

# You're It!



*Successful Single Mothering after Divorce*

J E A N N E L . W A R D

***You're It!***  
**Successful Single Mothering  
After Divorce**

**Jeanne L. Ward**



Eloquent Books

Copyright © 2010

All rights reserved – Jeanne L Ward

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, from the publisher.

Eloquent Books  
An imprint of Strategic Book Group  
P.O. Box 333  
Durham CT 06422  
[www.StrategicBookGroup.com](http://www.StrategicBookGroup.com)

ISBN: 978-1-61204-824-6

Printed in the United States of America

Book Design: Stacie Tingen

“But what was family? Surely more than genes, eye color, flesh. Family was story: truth and struggle and retribution. Family was time.....If he had learned anything it was that family was not so much what you were given as what you were able to maintain” Anthony Doerr ABOUT GRACE

“Aim for Grace” Ann Beattie

“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.” Emily Dickinson



# *Dedication*

For my daughters, Barbara and Laura, who lived this journey with me as children and have grown into amazing women.

For my beloved husband, Charlie.

For my sons-in-law, Mark D. and Mark B. – good men.

For our grandchildren: Lawton Brantley, Holland Anne, Harrison Bradley, Sophie Grace, Max Benjamin, and Eva Ward, who fill our lives with joy and wonder and are our link to and hope for the future.



# *Table of Contents*

Introduction.....	1
About the Author .....	7
Chapter One: You're It! Will the Real Adult Please Stand Up? .....	9
Chapter Two: The Man that I Married: Letting Go and Moving On ....	15
Chapter Three: Sunday, Sunday: Parenting after Divorce .....	21
Chapter Four: Your House or Mine? Children as Power Brokers.....	27
Chapter Five: Who Will Carve the Pumpkin? Holidays of all Kinds.....	31
Chapter Six: I'm Dreaming of Bob Vila: Home Maintenance.....	40
Chapter Seven: The Dearly Departed Thumper the Rabbit: Pets, Alive and Otherwise .....	46
Chapter Eight: Purple Eye Shadow and Green Hair: Thirteen is Thirteen, Divorce or No Divorce.....	52
Chapter Nine: Scrambled Eggs for Dinner: Culinary Tips Not Found in <i>Gourmet Magazine</i> .....	61
Chapter Ten: Tick Tock – It's Six O'clock: Childcare for all Ages.....	67
Chapter Eleven: Would You Like Me to Cut Your Meat? Family, Friends, Dating, and all that Stuff .....	78
Chapter Twelve: The Person You've Become: Random Notes and Thoughts .....	92
Acknowledgments .....	103





# *Introduction*

I remember the day I fully realized I was indeed a single mother. A friend and I had taken our children to the beach for the night so that my husband could move out without all of us there watching our life being disassembled. I'll always be glad I was not around when he took his pipe and pipe stand, his favorite chair, his saxophone and record collection, the framed Hippocratic Oath which I gave him when he graduated from medical school, and all the other things, large and small, which defined our life together. Since we had been together since high school, there was a lot of "us" stuff.

We returned from the beach in the early evening. The house was dark and, when I opened the door, it had an eerie stillness, as if life had been sucked out of it; actually, it had. The life we had made in this, our first home, was gone, just as his possessions, books, and clothes were gone. Fortunately, the girls were tired from the sun and beach and had fallen asleep in the car, so I carefully carried them to bed and tucked them in.

The spots vacant of Dad's things would be glaringly obvious in the morning light, as would the reality of his absence, but tonight it was quiet and dark. He often took all-night call at the hospital, so I was used to him not being there, but tonight felt different and, of course, it was. It was the beginning of our life as a threesome and mine as a single mother.

Many years have passed since that night, and my daughters, in their thirties, are wives and mothers raising a group of six amazing little people. They are caring, good women, who bring me more joy than they will ever know.

