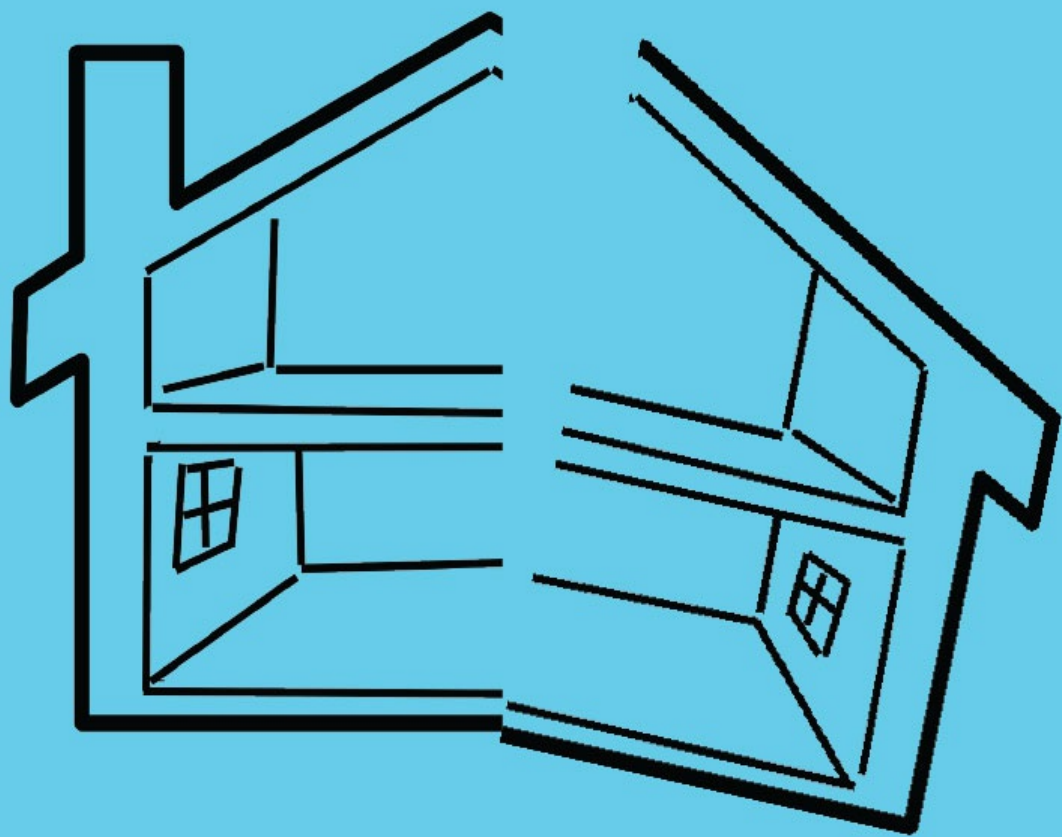


The Children's Hour

HOUSES DIVIDED



Kenneth S. Robson, M.D.

The Children's Hour:

A Life in Child Psychiatry

Kenneth S. Robson, M.D.

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Houses Divided

When I can no longer hear to think of the victims of broken homes, I begin to think of the victims of intact ones.

- Peter De Vries

A substantial amount of my practice involves conducting custody studies in contested divorces when the parents are in total disagreement regarding a plan of care for their minor children. The vast majority of divorces require no intervention, since parents generally resolve their post-divorce lives amicably. Because I am an experienced child psychiatrist, I attract referrals in the most difficult and acrimonious cases. While many “intact” families are rife with endless conflict, in divorce one may see, fully exposed, particular configurations of family life that can drastically reshape children’s futures. Just as with Arnie, a parent can destroy his child, and in cases of “parental alienation,” one parent can effectively destroy the other, a profound loss for any child. Alienation can be motivated by both conscious and unconscious impulses or needs including revenge, dread of losing one’s children, or the wish to be the only one. Regardless of motive, if alienation is successful, the end result is elimination of one parent from a child’s world. I consider this situation an emergency since there comes, in all of these cases, a point of no return where the process of alienation cannot be arrested, much less reversed.

