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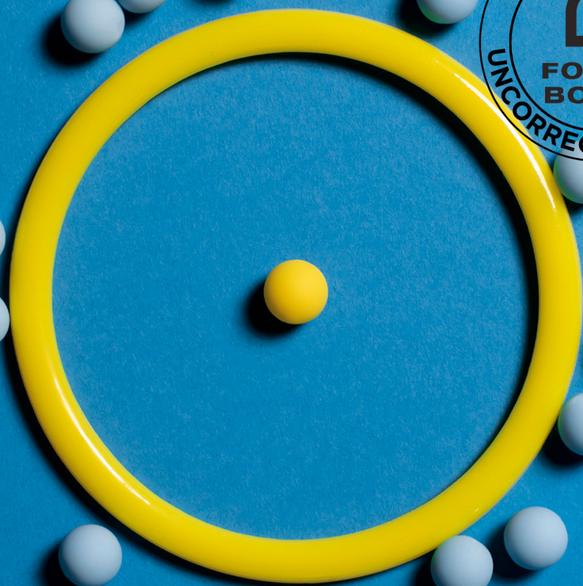

How a Seductive Ideology Broke Families and Friendships and How We Can Repair Them

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To my late father, Phillip, who taught me to think with great curiosity, and to my mom, Irene, who showed me how to love with great affection.

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Introduction

The most revealing sign of civic unrest is not the slogans shouted in public but the relationships abandoned in private. Since 2020, I've traveled around the country giving talks on a destabilizing ideology that seemed, almost overnight, to be everywhere. The Q&A sessions quickly became my favorite part of the evening—offering a glimpse into people's on-the-ground experiences and perspectives. Within the first year and with striking consistency ever since, one question emerged again and again: "What do I do about my grown children who not only have abandoned the faith and values they were raised with but have also estranged themselves from us?"

Late 2024 polling by the American Psychiatric Association reveals just how polarized American families are politically and ideologically. One in five Americans reported having become estranged from a family member (21 percent), blocked a relative on social media (22 percent), or skipped a family event (19 percent) because of political or ideological disagreements. These statistics underscore a cultural moment in which even our most intimate relationships are increasingly vulnerable to public polarization.[1] The divide in civic society now cuts through the heart of millions of homes.

This isn't an easy issue to untangle. Most of those who have shared their stories with me are strangers, and I can't

presume to fully understand the complexities of their family histories—the layers of hurt, misunderstanding, and missteps that shape every intimate relationship. I imagine that if I heard from their adult children, an even more complicated picture might emerge.

In the case of the parents interviewed for this book, I was able to engage in much more personal and in-depth conversations than I could do at a public event. I would have welcomed the opportunity to speak with their children as well, but that was most often not an option. Their relationships were fragile if not entirely fragmented, and the parents were universally desperate not to jeopardize any possibility of reconciliation. For that reason, names and telling circumstances have been altered to protect anonymity. I also interviewed adult kids from other families who have struggled with staying in contact with parents.

Even when initially hearing only the parents' side, I could sense the complex spectrum of culpability within this phenomenon. Some parents were candid about the ways they had contributed to their children's pain—divorce, for instance, was often named as a likely root wound beneath the more explicit ideological reasons given for estrangement. A couple of parents seemed to recoil at taking any ownership at all. But by far most of the parents I spoke with seemed genuinely caught in a larger cultural moment shaped by shifting norms, fraying social bonds, and a rising intolerance for dissent. The majority of these parents have worked to examine their failures and took ownership readily where it was warranted. While they had made missteps as parents, theirs were the ordinary parental failings that, in previous generations, would have been absorbed or forgiven rather than collected, catalogued, and marshaled retroactively to support a narra-

tive of childhood harm.

One objection to a book examining the ideological underpinnings of the no-contact movement is this: No one would choose to cut off intimate family members without just cause (an objection that I will explore more deeply in chapter 1). It's true that many people have had to cut contact after trying to make a relationship work by every other avenue first. When someone makes this painful decision to avoid serious harm like abuse, it's understandable that they might feel defensive when someone suggests that some choose estrangement unnecessarily. It isn't my goal to exhume anyone's personal situation. Were I in conversation with someone and it came up that they had cut contact with a family member, my reaction would be to express compassion, assume this situation was tragic but unavoidable, and respect their privacy. If you are in the situation of having had to cut contact over an abusive relationship, this phenomenon and this book aren't about you.

Critiquing the ideological misuse of no contact isn't a condemnation of the legitimate practice itself any more than warning about antibiotic overuse is an attack on antibiotics. Antibiotics are lifesaving when used properly, but when they're prescribed too casually or for the wrong reasons, they breed resistance and undermine their own effectiveness. In the same way, when the prescription to go no contact is overapplied—when ordinary conflict or ideological disagreement is mislabeled as "abuse"—it dilutes the meaning of real trauma and harms those who truly need protection.

This book draws a sharp distinction between the legitimate use of no contact and its overuse. The no-contact movement, however, tends to effectively erase such distinctions. Some of that is due to an ideological precept that the victim is always

right (to be discussed in chapter 1). Some of it might just be the sloppiness of discussions. Regardless, the overall effect of such conflation is the same: a collapse of the moral distinctions that once supported family obligation and social repair.

This conflation of examples is a tactic of cultural revolution that I call “trauma hijacking”: using egregious forms of abuse to justify responses to much less severe experiences. Most examples of trauma hijacking follow a predictable pattern. First, identify a genuine phenomenon in which a personal trauma necessitates an alternative to an established social norm, particularly when those seeking the alternative are highly sympathetic, like victims of abuse who need to break free of obligations to their abusive families. Then amplify these stories relentlessly, creating the impression that the issue is widespread and demands urgent social intervention. Once that sense of urgency takes hold, people become hyper-attuned to similar violations, increasingly willing to accept that these range across a broad spectrum—from minor to major infractions. Subtly shift the narrative so that the norm itself—not the individual perpetrators of the trauma—becomes the perceived source of suffering. Reframe anyone who upholds the norm as, at best, outdated and, at worst, oppressive. Simultaneously portray those who benefit from the norm as privileged and incapable of recognizing the full scope of reality. Finally, leverage this manufactured moral imperative to demand the deconstruction of the supposedly artificial norm in the name of justice.

