

Chapter 12 – Foe Befriending

“One of the hardest moments in our visitation was learning of the expressed “abandonment” by dad. I had tried to save the marriage and had done nothing to resemble abandonment. Then there was the children...”

In the *days of yore*, the gate-keepers question may have been “Friend or Foe?” As a non-custodial, a similar question (or thought) may have become “the norm”—as I sometimes felt like enemy or adversary at *ye-old castle*. But this feeling was not without reason, as I (and my children) soon began to experience the breach of **living in two worlds**—where the other world has other views that often are expressed around (or perhaps to) the children. Living as an exile was bad enough; but according to my children, I had “abandoned” them!

In the first week of September, while commuting with the children from Georgia to Alabama, my eight year old daughter asked me, “**Dad, why have you abandoned us?**” My immediate reaction was anger. I knew that she had not contrived such a question—with the use of this word “abandoned”—but had heard (or been told) such. Anger toward my ex-wife was one side of my reaction, but sorrow was the other. Such a question (from my daughter) is loaded with the kind of programming highly criticized by the sources I’ve read and the counseling (post-divorce) that I’ve received. Besides that question and my emotions, this weekend was (and has been) particularly memorable.

On that weekend, the kids were very frustrated; specifically, the oldest three were angry with the youngest because, as they put, “he was getting away with murder.” Of course, what they meant was that he was being mischievous—which was his character—and not being corrected for it by his mother. The kids, and in particular my son Ben, was especially irritated. As I have taken much opportunity to reflect on this weekend and the post-divorce changes of my children, **the source of their grievances** was the changes in the home as a consequence of divorce. How does a child comprehend that his parents—once married and together—are now at odds, separated and potentially acting-out mischief of their own? How does a child process comments that conflict with their own experience and understanding of someone so dear and important?

During the months (or year) following the divorce, my family (paternal family) was very good about **not** speaking critically about (or toward) my ex-wife in front of the children. Anyone qualified in such family matters will tell you that this practice only multiplies confusion and guilt in the child; nothing good can come from this practice or habit. To their credit, my family were intentionally reserved in front of the children— though clearly had well-deserved criticism in view of the fact that she lied about them in attempting to profile them as abusing the children.

Besides the statement from my daughter, my cause for the memory has also to do with my behavior; and specifically, my spanking of my son Ben for his behavior. In his frustration, I failed to recognize the root cause —with not only his brothers unchecked behavior but, more broadly, the sheer magnitude of changes that had occurred (or were occurring) to his (and his siblings) disadvantage. **Can children sense such changes—as to the foreboding or potentially detrimental affect?** Yes, I believe that they have the basic ability to sense danger or insecurity in light of a basis such as the presence and direct involvement of a father. Their parent was gone...and not coming back.

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On that particular weekend, Ben was expressing his sense of this danger or insecurity through his own insolent reactions. When he fought with the others in my home or apartment, I tried to verbally reprimand him; but his reaction was to verbally *fire-back*—and to stay in a somewhat curled-up position on one of the beds. I had never seen him like this before; so angry and antagonistic. To my stupidity, I did not realize the nature of his behavior—but saw it only as momentary act of defiance. Refusing to obey me when I ask him to apologize (to his siblings), he was told that if he did not (apologize) that he would be spanked. He refused...and I spanked him with my hand on his buttocks. What resulted from my spanking was not compliance; Ben did not even cry or show the least amount of pain. He was too angry to do that....

This moment, this event, and Ben's behavior was memorable because of the mistake that I made in thinking that a spanking was a solution. In our marriage, or more specifically in our parenting, spanking was seldom used as form of discipline or punishment. The last time I had spanked any of the children had been my daughter who, after picking on her younger brothers, refused to apologize. First sent to her room (for time out), she still refused to acknowledge her wrong and to apologize to them. As with Ben, she received a spanking on the buttocks with my hand—but evidently not as hard as Ben received on the day in September—for what occurred with Ben, was a bruise in the form of a silhouette of my hand on his buttocks.

Later that day, as my parents learned of the bruise (or spanking), they were infuriated—for they knew that as my ex-wife discovered it, she would react with extreme measures. They were right; she did respond by reporting the matter to DHR (in Georgia) and subsequently enrolling the children in counseling with an independent or private counselor. In the weeks that followed (and since that time), my visitation was over as long as she had anything to with it.

