

The Debt

When terrible, abusive parents come crawling back, what do their grown children owe them?

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What do we owe our tormentors? It's a question that haunts those who had childhoods marked by years of neglect and deprivation, or of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of one or both parents. Despite this terrible beginning, many people make it out successfully and go on to build satisfying lives. Now their mother or father is old, maybe ailing, possibly broke. With a sense of guilt and dread, these adults are grappling with whether and how to care for those who didn't care for them.

Rochelle, 37, wrote to me in my role as *Slate's* Dear Prudence because of the pressure she was getting from friends to reach out to her mother. Rochelle is a banquet waitress in the Midwest. She has a boyfriend but lives alone and has no children. She and her younger brother grew up with an angry, alcoholic mother who was on welfare but cleaned houses off the books to supplement the check. Rochelle's parents were never married and split when she was young. Her mother always told her not to have children. "We were the reason her life turned out as it did," Rochelle says. She told Rochelle she was so stupid that she'd need to find a rich husband to support her. She said she couldn't wait for Rochelle to turn 18 and get out of her house. Rochelle's younger brother had difficulties from the start—she looks back and thinks he might have been autistic. Her mother used to take a belt to him and call him the devil and say she wished he'd never been born.

Rochelle started waitressing when she was 15. By 18, she was indeed out of the house and into an abusive relationship with an older man. She broke up with him, got her own apartment, a decent boyfriend, and started working to put herself through college. Then her brother was killed at age 18, shot in the heart during a silly fight over a girl. Rochelle stepped up and took care of all the funeral arrangements. Her father came and, when he left, hugged her goodbye. "That was the first time he ever hugged me," she recalls. Her mother called later that night, drunk, and said that, by hugging her, Rochelle's father was trying to molest Rochelle. Rochelle wrote her mother a letter saying she had a drinking problem and needed help. In response she got a letter saying that she was a horrible daughter and she would get what she deserved and that her brother was defective and needed to die.

That was Rochelle's breaking point—after that, she didn't see her mother for the next 13 years. Even though Rochelle was barely scraping by, she would sometimes send her mother money for rent, knowing she probably used it for booze. Occasionally, a friend would check on her mother and give her a report. Then last year a tornado struck the town where Rochelle's mother lived, and Rochelle went to make sure she was all right. That began a sort of rapprochement. Rochelle started taking her mother out to lunch every other Sunday. She did it not because she felt she owed her mother anything: "Absolutely not." Instead it was for her own sense of self. "To me being a good person means helping people when you can."

The visits took a toll. Rochelle describes a physical response that sounds a lot like post-traumatic stress disorder. “All the stuff I tried to let go of seeps in. One little thing—the scent of her cigarettes, a mannerism, a word—floods back all these memories.” Rochelle started chewing gum on the drive to see her mother, she says, “because I’m clenching my jaw, white-knuckling the steering wheel.”

Rochelle found that being a good person to her mother was so draining that it left her sleepless and snapping at the people she did love. Her mother’s verbal abuse resumed and her demands started escalating—she wanted more attention, more money. Rochelle got a therapist, and with her help, has again cut ties with her mother. Rochelle says, “I can’t sacrifice my life and sanity in order to try to save her.”

In an essay in the *New York Times*, psychiatrist Richard Friedman writes that the relationship of adults to their abusive parents “gets little, if any, attention in standard textbooks or in the psychiatric literature.” But Rochelle is not alone. I have been hearing from people in her position for years, adult children weighing whether to reconnect with parents who nearly ruined their lives. Sometimes it’s a letter writer such as “Comfortably Numb” who has cut off contact with a parent but is now being pressured by family members, and even a spouse, to reconcile and forgive. Sometimes a correspondent, like “Her Son,” has hung on to a thread of a relationship, but is now fearful of being further yoked emotionally or financially to a declining parent.

One hallmark of growing up in a frightening home is for the children to think they are the only ones in such circumstances. Even when they reach adulthood and come to understand that many others have had dire childhoods, they might not reveal the details of their abuse to anyone. “The profound isolation that’s imposed on people is a very painful and destructive thing,” says Dr. Vincent Felitti, co-principal investigator of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 3.3 million cases of abuse or neglect were reported to child protective service agencies in 2010. This vastly undercounts the actual number of horrific and painful childhoods, as most never make it into any official record. The CDC notes that some studies estimate that 20 percent of children will be the victims of such maltreatment. That means a lot of people are wrestling with this legacy.

Loved ones and friends—sometimes even therapists—who urge reconnecting with a parent often speak as if forgiveness will be a psychic aloe vera, a balm that will heal the wounds of the past. They warn of the guilt that will dog the victim if the perpetrator dies estranged. What these people fail to take into account is the potential psychological cost of reconnecting, of dredging up painful memories and reviving destructive patterns.

