Abandoned Parents, the Devil's Dilemma: Causes and Consequences of Adult Children Abandoning Their Parents

By

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Abandoned Parents: The Devil's Dilemma
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How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!
*King Lear Act 1, scene 4, 281–289*

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Author’s Foreword

Some years ago, I needed desperately to understand what happened to my family and to the children that I loved and cared for all of my life. Like most parents, I thought I had done the best I could do with what I had to do it with. There was little help available to me other than some initial writings on Parental Alienation set in the context of divorces. Without much success, I continued my search and over a period of years, I began to take notice of similar stories that had begun to surface here and there. I started a FaceBook page on the subject, I heard from other parents and began to find commonalities and finally a picture emerged out of all the chaos that others have been experiencing.

I am a lawyer by training and I have used my skills to accumulate facts, formulate some hypothesis and draw some conclusions. This is a first effort – tentative steps toward
understanding. There is hope here. Perhaps not the kind of hope we wish for, but the kind of hope that allows us to live with meaningfulness, the kind of hope that helps get us out of bed every day and try again. Most importantly, I discovered that I was not alone.

**INTRODUCTION**

This book is dedicated to the growing phenomena known as abandonment of parents by adult children. Abandonment is a form of abuse. Abandonment is ostracism. Abandonment of parents by adult children is violence. Abandonment of parents is not limited to the elderly. This social ill has gone by many different names such as targeted parents, alienated parent syndrome and elder abuse. By whatever name it is called, it is at its root shunning: the act of terminating critical social and personal relationships. Shunning is the intentional act of harming another by silent bullying. It is more common that we would like to believe.

Abandonment, walking away, neglect, or minimizing is natural to the human being as a primitive and intuitive way of solving problems. In the context of family, it’s fundamental purpose and orientation is to relieve the adult child of what he or she finds unacceptable or inconvenient in their lives. Abandonment is abusive, torturous and if sustained over a period of time produces within the parent severe psychological and physical pain of such severity that the parent often develops serious mental and physical disorders and brain damage. It can and often does produce early death. Mental health resources have been late in diagnosing these phenomena and largely without adequate means to resolve the consequences to either the parent or the child or future generations. There is little information to report the effect on the adult children who do the abandoning but logically there must be serious consequences for them as well.

This book proposes to offer an approach to defining the phenomena, attempts to outline some causes and some initial resources for the parent(s) that are aggrieved by the conduct of their children. If there is comfort in numbers, parents should know that this seems to be a global problem that is cross cultural unrelated to wealth, education or country of origin. Finally, there are included here some resources and some ways to identify the growing estrangement in parent/adult child relationships before a complete break occurs. In the end the purpose of the book is to begin discussion of a growing issue that contains, within its silent boundaries, horrendous grief and pain. The mission of the book is to place one tiny pebble on the beach of hope, understanding and peace.
WHAT THIS BOOK IS AND IS NOT

This book is not a scientific study written by a social scientist. I am a lawyer and a pastor by training and therefore have some sense of critical thinking and observation. In coming to some of the conclusions, hypothesis and lists, I have poured through thousands of stories of abandonment, read books, opinions, blogs, support groups and web sites. My intent is to start a dialogue about this socially destructive force in motion all over the world. Please understand when you read this book, it is not social fact you are reading, it is an opinion based on observations and stories told to me. With that said, I hope what I have written helps form a basis for discussion and awareness.

This book is not written for adult children who abandoned or are estranged from their parents. I have included an appendix, which contains a message to you. However, you will not find much help here for your issues – whatever they may be. You will not find a balm here to support your rationalizations or your justifications for your conduct.

Estrangement vs. Abandonment

A distinction of terms

Before we go on to talk about causes, I would like to make a label/word distinction here between estrangement and abandonment for the purposes of this book. The emerging literature uses both terms interchangeably but there, I believe, is a difference distinguished by the behavior of the adult child. Estrangement might describe a simple drying up of the parent child relationship. There is no animosity or torture or direct hatefulness. There simply are fewer and fewer conversations, fewer letters, missed holidays all related to less and less points of reference in their respective lives. This is often caused by geographic distance or the end of life aging of the parents coupled with the business of work and family of the adult children.

Abandonment, on the other hand, is characterized by hurtful comments, physical or mental hatefulness. (see appendix which list a variety of abusive behaviors) where the intent of the behavior of the adult child toward the parent is to be cruel, to scapegoat or to banish. It usually is fueled by a core belief that the parents are guilty of a variety of short fallings and that a future relationship of any kind would be harmful to the adult child or his/her family. This core belief is held in
absolute firmness almost approaching religious fervor in its impenetrability.

