

A TEEN'S PERSPECTIVE ON DIVORCE DURING THE HOLIDAYS

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of Flyingfreenow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 150 of the Flying Free podcast! It has been three years since we started this podcast, and I thought we'd do something a little bit different today to celebrate. I want to introduce you to my daughter, Aimee. She is twenty-one years old. She is going to be twenty-two soon, by the time you guys are listening to this. She just got married last summer to Josh, and she is now working behind the scenes with the Flying Free programs doing customer service and all kinds of stuff that we need her to do, and she's saving me tons and tons of time. She's doing a great job. First of all, hi, Aimee. Welcome to the podcast.

AIMEE: Hi! Thank you for having me!

NATALIE: We're actually recording this in my office and taking turns with the mic, so hopefully this will work out okay. I'm going to be asking her questions, and she's going to be talking about what it was like to go through the holidays as a kid, as a teenager whose parents are getting divorced. Well, first we were separated for a couple of years, and then we walked through an almost two-year divorce process and then came out on the other side. And I just thought you know, you guys hear a lot from me, and you hear from other survivors, and you hear from authors and counselors and pastors and other people like that here, but we've never really heard from a kid. Not that she's still a kid, but I just thought it would be fun (maybe not fun, but interesting) to hear about things from her perspective. And I just want you to know that we have not discussed this prior. This is going to be very serendipitous, and I don't really have any real questions set. We're just going to riff a little bit and I'm going to ask her some questions and we'll see what comes out. I don't know — we'll have to see if we have to do any editing or anything after. So anyway, Aimee, why don't you tell us how old you were, if you can remember, when you first found out that we were going to be separated. We separated in September of 2014, and how old were you and what was that like for you? Because it was right before the holidays hit.

AIMEE: I would've been fourteen then, and I think I knew for a while before that things were going down, you know? It wasn't just all happy. I knew what was happening. I wasn't oblivious, like some of my younger siblings might have been.

NATALIE: So, do you remember how you felt, especially that first Thanksgiving and Christmas?

AIMEE: I don't think I saw my dad at all. He was living in a camper and then he was living in an apartment, and it made me feel super uncomfortable to go over there. I don't think he even invited me to hang out with him over the holidays, so I was here at home. It was very strange. I love traditions, and because my dad was gone, a lot of those traditions just didn't exist anymore, and I know I kind of tried to keep going with them especially for my younger siblings' sake, but it was just different, and there was no way of getting around that fact.

NATALIE: So you should know that she was number three in a family of nine kids and she was the first girl — she had two older brothers. So when you're the oldest daughter, I think, you're kind of like a second mother in some ways. I had been homeschooling up until that time, so we were really close. We were living on top of each other all of the time, 24/7. Aimee was a very responsible person, and she did a lot of stuff to help me out. I also want to make a note that Aimee and her dad were very close. Do you want to talk about the good stuff about your relationship with your dad?

AIMEE: Yeah, we were super close. I think when I was little, I would think to myself, "Who's my favorite parent — my mom or my dad?" and I'd be like, "Oh, I think it's my dad, but I better not tell anyone. I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings." So my dad and I were super close. I think I was one of the only children who didn't annoy him very much. I was always very helpful, and so we got along. We did lots of fun things together. We would go biking, we loved doing yard work. I helped him in his garden a lot. So we always got along. I was always the peacemaker and I think he appreciated that because I didn't bring a lot of stress to the relationship.

NATALIE: So the holidays for you, especially, not having him around I imagine were pretty devastating.

AIMEE: Yeah, it was devastating. I can barely remember those really sad times because I've blocked it out, essentially because I was just so sad about it. It's just weird to have such a major part of the year, Thanksgiving and Christmas, that's so family-oriented, and then having one of the people that literally made you not in your life for that part of the year. It is just weird and sad.

NATALIE: I'm curious to know, did you think it was going to be like that for the rest of your life, or did you kind of have hope that the next year was going to be more back to normal?

AIMEE: For those years that you guys were separated I had a lot of hope that you would get back together, but I also think deep down I knew that wouldn't happen because, you know, my dad did have a pattern of consistently no change, no remorse. He would pretend, but you could really tell. He didn't take responsibility for anything. I did, deep down, know that this was probably going to be the reality for forever.

NATALIE: Think about the following Christmas. Do you remember if you felt differently the next year? Was it getting better, or was it about the same? What was your perception about that time? This would be the second Christmas that we were separated so it would be after a year and a half of us being separated. I still hadn't filed for divorce yet, so there's probably still some hope there but nevertheless, it was kind of another Christmas like the one before. Was he a little bit more involved? I feel like you guys were spending more time with him at that point.

