

REVISED AND UPDATED
10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Alice Miller

PATHS OF LIFE

SIX CASE HISTORIES

*Translated by
Andrew Jenkins*



A Member of the Perseus Books Group
NEW YORK

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Preface

MOST PEOPLE are born into a family. This family will mark them for life. Critical as young people may be of their parents, sometimes to the extent of breaking with them altogether, there is no way of escaping the more or less indelible imprint that these first family influences leave. Awareness of this fact becomes inescapable when we have children of our own.

Many people give the matter little thought. They simply put their own children through the same things they experienced themselves when they were young, and they feel they are quite right to do so. But one day they find to their amazement and dismay that it is precisely with their children and spouses or companions that they have the toughest time achieving the inner freedom they have been striving for since their youth. They are then quite likely to feel that they have reached an impasse. As they found no way out of that impasse when they were children, they had no alternative but to knuckle under, to grin and bear it. And for some adults it seems to be just the same.

But it is not. For however much we may be the product of family background, of heredity, of upbringing (for better or for worse), as adults we can gradually learn to recognize these influences. Then we are no longer under the compulsion to behave like robots. The greater our awareness of the way we have been conditioned, the more likely we are to free ourselves from our entrapments and be receptive to new information.

The reader will become acquainted with a number of personal stories in the following pages. One of the things they are designed to illustrate is that the traces left by our childhood accompany us not only in the families of our own we have as adults, they manifest themselves in the very fabric of human society, all the way up to those outsize personalities who (again, for better or for worse) have left their imprint on the course of history. In my closing reflections, I turn to the question of whether and how we can learn to gain a clearer understanding of the way hatred evolves and thus prevent it from taking root.

As every life is unique, people naturally differ in the way they integrate their childhood into their adult lives. But regardless of the way individuals may decide to go, sensitivity to the harm done by a cruel childhood is increasing and that can only be a boon for society as a whole. Child abuse in all its forms has always been with us and it is still widespread today. But only recently have the victims started realizing what has been done to them and talking to other people about it. Subjects rarely touched on before are moving into the foreground of discussion, a discussion which opens up new perspectives of greater fulfillment in life for very many people.

This was brought home to me forcibly by a book I read recently. ¹ In it, fourteen fathers serving prison sentences for sexual abuse of their children and taking part in a carefully structured group therapy designed during their term of imprisonment tell the story of their crimes. It is encouraging to see how the mentalities of these men changed after they were given the opportunity to talk about what they had been through and thus felt understood and accepted. As was to be expected, they are

without exception stories of horrible deprivations in childhood, scenarios full of sexual exploitation masquerading as a substitute for the love they were denied.

When I say encouraging, I am referring to the transformation undergone by these men on the basis of the counseling and guidance they were given. They had lived thirty, forty, fifty years without ever being given the opportunity to scrutinize and investigate what they had been through as children, much less identify it as a wrong that had been done to them. Compulsively and without qualms, they inflicted the same suffering on their own children as they had been subjected to themselves. As long as they had no grasp of the way these things related to each other, they were unable to free themselves from that compulsion. Only now are they ready and willing to acknowledge their responsibility, because they no longer regard what happened to them in early youth as just the way things happen to be but have learned to see it as an outrageous wrong inflicted on them. Armed with this knowledge they can now mourn that horrible, twisted mess in their early lives where their childhood should have been.

This apprenticeship in critical thinking has not driven them into self-pity. Quite the contrary. From their own sufferings they have learned to empathize with their children and to acknowledge that they have harmed them for the rest of their lives. They are doing their best to repair that damage, but they know that much of it is irreversible. Not all of them have already succeeded in freeing themselves from this impasse. Some still have a long and difficult process ahead of them.

The figures in this book are my own inventions though not the stories themselves, which have accompanied me for a long time. In the course of writing, however, they developed a life and a set of dynamics of their own, which in its turn enabled me to expand on what I had learned over the last few years and give it a more graphic form. The persons described here are not intended as ideals to be emulated. They simply recount what has happened to them and how they have either succeeded or failed in coming to terms with it. In describing their destinies and their environments, I consciously decided to keep outward detail to a minimum and to concentrate on the relations between the figures, on their feelings and thoughts.

