

# SUFFERING SILENTLY

## MY STORY



(Picture taken circa 1971)

***This isn't just my story. It is the story of every parent that has "lost" a child through estrangement and every adult child struggling to have a relationship with their parent(s).***

If you asked my twin sister or older brother to tell you about their mom, and then you asked me the same question, you would get three distinct descriptions of her and think we had three different mothers. I have always said this to people when discussing my relationship with my mother and comparing it to how my siblings described her. After she died, we told stories about her, as people often do when they are reminiscing, and I learned things about her from my siblings that I didn't experience myself.

I always pondered why that was or how that could be, but I never truly understood it. How could a mother be described so differently by three of her children? I came to discover that we each thought of my mother differently and described her differently because we all had very differing relationships with her while she was alive that were only truly revealed after her death.

I was very close to my mother for the entire time of our relationship, only being able to recall two times that I felt she wasn't being "motherly" according to my definition. I discussed this with her as we had a very open, honest and direct relationship. We reconciled those two times without a blip in our time spent together. That was not always the case with my siblings, especially my brother.

I also uncovered that we don't always tell a person what we are feeling in our relationships with them and death offers a release for us to unleash all of that pain. But that is another story for another day.

Three years after her death, I found myself contemplating divorce. Up until that point, my relationship with my daughters, I thought, was bulletproof. I was a good mother to them in their younger years, attentive to their needs. I cooked, cleaned, had their friends over, was their CCD Teacher, Girl Scout Leader, Class Mom. They were my world and my life centered on them solely, maybe too much since I did not have a good marriage with their father. My focus was always on them, and I could not do enough for them as their mother. I enjoyed being a mom and I thought I was good at it.

After my divorce, I noticed that my relationship with one of my daughters was changing. Maybe because I divorced her father and he was alone and she felt the need to be there for him. That choosing of parents is referred to as the loyalty conflict, and as a result, he became the victim, and I became the villain. The relationship was strained, and I knew it. But I wouldn't address the strain or completely acknowledge it at the time. To do so would mean that I would have to face that the decision I made to divorce, which I saw as necessary for self-preservation, became a reason for my daughter to start hating me.

It didn't help that I didn't always conduct myself in the proper manner. As much as I was told not to involve my children in the divorce, like most people, I wasn't always successful. Sometimes I took my frustration out on the fact that I had to engage with my former spouse because we had children together and that bound us for life. My frustration over that fact was transferred and projected by me onto my daughters and I am sure they felt the pressure of that frustration.

Almost seven years after the divorce, I found myself estranged from my own daughter for two plus years. No contact, no communication. A series of unfortunate and hurtful events, led to that decision of hers to completely cut me out of her life for 27 months. And that is when that statement: "how can siblings describe their mother in vastly separate ways?" became even more than just a pondering for me, it became a deep need for answers.

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Why if you asked my daughters about their relationship with their mother would you get the impression that they were talking about two different people?

This is what I discovered.

Basically, what I have discovered and uncovered is this. Our children are different from one another, and they are different from us. We can't just develop a parenting style from our parents and use that because it worked on us or develop a parenting style different from our parents because it didn't work for us and use that to parent all of our children in the same way. We are all unique and what works for one of us, does not work for all. It is not a one size fits all parenting formula.

I have had to realize that to be the same mother to both of my children, I had to be the person they needed, not the person I needed to be. Just because it is what worked for me with my mother or my only other child, it doesn't mean that it worked for my estranged daughter. **I needed to meet my daughter where she was and understand that her needs for me as a mother were different than what I was providing. That to have the relationship with her that I so desperately needed, and she so desperately needed to have with me, I needed to ask her what she needed from me.** I needed to show her that it was Ok to have boundaries with me and that just because I was her mother, that didn't entitle me to tell her whatever I felt like saying just because I thought she needed to hear it. I needed to understand her and allow her the space to understand herself. I needed her to know me, but I needed to know myself first and allow myself to accept that I could change.

I realized I needed to ask her what her wants and needs were for our relationship, and her expectations of my behavior. I needed to change and that was ok with me because what she was asking me to change, was my heart. She was asking me to see her and accept her and help her to have a relationship with her mother because she needed her mother. She needed me. When we finally talked after all that time, and I was able to be there for her in this way, our relationship grew deeper and more intimate. Those relationships are truly more difficult because they ask us to grow in ways that aren't always easy or comfortable. But they are relationships so worth having because without the people in life that challenge us to love more deeply, to love more unconditionally, to love more freely, what would this life be!

Estrangement doesn't have to only involve those relationships where you don't have any communication with the other person whatsoever. It doesn't always result in the devastating "cutting off of a relationship completely" where there is no connection, no contact, and the boundaries that have been set by the other person involve never wanting to speak to you again.

In fact, what I have come to learn from all the books I read and the trainings I sought on these types of relationships is that estrangement can exist where you have contact, but you feel you are constantly walking on eggshells. Where you feel you can't express your views without your child feeling like you are saying they need to adopt your views in spite of their own. Where you don't feel deeply connected because you don't see eye to eye on most things and many conversations end up in disagreements.

While I have experienced both types of these relationships with family and friends at different times in my life, I never expected to be completely estranged from my own daughter. Never. You could have never convinced me of this. I thought we had the perfect relationship. My girls never rolled their eyes at me, told me off, threw a tantrum. We talked, we discussed things. I was a "go to mom", even their friends confided in

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me and asked my advice. Some of them called me “mom”. With my daughters I made it a point to have good, open communication, common respect, mutual admiration and a deep loving relationship that was always there and would always be.

