

Family Relationships

‘What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments,
but what is woven into the lives of others.’

Pericles

Leena

Mother of the Bride

Leena was angry. She knew she should be happy that her daughter, Anita, was engaged to be married. She liked her prospective son-in-law well enough, but she was fighting with her daughter. As she spoke she twisted her watch distractedly, anger written on her face. Her eyes looked as if they were searching for a target; I suspected it would be me. I guessed beneath her anger was a pulsating hurt, which I would need to understand, and keep in mind now, to maintain my empathy for her.

I acknowledged the differences between us, particularly with regard to our contrasting attitude to family. I was a white, non-practising Christian, who held Western beliefs – we tend to be more individualistic, valuing self-reliance and independence. An Indian Hindu, Leena had a collectivistic view, valuing community dependence and authority. I’d understood duty was her abiding attitude. It wasn’t for her to question; it was her duty as a daughter, wife and mother to follow the code set by generations. Naturally I was biased: she might at times have to set me right. From the authoritarian manner in which Leena spoke to me, I was left in no doubt that she was used to getting her own way and was not interested in a different viewpoint.

She would happily put me right. I asked her to tell me a little about herself.

She had come to England from India thirty-five years ago to marry Devang, a member of a wealthy, property-owning family. As it was an arranged marriage, Leena had not met him prior to her engagement, which she stated with weight, as if it demonstrated her obedience at that age, tipping her chin forward as she spoke, her perfectly coiffed hair bouncing in agreement. Leena had built a good life in the UK: she was proud of her family, and happily married, with one son and two daughters. Anita was their younger daughter, a solicitor, and their last child to marry. Leena now worked in the family business, in charge of the interiors, and oversaw their philanthropic work.

Devang had suggested she see me because he didn't know how to resolve her dispute with Anita. As Leena spoke, the heat of her anger reverberated in her body, a shield of rage that pushed everyone away: the filter through which each thought was processed and influenced. I felt it was burning her inside, shutting down every other feeling, blocking tenderness and warmth. As she described her conflict with Anita, it was as if she was obsessively building the case against her in her mind to knock her out. Like building a battalion with which to attack her. Her rage sought action, which she couldn't take: it was stuck in her body. I needed to let her express it fully.

I didn't want to stoke her anger by colluding with her and adding outrage I didn't feel to hers. I wanted to let her know I had heard her feelings, reflecting her view and her fury, as accurately as I could, and that I could see how distressed she was. Anger cannot be argued away: that increases it. It needs to be listened to, and understood, to reduce its force.

At the heart of Leena and Anita's argument was love, separation and power. It played out over the kind of wedding they each envisaged. Leena wanted a full-length traditional Hindu wedding, with all their family and friends present. Anita wanted a simpler wedding, with fewer ornate ceremonies, and only the friends and family she knew. The further question as to whether they have a

ceremony in India, too, as was traditional, hadn't been addressed by either woman: they knew it would cause further conflict.

Over a number of weeks, in many different ways, Leena said the same thing. She believed her daughter's selfishness, arrogance and single-mindedness were abhorrent. Leena felt she had learned to adapt to a more Western culture, but she held core beliefs that were central to her, particularly in line with the more traditional idea of the Indian mother. I questioned Leena: did she feel guilty that at some level her daughter was diluting their Indian heritage or being disloyal to their Indian identity?

I caught a glimpse of the scared child doing wrong as she nodded and spoke of her own mother's pride and trust in her, which she did not want to betray. Anita's fight for her wishes, against the family view, not only felt wrong but disturbed her. It threatened her sense of unity as a family. For Leena, criticizing her daughter, telling her what was right and wrong, was a way of loving her: 'Who else is going to care?' Leena added. 'In India there is no sense of personal space, personal decisions, personal views. We hold close together to survive. Everybody knows what everybody is doing, and their opinion is included. We don't have separate views, or closed doors.' I could see the disturbance in her eyes as she described the look of contempt Anita had given her at their last meeting, following Leena's vehement argument for a traditional wedding. It had stung. How dare her daughter disrespect her in that way? Leena had woken up ruminating and, throughout the day, she had fights and confrontations with her daughter in her mind. When I commented gently that it must be isolating and exhausting, she nodded.