There is no ready-made recipe for liberating oneself from the consequences of early injuries. The objectives we have and the capacity for realizing them vary from person to person. Even if we are not able to live up to our full potential in childhood, and though the traces of earlier fears, uncertainties, and deprivations stay with us in our later lives, there is still much that we can do to change things for the better because our awareness has become more acute. This new awareness is frequently a result of encounters with feeling individuals who have been lucky enough to grow up surrounded by love and respect, who have had a less troubled childhood, who have experienced pleasure and freedom and have thus been able to lead easier, happier lives.

The figures most closely matching that description in my stories are probably Daniel, Michelle, Margot, Louise, perhaps even Gloria. They are able to listen, to identify with others; they are outgoing, concerned, and usually less prone to illusions than the figures we see them encountering. As they have experienced honesty and

unconditional affection in their early years, they are better able to cope with their lives than those who are fed on illusions and later have to fight to find out the truth about themselves, like Claudia, Anika, Helga, or Lilka.

The informal, associative style of the book should not blind the reader to the fact that my intentions in writing it go beyond the issues involved in the individual biographies of these characters and seek to pose a number of more universal questions, most notably: How do early experiences of suffering and love affect people's later lives and the way they relate to others? There are modern branches of research into areas that would be part and parcel of any attempt to answer that question, for example, observation of life in the uterus, study of newborn babies and infants, the early lives of political dictators, statistics on genocide, and so forth. But as far as I know, research has yet to be done into the way the data already collected relate to the childhood experiences of the people actively involved. These stories and reflections are designed to provide a stimulus for organized inquiries in that direction.

SIX CASE HISTORIES

CLAUDIA AND DANIEL

Thirty Years Later

CLAUDIA AND DANIEL WERE fellow students at Berkeley in the sixties. They were also lovers. Among the other students, Claudia had the reputation of being a “good listener,” but also of keeping herself very much to herself. In their physical relationship, Daniel experienced her as warm-hearted and giving, but he also sensed a kind of deep-seated mistrust, a fearful reticence. She seemed to be longing for frank, uncomplicated intimacy, but at the same time she displayed an obvious reluctance to let herself go. It was as if she were shielding herself from something, but he did not know what it was. One day she announced out of the blue that she was getting married—to Max. Max? Daniel could hardly imagine two people with less in common than Claudia and Max.

Later Daniel got married himself. It was an unhappy marriage. But after the divorce he met Monica, and with her he was able to have the kind of relationship he had always hoped for.

Recently at a conference in San Diego (both of them are now psychotherapists), Claudia and Daniel met again. They had not been in touch for thirty years, so they were doubly glad to meet up after all this time.

Daniel has not changed much; but Claudia, the timid Berkeley student, is now a mature woman. The old rapport is still there, and soon they are telling each other about the way things have gone for them.

“You know,” Daniel says, “I could never understand how you came to marry Max of all people. Whenever you crossed my mind in these last thirty years, I ended up thinking maybe you purposely opted to live with a man you didn’t love and who was so different from you, because that way you couldn’t get hurt. We never talked about that kind of thing when we were at Berkeley, do you remember? I wish you’d tell me something about your childhood. After all, I knew Max too.”

“I’m glad you asked,” Claudia answers spontaneously. “I really did love you, you know, and for a long time I had this dream of telling you everything. But it’s a long story, so if you don’t mind I’ll write to you instead.”

Two weeks later, Daniel gets a long letter.

DEAR DANIEL,

Spurred on by your interest, I’m taking the opportunity (not for the first time!) to look back on my marriage and try to take stock. I’m sitting in my garden, which I love, and I’m hoping that I can face up to the memories I’ll be putting down on paper.

In retrospect, I see my marriage as one long, futile struggle, basically as a torment. I did all I could to get close to my husband. He claimed that he loved me, he was never unfaithful, he was never violent, he was a good provider. But the last thing he wanted was any kind of intimacy, with me or any other woman. He kept his feelings and his own past hidden from himself and from me. Just like I did, only much more so. And yet behind that front I sensed a longing for warmth, and I hoped one day I might be able to satisfy that longing.