There is also the risk of manipulative or narcissistic parents using this thesis of ideologically-driven estrangement to further claim a victim narrative for themselves. But this is the case with most any complex social phenomenon. For example, it’s generally true that hyper-individualism and loosening

sexual mores have contributed to the rise in divorce rates in the past. That reality doesn't negate the fact that there are clearly cases in which one spouse must leave and is entirely justified in doing so. Will a toxic spouse try to blame hyper-individualism and the sexual revolution to shield themselves from culpability after their marriage fails? Yes. But the misuse of something shouldn't deter us from its proper use, in this instance the importance of examining sociological factors that drive a broader trend.

Private sorrow and public trends aren't the same thing. Whatever the legitimacy of certain individual cases, there remains the broader reality: We are living through a sharp uptick in family estrangement, and such estrangements are increasingly colored by ideology.

For years now, loneliness has been a growing problem in the West, becoming a public health crisis marked by isolation, declining community life, and thinning personal commitments. Ideological estrangement is exacerbating and accelerating this crisis. When relationships are severed over politics, the loss is felt on both sides, leaving people more vulnerable to despair, bitterness, and the echo chambers that further divide us. My purpose here is not to paint a cartoon of heroes and villains, as if one side holds a monopoly on virtue and the other on cruelty, but to reveal how we are being influenced by social currents toward estrangement and how this dynamic is harming us all.

While this phenomenon is largely happening among parents and Gen Z, it certainly transcends age and relationship categories. In 2021 and 2025, writer Kate Mulvey published two essays. The first was titled "Why I'm Disinviting My Unvaccinated Friends from My Dinner Parties."[2] A few years later came the second: "I'm a Single Woman of 63, and I Feel

Friendless and Lonely."[3] In the first, Mulvey makes a public case for social exclusion in the name of principle, saying, "If you won't have the vaccine, you're no friend of mine." In the second, she laments the deep ache of isolation in later life, wondering where all the meaningful connections have gone and why her phone has stopped ringing. She recounts one friend cutting her off after taking offense at something she wrote (perhaps her earlier piece about cutting off the unvaccinated, though it doesn't say). It would be easy to read this juxtaposition as poetic justice, but it's better understood as a sobering reminder of how desperately we all need more grace—to be extended and received. Read together, the two essays trace a cultural arc. They are a microcosm of a broader societal trend in which ideological purity and fear of contamination, moral or otherwise, have left many standing alone.

This same pattern is now playing out, often with even higher stakes, within families. The decisions once made about who to invite to a dinner party are now made about who will be welcomed to a wedding or who should be shunned on their deathbed.[4] The stakes are both deeply personal and broadly civilizational.

At the center of this phenomenon is the terminal choice to go no contact, to cut off ties entirely. Yet this book addresses the full spectrum of polarized relationships—from families and friends who remain in contact but live with tension, to those striving to regain contact or find peace despite the divide, and everyone in between.

The most common ideological reasons for going no contact fall into roughly three categories: disagreement over Covid policy, voting for Donald Trump, and gender ideology. In each category those on "the wrong side of History" are considered threats to society and, more often than not,

threats to the lives of others. While the deconstruction of gender ideology isn't the point of this book, it occupies many of the illustrations of this phenomenon. It makes sense that it does. The transgender movement is at its core a rejection of one's own flesh, and that inevitably extends to one's own flesh and blood.

It should also be noted that, with the number of those who identify as transgender remaining relatively small (though it has risen sharply in recent years), they don't make up the entirety of those who have gone no contact over gender. Alongside them is a large, though largely overlooked, population of self-described allies and activists. This group often remains hidden in discussions of gender ideology. Yet their advocacy, and their intolerance of those who express even the slightest hesitation, can be even more zealous. With the conviction of crusaders who believe they are fighting on behalf of the vulnerable, allies often become the most uncompromising enforcers, cutting off relationships with stunning speed and finality.

Finally, this book also examines how political forces have both fueled and been driven by these ruptures. Ideology and alienation are intimately entwined. As our bonds fray, ideological estrangement and political hostility feed off each other, each intensifying the other in a cycle that is terminal—both to relationships and at times to life itself, as we have seen in the rise of political violence. If we can't hold fast to one another in the face of disagreement, we risk losing not only our most intimate bonds but also the architecture that makes a free, humane, and just society possible.

Part 1

A HOUSE DIVIDED

1

THE NEW SHAPE OF ESTRANGEMENT

Jack and Genevieve, empty nesters living in a leafy suburban neighborhood outside Chicago, had always shared a close and affectionate relationship with each of their five children, but their bond with their eldest, Liam, grew more distant after he finished college. Liam began expressing a newfound skepticism about the Christian faith in which he was raised. What began as doubt only grew, and eventually Liam, now a physicist, concluded he was an atheist. Jack was deeply saddened. Genevieve was more sanguine about it. Regardless, Liam and the family maintained their warmth and an easy, regular connection.

Things changed in 2020. Between Covid and the unrest following the death of George Floyd, much of the world felt on edge and, like in so many other families, what had once been easily overlooked differences suddenly seemed urgent and unavoidable. That same year Liam fell in love with a colleague, Krista, a slight and ethereal beauty with an intelligence that matched Liam's. The two bonded over social issues they cared about deeply and their common frustration with what they saw as the provincial intolerance of half the country.

