

Interview from The Online Newshour, Dec. 19, 2000

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: One-quarter of the adults in this country under the age of 44 are children of divorce. A new book, "The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce," by Judith Wallerstein, Julia Louis, and Sandra Blakesly, explores how divorce continues to shape the lives of young people, even after they reach full adulthood. The book builds on therapist Judith Wallerstein's 30-year study of 131 children and adolescents from 60 divorcing families in Marin County, just North of San Francisco. Wallerstein is the founder of the Judith Wallerstein Center for the Family in Transition.

You've been looking at these kids-- and now adults-- for 30 years. What's the legacy now that they're adults of divorce?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: The legacy-- and it's a very surprising legacy to me, but I think it's one that has really hit a chord throughout this country-- is that the major impact of divorce is not, as we thought, at the time of the breakup, although that's very hard, but the major impact of divorce happens when they enter young adulthood and they... when the man/woman situation, man/woman relationship moves center stage, and that's when the ghosts of the parent's divorce rise from the basement.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: So you really learned a lot about not only what happens to them as adults, but looking back, you learned more even about what they had suffered as kids when you talked to them now, right?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: I learned a lot. But I learned it in many ways. I knew them as children, so when they described their childhood memories, I could check with what I knew and remembered. And I happened to remember everything they told me-- although sometimes I can't remember what I did yesterday. But when they talked about having children, they all... Many of them said, in a surprising number, "I wouldn't want any child of mine to have my childhood," which was one of the most telling statements they made.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Many of them felt they had no childhood after the divorce, right?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: They really felt they had sacrificed their playtime, their childhood friendships. They had to spend a lot of time going back and forth from mother's house to father's house. They wanted to see their parents, but they wanted to see their friends, and they wanted to participate in the activities of the playground, and so on. And they did feel that they sacrificed a lot to their parent's divorce.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: So what is it that you most notice and know about them as adults that this divorce led to?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: They have a lot of trouble in believing that they can love somebody, or that somebody is going to love them, and that it's going to be a relationship that's going to last. And they're very convinced that they're going to go down the same path, and that their relationships are going to fail, and they say so very openly. One young woman says, "you can hope for love, but you can't expect it." Another: "Any relationship I'm in, I know I'm going to jinx; any relationship, any family I would be in would be a failure."

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And this time, you had another group you looked at, people now adults who had lived through maybe difficult times, but their families didn't divorce. What did you find? What differences did you find?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: Oh, I found striking differences that I didn't expect: That these young people, many of whom lived across the street and were friends of the people who participated in the study, when they reached adulthood, they had some templates, some internal images about what marriage was about, that marriage has its ups and downs; that it's a serious business. And they said, you know, "my dad told me anything that's worth having is worth fighting for." And they knew how people related to each other. And when they went looking for partners, they got into affairs, they got into all kinds of issues. I mean, it's an anxious time for everybody in our society. But they had in their minds what a marriage is about, and they didn't have the conviction that -- this is so tragic -- that their relationships would fail.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Mm-hmm. Why did this surprise you? I would think it would be fairly obvious, that if your parents are divorced, you might expect that you would be... have the same bad luck.