The Jorgensens had never been a happy family through the fifteen years of their marriage. When Marie filed for divorce, the three Jorgensen daughters, Karen seventeen, Crista fourteen and Alma ten, were not surprised. They had borne constant witness to their parents’ vitriolic, sometimes physical strife. The girls were relieved. Their father Eric, however, was taken by surprise when papers were served on him. He responded with seething anger at Marie, bitter hurt that hardened into payback, a guiding mantra he had warned her of many times: “Lose me, lose your girls.” Spurned by a wife he did not love, his rejection-sensitivity reorganized his life around retribution for being asked to leave a party he no longer wanted to attend. Like an elephant, Eric never forgot. He made certain that his audience, Karen, Crista and Alma, didn’t either.

The initial Massachusetts court orders in the Jorgensen divorce recognized Marie’s competence as a full-time, stay-at-home mother. The girls lived with her in the family home on Boston’s North Shore, residing with Eric on alternating weekends. By the time I became involved, directed to complete the

custody study, Karen had become totally estranged from her mother. She refused to see or communicate with Marie and now lived with her younger sisters in the same home but with Eric as primary parent. Karen would not meet with me, the two remaining sisters doing so under protest. My office could have been Salem during the witch-hunts. Alternately, Crista and Alma alleged: "Mom is nuts. You don't believe us but she is truly cracked; she hates us, too." Then, in the precise words used by Eric, like a grim Greek chorus, they continued: "She hates dad, too; she had no business breaking up our family. She's a busybody, she meddles in our lives. You better listen to us, no one else does; we don't want to see her anymore, just once in a while when we want to, that's enough." Crista by now was on the verge of relinquishing her ties to her mother while Alma was still ambivalent.

Marie had given me several home videos from summers on Nantucket. I reviewed them with care. It was obvious that the children were loved by her and loved her; there was no mistaking the delight all three girls displayed, over the years, in their mother's company. But Eric's relentless vendetta against her and her own helpless passivity combined to reduce Marie's power to virtually nothing in the battle for the hearts and minds of her girls. I completed my study and issued a report that recommended drastic action: Marie was to resume primary custody and Eric's time was reduced to allow some neutralization to occur. If there was evidence of continuing devaluation of Marie on his part, the girls would see him only with a neutral supervisor present to monitor his communication and, if necessary, terminate the visit. Technical matters delayed the implementation of my report's recommendations. By the time that occurred, both Crista and Alma had joined their sister in excluding Marie from their lives. A tearful Marie saw me repeatedly, asking for guidance, but no strategies were effective. When I met with her for the last time, she had become resigned to having no contact with the girls but held out the hope that as adults they might "come around." I did not share her expectations for the future. Antidotes to Eric's distorted, egocentric toxins were not on the market. Saddest to me was the loss of a good mother to these children. She had not been claimed by death; she loved them deeply but was dead to them in life.

The great majority of children of divorce wish, most of all, for parental reunion, a longing that rarely reflects an accurate memory of the familial misery that preceded a separation or divorce. Liam wished for no such resolution to his parents' divorce. When we first met he owned an "old soul" stowed in a short frame topped by an unruly shock of black hair. The rigidity of his alignment with his mother concerned me, since my mission was to preserve access for him to the best that both parents could muster.

Then I met his father. "He's nuts. He says he loves me but he doesn't. He's mean, wanna hear?" I shrugged. Liam went on to describe a frightening scene in the parking lot where his father picked him up on the weekends, few and far between, that he spent with his son.

Liam's dad had an explosive, mercurial temper that was a prime mover in his mother's decision to dissolve the marriage of fifteen years. Over those years he had terrorized his wife and three sons with destruction of walls, smashing of windows and, on occasion, physical violence that led to police involvement. On the Saturday morning in question, his mother and father squabbled through open car windows over the time of the boy's return on Sunday. In a rage, the father began a car chase around the parking lot, colliding with his wife's rear bumper when he could. Court orders temporarily suspended father-son contact.

An intelligent but brittle man, Liam's father towered above me. He was very tall though not imposing, his volcanic nature well wrapped. While he claimed to love all of his children, he was oblivious to the impact on Liam of his wrathful ways, broken promises and erratic appearances. Bitter about the divorce, righteous in his denials, he spent his time with me berating his wife; a listener might have concluded he was childless. In some way his tie to Liam was deficient and his parental heart in the wrong place. He was also dangerous. I came away from this contact wondering if Liam's exit wishes might not be well-founded.

