure I had learned about growing up.

But however random and clumsy these monologues might have sounded out loud, they were words from my heart. Even though I doubted if I was being heard, I never stopped this practice. At times during these prayers my darkness would momentarily lift. This activity was to become my most important healing source.

It was almost two years later that my daughter came to me and said she was moving in with me permanently. Her action was precipitated by her dad's live-in girlfriend. I was the happiest mother on the planet when she returned; I did not care about the reason. My dedication to my inner guidance, my love for my daughter, putting my needs aside and my belief that somehow it was necessary for me to let her go helped me prevail through my separation from her.

Meanwhile, the legal process was pulling me in other directions—away

from my heart, my body and my soul. It is an arena that can be especially devastating for women. Children, a home, a savings account, even the family dog are converted to a checklist of custody, property and asset arrangements requiring negotiation.

It's cold. And women don't like it.

The term "a divorce action" is an apt description. It's not surprising that this part of the process is where men are often most comfortable, most in control. Once the court is involved, there are tasks to perform, procedures and schedules to follow, obstacles to overcome and objectives to meet. Men tend to do better with this because they are action-oriented.

On a side note, even in a significant nonmarital breakup, men seem to move quickly into the world, setting up their new life. They are able to compartmentalize their pain. This is like putting it in a little box and closing it up. But the pain goes with them and affects their choices and their joy, as their box eventually spills over.

In my case, I had not been involved in most of the financial and business decisions during our marriage. It was a part of our life I had left completely up to him—a situation I came to bitterly regret. I felt powerless during this divorce because I had given up my power during the marriage. I was ignorant of many issues I needed to understand to be able to talk intelligently to an attorney and to make decisions that were well-grounded and in my best interests.

Each time Jim's lawyer served papers, it was another devastation, another rejection, another stab through my heart. I was still in the frame of mind that if I were willing to be fair, my husband would be fair. My sense of over-responsibility, my sense of "not enough-ness," prevented me from asking for what I was entitled to in the settlement. Not knowing how to protect myself, I crumbled under the attack instead of standing up on my own behalf. I was not *ready* for this. And just as I had done during the marriage, I allowed my husband to run over me. This is another responsibility I now accept.

Later I realized that as goes the marriage with its dysfunction—so goes the divorce.

The fact that I wanted to slow down the legal process while he wanted to move it along quickly only widened the gulf between us. I wanted to see his

sorrow, his hurt, his regret. I wanted to hear him acknowledge my feelings, admit where *he* went wrong in the marriage. I wanted him to acknowledge the good times, the positive elements of our marriage. I wanted him to thank me for giving him two wonderful children. He wanted to take care of business, do it his way and get it over with fast.

Whatever intelligence and professional skills I possessed did not translate into selecting an attorney who could protect and guide me through the divorce action. It took me some time to forgive myself for this mistake.

I felt pressured to sign the first settlement agreement within the year. Then I suddenly realized that my present attorney was not protecting my best interests, so for the next year I sought out another attorney for help. Some attorneys would not take on my case or said it was too difficult to undo or discover hidden assets. Eventually I was able to find one attorney who would try to pick up the pieces, propose a better settlement and find some of the monies my husband had taken out of the country. The unequal division of power that had operated in our marriage was extending into the divorce process...and beyond. Instead of taking charge and seeing this as a business transaction, I had let the tragedy of what was happening overwhelm me, while my husband was manipulating our joint assets.

The legal aspects of our divorce took several years, but it seemed like 20. In order to end the pain for myself and my children, I gave up many of my rights. I could not develop the skills I needed quickly enough or see clearly my husband's actions. If only I had found a "good coach" or "good attorney" and had had more support to help carry me through this process, I'm sure I would have felt less victimized and more active. Just as I had given up my power in the marriage, so did I give up my power in the divorce. I felt as if I had been dropped down a dark tunnel with no sign of light above or below.

Only now, years later, do I understand so many things that would have served me better as I tumbled down the hill.

Examining the Pieces

The intensity and speed at which powerful emotions surge through you—in the space of a single day or even an hour!—are among the most

devastating initial aspects of the divorce crisis.

At any given moment in the breakup process, you might find yourself experiencing:

- Remorse
- Self-doubt
- Loss
- Shame
- Denial
- Sadness
- Anger
- Confusion
- Guilt
- Despair
- Debilitation
- Relief

Up to now, I have been talking about the initial impact of divorce or a significant breakup on a woman's life intellectually, emotionally and socially. But you have probably noticed that this has been impossible to do without mentioning physical manifestations that may accompany these feelings:

- Crying
- Numbness
- Aching
- Tightening
- Hyperactivity
- Fatigue/insomnia
- Nausea
- Shortness of breath
- Not breathing

Although I had previous education specializing in the mind-body connection and how they interact, I have since reached a deeper understanding of how a woman's body can become every bit as much affected by her divorce or breakup as her self-esteem and decision-making ability.

