

The Alienation

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When Your Children
Become Strangers

SCOTT STOCKTON

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by Scott Stockton

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“If one wants to seek out evil people, the simplest way to do so is to trace them from their victims. The best place to look, then, is among the parents of emotionally disturbed children and adolescents ... The most typical victim of evil is a child. This is to be expected, because children are not only the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society, but also because parents wield a power over the lives of their children that is almost absolute. The dominion of master over slave is not far different from the dominion of parent over child.”

M. Scott Peck, M.D., *People of the Lie:*
The Hope for Healing Human Evil, 107

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1

ALIENATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

IN RAISING MY TWO KIDS, my parenting philosophy has always been this: Children are not a parent's to possess or mold into an image of perfection, but to love and nurture for their own spiritual growth, independent and free from the parent's own needs, wants, and desires. As Kahlil Gibran wrote so eloquently about being a parent:

Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls.¹

My former wife and I had different parenting philosophies, creating a major division between us that eventually led to our divorce when our daughters were ages five and eight.

¹ *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran, 21, emphasis added.

We shared 50/50 custody of the kids, and for the first five years post-divorce, the girls and I remained close. They spent two days a week with me, and we alternated weekends together. We had all sorts of fun. We'd paint pictures, print out coloring pages, play in the park, watch movies, play games, and read books. I'd cook them dinner in the small kitchen, and afterward, they'd race each other upstairs for a bath. Then I would tell them stories at bedtime.

My parents visited most weekends and spent time with the girls, who played games, acted out plays, laughed together, and just had fun being kids, with no expectations. Things were okay for a few years until they reached adolescence. After that, my relationship with them started to fray. Thus began a nightmarish journey that I never anticipated—my experience with parental alienation.

According to a recent study, 13 percent of parents say they have been alienated from their children, amounting to over twenty million parents in the US alone who have been exposed to parental-alienating behaviors.² The pain of this loss is so deep and blocks out so much light that many people never fully recover.

Parental alienation is very common in high-conflict divorce and coparenting scenarios. Although statistics vary, somewhere between 10 and 30 percent of divorces are classified as high-conflict, involving a high degree of anger, hostility, distrust, and intensive custody litigation. If we assume 20 percent of divorces are high-conflict and 45 percent of marriages end in divorce, then there are about 30 million cases in the US of high-conflict custody disputes with children suffering as a result.

In high-conflict divorces and custody disputes, it's not uncommon for one of the parents to have a personality disorder ("the disordered parent"). In one case, a friend of mine sharing custody with his ex-wife, who had a personality disorder, was reported by her to Child Protective

² Prevalence of parental alienation is drawn from: Jennifer J. Harman, Sadie Leder-Elder, and Zeynep Biringen, "Prevalence of Parental Alienation: New Data from an American Representative Poll," *Children and Youth Services Review* 66 (2016): 62–66.

Services (CPS) for child abuse three times. As a result, he had to undergo multiple investigations, during which he was found innocent. Despite being exonerated, the false accusations and emotional abuse led him to move to a separate city and see his children infrequently, on some weekends and holidays.

In another case, a friend's ex-wife took their nine-year-old son and moved back to Costa Rica without his knowledge. He worked with me, and I remember the day vividly when he came up to my desk asking me what he should do upon discovering she was about to board a flight back to Costa Rica with his son. He hasn't seen his son in over seven years and has spent all that time in the court system attempting to regain custody while filing a criminal case against his ex-wife for the abduction. The fact that I have two friends who have experienced extreme cases of alienation is a testament to the frequency and intensity of the problem. In both cases, the courts failed to protect the child from a pathogenic mother.

