

## excerpt from “The Love List” By Julie Hammonds



It began, as so many things do in my life, with a list.

First, a list of losses: a seven-year marriage, a home, the feeling of security that comes when you know you belong to one particular person and place. After my husband told me he was done with our marriage and ready to move on, these losses were inevitable. In a few months I would move out of our house; after a few months more, my job working for the governor of Alaska would end due to term limits. These losses would take place, whether I was ready or not.

Other losses would come as a result of choices I made, though at the time they seemed inevitable as well. Once my job ended, I would leave Juneau, the Alaskan city where we'd made our home as a married couple. I didn't know many things for sure, in the fog and grief of losing a marriage, but I knew this: I could not share this small town with my ex-husband. It was time to go, to make a new life somewhere else. Where, I didn't know.

Assessing these losses to come, I felt both exhilarated and terrified. No longer bound to a failing marriage, a demanding job, or the town I once loved, soon I could go anywhere, do anything, be anyone. Few people ever experience such freedom.

But the same changes that provided opportunity also scared me to the core. I liked being a wife, an Alaskan, a professional whose job title earned notice. I would let them go with enormous reluctance. Without them, who was I? Truly on my own, who would I become?

One Saturday morning as a sourdough waffle baked and news chattered on the radio, I stood alone in my kitchen, chilled by the enormous changes to come. Time was passing; soon, I would move out of my house and lose my income.

Obviously, I would be better equipped to face the future if I made a plan. But how could I come up with one, when what I needed to plan for was not just how to support myself or where to live, but both?

Whatever the plan would be, I could not imagine building it around another job that drained me of energy for all but the most menial tasks when I got home. Such a life drove me to spend free time working through lists of chores, mistaking checked-off tasks for meaningful accomplishments. I had lived that way long enough, letting “must do” get in the way of what I wanted to do: Of the many things that killed my marriage, this chore-driven personality that placed pleasure last was a prime suspect. What did I have to show for it? The future I'd been working so hard to build on the salary from a high-powered job and the chore lists that littered my desk would soon be gone.

My future life simply had to include more happiness. I could go without a big salary, a prestigious job title, even a house of my own. I was willing to give these up, if I could have just enough, and be happy.

Standing in the kitchen that rainy morning, I decided that any plan for my future had to begin in the fertile ground of love. Into my future life, I wanted to build activities I genuinely love to

do. Surely a good job, a rewarding place to live, and every other component of a healthy new life would spring up naturally from such rich soil. But what were those things I loved, exactly? Years had passed since I last asked myself that question, or listened to the answers.

Beside my list of losses, it was time to make another, more joyful list: a “love list.”

I walked upstairs to my desk and pulled out six sheets of blank paper, a box of crayons, and a spool of clear tape. Taping the sheets together to form a poster-sized rectangle, I attached them to the pantry door where I would see them each morning as I fixed breakfast. At the top of this big, blank paper I wrote a question: “What do you love?”

What do I love? Answering that question became a regular part of my morning ritual. Waiting for tea water to heat, I would stand pondering the list. When an idea popped into my mind, part of the fun was choosing which color crayon to use for any particular item. Taking long hikes was green, candlelight yellow, swimming in the warm ocean a soft blue. But what color was spending time with my family? Reading? Dancing?

I could use any color I wished — there were no wrong answers. There also were no boundaries to limit what I could add to the list. I could love an activity, a place, a person, an area of intellectual interest, an animal, or anything else. I could love something I did often, such as swimming. Or I could love — potentially, anyway — something about which I felt curious, such as the idea of learning scuba diving. Anything was possible and everything was OK, on the love list.

Occasionally, another type of thought would pop into my head as I pondered the love list. These were always related to the big question of doing what I loved, but they didn’t answer the question directly. A typical one read, “I do what I love because I respect myself.” As I wrote these philosophical insights on the love list in firm black ink, they became bricks and mortar against which the rest of the list leaned.

The love list defied organization, although interesting connections linked items added on different days. “Love” and “solitude” rested side by side in strong red crayon. “Living in a harmonious home” was also inscribed in red, but “a home filled with love and laughter,” a goal I was having trouble envisioning in my newly single condition, was written just below in brown.

As my list grew, the multitude of colors made it cheerful. And because it followed no order or particular format, anything that popped into my head fit right in. Some mornings, especially just after I posted the list, I added lots of items. Other mornings, nothing came to mind. What did it matter? Having the list posted so prominently affirmed the renewed importance of love in my life. Not romantic love with its vicissitudes: That was impossible to rely on at a time in my life when everything was in flux. I needed to know what I could count on, what would get me through. The love list provided stability and reassurance of my commitment to building a positive future.

*I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from “The Love List.” To read the complete essay, pick up your copy of “Ask Me About My Divorce” from an online bookseller.*