**GENERAL OBSERVATIONS OF THE CAUSES OF PARENTAL ABANDONMENT**

First, and let's be clear about this – parental abandonment is abuse and it follows the model of other kinds of physical and psychological abuse. Most importantly, it is a moral and ethical failing on the part of the adult child. There may be psychological diagnosis that can be made about the adult child who lives this hate filled life, and perhaps should be made, but first and above all it is a moral failure and in some cases even evil. Quite simply it is the wrong thing to do, a wrong action to take and places the adult child into a precarious environment that speaks to who they are, what they value and the nature of their character. There is not a crueler action to take against another human being than ostracism, abandonment and alienation and especially when that other human being is your parent. What makes an adult child or any age child take such cold, calculating and out of cultural norm action against the people who gave them life, support and nurture in their minorities - people who fed them, educated them, protected them and spent a good deal of the family resources to help them grow?

We know that this very behavior - abandonment and other forms of abuse - is common and perhaps the most common ending of the parent/child relationship. We know that it is cross cultural. From Japan to Iraq to Latin America, parents are being abandoned and abused and not due to any extreme social pressure such as war or famine. It is costing millions of dollars for governments to care for these parents not to mention the strain on the medical systems for the treatment of the emotional and physical disorders caused by this painful assault on their body and soul. We know that it is historical. In all of the world’s major religions there is an admonition against abandonment and abuse of your parents. In fact it is more than an admonition, it a responsibility to respect and honor parents. It seems it is fair to say that without the presence of this common conduct there would have been no reason to build in an admonition against dishonoring parents.

Today’s adult children who are taking these actions are quite possibly the ones who find some way to avoid measuring their conduct
by “rightness” or “wrongness”. Although it is hard to imagine how an adult child manages to justify not seeing her parents for 30 years, ignoring all attempts and pleas from the parents to just see them one more time before they die. It is not uncommon for the adult children who abandon their parents to lie, fabricate abuse stories, libel and slander their upbringing without so much as a blink. Shakespeare noted many years ago that taking someone’s good name is to take their only treasure.

The next general observation is that the relationship is inconvenient and no longer meaningful to the adult child regardless of the causes. Quite simply there is nothing in it for the adult child anymore. Perhaps distance contributes to this problem as well. Simply stated when the adult child lives in California and the parents live in Illinois communication on a daily or weekly basis becomes difficult. The ability to transfer information about the daily lives of the other becomes too time-consuming, and as a natural consequence, communications are limited to perfunctory and obligatory or crisis oriented speech. The basis and the emotional connection begin to dwindle and eventually disconnects. We are all living under the delusion that once there is a parent/child bond it is somehow magically there forever because of some hormonally dictated urge. It can and will dwindle over time from lack of communication and from lack of dependency. Often the adult child’s needs for relationships are very different and are satisfied more completely by their peers. Hence, peer relationships become more important and provide more helpful information about negotiating life. Peer relationships are often less “loaded” with the difficult history of growing up and therefore more easily negotiated. In evidence of this kind of relational abandonment take a look at how television characterizes parents: annoying, interfering, disruptive, unwelcome, clueless, ignorant at least uninformed, and most of all irrelevant. Only recently have television programs shown parents of adult children in a positive light in “Blue Bloods”, Tom Selleck’s program, where generational relationships provide guidance, sponsorship, protection and wisdom. No more Partridge Family or Father Knows Best.

Just as interesting the parents provide a much needed target for blame. In a time when life styles of young people are more complicated, lonely and alienated, when young people are under constant stress at work, financial difficulties and suffer from a lack of intimacy, when their lives are filled with a generalized angst that is often experienced as anxiety then blaming is historical man’s best ointment. And who better to blame. This is most profoundly demonstrated in the common scenario when parents offer a suggestion
demonstrated in the common scenario when parents offer a suggestion on child rearing and that suggestion is met with a tirade of blame language about how the parent made worse mistakes. The tirade is often out of portion to the suggestion made. Scapegoating is a necessary and convenient tool for negotiating a hostile environment and it is often the parents who are targeted. Expendability is the hallmark of today’s parent/adult child relationships.

