

The Dispatch

Family Business Insight for your Agriculture Company
April 2023: Estrangement

While most issues of the *Dispatch* are comprised of shorter musings on family business topics, this edition deals with the difficult subject of family estrangement through poetry and a longer essay. Bill offers a hard-hitting poem expressing many of the raw feelings, including shame, regret, and longing, that accompany the condition of being cut off from a family member. I then offer some practical steps you might consider if you are estranged from a loved one. As always, thanks for reading and for your feedback. [Lance](#)

Estrangement: A Poem

[Dr. Bill Long](#)

Two experiences stand behind the difficult poem that follows. Before teaching at Sterling College, as well as while in Kansas, I was a pastor, and so saw "up close and personal" many stories of family estrangement. Then, after leaving Sterling in 1996, I went to law school and then became a litigation attorney and law professor. In those capacities, I dealt with loads of highly-charged conflict and the emotions that go with it. The following poem, "Estrangement," is from an upcoming book of my poems entitled "*Love's Journeys*."

Estrangement—Losing Love

You can't be estranged unless you first loved another
Whether mother, father, sibling—or other
You first loved them for a lot of reasons
And love was probably strong for many seasons

You loved because nature told you to
Or maybe mom and dad encouraged it, also
You loved until you felt it in your soul
And knew that with them you were made whole

You experienced the joy of unique special times
Saw vulnerabilities and saw them in their prime
Learned to know the movements of their heart
All the things that set them so specially apart

But then something happened, something serious indeed
Perhaps in their life, where they didn't succeed
Perhaps in your life, where you weren't very alert
And led to a seemingly irreversible hurt

The easy relationship, with hugs and smiles
Is now replaced by unexpected trials
The words casually spoken in utter simplicity
Are now taken by each as some kind of conspiracy

Gone are the smiles, the anticipated visits
The chuckles and gifts that love often elicits
Gone are the light moments of yore
Replaced now by words that shake to the core

This is what estrangement is like
To be cut off from one you never disliked
And really hoped would still be your fave
As you faced your life's days until the grave

You helplessly search your past for wisdom
But the past won't reply; it is just dumb
You approach others, selectively so
Because shame coats your heart as anxieties grow

You ask for forgiveness, to have one more chance
But often the response is not even a glance
"You had your chance; you blew it big time
And I must live with the results of your crime."

The language is tortured, untrue and hurtful
And you want so much to make it fertile
But somehow a connection has been severed
You would do anything, this strife to weather

But often there is nothing and the hurt still continues
And pain invades tissues and even the sinews
And little comfort comes from the throbbing ache
And sometimes you feel you might even break

That is what estrangement is--
A most traumatic, disheartening biz
It hits you hard regardless of status
And breaks your heart and your whole apparatus.

Advice on Ending Estrangement

[Lance Woodbury](#)

Being cut off from a family member is painful and embarrassing. It's hard to understand, even harder to talk about, and still harder to resolve. Family estrangement, which often entails only minimal (or even hostile) interaction with a loved one, clashes with our social expectations of a "normal" family and conflicts with our earliest experiences of life with parents and siblings.

It's emotionally confusing because someone you love is physically present but relationally absent. You see them occasionally, or know they are alive — you may even live in the same town or just down the road — but you have no correspondence with them, and sometimes with their children. Actually, multigenerational estrangement, when grandkids are kept away from grandparents, can be more difficult to grapple with because the conflict isn't with the grandkids. They are collaterally damaged as the adults fight. But whatever the estrangement looks like, it *feels* like you have failed at making or maintaining a family.

Overcoming estrangement is no easy task. But, after considering several situations and reviewing a couple of books on the topic (the reviews are in the sidebar), I have a few suggestions.

1. Don't wait too long to attempt restoration of the relationship. It seems like the longer you wait, the harder it is to reestablish rapport. Attempting contact becomes more awkward with time, and in some ways it becomes easier to stay out of each other's lives. And should someone become sick or pass away while disconnected, the regret people feel is palpable.
2. Attempt to understand how your behavior has been seen or interpreted. Estrangement is often the result of one party's anger or profound disappointment with another family member's behavior. Try to get in touch with how your actions contributed to the estrangement, even if not intended. The more you can see yourself through the other person's eyes, the more conciliatory your communication is likely to be.
3. Write a letter. If the other person won't talk to you, write a letter expressing your apology, a desire to make amends, and express hope for a future relationship. Don't try to explain or justify your behavior, or point to the other person's faults. Just express your regret and your hope, and ask for an opportunity to reconnect when the other person is willing.
4. Recognize your future relationship will be different. After a serious conflict, you usually can't "go back" to the way things were. The pain of what happened is too great. The theologian Lewis Smedes wrote, "Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future."
5. Ask to have a "talk about talks." It often helps if people are prepared to discuss difficult subjects. Instead of approaching the other person or just showing up hoping to immediately work on the issues, ask to have a conversation about a *process* to work on your relationships. For example, ask if you can meet somewhere neutral, next week, for an hour, to explore how you might move forward together. Ask if the other person would be open to receiving your apology in person, and then set a time and place. Ask for an opportunity to meet in the future to better understand what you did that caused the other person so much pain. The point is to talk briefly about having a more significant conversation in the near future.

Of course, both parties have to be ready to explore ending the estrangement. The strategies above may or may not work, but it is hard to fault anyone's attempt to reconcile. Past performance doesn't have to be an indicator of future results.