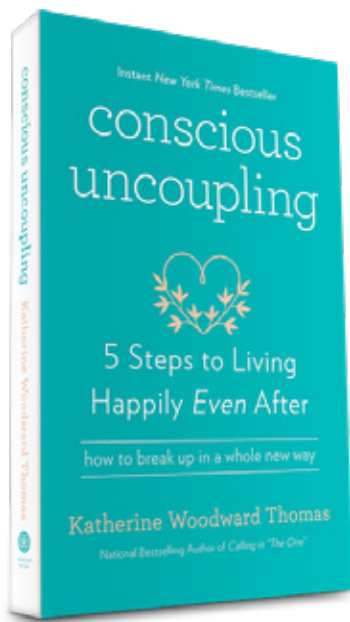


Conscious Uncoupling:

5 Steps to Living Happily Even After



Chapter 1

Shame, Blame, and
the Failure of Love



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Chapter One

Shame, Blame, and the Failure of Love

“We who have experienced it know that romantic love is a fall-in, crawl-out proposition.”

~ Martha Beck

Much of the horror of a breakup is the insult to our expectations of how this story was supposed to unfold versus how it actually did. Falling short of the happily-ever-after goal to which we all aspire is considered such a terrible failure it may feel as though you'll never recover. Not from the shock of it, not from the sorrow of it, and certainly not from the shame of it.

As saddened as I was by the loss of my marriage, I must confess I was equally mortified by the loss of face I was about to endure by making it public. We have a collective story about how romantic love is supposed to work, and it's a pretty straightforward one. It goes something like this. If it lasts, then it's real. If it doesn't, then it wasn't. Either that, or someone screwed it up really badly.

Upon telling people Mark and I were breaking up, I could look forward to a covert and automatic devaluing, either of our entire relationship, or of one, or both of us. I could almost hear how people would respond. Not overtly of course, but in the inner chambers of their private thoughts, which are never quite as private as we think. “Hmm. It must not have been very real to begin with,” or “Hmm... I never thought much of him (or her, depending upon who I'm speaking with).” It was enough to make me want to stay home, wrapped up in a comforter and my flannel pajamas, and do nothing but eat chunky peanut butter from the jar while watching classic movies in bed. Films where in the end the girl gets her guy and ... yep, you got it, they all live happily ever after.

Most of us assume true love will last a lifetime, particularly when a couple has stood before friends and family and taken vows. “Till death do us part” has been a part of marriage ceremonies since it appeared in the Book of Common Prayer in 1549, and perhaps long before. From the ancient Indian tradition that obliged a woman to hurl herself onto the burning funeral pyre of her dead husband, to the practice of binding the feet of a young Chinese girl to make sure she'd be unable to run away from her husband later in life, the idea that marriage is forever has been around for...well, just about forever.

We even assess the value of our unions based on the length of time we've been together, with each milestone anniversary surpassing the previous one in the hierarchy of suggested gifts. Tin for your tenth, silver for your twenty-fifth, and gold for your fiftieth. Even as I write this, I find myself wondering what tin gift I might have gotten Mark had I hung in there just a little longer; a handsome tin keychain perhaps, or a pair of classy

little tin cufflinks? Years ago, long before I married Mark, I recall being curled up on the couch late one night reading articles related to the masters degree I was pursuing in clinical psychology, and I found myself startled by what one respected psychologist had to say about long-term marriages. “Don’t celebrate the union of two people who’ve been married for fifty years until you understand what that relationship has done to their souls.” Before that, I’d never heard anyone say anything that might dampen our ideal of longevity as the best way to determine the value of an intimate union.

Which brings us smack back to our collective story about the end of love: If a romantic relationship ends for any reason other than one or both people die, we assume that relationship to be a failure.

What love stories can we even point to where living happily-ever-after included a kind-hearted, honoring breakup, and where the love that was shared changed forms and was blessed and celebrated by all? A breakup where neither party was blamed or shamed, yet where both people are left valued and appreciated for all that they’d given one another, and to the community, as a result of their union?

Say what?

In a culture that assumes that breakup is just another word for failure, it’s hard to not drop down into the gutter of disgrace at love’s end. Feeling dishonored and humiliated is a normal part of breakup pain, particularly if you are the one being left. Yet, the loss of love is hard enough on the heart, without the added loss of social status and shame that can come along with it.

Failure is just another name for much of real life.

