

ANNALS OF INQUIRY

WHY SO MANY PEOPLE ARE GOING “NO CONTACT” WITH THEIR PARENTS

A growing movement wants to destigmatize severing ties. Is it a much-needed corrective, or a worrisome change in family relations?

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August 30, 2024



Illustration by Wesley Allsbrook

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One day in the mid-two-thousands, a teen-ager named Amy waited to hear the voice of God. She was sitting in a youth Bible-study group, surrounded by her peers, and losing patience. Everyone else in the group seemed to hear God speak all the time, but Amy had never heard Him, not even a peep. Her hands didn't shimmer with gold dust after she prayed, as others claimed theirs did, and she was never able to say, with confidence, “The Holy Spirit told me to do it.” She went home that evening, determined to try again the next day. A few years passed and she still heard nothing. She began to wonder if something was wrong with her. “God didn't talk to me,” she wrote later, in a blog post. “I was afraid that meant either he wasn't there, or I wasn't good enough.”

Amy, the eldest of five siblings, was homeschooled by evangelical parents in the suburbs of Alberta, Canada. (She asked that I use only her first name.) She was bright, and happy, and remembers days spent reading “David Copperfield” aloud with her siblings. It was only when she left for college—Ambrose University, a Christian liberal-arts school—that aspects of her childhood began to strike her as peculiar. Amy remembers her parents telling her, when she was six, that her grandparents were going to Hell because they weren't Christians. She grew up believing in creationism, and was startled to feel persuaded by the evidence for evolution in her college textbooks. She grappled with the “problem of evil”: If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, how can he allow so many terrible things to happen? “I started to diverge from my parents,” she told me recently.



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Part of Amy’s original motivation for going to college, which she paid for herself, was to find a husband: she had been taught that men were better spiritual leaders than women, and hoped that a partner could help her hear God. Ambrose was socially conservative. No drinking. No sex outside of marriage. She found a boyfriend, but the relationship didn’t last, and soon she wasn’t sure she wanted to get married at all. She enjoyed her courses, and took such thorough notes that, on one occasion, other students offered to buy them. “Amy came to university like a sponge,” Ken Nickel, Amy’s philosophy professor, told me. “She wanted to understand.” On visits home, she stumbled into conflicts. During a family vacation in 2013, she told her parents and siblings that she didn’t think the Bible implied that it was wrong to be gay. “I think, naïvely, I was just, like, Oh, they’ve just never heard this interpretation,” she said. “And they’ll be, like, ‘Oh, my gosh, thank you for letting us know!’ ” Instead, as Amy tells it, one of her younger brothers became upset, and quoted Bible verses to make the opposite argument. Her mother sent her a letter expressing concern for her soul. During the drive home after her graduation, it came up that Amy identified as a feminist, and her parents began arguing with her about abortion. She cried in the back seat.

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Amy attended law school, and a few years later returned to Ambrose to speak at an event. While visiting, she learned from the university’s president that her parents had sent him a letter expressing displeasure about Amy’s transformation. Their daughter used to be a “Bible quizzier,” they wrote, but now “rarely picks up a Bible except to highlight the verses that she believes say the opposite of their obvious and orthodox meaning.” Her mother said that Amy had a difficult relationship with her brothers, whom she now regarded as “misogynists.” If her parents could start over, they would discourage her from attending the school. “She used to be a calm and steady young woman but now suffers from a sometimes debilitating anxiety in spite of how faithful and unwavering God is in His support and provision,” the letter read. “She has turned her face from Him towards despair.” Amy told me that learning about the letter was “destabilizing.” She wasn’t yet estranged from her family—that would happen a few years later—but she found herself visiting less often.

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Family estrangement—the process by which family members become strangers to one another, like intimacy reversed—is still somewhat taboo. But, in some circles, that’s changing. In recent years, advocates for the estranged have begun a concerted effort to normalize it. Getting rid of the stigma, they argue, will allow more people to get out of unhealthy family relationships without shame. There is relatively little data on the subject, but some psychologists cite anecdotal evidence that an increasing number of young people are cutting out their parents. Others think that we’re simply becoming more transparent about it. Discussion about the issue has “just exploded,” Yasmin Kerkez, the co-founder of Family Support Resources, a group for people dealing with estrangement and other family issues, told me. Several organizations now raise awareness and hold meetings or events to provide support for people who are estranged from their families. Becca Bland, who founded a nonprofit estrangement group called Stand Alone, told me that society tends to promote the message that “it’s good for people to have a family at all costs,” when, in fact, “it can be much healthier for people to have a life beyond their family relationships, and find a new sense of family with friends or peer groups.” Those who have cut ties often gather in forums online, where they share a new vocabulary, and a new set of norms, pertaining to estrangement. Members call cutting out relatives going “no contact.” “Can I tell you how great it was to skip out on my first Thanksgiving?” one woman who no longer speaks with her parents told me. “I haven’t heard family drama in years.”