If I felt warmth towards Leena as I stepped inside her world, feeling that her love for Anita was matched by the pain of Anita's rejection. I began to wonder whether Leena's forcefulness covered up earlier versions of herself that were more vulnerable. I described to her the different sources of her rage that were informed by her experiences, and how they were profoundly challenged by Anita. There was the memory of herself as a child, having been dominated by a strong mother and grandmother, whom she had loved deeply but had been

afraid of, receiving sharp slaps if she wasn't totally obedient. Leena came from a long line of strong women, but those women had for centuries been subservient to men and the requirements of duty. There was herself as the fearful young woman coming to a strange country, entering the life of a family she'd never met, and remembering her respect for their rules. Neither of her other two children had brought up these feelings in her. Their weddings had been as she wanted – uncomplicated. Two families joining together was everyone's business, not only the couple's choice.

I could see she felt shocked that Anita, who had been the child she was closest to, given a life of privilege, was adamantly refusing to do as she was asked. It felt such a small request in comparison to her own upbringing. Anita's stubbornness baffled her. Leena believed that as Anita's mother she had earned her daughter's compliance, from a position of absolute authority. But vulnerability, too, lay beneath this, the question of her own failure as a mother: what had she done, what had she missed, that meant she had such a daughter?

Leena's relationship with Anita was deteriorating. They'd had a fight in the kitchen, when Leena had commented on her new haircut. I could tell by the tone she used when repeating the incident that her seemingly innocuous words – 'I see you have a new haircut' – had been loaded with criticism. Anita had banged down her mug, looked at her with cold disgust, said, 'How dare you?' and stormed out. Leena felt that look had conveyed many unspoken words: 'Who are you? I don't even know you. I certainly don't like you.'

Anita had refused to speak to her mother since, not replying to texts or calls. This had shaken Leena. As she told me, I could see more of the wound that lay beneath her anger and confusion. I felt the hit of Anita's verbal punch in my stomach. Over the next weeks of therapy sessions it felt as if a battle was taking place inside Leena – she woke in tears most mornings, but then would attack the day, keeping frantically busy with endless meetings and site visits, numbing her pain with activity.

I sensed, although Leena didn't voice it, the longing she felt to

be close to her daughter. Yet the pain she felt, which was expressed as righteous fury, came from the fear that she might have lost Anita. I could feel her worrying about the future and worked hard to find out what she imagined. I came up against subtle resistance: whatever I said, there was a nod but no emotional movement. I realized she didn't want to feel the pain of the void left by the loss of her youngest child: she wanted to skip to the 'next' thing, where she was right and happy again. But she had no emotional energy to do that, because she was invested in holding on tight.

I wondered whether the more Western approach, with the child becoming an adult, finally leaving home and being independent, would help her understand. As I spoke, Leena turned away. I wished I could reach her – I felt for her as a woman and a mother, and wanted to show I knew how hard it is to let go of our children. A new beginning cannot start without an ending: we have to go through the phase between, to experience the chaos and turbulence of not knowing. My strongly held Western perspective is that, as parents, we must learn to shift our position, take a back seat, let our children make their decisions for their lives, let them actively leave us, which frees them to choose to come back. If only she could change how she looked at Anita, it would enable Anita to change. The relationships would recalibrate, yes, but remain loving.

Over the next weeks, I felt we needed to bring into focus the broader relationship Leena had with Anita. It had been lost in the polarization of their wedding battle. I suggested Leena show me photographs of Anita as a child. She lit up at the idea – she loved those photographs. When she brought them in, I could see Anita tucked into her shoulder as a newborn baby, that new-mother bliss in Leena's face, luxuriating in loving her last child, pouring time and attention into her, enjoying her in a way she hadn't been able to with her first two children. As she spoke, slowly sifting through the photos, I could almost smell the deep bond of a mother and her newborn, her skin pressed to soft baby skin. Other photographs of holidays and birthdays showed a happy child, funny and outgoing, who looked very like her mother – making faces, dancing. Even

her adolescence had been relatively calm. This meant, to me, that they had not worked through many of the conflicts that allow the necessary separation between adult child and parent. I also wondered how much Anita had hidden from her mother to be, as Leena had voiced, 'the traditional perfect daughter' of her mother's dreams, while living life as a Westernized young woman.

I looked up from the photographs and clarified what I saw: Leena's intense love for Anita. I found a way to say that love was interchangeable in Leena's mind with control. Anita had opposed her, not to hurt her but with the intention of being an adult, soon-to-be wife. Anita's identity as a wife and adult was as much shaped by her Western upbringing as her Indian roots. She wanted to hold both. It seemed to me that, unconsciously, Leena viewed Anita's marriage as a threat to their bond, and was trying to regain control of their close connection through taking charge of the wedding. She had conflated love with obedience: if Anita didn't obey her, she didn't love her.