It has always been in the back of my mind to write this book, but a conversation at a luncheon with a newly divorced young woman gave me the impetus to get this done. She was a recently divorced mother of three

young girls and she expressed her concerns about how they could grow up well-adjusted, when all she read was how many problems children of divorce experienced. The whole tone of her conversation was of a woman who believed she was defeated before she even started.

Suddenly, it became clear to me that I must write this book to let single mothers struggling with too many responsibilities and too little time know that the children they raise can turn into well-adjusted adults, capable of forming healthy relationships, respecting – not blaming – mom, and finding their own place in the world. I wanted to help single mothers believe in themselves and their children.

During my years as a counselor, I have worked a great deal with single fathers' groups. I have also, through my single parenting classes, got to know and respect many single fathers and their perspectives. But, there are very subtle and sometimes not so subtle differences in the way single mothers and fathers are perceived and, therefore, treated in society.

My favorite illustration is “the ponytail test.” During one of my single parenting classes we devised a test: one mother and one father in the class would send their daughters (ages six and seven) to school with a crooked ponytail and three buttons missing somewhere on their clothes. We all waited for the report the following week. The little girl of the father returned home from school with her ponytail redone correctly and a note from the teacher that she knew how hard it was for a man to do “these things,” so if he sent in the buttons she would be glad to help. The little girl of the mother, on the other hand, returned home with her same crooked ponytail from the morning and no offer of help with buttons.

As a former school counselor, it's easy for me to imagine the conversation in the teachers' lounge. Teachers would be muttering about the poor single father doing his best, while the discussion about the single mother would be how awful it was that *she* let her daughter come to school like

that; probably out until all hours. Single fathers have hero status, while single mothers are the gay divorcees! The ponytail test was sadly revealing. As a result, all the women in the class – myself included – took advanced ponytail lessons, lest we be judged so harshly.

This book is by no means intended to take away from the notion that family life is at its ideal state when children have two caring, involved parents. Single mothers are the first to celebrate the ideal, but they are living a different reality. No new mother gazes at her newborn in the nursery and looks forward to raising the child alone. I know I certainly didn't! It does not take a genius to realize that when one person does what two people were going to do, it requires a great deal of work and altered expectations. But, knowing that you can succeed makes all the difference. And, trust me, you can.

When I divorced in the late 1970s, gloom and doom surrounded single parents, particularly single mothers. Families of those who were divorced were referred to as “broken families.” The term was never used to describe a widowed woman's family. I remember one Sunday morning, not long after my divorce, my seven-year-old leaned over and asked me after the sermon if we were a real family or a broken one. The question saddened me. A life-long Catholic, educated entirely in Catholic schools, the attitude in that church did *not* represent the religion that I knew. Then I got angry, really angry, and a chance encounter with the new bishop in our diocese gave me a positive way to channel that anger. The next year, working with this caring bishop, we founded the first ministry in our diocese for divorced Catholics, which I headed for five years. I'm happy to say still exists today.

People have always been benevolent toward the widows: brought them food, helped with the children. But a divorced mother was a different story. Believe me, there were days, actually quite a few, when a big bowl of mashed potatoes, the ultimate comfort food, would have been a delicacy.

But by some unwritten rule, divorced mothers are not on the casserole circuit. Never mind that your husband may have been abusive or run off with a Cindy Crawford look-a-like; there was an unspoken notion that a real woman could keep her family together.

One person can raise a family, but it takes two people to make a marriage. No one truly understands what lies at the heart of a marriage. As John Taylor writes in his personal account of his own divorce in his deeply insightful book, *Falling*, “No one I knew who has decided to divorce undertook it lightly. It was a wrenching decision, fraught with remorse and heartache, imperiled by moments of genuine terror, and it had almost inevitably been postponed for years. Who had the right, I wanted to know, to moralize about these choices, to add the weight of public censure to the private anguish they already entailed?”