Eleanor Payson, a marital and family therapist in Michigan and the author of *The Wizard of Oz and Other Narcissists*, sees some clients who feel it would be immoral to abandon a now-feeble parent, no matter how destructive that person was. Payson says she advises them to find ways to be caring while protecting themselves from further abuse. “One of my missions is helping people not be tyrannized by false guilt or ignore their own pain and needs,” she says. Setting

limits is crucial: “You may need to keep yourself in a shark cage with no opportunity to let that person take a bite out of you.” It’s also OK for the conversation to be anodyne. “You can say something respectful, something good-faith-oriented. ‘I wish you well’; ‘I continue to work on my own forgiveness.’ ”

There is no formula for defining one’s obligations to the parents who didn’t fulfill their own. The stories of famous people with abusive parents reveal the wide range of possible responses. Abraham Lincoln couldn’t stand his brutish father, Thomas, who hated Abraham’s books and sent him out as a kind of indentured servant. As an adult, Lincoln did occasionally bail out his father financially. But during his father’s final illness, Lincoln ignored letters telling him the end was near. Finally, he wrote not to his father, but his stepbrother to explain his absence: “Say to him that if we could meet now, it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant.” Lincoln didn’t attend his father’s funeral.

Warren Buffett remained distantly dutiful to his mother, who had subjected her children to endless, rabid verbal attacks. On the occasions he visited her at the end of her life, he was a “wreck” of anxiety, sitting silently while his female companions made conversation. He was 66 when she died at 92. His tears at her death were not because he was sad or because he missed her, he said in his biography, *The Snowball*. “It was because of the waste.”

Bruce Springsteen’s frustrated, depressive father took out much of his rage on his son. In a *New Yorker* profile, David Remnick writes that long after Springsteen’s family had left his unhappy childhood home, he would obsessively drive by the old house. A therapist said to him, “Something went wrong, and you keep going back to see if you can fix it or somehow make it right.” Springsteen finally came to accept he couldn’t. When he became successful he did give his parents the money to buy their dream house. But Springsteen says of this seeming reconciliation, “Of course, all the deeper things go unsaid, that it all could have been a little different.”

We all accept that there is an enduring bond between parent and child. One of the Ten Commandments is to “honour your father and your mother,” though this must have been a difficult admonition for the children of, for example, Abraham, Rebecca, and Jacob. Yet the loyalty of children to even the worst of parents makes perfect biological sense. From an evolutionary perspective, parents, even poor ones, are a child’s best chance for food, shelter, and survival.

Regina Sullivan is a research professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the NYU Langone School of Medicine who studies emotional attachment in rats. In experiments with rats raised by mothers who neglect or physically hurt their pups, Sullivan has teased out that, when in the presence of the caregiver, the infant brain’s fear and avoidance circuits are suppressed. Attachment “programs the brain,” she says. “The ability of an adult who can say to you, *I had a horrible childhood, I don’t like my parents*, but then do things to continue to get the parents’ approval, is an example of the strength of human attachment in early life.”

As Springsteen's experience shows, one doesn't just leave such childhoods behind, like outgrowing a fear of the dark. Study after study has found that just as an emotionally warm, intellectually stimulating childhood is typically a springboard for a happy, healthy life, an abusive one can cause a litany of problems.

Abuse victims are more likely to suffer from depression, substance abuse, broken relationships, chronic diseases, and even obesity. Many of the high-functioning people I hear from who are wrestling with their debt to their parents have struggled with some of these issues. Rochelle says, "I was a very angry kid, I got into fights in grade school. I've worked on it a lot, on not being the spiteful angry person all the time." She also says she has dealt with food issues her whole life. Her mother brought home groceries once a month and she and her brother would devour the food before unpacking it. "We were starving," she says. "If I have an addiction, it's eating."

Those who refuse to make peace with a failing parent may also find themselves judged harshly. In his memoir *Closing Time*, Joe Queenan writes of the loathing he and his sisters felt for their alcoholic, physically and psychologically abusive father. When they were grown, Queenan writes: "We talked about him as if he were already dead; such wishful thinking was rooted in the hope that he would kick the bucket before reaching the age when he might expect one of us to take him in," although they agreed none would. When the father finally died, he wrote, "Clemency was not included in my limited roster of emotions." In a review of the book in the *Wall Street Journal*, Alexander Theroux writes, "It is a shameful confession to make in any book."

In his *New York Times* essay, Richard Friedman acknowledges that some parent-child relationships are so toxic that they must be severed. But he adds, "Of course, relationships are rarely all good or bad; even the most abusive parents can sometimes be loving, which is why severing a bond should be a tough, and rare decision." But substitute "husband" for "parents," and surely Friedman would not advise a woman in such a relationship to carry on because her battering spouse had a few redeeming qualities.

I know from my own inbox that many people are looking for someone, anyone, to tell them they should not feel guilty for declining to care for their abuser. I'm happy to do it. In private correspondence with these letter writers, I sometimes point out that, judging by their accounts, there doesn't seem to be any acknowledgement of guilt on the part of the parent for neglecting to meet their most basic responsibilities.