So the goal I set myself, as a kind of “full-time job,” was to break down the walls my husband had put up around himself, to penetrate to the core of his being and to communicate with him. But the whole undertaking was doomed from the outset. Max didn’t want to open up; he just wanted to be “left in peace,” as he put it. He was a typical “rationalist,” quite happy to communicate with me on a purely conventional basis. The only time he showed any signs of having an emotional life at all was during love-making or when he got angry. Anything going beyond that was suspect, alien, dangerous, something either to be pitied or made fun of. I guessed that the reason he was so closed-off must have something to do with his childhood, a conclusion I came to from the rare occasions when he made any reference to his youth. It was a long time before I got to know the details.

In my purse I had a photo of him that was taken when he was three. Whenever he had hurt me, I took it out and looked at it. It stopped me from feeling resentful. Resentment wasn’t what I wanted. What I wanted was to understand him. I felt an immense sympathy for that little boy with the cute face and the quizzical expression. I only had to look at that picture and all my hurt was forgotten. No more pain, no more anger. That way I was always willing to forgive the adult man that child in the photo had turned into. But ultimately I was harming myself. The greater my attachment to the child in him, the more I lost sight of myself and the position I was in, and the more obvious his rejection of me became. The last thing he wanted was to let that child live, to have any lingering intimations of what he had once been. I imagine he felt threatened by my attempts to get close to him; the protective wall got higher and higher all the time.

They say opposites attract. Is that why I married Max? I honestly think the differences were less apparent when we first met. At that time I too was afraid of my own feelings; I too was hiding from myself. But even in intellectual discussions, we never really spoke the same language. We were on two different planets.

There are lots of things that can cement a relationship: sex, children, a home, going away together. But if it all just serves to cover up a fundamental disconnection, it’s no good trying to paper over the cracks. In the end they always show through: illnesses, unnecessary surgery, things like that. It’s what happened to me, anyway.

It was an awful struggle before I finally admitted to myself that I wanted a divorce. Max was dead set against it; he insisted he couldn’t carry on without me. I was on the verge of a breakdown; I believed him when he said that and I felt responsible for the way his life would turn out. On the other hand, I didn’t want to pay for his life with my own. But no sooner were we divorced than Max found himself a new wife and seemed

to get along with her just fine. So I stopped feeling guilty. Luckily there are women whose needs are different from mine. With a woman like that, Max maybe didn't feel so defensive. With her he could finally cultivate his nicer sides and achieve his ideal of a secure middle-class home without what he called "all that agonizing."

At first I tried to give him that kind of home, although it meant denying my true self. Early on, I had had the experience of being made to feel inadequate as a person, and for a long time I was unable to put up any resistance. I always had to be on hand for my parents, always available for whatever it was they needed me for. My father was an alcoholic. He could be very winning at times, but he was just as liable to fly off the handle for no apparent reason. My mother had cancer and had to go to the hospital on a number of occasions. Sometimes I went to see her there with my father. Of course I was sorry for them; they were so unhappy. I wanted to do all I could to help them. But as a child there was nothing I could do. That combination of extreme helplessness and an overgrown sense of responsibility for others left a lasting imprint on my later life. It took me ages to give it up.

As an only child, I felt lonely and I desperately sought contact with my parents; I would have done anything they asked if I could have felt really close to them. But it was all in vain. There were times when they were nice to me, but then for no reason I could fathom, my father would suddenly crumple and crawl back to the liquor bottle again, putting up an impenetrable wall, cutting himself off from me and the things I wanted to ask him. And most of the time my mother was way out of earshot, too, preoccupied with an illness which as a child I never really understood but which somehow made me feel guilty.

I did what I could to not feel anything—no resentment, no sorrow, no anger. But I can still remember the feeling of longing. It sometimes caught me by the throat when I heard the trains hooting in the distance. It was a mixture of deep sadness and a desire to escape, to get away from the constant loneliness, the endless feeling of not being able to cope. I dreamed of far-away lands where people were nice to one another, people you could rely on.