Jack and Genevieve and Liam's siblings embraced Krista, including her at all family events from baby showers to barbecues. Krista was more skeptical and perhaps unsure of their sincerity, seemingly testing them at times by making a point of wedging political comments into apolitical conversations. Some of the siblings felt this was off-putting and condescending, but Jack and Genevieve assured them that, while challenging, these were the natural growing pains of merging lives with very different outlooks. Upon Liam and Krista's request, they even agreed to keep one room in the house for Krista to retreat to when she needed to take a mental health break from them because of her discomfort with their differences.

The following year Liam and Krista announced their engagement. Liam's sisters offered to throw a bridal shower, and the parents had them over for a champagne toast. After the toast Krista announced she needed to make sure they all understood that, despite the engagement, their marriage might be open. For Krista, this felt like an important moment to be transparent with her future family. For Jack and Genevieve, this felt like an unnecessarily aggressive confrontation; they didn't want to know the inner workings of the couple's sexual life. They didn't argue, but the rest of the evening was chilled, and the conversation strained.

Liam emailed the family shortly after to let them know that a Covid vaccination would be a requirement for all guests attending their spring wedding. For Liam and Krista, the shot was a necessary step toward ending a scary chapter in the country and a duty of a responsible citizen. For the rest of the family, the coercion and censorship surrounding the discussion of the vaccine didn't engender trust in either its efficacy or its safety. They had quietly made the decision to avoid it and communicated this to Liam.

For the young couple, this decision was intolerable. Jack and Genevieve offered to self-isolate the family prior to the wedding and take multiple Covid tests to ensure they weren't carriers of the virus, but Liam insisted that the vaccine was nonnegotiable. If they loved him, he insisted, they would do the right thing.

Liam and Krista felt the family was recalcitrant. Liam's parents and siblings felt the same about him. Both the family and the engaged couple believed the others had drawn a line in the sand that effectively elevated ideology over family. In an email to his parents and siblings, Liam expressed his bewilderment at their choice to not attend his wedding by refusing the vaccine. Jack, Genevieve, and Liam's siblings replied that it was Liam who had forced this situation by not accepting their offers of compromise.

With neither side willing to budge further, Liam and Krista made the decision to end contact with the family. They haven't spoken in more than three years.

—

The true story of Jack and Genevieve's family is sadly not an outlier. Family estrangement—or going no contact—isn't a new phenomenon. But in recent years it has gained significant visibility. Unlike previous decades where estrangement was often shrouded in shame and secrecy, today it's more openly discussed and sometimes celebrated as an act of courage and self-care, calling into question long-held social norms and beliefs about the importance of family. Digital platforms like TikTok, Reddit, and YouTube play a significant role in normalizing and amplifying stories of estrangement. Popular hashtags such as #ToxicFamily, #NarcissisticParent, and

#ChildhoodTrauma offer a wealth of advice on going no contact. These platforms provide validation and community for individuals grappling with the decision to sever family ties, making estrangement more palatable.

Estrangement is less stigmatized today; it's also on the rise. A Cornell study found that approximately 27 percent of Americans are estranged from a close relative. That is roughly sixty-eight million people.[1] The reasons for this growing phenomenon are contested. Some suggest that destigmatization acts as a necessary corrective, giving permission to people who need to cut ties but fear social stigma. Others, including clinical psychologist Joshua Coleman, author of *Rules of Estrangement,* propose that the proliferation of discussion on estrangement on social media can also create a kind of social contagion, ". . . cutting out your toxic family member is becoming sort of an act of personal expression and identity, rather than what it often is, which is an expression more of avoidance."[2] The two explanations are not mutually exclusive: destigmatization can increase willingness in a good way, while normalization increases frequency by lowering the bar for severance in a way that can be damaging.

That our culture has destigmatized estrangement suggests that we have changed our minds about some of our most serious guiding principles. Many young adults perceive family relationships as chosen and conditional, hinging on shared values and mutual respect. Political and cultural divides within families can quickly take on a more intense and dire tone, with ideological differences increasingly cited as key reasons for estrangement (rather than abuse, for example). As a point of comparison, while approximately one in four Americans experience family estrangement, one in five experience estrangement over a political or ideological divide.[3]

This phenomenon of politically driven estrangement isn't particular to people of faith, but I have found that they are disproportionately represented among those who have lost contact with family because of schisms over political or religious views.

This escalation of politically driven estrangement can unmoor society for generations to come. For centuries, close family bonds have been considered central to personal and communal well-being, yet for many today, family relationships are increasingly perceived as obstacles to mental health and personal growth. The generational divide underscores this change: A recent YouGov poll found that 70 percent of individuals aged sixty-five and older prioritize family relationships as most important, compared with only 50 percent of adults under thirty.[4] Younger generations often prioritize friendships or chosen communities over traditional family ties.

In 2024 *The New Yorker* examined this rising phenomenon in a long essay, "Why So Many People Are Going 'No Contact' with Their Parents."[5] The author profiles a young woman, Amy, whose story mirrors Liam's. Like Liam, Amy didn't experience any of the historically common reasons for estrangement such as abuse, addiction, divorce, or mental illness. Amy also had a religious upbringing that she began to question in college and eventually jettisoned.

Most strikingly, both Liam and Amy took the terminal step to go no contact over the issue of their parents' refusal of the vaccine for their weddings. Amy's mother also sought some sort of compromise that would allow them to attend while distancing. "I beg of you, do not respond to this imperfect email with anger," her mother pleaded. "Please see the love behind it."[6]

In reply, Amy sent a short email offering two choices: get the vaccination and attend or don't attend at all.[7]

A few months after the wedding, Amy asked for all contact to end. She struggled with the sadness of it but explained that, to reestablish connection, she would need not merely an apology or a smoothing over but a real commitment from her family to do a lot of work. She believed it was unlikely, so rather than holding on to false hope, she pressed on with her decision as the best way to move forward. She blocked family members' phone numbers and marked cards they sent "Return to Sender."

