

AFTER SEPARATION: Reflections on the Plight of the Alienated Child

Arthur L. Kovacs, Ph.D.

Introduction:

When parents decide to separate and move on to divorce, Courts across the country usually expect that they will somehow “get along” for the benefit of their offspring. The assumption is that even after separation they will work out arrangements for sharing custody, residence, and visitation, and they will cooperate harmoniously in making the whole variety of decisions about how their children should be raised: what standards should be set for them, how they should be disciplined, what values they should learn, what expectations they should fulfill, and what future destiny they should be encouraged to embrace. Unfortunately, if such harmony and respectful cooperation were possible for many a divorcing couple, the pair probably would never have sought a divorce in the first place!

All too often, and in contrast to the Court’s hopes, divorce is accompanied by a large residue of anger and bitterness in both who are separating. All too often, those who divorce continue to engage in irritable or even raging skirmishes, treat each other with contempt, wish vengeance and or vindication, have serious disputes about “what the children need,” and in general continue - on and on - to carry out during the post-divorce period the miserable and distressing interactions with each other that led to divorce.

In effect, a kind of war, mostly cold but intermittently hot as well, characterizes the post-divorce adjustment for far too many parents. Their offspring, tragically, become caught up in the war. In a humorous but yet chilling manner, the textures of such divorce outcomes have been well captured in Drew Barrymore’s first film, “Irreconcilable Differences.” In it, we see a loving relationship between two young adults (a union initially full of hope, playfulness, caring, and erotic transport), spiral downwards into competitiveness, enmity, and rage with a changed set of life circumstances. After their separation, the parents’ demands for their young daughter’s loyalty, understanding, and companionship – and conversely their pressures on her to reject the other parent – take a horrible toll on their offspring. The child protagonist in the film ends up petitioning the Court to be allowed to separate from *both* her toxic parents and to be sent to live with her calm, steadfast, and loving nanny!

For some portion of children caught in such miserable life circumstances, not infrequently one of the outcomes that develops is a growing desire on the part of the child to repudiate *one* of the parents, to begin balking at visitation, and eventually to engage in open rebellion, absolutely refusing to honor the keeping in place of established and agreed upon times of residence in the two homes. The child chooses one parent and becomes increasingly hateful to the other. The possible patterns of parent to parent and

parent to child interaction that generate such an outcome and what the rejected parent might do to ease the situation will be described in this paper.

The seeds of alienation:

By way of coming to grips with my topic, let me first note that six or more of ten frequently recurring post-separation conditions seem to have to come together in order for a child to become alienated from a parent. These include:

- Ongoing enmity and bitterness between parents in the aftermath of separation and divorce.
- Attorneys for one or another of the parents filing actions related to custody, residence, or visitation with children that are experienced by the recipient as extremely vicious and critical. Typically, the motions of attorneys are like the firing of howitzers in an ongoing battle.
- One or both of the parents openly expressing contempt, criticism, and/or hatred of the other parent in front of the child. This is often amplified and supported by members of the critical parent's cohort of friends and relatives.
- Overt or implied pressures from the parent who prevails in the struggle to capture the child that the child be loyal to him or to her and to adopt that parent's world view of what has happened and how terrible has been the parent who will be rejected.
- The parent being rejected having inflicted at least some serious wound or bitter disappointment on the child who will now repudiate that parent.
- As the rituals of visits are established, the parent who will be the capturing parent wanting to talk often to the child during periods when the child is visiting with the other parent, and he or she offering to be available if "there is any trouble" in the other home when the child is in residence there.
- When a visit is concluded, the capturing parent interrogating the child about details of what transpired during the child's absence and making many derogatory comments about what is being described.
- The capturing parent never acknowledging that some conflict between persons spending time together is inevitable and that when there are disputes between the other parent and the child, the child should work things out with the other parent.
- In extreme cases, the capturing parent filing unfounded child abuse charges against the to-be-alienated parent.
- The parent coming into control of the child being convinced that the child's rejection of the other parent is understandable and acceptable or even, unfortunately, that it represents the best outcome for the young person.

