

CHAPTER 2:

PATHWAYS TO ESTRANGEMENT

I made some life choices that conflicted with my mother's beliefs, and she completely rejected me. She said harsh things to me, and I decided that I could no longer be in contact with her. The more she tried to get me to see things her way or believe her beliefs, the further it pushed me away. I want to understand what led us here. You're always thinking of what has transpired and how you were treated. I reached a point where I was continually saying, "Why me, why me, why me?"

I have uncovered some reasons. I looked at our past history, and I realized that my family is cold. I really, truly don't remember being told "I love you" at all. Another reason is how much our values differed. I made my choices to be happy. In my eyes, I think God would want me to be happy. But my mother was not open and didn't want to hear what was going on with me. I've learned that each estrangement is unique, because we all have our own personalities and our own outlooks. Everyone wants to be given a road map to understand this situation, but we eventually have to create our own story.

—LYDIA PETERSON

"I am done."

That phrase sealed many of the estrangements described in this book. When one family member says it to another, the meaning varies: The person is done trying, done working to make the relationship better, done accommodating demands, done overlooking intolerable behavior, done apologizing for a lifestyle to someone who does not approve, or done with disrespect for a spouse or partner. Whatever the context, the words have a stark finality, and most people who utter them to a family member mean them that way. It is the end of the line, and there is no way forward.

The person who declares—sometimes for good reason—that he or she is “done” often sees the rift as inevitable. Frieda Greenwood, who is estranged from her emotionally abusive mother, felt all other possibilities were exhausted: “I don’t have the time and the emotional space. I’m not going to drain myself. I feel like I’ve wasted far, far too much of my inner and outer life wrestling with family-of-origin issues. I just don’t want to waste any more of it. I don’t want to give that emotional energy away anymore.”

Jeanette Vogel suffered a challenging relationship with her son Joey for two decades. She and her husband struggled to support Joey in the face of his insults, criticism, erratic behavior, and dishonesty. In her mid-sixties and with positive relationships with her other offspring, Jeanette was *done*. She told me:

When I think of what he’s done that was so unfair and how disrespectful he is, I think, “I don’t want you in my life. If you were a stranger, I would never let you treat me that way.” I don’t want to live without him, but I certainly am going to live without him. I have other children and grandchildren, and they’re enough. With Joey, I’m done.

Over and over, I heard this finality in statements from people who decided that no contact was better than enduring the stress of the relationship. Long-term bonds of attachment and cultural norms of family solidarity exert powerful influences. They lead us to remain in contact with difficult family members, even in the face of conflict and disappointment. Some individuals, however, overcome these pressures and declare the relationship to be over. In a rift, the age-old relationship question—“Should I stay or should I go?”—is resolved by saying: “I’m gone.” The question remains: How does a family reach this point of no return?

From my studies, I discovered that there is no easy answer to this question. The decision to terminate a family relationship follows a path that twists and turns its way to that bleak destination. I learned that each situation is unique; of my 270 interviews, there are 270

individual routes to standing on the edge of the rift with a relative on the other side. No two families are alike; history, personalities, and traumatic events combine in infinitely diverse ways.

Given this complexity, what can we say about how some families wind up in rifts whereas others do not? Through careful analysis of my in-depth interviews, it was possible to identify pathways to estrangement. By “pathways,” I mean identifying diverse trajectories that unfold across people’s lives, leading to the same outcome. My interviews provided an “up close and personal” view of many individual stories, offering insight into how and why family issues led to estrangement. Qualitative research like mine allows us to look at the typical journeys traveled by these families, why a particular journey is undertaken, and what factors shape the journey. If it is not possible to pinpoint a single cause of family rifts (and a Nobel Prize awaits whoever does), we can do the next best thing: Identify what some journeys to estrangement have in common.

Based on my large and diverse sample, I was able to identify six common routes to the destination “I’m done.” In later chapters, we will delve further into specific causes, but here I would like to orient you to the landscape of estrangement by describing six pathways that lead from family connection to estrangement:

- **The Long Arm of the Past.** The groundwork for an estrangement can be established early in a person’s life, through disruptions and difficulties that occur while growing up in the family. A history of harsh parenting, emotional or physical abuse and neglect, parental favoritism, or sibling conflict can shape relationships decades into the future.
- **The Legacy of Divorce.** One frequent scenario for estrangement involves the long-term effects of divorce on adult children. Loss of contact with one parent and hostility between the former spouses can weaken parent-child bonds.
- **The Problematic In-Law.** In-law relations cause strains in many families. They can reach a breaking point, however, when the struggle between the family of origin and the family of marriage becomes intolerable.
- **Money and Inheritance.** Money may not be the root of all evil, but it is the origin of a striking number of estrangements. Conflicts over wills and

inheritance emerged as a major source of family rifts.

- **Unmet Expectations.** Family relationships are built on expectations. We expect our parents, children, siblings, and other relatives to step up in times of crisis and to involve us meaningfully in family events like weddings and funerals. When our relatives violate norms for what we believe is proper behavior, people can become estranged.
- **Value and Lifestyle Differences.** Disapproval of a relative's core values can turn into outright rejection. Estrangements result from conflicts over issues like same-sex relationships, religious differences, or adopting alternative lifestyles.