Despite the similarities between the stories of Amy and Liam, ideological estrangement didn't originate in 2020. While research remains relatively new, many experts agree that the phenomenon had been quietly building for at least a decade prior. The year 2020 did mark a pivotal turning point, though. The Covid-19 lockdown led to a steep decline in mental health and a dramatic rise in anxiety and isolation, with many flocking to online forums and communities in search of connection and meaning. The nation was simultaneously embroiled in racial tensions that spilled into the streets, and political divisions calcified among neighbors, friends, and families. In some ways 2020 can be defined as the year we all became strangers and threats to one another.

An angry and isolated populace is one that inevitably searches for a scapegoat, projecting collective frustration and fear onto visible targets. In such a climate, going no contact is increasingly reframed not as a failure of familial bonds but as a necessary purge, doing one's part to expunge from personal life those whose views make them toxic to public life. Estrangement of this sort is both a symptom and a reinforcement of broader civic division—both echoing and amplifying

the polarization.

Research on adult child–parent estrangement shows that younger generations largely drive this dynamic and that the two parties interpret the breakdown in their relationship in divergent ways. Adult children often attribute the breakdown to generalized and intractable problems in their parents, such as narcissism or toxicity. Parents, on the other hand, tend to explain estrangement through external factors, such as the child's spouse, a therapist, or broader societal influences.[8] This divergence in perspectives complicates reconciliation efforts, as each party operates from a fundamentally different understanding of the cause of estrangement.

While the reasons for this growing phenomenon might be ideological, the consequences are profoundly and painfully human. Adult children who go no contact are left without a safety net when met with a crisis like a job loss, a health scare, or a difficult breakup. In such times, it's typically family that provides a unique source of support, stepping into places a friend or colleague might not. On the other side, estranged parents and grandparents experience a perpetual heartache they never anticipated, which some have described to me as living with a missing limb as they mourn the loss of relationship with their children and grandchildren.

This book seeks to understand what is driving the accelerated phenomenon of estrangement, with the goal of equipping families and friends to avoid ideologically driven estrangement or to repair their relationships if they have already fractured. The first step to overcoming ideological estrangement is to expose and analyze the factors that have made it a normal part of the culture today.

Through my conversations with families experiencing ideological estrangement and by sifting through hundreds of

posts, videos, testimonials, and articles, I have identified five core conditions driving this phenomenon: (1) demythologizing the family, (2) social hygiene, (3) broadening the definition of trauma, (4) the infallibility narrative, and (5) cultural narcissism. What we are facing in the politics of estrangement is less like a steady current pulling us downstream and more like a wildfire. As a native Californian, I am very aware that such fires rarely have a single cause. Was it the unlucky convergence of weather events? Was it aided by human neglect, mismanagement of the land and the reservoirs? Was there arson involved that initiated or accelerated the destruction?

In the same way, the phenomenon of political estrangement has emerged like a cultural wildfire, where multiple forces (each powerful on its own) have converged at once. The dry tinder of spiritual and familial decline, the fuel of identity politics, the wind of therapeutic culture, the heat of political polarization, and the oxygen of social media all feed the flames. Estrangement is often a tangle of forces—some beyond our control, others very much within it.

At the root of these conditions lies a radical revision of what it means to be human, recasting the person around two opposing principles: the exaltation of autonomy and the incentivization of victimhood. I call this "the Empowerment Delusion," as it promises power but leaves people profoundly powerless. On one hand, individuals are told they possess near-absolute power to redefine core aspects of reality—such as sex, the body, and the meaning of life—according to personal preference. On the other hand, they are told that the locus of control over their lives is almost entirely external—and that their identity and capacity for success are under continual threat.

Both sides of the Empowerment Delusion lead to frustration and despair. The first, radical autonomy, claims power over what is fixed and unchanging. The second, incentivized victimhood, claims powerlessness over what can be changed, by relocating responsibility for our successes and failures almost entirely onto systemic forces of society or by ascribing far too much power to those who have hurt us, thus freezing us in narratives of despair. Together these distortions breed nihilism: a sense of meaninglessness to our lives, our efforts, our flesh and blood. Across these pages, I will trace how these five conditions and this revision of anthropology through the Empowerment Delusion are reshaping both the individual and society and driving the politics of no contact.

Demythologizing the Family

The first condition at the heart of family estrangement today is the debunking of what some call "the family myth." This "myth" is the belief that familial relationships are worthy of special regard in a way that entails obligations. While the effort to demythologize the family has an older philosophical lineage, it has received renewed attention in our viral age. Influencers and online no-contact communities regularly challenge the belief that family merits unique loyalty, framing it as a social construct imposed on us rather than an authentic moral or natural imperative. For many, the universal mandate captured in the Bible to "honor thy father and mother" is now an antiquated notion that serves as a fig leaf to hide oppression, abuse, and other toxic behavior. A popular counterpoint to the old adage "blood is thicker than water" in these discussions is that such attachments are neither natural

nor necessary and that we can simply deprogram ourselves out of them.

Therapist Patrick Teahan, a prominent online educator about childhood trauma and going no contact, welcomes this shift as a sign of cultural progress: "The movement right now is that we can break a cultural norm. The structure is becoming undone around 'family is everything.' I think it's a good thing."[9]

In a way, Teahan is correct. Family is *not* everything. In the case of someone enduring abuse, the idea that they can flourish and live a happy, connected life after estrangement can be important. One woman I spoke with, Cameron, a mother in her early forties, endured an abusive marriage to a mentally unwell husband. The court granted her full custody of her children after recognizing the emotional toll on the children. I asked her how she found the strength and clarity to remove her ex-husband from her children's lives. "I thought about how when the kids were little, I tried to cultivate in them their natural instincts to recoil from things that might hurt them—to not play chase around an open bonfire as toddlers, to avoid a burner on the stove unless they could tell it was off and cooled. And I thought about what I was desensitizing them to by letting them bury their instinct toward self-protection from a harmful father." But for Cameron, cutting off contact was a necessary evil that she wishes could have been otherwise, not a good thing. She doesn't view the desire for a whole, intact family as a social construct. Rather, she understands that her children have lost something deeply human. "They were meant to have a father. There is no getting around that. They can heal and thrive, but the deprivation is real."

