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Motivational Models for Spontaneous Reunification With the Alienated Child: Part II

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Four motivational models explaining the dynamics of spontaneous reunification between the rejected parent and the alienated child are described. The models demonstrate how crisis can be a change agent for breaking a stalemate between high conflict parents. Within the culture of divorced and separated families, reunification between a rejected parent and an alienated or estranged child is surrounded by popular mythology. Well-meaning friends and relative's tender advice to this parent, telling him, "Wait until the child is eighteen. One day your child will come to her senses and call." This well-intended counsel is usually offered to soften the despair the parent senses when he or she bares their heart looking for hope for the return of a lost child. Yet, paradoxically, the rejected parent cannot afford to completely release all hope for reunification. The parent is not only losing a child but is losing the pride and social status of being a loving parent.

The rejected parent of an alienated or estranged child may come to believe that there is little or no hope of ever repairing the damaged relationship. Courts and mental health professionals are often perplexed about how to break the stalemate between two hostile parents who continue returning to court because of a parent's refusal to comply with court orders and in severe cases when the child refuses all contact with the rejected parent. Most efforts for breaking the stalemate have relied on the judge's empty threat to impose sanctions, court-ordered counseling or evaluations, on rare occasion's involuntary change of custody or just maintaining the status quo. In recent

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years there has been some success using Parenting Coordinators or Special Masters for families who have sufficient motivation and respect for the court to cooperate with the process. Other parents champion their own cause and do not care about court orders or sanctions. They are the true believers who view their task in life as protecting their child from the rejected parent and seeing the court as an enemy. Anything short of having the court completely agree with their argument is unacceptable.

However, 27 children and their parents have been identified (Darnall & Steinberg, 2008) having experienced varying degrees reunification without any significant intervention from the court or by a mental health professional. The study found that a crisis from the child's perspective triggered his or her interest in reaching out to the rejected parent. The reunification, a reciprocal positive relationship with both parents, was not always successful.

DEFINITION FOR SPONTANEOUS REUNIFICATION

Spontaneous reunification occurs when the child initiates contact with the rejected parent without prodding, court orders, or forced therapy. However, a child's request for reunification with a rejected parent can be channeled through an officer of the court, a mental health professional, or a family member, such as a step parent, a sibling, or even the identified alienating parent.

The goal of reunification must include a reciprocal relationship between the child and *both* parents so the child is not once again caught in the middle. Children at any age should not have to choose one parent over the other. Therefore, reunification is not choosing the rejected parent over the alienating parent. However, both parents must respect the child's dignity and right to have a reciprocal accepting relationship with the other parent, without interference and without exposing the child to further alienating or estranging behaviors from either parent.

MOTIVATION FOR REUNIFICATION

Crises were generated by external events or situational changes in the child's life such as a new significant other entering the parent's life, another divorce, a serious illness, a family member's death, a brush with the law, a traffic accident, loss of a scholarship, or no money for college. Intrinsic changes in the child were also a source of the crisis. A child's maturation or a reframing of a prior irrational belief was a strong motivation for reunification. The reframing of a child's irrational belief from "*You are useless and deserve to be hated!*" to "*Can you help me with college?*" often has a narcissistic or self-serving quality. Even hormonal changes and maturation can motivate reunification. One preteen daughter wanted a renewed relationship with her

father because she was blossoming into womanhood and desired her father's affirmation. She wanted him to be involved in celebrating her emergence as a maturing female.

Recognizing the opportunity that comes with a crisis is not easy for the rejected parent because he or she will not always have access to information about what is happening in the child's life. If reunification is to happen the right timing or the ripeness of knowing when to respond is crucial. The opportunity for reunification may come as a complete surprise to the rejected parent because all communication with the child ceased. The correct timing for reunification usually came about from an event that directly affected the child and to a lesser extent the parent. When the crisis occurred, some rejected parents were hesitant because they feared again being hurt by the child's rejection. The risk may be too great. Some aligned parents who previously engaged in alienation were receptive to the reunification, but most were initially reluctant to allow the child to reconnect with the other parent.