Then I fell in love with you. I never felt responsible for the kind of shape you happened to be in. You were so different from my parents; we could talk about anything and everything. I felt connected with you. The things I'd been looking for suddenly seemed so near; I would have so loved to stay with you. But I just couldn't trust my luck, I wasn't used to it; I was afraid of disappointing you, afraid you might leave me. So I started fighting that desire to stay with you, fighting the feelings I had for you, so that I would never have to suffer as I had in my childhood. It was all I knew. What I didn't know was that it doesn't always have to be that way. So I went on torturing myself.

I expect my decision to marry Max must have come as a big surprise to you. After all, he stood for everything I disliked. He was cagey, hidebound, interested only in abstract problems, very conventional. He knew better about everything, and he was a rotten listener. I didn't see it so clearly at the time, of course. But I did sense it. So what made me marry a man like that?

I thought, okay, he's pigheaded, but that's his strength; he won't start drinking whatever happens, so he won't leave me either. This conviction, unrealistic as it was, made me feel safe. My father's unreliability and unpredictability had always scared me. Whenever something was preying on his mind, he grabbed for the bottle. He immersed himself in booze and that put him right out of my reach. He never gave me any explanation, any information that would have helped me understand him.

Sometimes the liquor had the effect of putting him in a towering rage, and I racked my brains for what I might have done to provoke his anger. Whenever mother was hospitalized, I was left alone with him and his moods, and it was sheer hell. That's what made me look out for a "steady" husband, someone to lean on. But you displayed your feelings; you were vulnerable. And that made me afraid of my love for you, afraid it might plunge me into the same abyss as my love for my father did. I was afraid the day might come when I couldn't reach you, either.

In Max I thought I had found the opposite of my father, a rock that I might hurt myself on but one I could hide behind as well. But looking back I now see that the things that made me suffer during my marriage were basically the same things I had hated when I was still living at home. Max didn't drink; he was always sober. Yet his way of making himself scarce, inaccessible was even more foolproof than liquor. He had used his intellect to put up such impenetrable walls around his feelings that he wasn't capable of any kind of genuine communication at all, not even in exceptional situations. All I got from him was criticism, blame, scathing remarks, at best ironical jibes. Just saying something nice, without lacing it with sarcasm, was something completely foreign to him.

So marrying Max left me in the same kind of isolation I had experienced with my parents. It must sound absurd for an outsider, but in all seriousness I was expecting Max of all people to give me something that he was least equipped to provide: open, warm-hearted communication. I was unflagging in my attempts to reach him and wasn't going to give up hope that easily. But as I never had that kind of experience in my own childhood, I was unable to see that such openness between us might in fact be completely impossible.

Only years later did I realize that I had a choice. I didn't have to sacrifice myself; there was no point waiting for someone to change who had no intention of changing because he had never questioned his own opinions. Today I enjoy being able to really talk with people, my husband, Mark, above all, and some good friends.

Unfortunately, the divorce was not the end of the story of my marriage. It repeated itself in my relationship with my oldest daughter Carla. With her I kept on relapsing into that old childhood pattern, those constant feelings of inadequacy, guilt, helplessness. Luckily I have managed to establish an affectionate relationship with my two younger daughters. With them I feel relatively free. And I know of many cases where very close contact with the children has been possible despite divorce.

But between Carla and me there was such a yawning chasm that whatever I did I couldn't seem to bridge it. For a long time I put it down to repressed experiences from

my own childhood, ill-defined but tormenting anxieties that pervaded my entire body during and after Carla's birth. It's not surprising that it should have put a strain on our relationship from the outset. I believe that Carla's initial disorientation and uncertainty left its mark on her until well into adult life. Also, of my daughters she was the one who suffered most from the breakdown of our marriage. I was looking to that child to rescue me from the nonrelationship my marriage represented. And what newborn child can live up to that kind of expectation? As so often happens, her fate was sealed well before her birth.