While one might be required to cut family ties in certain

contexts, a broader claim has emerged—that the institution of family itself is arbitrary, that it tends to serve harmful power interests, and that society can evolve beyond it. This view will be examined further in chapter 4, as it raises crucial and consequential questions, not only about what family means, but also about what it means to be human and what ramifications such a shift might have on civic life.

Social Hygiene

As family life is attenuated, our sense of belonging and safety becomes destabilized and displaced. We can see this most clearly in the rise of identity politics and the fragile sense of self that emerges from these weaker and yet more antagonistic self-conceptions. The slogan "The personal is political" emerged in the 1960s and was initially intended as a radical reframing of personal experiences through a lens of power and societal structures. With time, however, this focus on supra-personal forces has eclipsed older social attitudes that differentiated people more clearly from their politics.

While no person's identity can be fully understood in isolation from politics, identity did not used to be reduced to political positions. Historically, what made up a person's identity was a combination of character, familial relationships, cultural heritage, and religion.[10] As the latter three sources of personal identity have weakened, so the first, character, has undergone a transformation. A traditional society holds that a person's character is determined by their virtues or vices—lived habits that define personal morality. A virtuous person might hold political beliefs that diverge from your own, but you could still highly regard their moral stature.

With the rise of the politics of identity that emerged after the civil rights era and intensified in the 2010s, it has become more common to evaluate a person's character, and therefore their social acceptability, based on political tribe. Once your identity is subsumed by your political opinions, who you are is judged no longer by how you behave but rather by what you endorse, making virtue and vice abstract categories and leaving little daylight between political tribe and moral stature.

This fusion of politics and identity turns disagreements into existential threats. Where communities once worried that a person's vices endangered the common good, now it's a person's political beliefs and tribe that are a threat. This is somewhat understandable. In the past, political disputes were usually arguments about how best to achieve a shared goal: Do we reduce poverty more effectively by encouraging the proliferation of private enterprise or by a more robust social safety net? Today, political disputes are not merely about means but about *ends*—dealing with questions that go directly to the heart of what it means to be human.

In recent memory, for example, a number of mainstream publications featured commentary arguing that growing concern about population decline was in fact a matter of misogyny and white supremacy, evincing clearly that the political debate had shifted away from how best to make family life possible and had become a question of whether encouraging reproduction was even moral. When politics moves from debating how to achieve shared goals to disputing the goals themselves, it makes us not merely divided but mutually unintelligible and it reinforces the suspicion that a person's politics determines their character and identity.

Increasingly, younger people project this concept of political alignment as the determinant of moral stature onto an

older generation that generally doesn't view disagreements in the same way. A recurring sentiment expressed by estranged adult children is "My parents reject something fundamental about who I am." They understand their political convictions as core parts of their identities, so disagreement is indistinguishable from rejection or even enmity. For Liam and Krista, the decision to go no contact with Liam's parents was deeply rooted in this dynamic. Liam and Krista believed Jack and Genevieve were being immoral by not getting vaccinated and were ready to reject the relationship because of it. But they also believed that Liam's parents' traditional views on sexual ethics were a fundamental threat and an implicit rejection of Krista as a person. They considered his parents unacceptable and assumed that they were unacceptable to his parents. If family members with opposing views are not just wrong but harmful to one's identity and sense of self, the concept of personal acceptance despite deep disagreement isn't possible.

A further psychological dimension is at play here as well, in that progressive ideology leads to a dynamic of low differentiation, a concept that arises out of Bowen family systems theory. Developed by psychiatrist Murray Bowen in the mid-twentieth century, the theory describes differentiation as the ability to maintain one's own convictions and emotional stability while staying connected to others, even in the presence of disagreement or tension. Families and societies, Bowen observed, exist on a spectrum of tolerance for differences, from low to high.[11]

People with low differentiation can't tolerate much difference at all. They tend to experience it as a personal threat, respond with emotional reactivity, and easily turn disagreement into relational conflict. Their concept of unity is collapsed into uniformity.

In contrast, those with high differentiation can engage with others who think or act differently without feeling destabilized or pressured to conform. They can stand firm in their own beliefs while allowing space for others to hold their own, avoiding both defensiveness and the loss of self that comes with placating others.

This sense of political identity as personal identity combined with low differentiation results in "social hygiene"—scrubbing our social circles clean of toxic ideas by cutting contact with those who hold them.

In cultural commentary, few social rituals have come to represent this tension as starkly as Thanksgiving dinner. In 2022 the Biden White House released a list of talking points to help progressives navigate political discussions over their holiday dinner. Talking points ranged from celebrating the specific successes of the Biden administration to warning family members that extremists will try to institute a national abortion ban.[12] Pass the potatoes.

Nearly a decade earlier during the Obama administration, a similar message was projected with the infamous Pajama Boy campaign featuring a hipster in plaid onesie pj's, encouraging young adults to advocate for health insurance at family gatherings over the holidays. Pajama Boy (who was a grown man) offered young adults a to-do list for their holiday time with family: "Wear pajamas. Drink hot chocolate. Talk about getting health insurance."[13] While the campaign was widely mocked, it signaled the growing intrusion of political ideology into the intimate spaces of family life. Earlier administrations hadn't leveraged disagreements within families to promote policies nor appealed to the young to correct the old, setting up and hardening generational conflict. What seemed at the time a one-off moment of political advocacy foreshadowed a

deeper societal shift.

The election of Donald Trump intensified the dynamic, shifting Thanksgiving talking points toward avoiding the meal altogether with Trump-supporting relatives. Countless pundits talked about or published think pieces on how to navigate, or simply skip, holiday gatherings in the wake of the election. The question was no longer about persuasion but about disgust and the dawning belief that half the country was simply beyond repair.