AIMEE: Yeah, I think by that point he was out of his camper and in his apartment, so this would have been 2015. I still wasn't really going over to the apartment. I didn't like seeing him in that environment because it just made reality realer. But I know the younger siblings were going over there. I honestly can't remember if I spent Christmas with him that year either. I don't remember — I don't think I did. It was pretty similar to the year before. Definitely easier, because we had fallen into this pattern of "Dad's not home, and it's going to be okay," and I think by that point we were getting stronger and more resilient and making new family memories and new family traditions and just coping in those ways.

NATALIE: Then the following year I had filed for divorce by that time in April of 2016, and then by the time the holidays started rolling around again, we had more of a custody plan in place even though the divorce wasn't final. We were working with attorneys by that time; we were working on co-parenting, and working on a schedule that was more equitable for both of us so the kids could see their dad more often. I believe by that Christmas, we would split Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and Thanksgiving. I think you spent part of the day with him and part of the day with me — I can't remember. It was a little more integrated. Do you remember much about that year? Do you remember anything about that year that was different or better or worse?

AIMEE: Now it's been a few years, and we were going over to my dad's on certain holidays, which felt good in a way just knowing, "Okay, I don't have to choose between mom or dad. This is my 'mom time,' and this is my 'dad time' over the holidays." That's actually been really good over the years, just knowing, "Okay, I don't have to choose who to spend the holidays with. It's already set out for me." I wasn't forced to go over

to my dad's anytime because I was older but the younger kids were, so I would always just go where the younger kids were told to go for the holidays because I wanted to spend time with my siblings too over the holidays. So that was easier, I would say, because I wasn't missing my dad over the holidays. I was with him for part of the time, and I didn't have to feel guilt over picking one parent over the other. It was just very laid out for me. It wasn't normal, but it felt more regulated.

NATALIE: I feel like we were starting to hit our new normal and starting to establish some new traditions, even. We had always gone over to my parents' house for Christmas Day every year, but my dad was dying of cancer, so we had that whole thing going on too. It was two years of chemotherapy, and then he went into remission for a little bit, and then got it back again, and then we watched him die. That changed everything for our extended family as well, which then also changed some of the family traditions that we had, and it was weird. It was kind of like the whole basket of fruit got completely thrown out, and we had to go through and pick up the pieces that we wanted to keep and then just let the other pieces go. I want to say too, that for those of you women who are either in the process of getting divorced or thinking about getting separated, or maybe you're already divorced and you've already got a custody plan in place, it's easy for the survivors to feel like, "It's so unfair. I gave everything I had to my marriage, everything I had to my parenting, and now I have to be alone for part of the holidays."

One of the reasons I wanted to bring Aimee on here is so that we could understand that we have to give some space to our kids to have their own experiences. Their experience is not going to be what ours is. Aimee wasn't married to her dad. She did see his behaviors, but not in the way I did or experience them in the way that I did. Plus, she would have been what you call the golden child in a dysfunctional family, and so she experienced things very differently, even, from some of her other siblings who were not the golden children but were maybe the discarded children or the targeted kids. I just think it's important to be able to let them have their own experience and to give them, especially these older kids, the freedom to express how they're feeling, the freedom to be angry if they want to, the freedom to be sad, and the freedom to go and spend time with their dad. I've noticed as I let my kids go and say, "Hey, if you want to spend time with your dad, go spend time with your dad if he wants you to come over there," and when it's time for them to go and have their holiday time with dad, for me to not be like, "Oh, I'm going to miss you so much. Oh, I'm so sad. I can't believe that I can't spend Christmas Eve with you — it just makes me so miserable." Then we're imposing those kinds of feelings on the kids and putting that guilt trip on them and making them feel like what Aimee said, like they have to choose or like they're hurting one parent over the other. The other partner may be doing that, but we want to not do

that. We want to actually let our kids have the experience that they have. So, do you have any more thoughts on those lines?

AIMEE: I just wanted to say too, as a kid, when I was at my dad's for Christmas Eve, I wanted to be with my mom, and when I was at Christmas Day with my mom, I wanted to be with my dad. I loved spending time with both of them, so if you're a mom and you're sad that your kids are gone, they are probably thinking about you, and they're probably sad that they can't spend that time with you. But at the same time, they're probably thinking about their dad too, and sad that they can't spend time with their dad at certain points. It obviously depends on your situation, but my point is that your kids love you. They're not going to go to dad's and thinking "I'm so glad I can leave mom's!" They want to spend the holidays with you. It's just a different situation from other families.