When I was expecting Carla, I attended a class where you learn how to change and feed your baby. These preparations were the basis for a kind of dialogue with Carla, albeit a silent one. I often used to walk the whole distance to class, immersed in silent conversation with my baby. That way I could free myself to some extent from the almost permanent anguish I was living in. Today I can say that I was really looking forward to the birth, but the way a prisoner looks forward to freedom, a freedom I hoped would fulfill my longings for a genuine relationship. I wasn't looking forward to it like a woman ready and willing to welcome a new baby and attend to what this little creature needs. I was starving for love, but I wasn't mature and fulfilled enough to be able to give any genuine love and affection myself.

When Carla was born, I really didn't have the faintest idea what goes on inside the head of a newborn baby. I just gave myself over to the ministrations of the trained staff at the hospital and went along with everything they said, like a good, nicely brought-up girl who doesn't want to cause anyone any trouble. My body tried to make itself heard but, unfortunately, in the form of symptoms that put me at the mercy of the nursing staff.

Soon I was producing too much milk and had a breast infection. The condition was treated with camphor and quickly cleared up. But from then on the baby refused to breast-feed; she cried and protested all the time. Today, I know that camphor functions by reducing lactation and that in its turn gets rid of the infection quicker. What I didn't know at the time was that after this kind of treatment breast-feeding is experienced by mother and child as something negative, if it is possible at all. These days they've stopped that particular camphor treatment.

It was only a few years ago that I finally understood what happened in that hospital twenty-eight years back. I chanced on a book by Françoise Dolto, a French child psychiatrist, in which she says that the very first thing a newborn baby uses for orientation purposes is the smell of the mother.¹ This familiar smell is what helps the baby to recognize the mother immediately after birth and to salvage the feelings of safety and security experienced in the womb and preserve them in the new surroundings. In French, the word for this recognition is *reconnaissance*, which also means "gratitude." How can a woman smelling of camphor communicate to a newborn child that she is the mother, that she has the best of intentions, has enough milk, and is eager to breast-feed her baby? A baby will trust his senses. And if the smell is alien and offputting, this is the child's reality and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

I imagine that the child's reaction is something like this: "I came out into this strange world after a long, scary birth and you didn't take me into your sheltering arms; you didn't console me. You let them take me away and didn't give me the reassuring skin contact I needed. You betrayed me. How can I ever trust you again? I'm in constant fear of being so terribly disappointed all over again." It may be that Carla's deep-seated distrust of me has to do with that early experience. The other reasons that came later were then the logical consequences of a relationship that was already badly undermined.

I was so unsure of myself in those first few days that I thought my baby would be better off and happier in other people's care. It was before the positive experiences I had with my other daughters, and I had absolutely no confidence in myself as a mother whatever. So on many occasions I left Carla in the care of the people who worked for us. That was bound to make her feel rejected because in spite of her mistrust, she was still looking for her mother.

Today I believe that if at Carla's birth someone had encouraged me to express my fears, that would have enabled me to better understand the distress my child was in. The relationship between Carla and me would probably not have been so traumatic and I wouldn't have had to go in search of surrogate mothers. The relationship would not have been burdened from the beginning by the strains imposed on it by the confusion we both felt.

The pain of being deprived of that first physical contact with my baby, of not having her there for breast-feeding, stayed with me for a long time. Just thinking about it made me feel terrible, as if it had only just happened. It was the pain of having been separated from my child when we needed each other most. For a long time I couldn't talk to anyone about it. It was as if the story of those events was locked up in my own solitude. It was only after I had told Mark about it that I began to free myself from the pressure.

When Carla was a child I couldn't help her; I sensed her anguish but I wasn't able to genuinely communicate with her, support and protect her. I expected her to provide the same things that I had been expected to provide: tacit understanding, faultless functioning, and unblinking acceptance of her fate. But, unlike me, Carla refused to cooperate. She was frequently unable to fulfill even the most basic of expectations, but she never openly rebelled against them. She had too little confidence in herself and sought other people's approval by adopting modes of behavior that I felt were alien to her.