~ Margaret Atwood

The root of the word shame means “to cover,” and it’s characterized by the need to run and hide from the eyes of the world. This was certainly true for a former client of mine, Leslie, whose husband of only seven months decided he’d made a terrible mistake by marrying her. While hiking one morning near their home in the Hollywood hills, he announced that he was leaving her and returning home to England alone. Stunned, she could barely speak, yet still managed to eke out a few questions to try to wrap her mind around what he was telling her. Was he having an affair? No. Did he miss England? No. Was he sexually unhappy with her? No. He simply realized that he did not like being married. In some ways that was worse. Shame flooded her from every direction. She must have been a bad wife. She must be unlovable for her own husband to reject her.

She began to worry obsessively, “What will people think of me?” “How will I tolerate the humiliation of being single again?” So filled with shame, she could not bring herself to tell anyone what was happening. Rather than call her friends for support, she stopped

answering her phone. Instead of asking family members to stay with her while she adjusted to her loss, she closed her curtains and became a recluse, isolating herself for months afterwards to save face and not reveal the shame of her rejection. Just at the time we need support and connection the most, we're apt to crawl under the covers and cower, consumed with feelings of social inadequacy.

Shame derives its power from being unspeakable.

~ Brené Brown

According to Columbia University professor and cultural anthropologist, Ruth Benedict, shame differs from guilt in that guilt is something we're more likely to feel when we violate our own core values, disturbed that something we have done is fundamentally bad and wrong. Shame is what we feel when violating external rules and expectations that society imposes upon us, and it leaves us feeling that we are fundamentally bad and wrong. When we feel vulnerable to the negative judgments of others because we believe they're covertly assessing our "defects," even if they do it ever so nicely and with pity in their eyes, we can easily slip into a deep, dark sea of shame.

Shakespeare once said, "Oft expectation fails, and most oft there where most it promises." Meaning that the higher our hopes, the greater the likelihood of a fall. The consequence of which is often deep confusion and inner chaos, for our minds lose their footing when our reality doesn't live up to the way we expected things to go. Just as surely as if we were lost in the thick of the woods, with no clear path in sight, we can become disoriented and even paralyzed with panic about what to do and where to go next to find our way back to safety. Our brains like it when we can predict the future, and so we're inclined to create stories and patterns that allow us to do that. Such as the happily-ever-after pattern that informs how this story is supposed to unfold.

Among the problems with shame was that it in fact did not make you shorter or quieter or less visible. You just felt like you were.

~ J.R. Ward

In her studies with the Neuroleadership Institute, my good friend, brain-based executive coach, Dr. Karey Pohn discovered that when our expectations are in line with reality, our brains receive a hefty dopamine hit to reward us. We feel good when life matches our vision of what we think could and should happen. Yet when our expectations are not met, our stress levels shoot through the roof, shifting our brains into a threat state. Our cortisol levels rise, our immune system function drops and our limbic brains, the seat of our emotional reactivity, go into fight-or flight mode as our dopamine and oxytocin levels take a nose dive, spiraling us downward into a morass of misery and morbidity.

The Once Upon a Time of Living Happily-Ever-After

At heart, I've always been a bit of an amateur anthropologist. As such, I will often relate to my own personal experience in an impersonal way. Meaning, that in many ways, I'm my own Guinea Pig, and my thoughts, assumptions, feelings, and tendencies often serve as information for me about what might be going on for us all. Imagine, then, how curious I became in response to the sense of inferiority and shame that engulfed me as my marriage was coming to an end. I noticed it at first by the profound feeling of being exposed and unprotected after taking off my wedding ring and walking around in the world without it. Frequently, I had the impulse to slip my hand in my pocket to defend against the vulnerability of my glaringly naked ring finger. I also noticed, and rather unhappily I might add, that I now felt slightly inferior to others who seemed happily coupled, as well as fearful that others might be looking down on me now that I was single again.

Although my mind rebelled against such an idea, on an emotional level, I felt as though I'd lost status in my now single state. Having had the advantage of teaching so many students over the years, I knew enough to not relate to these feelings as a personal pathology, but more as a collectively shared experience. The emotional vulnerability resulting from a breakup can feel as screeching as nails on a chalkboard, particularly if you are a highly sensitive person, as many of us are.

I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.