There was also the notion held by many of those who were unhappily married that, as a divorced woman, you were having a wicked, exciting, and independent life. I remember one evening returning late from work, lugging milk, pet food, and cheerios, about to face the babysitter, dinner, homework, wash, and oh yes, two small girls eager for my attention. One was crying because our pet gerbil looked sick; the other said her stomach hurt. Around the corner of the house appeared my married neighbor, and she said that it must be nice to be alone and do what I wanted. My mouth fell open at the stupidity of her comment and only years of training by the nuns kept me from killing her with a gallon of milk. Do what I wanted? *When?* I couldn't remember the last time I did what I wanted! I have a close friend who says she really never considered herself “single” until her children were grown.

Another widely-held misconception today is that being a single mother must be easier since, in the last thirty years, so many women head households and divorce is so common. It is true that when I, at the age of thirty,

became a single mother, I did not know anyone my age who was divorced with children, particularly in the Catholic culture that I inhabited. Community resources, employer awareness of family issues, and flexible child-care were non-existent. Today our society is very aware and concerned about mothers and the children they are raising. In some ways, they are too concerned. Single mothers are now blamed for everything wrong in our society, from delinquent children, poor school performance, to violent behavior, lack of respect for authority, probably global warming as well. When children of a mother alone commit crimes, the media frenzy focuses on these poor, latchkey, unloved children, raised by an irresponsible, careless mother. No one seemed to know what to say when the nation discovered that the most brutal school killing of our century, at Columbine, was committed by two boys both from two-parent families.

These attitudes make it hard for single mothers to believe they can succeed. A little less societal concern might be better. For all these reasons, at the end of the day, I must write about that which I know best and feel in my heart and soul: the experience of a single, divorced mother.

When I think of what it means to be a single mother, I recall in vivid detail a night when my older daughter was eight and her sister five. I came home from work to discover that the eight-year-old had spiked a high fever very quickly, and it continued to climb. I called our pediatrician (more about this *very* important person in your life later) who listened, and then in a calm voice told me to put her immediately in the car and take her to the emergency room; he would meet us there. He did not want to alarm me, but he did *not* like the intensity and speed of her illness.

I will never forget that ride to the hospital, with a frightened five-year-old in the back seat, and the very sick little girl with her head in my lap. It wouldn't have mattered that night if someone told me that half the known world was made up of single mothers; it would have been no comfort. I

was alone, really alone, rushing through the night with no other adult to reassure me.

For a single mother, when you lock the door at night, it is like the games of childhood where you get tapped on the shoulder and someone says, "You're it." This book is about what to do when *you're it!*

## *About the Author*

Jeanne L. Ward brings together a variety of professional and personal experiences to create *You're It! Successful Single Mothering After Divorce*. With a B.A. in Elementary Education and an M.A. in Counseling Psychology, Mrs. Ward worked as an elementary school teacher and later as a school counselor. In this role, she started groups for children of divorce. The notes from these groups form the basis of this book. As an adjunct professor for the local community college, she authored and taught the courses "Divorce: A New Challenge" and "Single Parenting – Becoming a New Kind of Family," along with other courses relating to work and family.

Her professional career also includes high-profile jobs in legislative affairs, lobbying for four local mayors, and serving as an economic development consultant in the private sector. Mrs. Ward's work with the media includes serving as an editorial writer for the local *Post-Newsweek Station*. In addition, through her column, "Relatively Speaking," she shared many articles about family life in the *Florida Times-Union*. She currently co-hosts a local political talk show, *First Coast Views*, and has participated in many speaking engagements about work and family issues.

As a community volunteer, Mrs. Ward founded the Ministry for Divorced Catholics in the local diocese and served as its director for five years. With friend and child development expert, Lenora Gregory, she founded the non-profit organization, Family Care Connections, which endeavors to influence corporate entities to implement family-friendly policies. For twenty years, this organization has honored local businesses through the Week of the Working Parent. Mrs. Ward's current community activities include Chairman of Hope Haven Children's and Family Clinic and board membership for Jacksonville International Airport Arts Commission and Dignity-You-Wear.