In my case, my former wife's mental health issues had a profound effect on my oldest daughter, Katherine. When Katherine developed an eating disorder, Mallory, my ex, insisted that she be seen by a psychologist who was the leading expert in eating disorders in the area, with a long waiting list. We stayed on her waiting list for close to six months before Katherine saw her. For a period of six months, the therapist usually saw Katherine twice a week, with significant contact with Mallory and fewer interactions with me. She wrote the following in her seventeen-page diagnostic report:

It is the assessment of this treating psychologist that Katherine's eating disorder is being maintained in large part as a function of the pathogenic parenting that she is experiencing. Based on treatment and the symptoms present, there appears to exist a shared persecutory delusion between Katherine and her mother that is creating a major attachment disturbance and symptoms. Katherine's eating disorder is then functioning to manage the

distress of the situation in the absence of real power and opportunity to change it.

The psychologist included in her report that four concerns existed related to Katherine's eating disorder:

- 1. An apparent enmeshed psychological relationship between mother and daughter.*
- 2. A potential invalidating environment created by mother's parenting.*
- 3. An apparent shared (induced) persecutory delusion.*
- 4. An apparent false (factitious) attachment pathology being imposed on Katherine for secondary gain to mother regarding limiting father's involvement.*

These issues will need proper assessment and resolution in any future treatment of Katherine's eating disorder symptoms.

When one or both parents have a severe personality disorder, normal-range parenting becomes impossible, and children are at risk of becoming ill. How can they not? Children, particularly young girls, are extremely socially sensitive. They feel and absorb poor mental health in their midst and react. They're also natural-born influencers, and social issues are highly contagious among young girls. When a child of either sex experiences a disruption to their attachment system, it can result in insecure, anxious attachment, enmeshment, and codependency with the disordered parent, adversely affecting the child's healthy relationship with the non-disordered parent. This is how alienation starts, creating a growing distance between a vulnerable child and a non-disordered parent who is trying to protect them. Children who struggle with understanding the shifting sands of their environment and feeling powerless turn the pain inward, on themselves.

Parental alienation is counterintuitive because the children become alienated from the parent with whom they've had a more secure and healthy attachment, and they demand proximity and emotional closeness to the disordered parent, with whom they have not formed a secure attachment. The disordered parent's disordered behavior, including anger, hostility, and vindictiveness, makes the children nervous and fearful of that relationship, so they develop maladaptive behaviors, as well as illnesses, and act behaviorally inappropriately to get attention from that disordered parent. Millions of child abuse cases result from parental alienation, and the courts are typically not able to competently preside over these cases. The media's reports of children being ripped away from a parent make it even more unlikely that judges will rule to protect children from the abuse of a disordered parent.

I discussed my case with a leading alienation expert in my area and a lawyer who had experience in alienation cases. They both emphasized that the courts in my area would not separate a child from an alienating parent, no matter how egregious their behavior, so my case was very unlikely to be successful despite the psychologist's diagnosis. It's very common for the courts and their delegates, including guardian ad litem (GALs), to substitute their judgment for the proper judgment of clinical professionals. This phenomenon is representative of the court system's abuse of its discretion, which is commonly referred to as legislating from the bench, by activist judges who interject their own subjective judgment rather than applying objective clinical and legal criteria. This behavior has become a form of theocracy—which I describe later in this book—in which the judiciary has expanded its power, unjustly based on ideological rather than legal grounds. The judiciary is the most insulated branch of government, so abuses within this branch are the largest threat to democracy, as judges have the final say on everything and many are unelected officials.³

3 Edyn Webber, "Why the Judiciary is no longer the 'Least Dangerous' Branch: Examining its expanding power in Modern American Democracy" (paper, University of Colorado Boulder, April 1, 2025).

The family courts are frequently viewed as the worst system of courts in the US, with the most incompetent judges. My lawyer expressed the opinion that the family court judge is “the dumbest person in the courtroom.” While her assessment may seem harsh and generalized, I am inclined to agree because of what I and many others have experienced firsthand.

In this book, I cover topics related to mental health as they relate to parental alienation and the mental health problems in our society in general, including narcissism and its resulting persecutory delusions and codependency “regimes.” Because the narcissist will, through various techniques, assume the posture of victim and savior as well as reverse victim and offender, their behavior is very difficult to diagnose. The fact that they frequently believe these delusions and so are very convincing in their conviction makes it even more confounding. They are skilled manipulators, zealously misrepresenting the facts and assuming a false moral authority by projecting shame onto others. I refer to this form of shame as “the original sin.”

