

Can Parents Be Forgiven?



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Author's Note:

“Can Parents Be Forgiven?” was originally Chapter 10 in my book *Reconstructing Family Values* (SPCK 1994). While I’d draw on other sources if I was writing on this topic now, the basic themes and the way they are talked about in Christian circles are still current. I would also pay more attention to the relationship between adult children and elderly parents, and issues of ageing and family life. Nevertheless you’ll find much food for thought here, and as I’m collecting material for a possible new book on ageing, I’d love to know what you think. Anne Borrowdale 2013

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*what of yesterday when she chased the baby in my room
and I screamed
OUT OUT GET OUT & she ran
right out but the baby stayed
unafraid. what is it like to have
a child afraid of you. your own
child, your first child, the one
you're expected to be most nervous with, the one no one expects
you to be perfect with (except women in parking lots),
the one who must forgive you if either of you are to survive. Alta¹*

When the earth receives the parents, the children receive their freedom. Russian folk saying²

Look at your family, past or present, with a tolerant attitude. On some level, we are all wounded creatures struggling to satisfy essential needs. Patricia Love³

Parents who expect their children to be perfect produce children who expect their parents to have been perfect. Jan Payne

Can parents be forgiven? The answer clearly depends on what they've done. One of the few certain things in this world is that we have all had parents, whether we knew both or either of them or not, and that they have left a legacy in our lives through their presence or absence. That legacy may be good, so that no forgiveness is necessary. It may be utterly destructive, so that we have not reached, and may never reach, the point where forgiveness is even possible. Some of us will have lost touch with the child we once were, forgetting or blocking out the experiences we had, for good or ill. But we have all been shaped by our childhood experiences and our parents' influence; the way we behave now in our relationships to authority, to those we love, to God, will reflect our upbringing. When I talk of children and parents here, I am generally speaking of those who take on parental roles, whether they are the natural mother or father or another adult. Unless those who took on these roles for us have come and gone very quickly, they are likely to have left a mark on our lives somewhere. There can be particular difficulties where step-parents have come into a child's life later on, but much of what is said in this chapter still applies.

The legacy of childhood

When we hear the stories of the damage parents have done, or reflect on any destructiveness which happened in our own upbringing, it can be easy to write families off altogether. Yet few of those who focus on the negative side of family life suggest that the parenting function should in general be taken over by the state or the community. The recognition that some families are damaging should lead to helping them to do their task more effectively, not to their dismantling. This seems to be the stance taken by

many who have suffered or are suffering abuse as children. Their dream is usually that the abuse will stop and good relationships come about, rather than that they should be taken away from their families.

Many adults spend the middle parts of their lives coming to terms with what happened to them as children. We hear much about survivors of abuse dealing with newly surfaced memories - perhaps triggered by becoming parents themselves, or by hearing others talk. A social worker in a hospital commented how often pregnancy can bring such memories to the surface for women who have been abused as children. Even for those adults who have not suffered abuse, though, mid-life is often a time for re-examining their relationship with their parents. Parents age and die, and people who become parents begin to see their parents in their own behaviour in new ways. These feelings about parents may or may not be articulated, but general observation shows that re-orienting ourselves towards our parents is a common experience in mid-life.

Those who want to go into more depth have plenty of opportunities nowadays: therapy may be too expensive to consider (though it is sometimes available free or cheaply for those in great need) but there are numerous self-help manuals available from bookshops: 'The hurtful legacy of toxic parents manifests itself in adulthood as difficulties with relationships, careers, decision making, and depression', says the blurb on one book. 'Whatever the burden you carry ... Dr. Forward can help release you from the demons of self-blame once and for all'.⁴ There is also a growing amount of Christian material which lets you do the same thing, but uses Christian language instead: 'Whatever the burden you carry, Jesus can release you once and for all.' What makes this material curious is that most of us will eventually be parents ourselves, or have some sort of contact with children; yet that aspect is put into a separate category from the one in which we are, as it were, victims of our parents. The assumption seems to be that *we* can never screw things up as badly as our parents did, ignoring the fact that they probably started out with just the same kind of optimism we have.