MOTIVATIONAL MODELS

Motivating the rejecting child or the alienating parent is a perplexing challenge for family courts and mental health professionals. Court orders are poor motivators for children or parents to change their attitudes and feelings toward a rejected parent. Courts can make orders for how a parent or child is to behave, but they can not order a change in attitude. Frequently parents obsessed with their desire to keep the child from the rejected parent are not intimidated by court orders or by the threat of contempt. Mental health professionals may have the best intentions but become frustrated when their clients either refuse cooperation or sabotage reunification. Sabotaging reunification has been an argument for changing custody. Many alienating parents repeatedly find themselves in court for contempt charges.

Studies on crisis intervention have demonstrated that an individual's resistance to change will frequently dissipate when faced with a personal crisis. For example, an alcoholic's family and friends create an emotional crisis during an intervention to break through the person's resistance to treatment. To some degree, this is what the alienated child may experience when considering reaching out to the rejected parent. Theories on international relations offer some valuable insight that help our understanding of this dynamic and can be applicable for motivating high conflict parents and children to work cooperatively towards reunification. (Kriesber, 1991; Rubin, 1991; Zartman, 1989).

Timing or what international theorists refer to as ripeness can make the difference between successful and failed attempts to reunify. The concept

of *ripeness*, defined as *a bilateral state of affairs, affecting both parties for the same reason*, is relevant for understanding the timing for reunification (Pruitt & Olczak, 1995). Conflicted parents and the alienated or estranged child can be ripe for reunification when the child perceives a crisis. Ripeness is a common state of mind where both parents or a rejected parent and a rejecting child are motivated to avoid or respond to a shared crisis. Characteristic of ripeness is a common interest for a mutual outcome. The source of the crisis can come from either the child or either parent. In cases of spontaneous reunification, regardless of the source of the crisis, it was found that the child somehow experienced the repercussions and was ripe for reconnection.

Zartman and Aurik (1991) described four circumstances when feuding parties are ripe or motivated to resolve their differences. Though their discussion focuses on international conflicts, what they offer is applicable for high conflict parents and for alienated or estranged children. The circumstances for change include a Hurting Stalemate, a Recent Catastrophe, an Impending Catastrophe or Deteriorating Position, and an Enticing Opportunity.

Hurting Stalemate

Hurting stalemate occurs when both parents realize that they and their child are in a “*no win*” situation, and if they remain entrenched in their respective positions, all will suffer.

Jim, like many 16-year-olds, is impulsive and frequently uses poor judgment. One evening while out with friends riding snowmobiles on the sixth green of the county club, he was arrested for destroying private property. Jim was scared and wanted to find a way of escaping trouble. He remembered his father, whom he had not talked to in years, was a trustee of the country club. Jim reasoned that his father might help if he was apologetic. He knew he needed help because he had already encountered the sheriff in a previous incident. There was little doubt that Jim wanted to manipulate his father but thought he had little choice.

Gingerly, he broached the idea to his mother about calling his father and asking for help. His mother was not happy with either Jim or his idea. She told him, “That’s up to you, but I don’t like it. I know your father can help if he has a mind to.” Mother had been frustrated because she felt for a long time that she had lost some control over Jim’s behavior. She knew for a time that she needed help from Jim’s father but did not know how to ask without more arguments or risking new protracted litigation. *It was easier for her to avoid Jim’s father and try to deal with her son’s contemptuous behavior alone.*

Although Jim felt embarrassed, he made the call. His father was thrilled to hear Jim’s voice again after an absence of four years. Wisely, Jim’s father listened, withholding any judgment until he heard the full story. He knew

that Jim was using him to get out of a scrape, but that was acceptable because he saw the opportunity to help his son and perhaps rebuild a relationship. Today, possibly for the first time in their relationship, Jim and his dad are connecting as father and son.

Jim's crisis broke the stalemate with his father. Though his father knew Jim was using him, he took advantage of the opportunity to become involved in his son's life. Jim's mother did not object to their contact and was openly relieved. She hoped that her ex-husband would provide Jim some guidance. After the initial shock of hearing her son wanting his father's help, she actively encouraged the relationship to evolve naturally.

Recent Catastrophe

A shared crisis will bring people together who have been fighting for years. Science fiction movies have made use of this theme in the films "War of the Worlds" and, more recently, "Independence Day." Both plots involved aliens who threatened the existence of the earth so the nations of the world united against a common enemy.

