



Wisdom for Separated Parents

Rearranging
Around the Children
to Keep
Kinship Strong



Judy Osborne

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 PRAEGER

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Acknowledgments

Time to tell the story of this book.

I keep thinking of a book as a garden. You find a fertile spot and dig around, set some seeds, weed and tend, and only much later get to harvest some tomatoes or a rose.

It was after a presentation at an MIT seminar that I found the place for this garden. I have often presented seminars about divorce at the MIT Center for Work, Family, and Personal Life (codirected by Kathy Luneau Simons and A. Rae Simpson). At each seminar, people talked about the pains of separation. Would it last forever? It did not feel very helpful to say to people in pain “Things may be very different in three years.” But Rae and I knew, from our personal and professional experience, that things *would* change. After one seminar, we wondered how we could tell the stories that we knew. And Rae said, “That’s a book.” And so the project began. I had found some fertile soil.

The interviews were the digging around. I am so grateful for all the people who were willing to tell me their stories, to go back into their histories and remember with me. Friends and colleagues and friends of friends. All were generous and interested and insightful about where they had been and how they made those transitions. And were ready to suggest the next person with an interesting story.

So I could begin the planting and, more importantly, the weeding. You will notice many names mentioned more than once. I am blessed by overlapping circles of friends and colleagues.

I shared the years from 2006 to the present with two groups focused on writing. Good friends and writers David Breakstone, Kathy Simons, and Rae Simpson shared life and love and wisdom in our twice-monthly meetings. They kept telling me to keep at it. Becky Sarah, Rae Simpson, Linda Varone, and I formed another group. They read endless drafts, encouraging me to

“find my voice.” Linda and I had extra breakfast meetings, shepherding each other’s projects as we weeded.

Then I needed some thinning of the tender plants so that the strongest ideas might grow. My daughter, Emily Hanford, was a very early reader. She’s a journalist, so I learned about her craft as she encouraged me. Emily helped me see the scope of the project, that these families were so common in her generation. Emily brought Sydney Lewis into my life. Sydney’s professional editing experience and life with divorced parents helped shape many ideas in the book. I’m grateful to her for the notion that “our family forms outpace our language.”

A writers’ workshop with Susan Piver gave me a chance to read aloud to “strangers” and to feel their encouragement.

I have especially tender feelings about sharing the drafts of the introduction and my personal journey with my daughter, Emily Hanford, and my son, John Hanford, and his wife, Jacqui Hanford. I gave it to them and held my breath. It was very important for me to share it with them and generous of them to agree to read it. I still savor the sunset dinner I had with my son and my daughter-in-law as they so tenderly gave me their feedback and encouragement.

I had lots more weeding help from my college pals Elaine Elliot and Carol Kent. They were not only careful readers but provided much needed respite in adventures to movies, theater, and museums. Elaine was ever alert to verb tense and kept me supplied with tomatoes and eggplant from her well-tended garden.

A group of professional colleagues has listened intently and fondly to my life struggles as well as my professional dilemmas as we met for the past 20 years. Alan Albert, Laura Englander, Scott Reinhardt, and Judy Starr sat with me as I unfolded my ideas into this book. They, and Deb Clendaniel and Bob Read, also read carefully and pointed out weeds.

Four colleagues were helpful in giving feedback about the chapters on Untangling and Rearranging: Laura Englander, Geri Ferber, Kathy Simons, and Rae Simpson. Their wide-ranging personal and professional experiences gave my ideas much more clarity and breadth.

My son-in-law suggested his father, Maynard Goldman, when I needed to understand the legal aspects of book contracts.

Shaping the final version, like edging the garden, was done in collaboration with Susan Aiello, an enormously enthusiastic and competent editor.

So big thanks to all I can mention by name.

My clients cannot be named, but, over the years since 1980, I’ve learned about love and listening and waiting through transitions from their stories.

Mostly I learned to love by being a young mom to John and Emily all those many years ago. And there were lessons of love and loss as my children grew and I found ways to continue relationships with my stepdaughters, Sheila Boardman and Katherine Boardman. And then more transitions as I learned

how to love my daughter-in-law, Jacqui Hanford, and my son-in-law, Derek Goldman.

Thanks go to my former partner, Sam Hanford, and his wife, Jane Hanford.

I want to dedicate this work to the spirited grandchildren in my circle of kin: Hannah and Rebecca Edwards, Chas and Oliver Goldman, and Robbie and Nevan Hanford.