My years of experience and the literature in my field make it more than tragically clear that the biggest distress and the most likely wounding feature of being a child of divorce is the trauma caused for a child by being trapped in painful and unsolvable loyalty conflicts. I have spent many hours in my consulting room listening to divorced parents and seeing their children, and when so doing I often find myself daydreaming about scenes from many motion pictures depicting the trench warfare of World War I. Each of

the parents is hunkered down in his or her respective trenches, separated from each other by a no man's land. Machine gun fire is exchanged intermittently between the hardened positions. There are sudden bursts of shell fire. Periodically, poison gas is loosed across the battlefield. And all too often, one, another or both of the parents manage to self-delude and in absolute certainty come to believe that their terrible actions are designed only for the best interests of their child or children. Rather than glimpsing that they are torturing their offspring, they manage to see themselves as advocates and liberators, fighting for a better world.

Why does this happen? For better or for worse, we are all prisoners of culture. In this part of the world (and even more strongly if one is descended from families originating in many other even more conservative societies), all of us have been trained from earliest childhood to believe that marriages are sacred and that once such commitment has been made that marriages must endure until "death do us part." Any person contemplating divorce, given the intensity of our moral training, must therefore inevitably experience painful surges of guilt and fear. The one who breaks up a family is facing stigma and ill regard from his or her friends and relatives. The fear and guilt are even greater if children are to be dislocated.

So we end up doing two things to get our consciences off of our backs if we do divorce. 1) We demonize our mates, focusing over and over again on our disappointments, our outrages, our nodes of bitterness, the clumsy and hurtful behaviors, and the character flaws and foibles of those who have been our partners. Next, we lunge after the affection and loyalty of our child or children. Their allegiances, if we can secure them, reassure us that we cannot, after all, be such terrible human beings if the testimony of their behavior is that they continue to love us. 2) In addition, if we are able to capture *more* of their loyalty than can our former mates, this will "prove" to us and to the watching world that WE are the GOOD one; "winning the battle" for children's primary allegiance makes it obvious to all who know us that our former mate is indeed the one, the wretch, who fully *deserves* to have become a divorced and abandonee person.

Finally, we often attempt to turn our children into our comfort sources. We make having their love too important, too much the only balm we can imagine that will soothe our aroused and hurting soul pain and vindicate our sense of injustice. This violates what should be a caring parent's sacred code of honor. A sensitive parent fights like a demon not to impose his/her needs and longings on offspring. The honorable parent is readily available to address the hurts and yearnings of the children; no reciprocity is ever expected. Such a parent keeps him/herself healthy for as long as sensible living can make that possible, for he or she does not ever want to become a burden to the younger generation. And wise and compassionate parents make sure that there is a surfeit of human warmth, caring, intimacy, and wisdom available to themselves through their attachments to members of their own generation and/or their parents' generation. They have others, so they will not turn to children to fulfill these purposes. It provides positive pleasure and a sense of integrity for thoughtful parents to set children free from having to fulfill roles as either intimate partners, or comforters, or the meaning makers for them.

Let me return now to my trench warfare metaphor. For children trapped in the no-man's land in the war zone of parental conflict, life is awful. Who would wish to live in such an unprotected environment? Unless the war stops, then, children have no sensible alternative but to make their way into one of the trenches. Which trench will be the one to which they flee?

There is a strong tendency for children to draw ever closer to the parent who is the primary parent, i.e., the one with whom they spend the most time, the one that seems therefore to be the majority source of their stability and security. This should not come as any surprise. Children are intuitively wise. They will signal their caring and their loyalty to persons who have the greatest capacity for good or for evil in their lives.