DHR completed the case in conjunction with an Alabama (or local DHR); and from my correspondence, the case was closed without any conclusive reason for child-abuse charges or modification to my child visitation privileges. If I had been guilty of child-abuse — or the agency had reason to suspect such— my visitation rights would have been suspended or revoked through a modification. As it turned out, no such modification occurred—which may have been why an independent counselor was subsequently enlisted by my ex-wife.

As to the independent counselor, a report was produced showing that the children had suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (or Disorder). Receiving a copy of the report, though not included in the evaluation, I needed to first understand what this disorder was all about. With some tacit understanding (hat included military exposed to combat), I reacted (to the report) with an attempt to learn more.

In the report was that the disorder had caused my son to have academic challenges at school; but he already had a history of setbacks to include a summer school remedial program the year prior. To my recollection, his reading skills were not adequate and, with our approval, he was enrolled in the summer program. As a follow-up to reading the report and learning more about the diagnosis, I attempted to call the counselor, but the conversation was not productive; for example, she did not seem aware that he been in a remedial program the summer prior. Further follow-up included a letter for which no reply was received; below is a segment of the letter written to the counselor:

You may recall that you and I discussed the matter in a phone conversation on December 24th (2001). From your explanation, as well as a recent copy (of the report), I am of the belief that you were not of aware of my son's academic and conduct problems during Kindergarten. I say this because your assessment indicates similar problems resulting from the spanking yet, again, he was required to attend a summer program...

The letter was not to excuse my behavior, but was intended to inform her of what she seemingly was not aware (from our phone conversation).

I obviously am not learned in the matter of medicine an the complexity of disorders and other psychological or emotional conditions; but given the outcome of the report, I believed my reaction and my response to be responsible. Yes, I was wrong for spanking my child and bruising his buttocks; and while I do not obviously consider spanking as completely out-of-order, the behavior of my son (and for that matter my children) did not warrant this form of discipline. What he needed—what they needed—above all else was reassurance and encouragement; but what I could not muster was the means to offer such to them. Two weekends out of the month is just not enough; but to be an effective parent—or parent at all—is to be readily accessible...without the restraints of a divorce decree, the authority of the state.

As I have take much time to reflect, the memory of the children's changing behavior is most vivid. They had been through a great deal of distress: several months living in Florida; a temporary reunion in the subsequent summer; the divorce in the fall; and the much changing environment though physically in the same home or house.

In his book, *Father and Child Reunion*, Warren Farrell points out that The National Center for Health Statistics reports that a divorced child living with his mother is about four times more likely to need professional treatment for emotional and behavioral problems. The statistic also includes other conditions that are linked to children of post-divorce circumstances—without delineating on any adversity imposed on the children through deliberate divisiveness of the parents.

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Realizing the statistic is somewhat vague, it cannot be considered in detail regarding the experience of my own children during this time; but what it can do is reinforce the very real conditions and problems that emerge in the children following divorce.

During the process of the divorce (in the fall of that year), both she and I were required to take a one-day course through the county. The course was aimed at preparing parents for the post-divorce experience—as though a one-day course was adequate. Following the course, I enrolled in a follow-on optional, multi-week program for a nominal fee; and I enrolled the children in program sponsored by the public agency. But to carry out this program, my ex-wife would have to agree. For whatever reason she decided not to involve the children; indeed, the first time she took action on counseling for them was following the spanking and DHR—which was roughly a year later.

I can offer nothing (or offer an excuse) for my spanking and bruising my son's buttocks; the discipline was more out of my frustration and loss of control (in their lives and mine) than anything else. Both my son's behavior and my reactive behavior had a broader context; both of us were dealing with the loss of

our lives together or the basis of having father or children in the home. Again, I am not excusing my behavior—but am trying to establish why I did what I did when it was not my practice or previous behavior.

In my childhood experience as well as my ex-wife, spanking was the norm. She told once of her mother “stripping her legs”. I received similar discipline with a belt or switch when I was young—as did my parents before me. Spanking has become taboo; and while bruising may seem extreme, it was not in view of my past experience whether paddled at school or spanked at home. Still, the vast majority of my bruises and other abrasions came from playing sports or riding bicycles—and not from any corporal punishment.