This approach to politics creates an environment where estrangement is a looming, implicit threat. One young woman I spoke with, Kaitlyn, has an aunt who goes in and out of no contact with Kaitlyn's family. At their most recent Thanksgiving dinner, the aunt showed up tense, though she relaxed as the evening progressed and conversation remained devoid of anything controversial. After dinner, however, she grew agitated and stepped outside. When Kaitlyn checked on her, her aunt reassured her that she was having a lovely time, that the conversations were pleasant, and that everyone was being kind. Then she sighed and said, "I just can't be at peace knowing that I'm in a room full of people who probably voted for *him.*"

Despite her experience enjoying all of them, the aunt felt cognitive dissonance akin to how someone might feel morally sullied if the hosts had stolen the turkey from another family's home. With moral stature relocated to political identity, a person can become complicit through proximity not to an act but to a person. Kaitlyn's aunt felt her personal relationships with them were deceptive, obscuring the reality that they were likely carriers of toxic political views that could contaminate others through exposure and poor social hygiene. She offered a terse thank-you to Kaitlyn, asked her to grab

her purse, and excused herself from the rest of the evening. She needed distance and clean air.

When every personal relationship becomes a stage for political performance, loyalty and affection are subordinated to ideological alignment. The family, once a sphere protected from the demands of public life, becomes yet another battleground. This blurring of boundaries is central to the rise in ideological estrangement: Convictions that might once have been debated around the table are now treated as grounds for exile from it.

Broadening the Definition of Trauma

Another condition contributing to ideological estrangement is the expanding notion of trauma. Over the past four decades, the formal definition of trauma in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) has gradually broadened. What was once limited to extraordinary, catastrophic events like combat or surviving a train crash, now includes a wider range of experiences, such as witnessing harm to others, being exposed to the details of a traumatic event, or being bullied. While these changes have improved recognition of genuine psychological injury, they have also blurred the lines between trauma and hardship.

In the popular lexicon, especially on social media, the concept of trauma has expanded further into the "big *T*" / "little *t*" distinction, in which chronic stressors, personal slights, and ordinary conflicts are framed as traumas. Additionally, participants in no-contact forums commonly speak of the experience of having a relationship with someone with different values as a source of trauma. These shifts lower the threshold

for seeing relationships as unsafe and make permanent estrangement appear necessary for self-preservation.

Psychologist Nick Haslam has documented what he calls concept creep: the steady expansion of ideas like abuse, trauma, and harm to encompass increasingly ordinary human experiences. As a result, behaviors once considered normal, like strict parenting, some emotional stoicism, or high expectations, are now more easily labeled as profoundly harmful.[14] While a case can be made for each behavior becoming pathologically injurious in particular instances, these broader definitions risk catastrophizing normal familial conflicts and foster the unreasonable expectation that life can be lived without adversity or emotional injury—things that are inherent to the human condition.

Furthering the conflation of "big *T*" / "little *t*" trauma, victims of physical or sexual abuse often share online platforms with individuals estranged from their families over political disagreements or unmet emotional needs. Users describe extreme cases of abuse alongside stories of more common familial hurts and challenges. These forums, such as the Estranged Adult Child forum on Reddit (with thirty-nine thousand members), frequently put such profoundly different experiences on the same continuum of *degree* rather than acknowledging radical differences in *kind,* making it difficult to assess the validity of individual cases of estrangement.

The new definition of trauma has become culturally normative. Universities, for example, often provide counseling services, "safe spaces," and other resources in response to political events, framing them as traumatic. Following Donald Trump's 2024 victory, Chico State offered painting, coloring, and journaling to help students cope.[15] While well-intentioned, these measures inadvertently train young people

to view political differences as emotionally harmful and existentially threatening to their psyches and well-being. In *The Coddling of the American Mind,* authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue this kind of framework creates cognitive distortions in young people—patterns of thought that cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) aims to correct. As CBT helps individuals challenge and reframe distorted thinking, practices like trigger warnings, the overemphasis on emotional safety, and the belief that disagreement is a threat reinforce these distortions rather than countering them.[16]

This emotional training has left kids fragile and relationships brittle, with a massive influx of therapists and therapeutic approaches rushing into the void. In her bestselling book *Bad Therapy,* Abigail Shrier writes of iatrogenesis, the phenomenon of harm caused by attempts at healing. [17] She describes what she calls the treatment-prevalence paradox: the more we intervene to prevent psychological distress, the more distress we can seem to produce. Shrier argues that the hyperfocus on the emotional state of adolescents and young adults can contribute to, and even cause, the very mental instability that mental health interventions intend to cure. Training them to place undue importance on their feelings—which are by nature unreliable—tends to induce an increase in negative feelings and make them feel more anxious, not less, leading to an ongoing cycle of further interventions.[18] In the same way, a broadened and ever more elastic understanding of trauma trains young people to search for it in their own lives, and perhaps even retroactively project it onto their past. Recognizing that we experienced hardships or hurts in childhood is different from telling ourselves that we endured trauma, that we are *traumatized.*

People like Liam and Amy, who might have endured emo-

tional adversity and family disagreements, shouldn't be lumped together with victims of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.

The Infallibility Narrative

Many who advocate going no contact believe that no one makes this decision unless it's the only remaining reasonable option. The adult child's choice is therefore always presented as self-justifying, creating an atmosphere where questioning the act of severing ties is seen as dehumanizing or condoning abuse. Like the expansion of the concept of trauma, this sort of unfalsifiable claim of the righteousness of those who go no contact risks conflating extreme cases of abuse with more ordinary familial disagreements by covering all with a hedge of inscrutability.