There is also a strong tendency for children to draw ever closer to the parent who appears to be the most fragile either emotionally or physically. Having endured the distress of the family collapse, children fear anything that appears to signal the possible crumbling of one of their parents and will want to "be there" to lend any help or emotional support they can muster to prop up the needy parent. It is as if the child in this scenario becomes the parent of his or her parent, trying to be attentive, trying to be loving, trying to be present and sustaining so the fragile parent will not collapse.

From this perspective, a parent who is experiencing the gradual withdrawal of a child's involvement, strangely enough, might feel complimented. It may be a sign that the child drifting apart is signaling his or her trust in the to be abandoned parent's sturdiness and capacity to endure: "I am pulling away from you because you don't need me like Mom/Dad does." As one of the psychology interns whose training I supervise noted to me recently, the departing child can be carrying a set of beliefs, a set he or she holds in secret, towards the rejected parent: "I know your love for me is secure. I'm leaving your life. I may even rage and curse at you. I may never see you again. In my heart, though, I know you won't abandon me. You won't hate me in return. You will always be there, caring and waiting. I *have* to depart because Mom/Dad is going to fall apart if I don't choose her/him, and I'm not there to help."

It can be important for separated parents to reflect, too, about what is ordinary. The distress inflicted on separated parents by the withdrawal of a child is only a heightened and more poignant version of the normative transitions of the ongoing life development of children. What is it that children do as they grow older? Through the elementary school years, children most typically are reasonably compliant and more willing to "do what they are told." Unless abuse or molestation is taking place, they are not likely to make much fuss about the visitation rituals of shared custody – although some grumbling is probably to be expected. All comes to change markedly, however, with the onset of pre-puberty. The challenging developmental imperative that comes to grip the child as the era comes on and expands is the beginning of preparation for emancipation and of leaving home a half decade or so hence. As children first embark on the process of readying themselves and then actively moving through adolescence, even in intact families they begin to withdraw from parents anyhow. Parents do not need to do

anything to induce what is a quite ordinary, unremarkable, and even a desirable ongoing disconnection.

Children increasingly are in their rooms rather than “hanging out” with parents. They begin to create a peer network, wanting to spend expanding amounts of time physically present with chums and/or endlessly texting and e-mailing the members of their social network. Parents are tuned out. Significant concerns and worries begin to be shared with peers rather than with family members. Adolescents press for more and more control of decision-making and of time allocation and chafe at and protest increasingly about requests for them to participate in rituals designed by their parents.

Youth traversing this developmental era most typically “do not want to be bothered” with the aspirations, emotional needs, or viewpoints of parents. They wish to be increasingly empowered to shape their own choices and to keep their own counsel in an ever-expanding number of domains of their lives. They also expect their parents to be selfless – to be attentive to *their* hopes and dreams, to provide practical help, to leave them alone when they want to be left alone, and for parents to go about parents’ own business in a self-contained and sustaining fashion when children do not want to see, talk to, or interact with them.

In Omar Khayyam’s “Rubaiyat,” the poet reminds all of us that our children come through us but are not part of us. Towards the end of his segment on parenting, he likens those of us who are parents to archers. We must help shape our youth as we would craft arrows. Then at last we must fit them to our bows and send them away into the universe on their own trajectory.

Being a parent is an exercise in extreme selflessness. Its purposes are the sustaining of those we have invited to enter into our care. It is not a vehicle for our fulfillment. Being a parent also means embracing an increasingly growing and at last a permanent separation from closeness with children. We must not burden our children with our needs, our longings, our hopes, or our justification. The force of caring is to be sent descending down the generations. We do for our children. In turn, one day they will do for theirs. Yes, sometimes some scraps of goodness run back uphill into our beings, but we must not expect it or demand it. Our holiest longing must be for our children to go forth in decency and wisdom and be liberated by us, their parents, to make of THEIR OWN lives something shining. They are not to be burdened with providing meaning or emotional sustenance for our troubled lives. That is to come from our finding our own ways to make use of our particular personal endowment and from the caring of others who are our peers and/or our mate.