I will profile each of these pathways, introducing a family in each one who traveled this route to estrangement. Then we will explore some possible causes of estrangement that cut across the individual pathways.

THE LONG ARM OF THE PAST

Some estrangements have deep roots in the past. Early experiences such as harsh parenting, substance abuse, and obvious parental favoritism have lasting effects. The desire to escape from one's family can form early in life, and a legacy of negative interactions (including teasing, jealousy, and sibling aggression) can make cutting a relative off seem like a justifiable choice.

Dani Bartlett grew up in a small picture-perfect Midwestern suburb, with stately homes, manicured lawns, and driveways strewn with tricycles, soccer goals, and basketball hoops. As Hollywood loves to show us, however, calm and pleasant exteriors sometimes mask complex and painful family dramas. Dani was raised in one such home.

Her father was born in this suburb, and his parents still reside there, a half mile away. Dani's father's success as a financial manager allowed him to purchase his own comfortable house and her mother to stay home full-time with Dani and three younger siblings. Dani is now twenty-one and an undergraduate at a

university. Her childhood memories reflect the troubled interior of suburban family life:

I was the first child, and my mother was abusive toward me. She wanted me to do really well in school, but there were things that I was struggling with, and I couldn't keep up with what she wanted. When I couldn't do that, it ended up with me being locked in the basement. She would punish me by not giving me food. It is the same with my younger siblings. Every time she gets mad, she breaks one of their toys or something else absurd, and no one knows how to deal with it. She isn't really fit to be a mother. She was also very abusive toward my father. She would call him terrible things, and she'd slap him, which led to police getting involved and my mother just getting angrier.

The last straw in the relationship with her mother occurred when Dani was in high school:

After a school event, she was driving in the car with me. She kicked me out of the car because I made a crude joke. Then she started speeding after me and almost hit me with the car. I had to call 911 and the police came. I went to my grandparents' house, and I just said, "I can't do this anymore." My grandparents took me in. I haven't talked to my mother in five years.

Her nurturing grandparents allowed her, despite her age, to separate completely from her mother:

I have no contact with her, although I am still in touch with my father. There's been a time or two where I've driven by her in town, and we'll make eye contact, but I'll just turn away. The only exception is I'll call home asking for a sibling, and she always asks, "Who is this?" I'll say my name, and she'll give

them the phone. When I moved out, my mother really started getting worried, because she didn't think that anything would happen as a result of her abuse. She now understands that I'm not making any contact and she doesn't push it.

Dani has accepted the estrangement and is not optimistic that it will ever change. She told me:

I've grown to a point where I'll be fine. I worry about my siblings and will until they are old enough to move out of the house. Maybe when that happens, my mother will come to her senses a little bit more. Will I ever speak to her again? I haven't made up my mind completely. But as of now, she's in an emotional or mental health state where it's not beneficial for me to let her in.

THE LEGACY OF DIVORCE

Divorce can have negative effects on children's relationships with parents that reach into adulthood. Although the legacy of divorce can affect the tie to either parent, research tells us that it tends to weaken the father-child bond in particular. Of course, this effect varies greatly, and some fathers remain close and influential figures in their children's lives. But other divorced fathers move, find new partners, and become invested in a new family. They may feel that their former spouse is an obstacle to involvement with children, and they also can experience problems in their own lives that hinder contact. It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of estrangements in my studies involved the offspring of divorced parents.

The challenges of maintaining a relationship with her father, Luis, after her parents' divorce have affected Elena Fuentes from the time she entered college to the present, fourteen years later. Her family immigrated from Venezuela to Miami shortly before Elena was

born. Elena told me that describing her childhood relationship to her father is not easy, as it involves both strongly negative and positive memories:

When I was a kid, he would do things that were odd and uncomfortable behavior for me. My dad had a drinking issue. On his day off, he would drink all day and become a little incoherent and too emotional. I remember my dad being flirtatious with other women, being inappropriate in front of strangers. It turned out he had relationships with a number of other women. My mom seemed to live in a bubble, as if she didn't see it—she was a little blind to things.

But as in many parent-child relationships, good times were mingled with the bad for Elena. Reflecting on why she tried to maintain the relationship, Elena looked back to her childhood:

Fortunately or unfortunately, however you want to look at it, I do have love for him. Growing up with him, I have some fond memories. He was a very playful guy. He would take us out, he would tell us that he loved us all the time. He would speak to us in English, even though he didn't speak it very well, because he wanted to assimilate and he saw it as a fun opportunity to bond with us. Things were sometimes bad, but they were definitely not all bad.

Problems between her parents increased when Elena was in high school. She told me: “He would do a lot of suspicious things that didn't add up until he finally left the family for another woman. He told my mom, ‘I don't want to be with you anymore.’” Luis wanted his children to accept his new partner and welcome her into their lives, and he refused to take any blame for the divorce. Elena's mother felt humiliated by his behavior and his treatment of her.

Despite the difficult history and the divorce, Elena initially did not give up on her father. She explained: “I wanted to continue a