Once again, as with books on child-rearing, there seems to be a fundamental divide between Christian and secular literature. The former emphasises forgiveness of parents, the latter may very strongly denounce forgiveness as destructive to the person's development. One thing which may make a difference is the extent of the damage parents have done. Some things can be cleared up by talking over what happened in childhood, and understanding can lead to forgiveness. But in many other cases, things are more complex than this. Popular Christian literature on the family can find it hard to address the painful, destructive aspects of family life, for this seems to threaten the notion of the family as a divinely ordained building block for society. This would be true of Ortlund's work, where serious violence and abuse do not seem to be possibilities, at least in Christian homes. At one point she comments: 'Commitment means a willingness to sometimes be unhappy. Remember what the angel of the Lord told Hagar when she ran away from home? "Return ... and submit" [Gen. 16.9]'.⁵ However, the main focus of this chapter is not on the extremes of destructive parental behaviour, the sort of abuses which result in criminal prosecution if uncovered. I have written about this in *Distorted Images*, and such behaviour, and the trauma which results from it, need very careful handling. The emphasis here is on parental behaviour which is seen as normal and acceptable, but which nonetheless leaves scars. The extremes of abuse are of course related to this, but as I have indicated, will not be my main focus here.

Discovering who we are

One of the tasks teenagers and young adults face is to carve out their own identity over against the expectations and ideas their parents have of them. The struggle to be your own person may take many years to resolve, and middle-aged people may still be caught up in it. There is a question here as to how much we are formed by our parents, and how much we are born as very different, unique individuals. The idea of children as 'wet cement' implies that they can be formed by their parents behaviour, and yet parents know that children come into the world with different personalities. If we look back on our early lives, we can usually recognise our *selves* with all our autonomy and uniqueness. Yet at the same time, we can be conscious that our parents influenced and formed us, through their attitudes towards us. Those whose parents had very fixed ideas of what their children should be like can reach adulthood unsure of who they really are.

One problem many people face is that of being labelled as children: the clever one, the musical one, the bad one, the happy one. Being imprisoned by such labels can be devastating, for they do not allow the person to have a range of feelings and abilities. The person labelled happy, for example, may find it impossible to own up to personal difficulties. Something similar may happen with Christians in churches where they are assumed to be joyful and free of doubt. Faber and Mazlish report some of the difficulties adults experience as a result of being labelled in childhood. Andrew Stanway observes that children need 'to be loved consistently, for themselves alone and not on the condition that they be something special or different from what they really are. This kind of love can withstand even quite bad parenting in other ways because it gives a child a sense of worth and stability that will last a lifetime'.⁶

As I have noted before, if parents believe that children are predominantly bad and must be strictly held down, this will affect children's sense of worth. However, if parents can develop trust in their children, and confidence that their children will manage in life, that enables children to believe in themselves. Similarly, to be loved and trusted as an individual who has value in God's eyes gives a sense of worth and stability. Though unfortunately much Christian language about God's love undermines the sense of human uniqueness and value. People are said to be worth something to God not because there is anything good or of value in them, but because God is the sort of God who loves the lowest of the low. Helen Oppenheimer's stress in her writing on the irreplaceability and lovable-ness of the human person before God is worth looking at here.⁷ Knowing that we are valued gives us a base from which to form equal and interdependent relationships in community, rather than leaving us desperately seeking approval from others, or accepting abuse because we feel it is all we deserve.