~ Thomas A. Edison

It started me on a Nancy-Drew-like quest to see if I could discover the source of these collective ideals that were holding so many of us hostage, and that I and millions of others had so dismally failed to fulfill. I began with the phrase itself, "and they all lived happily ever after." A quick search on the Internet allowed me to discover that several hundred years ago, living happily-ever-after was simply one way to end a story as people sat around the community campfire telling tales late into the night. There were many variations on the theme as well. In Persia, one might know it was the end of the story when the teller clearly announced, "This story has come to an end, but there is still more to be told," offering a precursor to the cliffhanger that any devotee of a weekly television drama knows and loves so well. In Norway, one might have said the very astute, "And if they're not dead, then they're still alive." And my personal favorite, offered by the Hebrews, "And they lived in happiness and luxury to this very day," which is my way to end a story.

Digging a little deeper, I discovered that while fairy tale motifs can be found throughout ancient Indian, Chinese, Greek, Hebrew and Roman literature, fairy tales themselves only emerged as a popular form of storytelling in the late-16th century in Venice, Italy. Wouldn't you know that the aspiration to live happily in the arms of your one true love

forever would originate with those romantic Italians paddling around in their Gondolas on the canals of Venice? Fairy tales were different from the more well-known and established folk tales of the day, uniquely characterized by their wish-fulfilling tales of magic, adventure, and a happy ending that always included coming into great wealth along with finding true love.

Yet, it made me wonder. Why then? What was life like in Venice, Italy in the late-16th century that would create the conditions in which the happily-ever-after myth would so quickly take root and begin to flourish and thrive? So much so, that this new aspiration in love would come to dominate the majority of love seekers throughout the world within a relatively brief period of time? We're only talking about a little over 400 years in which this one idea transformed our world in really significant ways. On an evolutionary scale, 400 years is but a hiccup on the timeline. Before this time, mating and marriage wasn't about love. It wasn't about happiness. It was still about forever, yes... but that's only because it was largely about land, trade, commerce, and power dynamics—not things you shift around too quickly. Before this time, mating and marriage was all about survival, and the deep human need to be safe and secure in life.

The Unfortunate Origins of Ideal Love

In my mission to understand what had given birth to our current expectations of romantic love, I discovered two extreme life conditions that were profoundly impacting the Venetians of the day. The first was a life expectancy of less than 40 years. Now, that doesn't mean that everybody up and died when they turned 40. A lot of folks lived well into their 50s, 60s, and 70s. Yet, the lion's share of Europeans who lived at that time--60% of them actually, died before their 16th birthday.

Wow. I don't know if you can put yourself in the shoes of those who lived in Venice a mere 400 years ago, to even try to imagine the unspeakable sorrow and grief they lived with, as half of the children that you gave birth to, half of the children your friends and neighbors brought into the world, half of the children your siblings had, half of your children's friends, were doomed to die before they even had a chance to grow up. And when I pause long enough to really let that touch me, I suddenly become aware of the part where we say, and they all lived happily-ever-after, like I'd never actually heard it before. In a world where the kids have such a narrow chance of survival, it's probably a really great idea to support the parents to stay together through thick and through thin, to give those babies the best possible shot.

The second thing I was fascinated to discover had to do with the rigid and oppressive class structure of the day. While there existed a thriving noble class in Venice at the time, the majority of city dwellers were quite poor, with economic realities providing hard-working Venetians little hope of improving their lots in life. Their sense of futility is likely to have further been solidified by a law that took effect in the 1520s that made it illegal for a Noble to marry outside of their social group. Remember, this is before 'love match' times, when marriage was all about the preservation of wealth. The oppression of their economy, along with this rather rigid law, created for the poor people of Venice an iron-clad sense of being locked into their current life circumstances, with no possibility of ever getting out of the daily grind of poverty.

Luckily, however, in post-Renaissance times, even the poor were a literate bunch, and able to take flight in escapist books that delivered the miracle of upward mobility in their fantasy life. Can we blame them then for eating up the delicious new literary offerings of fairy tales, offered by the man considered to be the creator of this new form of literature, Italian writer and publisher, Giovanni Francesco Straparola? While originally much less refined than the French would eventually make them a century later, fairy tales offered the respite of magic, enchantment and romance, where in the end the hero or heroine could be counted on to gain a better life, and where they all lived happily-ever-after in some far away and distant land (because remember, it couldn't actually happen in Venice given the laws preventing a royal from marrying a commoner).

I found it startlingly moving to discover the fertile soil in which fairy tales grew to be such a beloved part of our culture. And I was deeply inspired by the indomitable spirit of those robust Venetians, who refused to give up in the face of the impossibly oppressive circumstances into which they were born. I even began to see the myth of living happily-ever-after as the beginning of the Human Potential Movement, as it encourages us to be undeterred by our current life conditions, to nobly strive towards the possibilities of an abundant and flourishing life, no matter what evidence we might be experiencing to the contrary. I'd always thought that the Human Potential movement began with greats such as William James, Viktor Frankl, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Jean Houston, and Milton Erickson. Yet, maybe I'd not paid enough attention to the strong shoulders upon which they stood; for it was the unstoppable Giovanni Francesco Straparola who was responsible for popularizing the highly transformative practice of imagining a better way.