Amy didn’t immediately confront her parents about the letter, but it snagged in her mind. “The topics that it felt safe to talk about just got smaller and smaller,” she told me. Amy recalls that they often argued about Donald Trump; she was upset when Brett Kavanaugh joined the Supreme Court, and more so when her brothers celebrated. On visits home, she took to filling a coffee mug with alcoholic cider. “Things were tense,” she told me. Her parents had already noted a shift when they wrote to her university, concluding their letter,

“I don’t have the language to tell you how much we miss her.” Like many others, Amy would eventually go no contact.

When I was small, my mother used to read me a children’s book called “The Runaway Bunny,” by Margaret Wise Brown, the author of “Goodnight Moon.” Now I read the story to my own toddler. In the book, a bunny tells his mother that he wants to run away. “If you run away,” his mother says, “I will run after you.” First, he says that he’ll escape by becoming a fish in a trout stream, but his mother counters that she’ll become a fisherman and catch him. If he becomes a rock on a mountain, she’ll become a mountain climber. And on it goes. “Shucks,” he sighs eventually. His mother replies, “Have a carrot.” Since its publication, in 1942, “The Runaway Bunny” has never been out of print. The idea that a child might reject his parents is frightening. But there’s a question buried in the story as well: Is it even possible? If we make ourselves into a boat and sail away, will our family turn out to be the wind?

The field of family estrangement is still in its infancy. The tome-like “Handbook of Family Therapy,” a mainstay among psychologists, does not contain an in-depth entry on estrangement. “The cliché ‘hiding in plain sight’ is really appropriate here,” the family sociologist Karl Pillemer, who teaches at Cornell, told me. Kristina Scharp, a director of the Family Communication and Relationships Lab, at Rutgers University and Michigan State, defines estrangement as an “intentional distancing” between at least two family members “because of a negative relationship—or the perception of one.” Sometimes it comes from an accumulation of grievances. Other times, it’s because of one fight—for example, after a parent rejects an L.G.B.T.Q. child when they come out. According to a survey conducted by Pillemer in 2019, twenty-seven per cent of Americans are currently estranged from a relative. If you haven’t experienced it yourself, you probably know someone who has.

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When Bland, a journalist from London, became estranged from her family, in 2010, she found that social gatherings became awkward. She began telling people that her parents now lived in Australia. Really, she wasn't sure where they lived. When she was honest about her estrangement, people gave her “fearful looks,” she later wrote. “Perhaps because I embody what all parents dread—that their own children might also give up on forgiving and healing.” Non-estranged people, she found, often assumed that estrangements would end. “They think that it's always reconcilable,” she said. “I think that's an idealism. It's based on a myth that families all really love each other.” In 2012, Bland wrote about her estrangement for the *Guardian*, hoping to give others permission to make the same choices if necessary. “I didn't [walk] away from my own situation at a younger age than I did, for fear of being judged,” she wrote. After the article was published, she heard from dozens of people who had also cut out their families. “I became aware that everybody felt really alone,” she said.

Stand Alone, which Bland founded soon afterward, ran support groups, conducted research, and offered practical advice for estranged individuals. Young people out of touch with their parents “couldn't get a student loan, or they didn't have a guarantor to co-sign for a lease,” Bland said. The organization successfully campaigned in the U.K. to make it easier for estranged university students to get financial aid. In the U.S., similar groups have also sprung up. Together Estranged, founded by the entrepreneur Seth Forbes, in 2020, holds monthly virtual support groups, and special sessions around the holidays. Family Support Resources, founded by Kerkez and her husband in 2019, hosts an annual “Moving Beyond Family Struggles” summit, and offers guidebooks and private coaching. Communities online have developed their own lingo: “LC” stands for “low contact,” “VLC” for “very low contact,” and “NC” for “no contact.” The Reddit forum [r/EstrangedAdultChild](#) now has more than forty thousand members. Another group, [r/raisedbynarcissists](#), is creeping toward a million.