With more than two hundred thousand followers on TikTok and more than eight hundred thousand subscribers on YouTube, Patrick Teahan is highly sought after for his insights on childhood trauma and going no contact. In one pinned TikTok video, he explains how toxic families tend to see their children as cardboard cutouts and, when the adult child starts to go no contact, the parents will push back—which he implies is always unjustified. "It'll sound like this: 'We used to have amazing conversations. We used to be so close. I don't know what happened to us. Now you're all moody,'" Teahan says. "The real mind F of all that is we start to see [from] the way that they double down . . . that the family never really knew you to begin with."[19]

In a video on his YouTube page, Teahan explains not only that parents are wrong to question their adult child's decision

regarding estrangement but also that their questioning demonstrates the family's toxicity: "When estranged parents reactively believe that their child has been wrongfully influenced by a therapist or whatever, by TikTok or whatever, it kinda implies that the child has no . . . thoughts of their own and that . . . the parents [see] them as an object and not as an individual. It's kind of like a clue."[20]

And what if other family members question the adult child's narrative? They are subject to the same judgment as the estranged parents. A slide from one of Teahan's presentations asks, "Are there any safe members who get the abuse and fully support you?" If the answer is no, then he doesn't suggest reevaluating the decision but rather suggests considering cutting off those family members as well. The same slide tells readers that any of the following traits qualifies as abuse: if someone is unloving, toxic, exploitive, entitled, physically unsafe, abusive, self-consumed, or refuses ownership or reality.[21] Teahan never acknowledges the obvious: that while pushback from siblings, parents, or other relatives can be a toxic refusal to acknowledge abuse, it can also be a normal, inevitable response to an unnecessary estrangement.

Moreover, the claim that going no contact is always a last recourse isn't well supported. For example, participants in a study on the psychological effects of estrangement noted enjoying the reactions of shock and curiosity from others when discussing their choice, suggesting that, for some, having a story of childhood trauma and estrangement may serve a psychological or even social function.[22] Particularly in trans youth communities, sharing one's story of parental estrangement can be a sort of social ritual or induction into the tribe, mimicking the ritual of sharing one's testimony in evangelical circles to show how God worked in one's life. In the same way,

trans-identifying youth often share how family trauma worked in their lives. The claim of last recourse ignores the very human and powerful allure of identifying ourselves as victims and the sort of social capital given to those who have endured oppression.

This is the one-way nature of moral credibility in estrangement narratives: The infallibility narrative flows only toward the adult child. Ana Yudin, who holds a doctorate in clinical psychology and has more than six hundred thousand YouTube subscribers, reinforces this asymmetry. While she believes that adult children who go no contact are self-justifying, she insists that the parents' perspectives deserve intense scrutiny. She cites a *Journal of Family Communication* article cautioning that "the causes of a person's behavior are rarely this simple or straightforward, and thus children's assessment of their parents' behavior may be incomplete or inaccurate."[23] However, Yudin dismisses this caution as gaslighting. To suggest that adult children might bear any responsibility in repairing the parent-child relationship, she warns, is a slippery slope—one that dangerously undermines and harms adult children of dysfunctional parents.[24]

This asymmetry plays out in the no-contact community. Parents who have been cut off and tell their stories online are regularly subjected to derision and armchair psychoanalysis, while adult children are almost unanimously affirmed in their decision in such forums. For these communities and the therapists that advise them, there can be powerful incentives to defend adult children against all scrutiny—not necessarily out of ill will but because doing so affirms their own interpretive framework and reinforces a model of care centered on continued therapeutic dependence.

In response to genuine past injustices, our society has a

strong impulse to sacralize victims in a reactionary and indiscriminate way. Just as the slogan "Believe women" (in the sense of "Believe all women") was an excessive correction to the injustice reflected in the metoo movement, so is a growing narrative of "Believe all adult children." This black-and-white sorting of good versus bad categories of people echoes other identitarian divides. When combined with prevailing narratives, such as "Disagreements are dangerous," "Family is expendable," and "Daily life is infused with trauma," makes it almost more surprising when a young adult chooses *not* to go no contact in the face of any level of familial conflict.

Cultural Narcissism

The final underlying condition driving estrangement is the rise of narcissism on both sides of the generational divide. Christopher Lasch's 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, makes the case that modern American society fosters widespread narcissistic behavior because of cultural, political, and economic shifts—particularly the rise of consumerism and individualism and the erosion of traditional social structures like family and community.[25]

Lasch's argument has only become more relevant since his writing. Results of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory between 1979 and 2006 show a significant rise in narcissistic traits among college students in the United States.[26] Over several decades researchers tracked the values and attitudes of high school seniors and college freshmen. What their responses revealed is a clear generational shift: Young adults have become more focused on external rewards like money, fame, and image than previous generations were at the same

age. Empathy scores, meanwhile, have declined. This research by psychologist Jean Twenge and her colleagues points to a broader cultural movement toward self-focus and away from psychological well-being. The cumulative effect is an erosion of the interpersonal resilience required for healthy disagreement and the repair of long-term relationship.[27]

More recently, John Burn-Murdoch analyzed striking data from USC for the *Financial Times* documenting a decline in conscientiousness among the younger generations. The study covered the period from 2014 to 2025 and showed a dramatic drop in traits like discipline, reliability, and follow-through, alongside a dramatic rise in neurotic traits like emotional fragility and self-preoccupation. Both extroversion and agreeableness declined steeply as well.[28]

Taken together, these shifts help explain why relationships and commitments have grown more brittle across generations, even as the pattern is most pronounced among the young.

Social media has only exacerbated the rise in narcissistic traits by exponentially increasing an addiction to appearance over substance, perpetuating a disembodied abstract sense of community over the intimacy of a familial one, and habituating us to using others to satisfy our desire for cheap affirmation. All these tendencies, if not curbed and corrected, are terminal to a thriving family life.

Developmentally, narcissism is appropriate in young children; there is a "healthy narcissism," and it is precisely this that family life exists to form us beyond. In the intimacy of a healthy family life, each person is invited to learn, in a setting of safety and unconditional love, to work through the inevitable clashes of will and to grow in self-knowledge and forgiveness.

