

Grieving the Relationship You Had – and the One You Expected to Have

Your life is still producing a future.



When we think about grief, we usually think about losing something we once had. With estrangement, that is certainly part of the loss.

You may miss phone calls that used to come regularly. Sunday dinners. Vacations. Text messages about nothing particularly important. The sound of your child walking through the front door without knocking.

You may miss the person your child was at five, or fifteen, or thirty-five. You may miss who you were together.

But estrangement can involve another kind of loss that is harder to see. We don't only grieve what happened in the past.

Sometimes we grieve what we thought would happen next.

The Future We Quietly Expected

Most of us carry assumptions about the future that we rarely stop to examine. We don't necessarily make plans for them. We simply expect them.

When your children are young, you may assume they will grow up and leave home. Their lives will become increasingly separate from yours. They may have partners and families and responsibilities of their own.

You know the relationship will change. But somewhere underneath all of that, you probably assume there will still be a relationship.

Perhaps there will be phone calls. Holidays. Birthdays. Grandchildren. Family photographs. Ordinary visits. Perhaps someday your adult child will ask you how you made the stuffing or what really happened on that disastrous family vacation everyone now laughs about.

You may imagine yourself growing older and your child growing older, too, the relationship changing again as you both enter different seasons of life.

These expectations may be so ordinary that you never thought of them as expectations at all. Until they disappeared.

Then you discover that you are not only grieving a relationship.

You are grieving a future.



The Loss of Ordinary Things

Some of the deepest grief may attach itself to things that seem surprisingly small.

Not being invited to a wedding. Not knowing where your child spent Christmas. Seeing a photograph of a grandchild you've never met. Not knowing whether your child got the promotion she wanted. Realizing you no longer know the names of important people in his life. Having news you instinctively want to share and then remembering that you can't.

These are not necessarily the dramatic moments people associate with loss. They are the ordinary threads from which relationships are made. And when enough of those threads disappear, the shape of everyday life changes.

You may be grieving Thanksgiving. But you may also be grieving Tuesday.

Sometimes Tuesday hurts more.

We Can Miss What Wasn't Perfect

Estrangement can make remembering complicated. If the relationship had been entirely wonderful, perhaps the loss would be easier to explain. But relationships between parents and adult children are rarely that simple.

There may have been conflict long before the estrangement. There may have been disappointments, misunderstandings, difficult seasons, differences in values, things said badly, things left unsaid. Perhaps the relationship had already become strained. Perhaps you were unhappy with parts of it yourself.

That does not mean you cannot grieve it.

We sometimes think we are only entitled to mourn relationships that were good. But grief is not a rating system.

We can miss someone with whom we were angry. We can grieve a relationship we wished had been different. We can regret our own choices and still hurt over someone else's. We can recognize that something wasn't working and wish it had not ended this way.

Human relationships contain contradictions.

Grief does, too.

The Child You Remember

There is another layer of grief that parents sometimes carry quietly. Your adult child is an adult. But you also remember every person they have ever been.

The toddler asleep against your shoulder. The child learning to ride a bicycle. The teenager rolling their eyes from the passenger seat. The young adult calling because something had gone wrong and they weren't quite sure what to do.

Those versions of your child still exist in your memory even when the adult relationship has become difficult. That can create a peculiar collision of time.

The person who no longer speaks to you is also the person whose fever you checked in the middle of the night. Both are true.

You don't have to erase the earlier relationship in order to acknowledge the one that exists now. And you don't have to use the past to deny the present.

You can honor what was real then while recognizing what is real now.

The Life You Thought You Would Have

Estrangement may also change how you imagined your own future. Perhaps you expected to be an involved grandmother. Perhaps you imagined your children gathering at your house for holidays. Perhaps you assumed your adult children would know you as an older person in ways they could not have known you when they were young.



Maybe you expected relationships to become easier once the pressures of raising children were gone. You may even have imagined the ordinary realities of aging: helping one another, making decisions together, sitting in waiting rooms, sharing family responsibilities.

Then suddenly - or gradually - that imagined future no longer feels dependable.

This kind of grief can be difficult because we sometimes tell ourselves:

But none of that had happened yet.

That's true. And it was still part of the life you expected.

We invest emotionally in futures all the time. Recognizing their loss does not mean we were entitled to have them.

It means we are human beings who imagined what might come next.

When the Future Becomes Smaller

After an important imagined future disappears, we can become reluctant to imagine another one. Why risk it? Why look forward to something when life can change so dramatically?

Sometimes we respond by narrowing our expectations. We stop planning. We stop anticipating. We protect ourselves from disappointment by asking less of the future.

That may feel safer. But eventually protection can become another form of loss.

Because the future does not belong only to the relationship that changed. It still belongs to you.

There are experiences you cannot yet know about. Relationships that may deepen. People you haven't met. Places you haven't visited. Things you may learn. Work you may do. Ordinary mornings that may surprise you by being good.

None of these replaces your child.

That is important.

A new relationship does not fill the exact space left by another one. A satisfying life does not make estrangement insignificant. Life is not a system of substitutions.

It expands.

Making Room for a Future You Didn't Plan

There may come a time when you begin imagining the future again. At first, that can feel disloyal.

If I plan Christmas differently, am I admitting my child won't be there? If I enjoy being with other people, am I replacing my family? If I make plans for next year without including my child, have I given up?

No.

You are planning a life based on the reality available to you today. If reality changes, your plans can change.

The door does not have to be locked simply because you stop standing beside it. You can remain open to reconciliation and still make dinner reservations. You can hope your child calls and still plan the trip. You can leave room at the edges of your imagination for something you deeply desire without requiring the rest of your future to remain empty around it.

What Was Real Still Matters

Estrangement does not erase the relationship that came before it. The birthdays happened. The vacations happened. The ordinary Tuesdays happened. The laughter was real. So were the difficult moments.

You do not have to rewrite an entire relationship because you know something now that you did not know then. You can allow the story to be complicated.

There were things you loved. Things you regret. Things you miss. Things you wish had been different. And perhaps things for which you remain profoundly grateful.



All of them belong.

Grieving means making room for the whole truth rather than reducing a complicated relationship to its ending.

And the Future Is Still Yours

There is no way to know today what will happen between you and your child. That uncertainty is real. But uncertainty works in more than one direction. You don't know what other good things are ahead, either.

The future you imagined may have changed. That deserves grief.

But losing one imagined future does not mean losing the future itself.

For now, perhaps you don't need a new five-year plan for your life. Perhaps you can begin smaller. Something you are looking forward to this week. Someone you would like to see. Something you would like to learn. Something growing outside your window. A place you'd like to visit. A meal you want to make. A book waiting beside your chair.

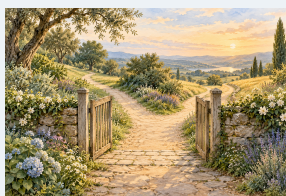
These things may seem insignificant beside the loss of a child from your life. They are not meant to compete with it. They are evidence of something else.

Your Life Is Still Producing a Future

You may not yet know what that future looks like. You don't have to.

You can grieve the future you expected without surrendering your willingness to meet the one that is still coming.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Next: When Memories Bring Both Comfort and Pain

Memories can become complicated after estrangement. A photograph can make you smile and hurt almost simultaneously. Next, we'll look at how to make room for the whole history of a relationship without requiring the past to become entirely good or entirely bad.