Advocates argue that we tend to support someone who leaves a bad partner, but look at families differently. “We are inundated in a culture that is obsessed with biology,” Scharp told me. “We're told things like ‘Blood is thicker than water’ and ‘A family is forever.’ So, if you have a happy family, it's really hard to imagine estrangement.” She said that, when people hear about estranged families, they think, “‘All families fight. Families forgive each other.’ Yeah, I mean, *sometimes*.” When someone discloses an estrangement, Scharp doesn't say, “I'm so sorry.” Instead, she asks, “How do you feel about that?”

Amy has curly brown hair, wears glasses, and speaks in an efficient manner. She is passionate about social justice and runs a law practice in Calgary targeting police and prison misconduct. “She definitely has strong views,” her cousin Robyn told me. “She will stand up for the thing that she thinks is right.” When Amy and I spoke one day, she was walking her rescue dog in the park. That afternoon, she was hosting a fund-raising barbecue. “We have, like, two cubic feet of chicken wings,” she said.

By 2019, the year after Amy graduated from law school, she had a new boyfriend, Peter, a Jewish social worker. Once, she told me, she mentioned making breakfast with him, and her mother said that she didn't appreciate finding out that way that the two were sleeping together. Amy took a job in the far northern reaches of Canada. She was making a good salary and she offered to bring her parents north for a visit, but the timing never quite worked out. Then the pandemic began, and travel stalled. Peter proposed to Amy in

June, 2020. They had a video call with Amy’s parents, who seemed happy for them, and the couple set the wedding for September, 2021, hoping that a vaccine would be available by then.

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Two years earlier, Amy had told her parents that she knew about their letter to Ambrose, and in 2020, at a gathering for a relative who had passed away, her mother asked if they could talk it over. She e-mailed the letter to Amy, who hadn’t yet read it. “This is risky, but I feel like the unknown has not helped us,” Amy’s mother wrote. “I hope you’ll give me a chance to explain the dark place I was in. I wish I’d never written it. Let me know when you’re ready to talk. Love, Mom.” Amy didn’t want to read the letter, so she had a friend summarize it for her. “I’m really hurt that you wrote these things about me,” she wrote back to her mother. “I am struggling with all the feelings this brought up for me, but I’m ready to talk.” When they talked, though, the conversation devolved into an argument. At one point, Amy asked if her mother believed that she was going to Hell, and her mother said yes. Amy’s take: “There’s a sense in which that feels like the most loving thing to say, because it feels like the truth.” Still, it stung. “Like, nothing else I do as a human being is going to be important to you, as long as I don’t ascribe to this particular belief,” Amy said. (Her parents and most of her siblings did not respond to multiple requests for comment. One sibling declined to comment.)

Amy was still close with a younger sister; they had recently travelled together in Europe. Peter wrote Amy’s mother letters, hoping they could become pen pals. In one, he shared some news: he had recently donated sperm to a same-sex couple, friends of his, who were now expecting, and he would be involved in the baby’s life as an uncle-like figure. “That’s kind of when the pen-pal relationship stopped,” Peter told me. Amy believed that her parents were “backing away” from her and Peter’s lives. The following spring, Amy’s parents told her that they would not be getting vaccinated against COVID-19. Amy’s mother had long been ambivalent about vaccines, but Amy had come to see them as vital. While shopping for dresses together, Amy’s younger sister, a bridesmaid, went in for a hug and seemed confused when Amy didn’t reciprocate. (Amy and Peter were observing strict social distancing.) “It was a pretty tense three months from that point on,” Peter told me.