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: Because what we all believe now in America-- and all of our resources have gone into this-- that it's the breakup that matters. And we tell parents-- attorneys tell them, mental health people tell them-- that if you can settle your problems between you with civility, if you can settle the financial affairs with some justice, and if the child will continue to have contact with both parents, the child is home free. That's what we say, and that's what we've been believing. And I have to confess, I've contributed to that, because my work has shown that it is an upset for the children at the time. But I didn't expect that the greatest upset -- I'm talking now about divorce as a cumulative experience-- that the greatest impact would be in their 20s and in their 30s; that's scary.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: I found the book a devastating critique of divorce. Some people out there listening might be thinking, well, this is so hard on people that are children of divorce, but I have to get a divorce; there's something in my marriage that makes it necessary. What do you say to those people?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: I'm not taking a stand against divorce. I'm saying nobody from the outside can quantify the suffering of any man or any woman. But I am saying, and I show in my book, that a number of people who were disappointed in the marriage and disappointed in each other but found parenting rewarding-- not that they were martyrs, but that the parenting was rewarding and were able to do it together-- that their children felt protected and nurtured, and the children in the divorced families felt somehow exposed.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Is your group... Marin County is a wealthy county, one of the wealthiest counties in the country, and your group is all from Marin County -- can you really draw conclusions that work for the whole country based on your sample?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: My group represents divorce under the best circumstances. I chose youngsters who were psychologically sturdy. They weren't in any trouble before the breakup. Their parents are well-educated, and they didn't...there was nobody on welfare, there was nobody who really suffered poverty, like many, many families do after the breakup. And so, I think I was able to see the psychological impact with great clarity. Does this apply to all families in America? Nothing applies to all families in America. But so far, every one of my findings has held up with large studies, and that's a record of 30 years.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: What do you say to that person out there listening who does feel it's most necessary to get a divorce? What do you say that might help limit these really negative consequences?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: Well, there are a lot of myths I think are unfortunate. Many parents are told that if you're unhappy, the child is unhappy. A child is not a mirror of a parent. A child has a stance of his own, and many children... most children, when there's a divorce, are very surprised by the parents' action.

So my first message is, don't jump, stand still. Get whatever help you need. There are many situations where divorce is the best choice, but there are many more where it isn't. And it's hard for me to believe that 45% of marriages are so bad that they really need to divorce, and that's what's happening in this country.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And then what? If you do decide you have to get one, what can make the situation better?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: I think parents have to realize they're in it for the long haul; that their children are going to need their help in separating their fates from the fates of their parents; that the parents need to say, our marriage is not representative. They can go out of their way perhaps to enlist the help of grandparents or other members of the family or friends who have good marriages, because these young people grew up with the sense that they had never seen a man or a woman on the same beam, to use their language, and they didn't... weren't sure that that existed anywhere.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: What's at stake here for the nation as a whole?

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: I think the nature of our society, I think we are very fortunate that this is not a very cynical group. These are young people who want love, they want marriage, they want lasting relationships. A lot of them are staying single. A huge number are staying single. These are national statistics, and these are mine. Second divorces are higher than first divorces. And if we can come to some consensus that we need a protection to bring up children, then we have to in some way reverse direction.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Well, Judith Wallerstein, thanks for being with us.

JUDITH WALLERSTEIN: Thank you.

From: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/w/wallerstein-unexpected.html>

The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce

A 25 Year Landmark Study

By JUDITH WALLERSTEIN, JULIA LEWIS, and SANDRA BLAKESLEE

Hyperion

When a Child Becomes the Caregiver

Karen James's visit drove me to continue probing the long-term effects of divorce on children. The minute she left, I went to my study and drew out her family's record to refresh my memory. I have copious files on each family member in our study, including verbatim transcripts of past interviews, letters from teachers, notes describing dollhouse play, children's drawings, comments from parents about their own lives and their beliefs about their children, comments from children showing an astonishing difference in perceptions, and my own margin notes about what each family represents. The first item that caught my eye was a drawing Karen had done when we met. (Children's drawings often tell you what they are feeling and reveal far more than spoken words.) Karen had depicted each member of her family in meticulous detail—her mother, father, eight-year-old brother Kevin, and six-year-old sister Sharon. Dressed in bright colors, they were standing very close together, each smiling broadly. Even the cat was smiling. "My Family" was printed across the top in large block letters. I was intrigued by Karen's capacity

to maintain an image of serenity in her drawing because by now I was privy to the shrieking disorganization in her family life. Karen's wish for peace and family togetherness was poignantly clear. As I was to learn, this was the central desire of her life.

