“How does one become a butterfly?” she asked.
“You must want to learn to fly so much that you are willing to give up being a caterpillar.”

—Trina Paulus, *Hope for the Flowers*

None of us are untouched by divorce. Approximately half of marriages end before the death of a spouse,¹ and if you haven’t experienced divorce firsthand (as a child or as an adult), then your once-married sibling, your son’s best friend, or your next-door neighbor has. Yet, the fact that divorce is statistically normal doesn’t seem to have done much to change our cultural view. Our reflexive use of phrases like “broken home” and words like “visitation” support the notion that the original nuclear family has more intrinsic value than any other kind, and that any postseparation family configuration is, at best, a watered-down substitute.

In political discourse the perceived collapse of the “traditional family” is blamed for societal ills. Those who seek to characterize

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the decision to divorce as a moral failure often cite studies describing children’s poor adaptive responses to divorce. All this, despite research indicating that it is the conflict between parents, more than the fact of the divorce, that places children at risk.\(^2\)

We propose the introduction of a new idea for professionals working in the area of separation and divorce: That divorce can be best understood as an experience embedded in ordinary human development. We view divorce not as a failure, but as a point of temporary breakdown in the ongoing evolution of a family. By extension, we view divorce professionals as healers, with the job of helping the family to reconstitute itself in a way that allows each of its members to get back on a healthy developmental track.

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**What Do We Mean by “Development”?**

The inborn propensity to move from a state of total dependence, through the achievement of a personal identity, and into a state of relative independence is universal within our species. Even if you’re not familiar with any particular theory of human development you know that as individuals we grow up, to some extent, along a predestined path.\(^3\) It starts from the moment we are

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3. Our description of human development as being composed of an unfolding series of “phases” (with each phase serving as the foundation for subsequent phases) is an idea so widely held among mental health researchers, theoreticians, and practitioners that it has reached the stature of a concept that “goes without saying.” However, the model of development that the authors present here represents an integration of the seminal work of several iconic theorists, notably that of Sigmund Freud (drive theory, psychosexual stages of development), Erik Erickson (psychosocial stages of development), Jean Piaget (biological/cognitive/intellectual phases of development), Margaret Mahler (separation-individual theory of child development), and W.R.D. Fairbairn (model of endopsychic organization).
Born (many would argue it starts in the womb) and continues throughout our lives. We face a series of increasingly complex challenges—learning to sleep through the night, to tolerate the absences of our parents, to delay gratification, to leave the home of our youth, to becoming increasingly financially and emotionally independent, to form intimate partnerships, to become a parent, to tolerate our child’s increasing independence from us, to care for and eventually lose a parent, to adjust to our own aging—and confronting these challenges is inevitable. Each developmental phase calls on us to master new concrete and emotional tasks and to achieve new capacities in the service of emotional growth.

All developmentally important moments carry transformative potential. Whether they occur in infancy or old age, these important moments challenge us to overcome fear, relinquish the familiar, and take on new experience. These are moments of dynamic tension in which we stand on the precipice of change. If we are to let go of the known in favor of the unknown—if we are to take that leap—we’ll need to draw on a reservoir of established emotional, cognitive, and perhaps even physical capacities. And we’ll need to develop new ones.

Some common life challenges are not predictable in the way that, for example, the onset of adolescence is. But sometimes an unforeseen challenge is so profound, and the successful navigation of it requires the mastery of so many complex concrete and emotional tasks, that it becomes a development phase—a new stage in an individual’s personal evolution. Though not anticipated, such a challenge is not unique to the individual and contains universal themes such as fear, grief, and loss. As with predictable developmental phases, such challenges offer the opportunity for significant psychological growth. Examples of these challenges

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include having a developmentally challenged child, being laid off from a job, facing a serious medical diagnosis, or getting divorced.

Now let's dig into one illustration of a developmental experience, so we'll have a context for moving these concepts into a discussion of our divorce work.

Think back to your own transition from home to college. Remember how you screwed up your courage to wave goodbye to your parents, then turned back toward your dorm room and the new roommate who was a stranger to you. Remember how you mustered enough courage to enter the dining hall for the first time, how you coped with the anxiety of being suddenly on your own. Perhaps after a week or two on campus, you had pangs of feeling at sea and ached for the familiar safety of your old life. But these moments soon gave way to the thrill of freedom and the excitement of meeting new challenges, new people, and new experiences.

Your personal experience may have been quite different from the one we described. But our point is that if your desire to master the task of adjusting to college outstripped your fear and doubt, the pleasure of your new success built on itself and propelled you onward to master new challenges of increasing difficulty. Eventually, college became your new normal.

All emotional development is like that. Each time we face a compelling new idea that offers the possibility of growth but challenges us to relinquish aspects of the known and the safe and we are able to successfully navigate that moment, we add a brick to the foundation of further growth.