This split becomes more obvious when the dependency shift begins as parent’s age and a social and traditional burden is perceived by both as a shift of responsibility to the adult child. Those responsibilities and burdens are challenging at best, an interruption to the adult child’s life and commitment to others and a burden without an emotional connection. It is often times yet one more burden placed on an adult child who is burdened beyond capacity in the first place. So avoidance is the best solution and coupled with a generalized complaint about how that parent “failed” them as a child is all that is needed to justify walking away. The proof is lying in nursing home beds all across the nation as day after day passes and not a visit, a letter or a telephone call from an adult child. If telephone calls are made they are most often made to the nurses for a brief run down on how Mom is doing. And this, just in case someone in their peer group asks how Mom is. This daily horror is kept as a conspiratorial secret by the nursing homes, the clergy, the nurses and aides and doctors. These professionals well know the physical and mental consequences of this kind of loneliness and emotional pain but they dare not speak for fear that the patient will just be moved to another facility. Depression is the most undiagnosed illness present in nursing homes today and all the better to keep the patients obedient and quiet.

Finally, all abandonment, in the face of desperate attempts by the parents to connect with their lost child, seems to have one underlying motivation and focus and that is a homicidal intent. The adult child has socially and psychologically “terminated” their parent. The child continues in life as if the parent is physically dead. They do not think of them, seek out information about them or remember them at holidays or birthdays. It is as if the slate has been wiped clean long before the actual physical death. This “death” is complete and impenetrable. Any effort to mediate or reconcile by anyone inside or outside of the family is met with complete denial and often anger at the intervener. These children do not seek therapy for any angst associated with the loss of their parents. They do not seem to grieve the loss of the parent. The only observable defect in their persona is that they often do not do well in adult life. They generally are not happy and have a sense of emptiness which is never connected to the loss of a relationship with
their parents. What happens to the children of these adults is yet to be fully determined but what a powerful model for them.

We do know that the ultimate purpose and aim of abuse is to terminate the life of the one being abused whether that termination is spiritual, emotional or physical. The more intentional the abuse becomes, in the sense that the behavior is planned and designed to inflict pain, the more the behavior is motivated by the desire to terminate the life of the parent. There are no exceptions to this motivation. In fact, many parent abusers fanaticize about the death of the parent. Some become titillated at the idea of their parent’s death often smiling and smirking when it is brought up in conversation. Often adult children will laugh about their parents attempt to reconcile with them. They often speak of a parent in past tense terms and boast about not knowing if the parent is still alive or not.

“I haven't been able to speak to my oldest daughter in 4 years. When she found out I have an incurable kidney disease on Mother's Day 4 years ago she texted me to "DIE! DIE! DIE! You deserve it!" Right out of the blue. It devastated me. I have no idea where she is coming from and she has cut all ties with me and my grandchildren, one of which I raised from birth to 5 years old. She is now 19. I haven't seen any of them in 10 years. It is heartbreaking and unfair and there is nothing I can do about it because she has blocked me from Facebook and I do not have her current address or phone #. Her sister will not get involved for fear she will stop all contact with her as well. I raised her to be a Christian and I have prayed and prayed about this but have found out that this is a 'silent epidemic' in America and I am not alone in this. That doesn't help much as I love my daughter very much and my grandchildren and am at a loss for words to explain it or console myself. Maybe after some time of growing up some more will change things for her. Hopefully so.”

**THE MORAL AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF ABANDONMENT OF PARENTS**

A growing economic and human concern around the world and across cultures is the abandonment of parents by their adult children. Mostly this is public in the elderly as it is more visible when the parents
are infirm. But the hidden parental abandonments are just as prolific. Adult children are just walking away from their relationship with their parents and often with a vitriol of blame and harshness. The cost of this abandonment in economic terms is staggering but in terms of human pain and misery it is immeasurable.

The official issue of elder abuse and abandonment as defined by various governmental units is vague and limited primarily to physical abuse or neglect. Remarkably the US government is unwilling to say two things that are relevant to our inquiry: First, government is unwilling to say that abandonment of the elderly without physical violence or neglect is abuse; and secondly, government is unwilling to say that adult children have a legal obligation to support their parents both financially and emotionally.

Meanwhile emergency rooms, bus stations and two bit hotels are filling up with older parents who have been dropped off with the promise to come back later. And it is done without a second thought. Sometimes these adult children just keep letting more and more time lapse between phone calls or visits. Separation by physical distance adds to the problem and makes an easy excuse to not go and see them. Again all relationships weaken over time even our most precious ones.