The couple wanted to get married at Peter’s synagogue, which required vaccinations. Some of their friends, Amy told me, also feared bringing children to a wedding where some guests would be unvaccinated. In June, she sent an e-mail to her family telling them they would need to get vaccinated to attend, then left for a weeklong camping trip. She returned to a series of upsetting e-mails. Amy’s sister accused her of being selfish, and prioritizing friends over family. They fought on the phone, and Amy eventually told her she couldn’t be a bridesmaid. They haven’t spoken since. Peter, who had lost his mother and brother, tried to talk to Amy’s siblings. “The scariest thing to us is losing another family member,” he wrote to one. Briefly, they discussed alternatives. Amy suggested her parents could throw their own celebration. Amy’s mother asked if the synagogue’s leaders would let them come through a separate entrance, and keep their distance from the other guests. “I beg of you, do not respond to this imperfect email with anger,” she pleaded. “Please see the love

behind it. In the last few years, I have felt such reserve from you whenever we are in the same room. I have come to believe that you would prefer to not have me in your life at all. Is that true?” Amy responded with a short e-mail of her own. “This is the only response I have for you about vaccinations and our wedding,” she wrote. There were two choices: get vaccinated and attend, or don’t. “I can’t help you deal with your feelings about this choice or make it for you,” she wrote, curtly. “Please do not keep trying to discuss this further with me.”

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The wedding ceremony, Amy told me, was “amazing.” She and Peter were married under a chuppah, and their friends lifted them up during the hora. Her maternal grandmother, who was not religious, walked her down the aisle. “It was wonderful,” Nickel, Amy’s former professor, who attended with his wife, told me. The engaged couple had asked guests, in lieu of giving gifts, to donate to UNICEF’s vaccine fund. But Amy’s parents did not attend, nor did most of her siblings. Through a relative, she heard that the family was staying in an Airbnb close to the venue, as originally planned. One vaccinated younger brother arrived bearing a gift from the family: a duvet. Amy had set up a live stream of the ceremony, and she wondered if the others were watching.

For a period after the wedding, Amy and Peter tried out a low-contact relationship with Amy’s family. They sent cards back and forth. She and Peter had moved back to Calgary, and, at Christmas, her parents dropped a wreath at her door. That winter, however, the brother who had attended the wedding sent Amy an e-mail calling her actions manipulative and immature, but expressing a desire to bring the family back together. He asked if they might have a phone call, but Amy, responding much later, said no. She wrote back, cc’ing the rest of her family, asking them not to contact her again unless there was a medical emergency. (She told me, when I questioned this reaction, “I don’t allow other people to treat me that way. Why should family members get a pass?”) “Do not call, text, or email us,” she wrote. “Do not send us gifts, packages, letters, or deliveries. Do not come to our home. Do not use other individuals or extended family members to communicate with us by proxy.” Another brother wrote back calling her a “bitter self-obsessed psycho.” He told her, “Have a good life.”

In interviews with nearly a dozen people who have little or no contact with certain family members, I heard a wide range of explanations. One woman had spent much of her twenties coming to terms with sexual abuse from her father, before cutting ties with her entire extended family. (Many interviewees, citing privacy concerns, did not want to be identified by name.) Other fissures were harder to trace. Some people felt ignored or misunderstood by their parents, or believed that a sibling had always been the family’s favorite. Several described a family member as a “classic narcissist” or as “toxic.”

For some, going no contact felt like a weight lifted. “You get this clarity,” one woman, who had distanced herself from her parents because of her father’s rage and substance abuse, told me. She described the experience as pressing Pause on a tape she had heard over and over again since childhood. “You get to silence

all of that. And you get to just know who you are.” Another woman had cut contact with her mother and brother in part because she didn’t feel as though she could be herself with them. “I feel like I’m not heard, I’m not seen,” she said. Since pausing their relationship, she told me that life “has been easier—much, much easier.” But, like many people I spoke with, her newfound freedom came with guilt: “There are still days when I doubt myself. What if I invented it all? Or what if I just understood wrong? Or what if they mean well?”

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On TikTok, some estranged young people express distress and sadness, but others testify to the mental-health benefits of going no contact. Many describe a life with less anxiety and more self-respect; some provide advice about how to break from your parents. In the Reddit forums, people post long descriptions of family entanglements and ask for advice, or just vent about daily life. (Sample post: “Has anyone ever had a good response to, ‘I will pray for you?’”) I spoke with a university student who had cut ties with her parents and brother, and she told me that the forums were “instrumental to me not feeling alone.” She got practical tips on changing her credit cards, and applying for financial aid. She wrote her own will, moved, and warned friends not to tell her parents where she’d gone. She told me, of reading stories about people who had chosen estrangement, “I think that was one of the main reasons I was able to find the strength to do this.”

