

Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them

*by Karl Pillemer
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It seems odd to open a book review written by a distinguished academic researcher by citing another scholar. Ann Masten is a Professor at the University of Minnesota known for her research on the development of resilience and on how families face adversity. I found myself thinking about her work as I read Professor Karl Pillemer's new conclusions on family estrangements. Dr. Masten coined the term "ordinary magic" to connote the fact that resilience is a more common phenomenon than any of us suspect. We are all more robust than we think we are, and we often experience good outcomes spite of serious threats to our development. She concludes that resilience emerges from ordinary daily activities, a far more optimistic perspective than the idea that only very rare experiences propel people to persevere. Her model includes the "self-righting power" of human adaption over the expected gloom-and-doom or hoped for rose-colored glasses version of outcomes.

Although Karl Pillemer does not cite Masten's work in his book, he may as well have. Reflecting his background as an American sociologist, gerontologist and Professor of Human Development at Cornell University, his prior research focused on intergenerational relations and social engagement of older persons, particularly those considered to have accumulated great wisdom. Dr. Pillemer claims to have stumbled upon intriguing information about family estrangements while

conducting his long-term research study on wisdom. He blogged about a woman in her 80s who was cut-off from her family and was surprised by the onslaught of posted reactions from people with whom it resonated and who wanted to find a way to make the problem better. Dr. Pillemer assumed that somebody else must have written some sensible advice on this topic, only to be shocked that there really was no guidance to be found.

Professor Pillemer establishes how commonplace family estrangements are, and yet shame, deep emotional pain, isolation and embarrassment push them out of sight for fear that we will feel exposed in our failures. Apparently, we all worry that the existence of family separations reflects poorly on us as human beings. There is no available database or body of literature that records how some estranged people manage to reconcile in rough emotional circumstances.

Pillemer asked a nationally syndicated newspaper advice columnist to put out the call for participants. This brought him respondents from around the USA. He interviewed 270 individuals of whom about 100 had a successful reconciliation story to tell. At the same time, Professor Pillemer used Web-based surveys to collect a second data set, a nationally representative sample of 1,340 Americans over age 18. He asked them the simple question: if they had a relative, from whom they were estranged? Although Pillemer used samples of convenience, his inquiry led him to conclude that over one fourth of the US population, or approximately 65 million adults, are experiencing an active separation, and in the vast majority of cases, the situation is very emotionally

painful. Interestingly, in terms of social inclusion, the demographics did not show any trend by race, gender or educational level, leading him to label family estrangement “an equal opportunity problem.”

Pillemer analyzed his quantitative and qualitative data with an eye toward discerning the common pathways to relationship breakage and the collateral damage. The data confirmed the belief that estrangements create chronic distress. Some emanate from “volcanic events” and others from the pain of ruminating on revisionist histories. Feelings tend to harden, as the remembered moments stay frozen in time. The narrative is told and retold and becomes petrified with less and less chance of augmenting or reframing. The pain is amplified by shame and a lack of closure. The “injured parties” become fixated on their own version of reality, making it difficult to adopt another perspective.

Why are people from all walks of life susceptible to such a deep and wounding pain? Pillemer looked back to the work of John Bowlby, the British psychologist who believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact across the lifespan. Bowlby thought that attachment had an evolutionary component as it aids survival. This is why the stakes feel so high when we experience disruption within our nuclear family. Indeed, Pillemer’s examples were drawn mostly from parent–child and sibling relationships, with aunts, uncles and cousins playing roles that were much more peripheral.

Some family members are caught in the middle between two others who are estranged from each other. As time passes, multigenerational family learning is lost if a child does not have the opportunity to know a grandparent and hear stories about their great grandparent’s families. Participating in a successful reconciliation restores

human capital on many levels. Obviously, grandparents can babysit yes – but there is the value-added of skills and knowledge that can only be taught by those particular family members.

Clearly, Pillemer is a proponent of doing the emotional labor to move toward reconciliation. Some are motivated to reconcile by growing older and realizing that time is limited. There is apprehension about being consumed with regret if they wait too long to reconcile and the other person dies. Or when a loved one in common is very sick or passing, the bond can be unexpectedly renewed in shared fear and grief.

However it happens, Pillemer makes the case that doing the work of unification provides an unparalleled opportunity for personal growth. He goes as far as seeing it as analogous to developing a spiritual practice. Still, with his social science background, he remembers to caution that family systems theory dictates that all members are in constant change and whoever stepped out of the family orbit will not step back into the same structure. Specific boundaries will need to be negotiated at the point of reentering the network. Additional advice is offered in the areas of accessing therapists and mediators when they are needed, as well as taking the time to do a self-examination of problematic behaviors even when the individuals are convinced they have been terribly wronged.

It was interesting how often Pillemer seemed to echo the words of seasoned practitioners of group psychotherapy. Good clinicians are ready when a client prematurely declares that they have had enough of the group experience and are going to quit. They say something like this: “you are certainly welcome to leave, but think about how your opportunities for learning will end as well.” Whether the person initiated the separation or were

the jilted party, no one in this study regretted having reconciled. Many saw the reunion itself as one of their most important life accomplishments. In addition, everyone who ended their estrangements released their focus on the past and reconverged on the possibilities of the relationship's present and future.

Dr. Pillemer is not recommending that all individuals try to reconcile. He recognizes that some people are truly too toxic. But for successful reconciliations from estrangements, what he did find was similar to what Ann Masden discovered about resilience. The engines driving toward reunions may be quite prosaic. The magic is found in the fact that the capacity for overcoming family estrangement is not a rare quality. It arises from processes that allow individuals to adapt and thrive, even

after a painful schism. Pillemer illuminates how adaptive capacities emerge and explores what practitioners and researchers can do to foster even imperfect reconciliations. Identifying a list of essential attitudes and behaviors that facilitate rapprochement is a major contribution of this text. He provides strategies built around strength-focused goals. Researchers, practitioners and students of mental health services will find this work a unique and useful resource. Plus, anyone who has ever had a relative should give it a read!

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