But maybe I was wrong. I wanted to love and understand her, so I wanted to believe that the way she was acting was something she could discard at a later date. At all events, our relationship degenerated into a kind of permanent crisis, largely because she resented my refusal to take the roles she was playing at face value. That was something I couldn't and wouldn't do. I thought I knew who the real Carla was; I felt sure that she had no real need to go through all that playacting, I was certain that it was masking her real, lovable self. I felt the reasons she had for wanting to suppress

her real nature were the injuries I had been a witness to, the injuries inflicted on her whenever she revealed the person she really was. But just like Max, what she wanted most was to appear strong, whereas I tormented myself with feelings of guilt. It took me a long time to stop colluding in that particular little game because all my life I had been used to taking responsibility for others.

But in Carla's case there was a sense in which I really was to blame. I felt responsible for the suffering she had been through in those first few days after she was born. With that uppermost in my mind, I was bound to see all her reproaches in later life as justified. I heard in them the voice of the newborn baby unable to tell me what she was going through except by crying. Today I know it was a mistake. I had an adult woman in front of me and all I saw was that poor, helpless, forsaken child she had once been. It was just like my relationship with Max. For much too long I thought that in Carla there was a lovable, unspoiled child trying to get out, a child she refused to let live. And it was with that child that I kept trying to communicate.

That didn't help Carla at all. It wasn't until I gave up trying to repair the past that Carla's life eventually took a more settled course. I finally came to terms with the fact that it was about time to give up my old pattern of the helpless helper. With my own daughter it was of course harder than with anyone else. I had, however, to face up to the fact that it was not in my power to change the way the consequences of my own fate were reflected in the lives of my daughters. It was something only they could contrive to do. My younger daughters found it much easier than Carla to develop their gifts and make use of their potential, because the early part of their lives had been much less stressful. Thanks maybe to the experience of breast-feeding, they were able to build up a feeling of trust in me from the outset. And today that has helped them to have far fewer problems establishing relationships with other people. I hope that someday Carla will find an empathic partner, someone with whom she feels secure enough to shake off the artificial sides of her character and to open up.

That chance encounter with you has stirred up so much that was dormant in me. But I'm glad. It would have been such a shame if we'd never heard from each other again. And I'm glad I could tell you so much about my marriage and the pain in my relationship with Carla. With my other friends, I've always tried to defend Max, or else I was ashamed to admit that I had stood for that intolerable situation so long. Some of my friends even tried to play the intermediary, to help me to understand Max better. That was what hurt me most of all. After all, it was my unending attempts to understand Max that had finally brought me to much pain.

I had no access to what was really wrong with him. And my big problem is that my feelings of love wither if I find I can't understand the other person at all. I was able to tell you all about the situation I was in because I knew you'd take my part. I needed you to be biased in my favor. And the fact that you knew Max also helped. It's only a small and very subjective part of a long story; but how can you describe the ins and outs of twenty years of marriage in one single letter?

As far as my relationship with Carla is concerned, I now see it as a consequence of my speechless childhood and the situation that the marriage to Max put me in.

Heredity may also have played a part, but contemporary geneticists have established that if a child grows up under optimal conditions it's even possible to change, or at least modify, his or her innate genetic programs. I'm sure that's true. If Carla had had a relaxed, protective, understanding environment in our family, she would have been able to develop more trust right from the start. But there was no way for me of to change her life. Interestingly enough, it was only after I gave up my struggle and false hope that I have finally gained more real confidence in Carla's future.

I didn't want to turn all psychological on you; I just wanted to tell you about the impasses in my life, the blind alleys I've got stuck in since we parted ways. Fortunately, I managed to get out of them in the end. And I thank my lucky stars for that.

All the very best from your old—and new—friend,

CLAUDIA

DEAR CLAUDIA,

I was very touched, and very sorry, to hear how much and how long you suffered in your family. But you have succeeded in extricating your life from that web of pain. You haven't succumbed to your distress; you haven't lost courage. Two weeks ago, in San Diego, you seemed much more outgoing and relaxed than I remember you being in Berkeley, although you've had such a tough time of it.