I wonder what their grown-up families will look like. I hope that a more complex language and understanding about becoming parents will help future parents whether they continue together or apart.

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Introduction: The Secret Life of Separated Parents

People think it's odd that we talk on the phone. He could always reminisce about the past or dream about the future. We could spend hours at that. We've known each other for 42 years. I mean, how many people do you know for that long? I'll never have 40 years with anyone else except a sibling. (married 1964, separated 1986, divorced 1990, interviewed 2007)

At first, most separating parents are looking for relief and some space to get on with their lives. It was true for Susan, quoted here. There were years of struggle as she tried to get her husband to be a more involved father with their children. After separation, there were years of struggle over money. When the divorce became final, in 1990, Susan would have found it hard to imagine these long phone conversations.

I am a separated parent, too, separated since 1975, and have known the sadness and anger that developed into a more benign and cordial friendliness. I have also been a family therapist since 1981. My personal and professional life has been lived through the great wave of separations and divorces.¹ This wave of divorces during the late 20th century impacted our entire culture in one way or another.

In 1988, in the month that would have been my 25th wedding anniversary, I celebrated my daughter's graduation from high school, seated next to her father and his second wife of 10 years. In 2008, my former partner and I exchanged phone calls and e-mails arranging visitation again, this time for our grandson's visit during the month that would have been our 45th anniversary. We talk from time to time, and can reminisce about early days with respect and fondness for the history that we shared. We did not have to give up a part of that history out of anger and hurt.

I have seen these cordial connections repeated in the lives of many friends and know that most separated parents have ongoing connections. Some

connect around the rituals, holidays, and anniversaries of life and the accomplishments of their children. Some parents just show up to family events and are casually interested in each other. Some parents stay quite involved, with regular contact. Some separated parents have a great deal of contact with each other when kids are young and then drift apart as children become adults. Like Susan, some parents have long, extended, and acrimonious connections for years. They may soften back into a cordial space only after grandchildren come along. Some separated parents add new partners to the parenting unit and form new multiple-parent families.

I have often wondered when it is that separated parents realize that their connection will be lifelong. It is not on their minds early in the process.

At first, separations are usually overly hostile or overly friendly. Neither position holds for the long run. Initially, parents have jitters and anxieties as they learn to be together again in public and in private. Some have new partners to add to the mix. But, as they meet for teacher conferences and graduations and school plays and baseball games and weddings, a benign energy can grow to replace the old anger and hurt and sadness. They find new ways of looking at each other—not just from the passage of time but from a mix of events and experiences. These nuances can make for the messiness of life and point to creative new family connections.

It is at moments of coming together in unconflicted ways that something bigger starts to happen. As separated parents gather for celebrations, the benign energy can transform the old feelings. A new sense of relief and a change in the expectations for family gatherings begin to grow. This new, less edgy, and, perhaps, more positive tone can be powerfully healing for separated adults and their children. To be in a room together in safety and comfort is healing for the extended family, as well. Some separated parents and children know this more benign energy early in their separation. Some learn this later, when kids are well into their adult years. Much relief comes in learning to feel comfortable together after years of custody battles, visitation changes, and memories of lost trust. Parents can move from being adversaries to being allies.

This is the secret. There is connection. It can be cordial.

Separated parents move through transitions with each other and with new and former members of their extended families forever.² And not just because of children. Sharing children is the impetus for most of the connection, but they share a history long before children. Separated parents reminisce about their early life together, their formative years of uncertainty, vulnerability, and mistakes along their paths. Benign connections provide an opportunity to understand the past as the next generation comes along. Grandchildren make us kin in any case.

It is a secret in the larger society, as well. The big news stories are of anger and alienation lingering between separated parents. Media may support anger as the norm, because there are more dramatic feelings in the initial stages of

the formal separation. Drama gets attention. Researchers and journalists presume continuing struggle or chilly disconnection. A recent survey focused on the 35 percent of divorced couples who were not friendly with their former spouses and had contact only when necessary.³ What about the other 65 percent? The experiences of the 65 percent who continue cordial connection, or come to cordial connection later in life, are underreported.

As Susan said, “People think it’s odd that we talk on the phone.” The media—and some professionals—have shaped that expectation and therefore leave parents, like Susan, feeling like outliers.

