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I'm Not Crazy—I'm Evolving

Twenty years ago my husband and I had it all. Two children, oceanfront house on Maui with a pool, no mortgage and a growing pension plan, interesting work, windsurfing and tennis, great friends, world travel. And I was miserable.

I cooked a hot breakfast every morning and packed perfect little lunches for preschool. The laundry was done, the house clean, and the evening routine in place. I volunteered in the classroom, sat on the school board, designed and built a new house, bought and renovated rental property, and spearheaded community improvement projects.

My life had meaning. Honest. I was working very, very hard to prove it every day to myself and everyone else.

Rick and I never slowed down. We were reinventing how to eat, exercise, parent, work, spend, invest, worship, everything, from scratch, on the run. Just when I got part of it right, something else needed help. Rick was the biggest of my long list of problems. He was working as hard as he could, but I needed him and he didn't get it. He was everyone's hero at work, but on call and often working six days a week, his mind was never home, even when he was home. To him home was baby diapers, scut work, and a demanding wife.

With a toddler holding one hand and an infant in the other, I was asked, “What do you do?” I had the “luxury” of staying at home while Rick was killing himself supporting us. What was I going to fall back on if we split? What was giving me meaning and value?

Damned if I did. Damned if I didn't. Guilt reigned. I did more.

We needed help but our friends were seeing therapists right through their divorces and the best therapist in town had just left his wife for a younger woman.

Trapped and needy, I was ready to throw it all over for a man with nothing but kind eyes and the time to listen to me.

Now I look at women in their mid thirties and early forties and see that look. They escape into working out, volunteering, affairs, alcohol, television, or more work. Finally they leave their husbands, frantically breaking away from the chaos of their lives. □

But I want to scream to them, “Don't leave him! It's not him!”

I want to tell them what I know now. My mother calls it “a stage.” It is a transition time, the same as the terrible twos, preteen angst, the early college mess. Demands and responsibilities increase. What worked before, no longer works. The breakdown of old assumptions results in chaos. But evolution in nature and in life is rarely smooth and chaos is the step before self-organization to a new higher level.

But, if it's everywhere, where is our support? It's like childbirth before LaMaze and death and dying before Kubler-Ross. In fear and ignorance, we're treated and medicated, our normal processes pathologized, when, with a little knowledge of the process, we could support each other and see it for what it is—Not our husbands fault, not our fault,

but the result of a rich life, the price of reaching our goals and finding that it is all too hard, too much, and not what we thought it was.

I thought something was wrong with me, with Rick, and with our life, but it was normal. Rick and I were in the middle of the chaos, changing our relationship to our relationships, changing our perspective on life and the world. We were evolving, and the outcome would be a higher level of competency.

I think back to my attitudes toward my mother at different stages of my life. How I wouldn't be caught dead walking with her in the mall--the shopping center in those days. How later I patronized her. I couldn't see how she related to *my* life. Eventually she, a mother of five, became the wisest woman in the universe. Recently my friend's 20-something daughter accused her of being too good of a mother. How can anyone expect to handle the difficulties of life with such a background?

Rick was not immune from the onslaught. At the breakdown time, he was never right. Everything was both not enough and too much for me. I was ready to blow it all out, risk it all, to get to the bottom line, to the complete destruction of the old. Anything for some kind of peace.

One sunny afternoon, while the kids were splashing in the pool and I was fixing tuna sandwiches, Rick and I had a spat over money. I stopped in the middle of it. I told him that I was done with it all and wanted a divorce. He paused, looked at me, shook his head, and continued. I walked from the kitchen to the garage to change the towels from the washer to the dryer. He followed, talking at me.

Unloading towels, I said, "You don't get it. D-I-V-O-R-C-E."

He stopped again.

I leaned against the dryer and said, "We've done it. The practice, the house, the babies. Now all I want is to be happy."

I could see a shift behind his eyes. A calmness. He said, "I just want to be happy too."

In that moment everything changed. Two years of chaos suddenly cleared. My anger and confusion evaporated. A certain kind of clarity guided me. I didn't know what I wanted but I knew it was going to be different. I told Rick that I was moving out and I was leaving our 5- and 3-year-olds with him. I would pick the children up at 2 and play with them until 5. If he wasn't home by 5, they would be alone. He didn't protest.

The next day I moved into a rental I had been renovating. I slept on a futon on the floor under my grandmother's quilt. I lived on cottage cheese, ripe tomatoes, and everything green. Every day, after playing with my children, I returned to my private little world. My spinning thoughts were smoothing out. I was discovering peace for the first time in my adult life, maybe the first time ever. Within a few days, thoughts of the kind-eyed man faded away.

My husband called the cleaning service in twice instead of once a week. Not normally a morning person, he got up very early to brush out our daughter's tangles, straddle our son on the floor to brush his teeth, and stop by the market to buy their lunches. He got to know the neighbors, moved the stereo speakers out to the lanai, bathed the kids in the pool, and began having people over for barbeques. They all loved it.

We were each designing new lives. We were free. I learned that, when I got out of the way, Rick bonded with the children and it was bringing his mind home from work. He learned that home could be a haven from the world.

We began to talk at 5 when he came home and I was leaving. We talked about life and what we really cared about. By the end of a month, we had designed our way back together. We began to consciously slow down and have more fun. We said no to the outside and focused on ourselves. What seemed so difficult before was simpler.

We were lucky. We didn't get caught up with the "help" of the eighties, the well-meaning therapists, attorneys, and friends. We found our way, painfully, by feel, at the worst of it not divorcing only because we both agreed that we couldn't bear giving the beach house up for attorney fees.

Now, after 30 years together, Rick and I are in the middle of another big transition, this time tougher for him than for me. He's cutting back and eventually selling his 25-year practice, wondering what he could possibly do next. The kids are gone. I'm writing a book. Maybe it will defy the odds, and I'll get famous. Maybe people will call him Lynn's husband, Mr. Rasmussen, rather than Dr. Rasmussen, the surgeon. Maybe he'll hate this new life and leave me for a younger woman.

But I don't think so. I think that we will make it through together, because breakdown, chaos, and reconstruction is familiar territory. It's too interesting and we don't want to miss out on the next stage. We find ourselves moving toward the new romantic ideal: The old couple, together for a lifetime, laughing, still holding hands.