The James divorce totally bewildered the children. Though on a rocky course for several years, the marriage was functioning (in the children's eyes) and family life seemed pre

The real storm began with the sudden traumatic death of Mrs. James's mother, who was killed in a highway accident. Mrs. James collapsed with grief. She had depended on her mother for advice, affection, and help in maintaining the social façade of a happy marriage. The death precipitated an agitated depression in Mrs. James, who became increasingly angry at the world and critical of everyone around her. She turned to her husband for solace, love, compassion, and sexual intimacy. He became the chief target of her rage because he did not provide the help she needed. Quarrels that were part of the marriage began to magnify and cascade as the anger took on a life of its own. Soon their life was nothing but a series of arguments, each louder than the next. Dr. James was badly frightened by the intensity of his wife's needs and withdrew further. Reeling from both losses, she attacked him more and more wildly. Stung by her loud accusations of his failings, he countered with accusations of infidelity, long-standing frigidity, and incompetent mothering. As best I could make out, the final trigger was Dr. James's departure for a two-day dermatology convention. Consumed by her anger, she impulsively sought legal counsel and filed for divorce.

As I looked over the record and searched my memory, I was surer than ever that the James's quarrels had more passion than content. They were not fighting over infidelity—which was apparently old hat—so much as wanting to hurt each other. Each heatedly denied the other's accusations. Yet, like so many divorcing couples, they fought savagely, as the children looked on helplessly or ran away and hid. As happens in many families, there was no disagreement around child custody or visiting. Mrs. James would have done anything to irritate her husband, including making him take the kids—as long as that is what he did not want.

Anger Doesn't End with Divorce

The marriage was dissolved amid rising chaos within the family. The parents' fury at each other did not subside over the years that followed, although it was never fought out in the courts. This is a familiar situation for those of us who work with divorcing couples. Contrary to what most people think (including attorneys and judges), the vast majority of divorcing parents do not drag their conflicts into the courtroom. The 10 to 15 percent of couples who do fight in court consume the lion's share of our attention but they do not represent the norm. Most parents negotiate a divorce settlement, decide on custody arrangements, and go their separate ways. Unfortunately, many of them stay intensely angry with one another. In our study, a third of the couples were fighting at the same high pitch ten years after their divorce was final. Their enduring anger stemmed from continued feelings of hurt and humiliation fueled by new complaints (child support is too burdensome or too little) and jealousy over new, often younger partners. The notion that divorce ends the intense love/hate relationship of the marriage is another myth of our times. Like many divorced people, Karen's mother frequently called her ex-husband and got into shouting matches. As a result, the children were exposed to the hurt and anger that led to the breakup throughout their growing up years. Millions of children today experience the same unrelenting drama of longing and anger that refuses to die.

It is, of course, hard to know how often divorce is precipitated by factors outside the marriage. I have seen a good number of such instances. Indeed, it is one of the common causes—or more precisely, final triggers—of divorce, yet few people seem to recognize its importance. Whenever people are shaken by a

serious loss in their lives—be it the termination of a job, death of a parent, serious illness in a child, or any grievous event that can evoke powerful and primitive passions—the bereaved person will turn to their spouse for comfort. If the partner responds with understanding and tenderness, the marriage can be forever enriched. But the tragedy can also split people apart when the bereaved person is deeply disappointed in the partner's response and feels rejected in his or her hour of greatest need. Grief turns to rage as the two people end up irrationally blaming the other—one for not having empathy, the other for making insatiable demands. The initial loss is soon compounded, anger and accusations take over, and the marriage cascades downward. Mrs. James followed this script to the letter.

It's especially tragic when divorce occurs as the sequel to a serious life crisis. The suffering person loses whatever support there was in the marriage and confronts the transition from marriage to singlehood in a depleted state. The children are badly frightened and apprehensive about what lies ahead. It's as if the entire family at its weakest point is expected to deal with an earthquake and its aftershocks.

What happened to this family is instructive. Many people, including lawyers, judges, and mediators, don't understand how often in divorce seemingly rational complaints cloak powerful, irrational feelings. Or they assume that the complaints always reflect anger at the spouse and not some other deep sadness. However familiar Mrs. James's marital troubles sounded to her attorney, her anger did not arise from the marriage per se but from a secondary loss that fueled her rage. Ideally, her grief over her mother's sudden death and her inability to mourn should have been addressed before she moved ahead to make thoughtful decisions about her divorce and her children.

This is the kind of rage that can last for decades after divorce and it is the kind of anger that leaves lasting residue on a child's personality. As an adult, Karen is terrified of conflict because it's so dangerous. But we're getting ahead of our story.