We who have children must face an inevitable hurt. Separation from children comes to all parents. For those who are divorced, the process is accelerated. It comes much earlier – as soon as children begin to live in two houses. And all of it gains momentum as the young people begin to go on play dates, “hang out” in the community with friends, go elsewhere to have peer companionship while they study, begin overnights in others’ homes, travel, begin to date and to fall in love, and get ready to leave home fully. For

divorced parents, mourning the loss of closeness begins at the moment of marital separation. If one of the parents has a child in residence for less than 50% of the child's life, then that parent begins quite early to take on some of the experienced properties in a child's mind of having become like an aunt or uncle rather than a parent.

In many ways, being a parent is very much like having a garden to tend. The enterprise is a great deal of work. Sometimes it is backbreaking. We must cultivate the soil, fight predators, prune, fertilize, irrigate, and make sure that plants have the right balance of shade and sunshine and the proper soil chemistry. If we do the work thoughtfully and fully, we may be fortunate. Blossoms will emerge. The plants will flourish sturdily. But our joy can only be the joy of seeing how our plants have unfolded and what they have become. We can take pleasure from observing how much they have come to add beauty to the world. But our plants are not going to thank us. They are not going to feel eternally grateful to us. They are not going to call us when we miss them. They are not going to show up when we want to hold some family ritual. They are not going to be interested in our struggles and give comfort to us about them. They are just there – in the world – thriving, giving shade, giving color, putting oxygen back up into the depleted atmosphere of a tired planet, and forming seeds for their own progeny.

The challenges and life currents I am surveying in this paper that course through divorced parents and children often make it difficult for a good adaptation to life to evolve in a way that sustains all the members of the divorced family who must endure the transition. Unfortunately, one or more of the ten conditions I noted above often emerge, ones that can result from failures to understand and to manage well the stresses of the terrible life dislocations that flow from a decision to divorce. If a majority of the ten comes into play, then some portion of the young people subjected to such awful turbulence will be at risk for separating from and repudiating one of their parents.

I shall now describe what are the pitfalls of some of unthinking attempts made by banished parents to manage their banishment and also the narrow possible range of reconciling possibilities available to alienated parents for beginning a process of reunification. It would be helpful for parents to pay careful attention to what follows. The suggestions are critical for initiating renewed movement towards an engagement with any child who has abandoned a parent.

What are the moves that the alienated parent should avoid at all costs?

- Under no circumstance make any utterances ultimately designed to engender guilt in the departed child, (e.g., “I’m the one paying huge child support for you. You’re just using me, taking advantage of me, and not doing your part.” “I miss you so much. How can you hurt me this way?”) It is a fact of human affairs that when we are made to feel guilty, we have additional reasons to hate the one doing so, and this encourages further withdrawal.
- Under no circumstances make any utterances that represent name-calling or character assassination of the rejecting child, (e.g., “You’re an ungrateful brat.” “You’re a vain, self-obsessed little asshole.” “I’m ashamed to be the parent of