Letting go and growing up

Parental love needs to have the hallmarks of trust and confidence in the maturing child, because, as Herbert Andersen points out, it is 'The parental love that lets go and sets children free to serve in the world (which) parallels the love of God in Christ'. Families have to encourage individuation so that people can become autonomous enough to leave home for the sake of the gospel.⁸ Yet letting children go is very hard. Many

people's experience of parenthood is an acute and painful love for the child which changes in intensity, but lasts in some form for ever. So the urge for parents to protect and make decisions on their children's behalf is very strong. It is hard to stand by and watch someone they love making what seem to be the wrong decisions, whether that person is six, sixteen or sixty.

It can be difficult for parents to let older children go - to acknowledge that a young person in their twenties, thirties or even older, is now an adult and is responsible for their own decisions. It is known that parents or partners of addicts often carry on excusing and covering up for them, bailing them out when they are in trouble. Similarly, parents of adult offspring with other difficulties can collude with childish behaviour, when they actually need to force their son or daughter to stand on their own feet. There is a difficult line to tread between love and care for another, and preventing them from taking responsibilities for themselves.

There is a temptation, too, for adult children to expect their parents to continue to look after them in some circumstances, whilst fiercely asserting their independence in other areas. Many a young and not-so-young adult visiting the parental home expects to be waited on hand and foot by their mother, or to have their children looked after because 'mum won't mind'. When elderly parents become dependent themselves, the role reversal can prove difficult to manage for both parties. Adult children in their turn may become over-protective, something I notice in myself when accompanying my (robust) seventy-six year old father on the roller coaster at the theme park near his home! Other people face decisions about dealing with a frail elderly parent who wishes to live alone, but whose vulnerability causes them concern. Again, it is a difficult line to tread between protecting an older person, and allowing them to continue to enjoy life, and take their own risks.

This tension between protectiveness and risk-taking is evident in Christian life too. We are often reluctant to take risks with our faith, not just in how we live but in how we think. We may look to others to tell us what we ought to believe, rather than being prepared to think things out in order to make them our own. As I have already noted, we want to deal in absolutes, to know exactly what we ought to be doing. Absolutes do have a place, yet merely demanding obedience to a set of rules leaves people without any capacity for real moral thinking. They may survive whilst they are given the answers from above, but be unable to find any way forward when faced with the messy complexity of moral choice in real life. While it may be no bad thing to be obedient to the values set out in the Christian Gospel, the mindset of obedience easily leads people to follow anyone who is strong, without being critical of *what* they are being asked to do. It seems that people are only happy to be God's children if they can remain forever under the age of consent and responsibility - leaving it all in the hands of their heavenly father. This has its place at some stages in the spiritual journey, as Fowler shows,⁹ but we need to move on from that to discover what it means to be an *adult* child of God.

Some have criticised the idea of God as Father for keeping believers in a state of spiritual infancy. Yet this comment says more about our beliefs about the parent or father/child relationship than about God. A good parent allows their children to come to maturity and reach their own decisions; stands by them when in trouble, welcomes them when they come home, and rejoices when children become mature people with

their own place in the community. Christians are to move from the milk suitable for infants onto solid food, to put away childish things, to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling for God is at work in them. Christian life is a journey, a pilgrimage, not perpetual infancy. Whether we start with what we know to be good parenting, or with what we know of God's relationship with us, the message that God's Fatherhood or Motherhood allows us to grow up is the same. Just as we may think we know all there is to know when we are young adults, so Christians who have grown in their faith may feel confident that they know just what God is like. Without realising it, they may define and try to control God through their pronouncements. God accepts this vulnerability, looking, as parents look, for their offspring to come to a more mature wisdom which realises how little it knows and understands.

We can also extend this to include the way that adult children end up taking care of frail elderly parents. The child/parent image is not simply a paternalistic one, but involves interdependence. If Christ is served when we care for others in need, here too God is made vulnerable, reliant as in the incarnation on human care. 'Family' metaphors of humankind's relationship with God easily become limited to seeing ourselves as children and God as Almighty Father - or even Mother. But family imagery can be much wider and richer than this. We are also Christ's sisters, brothers, mothers, and friends. (Matt. 12. 48 - 50) There are of course limits to how far we can use the metaphor of God as Parent, and it will always be an incomplete image. As McFague points out, metaphor always carries within it the whisper 'it is and it is not'.¹⁰ Yet it is worth keeping room for it, because it makes ordinary domestic relationships a springboard for understanding something of who God is, and what we can be.