Becoming a Caregiver Child

Six months after the divorce, Dr. James married a much younger woman whom the children liked very much. She was lively, funny, and did not try to intrude into their lives as a rule-making stepmother but rather befriended them and treated them warmly. Unfortunately, Dr. James carried some baggage into his second marriage and it, too, was stormy, featuring many unexplained weekend departures by the second wife. Three years later, she kissed the children good-bye and left to marry another man. "I was a basket case," Dr. James told me during one of our follow-up interviews. The children were stunned, bereft of explanation for the second loss in their family life.

Nor did Mrs. James find much happiness in the years after her divorce. She had several love affairs followed by a second marriage. The new husband, who ran a landscape business, could not tolerate the children and soon grew bored with his pretty wife. The marriage lasted less than five years, throwing the mother into continued turmoil.

For Karen, the legacy of divorce was that she moved into the role of substitute parent for her younger siblings and of confidante and adviser to her troubled mother and father. It was an entirely new role for this child who, like many others before the divorce, had been leading a fairly protected life. Yet Karen undertook the classic role of caregiver or "parentified" child with aplomb and grace. In fact, she was a model parent. "My brother is scared of a lot of things," she once warned me.

"What is he scared of?"

"Of the dark. Of going upstairs. Of being alone. I try to take care of him. I go into his room every night, so he won't cry." Many young girls voluntarily move to fill the vacuum created by parents who collapse emotionally, and sometimes physically, after divorce. The caregiver child's job, as she defines it, is to keep the parent going by acting in whatever capacity is needed—mentor, adviser, nurse, confidante. The range is wide depending on the parent's need and the child's perception. One ten-year-old in this group got up regularly with her insomniac mother at midnight to watch television and drink beer. She frequently stayed home from school to make sure that her mother would not become depressed and suicidal or take the car out when she was drinking. A father told me how his twelve-year-old daughter had packed his clothing, helped him to find an apartment, and arranged to do his shopping. She called him nightly to make sure that he had gotten home safely, and to beg him to stop smoking. Although most caregivers are girls, we've seen several dramatic instances of boys who undertook similar roles. One fourteen-year-old boy, whose mother abandoned the family, stopped going to school and undertook all of his mother's responsibilities, including shopping, cooking, cleaning, and caring for his father who was in a state of collapse. Such children soon sacrifice their friends, school activities, and, most important, their sense of being children—childhood itself. In return, they gain a sense of pride and the feeling that they have saved a parent's life. When there are siblings at home, the caretaker child moves forthrightly into the parental role and takes charge of running the house, making dinners, seeing that homework is done, putting little ones to bed, cleaning bathrooms late at night. Karen was well suited for this caretaking job and quickly learned to keep her own feelings under tight control. To her great credit, Karen had enormous compassion for both of her parents and was especially comforting to her mother, who in turn acknowledged how much she depended on her ten-year-old.

With no hint of embarrassment, Mrs. James told me, "Karen takes care of me. She understands me without words." Like most parents who come to rely heavily on their children, she had little or no awareness of the child's heavy sacrifice of her own playtime and friendships. She wasn't aware of the fact that Karen was missing school and not paying attention to classroom work. Instead, she spoke as if Karen were an adult or even a much older person. "When she sees me sitting alone in the evening, she knows that I feel sad and she puts her arms around me. She is also very wise. She told me to get rid of my boyfriend. 'He will only hurt you,' she said. I've learned to listen to her."

And who, I wondered, does Karen turn to for soothing words? Who does she have to comfort her in the years following divorce? Or does she gradually learn to block her own feelings and needs because they are too painful?

Karen told me how she liked to sit alone in her grandmother's garden where it was quiet and she felt safe. I regretted that she didn't have many friends but was pleased to hear she had at least this one oasis. I remember Karen years later telling me, "My grandmother saved my life."

There's no way for a sensitive child to see her mother cry or her father fall into depression without worrying that she's the cause of it—and so she takes full responsibility for her mother's tears and father's moods. I watched Karen with a feeling of great helplessness, realizing there was nothing I could do to alleviate her pain or slake her thirst for protection. I remember once asking her, "What will you be when you grow up, Karen?"