At our next session Liam seemed frightened; he burst into tears and wept wordlessly for a time. "He will get me, Dr. Robson, he will; he won't stop until I move in with him. I hate him. He never cared when he was around and he doesn't now." His voice rose to a scream: "I hate him, I never want to see him again, I want to cut him out of my life . . . cut, cut, cut . . ." Here he lost control, picking up a chair and trying to throw it across the room, his face contorted with anguish. I restrained him and he calmed in time. He knew my office rules: no one gets hurt, nothing gets broken; but in this instance they failed to contain him. I was watching a down-scaled version of his father, caught inside like a bad, permanently undigested meal. Liam looked at me imploringly: "I hear him all the time, calling my name, yelling my name." "In your head?" I asked. He nodded and began to cry again. "Do you think about dying?" He nodded again and shared with me that he had thought about running into traffic. I decided that he needed hospitalization.

There is no getting away from a parent who terrifies. Though across the world, such a parent remains ensconced within a child. Often that part of one's identity remains latent until later in life when it can erupt quite suddenly when the strain of parenthood begins. The mechanism for such an unfortunate piece of one's psychic anatomy was seen in the Holocaust. The Jewish guards, "Kapos," unconsciously adopted the sadistic ways of their Nazi keepers, at times outdoing them in their torment of fellow Jews in the Camps. Reports after the war expressed disbelief, repugnance and amazement at this seemingly bizarre behavioral display, but unfortunately Nature seems to have invented only one mental mechanism to master terror's assault upon one's being. Its formal title is identification with the aggressor, a rigid, primitive means of adaptation, coping or defense. Children can be selective in deciding whom they love, but they have no control over whom they hate.

Liam profited from his stay in hospital and was started on anti-psychotic medication to help his tenuous equilibrium. His father knew of Liam's distress but did not visit him. A kindlier Late brought his mother into a new relationship with a gentle man who was genuinely invested in Liam's life and sensitive to his needs. He brought with him an auxiliary therapist in the form of a golden retriever named Jack, whom Liam quickly came to love. Jack slept on Liam's bed and listened in the way only dogs can. I discouraged Liam from any more vitriolic debasement of his father, concerned that it would preclude any possibility of a reconciliation in the years to come. Ties matter, even when frayed. Liam was too young to know what he might need or even want down the road.

The Underground Railway that carried runaway slaves to the North had a major stop in Boston. It was a force to be reckoned with. Reborn in the Twentieth Century, a new model of this clandestine travel transports divorcing parents and their children out of Boston to escape a variety of evils attributed to the parent left behind. The Cohen girls were passengers at the time I became involved in their parents' ugly dispute. Lily was eight, Hannah eleven when their mother, Laura, fled the family home with them. Because federal kidnapping charges were leveled against Laura, the LBI was involved in tracking mother and daughters down in Cuba, their last stop on a labyrinthine journey. The network that supported Laura Cohen, and numerous others like her, is vast and well endowed. Its backers share common beliefs in the corrupt state of our legal system and the excessive powers of government. They were, therefore, sympathetic to Laura's profound concern that her husband Art was involved in serious, ongoing sexual molestation of both of their daughters. These allegations were not substantiated in court. It was in this

context that, as a last resort, Laura fled. The escape didn't last long.

Hannah was suspicious of my every move. Short and stocky with black, curly hair, she followed me like radar with her dark eyes. Her lips pursed tightly in a silent, stubborn scowl. Lily was a smaller version of her sister but seemed at ease with herself, more sociable, more trusting. While the details of their experiences were never disclosed to me, I knew that both girls had lived in hiding with confusion and anxiety. In my initial meetings with them I simply let them “hang out” with me, explore the office, play cards, examine my dolls, and eat or drink. I posed virtually no questions to them, hoping to create an atmosphere of safety and neutrality. I knew they were confused about my role as one of the many anonymous players who had assumed bit parts in the drama of their lives during the past year. To be enigmatically benign, ask nothing of them, seemed to me a kindly strategy to avoid their confusing me with whoever and whatever had gone before.

Lily was happy to engage: “You’re here to take our mom away from us so we can live with dad. Mom is in jail.” Hannah stood behind her sister, whispering, coaching, monitoring her every word. She was the prompter in this libretto. “I know you guys don’t know me, but my job is to help figure out with your mom and dad, and the judge, what’s going to help you the most now that you’re home again.” Lily nodded, smiled while Hannah countered “I know what—you’re a spy to keep my mom in jail. You don’t know what our dad did to us all the time. We hate him and we’re never gonna live with him—he hurt us a lot.” “Yeah,” echoed Hannah in a rote manner that was to recur frequently, “he hurt us all the time.” “Well, whatever happened before, you’re safe now and part of my job is to be sure that no one hurts you.” I invited the girls to play Old Maid. Lily joined me on the floor but Hannah, flustered and torn, held back. I had begun to establish my “straight man” role.

