

Hope, Acceptance, and the Space Between Them

Acceptance tells the truth about where you are. Hope leaves room for what you cannot yet see.



Acceptance can be a frightening word when you are estranged from your child. It can sound like giving up.

Accept that this is how things are. Accept that your child doesn't want a relationship. Accept that the family has changed.

Perhaps someone has even told you that you need to accept the estrangement and move on.

But what, exactly, are you being asked to accept? That the relationship will never change? That reconciliation is impossible? That you should stop hoping? That you no longer have a child?

You cannot know most of those things. None of us knows what another person will think or feel five years from now.

But there is something you can know.

You can know what is true today.

Perhaps that is where acceptance begins.

Acceptance Is Not a Prediction

If your child is not speaking to you today, accepting reality means acknowledging:

My child is not speaking to me today.

It does not require adding:

And my child never will.

Those are two entirely different statements. One describes reality. The other predicts the future.

Grief can make us collapse them into one. If I accept what is happening, I am admitting it is permanent. If I acknowledge the relationship as it exists, I am closing the door. If I stop trying to change things, nothing will ever change.

But acceptance does not have that much power.

It cannot determine the future. It simply allows us to stop arguing, for a moment, with the present.



Hope Is Not a Prediction Either

Hope can become confused with certainty in the opposite direction.

She will come back. He'll understand someday. Once the grandchildren are older, things will change. Eventually she'll realize what happened.

Maybe.

Human relationships change all the time. Reconciliation happens. So does continued estrangement. We do not know which story will be ours.

Hope does not require pretending that we do.

Perhaps hope can be something quieter.

I remain open to the possibility that something could change.

That leaves room for the future without requiring the future to rescue the present.

The Space Between Giving Up and Waiting

When we imagine only two choices, both can feel impossible.

Either give up on the relationship.

Or wait for it.

But there is a large space between those choices.

You can love your child without contacting them. You can respect a request for distance without agreeing with every reason behind it. You can hope for reconciliation without organizing each day around whether it happens. You can leave the door open without standing in the doorway.

You can make plans. Build relationships. Celebrate holidays. Change your house. Travel. Learn something. Laugh.

Become interested in things that have nothing whatsoever to do with estrangement.

None of those actions announces that you have stopped loving your child.

They announce that you are also living.

When Waiting Feels Like Love

This distinction can be especially difficult because waiting may feel connected to love.

If you stop checking your phone, does that mean you care less? If you stop watching social media, are you turning away? If you stop rehearsing what you will say when your child calls, have you abandoned hope? If an entire afternoon passes and you realize you didn't think about the estrangement, should you feel guilty?

Sometimes vigilance becomes a way of maintaining connection when actual connection is unavailable. The attention itself begins to feel like love.

But love does not require constant surveillance of an absence.

You do not love your child more because you spent Tuesday miserable. And you do not love your child less because Tuesday was unexpectedly wonderful.

Love can remain even when your attention goes somewhere else.

Acceptance May Need to Happen More Than Once

There probably isn't one morning when you wake up and announce:

I have accepted this.



Reality keeps arriving. A birthday comes. A photograph appears. Someone mentions your child. You hear family news secondhand. A grandchild reaches another milestone. Something changes, and once again you encounter the relationship as it actually exists.

Acceptance may be less like crossing a finish line and more like repeatedly returning to what is true.

This is what is happening today.

Sometimes you may be able to do that calmly. Sometimes you may hate it.

Acceptance does not require liking reality. It does not require believing reality is fair. It does not require approving of anyone's choices.

It simply means that, for this moment, you are willing to begin from what is actually here.

That gives you somewhere solid to stand.

Hope Can Change Shape

Early in estrangement, hope may have one very specific form:

I want my child back.

That makes sense.

Over time, hope may become larger.

You may still hope for reconciliation. And also hope for peace. Hope for understanding. Hope that your child is well even when you are not part of their life. Hope that you can become more honest about your own mistakes without being destroyed by them. Hope that you can trust yourself again. Hope that other relationships can deepen. Hope that you can enjoy your own life without feeling disloyal. Hope that whatever happens next, you will be able to meet it.

This kind of hope does not replace the hope for reconciliation.

It expands the number of futures in which your life can contain meaning.

What If Reconciliation Happens?

Sometimes moving forward creates another fear.

What if I change too much? What if my child comes back and I've built a life that no longer has a place for them?

But participating in your life does not make reconciliation less possible.

If anything, becoming more grounded in your own life may allow you to meet a future relationship as the person you are now rather than as someone who has spent years suspended in waiting.

If your child calls someday, you can answer then. If a conversation becomes possible, you can have that conversation with whatever understanding you have gained. If rebuilding the relationship becomes possible, you can decide what that requires when the possibility actually exists.

You do not need to rehearse every future today.

What If It Doesn't?

This is the question we may be most reluctant to ask.

What if reconciliation never happens?

There is no easy answer to that. There are losses we would never choose and cannot repair.

If estrangement continues, there may always be grief associated with it. There may always be days when you miss your child. There may always be a part of you that wishes the story had been different.

But grief and a meaningful life are not mutually exclusive.

Pain does not have to disappear before life becomes inhabitable again.



That may be one of the most important things to understand. You are not waiting to become someone who no longer cares. You are learning how to care deeply without allowing what you cannot control to consume everything you can.

Reality and Possibility Can Live Together

You can say:

This is the relationship I have with my child today.

And:

I do not know what this relationship will be someday.

Both are true.

Between those two truths is an enormous amount of life. Today's breakfast. This afternoon's work. The friend you are meeting Thursday. The garden that needs water. The trip you are considering. The book on your nightstand. The person you are becoming.

You do not have to sacrifice those things to prove that reconciliation matters.

And you do not have to sacrifice hope in order to participate in them.

Perhaps acceptance and hope were never opposites.

Acceptance tells the truth about where you are. Hope leaves room for what you cannot yet see.

And between them, you live.

You Can Leave the Future Open

There is freedom in not requiring yourself to decide how the story ends. You can stop trying to answer a question the future has not answered yet.

Maybe reconciliation will happen. Maybe the relationship will take a form you cannot currently imagine. Maybe the estrangement will continue.

You don't know.

You can put that question down, too. Not because it doesn't matter. Because it cannot be answered today.

And then you can return to the question that can:

Given the Reality I Have Today, What Life Is Available for Me to Participate In?

You can answer that question this morning. And tomorrow, you can answer it again.

Hope can come with you. So can love. So can grief.

None of them has to be left behind before you begin.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Next: When Estrangement Changes Other Relationships, Too

Estrangement rarely affects only two people. Relationships with spouses, siblings, grandchildren, relatives, mutual friends, and even communities can change around it. Next, we'll look at those secondary losses - and at the connections that may still be available to us.