She blushed. "I want to work with children who are blind or retarded or who can't speak." I thought of Karen's mother who sat alone and cried, of her brother who was afraid of the dark, of all the sorrowful people in this family, including herself, whom this amazing child wanted to rescue and I almost cried.

When a child forfeits her childhood and adolescence to take on responsibilities for a parent, her capacity to enjoy her life as a young person, develop close friendships, and cultivate shared interests is

sacrificed. Beyond this loss, there is a major psychological hazard if the upside-down dependence goes on too long. The child may become trapped into feeling that she alone must rescue the troubled parent. When she attends to her own needs and wishes, she feels guilty and undeserving. This happens if the parent's unhappiness continues for years and the parent comes to rely on the child for comfort or when the child herself assumes the role and won't give it up. Whatever its origins, the child feels obliged to care for the parent in whatever capacity is needed—as caregiver, companion, mentor, or the person who keeps depression at bay. Karen said, "My mom has no one. Only me."

As strange as this sounds, many of these youngsters believe that it's their duty to keep their parent alive. Without them, the parent would die. This is an awesome responsibility, especially for a child who has no one to confide in. It is far beyond the kind of help a devoted child gives to a parent in a temporary crisis, divorce or otherwise. It is an overburdening that seriously inhibits the child's freedom to separate normally and to lead a healthy adolescence. Bound to the troubled parent by unbreakable strands of love, compassion, guilt, and self-sacrifice, the child is not free to leave home emotionally or to follow her heart in love or marriage. In fact, the parents and siblings may not feel able to function without her. They may cling to her and block her exit. As I was to learn later, many of these child caregivers reinstalled the rescue relationship that they had with their parents into their adult relationships with the opposite sex. This is a serious long-term consequence of divorce for those who become caught up in the caregiver role.

The Diminished Parent

By the time Karen was fifteen, her home situation had changed very little. She made no waves in high school and got just passing grades. Her teachers described her as being quiet, reserved, and ladylike. They made no inquiries about her frequent absences, perhaps assuming too easily that someone at home was ill and she was needed. Clearly she was not working to her potential. How could she?

Again I asked Karen about her plans for the future and she replied in what had become her customary grave, thoughtful manner. "I'd like to get married and maybe have kids. But you never know, you might get a divorce. I don't ever want that."

To understand how divorce affects children over the long haul, we need to explore the fact that the divorced family is not just a cut-off version of the two-parent family. The postdivorce family is a new family form that makes very different demands on each parent, each child, and each of the many new adults who enter the family orbit. For millions of American children the experience of growing up—of simply *being* a child—has changed. For millions of adults, the experience of being a parent has been radically transformed.

The first thing we need to acknowledge is the close link between the marital bond and the parent-child relationship. Every parent and child knows this is true. When the marriage is working and the couple is content, the parent-child relationship is nourished and rewarded by the parents' love and appreciation for each other and supported by their cooperation. But when the tie is severed, the break sends messages throughout the system that quickly reach the children. The first message is that parenting is diminished. The adults are now each on their own and occupied with building separate lives. How will I manage and where am I going and how can I put my life together?

How does this diminished parenting show up? Ask any child of divorce. In every domain of the child's life, parents are less available and less organized, provide fewer dinners together or even clean clothing, and do not always carry out regular household routines or help with homework or offer soothing bedtime rituals. But the big picture is more troublesome than the details. When the marriage breaks, children take

on a new meaning for their parents. They may become a much heavier burden. Or they are an unfortunate residue from a dream that failed. Or they may give hope and meaning to a parent's life.

After divorce a surprising number of otherwise well-functioning adults reach out to children for help with their grown-up problems. In Karen's case, this kind of behavior became the norm, leading her into the role of caretaker child. But in many families, the reversal of parent and child roles is more or less temporary, albeit shocking. One father told me that he revealed all his business and personal plans in Castro-like lectures to his seven-year-old son who "understands everything." In our playroom, this child's play consisted of running a Mack truck over a little car. Parents who are otherwise mature and responsible in their social and professional commitments will choose to be vulnerable in front of their children. Suddenly they place tremendous stock in the child's opinion—even when the child knows absolutely nothing about the issue at hand. Thus the adult will ask for advice about a lover, how and where to live, whether or not to remarry, and whom to choose. Others share their disappointments in love with very young children. I was startled when Sammy, who was four, comforted his grieving mother whose lover had just left by saying, "He shouldn't quit in the middle. That's not right."