- such a stupid and cruel child.”) Attacks by a person in our life are never an encouragement to go forward and to seek more of that person’s company.
- Under no circumstances blame the other parent and suggest openly or even imply that the decision to reject is not really the child’s but that the child is merely the puppet of the other parent, (e.g., “You may not realize it, but your mother has brainwashed you. I’m a *good* father. She’s put ideas in your head, and you’ve been stupid to believe them.”) None of us likes to hear that we are simply in someone else’s thrall and that what appear to us as if they are *our* decisions are not *really* our decisions. We feel wiped out, discounted, unheard. Once again, this will not instill a desire to move forward towards the speaker.
 - Under no circumstances, retaliate, (e.g., “Well if that’s what you want – that I disappear – I will. Just consider me gone. If you ever change your mind and want something to do with me, I hope you’ll be able to find me. I don’t need to keep trying to see someone who keeps rejecting me. I’m not a fool.”) Yes, that parent is indeed a fool. The foolishness of this response for me is self-evident. It is a sulk. It is closing the door on the possibility of repair. In this instance, hurt pride is killing the chances for redemption.
 - Under no circumstances attack the other parent, (e.g., “Your father must be gloating that you don’t want to see me. He was always a bastard. I don’t know why he gets to have your company when that scum bag went off with his whore and broke up our family. He gets a reward, and I get shit on by you?”) This kind of behavior only exacerbates the child’s loyalty conflicts and increases the desire to draw away from the parent who is uttering such hateful and poisonous rhetoric.
 - Under no circumstances threaten or actually use the club that may have been given you, the rejected parent, by the Court. If an order is in place directing specified times for a child to be with a parent, that parent in many venues can contact the local police. Accompanied by the police and a copy of the order, the parent can show up at the child’s school or at the child’s residence and attempt to coerce the child – even with threats of going to Juvenile Hall – into coming for a visit. I do not know of a single case where such behavior resulted in any improvement in already inflamed and tragic circumstances.

What are the moves that the alienated parent should attempt that might soften the impasses?

- Be certain to begin with an apology. I cannot stress the importance of this too strongly. There is no such thing as a perfect parent. All of us have failed our offspring on occasion. Faced with such a devastating loss, it is time to become reflective and ask ourselves what is *our* part in what has happened that *we* have contributed? We may not have played the largest part in the alienation drama, but we certainly bear some culpability. Try to identify the three or four most hateful or hurtful moments that have been exchanged with the child you have lost. If your child would be willing to visit with you to listen to you take responsibility for your failings, it would be wonderful to see the child in person. If the child is unwilling to see you in person and alone, find out if the child would listen to you in the presence of a family counselor so that there can be a safe space. If the child

simply will not agree to be physically present with you anywhere, then write or e-mail your self assessment and your apology to your offspring. Consider the following example:

“Sarah, you’re not willing to see me anymore. I’m truly sorry that you’ve come to that conclusion. It must have been a painful and difficult choice for you. We haven’t spoken much about how your decision came about. I’ve been too busy, I think, being angry at your dad for poisoning your mind or yelling at you for how you were treating *me*. I don’t know if I could have listened to you even if you had tried to tell me more. I wish I could take so many of my words back. They’re hateful, and it must have been so miserable for you to listen to me ranting in such a fashion.

I also have been trying to think back and remember how else I may have failed you. I’m going to have to guess, since you haven’t told me these things yourself. But I’m remembering the years I was so frightened about your sister’s diabetes. She took up almost all my time. I know I pushed you away over and over again. I know I wanted you not to need much from me, to be self-sufficient, and even – and I curse myself for this – to be my assistant in caring for your sister. You must have felt so cast out of my life. And after a few years spent helping your sister to stabilize her illness, no sooner did that come to some peace than I decided to go back to school and get a degree. I was gone for so many hours. When I was home, I would shut myself up in the den to study and write my papers. You and your sister were left to fend for yourselves. In a way, I’m not surprised that your father finally decided to divorce me. I would love to know if the things I am telling you that I now deeply regret were as painful to you as my memories of them are for me as I think back. I would like to talk more with you about all of it. I would like to spend my life trying to make whatever amends I could for all the distress I caused you. Please let me know if we could at least begin to talk.”

- If you cannot initially embark on a renewed flow of communication with your offspring, learn to practice patience. Every few weeks, invent some kind of goodness to bestow on your lost child and ask for nothing in return. For example, send tickets to an amusement park, a movie, or a concert that your offspring might enjoy along with some simple message such as, “My love for you is still in place. Your being away from me will not stop my love. I was thinking of you, and I thought you might enjoy these tickets. Take whomever you would like to have by your side.”