Natural catastrophes often bring out the best in people even between strangers. People sharing a catastrophe or crisis will put differences aside for their common purpose. Hatred and hurts are prioritized to a less important status, at least for a time, so they can work together, mutually supporting one another. Putting their other issues aside for a common purpose can resolve the crisis for the child's well being.

Marta learned from her adult brother and sister that their father, whom she had not seen for the last four of her nine years, was diagnosed with cancer. When she expressed to her mother her desire to see her father, she was told he was "a dirty, dangerous drunk who deserved to be sick and was not worthy of her compassion."

Marta decided that she wanted to see her father before he died. She asked her sisters for help because she knew they had frequent contact with him and their stepmother. Also, she knew she had their support. Her siblings began driving Marta to visit their father behind their mother's back. When Marta's mother learned of the family conspiracy to reunite "her child" with her father, she immediately returned to court in an attempt to block reunification. In response, Marta wrote a letter that was conveyed by her siblings to the judge hearing the case. In her letter, she asked for time with her father without jeopardizing her primary custodial residence with her mother suggesting that her mother needed time for herself while she spent time with her ailing dad.

The judge's order gave Marta specific days each week when she would spend time with her father, usually in the company of her siblings. As the relationship progressed and the father's health deteriorated, her mother's heart softened, allowing Marta to spend additional time with her father. After

her father's death, Marta wrote a thank you letter to the judge for allowing her to spend valuable time with her father before the opportunity was lost.

Though the court was ultimately involved in facilitating the reunification, it was the crisis of the father's terminal illness that motivated Marta to reach out to her father. In addition, it is important to notice in this example that sometimes siblings can help by encouraging reunification. However, there is a word of caution. A rejected parent having a positive relationship with a son or daughter should not use that child to try facilitating a relationship with the alienated child. There is a big risk that doing so will make matters worse with both children.

Marta's mother encouraged her to reject her father. She recalled a memory from her early childhood telling her father that she hated him. When he accused her mother of "poisoning this child's mind," Marta physically stood between them and defiantly told her dad that it was all her idea, and she never wanted to see him again. She could not recall any reasons to justify her hatred towards her father. Perhaps for different reasons, they all shared a crisis, knowing there was little time to reconcile.

Impending Catastrophe or Deteriorating Position

Both parents are more likely to break a stalemate when they agree that any inaction on their part will lead to a crisis that will hurt their child.

Jim and Casey had been fighting for five years, mostly on the telephone about financial problems and Jim's continued lack of contact with their 16-year-old daughter, Stacy. The fighting became a family ritual because the hostilities were so predictable. While all this fighting was going on, Casey failed to notice the subtle changes in Stacy's mood. She became more sullen and withdrawn. She expressed little interest in what used to be pleasurable activities. No longer was she invited to parties or ran to the phone for that very important phone call. Now the phones were quiet, and the dresses hung undisturbed in the closet. Casey was oblivious to what was happening to their daughter until this mother received a call from the hospital that Stacy had seriously cut herself in a suicide attempt. Scared, Casey called Jim and told him to meet her at the hospital. Jim fearing for Stacy's life could not contain his anger towards Casey. Casey, feeling defensive, counterattacked with her own allegations. Jim's accusations were like a flashback of their fights during the marriage. She could never get use to his controlling nature and being blamed for everything that went wrong. Like so many times in the past, they lost control of their words and no longer saw what was important.

When the psychiatrist entered the waiting room, they stopped yelling and redirected their attention to him. The doctor stood staring in disbelief. After Jim and Casey regained their composure, the psychiatrist led them into a small sterile looking office beside the waiting room. The doctor informed

them that their daughter tried to kill herself because she felt responsible for all the fighting, the multiple trips to court and the loss of her father from her life.

Immediately, Jim and Casey wanted to react, much like Pavlov's dogs, with accusations and blame toward one another. Somehow, their wiser instincts helped curtail their impulses. They knew they had to listen to what the doctor was saying. "Your daughter told me she wanted to die because she couldn't stand to hear the two of you yelling and fighting, and she did not want to grow up without her dad. The two of you need to show your love for Stacy by putting your hostilities aside. Otherwise you're going to lose her forever." This was the wakeup call they needed to hear. They both understood that inaction could cost them their daughter's life.