NATALIE: And like I said, not every kid is going to have that experience. There are some of my kids who actually don't like going over to dad's house, and they don't want to, and they have to because it's part of the custody plan. It's better, if we've got a child who doesn't want to go, to be able to be bright about it and cheerful about it (not cheerful in the face of their disappointment), and to be more like, "It's going to be okay. Everything's cool. We get to spend time on Christmas Eve, and then you're going to spend some time on Christmas Day with dad, and then you're going to come back home again and everything is going to be fun. Just enjoy the time that you have." Try to get them to get on board with it and help them to see that it's not this tragic, horrible thing, but that it's just part of our new normal.

And here's the thing. Whether you go through a divorce or a separation or not, things change over time. Even in healthy families, situations change. Grandparents die. Aunts and uncles get sick. People move away. Older siblings move away. Siblings get married and then they spend holidays with their in-laws and there's a lot of taking turns. And sometimes you might even have to celebrate a holiday on a different day than the actual day of the holiday. And that's totally fine, too. These are all things and strategies that families all over will implement in order to make things work best for their family. And all of it is good. There's nothing that's wrong about any of that. So I think if we talk ourselves off the ledge and instead of thinking, "Oh my gosh, the whole thing has gone wrong, and it's all falling apart, and the holidays are just crap," you can feel like that, but you can also talk yourself off the ledge a little bit by giving equal air-time to the opposite idea that, "You know what, things are just different. They're not bad, they're not better, they're not worse. They're just different from the way they were before, and we can build new memories and new traditions." And have we done that, Aimee? Do you feel like we've started establishing some new routines, and what do you think

about that?

AIMEE: Oh yeah, we totally have. You married someone new, and that creates a lot of new traditions in and of itself, because now we have a new family member that we're pulling in, and that's been really good too. I love the holidays now. I used to dread them back in 2014 and 2015, but now we have traditions with Dad and traditions with Mom and Tom, and it's really good. You've done a great job of being super positive and being like, "Okay, now it's time to go to Dad's, but we'll see you tonight or tomorrow," and the kids are all excited. We kind of joke around and say, "We get double presents because our parents are divorced." When you add that humor, it just makes everything better.

NATALIE: It's true. It's true. They make out like bandits now. And then they've got Tom, their step-dad, who loves to give gifts. He goes a little bit gonzo too. All right, so, I'm curious now. You're a newlywed and this year is going to be your very first holiday with your husband. Do you have some plans? What are you planning on doing this year to make it special for you and Josh?

AIMEE: I think we're going to do it pretty similarly to how we did it last year. We have to visit all of the families. We have to go to Josh's family's house, and then my mom's and my dad's. That's kind of what we did last year too. We do have to figure out how to incorporate some "Josh and Aimee Christmas Time" by ourselves, but it will definitely be a challenge, as we have to go to so many different houses over the holidays. But again, like what you said before, Mom, it's okay to do holidays on different days. We've definitely done that before with different families, either Josh's family or my family. We do Thanksgiving the day after with Josh's family, or whatever works. And it's still just as special. You kind of just have to be like, "Okay, we're doing an extravaganza this year. We're doing three days of Christmas." I hope someday that Josh and I will be able to figure out some "us" Christmas and Thanksgiving traditions, but for now, it will be very much hopping around from house to house.

NATALIE: Before we go, can you tell them a little about what you do for the Flying Free Sisterhood program and also for the podcast? You're very involved in putting this podcast together. Just tell them a little bit about what you do.

AIMEE: I answer emails. If you are emailing communitysupport@flyingfreenow.com, you will get a response from me, Aimee. I also put together the website page for the podcast, so every time the podcast comes out and you go to the website, it will be right there for you. I put that all together. I also handle all of the social media. So Instagram, Facebook, all those posts, all the Instagram stories, that's from me. Then I do whatever projects Mom wants me to do. So whether that be a book trailer or other miscellaneous

things, whatever Mom fancies, I do.

NATALIE: And there you have it. You guys, Christmas is just a couple days away, and we just want to wish you a merry Christmas. Thank you so much for listening to this episode. If you would want to, and we hope you do, we would love it if you would leave a rating and review on Apple iTunes. We love reading those. Aimee is now reading those and putting little excerpts on the podcast page. It's fun to hear from you and to hear how this podcast is helping to change your life and the lives of the people that you love. Share it too! If you know other women who are in relationships that are difficult, painful, and confusing, this is a great podcast to share with them. That's it! Have a wonderful Christmas. Until next time, fly free.