Some people might say, "Don't take life so hard; don't try to understand all those things there can never be an answer for." Others might say, "Why do you blame only yourself for all the things that Carla wasn't given in those first few years? If the doctors and nurses didn't know how harmful camphor is, how could you have known? And anyway, the baby had a father, didn't she? Couldn't he have cuddled the baby and reassured her? Aren't both parents responsible for their child?"

There may be some truth in all that. But given who you are, you want to understand your own life as well as you can. And you certainly have the right. There are plenty of people who don't seek to make sense of their life. Another thing you say is that in order to love others you have to be able to understand them. I'm like that myself. That's why I feel close to you, and that's probably why you confided in me. I'm grateful for your trust and I want you to know that I treasure it.

Like yours, my first marriage was also marred by endless misunderstandings. It was less traumatic than your experience, but you certainly couldn't call it fulfilling. I never felt understood, but to be honest I never understood Nicole either. So why did I marry her? For a long time I thought it might have been defiance, to spite you and show you I didn't care that you left me. I wanted a marriage in which I could be more or less

sure that I wouldn't be left a second time. But a motive like that is much too weak to sustain a marriage. Soon I felt as if I was in a cage, penned in without the guts to articulate my own wishes, just the way it had been with my mother. I never dared contradict her, either.

In my marriage I had a much starker sense of unease than in my childhood, but I still couldn't put a name to it. Nicole seemed to live in a different world. I felt I was all alone and hopelessly at the mercy of my own feelings. I see that clearly now. With Monica, the relationship is very different: it's genuinely mutual. I always thought that we two had been able to communicate frankly, but when you got involved with Max I started thinking my good memories of you must have been an illusion. I simply couldn't understand you anymore.

Now I see why you tormented yourself with Max all those years, why you put up with an emotional cripple who was unkind to you on top of everything else. For already, as a child, you were expected to cope with things that were too much for you. I'm sure that my childhood was heaven compared with yours. But there were still a couple of things it took me years to work out for myself, notably my relationship with my mother. But, unlike you, I had brothers and sisters, so I wasn't alone with my family problems.

In my first marriage I always assumed it was my resentment at the things I'd gone through in my childhood that stopped me from understanding Nicole. I often blamed myself, thinking I ought to be able to understand every woman. My mother always expected so much understanding from me. Naturally I was much too young to be able to live up to those expectations, but that didn't stop me from doing the best I could. Since I met Monica, I've realized that those attempts were doomed to failure, the simple reason being that Nicole and I had nothing in common. I still don't understand her, even today, although now that our children are grown and living their own lives we no longer have any reason to get in each other's hair.

My youngest son seems to have interests similar to Nicole's—career, fashion, luxury. Like you, it took me a long time to get over feeling guilty for not having much contact with him after the divorce. After all, if I'd spent more time with him I might have been able to get him interested in things of the mind. But now I realize that he's perfectly entitled to be like his mother, and it's not my fault if he is. The business between you and Carla is much more complicated because it got off on the wrong foot and you blamed yourself for everything. Nothing was going to make you admit that she might also have become like her father. That was probably what hurt you most. I know you and I know Max, so I can imagine why it hit you so hard.

There's nothing we can do to change what we've been through with our children. In the last few years I've been deeply preoccupied with the question of what we can do to avoid unnecessary suffering in very early life or, failing that, to achieve a better understanding so that we can help children to come to terms with it at as early an age as possible.

It's only very recently that scientists have finally come around to admitting the

cardinal importance that frequent stroking and massaging has for the development of the infant brain in the first two years of life. It's something that Ashley Montagu was urging almost thirty years ago² and a couple of other psychologists also chimed in at the time. But now there are even features on it in *Newsweek*,³ and that means there's far more likelihood of parents being made to realize how badly their babies need to be in constant physical contact with them. Nicole and I didn't know much about that. As in your own case, it was only later that we became painfully aware of the sins of omission we had unwittingly committed.