Parental imperfections

But what if parents treat children harshly, so that the only God they can imagine is judgemental or distant, or demands too high a standard? I have already discussed the harmful effects both of over-strict discipline and failure to set limits. These problems usually centre around the child's will, whether it is broken, whether the child rebels, or whether she or he is uncontrolled. Yet there are also problems for children who do not rebel but are instead the epitome of Christian children, 'mild, obedient, good as He'. The difficulties caused for 'good' children in families is explored by Patricia Love in *The Chosen Child Syndrome*. Children who are marked out as 'good' within a family may feel that they are in effect being told they are not to have problems or needs: 'At least you never cause us any worry' conveys the message 'you cannot have any problems'. Some children are expected to take care of their parents emotionally, and sometimes physically, and may be praised as very good, they may even win 'Children of the Year' awards. Yet they may be left without anyone seeing that they have needs too. I suspect that Christian parents may be more prone to creating this syndrome, since the values being praised are often identified with Christian values of love and self-sacrifice. Telling a child that they are a special child in the family can also make it difficult for that child to be themselves, to fail and do wrong occasionally. Such children may feel doomed always to disappoint their parents, because they can never live up to the ideal in their parents' minds. And it does not do much for sibling relations if one child is always being held up as the one who does no wrong.

Some children who are treated in this way have severe problems in adult life. This

will particularly be the case where their treatment had no let-up or counter-balancing factors. Probably many others, though marked, have been able to cope; any difficulties caused have not taken over their adult lives. Few of us had entirely happy childhoods, our parents were deficient from time to time, they wounded us as well as nurturing us as best they knew how. But we are all somewhere on a continuum which stretches from good-enough childhoods through to those which were so abusive they destroyed our capacity to relate in adult life. It is worth noting that such issues can come to a head when elderly parents are cared for by their adult children. Having three generations in a household may be delightful, but it can also bring strain, and it can be very difficult to be caring towards a parent who has damaged or even abused you in your childhood. The mixed feelings which come from doing a full-time caring job can be even more stressful in such cases. What is it like to have someone who cast a shadow over your life now dependent on you for everything? What is it like to be at the mercy of a grown child who dislikes you?

One of the strongest critics of methods of childrearing in recent years has been the psychoanalyst Alice Miller. She writes passionately about the damage inflicted on children by well-meaning parents, 'the unintentional persecution of children by their parents, sanctioned by society and called child-rearing'. She asserts that the Judeo-Christian tradition is incriminated in this: 'Can it be that the coercive measures of "poisonous pedagogy" would have less power over us and our culture if the Judeo-Christian tradition had not lent them strong support?' For it shows loving fathers tormenting sons - Abraham and Isaac, God and Job, God the Father and Jesus. In paradise, humankind is forbidden under threat of loss of love and abandonment to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, to ask questions about the world. 'Thou shalt not be aware', is a commandment which predates the 10 commandments.¹¹

Miller asserts that 'it is not a matter of assigning blame to individual parents, who, after all, are themselves victims of this system, but of identifying a hidden societal structure that determines our lives.' Parents' behaviour can be better understood if it is seen as part of an overall system, and we should not fail to denounce that damaging system simply in order to protect parents. The fact that mothers and fathers may feel guilty and distressed if what they have done is made clear should not stop us trying to move forward. Parents cannot expect to be perfect, and they too are victims of their childhood and child-rearing ideology. Adults need to express their rage at being failed, and not feel they must defend mothers from all accusation: 'We cannot undo the harm done to children, neither by blaming nor by defending the parents, but perhaps we can help to prevent future damage if we do not have to deny the truth out of our need to defend ourselves or our parents.'¹²