As I mentioned earlier, my health had not been good for several years,

which perhaps was the trigger for my daughter's "cancer" remark. During the divorce process, I found my body reacting more strongly to the feelings I was trying to hold back. I would tremble. My stomach would harden like a rock. My breathing was tight and shallow. I would collapse into depression, wondering how I could get through the simple motions of day-to-day living. At times I would feel numb and at other times I would experience sharp stabs of physical pain. On other occasions, I would burst into tears.

I knew in theory that emotional pain that goes unhealed goes underground. It is stored in the body, creating the risk for any number of physical problems and negative, even obsessive thinking—making recovery from a divorce or breakup all the more difficult. Despite a strong desire to avoid this pain, I knew I could not ignore the signals my body was sending and had to surrender to its primal screams.

Too often during my divorce process, no rational answers would comfort me. Straining endlessly for logic only wore me out. So I would appeal to God, a spirit, a higher power or whatever divine energy might work to answer. My questions ranged from sad to specific, vague to vengeful.

- Why is this happening?
- Why is my husband hurting me so?
- What do you want me to do?
- Why is my daughter not with me?
- Why were my siblings not supportive?

I spent hours, days and months searching for answers, begging and pleading for help. Even though I doubted help was at hand (or even on the way), I continued to speak from my heart.

Eventually, these beseeching conversations took a different turn. I began to pray for the strength to go on and to feel what I needed to feel, the courage to face and understand what I needed to learn to grow through the experience, and for the ability to simply do what was for my highest good and the highest good of my children.

With my many prayers, my daily walks when I could and my need to be close to nature and music, I began to discover a source inside. I spent many days and months journaling whatever came into my head, and I tried to listen to my body and put words to the sensations I was feeling. It became

clear that while I had married for many reasons, I had also looked to the marriage to “fix” something inside me that yearned to feel whole and secure in the world. I was longing for an inner peace that I only hoped existed and that I had actually longed for all my life.

This shift—from needing answers to accepting guidance—made a profound change in my view of the “climb up the hill” I had taken. I began to see that my marriage, your marriage, any marriage or significant breakup cannot heal life’s wounds or magically mend where we are broken. Marriage or any significant relationship can provide a nurturing soil in which people grow, or it can bury them even deeper in misery.

But what this process taught me most of all is that I had to be my own inner healer for my mind and body so I could reach the depths of my soul. I couldn’t find it outside myself, or expect my wholeness to come from being married—to anyone. While I could—and did—reach out for help, I had to save myself.

I was moved to explore spiritual literature—a search that brought me to a tentative understanding that God represented a space of love, peace and divine energy. And that divine energy was connected with the core of *me*—my soul. I felt that a faith in God made for a greater connection with myself and would help me transcend the deadly confusion and paralysis I was experiencing from the breakup, as well as the pain surfacing from the past. I believed that finding this elemental place, soul, divine energy deep inside me would be my Inner Healer.

Putting the Pieces Together

I began to draw on every resource—mental, physical and spiritual—to heal my body and my mind while simultaneously reaching out for strength and direction for a higher knowing. This higher knowing came through in many ways. It was a voice inside of me that appeared to come from a place other than my ego. I used grief work and bio-energetic exercises to heal my feelings and to learn how to become more at home in my body. I did inner child work to heal my negative thinking and to improve my self-esteem.

Then I turned to prayer, mindfulness meditation, music and retreats in nature to contact my soul. Gradually this created the connection to a force

that was made up solely of love, what I consider to be the energy of God.

I had a sense that in spite of everything I'd been through, something important, something I couldn't quite name, was happening inside me. The process was neither smooth nor simple; it was difficult, lonely and inexplicable. The few moments of clarity and peace that came would quickly disappear.

At times I didn't want to grow. I just wanted to run away. I wanted all the changes to stop and for my family and life to magically go back to the way they were before. No matter how sick or unhappy I had been, I just wanted my former, familiar life. These thoughts and feelings tugged at me, but I would keep moving forward—body, mind, soul. Body, mind, soul. I worked them back and forth, knowing that they all functioned together, trusting that I was developing a greater relationship with these parts of myself.

It meant surrendering to the process in spite of my fears. First, surrendering to my body and to my feelings. Allowing my body to express what it needed to express. I cried and got angry over and over and over again. In the quiet of my home, I would allow the emotional floodgates to open, and each time I released another wave of deep sobs or exploded with intense fury, I felt a physical freedom and lightness that I did not know existed. I soon found myself going deeper into my body than I had ever gone before and realized that I was dropping into my core, which felt like the central and most important part of myself. Of course, the pain would return, and I would have to let go once again. But each time I did this, I saw that there were layers of armor and tension being peeled away.

I realized I was letting go of feelings I had held in my body for years. Not just from the 20 years of marriage, but from my childhood as well. This took time, but as I surrendered to my grief, slowly the physical symptoms and health problems I had experienced during the later years of my marriage and divorce started to improve. The sadness and anger stored inside me began to dissolve.

I began to really listen to my mind, trying to unscramble and decode all my self-critical and negative thoughts. I suspected this was the voice of my wounded inner child and her damaged self-esteem. I listened carefully to what I was telling myself, and realized the harsh words and judgments were

hauntingly familiar. Some of them I had heard from my parents as well as in my marriage. And I had made them my own. I came to understand that my mind was like a computer that had been programmed to work against me.

