

The Grief of an Ending Without an Ending

You can leave the door open without standing in the doorway.



Some endings announce themselves. There is a last day of work. Divorce papers are signed. A house changes hands. Someone dies, and there is a date we can point to when the world became different.

Estrangement from an adult child may offer no such clarity.

The relationship may have ended gradually. Or contact may have stopped suddenly, but nothing about the ending feels complete. There may still be questions you want answered, words you want to say, misunderstandings you want to correct, or conversations you continue to hope will happen.

Your child is still living. The relationship could change tomorrow. And so the ending never feels entirely like an ending. You may find yourself living somewhere between what was and what might still be.

That is a difficult place to remain.

When the Story Has No Period

We like stories with endings. Not necessarily happy endings. But endings that allow us to understand what happened. This happened. Then this happened. And eventually, this is where we arrived.

Estrangement often refuses to cooperate.

Perhaps you know why your child ended contact but disagree about what happened. Perhaps you received an explanation that created more questions than answers. Perhaps there was no explanation at all. Or perhaps you understand some of what happened and still cannot understand how the relationship arrived here.

The mind naturally tries to finish the story.

What did I miss?

When did things begin to change?

What did that conversation really mean?

If I had responded differently, would we still be speaking?

What are they telling other people?

Do they ever think about me?



Will they come back?

These questions aren't evidence that something is wrong with you. They are what human beings often do when something important doesn't make sense. We look for coherence. We want the pieces to fit. And sometimes they simply don't.

The Problem With Waiting for the Missing Piece

There may be information you genuinely do not have. Your child may hold part of the story. Other family members may hold other parts. There may also be things about the relationship that you understand differently now than you did when they happened.

Reflection can be valuable. We can recognize mistakes. We can change our understanding. We can become willing to take responsibility for things we wish we had done differently. But reflection has limits.

At some point, we can find ourselves searching for one final piece of information that we imagine will make the whole story settle into place.

*If only I knew why. If only I could explain. If only we could have one honest conversation.
If only they understood. Then perhaps I could finally be at peace.*

The difficulty is that every one of those sentences depends, at least partly, on another person. And another person's willingness to talk, listen, explain, reconsider, forgive, reconnect, or even answer a message is something we cannot control.

When our ability to live peacefully depends upon receiving something another person may never give us, our lives can quietly become organized around waiting.

Hope Can Keep the Door Open

Hope is not the problem. You may hope your child calls tomorrow. You may hope something changes next year. You may hope that time gives both of you a different perspective. You may hope for reconciliation for the rest of your life.

Hope can leave the door unlocked. But hope does not require you to stand beside the door all day.

There is a difference between remaining open to what might happen and suspending your life until it does. That distinction can be difficult to see when the relationship matters so much.

Moving away from the door may feel like giving up. Planning a joyful holiday may feel disloyal. Changing family traditions may feel as though you are accepting an absence you never wanted.

Building a satisfying life may even create an uncomfortable question:

What if my child comes back and discovers I learned to live without them?

But learning to live with an absence is not the same thing as deciding the absent person doesn't matter.

It means acknowledging the life that exists today.

Two Things Can Be True

Estrangement asks us to hold truths that seem to contradict one another.

You can love your child and be angry. You can regret things you did and believe some accusations against you are unfair. You can hope for reconciliation and accept that there is no reconciliation today. You can miss someone deeply and enjoy your afternoon. You can grieve what has happened and still become interested in what happens next in your own life.

One truth does not cancel the other.

This matters because grief can tempt us into an either/or world. Either I keep hoping or I accept reality. Either I love my child or I move forward. Either this relationship matters or the rest of my life matters.

But perhaps the task is not choosing between them.



Perhaps the task is learning to carry both.

What If There Is Never a Satisfying Ending?

This can be a frightening question. What if you never completely understand what happened? What if your child never agrees with your understanding? What if there is never a conversation in which everything is finally said and heard? What if the story remains unfinished?

We cannot know. And recognizing that can hurt.

But there is another question worth asking:

Does the Relationship Have to Be Resolved Before Your Life Can Continue?

At first, the answer may feel like yes. Because how could something this important remain unfinished?

Yet many parts of human life remain unfinished. There are apologies we never receive. Questions no one can answer. Conversations that never happen. Relationships that do not become what we hoped. We may wish desperately that reality were different.

But our lives are still being lived inside the reality that exists.

You Can Finish What Belongs to You

You cannot complete both sides of a relationship. You cannot write your child's part of the story. You cannot manufacture reconciliation. And you cannot know what the future will bring.

But there may be things that belong to you that can be completed. Words you need to acknowledge, even if you never send them. Regrets you need to face honestly. Love you need to recognize. Anger you need to understand. Expectations you may need to examine. Things you wish had been different. Things you are grateful happened at all.

Completion does not require pretending that nothing remains unfinished.

It means beginning to distinguish between **what remains unresolved between two people and what can be addressed within your own life.**

That distinction creates room. Not necessarily relief all at once. Not an answer. Room.

Room for grief and for dinner with a friend. Room for missing someone and planting something for next spring. Room for uncertainty and curiosity. Room for hope without constant vigilance. Room for a life that does not have to wait for the story to end before another chapter can begin.

Your relationship with your child may still have an unwritten future. You don't have to close that possibility.

But you also don't have to leave the rest of your life unwritten while you wait.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Next: Why Estrangement Can Feel So Lonely

Some losses are surrounded by community and ritual. Estrangement often isn't. Next, we'll look at the particular loneliness of grieving a relationship other people may not recognize as grief - and why being understood matters.