Many criticisms can be made of Miller's work, but she undoubtedly has some useful insights to set alongside other analyses of what happens to children in families. She does raise acutely the question of how far parents can be blamed for the damage they cause, and whether it is Christian to refuse to blame them for fear of hurting their feelings. How responsible are parents for what they do in relation to their children, if they have done their best? There is much that can be said about the nature of responsibility and blame which I cannot go into here. However, it is worth noting that it is possible for someone to accept responsibility for things for which they are not strictly to blame. Children can be very quick to say 'don't blame me' when one of their actions

has caused a plate to break, for example. What they mean is that they did not intend the breakage; though as a matter of fact it was their action which caused it. It is hard enough to apologise for problems arising from weakness and deliberate fault. But perhaps harder still to accept responsibility for what we do through ignorance, particularly if we felt we were acting in the best way possible at the time. Mothers in the nineteen fifties who left their children crying for long periods rather than pick them up and feed them were following what they thought was best for the child. Yet therapists say that many adults today are coping with the traumatic effects of such treatment. In that sort of case, it can help for parents to acknowledge the consequence of their actions, to accept responsibility, and to allow an adult child to express their feelings about what it has done to them.

The trouble is that there are so many things which parents seem to have done wrong: they have not only eaten sour grapes to set their children's teeth on edge, but lemons and unripe gooseberries as well! As more and more trauma is traced back to early childhood, so parents become more and more responsible. Not only what the mother eats during pregnancy, but even her feelings during that time are said to affect what kind of child she has. We are seeing the beginnings of cases where children sue their mothers for taking drugs or smoking during pregnancy. Similarly, there was a case brought recently by a young adult against a local authority for not handling his care properly when he was young. The prospect of suing parents for not bringing you up properly seems to be on the horizon. In Isaiah, the prophet asks: 'Does the pot complain that its maker has no skill? Does anyone dare to say to his parents, "Why did you make me like this?"' (Isaiah 45. 9 -10) The answer increasingly seems to be that they do.

The question at issue here is what a child actually has a right to. No-one has a right to perfect parenting, for such a thing does not exist. We can expect to be fed, sheltered and have some loving attention paid to us, but it is difficult to use the language of rights here. We cannot introduce quality control and value for money principles into family life without destroying it. In any case, such an approach takes a child out of the family and community as if they had rights over against it. It may be a misfortune to be born into poverty, or into a nation at war, but we cannot expect to choose the circumstances into which we are born, and neither can being born into a rich family in a peaceful nation be a guarantee of health and happiness. There are too many variables which affect who we are and what happens to us to be able to blame parents entirely. And since our parents can blame their parents and our grandparents can blame their parents, it is impossible to say where the buck stops.

There seems to be little profit in going down the road of 'rights' or of seeking one person to blame. Once we have recognized what happened to us as children, it may be possible to talk it through with our parents, if they are still alive, and to ask them to acknowledge the ways in which what they did affected us. Where parents have died, or are unable to respond for one reason or another, it may be more difficult to come to terms with our childhood. Self-help books offer some suggestions about this, such as writing a letter to the dead parent.

Having some idea of why our parents did what they did does begin to take us forward. We may be able to see the problems they were living with, learn what advice they were given, understand whether they operated from ignorance, weakness or their

own deliberate fault. If we are parents ourselves, we may see how we reproduce the patterns we learnt in our childhood. It is useful to reflect on the things we feel we must never do to our own children, for this points to our own early experience. It is common for parents to hear their own mother's or father's voice when they are criticising their children. They may consciously try to avoid particular forms of behaviour, yet find themselves doing it all the same. Or they may feel as if their own parent is sitting on their shoulder questioning and criticising what they are doing: 'you're not going to let her speak to her father like that, are you?' Understanding what is going on can encourage us to challenge the attitudes which are harmful to children generally, so as to encourage more positive ones in the future.