Mental health problems in children and adults have reached epidemic levels. Parental alienation is itself an epidemic affecting millions of families each year. It has become my mission to inform others of the dangers of parental alienation and pathogenic (psychologically abusive) parents who contribute to this mental health crisis, as well as raise people’s consciousness of certain cultural influences that contribute to the current cultural crisis negatively impacting children.⁴

I look at alienation in a broader sense by delving into the components of modern culture that alienate children from their authentic selves through the development of false prophecies, myths, and competing secular beliefs that hinder their spiritual development and are antithetical to Christianity itself. Many of these false beliefs are cloaked in altruism, so

⁴ I refer to “abuse” in a non-legal sense as definitions vary state by state and the legal definition is less important than the consequences. I define abuse as anything that negatively affects the child’s health and emotional stability, including alienation from a loving, normal-range parent.

they appear to be righteous. This is leaving more and more children vulnerable and anxious. In my experience, the pathogenic parent embodies these false beliefs in the extreme, which further alienates children from their spiritual core and foundational values.

* * *

I became aware of Mallory's mental health struggles during our marriage, when she would fly into fits of uncontrolled rage and do things such as break plates, throw her phone into the wall, and yell at me and sometimes the children. Our preschool-aged children hid under tables as she screamed at me for no justifiable reason.

Although she has not been officially diagnosed, I believe Mallory has a severe personality disorder, most likely a combination of narcissistic personality disorder and borderline personality disorder, which frequently coexist.⁵ The severity of her outbursts was typical of what psychiatrists call "narcissistic rage," which is truly frightening because it comes with disgust and uncontrolled anger in which the person seems inhuman, even animalistic.⁶

5 Paul Mason and Randi Kruger, *Stop Walking on Eggshells: Taking Your Life Back When Someone You Care About Has Borderline Personality Disorder* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2020), 2. Mason and Kruger describe the co-occurrence of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) as high as 40 percent.

6 I refer to Mallory's behavior as characterized by those with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, or other "Cluster B" personality disorders based on extensive research including the survey factors in the book *Stop Walking on Eggshells*, pp. 17–20, as well as on discussions with multiple psychologists who confirmed that these behaviors are indicative of NPD, BPD, or other Cluster B disorders, although they can't diagnose her because she is not their patient. I also discussed it with the GAL, who believed Mallory had a Cluster B personality disorder because she exhibits histrionic behavior. I refer to this as "narcissism," although there is frequently some overlap of the Cluster B types and many times multiple personality disorders are present, which are sometimes referred to as the Dark Triad. I am not a psychologist and so cannot diagnose her, but I can provide details of her pathogenic behaviors and how they negatively impacted the children. These labels are less important than the consequences of her behaviors, which I generally refer to as pathogenic and disordered.

While these events did not happen frequently, they occurred enough to make me concerned. On a few occasions, Mallory kicked me and pushed me. While I was never physically injured, as she was much smaller, it changed my mindset. I became fearful that she would go into one of her rages and the children would be frightened by her volatility. I made it a habit to hide my phone from her because I was worried she would throw it into a wall. She damaged multiple phones because she couldn't control her temper. While this rage was disturbing, it wasn't the most concerning aspect of her disorder.

During the period when we were in the market for a new home, Mallory became unhinged. She worried constantly about money, even though we were financially secure. We'd made an offer on one house, and Mallory became depressed to the point that she would drink so heavily at restaurants that I had to walk her out. She had never drunk heavily prior to these episodes. On one of these nights, I drove her home, and she started to dissociate from reality. Curled in a ball in the front seat, she rocked back and forth, telling me she couldn't come inside the house. She appeared disconnected from reality, behaving, in movements and voice, like a small child around age four or five.⁷ She started to say strange things about her ex-boyfriend—that she was so mean to him, and that she didn't know why she was so mean. She said that her parents may have abused her as a child. I asked a number of questions, but she was in such a fragile state that she couldn't respond to any of them. She said I was the only secure parent, and that she should never have had children as she couldn't take care of them.