- Send random text messages, e-mails or note cards with loving sentiments on them, but do not space these too closely together. You do not want your child to feel nagged or intruded upon. The messages should be of love and appreciation. “I passed a junior high today when the kids were leaving. I thought of you. I did check your grades online the other day, and I felt so impressed with how well you seem to be recovering from our family’s troubles and are applying yourself again. You should be feeling very proud of yourself.” Do not ask for any response.
- Be sure to honor important ritual events in the child’s life. Do something the child would appreciate for his or her birthday. Do what has been the tradition for holiday times. For mothers’ day or for fathers’ day (as appropriate), send a greeting card with a message something like, “I know I’m not going to be seeing you on mothers’/fathers’ day. It is coming, though, so I’ve been thinking of you. You were only in my life for a dozen years, but I want you to know how glad I am to be your mother/father and how much I cherish memories of those years I was able to be with you, my memories of knowing you, and my taking delight in the fact you were and are alive.”
- Once or twice a year, send a message that you will not abandon hope that some day the two of you might be present together in whatever way that would, of course, remain to be defined together. Ask if the child is ready yet for such an event. But do not pull at the child. Make it clear that you will accept that receiving no answer from the child is itself an answer, and you will then drop the subject for now.
- Be prepared to use creative seduction. Invite the child on interesting vacations with you and the new persons – if any – in your life. “I’ve made arrangements to take a bare-boat cruise around the American Virgin Islands for two weeks in August. I’ve invited Sally – we’ve been spending more time together – and, since there’s an emptiness in my life without you, I’ve invited your favorite cousin, Jake, to come along. He wants to get away from his family for a while this summer. Is there any chance you’d be willing to break your absence from my life and come with us? I think it could be the vacation of a lifetime. And if there’s a friend of yours you’d like to have with you, I’m sure we could squeeze in even one more person.” You can design an infinite variety of temptations.
- You must be the carrier of whatever is the energy required to sustain your one-sided relationship with your child. Bear the burden. Expect nothing in return. Offer love and connection over and over again, year after year. As your child comes ever closer to emancipation, the child is also beginning to throw off the influence of your former spouse and to think increasingly for him/herself.
- Under some circumstances, consider a return to Court particularly if you have accumulated a record of steady kind loving responsiveness to a child who has fled even if your efforts have never been acknowledged or rewarded. Ask that there be a renewed custody evaluation. This is risky. Your child will resent being dragged through litigation hell. You will encounter orienting tendencies that are part of an overarching philosophy pursued by those who interact with the Court. Judges and commissioners have a bent toward mandating equal custody and visitation and another bias in favor of undertaking reunification of alienated children and parents. Custody evaluators have a tilt towards recommending

shared custody and visitation unless their investigation unearths conduct that is egregious. So far, so good. But while you are likely to get a set of orders reopening the road forward towards reconnecting with your rejecting child, the Court often does not do enough to give effective support to you. You may be confronted with the challenge of what to do if your child starts yelling or crying or yelling and crying, or yelling and crying and running away about visiting you when he or she is now ordered to do so once again. Yes, you can get the police involved, but I cannot recommend that. What often *is* required to make such a solution work is in the hands of the judge supervising your case. When issuing orders, the judge *must* make it clear to the parent who has benefitted from the alienation that the disconnection is going to stop. The child *is* going to be restored to the life of the other parent. The judge should assign the responsibility for making the reconnection work to the parent with whom the child has become most enmeshed. That parent should be ordered to see to it that the captured child resumes contact with the rejected parent and that the two begin to re-cement a relationship. It is helpful if this movement towards reunification is done under the tutelage of a knowledgeable reconciliation therapist. If the alienating parent fails to make the repair unfold, the judge needs to make it clear to that parent that the Court is going to impose serious sanctions, sanctions that will, if necessary include ordering jail time for contempt of Court. While any parent who has lost access to a child cannot compel a judge to so rule and to so act, the papers filed with the Court could certainly request such an intervention. Unfortunately, this solution is rarely imposed by the Court.