Must children forgive?

Discovering where responsibility lies is one thing, but forgiveness is another. Many Christians make it an essential component of family life. Anderson states that since 'in no other context of human life does our sinfulness show as clearly as it does in the family', forgiveness is an 'essential component of being children and parents together'.¹³ Moynagh stresses that whilst children can be critical of their parents, they must acknowledge and thank parents for what they have done, and forgive them. Failure to do this, he says, is a failure to obey the commandment to honour (or 'glorify and exalt' in his interpretation) your parents. Forgiveness breaks hurtful patterns in family life, and is 'perhaps the most effective family therapy there is'.¹⁴ It is one thing to talk about the importance of forgiveness as a necessary currency in everyday family life. Without readiness to forgive misunderstandings and hurts, no relationship can thrive. In ordinary encounters within families, we need more generous forgiveness of one another.

However, it is quite another thing to insist on forgiveness where there has been consistent bad treatment in the home. Moynagh quotes the case of Eric, who 'felt gnawed away inside by resentment towards his mother and father. He sometimes felt like hitting out at other people as a way of getting even with his parents. In counselling he was shown how forgiving his parents so that he could affirm them ... would reduce his resentment and the tension inside him. He did so, and found new acceptance at home'.¹⁵ The trouble is that things are rarely that simple. Anger and resentment are strong emotions, and trying to forgive without dealing with the anger can lead to further problems in the long run. Christian theology stresses the importance of such things as love, forgiveness and self-sacrifice, but the vision of the family in which such things are supposed to happen so often fails to connect with the messy reality of most people's experience.

Jim Conway in *Adult Children of Legal or Emotional Divorce* also makes forgiveness a central element. He does emphasise that the fact that a real hurt has been done must be recognized, and grieved over. It may include challenging the parent who did the damage, but needs to move on to letting go, refusing to hold a grudge. The parent has not earned forgiveness, but is to be given it freely and permanently. The problem is to be relinquished into God's hands: 'The focus of forgiveness must always be grace. Forgiveness is always unmerited.'¹⁶ The difficulty with those who stress forgiveness is that it all too easily comes across as an oversimplification of the long and painful process of coming to terms with damage.

Therapists tend to be much more scathing about the business of forgiveness. Forgiveness impedes healing, says Forward in a chapter headed 'You Don't Have to Forgive'. Though it is right to give up the need for revenge, we do not have to absolve the guilty party of responsibility if what they were doing was mistreating an innocent child. 'Absolution is another form of denial: "If I forgive you, we can pretend that what happened wasn't so terrible.' Forgiveness is dangerous, says Forward, because it undercuts the ability to let go of pent-up emotions, and people can end up hating themselves even more. The example this counsellor gives is of a devout Christian who had to get in touch with her rage to be healed, and who discovered that God wanted her to get better more than God wanted her to forgive. Forgiveness cannot be forced, and the more severe the hurt, the more time will probably be needed to be angry and to grieve. Forgiveness comes at the end not the beginning. Parents need to acknowledge what has happened and take responsibility, be prepared to make amends, and to 'earn' forgiveness.¹⁷ Miller too is critical of the idea that a gesture of forgiveness will put everything right. Easy reconciliation by teaching people to forgive and understand their parents is not appropriate unless anger at the damage done has been allowed expression: 'the therapeutic goal of improved interaction between partners or with other members of the family can be a legitimate one but cannot be compared with the individual's liberation from the results of the harm done to him as a child.'¹⁸

This is a difficult area for Christians to come to terms with, for we are used to having the virtues of forgiveness thrust at us. It does seem that we have a duty to forgive freely whatever the circumstances. Yet perhaps the knowledge that forgiveness cannot always come easily can help us to rethink what happens when God forgives us. The answer may lie in seeing that forgiveness does not have to mean 'pretending it never happened', but letting go of what has happened. The Greek word translated forgive in the Lord's Prayer can have the meaning of letting go, and it is a helpful way of looking at things. Forgiveness in this sense is possible when we have acknowledged what has happened, but can move forward from it, refusing to let it fester in our lives any longer.