As anyone who has spent time on Reddit knows, posting there can be validating. You can spill your guts and be affirmed. You can rage. When there’s nowhere else to turn, this is helpful—maybe even lifesaving. But, scrolling through no-contact communities, one can find it hard to avoid the fact that posters are not exactly unbiased. Some are vigilant about not allowing parents into the forums, and sometimes they advocate a slash-and-burn approach to complex relationships. One poster described feeling torn about going no contact because their parents “are nicer now.” “If anyone BUT your parents treated you this way, everyone would say Kick em to the curb!!!” one commentator responded. Certain texts circulate like touchstones. A blog post titled “The Missing Missing Reasons” argues that parents willfully disregard their children’s reasons for cutting ties. “If you’re an estranged adult child and you’re looking for a way to get your parents to hear what the problem is, I’m sorry, but you have your answer already,” the author writes.

Also popular is the work of Sherrie Campbell, a psychologist in California who has written several books on cutting ties with family members. Campbell told me that her practice is “full of healthy people trying to figure out how to cope with the toxic people in their lives.” She started writing about estrangement after breaking with her own family, in her forties, because she came to see them as toxic, and she offers readers blunt advice on how to do the same. (“Power is a toxic person’s drug,” she writes. And, “Selfishness and parenting cannot coexist.”) Campbell doesn’t see a lot of reconciliations. “Most people walking into my office have reached a place where they’re helpless, and hopeless to change the relationship,” she said. Campbell told me that toxic people are different from flawed people. “I mean, I’m a parent. I’m flawed,” she said. But toxic people “are very bad people with good moments. They’re not good people with bad moments.” I wondered

where the line was. Campbell told me that toxic parents often use the phrase “Because I’m your parent” to justify their behavior. But other parents—tired, frustrated, burned out—say that, too.

Support groups can be more nuanced. One middle-aged man from London, who became estranged from his family as a result of a “communication breakdown,” told me that he found Stand Alone sessions helpful, but wished they offered more advice for people feeling unsure about their choices. “You’ve got people who are estranged, but they’re really happy,” he said. “But then you’ve got sort of the middle category of people who are estranged that either want to not be estranged or don’t know if they want to be.” He counted himself in the latter group. Often, “there isn’t really necessarily a good reason for the estrangement, but rather many misunderstandings along the way,” he told me. “And then, after a while, it’s just too much time under the bridge.”

Recently, I sat in on an online support group hosted by Together Estranged. People had called in from Ohio, New York, California, and Nova Scotia. One woman had cut out her family for the second time, three years earlier, and seemed content. “I remain very, very O.K. with it,” she said. But another woman, who was estranged from her parents, said that she had to learn of her father’s death through an acquaintance. “If I sit with it, then I will continue to spin, like, What could I do? What can be done? Is there any angle? Is there a letter?” she said. Another participant shared that her childhood dog had recently died: “The urge is to kind of go back and seek comfort in the same people, and you realize, well, you left for a reason.” A moderator said that she recognized the impulse to get back in touch. “When you have estrangement, you know, the person’s still alive,” she said. “So it kind of has this itchy feeling to it.”

The thing about listening to someone’s else’s family drama is that it’s really none of your business. Nevertheless, we all have opinions. While reporting this story, I sometimes found my allegiances shifting. When I spoke to adult children who had found some peace after distancing themselves from their parents, I felt relieved. But when I spoke to a mother who had not heard from her daughter in more than ten years—who didn’t know where she was, or how she was doing—I felt her pain, keenly. They had always been close, but they clashed after her daughter finished university and wanted to travel on her own. One day, the mother received a text from her daughter asking her not to contact her again. “And that was it,” she said. “When it first happened to me, I really didn’t know what I’d done. . . . But I can see now, with the help of a lot of therapy, things that weren’t good, and weren’t right.” She hoped to speak with her daughter again, “even if it’s only one conversation.” I asked her what kind of relationship she would be willing to accept. “I’d accept anything,” she said. “Anything would be better than this.”