Enticing Opportunity

An opportunity may arise that may be too good to be true and demands the parent's cooperation or their working together. This requires the parents to think about what is best for the child rather than their own narcissistic needs. The opportunity may be completing the college financial statements for scholarships, graduation, extensive medical treatment, or an important family event. For the narcissistically injured parent, he or she must feel a stronger empathy for their child's need rather than wallow in the pit of their own hurt or rage. This is not easy for someone having a severe personality disorder (Eddy, 2006). Frequently the psychologically injured will rationalize his or her behavior believing they are protecting the child from an unknown or irrational threat.

Robert has not seen his dad for ten years. His last memory of his parents together involved a great deal of yelling and screaming about something that was so insignificant he could not even remember. He also knew his father was somewhere in the background of his life because he received birthday cards and Christmas gifts from him every year. At times Robert felt guilty for not responding, especially about the gifts, but he learned early how to push those thoughts and feelings aside.

Now Robert was facing a dilemma. He needed money for college and knew that his mother couldn't help. Maybe Robert was mistaken, but he believed that his father was financially secure so he thought he might ask his dad for some tuition help. However, he knew that his mother would be angry if he asked his father for help but feeling desperate, he thought he had no choice. So he decided to present the idea to his mother as a way of "getting more child support money from his father."

Robert's two older sisters were opposed to his plan. They were strongly aligned with their mother and refused any contact with their father. The

sisters pressured her to keep Robert away from their father because they did not believe their mother should give Robert any support.

However, with his mother's blessings, Robert decided to ask his father for help. His mother knew that his father's help was Robert's only chance in getting into a good university. Robert could not blame his dad for being angry or for denying his request. He had the insight to believe that his father would think he was just using his dad for money. In fact, that was exactly what Robert was doing, using his father. Robert told himself, "Go for it! What do I have to lose?" To Robert's surprise, his father was receptive, though he insisted on seeing Robert and on setting some boundaries about how the money was to be spent. Robert reluctantly agreed to his father's terms and so there was the beginning of a renewed relationship.

Success can take many forms, not just reconciliation but also a change in the parent and child's beliefs or perceptions of each other. Reunification may not always mean having a close relationship with both parents. Instead, it can mean a change in the relationship that all can live with. An example is Robert's realization that his father "is sometimes an ass, but I still care about him." Robert and his father may not have achieved a strong emotional bond, but both are satisfied that they can talk with each other and in a limited way be part of one another's lives. Some may not consider Robert and his father a success, but the son's favorable change in his perception of his father is not a failure for either of them.

The aligned parent's failure to support reunification can cause problems for the child. Crisis from the child's perspective created an opportunity for reunification. Though there are varied degrees of success, we have learned that crisis can break a stalemate. We can look back in history finding examples of people from various persuasions who came together after a national crisis. We saw the phenomena after 9/11, the Challenger, and Katrina and, for those who remember, the Kennedy assassinations. For a time, people came together if only for a short time. If one does not take advantage of the opportunity a crisis affords, the opportunity may be lost.

There are anecdotal examples of judges creating a crisis in the courtroom breaking a stalemate between two hostile parents. After learning the mother coached their daughter to make false allegations against the father, the judge wisely ordered both parents to jail. The father understood what the judge was doing and was not bothered by going to jail. He smiled when hearing the judge's order. After four hours, the parents returned to the courtroom and there after father had uninterrupted visits with his daughter.

A second judge in Virginia recognized that the mother was hindering reunification, and the father was being obstinate. They could not speak long enough to agree on anything. He ordered both attorneys to ask their clients for a name of a responsible adult to take custody of the children. The judge was not bluffing. He created a crisis for the parents. There was no argument or debate. Now the parents had to either work together or lose their child.

A change of custody was not necessary. The judge's actions broke the stalemate caused by severe alienation and father's estrangement.

Many of the problems that occur between a parent and child do not just disappear because there is a crisis and an attempt at reunification. A parent's long-standing personality problem or obnoxious behaviors can again raise dormant issues for the child and spawn anxiety over the connection that was wrongly identified as alienation. For many parents and children, reunification therapy may prove helpful if the parents and children cannot overcome these obstacles. Many of these families went on with their lives with a newfound unity without professional or court intervention. These parents and children taught us there is reason to hope. The issue is knowing when and how to respond.

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