At that point, her image of perfection cracked for a brief instant. She could not handle the guilt of this reality and so began to dissociate from it. A narcissist cannot admit guilt or submit to their own conscience; they must deflect, scapegoat, and lie to cover it up. This projection of blame most frequently takes the form of shaming, just as the devil made Adam

⁷ *Stop Walking on Eggshells*, 61, describes people with NPD and BPD: "Both have stunted emotional development. People with BPD are at about age two; people with NPD are at about age 6."

ashamed and enticed him to carry the weight of the knowledge of good and evil. There are brief moments of clarity in which the narcissist can reflect on reality before they sink back into their hole, as confronting these truths is too painful.

The next day, I entered the bathroom where I found Mallory staring blankly into the mirror. Her eyes were so black and vacant that I hardly recognized her. I can only compare it to a scene from *The Stepford Wives*. She looked soulless and dangerously absent. When I asked her questions, her responses didn't make sense, and I realized that she was in a dissociated state. I became extremely concerned and called her father. I had a difficult time reaching him, so I left him a voicemail. I told him I was worried and that we needed to get her in to see a good doctor. He was a doctor, so I thought he could refer me to the right psychiatrist. My mental state was so shaky at the time that I was crying on the voicemail. I'd never witnessed anything so scary, where someone experiences a mental breakdown and turns into some sort of zombie.

When her father called me back a few hours later as I was leaving work, he told me that he couldn't be involved in finding a doctor because he was worried it would reflect badly on her career. He told me to find someone on my own. This shocked me. He seemed more worried about his reputation and her medical career than finding the best doctor so she could recover from her condition. I told him that she should take a break from medical practice, but he said "no," that she would never get another job in the medical field. "Why does it matter if she is miserable and constantly stressed out?" I asked. He didn't respond. There was only silence on the line.

Months earlier, I'd called her family out of concern. She was flying into rages, having an apparent mental breakdown, and drinking heavily. I told them that we needed to organize an intervention. I knew she only respected her father, and that no matter what I said, she would shrug it off. Her dad was her only hope for confronting the illness, but he consistently downplayed her condition as mild depression. Her parents did come to

visit, but they brought a family friend who was the most active participant in the “intervention” by talking with Mallory extensively one-on-one. I was annoyed that her parents would invite a friend to do all the talking for them. It was their responsibility, but they’d outsourced it to a woman, a socialite who seemed particularly incapable of such an important conversation. The intervention did little to improve Mallory’s mental state.

While I researched psychologists in the city and she went to a few appointments, the person did not appear qualified. She refused to return my calls when I tried to explain to her the incidents I’d witnessed. Many therapists will do this because of patient-therapist confidentiality, but the therapist’s stonewalling prevented Mallory from getting the best treatment. Her condition never improved. This is a fundamental flaw in the therapeutic approach, which makes it largely ineffective at treating these types of disorders.

My intense struggle to understand Mallory’s erratic behavior led to a stream of ruminating and spiraling thoughts and constant stress that irreparably changed me. It warped my reality so much that everything appeared unstable, in a constant state of transformation. Humans are not meant to live in a permanent state of uncertainty and hypervigilance, always on guard. How can we live in a perpetual state of war, always having to think about the next move to protect ourselves and our children from madness?

When I realized things at home were completely out of control, my protective defenses kicked in because my mind could no longer operate under constant stress. I fell into a deep depression. My entire system became desensitized because there was too much disturbing stimuli, too much work to understand the chaos, and my body did its best to keep me alive by shutting down.

One day, I had a pain in my gut so severe that I went to the ER. My tests were normal, and the doctor said it was probably stress. A few months later, when I was driving to work, I had a pain in my chest so intense that I had to pull the car over. I realized I was having a panic attack. A few

months after that, I developed shingles. I was told it was unusual to develop it at such a young age. These ailments are frequently precipitated by high stress levels caused by the disintegration of a marriage.