Just this summer, I was on a horse, on the top of a mountain in Montana, chatting with one of the ranch’s wranglers. He asked about my book. I said it was about separated parents who found ways to stay connected. He stopped me very suddenly. He was excited to tell me about a couple with two children who had been guests at the ranch the prior week. “I saw how helpful the father was when the mom had trouble with her horse and said he’d likely get some good points with his wife for being so kind. The father looked surprised and told me they were not married and had been divorced for several years. They came to the ranch each year to continue a tradition for their daughters.” Separated parents are everywhere, working to keep kinship for their children. Even on horseback, high up in a Rocky Mountain canyon.

THE INTERVIEWS

In my nearly 30 years of professional experience as a marriage and family therapist, I have heard countless family stories. I heard Susan’s story. I heard stories of families like the one in Montana. Stories of respectful caring and shared pride in continuing to parent. Stories of an awareness of kinship.

Several years ago, I began to talk more formally about the long arc of history for separated parents. I chatted with anyone willing to share his or her story about ties to a former partner. Although they are well under the media’s radar in our culture, I didn’t have to work very hard to find these stories of connection.

Wisdom and sadness and joy emerged as these people talked about how they continued to be connected with a former partner in complex and serious ways. I began formal, taped interviews with an amazing group of more than 50 men and women. They had learned to look at endings without having to deny regrets and sadness. They felt that the feelings of sadness and regret helped to round out the edges of the old hurts and angers.

I decided to limit my interviews to people who had been separated for at least 10 years. After 10 years, most of the court-ordered connections about custody, visitation, and money are completed or are more or less routine. For the most part, the heat has been turned down on the power struggles. The legal ink has dried. By then, parents begin to feel free to participate in relationships with each other by choice and are often able to regain empathy

and trust. When separated parents see that each is able to be devoted and constant for their children, much of the remaining hurt and anger and feelings of abandonment are held more gently. After a 10-year period, separated parents who have continued to care for their children see each other in softer ways—feeling respectful, albeit distant. Trust is more measured, more pragmatic, and more fragile.

Wisdom for Separated Parents is based on these more than 50 interviews with men and women from California to Maine, Wisconsin to Florida. They are nurses, professors, artists, therapists, lawyers, administrators of towns and universities, realtors, nonprofit consultants. Some are retired, some still working. All were married when their children were born. After separating, some parents remained single. Some went on to form gay and lesbian relationships and stepfamilies. Some went on to other heterosexual relationships, including a second marriage. Some parents were not yet divorced, although they had been separated more than 10 years.

For this book, the fact of divorce is irrelevant. The impact of separation—or separations—and what came after the formal separation is what shaped these families, the process of untangling and rearranging the physical, practical, emotional, and psychological aspects of family life while staying devoted to being parents.

WHAT'S NOT HERE

This is certainly not a definitive or comprehensive look at separated parents. The parents interviewed were largely white, middle-class North Americans. There were two mixed-race couples represented and numerous couples of mixed religious traditions. Those who volunteered to be interviewed certainly felt good about where they are today. They might tell a different story tomorrow or next year. We all see things differently from moment to moment. But these parents had reached a place of civility and pride in the growth of their postdivorce relationships. You won't find "toxic" relationships here.

And you won't find the children's voices here. Others have studied and collected the stories of the now adult children.^{4,5,6,7} *Wisdom for Separated Parents* focuses on the adults and what happened for them. The adults made many transitions over the years as the legal and required connections faded. How they managed this is new territory. This is the secret that is underreported.

These stories begin to uncover the "secret" cordial ties. Telling the "secret" allows us all to have another lens through which to view the process of separation and divorce. We can start a conversation about how separated parents continue to care for their children. We can move from notions of "broken families" and "failed marriages" to remaking connections as successful separated parents. These parents wanted to talk about feeling successful and connected as they created lives apart while caring for their children.

LANGUAGE

When talking with separated parents, one always bumps up against the limits of the traditional language that the culture and media have used. Our family forms outpace our language. I recently interviewed a young woman, age 30, who told me of her parents' divorce when she was 14. In 2009, she said, "I feel embarrassed to tell you this, but my parents have a good relationship now. I don't know why but they do. It's kind of weird." I assured her that this was not uncommon. There are words that would better describe the realities of these families. A useful word is *kin*.

Kin

The possibility of using the word "kin" to describe separated parents emerged in the last 50 years.