It was Monica who first drew my attention to this. She works with midwives and expectant mothers and does what she can to explain the importance of bonding, the direct skin and eye contact between mother and newborn child. It's hard to understand, but despite all the parenting courses and the masses of books for mothers-to-be, there are still thousands of women who have no idea how important the first few minutes after birth are for the child's well-being, both then and later in life. They are entirely ignorant of the fact that a mother who has physical contact with her baby in those first few minutes will find it easier to divine the baby's needs simply by virtue of being "in touch" with him or her. Her body releases hormones that help her to sense what those needs really are. There can be no better foundation for the child's later development.

Monica and I do what we can to spread the word among parents-to-be and the medical and nursing staff at the hospitals. Many adults are simply unaware that a baby is a feeling individual right from the start. They are skeptical when told how emotionally sensitive babies are, how important it is to take that into account. The skepticism is understandable; after all, they were taught as children to be as insensitive as possible in that respect. Some only acknowledge the fact after they've been in therapy, and then it's sometimes too late for these insights to do their children much good. A great deal has been done in the last few years to make the emotional world of babies and infants better understood, but it still isn't enough by any means. Some experts are only just beginning to take the degree of early infant traumatization in hospitals seriously.

Recently I read a book about circumcision. According to the author, Ronald F. Goldman,⁴ research has shown that more than 80 percent of the last generation of American males were routinely circumcised after birth for reasons of "hygiene." Men rediscovering their early infant emotions in therapy frequently report that they felt betrayed because their mothers had agreed to the circumcision. The campaign against this routine procedure was initiated by a number of nurses who refused to have any part in it.

The author of the book, a physician, quotes a number of surveys demonstrating how difficult it is to persuade doctors of the harm done by circumcision. They either deny that it represents any kind of trauma at all, or they play down the effects it has. Goldman draws on numerous examples from his everyday clinical practice to substantiate his theory that many mothers agree to this medical intervention against their own feelings. For most of them it was not even associated with any kind of religious convictions, and later they suffered pangs of conscience about having let it be

done to their babies.

One woman reported that after the birth, her son never cried and was always happy and trusting during breast-feeding. Then he was taken away from her to be circumcised, and after that nothing was the way it had been before. He cried frequently, refused to breast-feed, and the relationship between them was permanently disturbed. This is doubly tragic after such a promising beginning. What you said about camphor reminded me of this story, and I'm sure there are lots of women who've been through similar experiences.

Today I believe there are two things that are needed: information, of course, but equally—at least in cases of severe abuse—the insight into our own suffering. It is only then that we can accept this vital information and react responsibly to our own situations. Both are mutually reinforcing. Sensitivity to the signals being emitted by newborn babies will presumably come of its own accord once we stop warding off what we know from our own biographies.

There can be no doubt that there would be fewer tragic errors if more were done to disseminate these new insights. But there's a definite risk that this information will go unheeded as long as our feelings are captive to total amnesia. Intellectual knowledge alone is not enough; that kind of knowledge does not penetrate to the level of our actual behavior, our actions. But strong emotional experiences can do precisely that. And these emotions will inevitably be released when people start telling a sympathetic person they trust about their own childhood. Today there are even video features that prove the point.

There's a documentary by a Japanese television team I saw. Hardened criminals, murderers most of them, who have never allowed themselves to have any feelings, are given group therapy during which they talk about their childhood. It's amazing to see how much emotion is reflected in their faces as they do so. Many are able to cry for the first time in their lives, to grieve over their own personal fate and what they have done to their victims. They begin to realize that the murders they have committed were attempts to escape from what they are now feeling.

When you see those faces change, you suddenly realize that no amount of reading or press coverage could ever have had the same effect as the eruption of long-lost feelings in the presence of someone who is genuinely willing to listen. Only now are they able to understand why they did something they never wanted to do; only now are they receptive to information that can help them to avoid committing similar acts in the future. The implacable repression of their feelings kept them captive not only to their own ignorance but also to the danger they represented for society and for themselves.

It is very painful to be confronted with the sufferings of our childhood. So I can well understand why many people choose a different path and just don't want to know. But I'm glad that not everybody opts for that course, and I'm glad that we've met again after all these years. In Berkeley there were lots of barriers between us, but it looks as if deep down we've always been similar. It's just that when we were younger we were

not free enough to live our lives the way we really were.

All my love,
DANIEL