In response, I began to practice bringing love and compassion to my inner child to heal her many fears and doubts. It was like reprogramming her with a newer, kinder update. Piece by piece, bit by bit, I began to give her the confidence, love and patience that she had not received. I would say out loud positive and strengthening words like “you are worthy,” “you do deserve love,” “you are lovable.” This was a process that I continued to do over and over and over again. Like any child, she needed the consistency and repetition of my loving words. As a result, I was able to develop a deeper relationship with myself. My mind began to quiet down as I replaced the self-critical thoughts with loving, patient words. The deep wound of divorce had uncovered layers of my inner self I hadn’t remembered or sensed for a very long time: the frightened and vulnerable little Jill that lives inside us all.

I continued with nurturing my soul through prayer, meditation, music and contact with nature. Through these experiences I was able to tap into a loving energy, something I identified as my divine essence. It went beyond any of the religious teachings I had been exposed to as a child, and any of the books I had read as an adult. Spirituality was no longer an intellectual concept, it was now an awareness and the feeling of this divine energy deep within me.

This connection with my soul was taking me past physical and psychological distress to a place of forgiveness toward all the betrayals I had ever felt in my life. The innocent and pure loving essence of my inner being gave me hope and the courage to go on. It was strangely familiar—as if parts of me were being given back that had been lost for a long time. On occasion, I could sense that the very core of me was total love.

As I grieved all my losses, past and present, my outward behavior changed. I began to stand up for myself and set limits. I felt okay stating and asking for what I needed (or didn’t need!) in my daily life. I was becoming my own internal mother, my own best friend, and I was taking care of my inner child. My presence in the world felt stronger, more powerful, and my interactions with others more grounded. It was hard but rewarding work

and it was happening gradually.

This new sense of security affected my relationship with my children, and I could see their pain begin to heal as well. My self-esteem grew and I was developing a feeling that I was “enough,” just as I was. This increased connection with my authentic self was making me happy—in a way I hadn’t felt since I was a very young girl. Now I loved my sensitivity, my vulnerability and the feeling of compassion I could bring to all the bad things that had happened over the years.

Despite this progress, I knew I wasn’t finished healing. I didn’t know how long it would take, but I knew I liked the “wholeness” that was coming into my life. And I knew I wanted more.

Getting You on Your Way

I have begun this book by sharing with you my personal journey through the divorce process. The “externals” as well as “internals” of your divorce or breakup may be quite different. But I think it is important for you to know that I have experienced first-hand the devastation and chaos a divorce *can and does* create in all facets of a woman’s life. It is also important that you know I have returned from this terrible tumble with more of myself, not less.

At the bottom of what might appear to loom as a pit of endless darkness lies a gift, glowing and shining from deep within. It is the light of Your Real Self—the open and free expression of your unique intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual self. It is your spontaneous urge to show love and compassion, your vitality and enthusiasm, your wit and laughter and every other one-of-a-kind quality you possess which has lain dormant, simmered silently, or just plain gotten lost.

As a result of my own experience and that of so many other women I have had the privilege to work with in therapy and in workshops, I have heard many different stories about marriages and nonmarital relationships of different lengths, different problems, different levels of abuse or neglect injustices in the legal system and depths of betrayal. A number of them will be recounted throughout this book. Despite the individual personalities of the women and their varying circumstances, I believe there is a common

thread that unites all of us struggling with the end of a relationship: We are all trying to move toward wholeness. If we choose to take up the challenge, a breakup of a nonmarital relationship or a divorce is an opportunity to fully awaken to our real selves. I further believe we are here to inspire each other as we move through our personal journeys.

As women, I believe we grapple with both biological and learned tendencies to be more caring and concerned about others, at the cost of neglecting or even ignoring ourselves. To heal, we must embrace ourselves with the gentleness we so easily tender to others. We must look at ourselves kindly, examining our behavior and our relationships without criticism and without letting the voices of others get in our way. We must love ourselves through all our doubts, fears and pain. Because the hill is steep and because the Jacks in our lives *do* fall down, it is critical to know (hopefully sooner than later) what is missing from our own pail.

This is one of the main reasons I have incorporated the stories of other women going through the divorce process or a breakup of significant nonmarital relationship into this book. I hope that readers find the challenges and discoveries of these women an education and inspiration on their own journey toward wholeness. Naturally, the precise details of these stories as well as the names have been altered to ensure privacy. But I have selected these “examples” carefully to provide potential mirrors for your own experience, your own behavior, your own personal hopes. Additionally, the physical and spiritual exercises offered throughout the book are carefully designed to give you the tools necessary to heal and remind you of your real self, the special person you were always meant to be.

One of my personal hopes is that the inclusion of this material will, at the very least, provide assurance that you are not going crazy or being punished, or that your pain has no purpose. At most, I hope it will help you believe that something of major significance is trying to emerge from this ordeal of divorce and heartbreak.

Namely, you.