No one prepared me for being estranged from my adult child for the better part of two years. Then again, we aren't always prepared for life's tragedies until we go through them. **We only recover from them if we are willing to learn about ourselves, willing to discover what went wrong with the relationship that we can take accountability for, and willing to see things through the other person's point of view.** I had to realize that just because she wasn't eye rolling me didn't mean she agreed with me. I had to realize that not yelling at me when she was frustrated wasn't a good thing. I had to realize that she didn't think I was the perfect mom that I thought I was being. I had to realize that what I thought I did wrong, wasn't what I did at all, and instead listen to what she told me about her issues with me, and that is the space where the healing began. For both of us.

No one told us about parenting an adult child. At least no one told me. Maybe because my mom passed before I got the chance to ask her expert advice. You see, I went to my mother for everything, and I trusted her opinion and respected it, deeply. We were friends, not just in a familial relationship, and that friendship existed the entire time she was on this planet. There wasn't one thing I couldn't tell her, good or bad, one conversation we couldn't have, about religion, politics, parenting, world issues, my own personal issues or hers. I told her everything, and I believe she shared as much of herself as I asked. This type of relationship is rare, and I have only come to know that after discovering how difficult relationships can be as I've grown.

There is a good book out there that taught me about my children and my separate relationships with them. Actually, there are a lot of good books on the subject because when I have a problem that needs solving, I read everything I can get my hands on. I could read a book on a plane. **And when I am in trouble, I seek the advice of experts. Since my inner circle has diminished, I am left with finding my people elsewhere. Therapy has helped, but I am never sure if the person I am talking to understands my problem because I can't ask them if they have had a similar circumstance. They always seem to think they can ask me anything but asking them anything about their personal life is forbidden. That doesn't help me because when I have a problem, I want the person I am talking to, to have had a similar problem and to have been successful at finding the solution.**

I can think of no better place than the writings of some smart people who have been through any life challenge that mirrors my own and offers their ways of how they got out of the mess they found themselves in. In fact, I look at these books as solutions, because I am a solutions person. Sure, I wallow in the emotions I find myself in and some days, I am all about my emotions. But for the most part, I want out of the uncomfortable tensions of a relationship gone bad. I am, after all, a people person. I crave connection and deep intimacy from others. It is what makes me tick and, on some days, helps me to breathe. When I am disconnected from those that I love, I feel untethered, lost and very, very alone. So off to reading I go, sometimes for days until I find the way out. I have no problem uncovering my part in it and owning up to it. I can come to the person with a better understanding of myself and my part in things having gone bad and I can apologize.

**That way out is different for everyone, but the one thing that remains the same for any person in an estranged relationship is that they need to know there is someone out there, that has been through what they are going through, and has found the solutions, tried and true, that worked for them.** After all, to be successful we model successful people, so what better place to look than someone who has been through it and has come out better on the other side.

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Many people tried to help me and they meant well. I am sure part of my difficulty in listening to them was that I wasn't ready to hear that any of this was my fault. Once I did the work on myself with the help of a qualified therapist who helped me to become a better person, I was able to heal first and be ready to have a new relationship with my daughter. One where she could express her boundaries and have me respect her and meet her in a place of healing.

Someone else that helped me was the author of a book called, "Rules of Estrangement". Joshua Coleman. has helped me so much just by reading his book and hearing his story. His story is similar to mine; and we shared some of the same struggles. His work helped me reconcile with my daughter. I became trained by him on reunification and the tools needed to mend a broken relationship. I owe him a debt of gratitude.



I have embraced my daughter and she has embraced me. We are discovering all the ways we are different and all the ways we are similar, and both of those things are bringing us great joy. We are learning forgiveness together and acceptance. It has truly been a great blessing in my life and had we not been estranged; this relationship would not have been possible. I can embrace that now with a loving heart.

If you need help with estrangement of any kind with your adult children, please check out these books and if you need someone who has been through it and knows a way out, consider giving me a call. I'd like to help you get out of the deep despair you are in because even though I am seeing my light at the end of my tunnel, I know you are still there in the darkness and you need someone to show you the way out, you need someone to show you your light.

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## **Suggested Reading:**

\*Rules of Estrangement by Joshua Coleman

Adult Children of Parent Alienation Syndrome: Breaking the Ties that Bind by Amy Baker PhD

Co-Parenting with a Toxic Ex by Amy Baker PhD

The High Conflict Custody Battle: Protect Yourself and Your Kids from a Toxic Divorce by Amy Baker PhD

Walking on Eggshells: Navigating the Delicate Relationship between Adult Children and Parents by Jane Isay

Mending the Broken Bond: The 90-Day Answer to Repairing Your Relationship w/Your Child by Dr. Frank Lawlis

The Way We Were: Dealing with your Parent's Divorce by Brooke Lea Foster

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Divorce Poison: How to Protect Your Family from Bad-mouthing and Brainwashing by Dr. Richard A. Warshak

Collateral Damage: Guiding and Protecting Your Child Through the Minefield of Divorce by Dr. John T. Chirban

Helping Children Cope with Divorce by Edward Teyber

I Thought We'd Never Speak Again by Laura Davis

Done with the Crying: Help and Healing for Mothers of Estranged Adult Children by Amy Baker

*\*I received training from Joshua Coleman, the author of "Rules of Estrangement", which in addition to these authors and books, also helped me to reconcile with my daughter. I would like to share that training with you.*