I was fortunate to have come across a picture of my son on the Internet just prior to writing this chapter; it was the picture that I’ve acquired of him since the time of the spanking (or roughly eight years ago). Purportedly he is twelve years old in the picture and, sitting at a table, his elbows show bruises (unless, both elbows dirty). I also had the chance to watch him play a pick-up game of football involving his younger brother (at about the same age); and based on the way that they were *going at it*, there is not any wonder that he keeps bruises...just like I did.

If parents are able to make a big mistake, I made mine when I spanked Ben too hard...to the point of leaving a bruise. Of course, this (spanking) was not my first mistake; but it was the first big mistake after the divorce. Was it extreme to spank my child as a form of punishment? I do **not** believe it was; but it became so just prior to the divorce (my daughter) and subsequent to the divorce.

During the marriage however, punishment or discipline was something that we had agreed on by and large—as to the use and type. Again, time-out was the rule in the appropriate age. Spanking could amount to a tap on the thigh. This discipline was used in particular for my youngest child who pitched temper tantrums and would writhe and buck while trying to change his messy diaper. Reluctantly, my wife would use this method short of having a hazardous waste spill or something worse....

One deviation from our agreed on methods (that I'm aware of) occurred while we were living in Atlanta. I came home from work to find her standing at my oldest son's door in a fury. Not recalling why she was angry, but that she had thrown a metal trash can at him. When I arrived, he told me what had happen (the metal trash can) and I excused my wife and tried to handle the matter more calmly.

My reason for recounting this matter between the two was not to excuse my spanking my son—for there is no excuse or rationale—but is to point that all parents are capable of (and indeed may) revert to some unreasonable or irrational form of discipline. I would say that throwing a metal trashcan at anyone is beyond reason—and I'm sure my son feels the same way...or did. On balance, our method was successful (I thought)...until the days leading-up to divorce and need to conspire against me.

With young children, anything can happen. In the home (or the domain) you can break-up a fight, quell a temper tantrum (unless it's your spouse), or address (or redress) some otherwise intolerable or unacceptable behavior. It is **not** boot-camp or some over expectant, intolerable rules and regulations; but it simply trying to teach the children to share, to care (about), and to bear (with one another) feelings, interests, and personal things. It is trying to maintain or mobilize some degree of order so that everyone is collectively getting along...and even loving each other if that is possible. For children, there obviously has to be some instruction or teaching; but for adults, such should be understood and self-directed. Of course, this "teaching and instruction" is best performed by example or modeling—rather than words. Being a parent not easy, but it sure is a lot easier than being a non-custodial....

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Living around her family was not difficult when we were childless; but when we returned to Florida (from Savannah Georgia) with children on the way, **relations changed drastically**. An intrusive mother was frequently showing-up unannounced at our house and, with regularity, would create frustration in her daughter (my wife at the time). Usually armed with a bag full of sweets, the mother would quickly grab the attention of the children. For my wife however, these impromptu visits were very disconcerting—to put it mildly. Her mother would not only arrive unannounced but presume the *command and control* role. I suppose she had to justify her existence by imposing on her nearby daughter but, as a practice, she would upstage my wife with a volley of criticisms to boot. In other words, she was not supportive—but intrusive and condescending. Oddly enough, my wife did little about it except to complain to me. Our *boat* (figuratively speaking) was being rocked by her mother; but I was **not** to rock her mother's boat. Something had to give....

During these early years of child rearing, my role as a parent was hands-on. As one of my wife's friends (at the time) said, "I was more active with my children (as a father) than most...." Whether that was true or not, my feeling on the matter was that after work, I should come home and help with the kids. I should help feed them, rock them and do whatever I can to help her. Of course, with the involvement, came some wonderment on the part of her mother. I'm not sure how she viewed my participation; but I think she would have preferred that after work, I go carousing and hang-out at the local pub.

In the realm of some wonderment was an occasional need to *call the children down* while at her mother's home. Not only can my children be in the thick of it, but now you have cousins and other kin folk stuffed into close quarters— so again, "anything can happen". If the children did not behave, they would be sent to a bedroom to cool-down or to simply be separated from the each other. I don't think this happened often—but it did happen. When my instructions were given in the instance, some quietness or seemed to come over the crowd and her mother might express a look of disapproval or doubt. Even

so, the children (or a child was) were put in time-out if a verbal did not work or the matter had gotten too heated....