Joshua Coleman, a clinical psychologist and the author of “Rules of Estrangement: Why Adult Children Cut Ties and How to Heal the Conflict,” spent several years estranged from his daughter, following a second marriage and the birth of his younger children, and described the experience as “nightmarish.” “I found myself daily rehearsing every parental mistake I’d ever made,” he wrote. “It was frightening, it was heartbreaking, it was guilt-inducing, it was shame-inducing,” he told me. He and his daughter have since

reconciled, and he now helps parents figure out life after being cut off. Mostly, they are devastated. “Every day, I’m dealing with parents, or mothers in particular, who are just sobbing on the call with me,” he said. “The amount of grief that the parent feels is really hard to describe.” Some take responsibility for what happened, but “some are, frankly, confused.” Bland, who founded Stand Alone, runs video courses for estranged parents with titles like “What Does the Silence Mean? I Don’t Know What Happened!” and “What Is the Younger Generation Thinking?!”

Coleman believes that estrangement is becoming more common, in part because of “changing notions of what constitutes harmful, abusive, traumatizing or neglectful behavior.” He cited a paper by the psychologist Nick Haslam that showed that the definition of trauma has expanded in the past three decades to include experiences that were once considered ordinary. “The bar for qualifying as a trauma today is much lower,” Coleman writes. He’s seen parents cut out because they say negative things about a child’s sexuality, or romantic partner, or because they refuse to accept a child’s boundaries. A growing number of his clients cite political differences as a reason for estrangement. In “Rules of Estrangement,” Coleman devotes a chapter to the prevalence of psychotherapy—subhead: “My Therapist Says You’re a Narcissist”—and concludes that “therapists’ perspectives often uncritically reflect the biases, vogues, and fads of the culture in which we live.” In a culture that values independence, in other words, a therapist might advise a clean break. “Today, more than at any other time in our nation’s history, children are setting the terms of family life in the United States,” he writes.

The phenomenon may also be related to broader changes in how we think about the family. Bland has noticed a generational divide. Older people often have a sense of duty when it comes to family, and this means that “they won’t break relationships even if they find them very dysfunctional,” she told me. Parents tell her that they tolerated worse behavior from their own parents. But members of younger generations “feel that they need healthy relationships, rather than *any* relationship.” They don’t see family relationships as mandatory. Coleman told me that divorce often plays a role. The liberalization of divorce law in the seventies helped people escape terrible marriages, but divorces can also provoke feuds, introduce new allegiances, and “cause the child to feel more like the parents are individuals, with their own assets and liabilities, rather than a family unit that they’re a part of.” There’s been a shift away from “honor thy mother and father,” Coleman said, and toward notions of happiness and mental health. “In some ways, the ideals we now have for romantic love are really parallel to the ideals we have for parent-adult-child relationships.”

Some critics think the movement has gone too far. Do we owe our parents more than we owe romantic partners? Few would argue that one should continue a relationship with a parent when it involves physical or sexual abuse. And yet many estrangements happen for other reasons, including emotional abuse or toxic behavior—more difficult terms to define—or differences in world view. It can sometimes be unpleasant, even horrible, to hang out with your parents. And yet severing ties can also cause harm. What is lost when we render our families optional? Isn’t part of the point of your relationship with your mom that, even if she aggravates you, you still pick up the phone?

The problem with calling someone “toxic,” Karl Pillemer, the Cornell sociologist, told me, is that “it’s completely in the eye of the beholder.” No one self-identifies as toxic. “It’s a label applied to someone by someone who is angry at the other person.” The term also forecloses the possibility of bridging the divide. “If you consider a family tie toxic, then there’s no reason anymore to try to work on it or to consider the other person as a human being,” he said. The loss of the relationship can also hit the parent harder. Pillemer, who has written a book titled “Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them,” told me that “parents, on average, care much more” about the parent-child relationship. “If you ask older parents and their adult children, ‘How important is this relationship to you? How central is it to your life? How upset are you if you can’t see the other person? How much is your identity bound up in the relationship?’, older parents are much stronger in those views than their adult children are,” he said. “You’ve invested for years in your children.” Meanwhile, adult children have “many competing roles, many competing responsibilities. It’s structurally easier for them to exit the relationship than it is for parents.”

On the forums, though, even the mention of reconciliation can be triggering. One poster said that they had been contacted by Coleman on behalf of their mother, who wanted to reconcile; commentators derided Coleman as “callous” and a “flying monkey.” But sometimes reconciliation is possible. Pillemer mentioned the scene in “Sleeping Beauty” in which the princess pricks her finger and suddenly everything in the castle stops. “The musicians are in mid-bow stroke, the dancers are in mid-leap—everything freezes,” he said. “That’s what happens in estrangement. Over five, or ten, or fifteen years, the situation is frozen in the mind.” He acknowledged that there are exceptions—relationships that can’t or shouldn’t be saved—but, in many cases, people continue to grow while apart, and sometimes this allows them to reconnect.