The parents' motives are not hard to understand. Even women who choose to leave their marriages and have successful careers will feel alone and beleaguered as they face new responsibilities and have to make decisions alone, without advice from a partner. Men are also depressed and lonely at this time. They need help setting up a home for themselves and to be reassured that their children want to see them. Men and women alike feel isolated and alienated from former friends who may be reluctant to take sides—and thus stay away from both. Other friends are concerned about the cracks in their own marriages and will keep a safe distance. Family members often disapprove of the divorce and do not hesitate to say so. Feeling hurt and defeated, each parent naturally turns to the children as their most loyal confidants. Both rely heavily on their offspring for sympathy and companionship. These youngsters literally help keep the parents going. They are remarkably intuitive about adult depression and protect their parents from pressures outside and inside the home. Twenty-five years after divorce, many men and women still say to me, "I would not have made it except for this child."

Given how emotionally dependent on their children many parents become, it's not surprising to see bitter custody or visitation fights over who has priority in the child's life. Many parents come to believe that without that child, they have no one. Their only remaining important life relationship and loyal support lies with that child. Thus the legal battle often has its roots in adult despair and not, as many people think, in the parents' simple desire to spend more time with the child. Men and women tell me that when the child is with the other parent they become seriously depressed and wander restlessly from room to room unable to bear their loneliness. Sometimes this behavior occurs only during the months following the breakup. But it can also endure, providing the basis for endless litigation over custody and visiting. Such battles may distract parents from their personal misery but they hardly resolve it.

As these relationships develop, parents and children often become more like peers than separate generations, which in turn can make the children more independent and responsible. They are justifiably proud of their achievement. Many of our efforts to understand the impact of divorce on children have assumed incorrectly that the child is a passive vessel who is shaped by the changes ushered in by a divorce. *But the child is an active agent.* (This is a theme I will develop in depth in a later chapter.) No one asked Karen to step forward. She did it on her own. Her role in the postdivorce family was entirely different from her role in the predivorce family. In some homes, everyone benefits from the child's new role. Adults gain needed help. Children gain maturity and self-confidence. They also show a moral sensibility and compassion for others far beyond their years, which they can draw upon later in their adult relationships and often in their career choices. Karen's decision to study public health and to develop programs for crippled children was by her own account rooted in the early responsibility she took as a

child. For the fortunate parent who is able to rely on the child to get through the extended divorce crisis, the child's availability may tip the balance between chronic dysfunction and recovery.

Of course, caregiving by a child can occur in intact families when a parent is ill or troubled. I recall one little girl, Martha, the oldest of three siblings, who took over running the household for a year when her mother was recovering from a serious car accident. Martha and her father shared in parenting the younger children and in taking care of Martha's mother. The difference was that although the mother was in a wheelchair for many months, she maintained close touch with what was going on in the home. Both parents maintained adult responsibility for all their children at home. Martha matured as a result of her experience and was rewarded by both parents with appreciation and praise. In many immigrant families one of the older children often is responsible for helping the adults to understand the new language and strange culture. Here, too, the child performs vital functions that enable the family to keep going, but the adults maintain their responsibility at the head of the family.

In contrast, in a postdivorce family, the child often takes responsibility for the one or both parents who are temporarily or lastingly overwhelmed by the crisis. This situation can be compounded by the adult's subsequent disappointments in relationships. A formerly competent mother or father is unable to carry on as before. Recovery from a divorce is a lot harder than we have realized and it lasts a lot longer. As a result, the burden falls on the child who steps forward to take charge—out of compassion and often out of unrealistic guilt. This is one way that divorce profoundly changes not only the child's experience but, as Karen illustrates, the whole personality of the child as she grows up and becomes an adult. Caregiving that involves sacrificing one's own wishes for the needs of others is poor preparation for happy choices in adult relationships, as we'll see in coming chapters. ø