A woman I'll call Beatrice wrote to me as she wrestled with how to respond to a series of emails, calls, and letters from her long-estranged parents. Beatrice, 42, has a doctorate, is a professor of mathematics at a Midwestern university, and lives with her supportive boyfriend. She thinks of herself simultaneously as a "self-made person" and a "damaged" one. She decided long ago not to have children. "I have never felt confident I could trust another person to be the other parent. I'm not sure I could be a competent parent because of what I've been through."

Of her childhood she says, “I don’t remember any happy days at all.” Her father had violent rages; he once knocked her down a flight of stairs. If she couldn’t finish dinner, she would have to sit at the table all night, then get beaten by him if she didn’t clean her plate. Her mother never intervened. Her parents divorced when she was young and her father refused to pay child support. A few years later, her mother became the fifth wife of Beatrice’s new stepfather and life got much worse.

He was unemployed and always around. Beatrice was a young teen and when she got home from school he would go into her bedroom, put his fingers up her vagina, and say he was giving her a massage. He made her touch his genitals. He let his friends come over and “have fun” with her, as long as they didn’t take her virginity. When she was 17, she finally stood up to him and he kicked her out of the house. He told her mother she had taken off of her own accord. By that time she was working 40 hours a week at a crafts store in addition to going to school, and a co-worker let her move into her basement. She contacted her mother and asked her to meet her for lunch. Beatrice explained everything that had been going on with her stepfather. “She told me she didn’t believe a word and didn’t want to hear any more,” Beatrice says. “That was the last time I saw her.” That was 25 years ago.

Beatrice says that during her childhood she would sometimes feel sorry for herself. Her friends would complain about their parents, or about having bad days, and she would think they had no idea what a bad day was. But she says of being on her own at 17, “The day my stepdad kicked me out, my life got better. I could come home and no one was trying to do anything bad to me. I didn’t have to hide. I didn’t worry about getting hit. That meant everything.”

Last year, separately and out of the blue, Beatrice’s mother and father each got in touch. Her biological father sent a small gift and a card with an update: He was in debt, out of work, and was supporting Beatrice’s troubled sister. A few months later, there was a message on her answering machine. “This is your mother,” the voice said. She wanted Beatrice to know her stepfather had only a few days to live. She told Beatrice she was willing to forgive her. “That made me laugh,” Beatrice says. Her mother started sending emails and Beatrice sent her a reply saying she was busy and couldn’t deal with any of this. She hasn’t heard back from her mother since. But she fears that both her parents will contact her again and explicitly ask for help.

“I’m worried about that happening. I’m worried she’ll call and say, ‘I have cancer.’ I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Beatrice says. “If she knows I’m a professor, I’m sure everyone thinks I make a huge salary and I’m going to save them. My salary is enough for me to do what I want.”

Dr. Ronald Rohner, an emeritus professor of family studies and anthropology at the University of Connecticut, has devoted much of his career to studying parental rejection and its effects. He says there’s little research on adult role reversal—that is, what happens when the parent is vulnerable and wants support from the child. But he says the studies that do exist demonstrate that “it really truly is as you sow, so shall you reap. Those parents who raised children less than lovingly are putting their own dependent old age at risk for being well and lovingly cared for themselves.”

In a 2008 essay in the journal *In Character*, history professor Wilfred McClay writes that as a society we have twisted the meaning of forgiveness into a therapeutic act for the victim: “[F]orgiveness is in danger of being debased into a kind of cheap grace, a waiving of standards of justice without which such transactions have no meaning.” Jean Bethke Elshtain, a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School writes that, “There is a watered-down but widespread form of ‘forgiveness’ best tagged preemptory or exculpatory forgiveness. That is, without any indication of regret or remorse from perpetrators of even the most heinous crimes, we are enjoined by many not to harden our hearts but rather to ‘forgive.’ ”

I agree with these more bracing views about what forgiveness should entail. Choosing not to forgive does not doom someone to being mired in the past forever. Accepting what happened and moving on is a good general principle. But it can be comforting for those being browbeaten to absolve their parents to recognize that forgiveness works best as a mutual endeavor. After all, many adult children of abusers have never heard a word of regret from their parent or parents. People who have the capacity to ruthlessly maltreat their children tend toward self-justification, not shame.

Even apologies can have their limits, as illustrated by a Dear Prudence letter from a mother who called herself “Sadder but Wiser.” She verbally humiliated her son when he was a boy, realized the damage she had done, changed her ways, and apologized. But her son, who recently became a father, has only a coolly cordial relationship with her, and she complained that she wanted more warmth and caring. I suggested that she should be glad that he did see her, stop whining for more, and tell her son she admires that he is giving his little boy the childhood he deserves and that he didn’t get.

It’s wonderful when there can be true reconciliation and healing, when all parties can feel the past has been somehow redeemed. But I don’t think Rochelle, Beatrice, and others like them should be hammered with lectures about the benefits of—here comes that dread word—closure. Sometimes the best thing to do is just close the door.