Christians are used to confessing their sins at every turn, and receiving forgiveness, but whether we actually accept responsibility is another matter. It is often the case that in human experience, for forgiveness to be complete, the other has to acknowledge what they have done. It can be very annoying to have someone insisting that they forgive us when we are convinced that we have committed no offence. Yet how do we accept responsibility for what we have done as individuals and as community? While it may be easy to feel sorry for deliberate wrong-doing, it is much harder to repent of being wrong simply by virtue of being ourselves. This is an issue men face in dealing with sexism, and white people in dealing with racism. We are not to blame for being formed by the culture in which we grow to maturity, but once we become aware of sexism and racism, we become responsible for repenting of them and doing something about them. It is not a simple matter of confessing one action or thought and receiving absolution, but of constantly challenging those ingrained patterns of thought that we now see to be wrong.

Perhaps it is, as Miller suggests, that we need to repent of the wrong systems of childrearing we are all part of, rather than seeing it only in terms of individual guilt. Christianity does sometimes concentrate on individual guilt to such an extent that corporate wrong is obscured, yet as Dodd remarks, we must recognise that

The problem of evil is indeed something which goes beyond questions of individual responsibility, and salvation is more than a device for freeing an individual from his guilt: it must cut at the root at that corporate wrongness which underlies individual transgression. This is, according to Paul, what has actually been effected by the work of Christ. In him (people) are lifted into a new order in which goodness is as powerful and dominant as was sin in the order represented by Adam; or, rather, it is far more powerful and dominant.¹⁹

Honour one another

The fact that many people feel they ought to forgive their parents does not entirely stem from oppressive religious teaching. It may also reflect an understanding and genuine love for parents which sees them as frail human beings who were scarred in their past, and whom God still loves. When children grow up to become parents themselves, they may learn a new tolerance, seeing that on some level all of us are wounded in some way, and struggling to do our best. Honouring fathers and mothers may mean recognizing them as frail human beings who are not the gods or devils our childish memories make them. We may come to understand why our parents behaved as they did - even if we are critical of it.

It is common for women to find new understandings of their mothers when they go through motherhood themselves. This is often a positive experience, though for some it may bring a fresh realisation of the hurts of their childhood. Jean Radford captures some of this when she reflects:

The desire for motherhood is ... about ... the desire to relive my childhood with the mother I desired to have rather than the mother I actually had. Is it that lost child or the lost mother I want to regain? Or both? To go back in fantasy, to recover, to make good, to change things for the better. Dear God, give me the courage to change the things I can change, the serenity to accept the things I cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference. The words of that prayer are the best words I could find, they give a shape and ritual to something in my wish for children. A child is a way of coming to terms with the past?²⁰

Adults who are seeking healing for their past have a number of different resources they can turn to. Yet the emphasis is often on taking an assertive stance in relation to parents, and being prepared to cast off ties with parents if the confrontation does not 'work'. They stress the behaviour of the individual in a way which seems to deny the interdependence that exists even in families which have been unhealthy. A false choice seems to be presented here, either inappropriate dependency, or complete independence. Yet we need the sense that we can be related to others, connected in a way that will cause pain as well as joy, without this being a threat to our sense of self. Trying to sort out a complex muddle of family relationships will not be easy because this sense of connectedness is usually still very real. How *do* you face your parents with the hurtful legacy they have left you, when you know it will cause them pain?