The only other situation that ever drew a similar reaction however was one time (and only one time) that I turned-off their television in an attempt to carry-on a conversation. Not long after my wife and I married, the condition hit me that they (her mother and step-father) kept their TV on round-the-clock. Yes, it never was turned off; thus, it was not inconceivable that my action was the first time—at least in quite a while. Anyway, my turning it off was met with a similar stillness—a kind of implied affront as though I had made a critical remark directed at one or both of them. In the few times that I called the children down, a similar reaction was always to follow. I guess it was just a different set of standards or maybe a different role on the part of parent; but I did not ever inquire... nor did my wife and I ever discuss it.

Since that time, I have come across some description of an environment or lifestyle as generally described of her family.

Again, my opinion or consideration is not with any credibility other than the desire to try understand *where she came from*—and why they might react the way they did in general. My reading is not extensive and is not considered as anything other than a possible contribution or cause in the dynamic of her home. Drawing from my sources and with only a minimal amount of information (cited in early chapters), I will express my belief with a question or two. Could their reaction—and a prevailing

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conscience to avoid confrontation of any kind—have been the result of living in domestic violence? In other words, is peace or calmness so important that any misbehavior is overlooked or left unattended because of the past experience? Sometimes, momentary peace or the mandate *to just get along* is perhaps necessary; but if this desire becomes so important that misbehavior is left

unattended or addressed, the passivity of doing nothing seems to encourage the hostility of doing anything.

Yes, her mother did not like confrontation—but I said nothing about criticism and *back-biting... right down to the bone*. Both her mother and her step-father could be relentless in their own way. As described in prior chapters, the step-father made sport of his criticism toward some family members; it was his occupation in life. Her mother was sharply critical as one way of needling her way back into the lives of her children; a kind of *she-said...she-said* volley of alleged conversation that might *stir the pot...or at least keep the water warm...* but not boiling. The bevy of brutal back-biting was **not** kept from my family either— as my wife seemed most affected...though unwilling to confront her mother. The eldest couple (or daughter) of the family was especially affected, as described before, eventually seeking a distant relationship (socially and emotional).

Yes, I do not understand the dynamic of her family to the point of being certain in my opinion—but only in the actions that I describe above. Passivity in the presence of many and criticality in the company of few: a keeping of the appearance of love in the actual circumstance of competition stemming from the always needed, but never received love of two parents; and by “parents”, I don’t mean the step-father, but the two natural parents who may have loathed each other to the degree that there was no room or opportunity to love the children.

I have used the expression, “the orange falls close to the tree”, in prior chapters as a euphemism to allude to the condition that a mother’s behavior (in relationships) as a model for her daughter. I have also described what little I learned about the relationship—or lack of relationship—between the children and father. To remind the reader, the relationship was potentially best-managed (or considered) with a developed desire for distance, but tolerated with the occasional—though much-dreaded—return of a drunken and dissipated dad. To suggest that her dad was not involved (in their lives) would actually be to their momentary benefit, but to their long-term disadvantage. In his book *Life without*

Father, David Popenoe describes the disadvantage for just the basic condition of **not** being involved:

For girls whose fathers are not involved, many positive character and personality traits fail to be developed. Girls deprived of strong relationships with their fathers tend to grow up with the perception that men are irresponsible and untrustworthy.

Perhaps the desire or demand for momentary peace had become a priority in the larger events of dad's return. Still, the possibly consequence of an uninvolved dad and a controlling mother cannot exclude the deep feelings of an irresponsible and untrustworthy persona of men.

I have not fully addressed (or redressed) this family dynamic with regard to what I think I know...or have learned; but intend to re-visit the matter in later chapters because of the basic belief that who we are...has much to do with who we were. I do believe that people can change for the better; but if their mode of survival is so ingrained as to preempt any possibility for real change, they will remain dependent on and enslaved to that which they've learned—even from childhood. To begin such change is to first recognize or identify the behavior in the first place.

I stand at the gate and wait for the question, "Friend or Foe?" I close by saying that my desire was to always be a friend; but I remain a man even so.