On the other hand, development isn't really linear. Let's consider a hypothetical college student who struggles with his ambivalence about leaving the comfort of home. He might choose college and even separate from his family fairly easily at first. His first weeks at school might go smoothly, and he may feel thrilled to be coping so well. But if a new stressor is introduced into his life (perhaps his mother becomes ill or he starts failing chemistry), he will likely need a bit more reassurance and support—at least for a while.

Let's say that the effect of the new stressor increases (the student's mother gets sicker or he flunks chemistry) and this boy begins to regress. He loses the ability to self regulate; he starts
skipping meals, develops insomnia, and is too tongue-tied and insecure to contribute during class discussions. In the evenings, he plays video games alone in his room, just as he had during the summer before he entered middle school (another tough transition for him). As days stretch into weeks and he stops participating in his college life, we now describe him as in a “developmental crisis.” He is faced with the task of mastering important challenges associated with a new life phase, but he has slipped back to an earlier phase of his development and is stuck there. At that moment, under those psychological conditions, the pull backward is greater than his desire for the next big thing.

**Divorce as a Developmental Crisis**

A primary function of a couple and the family it creates is to provide a unique environment in which its members can face and successfully master new developmental phases and their attendant challenges. If there comes a time when the original configuration of the nuclear family can no longer do its work, we hope the couple or family will seek help in the form of counseling or therapy. But if they don’t, or if efforts to rectify the situation fail, it makes sense that there be an organizational restructuring. Even though couples come to us “because my husband slept with his secretary,” or “because my wife and I have grown apart,” they are really in our offices because they can no longer work together to facilitate their own (and their children’s, if they have them) continued evolution into more accomplished, nuanced, authentic versions of themselves. Rather than viewing divorce as a sign of moral weakness or a selfish choice, the authors view it as a developmental crisis with transformative potential.
Chapter 1

Divorce involves family members at different ages and with differing levels of inherent psychological and cognitive capacity, all facing a rapid succession of significant changes while experiencing a roller coaster of powerful emotions. For many of our clients, the simple acts of getting out of bed and putting one foot in front of the other require Herculean effort. And yet, somehow, they have to make a series of complex and frightening decisions that carry lifelong consequences.

In our developmental model, divorce is not simply a series of legal disputes, conflicts to be resolved, or problems to be solved—though it is a legal process usually requiring the resolution of conflict-laden, problematic questions (Who will keep the house? How will we share time with our children?). Viewed as a developmental crisis in the life of a couple and family, divorce becomes a stage of life in which there is a dynamic and shifting tension between the old, dysfunctional way of doing things and an array of new options.

The process of getting divorced tasks us with letting go of established traditions and familiar routines of daily life. It requires adapting to new rhythms, to the loss of a partner, to new financial and social realities, and to the intermittent absence of children. Divorce often requires learning new skills, such as balancing a checkbook, resetting a circuit breaker, or establishing bedtime rituals for kids. In the absence of a spouse we must learn to soothe ourselves, and to find new sources of comfort and support. Like all significant life passages (leaving the home of our youth, coupling, becoming a parent, losing a parent), dismantling a marriage means redefining our identities.

Although divorce will likely remain a painful chapter in the lives of all involved, it need not be a bad developmental turning point. A well-handled divorce can help a family regain its capacity to attend to the evolving needs of its members. A very well-handled divorced can raise the bar by improving the
developmental trajectory of each family member. If, as helping professionals, we want to be agents of transformation, we need to know a lot about the conditions in which people can change in tough but important ways. And we need to learn how to create those conditions in our work.

Summary of Concepts from Chapter 1

- Human beings “grow up” by facing a series of developmental phases and mastering the new challenges (emotional, cognitive, physical) associated with them. Some developmental phases are predictable and universal. Others are not predictable, but contain themes that are universal to human experience.
- Developmental phases have transformative potential; they offer opportunities for emotional growth.
- The function of a family is to support its members in moving through developmental phases in healthy ways, even under difficult conditions.
- A healthy family provides the conditions in which healthy development can proceed.
- Divorcing couples and their families have lost the ability to support each other in mastering new developmental phases and are in a “developmental crisis” with transformative potential.
- If, as helping divorce professionals, we want to help our clients to navigate their developmental crisis at their own highest level of transformative capacity, we need to understand the conditions under which humans can change in difficult and important ways and how to create those conditions in our work.

A well-handled divorce can help a family regain its capacity to attend to the evolving needs of its members. A very well-handled divorce can raise the bar by improving the developmental trajectory of all involved. If, as helping professionals, we want to be agents of transformation, we need to know a lot about the conditions under which humans can change in tough but important ways.