In the mid-20th century, togetherness was the defining notion of family. Magazines and TV created the notion of perfect man-woman-two children families. Separations and divorces were alarming. When they occurred, parents were advised to make a complete split. A prominent professional journal of 1977 advised against parents' continuing involvement with each other. The report stated that parents who had "seemingly pleasurable post-divorce interactions were seen as suggesting an unconscious wish to 'hang on' to the marriage," which might be confusing and/or harmful to the children.⁸

Thank goodness that notion seems odd today. As separation became more and more common in the 1970s, parents began to demand shared custody.⁹ Often perplexed and confused, professionals in schools and courts and mental health systems scrambled to understand how to support parents who wished to continue to share parenting responsibilities. For parents to remain closely connected and committed was the new adventure of the late 20th century. With joint custody legislation, first enacted in California in 1980, parents were pioneers in learning to live a family picture that was far different from what many could have imagined a decade earlier. They could think of themselves as close kin.

The word "kin" does give a definition to this web of continued family connection. A notion of kinship keeps children at the center, allows a parent to keep connections and to talk and think about success rather than failure. The extended family and friends can support a transition, not a division.¹⁰

"Kin" means connection through marriage. Legal action can sever marital bonds, but the ties through children remain. When there are grandchildren, being kin is a reality. Calling each other kin and using a language of change, acceptance, and commitment and devotion to childrearing allows us to expect and support these lifelong ties between separated parents.

The people who shared their stories with me struggled with language for themselves and their more complex and extended families. It is difficult to explain these continuing relationships without a change in language. I have

purposefully not used the term “ex” except when quoting a parent. The point is that we don’t have to think and speak in terms that suggest divisiveness. Extended family, friends, and new partners find it hard to understand attachments between former partners when negative language prevails.

Untangling

Another stumbling block is the language of separation. Any family that moves apart experiences the ending of a small civilization. Its history and customs must change. The conventional wisdom is that the change happens at the moment of public separation. But the people I talked to did not focus on the moment of separation or the day in divorce court.

They wanted me to understand the many smaller separations that led to a moment of formal separation or the moment of divorce. Marriages don’t end in a big moment. Parents ended or changed their relationships in small ways. These people wanted to tell me how their marriages untangled over time. They could look back to see how things unfolded and how smaller moments of separation had shifted their ties to each other. They talked of silent debate within and then loud or sad talks with their partners. Even when marriages ended suddenly, these men and women spoke of the many signals and separations before one partner acted in ways that led to separation.

This is just what I wanted to understand, how the small differences and conflicts led to the decision to separate in a formal way and how that decision was experienced in the wave of divorces that swept these parents along. Some couples told of long years of struggle before the formal separation. Some couples were so stuck—like Velcro—that they needed hordes of professionals to untangle from each other. Some were determined to stay married and live separately to avoid legal intrusion in decisions about how to parent their children. As they told their stories, many understood their decisions in new ways. We learn as we tell our stories. We learn as we listen to stories.

Rearranging

Divorce is not only a single legal event but also a psychological chain of relocations, shifting relationships, and other changes. “Rearranging” is a more accurate word.

All families rearrange in large and small ways to accommodate growth and change. Rearranging around children happens all the time. Having children is the biggest change for any couple. Throughout history, fathers went to war and died. Mothers died in childbirth. Families rearrange as they include in-laws, grandchildren, and aging relatives. It is no different for parents who have separated. They simply rearrange at two different addresses.

Until the possibility of joint custody, there was no large sample that allowed us to see the variety of rearranging possible in families. Notions about “rearranging” are the heart of this book. There were no neat patterns in the

rearranging of these families. But there were important factors that contributed to how they rearranged.

FACTORS IN REARRANGING

Five factors can shape the shifting connections between the former partners.

1. The most important factor is the ability of parents to shift from being former lovers to being co-parents. Letting go of old hurt, abandonment, and sadness is crucial. The couple must give up the struggle to renew adult intimacy and move forward, concentrating on co-parenting. The most important thing for parents to understand is that children need parents who are speaking respectfully to or about one another whether they are together or apart.
2. The ages of the children at the time of separation plays a part. Separating when children are young gives more time for finding a way to work as co-parents. There is more time for the energy between separating parents to become benign. People who “stayed together for the kids” reported long, energy-draining years of indecision. Those energy-draining years may have been as hard on children as any actual struggles about separation. Either way, there are costs—and benefits—for adults and kids.
3. Adult choices for a single life or a new partnership can also make for more or less connection between the separated parents. New three- or four-parent connections in stepfamilies enlarge the kinship circle. However, new partnerships can foster new struggles and family division. The struggles and family divisions can last for a while or forever.
4. Living near each other in the same community helps shape closer connections over the years but doesn’t guarantee it. Some families rearrange across an ocean with great success.
5. Any life event or milestone has the potential to reshape relationships between separated parents. For example, children’s illnesses or death in war bring parents into connection again. Events in the extended family, like funerals of former in-laws, do so, as well.