A true narcissist, by contrast, is in a state of arrested development. Today's prolonged adolescence produces adults who have never been coaxed beyond the early stage of childhood preoccupations with the fulfillment of their own needs and desires. Because of this arrest, the narcissist is almost constitutionally incapable of self-knowledge. Deflection, projection, and a preference for fantasy and grandiosity over reality characterize the thought patterns of the narcissist, erecting an almost-impenetrable fortress around the person's psyche, protecting what is actually a very fragile, undeveloped sense of self. As narcissism rises, relational stability predictably declines.

With the rise in narcissistic traits, there has been a simultaneous surge in accusations of narcissism. This overlap is not incidental: A culture increasingly shaped by self-focus naturally becomes more alert—sometimes hyper-alert—to narcissism in others. At the same time, because we are soaked in pop therapeutic language, we tend to use the word *narcissism* imprecisely and gratuitously. "I'd say before 2020, people were not using this word at all outside of therapy circles," Israa Nasir, MHC, stated in an interview on the ubiquity of the term. "Now, I hear people in my personal life use it while describing relationships, dates gone wrong, as well as in therapeutic environments while talking about their parents. The term has proved super sticky, and has quickly skyrocketed into our public consciousness."[29]

Younger people are more likely to interpret interpersonal conflict through a lens of narcissism.[30] It's very common for adult children on no-contact forums to claim that they were raised by narcissists. The real increase in narcissistic traits and the emotional charge of family conflict make such accusations feel justified, even as they far exceed any clinical basis.

Complicating matters further, narcissistic traits themselves tend toward projection, making it easier to locate the problem exclusively in others. What is clear is that though traits of narcissism have risen sharply, our use of the term greatly outpaces actual clinical diagnoses of the disorder. This makes it inevitable that some adult children are taking difficult human behavior, pathologizing it, saying that it's incurable and that they aren't implicated in the demise of these relationships.

Reconsidering the Ties That Bind

We hear the five conditions driving the no-contact movement reflected in the slogans and sentiments we encounter online, in therapy rooms, and in everyday conversation: "The family is a social construct." "The personal is political." "Protect your peace." "Believe victims." "#ToxicParents." Embedded in each phrase and each condition is the Empowerment Delusion of radical autonomy and victimhood. Together they dry out the cultural underbrush, making every relationship more flammable. And these ideas can spread quickly—from a single household to entire communities, from one rupture to a culture of rupture.

A young woman I spoke with who had recently gone no contact noted that people often tell her they are her family now, but it rarely ends up being true. "It feels like an easy, comforting thing to say, but there is a lack of action to back it up." For her, this gesture at connection feels like a repeated source of abandonment in her adult life.

Embedded within the promise of liberation through going no contact is the sad reality that this will leave many with no

contacts. They often end up lonely and without a stable support system. There is good reason to think this is a sadness that doesn't get better with time. In fact, one of the most common regrets people have at the end of life is not having given sufficient time and priority to their closest relationships.[31]

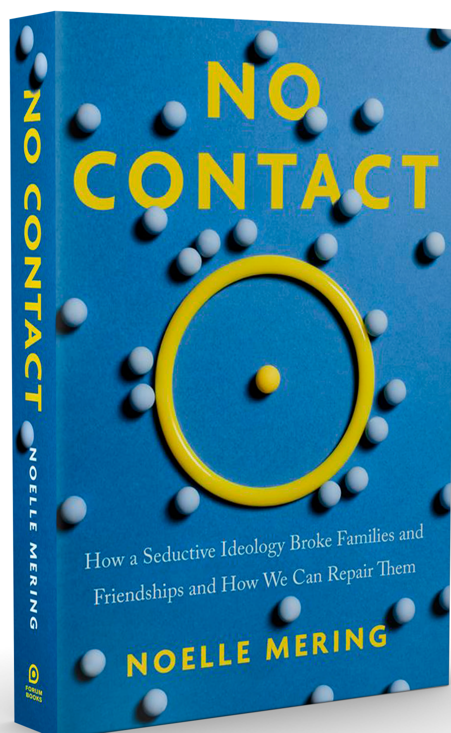
Family dynamics are inherently complex, making it tempting to avoid deeply interrogating the phenomenon of estrangement, as it often feels too varied, emotionally charged, and subjective. Who would willingly choose such a painful path? It seems likely that very few make the decision to go no contact lightly. However, significant cultural, ideological, and psychological conditions are fueling this rising trend—forces that may operate beyond the conscious awareness of any individual. We see something similar in cases of marital estrangement. The likelihood that you will divorce increases significantly just when a friend has another friend who is getting a divorce, indicating how social contagion acts as a strong driver of our behavior.[32]

The line between the tragically necessary and the tragically unnecessary types of estrangement isn't always clear. Examining such a deeply personal phenomenon is undeniably fraught. On one hand, the complexity should serve to warn us against dismissing estrangement as a trivial or passing trend; on the other, it reminds us of how vulnerable any of us are to error when grappling with such complexity. The stakes, then, make deeper analysis both a challenging task and a responsibility too important to ignore.

For Jack and Genevieve, it has been a long and painful three years since Liam cut contact with them and his siblings. They kept thinking perhaps they'd run into one another on visits to the city, but they never did. One brother eventually

saw a former colleague of Liam's and learned that the couple had moved out of state six months earlier.

Jack and Genevieve maintain hope that things might be repaired someday. Genevieve admits that sometimes it's hard not to blame Krista, but she's quick to correct that instinct and sees Liam as just as much an adult with agency and responsibility. Some of the siblings have said candidly that family gatherings feel easier now. But they all have a strong sense of sadness and loss. Several say he shows up here and there in their dreams. Holidays, celebrations, and family photos never feel complete. And the sense that it didn't have to be this way hovers over them all.



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