Parents become more and more useless and the tasks that they used to perform for their children are no longer in demand. Advice is not needed, childcare, sustenance is not needed, and the companionship is just something else to add to the stress of the family life. The parent becomes a “nuisance”, a word defined as: “an annoying or irritating person or thing”.

Perhaps it is nature’s way of stress reduction—a kind of narrowing of stimulus. The fact is that abandonment is a seemingly natural process of terminating relationships that no longer have anything valuable to offer. The cultural taboos against abandoning parents are disappearing all over the globe. Parents as they age are becoming expendable. It is as if they have become diseased and the healthier community needs to isolate itself from them just like biblical lepers that were thrown into colonies of miserable existences.

Ethically speaking there is nothing in it for the adult children to continue in relationship with their parents. There is everything to gain by not doing so in terms of the expenditure of time and energy and sometimes resources. Most importantly there is no downside for abandonment. There is no longer any community imperative to provide for your parents. The way adult children treated their parents used to be one of the biggest measures of an adult’s worth and character. No longer. No one loses a job, fails to get a promotion, bears
a bad mark against their name, or suffers any exposure to the greater community for this behavior. It’s free from all disparity. In fact it is rare that anyone is ever asked about the welfare of their parents. It is merely assumed that the subject is taboo.

Honor your father and mother is the 5th commandment, the first one of the 10 that speaks to the issue of relationships among people. It is couched in terms of a blessing: “so that you will enjoy the land given to you by your Holy Father”. In its reversal it is an admonition to a disobedient child.

So what is lost? Obviously what is lost is a lifetime of experience and wisdom, help with the household tasks and rearing of the children, a built in sounding board, and the first community of existence. Generational relationship is what keeps us from being alone in the world. On a public level the economic cost is staggering. When the family abandons a generational task i.e. taking care of their elderly, the government must pick it up in the form of welfare. Unless of course you live in India where the abandoned are simply left on the streets and in empty lots to rot and die in despair. Or as it was in certain Indian tribes in Alaska when in the dead of winter and food was scarce the older ones were left beside the trail for the bears to eat. The reasoning was that in the spring the Indians would hunt and kill and eat the bear thus affecting some sort of reunion with their dead parents and honoring everyone’s spirit in the exchange. Modern adults no longer hunt and eat bears.

Today when parents are abandoned they often exhibit greater medical problems than their happier non abandoned counter parts. Depression is a major undiagnosed illness in nursing homes and among the abandoned. It is in fact an illness which defines older Americans especially if that parent is alone without a partner or spouse. Medical issues such as depression and especially depression form a convenient excuse for abandonment. Children say that it is just too difficult to deal with grandma’s mental health when in fact it becomes an inescapable chain that traps the parent and the children into a non relational existence. American adult children, and I think most adult children, seem to believe that they are entitled to a perfect relationship with their parents and if it can’t be perfect, if it is challenging in any way, then they are justified in abandonment because she/he is just too difficult to relate to.

Is this abandonment a natural occurrence in the evolution of humanity? Are we developing into a species that generates expendable human beings without thought of consequence? Is this an issue that should ever be considered worthy of change and exposure?
TEMPTING EXPLANATIONS

There are two theories of how the estrangement between parents and adult children occurs outside of the Parental Alienation Syndrome of children during divorce. The first is that the adult child has fallen into a cult or more recently that a “cult” can exist between two people – husband and wife for example. The second is that parental abandonment is another aspect of domestic violence.

While it is quite tempting to make the connection between cultism and parental abandonment, the cult description does not quite fit all the dynamics of parental abandonment. The mind control manipulation techniques are similar but not completely explanatory. Cultism or being a member of a cult does not explain the animosity that develops against the parents without the presence of a religious community. In the abandonment of parents we find that the adult child seems to continue to interact with the real world of work and peer group involvement. There usually is an absence of the overtones of a political or religious support group who shares a common belief system. While spreading the lies about the parents is common among those who are in relationship with the adult child and the third party intervener, it does not rise to a cult mind control central thesis or belief system. The lies and vilification of the parents tend to be more in the order of an explanation as to why the parents of the adult child are not in the picture. Sometimes the side benefit of sympathy for the “abused child” is another side benefit. In some cases the lies and vilification of the parents may be used as an explanation for why the daughter or son in law has “married beneath them” or why that person doesn’t quite measure up to the ideal mate. He was abused as a child suggests that he has undiscovered potential and will develop into that ideal mate.

End of this sample Kindle book.

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