



Exclusion and Embrace

A Different View to Help Understand What's Happening

Exclusion and Embrace in the Divorce Experience

If you've experienced a grief-causing loss, then you've heard or felt this from your friends. There are some people in your life, groups even, who treat you differently since your divorce. There is distance now. Maybe your family even. That could be as much about their needs as yours. You see, they don't know *how* to relate to you in grief. And, they do care about your well-being. Another cause of *exclusion* is that friends may have related to you socially as a couple, but don't know *how* to relate now that you're a single. Still other exclusion may come from groups or social settings that you just don't feel you belong in anymore. Often, divorcees find that they've lost close in-law relationships in the separation. A sense of *embrace* is a key factor in finding balance from all this exclusion. More on that later.

The isolation of being "other" isn't all bad news

So give yourself access to the honesty of your soul. That is a risky journey to take. Divorcees who allow this part of their journey to happen will often tell me (once safely on the other side!) that the exercise was rewarding. Part of the "aloneness" of divorce is that you are quite stuck with yourself! Marriage, family, household responsibilities are all busying. They also can distract you from the essence of who you have become. You have changed over the years of your marriage. You are now living a new reality. You have suffered hurt, and are even confronting the mixture of your own blame in the dissolution of your marriage. That is a lot to process. The movement toward reflection and adjustment will come as you task in these areas and more. So, again, give yourself access.

Okay, I'll come clean and tell you about the Yale Theologian now

None of us wants to feel lonely. Dr. Miroslav Volf is a Yale theologian who has devoted much of his study to human reactions to "otherness." As a divorcee once said to me, "I know lots of people get divorces. But once mine happened, I felt like the only person in my world that was divorced. It's like I've got a scarlet 'D' on my forehead." Much of human distancing happens in response to otherness. How we treat those whom we perceive as "different" is what Volf has given his attention to. "*Exclusion and Embrace*" is his primary theme. That is, offering embrace to those that have been excluded.

The irony of healing while helping others to heal

Especially in a consumer-driven culture, our response to much of life is to consume! Sad about your divorce? Go shopping to distract. Feeling like you need a change in your social life? New clothes are surely a must. Feeling like you've got a bit of a mid-life crisis going on? A new car might be the elixir! Trouble is, none of this fills the void inside us. Henri Nouwen's concept of the "Wounded Healer" (the title of one of his books) holds part of the answer. By being in a support group, we give as we are getting. By finding people in need and volunteering or helping out, we give to something beyond our selves. In so doing, we regain perspective about our hurt. We re-discover our value in relationships. We are reminded that our pain and disappointment is not ALL of who we are. No one would've wished your divorce upon you. But because of your experience, you might be uniquely postured to help someone else. You are now divorced. You can help others who hurt.

Embrace: What's all this talk about hugs?

Volf's concept of embrace is not about physical hugs or sex. For many in divorce, their sense of relational normalcy is a little dinged up. For some time, perhaps, their marriage was less than healthy. One of the responses that come with the search for "embrace" is that you learn about healthy relationships all over again. And these do not have to be romantic relationships. What is healthy in a treasured friendship, or even in a healthy collegiality, can teach us much about what a healthy dating or marriage relationship would be like. We do this type of work in divorce recovery groups. Support groups bring embrace!

If I can just get back out there I'll be fine. I just need a date!

For some of you, that's been the easy answer going back to your teenage years. Frankly, for a lot of my participants, finding the next person to date is too easy! Getting to know yourself outside a significant relationship is exactly what you need. But you protect yourself from that kind of self-awareness by the urge to date sometimes. Jumping back "out there" feels intuitive. Maybe even a logical place to find "embrace." But the genuine embrace you need is larger than romance. You need healthy relationships and perspective!

Genuine hope as opposed to a false sense of optimism

Volf utilizes what he considers to be a mythical mainstream American spirit of "optimism" as a vehicle for understanding the need for genuine narratives of hope. His call for honesty and accuracy in assessing life issues is a helpful one for churches. Rather than trying to idealize marriage, church or personhood, a ministry like divorce recovery demands an atmosphere of genuine candor. Distraction from, or rationalization of, painful realities is not a healthy starting place for healing. A key passage: "Authentic Christian hope, on the other hand, is about the promise that the wrongs of the past can be set aright and that the future need not be a mere repetition of the past." (1998 *Christian Century*, by M. Volf)

Ambiguity as part of the Exclusion to Embrace journey

There is personal growth that has come as a result of tremendous pain. Many divorcees who receive support find themselves processing the confusion that comes from powerful good attached to profound pain. They wonder how or why a loving God might try to work good within this terrible bad that has happened. Although many persons will attempt to hide their difficulties when inside a church, the reality is that a divorce ministry attracts hurting persons. Especially the opening session of a divorce program will predictably include the sharing of pain and bitter disappointment. As the sessions progress, all but a very few participants will report that there really have been valuable lessons learned. Some speak of insights gained that apply beyond simply the arena of their divorce experience. The nature of healing is that we discover horrible pain can sometimes bring surprising good. This ambiguity is a confusing, but real, part of life.

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