The depression dulled all my senses so I could no longer experience joy in the same way. Because I was always on high alert, my energy was spread like a thin gray line across the day. Depression stole my energy and slowed my brain activity to a crawl, so I started to struggle at work, barely having enough concentration to finish projects, which were usually late or just in time. I always missed the next promotion, which gave me fewer resources to fight for my children's emotional health, safety, and survival. This kept me in the depression loop of feeling guilty for missing opportunities and left me with an overwhelming sense of fear. I was angry at my own weakness. Depression demotivates a person, creating a stronger sense of alienation. Depression alienates people from their support systems—their parents, siblings, friends, and jobs. They feel increasingly isolated and alone.

I mostly walked around like a shell of a man, a zombie struggling to survive. My friend at work said, "You look like you could kill someone."

"Sometimes I feel like I could," I replied in jest.

The beginning of the end of the marriage occurred during an NFL football game. Mallory's obsession with public recognition—feeding her fragile ego—meant that any interference with the recognition would spark extreme hostility and disordered behavior in her.

At the game, just beforehand, Mallory was due to participate in a breast cancer awareness event. When I arrived home that day, the nanny was changing Anna's clothes. She had strict instructions from Mallory to have the children ready for me so I could take them to the game. The nanny was clearly distraught because Mallory had put the fear of God in her. The children weren't ready, as they were playing and had no interest in football or any concept of the event. When I arrived at the game, I was carrying Anna in one arm and holding Katherine's hand as we entered the parking lot. I was directed toward a mobile trailer where they were supposed to

have tickets waiting. It was a large space, and it took me some time to find the trailer. Anna was particularly irritable and annoyed. When we finally reached the trailer, they directed me to a far gate where I was to meet a representative with the tickets.

Worried that I'd be late at this point, I started running for the far gate with the children in tow. I was able to get the tickets, and the woman pointed me in the opposite direction toward where I should enter. When I neared the entrance, I could see Mallory on the other side of the locked gate, fuming at me, yelling as I approached. "You're fucking late. What the hell is wrong with you? The children didn't get to see me honored on the field for breast cancer. You robbed the children of this special memory of their mom being honored." She would recite this claim frequently, even though the children were too young to remember anything about the event.

When we reached the gate, Mallory took the children from me, grabbing Anna from my arms. The gate attendant told me I didn't have a VIP pass to enter. "You're a fucking loser," Mallory said angrily. This statement would stick with me for many years—her tone of voice and demeaning body language. To call me a *fucking loser* in front of my children was not okay. It would never be okay. Mallory flashed an ID badge at the woman, and I was allowed to enter. The children were made to watch the game for two hours while Mallory fumed at me the entire time. Finally we left, rushing the children, who were irritable and crying, to her car. I carried Anna in my arms while she tugged at Katherine, climbing over a construction barrier. We walked into the large parking garage with no people in sight, and she strapped the girls into her car. She was yelling obscenities at me with such fury that the children became hysterical and started crying. I wanted to cover their ears to protect them from the verbal assault. Mallory was completely deranged, and despite the children crying, she continued to scream at me.

I looked back at the girls, who were red in the face with fear, tears running down their cheeks. "It will be okay," I told them. "Stop screaming,"

I pleaded with Mallory, but this only made her angrier. Then she took off her wedding ring and threw it across the parking garage. It skidded under several cars.

“It’s over,” she said. “If you want to stay married, go find the fucking ring.”

She got in the car and raced through the parking lot toward the exit. I stood there feeling like my entire life had been ripped open, as if she’d pulled out my heart and fed it to an animal. I was shocked and scared. I crawled around the parking lot, looking under cars for almost half an hour before I found the ring. It was humiliating. When I found it, I put it in my pocket. I never gave it back to her.

This was truly the end for me. I’d been put through so many tirades with the children present. During these episodes, my wife would yell, scream, and demean me. The children would cry in fear for extended periods of time, and yet she still wouldn’t stop. I can’t quite explain how awful it was to watch my children suffer at the hands of their angry mother.