The choice offered seems to be between confronting parents and moving to freedom, or remaining silent but imprisoned. Certainly remaining silent because we believe that family life should never be troubled by conflict is unhelpful. Jesus was not directly talking about conflict in families when he spoke of bringing a sword rather than

peace, and of setting children against parents and parents against children; but his words are a reminder that harmony is not always a positive family value. Other interests may demand that we take risks with relationships. Yet there may be different ways of doing this. Perhaps guidelines are needed for moving a little way at a time, given that not everyone is capable of the one bold step. There is a difference between avoiding confrontation in the mistaken belief that parental authority should never be challenged, and moving gently to try to put relationships right with someone you love. It will be much more difficult for adult children to talk with parents where strict parental authority is upheld than in more open homes where parents have been able to admit they were sometimes wrong. It may help to see that the tensions between parents and children is part of a wider set of relationships - working things through with siblings or other relations, or talking to friends of the family, can be helpful in getting other perspectives on why things happened as they did.

There is some chance of breaking painful patterns of family life when parents keep themselves aware of what it is like to be young, and have reconciled themselves to the pains and joys of their childhood. They have to avoid seeing children as 'other', a different race who do not feel or notice things as we do, who are ignorant and innocent of the things that matter. Equally we have to avoid seeing our parents as 'other'. For they too are people like us, not a different race who do not feel and notice things like we do, who are ignorant and innocent about the things that matter. Perhaps we can understand honouring our parents in this way. Miller, amongst others, has been severely critical of the way the fourth commandment to honour your parents has been used. She uses the phrase: 'fell victim to the Fourth Commandment', and suggests we need a new commandment to 'Honor (sic) your children'.²¹

But 'honouring parents' can be reclaimed in the sense of granting parents understanding and respect as people, rather than worshipping or obeying them. Teenagers and young adults breaking free of their families of origin may fail to give this kind of respect to their parents, but it is something Christians should be urging them to do. It means that though parents values and behaviour may seem hopelessly out of touch, they are not automatically ridiculed or denied a voice. Indeed, adults in middle age can treat older people in general and not only their own parents, rather dismissively at times - we can easily become 'ageist'. What might it mean really to see elderly people as individuals deserving of respect? Parents can be forgiven more easily when the relation of adult child to parent is not seen in isolation, but as one dimension of the whole network of relationships of family life, with all their pains and possibilities.

1 From 'Momma: A Start on All the Untold Stories', by Alta, © 1974 by Times Change Press, Box 1380, Ojai CA 93024.

2 Quoted in L. De Mause, ed., *The History of Childhood* (New York, Harper & Row, 1975), p.397.

3 P. Love with J. Robinson, *The Chosen Child Syndrome* (London, Piatkus, 1991), p.11.

4. S. Forward (with C. Buck), *Toxic Parents* (London, Bantam Books, 1990).

5. A. Ortlund, *Disciplines of the Home* (Milton Keynes, Word UK, 1990), p.25. She does not seem conscious of the irony of using Abraham's 'mistress' as a role model!

6. A. Stanway, *Preparing for Life* (London, Viking, 1988), p.134.

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7. See H. Oppenheimer, *The Hope of Happiness* (London, SCM Press, 1983), and my *A Woman's Work* (London, SPCK, 1989).
 8. H. Anderson, *The Family and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984), p.38.
 9. For a useful brief discussion of faith development, see the report *How Faith Grows* (National Society/Church House publishing, 1991).
 10. S. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1982), p.13.
 11. A. Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* (London, Pluto Press 1990), pp.22 and 94-5.
 12. Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, pp.194-5 and 301.
 13. Anderson, *The Family and Pastoral Care*, p.97.
 14. M. Moynagh, *Home to Home*, p.62.
 15. Moynagh, *Home to Home*, p.152.
 16. J. Conway, *Adult Children of Legal or Emotional Divorce* (Eastbourne, Monarch, 1991), p.205.
 17. Forward, *Toxic Parents*, pp.186ff
 18. Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, p.200.
 19. C. Dodd *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. I am indebted to Professor J. Rogerson at the University of Sheffield for this quotation. I do not have the complete reference.
 20. J. Radford, in Gieve ed., *Balancing Acts* (London, Virago, 1989), p.137.
 21. Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, p.203