The girls lived with a maternal uncle and aunt outside Boston while around them swirled a myriad of court proceedings. During this time I met with both parents alone to make contact and gather history. Laura, in appearance, was a clone of her daughters. She was a one-woman wire service, providing vast numbers of documents describing her courage in protecting her children from their father’s carnal lust. Many hours were spent establishing a chronology of events, the paternal narratives diverging sharply. Art was a large, brusque but kind-hearted man who shunned the public eye and seemed very concerned about his daughters’ traumatic journey. In several meetings with Laura and her daughters, their

closeness was evident. Hannah, the appointed or self-appointed stool pigeon, made her mother aware of my “sneaky questions” and made certain she knew that “he doesn’t think anything happened to us with dad; he doesn’t believe us.” Having said nothing of this kind, I wondered whose opinion her words reflected. Perhaps her own?

My initial meeting with Art and the girls required much preparatory effort. They had not seen their father for more than a year, though historically he had been involved deeply in their lives. He brought favorite, well-worn toys and a craft project to this session. I had warned Art to avoid defending himself should either or both girls use this contact to renew their allegations of abuse, face to face, with the “perpetrator.” Lily was clearly thrilled to see her father, jumping into his arms, delivering a long hug and “I missed you, daddy.” As Art then welcomed Hannah, she withdrew to the back of the office and, pointing her forefinger at him, began his prosecution: “You’re just trying to fool us again. You hurt us.” Lily, as a barely audible chorus, repeated “You did hurt us.” Hannah went on: “You want to take us away from mommy. You want to hurt us again, again, again.” Lily, holding Art’s hand tightly, nodded her assent during this diatribe. Art, heeding my warning, spread a blanket on the floor and began the project he had carried with him. Neither child could resist, and they joined him.

Over several weeks I met with the girls to try and document their heinous allegations that included multiple episodes of sodomy, fellatio and vaginal penetration. There are physical findings that suggest such violence. The examinations I requested on both children were negative. And while neither child could describe the details of a particular date, time, place clothing worn etc, I knew that embellished, melodramatic stories can contain a nidus of documentable truth and was mindful of my primary responsibility for these children’s present and future safety.

Hannah again and again accused Art of sodomizing her repeatedly, while Lily looked on. On one occasion Hannah was weaving in new details when, suddenly, Lily said quietly, “We faked it, we faked it all.” Hannah, more startled than I, turned to her sister with a shocked, quizzical look. I continued, “I heard you, Lily, but now I’m mixed up; I’m not sure what happened.” Lily, again: “We faked it all, all the time we faked it.” Now Hannah, unable to contain herself, stared at her sister and queried, “Well, did it happen or didn’t it? I’m mixed up now too.” Lily and I were silent; Hannah looked confused and repeated her questions to Lily twice more. Then, turning to me she uttered, “It did happen. I know it and

you don't believe it." "Well," I responded, "I'm confused. So is Lily and so are you." This dramatic turn of events is not uncommon. Recantations of this kind can be adaptive denials of truth on a child's part to avoid breaking up a family, elude threatened harm, or escape guilt at implicating a loved one. But what was striking in this instance was Hannah's obvious confusion and her question, "Well, did it happen or didn't it?" If this is the best validation of fact your star witness can manage, the recantation is most likely genuine, the denial accurate.

As the threads of this case (and there were many more) unraveled, Laura's dread, which was at the center of it all, became clear. Such dread is a familiar one in divorce: the threatened loss of one's children, for a father enormous, for a mother unbearable. Laura saw Art as a better parent than herself, as a stable man with a supportive family in contrast to the chaos and instability of her own, a reality that she knew to be her legacy. Children in divorce are not infrequently sacrificed on the altar of the dread, primitive and absolute, of being alone and unloved, totally alone. Primitive fears are assuaged by primitive solutions including lies and flight when all else fails.

The Court awarded Art sole custody of the children. Hannah remained more of a skeptic than her sister about Art in particular and life in general. The biggest loss for the girls was their mother, whom they loved. They understood what their loss might mean to her. Divorce may be commonplace nowadays, but so is death, its frequency not diminishing its power.