THE FUTURE FOR SEPARATED PARENTS— AN OXYMORON?

If you stay in touch with a former partner, connections keep changing. Wanting change or being pushed to change is what we humans do, individually or in relationships. Change is normal in families.

This is a secret, as well. Change is always possible for separated parents.

Decades after the children are grown and the legal ink has dried, issues continue to surface: Who has rights to retirement and Social Security benefits? How do I honor deaths of former in-laws? How do we share grief over our own or our children's illnesses? How can we share connection with common friends? Can there be talk of the shared history of the years before the separation/divorce?

Aging former partners may be drawn toward each other once again because our family circles get smaller in the upper register. As we live longer, we watch the fragility and death of former partners. We may find ourselves helping our children care for an aging parent, our former spouse.

And, with the passing of time, we may wish to connect over a current event. My former husband and I shared a Red Sox moment, in Kenmore Square, when "The Impossible Dream" team won and headed to the World Series in 1967. We remembered together in 2004. The death of Jerry Garcia brought two long-separated parents together for a good cry. Deadheads in their youth, who else would share that moment in 1995?

It feels strange to feel again the attachment to a former partner and difficult to explain to those who haven't experienced it. How do we deal with that with our kids, our new partners, our network of family and friends? Many of these family members and friends had feelings and opinions—and judgments—about the original separation. Those feelings and judgments may be just as strong when reconnections occur. Friends, who went through hell at the time of the separation and divorce, may be bewildered by this newfound openness to a civil connection and warm feelings. When warmth is reestablished, it is neither a threat to new partnerships nor an invitation to return to a daily kind of relationship. It may simply be a human response to an old connection and a long history.

No religious or cultural codes instruct former partners to honor and cherish each other or offer rituals and customs to follow.¹¹ How do you say goodbye when a former partner dies? Jackie said,

I've always kept an eye on my sky miles. I have to save 25,000 miles so I can go to Dave's funeral. I don't expect him to live too much longer. He's frail. (married 1954, separated 1979, divorced 1982, interviewed 2007)

Who will get mentioned in obituaries? Were burial plots bought during the time together? Separated parents have lots of opportunities to live within the shadow of each other, tied in sticky and silly and serious ways for the rest of their lives. The relationships are more measured but always have the possibility of bumping against the borders of former intimacy.

PHOTOGRAPHS

During the interviews, I was shown many wonderful photographs. There were photos of recent holiday gatherings, of weddings, or of celebrations of

grandchildren. Separated parents, their new partners, adult children with partners, grandchildren, and former in-laws—endless family connections. Those photos looked like a 1950s photo of extended family, but very few of our grandparents would understand the curious, tentative, and devoted connections that are very much alive and represented in these new photographs.

This photo is our first Thanksgiving together with the kids since we separated 15 years ago. Even though she wanted the divorce, she didn't like to be reminded that I had a new relationship. The picture happened because she remarried and had her own new connection. Only then could she have us all together. That Thanksgiving was one of the best days of my life. I played music. My ex found the book of Beatles songs that I had given her on our honeymoon. I was surprised that she'd kept it all these years. I thought that was kind of nice.

I'm curious to see what will happen when we get to the grandchildren level. It would be nice to have everyone come to one place. I hope we do it again. (married 1978, separated 1988, divorced 1996, interviewed 2008)

The gathering of family fed something deep in this man's soul. His new partner treasures the photo, as well. She says, "I was happy that it wasn't awkward anymore."

Photographs can have deep meanings. They made visible the reconnections and repair that had been possible in these families. The photos are tangible proof, reminding everyone that there are continuing connections after many years apart.

These are the family pictures of today. These folks know the particulars, the emotional truths within the photo, and now show them with pride. These were the pioneers, folks just moving along through their daily lives—adults and now grown children—changing the idea of family. This is the new American family. These are the families that were created while people were wringing their hands about the impact of divorce on children. It is a kind of family that the vast majority of Americans either live in or know in their communities.

HOW CAN WE USE THESE STORIES?

These stories support no particular position in the controversies about family. But these stories help to explain our family changes. These stories make it clear that grandchildren really are connected to everyone. These stories and a new language will help us to understand and expand realistic choices for families in the future.

The secret is out. The stories offer a complex and ambiguous picture of what happened for some parents who were lined up in the statistics of family