Mrs. Ward has been recognized for her contributions through numerous awards over the years, including the *Florida Times-Union* "Eve Award," the National Council of Jewish Women's "Women of Power Award," "Advocate of the Year" from the People with AIDS Coalition, and poster honoree for the Mayor's Commission for the Status of Women, among others.

The greatest motivation in writing this book for single mothers after divorce was her own personal experience as a single mother of two small daughters. She now resides in Jacksonville, Florida, with her husband, Charlie.

## Chapter One

---

# *You're It!* *Will the Real Adult* *Please Stand Up?*

We all know a single mother like this: She and her children are buddies. They dress alike, share adventures and giggles about their dates, and live like roommates, with everyone having an opinion and no one making a decision. This book is about how to move beyond the “children as roommates” mentality and become a mother in charge.

Ordinarily, when the reality sets in that you really are “it,” the normal response is to get into bed and pull the covers over your head, and comfort yourself with chocolate chip cookies. I have a personal theory that there is no life crisis not made a bit more bearable by chocolate in some form. Once you have eaten all the chocolate chip cookies you can stand and the crumbs are driving you from the bed, take an honest look at yourself and see which of the following syndromes you might have (it may be a combination), and begin the real work of becoming a responsible single mother. By the way, along the road of life, a day in bed with cookies is allowed from time to time.

### **The Rose Garden Syndrome**

A wonderful friend of mine, now deceased, gave life to the Rose Garden Syndrome. She was in a graduate school class and a student commented on the plight of working women raising children alone. The professor came back with, “Well, no one ever promised you a rose garden!”

My friend stood, calling upon the warm, southern accent she acquired growing up in a small Georgia town, and said, “Well, I do declare, everyone *did* promise me a rose garden. If I was a good girl and did everything right, things would work out. They lied.”

She had married young and had three boys. When they were five, six, and eight, her husband left her for someone else. She was never able to get past how unfair it all was. She had never pictured herself in any role but homemaker, despite the fact that she was a gifted speaker and writer.

She refused to work from an office and mostly worked on her bed, developing seminars. Somehow, her being home made all the changes seem less real. Everyone around her was aware of this “unfair thing,” especially her children.

The truth is that we did not discover the world was unfair when we were divorced, but much earlier. I discovered it when I was eight and had my *third* baby brother and not a sister. Or maybe the day in second grade when the boy in back of me was pulling my hair and I got in trouble for yelling at him. We have always known about *unfair*, not just from the magnitude of divorce. In the world of unfair, this is *major*, as my children used to say.

If you are prone to overindulging in self-pity, try something that I used in my divorce adjustment classes. The class was three hours long and the potential for hours of blood-curdling divorce horrors was plentiful. To counter this, for the first fifteen minutes of class, everyone could wallow in self-pity as much as they liked. They were free to bring wedding pictures, describe the perfect (young) body of the wife who replaced them, and on and on. You get the idea: basically a group wallow. But, at the end of fifteen minutes, the wallow was over and for the next two hours and forty-five minutes, we worked on the future.

Maybe a good wallow before you start the day will get it behind you. Motivate yourself by thinking about how little you like being around people who feel sorry for themselves: poor helpless victims in a cruel world. You don't want to become that bitter person and you surely don't want to raise your children to be like that. At the end of the six-month divorce class, the wallow time was almost non-existent. Remember, you are not a victim of divorce. You are a woman who has had a divorce as a part of her life experience: *big* difference.

### **The Popularity Contest Syndrome**

No young girl growing up in America is untouched by the September ritual of Miss America. If you could not be Miss America, the next best thing to be was Miss Congeniality: the one everyone likes. Now, give this some thought. How sweet must you be to get forty-nine women to vote for you? Clearly, you couldn't have told anyone that her song was off-key or her swimsuit a bit snug. You couldn't have had a grumpy day during competition or yelled at anyone because she took your hairdryer. In other words, the way to get this award was for everyone to like you. Motherhood, and certainly not single motherhood, is not a popularity contest.

