



# *Book Review of Marilyn Beloff's Moving Forward: An Ancient Divorce Ritual for the Modern World*

*By David Hoffman, JD*

More than a decade ago, I had a divorce client who, along with her soon-to-be-ex-husband, did something rather remarkable: they created a private ritual to mark the transition from being married to being single. Here's her description:

*We met on a beach near our home, and we had the beach pretty much to ourselves. We gathered shells, stones, sand, and other objects from the beach to build a lovely structure in the sand, signifying our home and our marriage. We talked about all of the positive things that had come of our marriage and how much love there was between us. We paused to let that all sink in, and then each of us, ever so carefully, took the components of this structure and used them to create two separate structures – one for each of us – to signify that we were leaving the marriage with many gifts that would enable us to be our separate selves in our new lives. We looked at each other's structures, commented on how lovely they were, and – after pausing to let all of this sink in – decided that we were ready to move on.*

They came up with this idea on their own. Psychologist Marilyn Beloff's magnificent description of divorce rituals – “Moving Forward: An Ancient Divorce Ritual for the Modern World” – had not yet been published.<sup>1</sup> Their idea emerged from the felt need to mark an important life passage in a heart-felt and loving way.

Fast forward a few years to 2003: I was at the annual IACP Forum in Vancouver, Canada, at a well-attended plenary session, where I saw Dr. Beloff standing before us with a small group of people. She looked very much like a rabbi officiating at a wedding. But it was the opposite – a divorce ritual, in which each of the parties, their children, and two friends had a chance to express their love and good wishes for the divorcing couple. I found this demonstration (which was done, by the way,

with role players, not an actual divorcing couple) deeply moving. I stood at the back of the room in tears.

I invited Dr. Beloff to Boston to lead a one-day training workshop for divorce mediators, therapists, Collaborative Practice professionals, and others, so that we could learn how to help people create their own rituals of this kind. Of course, not all divorcing couples are good candidates for such a ceremony – some are still too caught up in acrimony, sadness, or shame. But after that workshop, I began suggesting to many of my clients that they consider creating a ritual of some kind to mark this significant life change, in which they could lovingly express – privately, or in the company of loved ones – their appreciation for each other and their hopes for each other's well-being.

One of the reasons why Dr. Beloff's book will be so valuable to professionals who work with divorcing couples is because the only ritual that our society currently provides for divorcing couples is either a trial (which often evokes nothing but fear and loathing) or the perfunctory hearing in court in which the divorcing couple presents their agreement for the court's approval.

Since the vast majority of divorces are resolved not by trial but by agreement, let us focus for a moment on what happens when a judge reviews such an agreement and pronounces the parties to be officially divorced. In the jurisdiction where I practice, the only 'ritual' involves the judge asking the divorcing couple a few obligatory questions about whether the marriage is truly beyond saving, whether the parties have made a full disclosure of their finances, and whether they signed their agreement voluntarily. If the parties answer “yes” to all of those questions, the judge applies the rubber stamp of court approval to their agreement and calls the next case.

The first time I saw divorce proceedings of this kind,

I was struck by how cold, mechanical, and devoid of emotion they were. The courtroom seemed more like an administrative agency where the sole order of business was to check some boxes, sign some forms, and file the records of the termination of the couple's marriage in the appropriate cabinet of a government office somewhere. It was a rare judge who even cursorily acknowledged that a momentous change in the lives of the parties (and their children, if the marriage produced offspring) was occurring.

In saying all of this, I am not recommending that courtrooms become the venue for an exploration of the divorcing couples' feelings. What I am suggesting, however – and this is one of the premises of Dr. Beloff's excellent book – is that we have, in most cultures, a remarkable disparity between the elaborate rituals that mark the occasion of a wedding, while virtually no thought or energy go into marking the equally important change called divorce.

A notable exception to this generalization can be found in orthodox Jewish practice, in which obtaining a Get (a religious decree of divorce) is an elaborate and, for many, an emotionally charged experience. This experience, which was the subject of Dr. Beloff's doctoral dissertation, involves a panel of rabbis and requires that the husband (note the patriarchal and heteronormative aspects of this ritual) grants the wife the divorce, thus releasing her from the bonds of matrimony.

One of the many noteworthy aspects of "Moving Forward" is its detailed description of the various steps in the Get process and, even more significant, the emotional release that the ritual often provides. Dr. Beloff goes on from this description, including a deeply touching description of her own religious divorce, to provide us with equally profound stories of seven people whose reactions to the Get ritual differ widely.

Some of the participants found the ritual to be saddening, others spiritually rewarding – but all of the participants expressed a sense of release. Here's the description from one of the people that Beloff interviewed:

*[U]ntil the moment that the Get was happening, I don't think I really understood what forgiveness was. During that ritual, which was very, very powerfully*

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*charged, an amazing, loving ritual, I reached inside to answer the question of "do you forgive him"? I found an answer like I had never found before, and it was one of those very pivotal moments of something that till then I couldn't have or didn't feel. It was pure grace that I was given back. I was given that moment of grace to be able to find whole-hearted forgiveness. That was a ritual that really worked.*

*In a beautiful and poetic Foreword to "Moving Forward," lawyer Nancy Cameron cites a critical passage of Beloff's book and the central question that Beloff considers with her stories:*

*What if we, as a culture, honestly faced the death and fragility of our relationships and our truths surrounding divorce, giving divorce its due through a formal rite of passage? What if, instead of hiding our faces in shame and denying our truth, we acknowledged the fear and pain at the death of our marriages and held expectations for healing, transformation, and rebirth as healthy, strong people, rather than continuing to pathologize divorce and those who are divorced in our culture?*

One of the most valuable parts of “Moving Forward” is Beloff’s distillation of the lessons from these powerful stories in a concluding section of the book, in which she describes the elements of a secular, egalitarian divorce ritual our clients can use. The companion video (which can be viewed at [Beloffbooks.com](http://Beloffbooks.com)) is especially worthwhile because it depicts a ritual that anyone – regardless of whether they are religious or not – could adapt to the circumstances of their divorce and, by doing so, bring peace into the process of parting.

“Moving Forward” is a unique combination of analysis, description, and demonstration that will be extraordinarily useful for Collaborative Practice professionals who are trying to infuse some healing – to the extent possible – into the process of divorce. Some

couples may not be interested in learning about divorce rituals, but for those who are, professionals in our field need to know about “Moving Forward” so that we can make its valuable insights available to our clients.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> BookBaby, 2019.

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