

What to Do With the Questions That Don't Have Answers

A life does not require complete information before it can be lived.



Estrangement creates questions. Sometimes hundreds of them.

What happened? When did things change? What did I miss? Why didn't she tell me? Why does he remember it so differently? What are they saying about me? Does she miss me? Does he ever think about calling? Will I see my grandchildren again? Will we ever speak again?

And perhaps the most persistent:

Why?

Questions are not the problem. Questions are one of the ways we make sense of experience. But some questions lead toward understanding. Others leave us standing in the same place asking them again.

The Mind Wants the Story to Make Sense

When something significant happens, we naturally try to understand it. We look backward. We replay conversations. We reconsider events that seemed unimportant at the time.

Perhaps there were signs we didn't recognize. Perhaps something our child said years ago suddenly seems significant. Perhaps we remember an argument differently now.

This kind of reflection can be valuable. It may help us recognize patterns. It may reveal things we wish we had handled differently. It may help us understand our child more clearly. It may even change the story we have been telling ourselves about what happened.

Understanding matters. But understanding has limits when the story belongs to more than one person.

You can examine your part. You cannot examine someone else's inner life with the same certainty. Eventually, you may reach the edge of what you can know.

When Thinking Becomes Searching

There is a difference between reflection and searching.

Reflection asks:

What can I understand from what I actually know?



Searching asks:

What piece am I missing that will finally make all of this make sense?

The difference can be subtle. You may replay the same conversation for the fiftieth time. Read old messages again. Try to remember exactly what was said. Search social media for clues. Ask another family member what they think happened. Imagine conversations between your child and people you both know. Construct explanations. Discard them. Construct new ones.

For a while, this may feel like movement. But eventually you may notice that you are traveling the same road repeatedly and arriving at the same unanswered question.

There may simply be information you do not have.

Some Answers Belong to Someone Else

This is one of the hardest realities of estrangement. Some of the answers you want may exist. But they exist inside another person.

Only your child knows exactly what they think. Only they know what they remember. Only they know what they have told other people. Only they know whether they miss you. Only they know whether they imagine reconciliation someday.

You can guess. You can interpret. You can use what you know about them. You may even be fairly certain.

But certainty created from the outside is still different from an answer given by the person themselves.

And sometimes that answer is unavailable. Not because you have failed to find the right question. Because another human being has possession of information you cannot require them to give you.

Even an Answer May Not Settle the Question

There is another possibility worth considering. You may receive an answer and discover that it does not bring the clarity you expected.

Your child may explain what happened, and you may disagree. Their memory may be completely different from yours. Their explanation may raise three new questions. You may apologize and discover that the apology does not change the relationship. You may finally say the thing you have rehearsed a hundred times and find that the other person does not respond as you imagined.

We sometimes place enormous weight on the missing conversation.

If we could just talk.

Perhaps a conversation would change everything. It might.

But sometimes what we are longing for is not merely information. We are longing for an answer that makes the pain make sense. There may be no answer capable of doing that completely.

The Question Underneath the Question

Sometimes it helps to listen for the question beneath the one we keep asking.

Why did this happen?

may contain:

How could someone I love choose a life without me in it?

What did I do wrong?

may contain:

Am I a bad mother?

Will she ever come back?

may contain:

Am I allowed to stop waiting?

Does he miss me?



may contain:

Did I matter?

These deeper questions are not always answered by obtaining more information about the estrangement.

Some of them are questions about our own worth. Our identity. Our history. Our ability to trust what we remember. Our permission to live when something important remains unresolved.

Those questions may deserve our attention even when the original question cannot be answered.

There Are Questions You Can Answer

Not every question belongs to your child. Some belong to you.

What do I understand differently now? Is there something I regret? Is there something I need to take responsibility for? What do I know to be true about the relationship? What remains uncertain? What am I assuming rather than knowing? What have I learned about myself? What kind of person do I want to be now?

And eventually:

What deserves my attention today?

These questions do not replace the unanswered ones. They return some agency to you.

Instead of requiring another person to provide the next piece of your life, you begin working with the part that actually belongs to you.

You Can Put a Question Down Without Answering It

This may sound strange. We tend to think questions are supposed to be answered. But sometimes the most honest response to a question is:

I don't know.

Not:

I will never know.

Not:

It doesn't matter.

Simply:

I don't know.

There is humility in that sentence. And sometimes relief.

You can return to the question later if new information appears. You can reconsider it if circumstances change. You do not have to declare the investigation permanently closed. But you can stop conducting it today.

There is a difference between leaving a question unanswered and spending every day trying to answer it.

Notice What the Question Is Costing

An unanswered question may deserve attention. But attention is not unlimited.

Every hour spent replaying the past is an hour not available for something else. Every conversation devoted to analyzing the estrangement is a conversation that cannot be about something else. Every evening spent searching for explanations is an evening you actually lived.

This is not an argument for never thinking about your child. Of course you will.

It is an invitation to notice when the search for understanding has stopped producing understanding.

At that point, the question may no longer be helping you make sense of your life. It may be organizing it.

And that is worth noticing.



You Don't Need Every Answer to Know What Is True

There may be many things you do not know. You may not know exactly why the estrangement happened. You may not know how your child currently understands you. You may not know whether the relationship will change.

But uncertainty about those things does not make everything uncertain.

You can know that you love your child. You can know that the loss hurts. You can know there are things you wish had happened differently. You can know what you have learned. You can know who has remained beside you. You can know what kind of relationships you want to cultivate now. You can know what you value. You can know what needs tending today.

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Leave Some Questions Open

Perhaps some questions will be answered someday. A conversation may happen. A letter may arrive. Someone's understanding may change. Perhaps yours will.

If that happens, you can meet the new information when it comes.

Until then, you do not have to manufacture certainty. You can leave some questions open. Not as doors you must stand beside. Simply as things you do not yet know.

And then you can turn toward what you do know.

There is a day in front of you. There are people available to love. There are responsibilities that belong to you. There are things that need tending. There may even be something you are looking forward to.

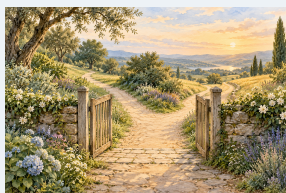
The unanswered question can come with you. It simply does not have to lead.

Perhaps that is one way we begin living with uncertainty. We stop demanding that every question provide an answer before we give ourselves permission to continue.

And we ask a different question:

Given What I Know Today, How Do I Want to Live?

That question belongs to you. And it can be answered.



CONTINUE THE SERIES

Next: Hope, Acceptance, and the Space Between Them

Parents sometimes fear that accepting the reality of estrangement means giving up hope for reconciliation. It doesn't have to. Next, we'll look at the difference between acknowledging the relationship as it exists today and deciding what it will become tomorrow.