Some of the things that mothers need to do, and *must do*, will not help you win a popularity contest, but will help your children become mature and happy adults. Many women want to turn away from the role of the mother who makes hard decisions; some even fall quickly into re-marriage so they don't have to face these decisions alone.

Re-marriage is not a solution for this. Think for a minute, why would some poor man feel honored to take the role of enforcer with your children, when you don't want to do it? Unless he's never been married and has been living with his mother (a book in itself), he probably faces the same children issues you do.

The sooner you accept the fact that to be a good mother you can't be popular all the time, the happier you will be. Unfortunately the period surrounding a divorce is not a particularly self-esteem building, feel-good time, so it is especially hard to hear even an unkind word from your children. A possible motivator is to close your eyes and picture the worst behaved child you have ever known (we all remember one). See him or her at six, ten, fourteen, eighteen. Now open your eyes and take charge. No one wants to live with that! This imaginary child's behavior was probably sort of cute at six, wearing thin at fourteen, and downright scary by eighteen.

### **The Family as a Committee Syndrome**

We all know that old joke that men tell about how they are in charge of all the big things in the family like world peace, global warming, and terrorism, and the wife is in charge of the little things like where they live, what car they drive, and where the children go to school. This humorous vignette seems quaint today. Many people advocate the democratic approach to family life, like "teams" in corporate America where decisions are made as a group. Many single mothers get confused about this and how their "committee" should function. First of all, unless you have only one child, you are always outnumbered. Second, as a single mother, you must decide where you live, what school your children attend, who takes care of them when you are working, and other major matters. Only *you* possess the knowledge and ability to make these things happen. Children don't make these decisions in two-parent families. Why should they in a single-parent family?

When there are areas that children can appropriately make decisions themselves, they should. For example, letting them pick a fast food restaurant they like or wearing what clothes they want (this one may spark controversy, but remember, no one ever went to first grade in their pajamas).

They can decide which friends to have over. The list grows and changes as your children do. Decisions, even unpopular ones like moving, which often occurs after a divorce, are yours to make. And you don't have to defend them. Let the children stick to the pizza places and what clothes to wear. Like the quaint joke, you make the big *and* little decisions, but I doubt you have much time to devote to global warming!

### **The Queen for a Day Syndrome**

There was a show in the early days of TV called *Queen for a Day*. As a child, I was fascinated by it, and even at a young age was confused by the premise upon which the show was built. Women came on and told about the hardships of their lives: house fires, abandonment, illnesses, etc. The audience would vote, and the woman with the worst problem was crowned "Queen for a Day." She actually got a crown and was showered with such gifts as a washing machine, clothes, food, and children's toys. I never did understand how a new washing machine would make all those terrible things better.

In reality, the Queen was getting emotional and financial rewards for being a victim. The show no longer exists, thank goodness, but unfortunately, women who like to play the role of victim still do. In this syndrome, you think of yourself as the victim of cruel people and events. Even if this is true, pull away from the dangerous role of a woman who refuses to take charge, and change what you can change. The very first thing you can and should change is your own attitude. You will discover over time that you will start to feel better about yourself, and more confident as your attitude improves. Take charge and let your children know that you are there as a mom and will take care of them. All the Queens for a Day in the world let their children flounder as they wait to be rescued by the king. And, even

if the king does appear, he probably has a kingdom to run and children to raise, and wouldn't be interested in a victim as his queen!

Before you go to the rest of the book, read and re-read this chapter.

### **To Become – An Adult Woman**

1. When you no longer act like a victim, you will no longer feel like a victim.
2. Accept the unfairness of the situation, and then lay it to rest.
3. Embrace the role of mother-in-charge.
4. Remember that mothers are always loved, and only sometimes liked.

Buy the B&N ePub version at:-

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/you-x2019-re-it-successful-single-mothering-after-divorce-jeanne-l-ward/1108181779?ean=2940013751323>

Buy the kindle version at:-

<http://www.amazon.com/SUCCESSFUL-SINGLE-MOTHERING-DIVORCE-ebook/dp/B006VXPJ6K/ref>