When Coleman works with parents who want to reconcile with an estranged child, he will typically ask them to write an “amends” letter, to see if a dialogue might be opened. The letter might acknowledge mistakes, and note, “I know that you wouldn’t have cut off contact unless it was the healthiest thing for you to do.” If the child agrees to attend family therapy, and the parent is willing to respect the child’s boundaries in terms of when and how often they speak, the chances of reconciliation are “extremely high,” he told me. Bland has now left Stand Alone and offers private coaching, where she often brings estranged adult children and their parents back into conversation. “That can be very powerful for them,” she said, of the children. “To have the opportunity to say something that they’ve needed to say for quite a long time.”

After Amy cut ties with her parents and siblings, she blocked their e-mail addresses and phone numbers. It has been more than two years since she has spoken with them. “They picked this and just dug in on it,” she told me, of their decisions around the time of her wedding. “I don’t know what relationship you expect us to have going forward if your ideology is more important to you than celebrating this life event with me.” Sometimes she misses her younger sister, but she has found solace with friends and in no-contact communities on Reddit. She has been seeing a therapist to try to make sense of what happened. She no longer identifies as religious. “It’s not for me,” she said. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to kind of shake the associations that I have with God.” As an exercise, she wrote herself the apology she would need to receive

from her family for anything significant to change. “I looked at it, and I was, like, That’s never going to happen,” she said. There was anger in her voice, and also sadness. She sounded tired.

I thought of the estranged parent I’d spoken with who told me that she would be willing to accept any kind of relationship with her missing daughter—even a fraught one. She’d sounded heartbroken, and described an ongoing, complex grief. Her daughter was both unreachable and unmournable. As a new parent myself, I felt scared at the idea that I might somehow screw up, and my child would reject me. Speaking to Amy over time, I felt sympathy for her account of her family’s intractability. I could see that she had found a fragile peace in forging her own path, without their presence. And yet I wondered often about her parents and the suffering they must be enduring. It seemed that they had tried, at various points, to remedy the situation. Surely, they would not have wished for this outcome. Perhaps they did not see it coming at all. When I spoke to Ken Nickel, Amy’s former professor, he told me that he hoped the relationship would improve. Amy’s estrangement was an “estrangement in world view, in ideas,” he said. “In my understanding, Amy wasn’t beaten as a child, she wasn’t neglected. She was loved. As best as her parents could love her, they tried to love her.” He added, “I don’t genuinely see it as ‘Her parents did harm to her.’ So my hope is that she can somehow forgive them for that, in the years to come.”

When I asked Amy about the possibility of reconciliation, she said that she would need a very real apology in order to even consider it. When I pressed her on whether a full break was really necessary, she stressed that they had tried a period of low contact and that it didn’t work. “Reconciliation, for me, would mean them doing a bunch of work, and I don’t think they’re going to, so I just need to move forward like it’s not going to happen,” she said. Her parents used to send her cards, on which Amy would write “Return to Sender,” but they no longer know where she lives. I thought of unread cards piling up, a testament to Amy’s anger.

Recently, she and Peter bought a house in Calgary, a few hours’ drive from her parents: a fixer-upper. There are four bedrooms, and a yard with a playhouse, which Amy wants to turn into a chicken coop. She gave me a tour on a video call. “It’s all a bit chaotic,” she said. There were paint swatches on the wall and a man was installing tiling in the kitchen. Amy and Peter slept on the floor while they redid the bedrooms, and took cold showers when their water heater broke. Amy showed me a room where she had installed laminate flooring herself. “There’s a significant amount of trial and error,” she said.

Over time, the estrangement has receded into the background of her life. “I have a good thing going,” she said. Lately, though, it’s been on her mind a bit. She and Peter are planning to start a family, and are thinking about what kind of parents they will make. “There’s a sense of feeling like things are actually going really well, and it would feel really good to share those things with some kind of parent figure,” she told me. “There’s lots of things that imitate it, or come close, but there’s nothing that’s exactly the same.” ♦

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