

3 Scheins Roundtable #2

Written by Margaret Evans
Wednesday, 21 December 2011 11:04



A Christmas Wish

I have not seen my oldest daughter nor heard a word from her in almost two decades. I, now, would not recognize her if she passed me in the super market. I have seen her once since she was 11. She has not been in touch with my other daughters, my brothers and sisters—with any member of my family since she was 11.

I have written, called, driven to where she lives, and left letters under her door. She has never responded. I feel like my ex-wife has turned her against everybody. I am, by profession, a consultant on conflict resolution—what I do is help people connect. But I can't seem to connect with my girl. How do I get back with my daughter? I don't know anything about her.

– R. G., Chicago

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Dr. Martha: "He's in agony."

Dr. Maggie: "He's a 'mediator' in a hell that has barred communication—his lifelong way of getting around. He wants us to help him find his way out."

We all began with the agreement that we have a disclaimer: Dr. Maggie knows R.G. well, and Dr. Martha and Bernie know him well enough through her. We know intimately the pain he is in over this. Dr. Maggie has seen it strike his usually kind, observant and welcoming face and turn it to damp, dark, sadness.

Dr. Maggie asked how would we respond to this if we didn't see how much it hurts first hand, if his hurt didn't also pain us?

Bernie observed that it is much easier to give advice and analyze when you can judge impersonally and never have to face the results.

We all agreed, however, that the reason people write into columns like this, and the reason people write columns like this, is to find balance between a more objective view and the personal one. So, that is our challenge.

Again, we must go with the facts: for whatever reason, a father can't reach his daughter. And this, we all agreed, is an extreme case of that.

Does it make a difference if the ex-wife bad-mouthed R.G.'s side of the family?

Dr. Martha: "From his perspective, yes. If so, he may feel the need to combat the false image his ex has created of him. Helplessness breeds desperation. However, even if his ex-wife has set him up as a monster, combating her part in this is a moot point—she's not ultimately the

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problem and he has no access to her either.”

Bernie: “A father in this situation can't help but have fantasies of helping free the daughter, opening a path for her away from whatever fictions may have been created and towards him—a job, a grant, a school--”

Dr. Maggie: – “Right, a cute guy who lives out of town. So, aside from a rescue fantasy, what is real here is his pain and what looks like total blocks to his taking action.”

Dr. Martha: “As always in therapy, the only person you can change or work on is yourself.”

Dr. Maggie: “Ok then. Does it help R.G. if we examine the daughter's perspective? The impact on the daughter's heart of her father's absence is unaffected by whether or not her mother made him out to be at fault.”

Either way, the fact is that her father is not present. No matter what fiction her mother may have provided (that he doesn't want to be part of her life or that he is a monster), or what stories she tells herself (perhaps in order to justify his absence), do not think, R.G., that this does not pock her soul and leave horribly painful abscesses on her heart. The wound her father's absence leaves in her does not take the shape of any fiction told about why... it takes the shape of your being gone.

Dr. Martha reminds us here, that yes, he knows this, and this is partly why the fact that he can't reach her hurts him so much.

Dr. Maggie: “He's desperate not only to know her, to see her, to be part of her life, but also to heal a wound shaped like him, her father – and he believes that his presence would be the alexin of her wound. That is a tall order, and a twisted hell, indeed.”

“What if,” Bernie said, “the ex-wife did influence the daughter enough to control her,

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disempowered her enough, that even, at 36, she does not have the strength to respond to a phone call—even though her father is on the line – to a letter, to question where and who her father is—the father she once knew and loved when she was little?”

Dr. Martha: “If that were the case, it complicates things. She will have a tough time blaming the mother- who she's been with all her life and who she feels is all she's got. Why? Because if her mother has forbidden her to contact her father, then she risks losing the only parent she's really known in exchange for one she desperately needs, but is unsure of, and probably deeply resents.”

Dr. Maggie: “Yes, she must blame her dad. Who else can she blame? And the shame of it is that-deserved or undeserved—R.G. would welcome that blame, welcome whatever she has to say to him no matter how much it might hurt, for the simple reason that above all he wants what's best for her, wants her back in his life. What hurts him most after all these years is her absence. He knows he has made mistakes. He wants her there so that he can rectify them as best he can.”

Bernie: “That is the most selfless welcome he can offer her. And that is a true father: to be there for her even if she only wants from him an outlet for her pain. That is, perhaps, the only way they can begin a new relationship.”

Dr. Maggie: “She should know her father is that brave.”

Bernie: “Perhaps she fears he'll fault her mother, but I don't think he will. He's given up all needs except his need for his daughter to re-enter his life. That's it.”

But this is where the personal and the objective collide. We believe he won't, and Dr. Maggie has spoken with him about this, but that doesn't make for clear-sighted advice.

“The fact is,” Dr. Martha adds, “he may have hurt her in ways he is either unaware of or is in denial about.”

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Dr. Maggie: “Yes, but I am pretty sure that is the conversation he is welcoming from her. He is willing to hear that now. He is desperate to hear that now.”

This is not easy. If it were, R.G—the mediator – would've already solved the problem. We have at least five topics here, his pain, her pain, his pain at her pain, his desire to rectify that by communicating with her, and his pain that so far, he has been unable to do that. It is a hell that bars the loving from the loved, and tougher in this case since the way out of such a hell, the way from one person to another is communication, and that's what has been impossible.

“Perhaps,” Dr. Maggie offered, “he will have to end up having a conversation with himself instead of with her. A conversation about what he can and can't do, what is and is not his fault, what wounds—of his own or his daughter's—he can and cannot heal, and about how to forgive himself for any part he may have played in creating the separation. But those are very, very hard conversations.

The daughter is now 36, an adult at least in age. One could hope that with more age will come more perspective, that part of her will begin a yearning to know him, will realize that we are all flawed and do the best we can in any given moment.

It would be nice, however, if this Christmas his daughter came home to him. If he could be a father to her.

And of course, we all know that there may be no solution to this. So how do we help him? What about facing the fact that it is possible he can't bring her back, can't ever reach her? Well, from a purely clinical and philosophical perspective, that might be better for him – allowing him to focus on himself, not her absence, to change his response to that absence since he can't change the reality of it. But we do know R.G., and even the dead of his family, with whom he will never again speak in this life, he loves and he will not let that love go.

“So,” Dr. Martha concludes, “here we are—his proxy messengers—hoping to reach his daughter for his sake, and for hers.”

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Dr. Maggie: “On behalf of the flawed but beautiful man who I know loves you, despite whatever mistakes he has made – Your father is waiting for you. He has been waiting for you nearly your whole life. All he wants is to recognize your face. If you want more than that, he will give you his whole world, and ask your forgiveness for it.”

To all the daughters, sons, parents, friends and siblings who have been waiting for the fear, hate, resentment about a long-lost loved one to subside before you try to reconnect, we would like to suggest that sometimes, distance and time are not the balm many make them out to be: sometimes, the only thing that can help you heal yourself and the wound another's absence has made is to face that person and yourself, directly—with the spirit of forgiveness for both of you.

About the authors: Dr. Martha Schein is veteran educator and licensed practicing psychologist; Dr. Maggie Schein has taught and consulted for 15 years and holds a PhD in Moral Psychology and Ethics; Veteran educator Bernie Schein, author of IF HOLDEN CAULFIELD WERE IN MY CLASSROOM, offers creative writing workshops, tutorials, and counseling for adults and kids.

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