I've been married three times and each marriage was successful.

~ Margaret Mead

A Case for Consciously Evolving Love

As inspiring as all this is, it's time to consider that the myth of living happily-ever-after may have outstayed its welcome, and should now be up for review and revision. The mores of dating, mating and marriage have never stayed the same for long. From the radically novel idea of romantic love as the reason for marrying in the mid-18th century, to the "traditional" idealized stay-at-home mom and breadwinning dad of the 1950s, to the two daddy household, where birth mommies visit two weekends a year, the customs of love have always been, and remain, a moving train.

Dr. Helen Fisher, professor at Rutgers University and renowned relationship anthropologist, reports that serial monogamy has now become the norm, suggesting that most of us will have two or three significant relationships in our lifetimes. The

implication being, of course, that most of us will also go through one or two significant romantic endings as well. Just as it was once the norm to meet and marry your one true love, it's now just as common to not mate for life. With over 40 % of first marriages, over 60% of second marriages, and over 70% of third marriages ending in divorce, maybe we should begin to consider it normal to change our primary partners? The bottom line is this: the majority of us will not, in fact, have one lifelong partner to whom we will remain faithful for better or for worse and until death do us part. In an age where we recognize the need to up-level just about every aspect of life to keep up with our ever-evolving life conditions—our work environments, sleeping habits, child-rearing practices, diets and computer programs, maybe we should also consider retiring our outdated and overly simplistic model of romantic love. Setting aside the escapist fantasies we have of the lives we wish we could live and move toward a more wholehearted vision that's relevant to the lives that we do actually live.

A recent New York Times article reports that for the first time in recorded history, more people over 50 are now divorced than widowed, the rate of uncoupling after a long marriage having nearly doubled since 1990. And why not? The wonders of Viagra and the miracles of hormone replacement therapy offer to keep us sexually vital long beyond what Grandma and Grandpa dreamed possible. Where Grandma was lowering her expectations and settling down to enjoy some pleasant bridge playing as she entered her sixth decade of life, we're just getting started, looking to get a make-over, maybe to run a marathon or two and gearing up for our next big love. "Silver Seekers" over 60 are reported to be one of the fastest growing demographics of Internet dating sites. Those of us who are "retirement age" want more out of life than weekly playdates with our grandkids. We want weekly playdates with our main squeeze.

Failure is just another way to learn how to do something right.

~ Marian Wright Edelman

It is my hope that we might begin a conversation that will allow us to expand our capacity to more wisely hold the nuances of modern day living and modern day loving, particularly around the end of love. Rather than define the value of our relationships by the overly simplistic question, "How long did it last?" that we instead begin to ask questions like, "What wisdom have I gained?" and "What have I learned about love that I can now apply moving forward?"

I believe with all my heart that love does indeed prevail against all odds. And apparently I'm not alone. For Andrew J. Cherlin, author of the highly regarded, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, tells us that Americans, in spite of having one of the highest divorce rates in the Western world, have one of the highest marriage rates as well. In fact, close to 90% of us are predicted to marry at least once in our lives, in spite of the uncertain odds that that marriage will last a lifetime. So, our attempt to redefine a "happy ending," is not evidence that we no longer believe in love. To the contrary, we are the relentless believers in love

and life-long union. Yet, given the realities of our time, which include the postmodern tensions between the stability of marriage and the American ideals of individual freedom, self-expression and personal growth, we must accept the choice to unmarried by the many who make it. For learning to live happily even after, finding a way to forgive the unforgivable, and move forward in life graciously with hope in our hearts, and goodwill in our gestures and in our words may very well be the essence of what it is to truly love each other.

Even divorce might be seen as one kind of fulfillment of love. Love asks many things of us, including actions that seem to be utterly counter to feelings of attachment and loyalty.

~ Thomas Moore

Yet before moving too quickly towards the evolution and expansion of love, let's first take a moment to peer a little deeper into love's shadows, as we take a quick detour to meet Shame's sordid sisters, Hatred and Rage. Fasten your seat belt, as we take a little spin through the dangerously unpredictable and primitive hells of hatred, revenge, and the disturbingly darker sides of love.

