
Psychology and Family Law

Lessons I Learned from My Parents

Part III of a Series

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When people consider the impact of divorce on children, they typically focus on minor children. Is this because they somehow believe that once children reach the age of majority, their parents' divorce doesn't affect them? Those who know me

are very aware that I distinguish between minor children, dependent adult children, and independent adult children. In this segment from my series, I am going to discuss how my parents' divorce shaped my perspective in this regard.

Anyone who looks at my resume', will notice that I attended three different undergraduate schools and ultimately graduated from UCLA in 1987. What is unclear, however, is the reasoning behind my having moved from school to school. I was admitted to Brandeis University in Massachusetts as a freshman, and my father offered to pay for my tuition and related expenses. I cannot begin to describe how wonderful it felt to live away from the conflict at home for the first time in my life, especially since by now my parents were divorcing. Don't misunderstand - even though I was on the other side of the country, my parents, siblings and extended family were always gracious enough to keep me informed with regard to the family drama. Nevertheless, there is a big difference between hearing about such things while living on the other side of the country, and actually witnessing them first hand.

My belief that distance somehow shielded me from the impact of the divorce proved to be false over spring break of my freshman year in college. I had decided to visit my paternal grandmother in Miami over the break. When I arrived, I was caught by surprise to learn that my father and his new wife were there! There was a reason behind their surprise visit, and my father wanted to explain it to me in private, so he asked me to walk along the beach with him. What I learned during that walk so traumatized me that I cannot recall anything else that occurred that week.

My father told me that he and his wife would continue paying my tuition and living expenses *on the condition* that I permanently and completely sever all ties with my mother. When I told him that I would not choose one parent over the other, he told me that my decision was a choice, and that they would no longer be supporting me or paying my college tuition. Never in a million years would I have believed that he would actually make good on his word, especially since it was too late for me to transfer to another school for the following school year. However, when I returned to school, he would no longer take my calls. To my dismay, he had not only cut me off financially, but he actually "divorced" me as his son.

It is a mistake to believe that my experience is an anomaly. As mentioned in my prior article in this series, I had the pleasure of reading a book about the children involved in divorce and separation, entitled *Broken Circle*. The Broken Circle Project gives voice to young adults talking about how their parents' divorce or separation impacted their lives, then and now. In a number of the stories, the now-young adults also mentioned that they had been "divorced" by one of their parents.

Like other children who have been abandoned by a parent following their divorce, I took it very personally and built my own emotional wall. For a very long time, I had very serious trust issues and was afraid to make myself vulnerable to others.

Since I mentioned earlier that I attended three different undergraduate schools, I guess I should explain how and why I ended up attending the other two schools. Although the deadline to transfer from Brandeis had since passed, my mother's connections were able to get me into UC San Diego without my losing any time from school. As if the loss of my relationship with my father were not enough for me to deal with, it was during that summer that my mother learned she had breast cancer. My concern over her condition caused me to transfer to UCLA for my junior year and return to live in the "family residence."

The lesson my father taught me was that parents are ready, willing, and able to use their adult children as pawns, just as they do with minor children.

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