Many people would say that a parent always loves their children. I disagree. Narcissists do not love anyone, and they have no empathy. These long, raging tirades proved to me that Mallory had no empathy for even the innocent children who suffered and would continue to suffer for years. We all get angry at times and say things we shouldn’t, but Mallory’s prolonged, uncontrolled rage was different in intensity and duration. She had no off switch.

That day, I knew I could no longer shelter my children from their mother’s extreme volatility. And I wouldn’t let them go through it anymore—watching one parent abuse another while I stood by and accepted it. I had to serve as a role model for breaking the cycle of abuse, for walking away from it, despite the grave personal cost and associated pain it would bring me for decades.

I also greatly miscalculated the personal cost and long-term pain of the decision. I had no idea that “alienation” existed at the time, and the extent

to which it would be used against my children to alienate them from loving family members.

After we separated and I was no longer in the constant thrum of the chaos, my depression eased to a certain degree, and I regained some normalcy. The divorce was intense, and coparenting with Mallory was challenging, but my children gave me the will to live. I shared 50/50 custody after the divorce; for five years, I had a close relationship with my children and they were very close with my parents. The children would hang onto their grandmother's legs, refusing to let her leave to return home. The reality today could not be more different, as they now refuse to be in the same room with her. It's heartbreaking to look at those photos of the girls holding onto their grandmother. It was only after they became adolescents—around age twelve for my older daughter—when the enmeshment with their mother became stronger and they began exhibiting the signs of alienation. Katherine's eating disorder emerged around the same time as the alienation increased in intensity.

Once they started to reject me as a result of the emotional abuse they were experiencing, my remaining life force drained out of me. Everything I cared about was stolen from me and turned against me every day in the form of false accusations from Mallory, such as "You abandoned the children," "You're never around," "You don't understand them," and "You are a dead-beat dad."

My struggle to find meaning in the chaos of parental alienation has changed the way I view relationships, parenting, and the world. We are all born to find meaning in our lives; when one is confronted with madness, chaos, and manipulation, the struggle to find meaning becomes exponentially more difficult. I was confused by the unstable world Mallory created, shifting almost instantaneously from one personality to the next. As my oldest daughter, Katherine, said, "When I get home, I don't know which mom I will find ... the crazy, mean one or the nice one." It wasn't always

like this, of course, or I wouldn't have committed to so much uncertainty. But once the chaos began, it was already too late.

I was stuck in a strategic and tactical mindset, just trying to react to the unpredictable behavior of my former spouse, which meant I was never truly present. When you're battling with a narcissist, your emotions are mostly locked down and compartmentalized, so it's difficult to feel much of anything. If you're in fight mode, as a protector, your system slows down, so your emotional response is dulled.

Writing this book, I realize I'm only partially aware of my emotions, because I still have a target on my back. I'm constantly swiveling, looking in every direction, stuck in a "safe" space with my back to the wall. My head is on a swivel, looking forward and backward but never in one place. I'm only partially emotionally available because all my energy is focused on protecting myself and my children. Vulnerability doesn't work when one is on a battlefield, so it's barely accessible. In this way, it can be compared to a form of post-traumatic stress disorder.

While we were married, it wasn't just the volatility but Mallory's need to control everyone and everything that made life with her so unbearable for the children and me. We were merely pawns in her chess game. It was a game to achieve some grandiose prize, a utopia of some imaginary elite class. If we accepted our roles, we would be subsumed into her grand delusions with no individual identity apart from her.

Unfortunately, in the years that followed our divorce, Mallory would go on to use psychological tactics common to a disordered co-parent: manipulation, triangulation, shame, invalidation, gaslighting, confabulation, silence, screaming, control, favoritism, mocking, withholding, or violence—either physical or emotional. Shame is the narcissist's most powerful weapon and one they use frequently by claiming a false moral authority. Because of her compromised mental condition, she was on "autopilot" in many ways, so it's unlikely that she was consciously aware of the