As I spoke, Leena froze. She looked very young and stricken. I described to her what I could see, and commented that she wasn't breathing. Leena took a big breath, then short shallow ones, as she held tight. She couldn't quite bear to let herself know her greatest fear. Her silence conveyed her uncertainty, a shift away from her position of being right. She moved around in her chair, crossing and uncrossing her legs, as if part of her could take in the push and pull of holding on and letting go, and another part couldn't... quite. I told her that I wasn't trying to force her in a particular direction: I understood the complexity of her dilemma. I hoped that, by bringing their whole relationship into her awareness, perhaps Leena had a clearer insight into what was going on. Leena nodded. The process of change, as uncomfortable as it was, had begun.

At a family dinner to celebrate Leena's son's birthday, Anita had not said a word to her but had been affectionate and warm with the rest of the family, in particular her father. Their closeness versus Leena's distance from Anita had created an atmosphere that pervaded the room. I felt Leena's jealousy and her rage. I asked

Leena what she felt in her body. She put a hand to her chest: it felt tight. As she breathed into it, she made a sound, animal-like, quiet but distressed. I asked her to stay with it. Tears came down her face, tears that signalled a loosening of her rigid grip.

Over the next weeks Leena's body was in revolt. She had headaches and tummy aches, and her back hurt. I talked to her about listening to her body, asking her what she thought it might be telling her. I suggested she take up exercise to release the tension, and develop habits to help calm herself. This was not natural to Leena, who knew how to overcome difficulty with grit and determination but had no idea about self-care. Duty was her abiding rule, not meeting or even knowing her own needs. Reluctantly she began to go to a yoga class, and significantly she started to write, which became an outlet for her whirring furious mind. She surprised herself with what came out of her pen, quoting her journal: 'I was never asked what I needed, felt, thought or wanted. I never argued or made demands on my mother.'

This led us to explore her silence as a child and a young woman. It had been passed down for perhaps twenty generations from mother to daughter, and to a great extent from her to Anita. It might have gone unchallenged if she hadn't come to the UK, but now Anita had different expectations. It was at the heart of their difficulty: Leena had no way to understand the emotional cost to herself of that silence. Yet again she was not being listened to, or being allowed to make a decision. Even when it was her time as a mother to influence her daughter, she was not being heard. She felt as if she had been oppressed and now she was still being oppressed, but by the younger generation. Our work was to help her develop a fuller picture of the different emotions, often conflicting, that were going on inside her.

I asked her to tell me what her husband and other family members thought. She sighed, twisted her watch. They wanted the disagreement to end. Her husband looked at her as if she was a mad woman. She felt alienated from them all. Being 'right', I said, could be lonely and make you angry. Finally, I felt I could tell her

that I suspected a primitive physical yowling lay beneath her anger. It overrode her thinking. She didn't want to let her daughter go – her last child. Her baby. It was as if she was mourning the ideal daughter she wanted and couldn't quite come to terms with the daughter she had, who wanted to be allowed to shift the centre of her world from her mother to her husband. I empathized with the strength of her feelings and how they must scare her. How she wanted to punish, almost crush, the child she had loved and protected most in the world through the hurt of losing her. Yet acting out her anger was harming them both.

Leena pulled her tailored jacket across her chest, as if armouring herself against my words, but she was silent, taking them in. Or at least some of them.

After a long five minutes, she asked me quietly what she should do. I responded equally quietly. It wasn't so much what she should do but what she could allow in herself. Could she allow herself to want to hold on to her daughter, and allow her daughter some independence? Could she let Anita be the child she was rather than the child Leena had imagined she should be? I acknowledged how confusing it was, since Anita was bi-cultural, and was, in her own way, negotiating how she could live an Indian and a British life.

Leena stamped her foot, with childlike frustration. She pressed her hands against her ears, as if her head was about to burst. I asked her to close her eyes, and breathe, then to hold her body very tight, squeezing every muscle for a few minutes, then release and let go. I followed with a relaxation exercise and could see the calm wash through her body. Now wasn't the time for words: it was time to let her system unwind. She left silently, allowing me to give her a hug, her large frame shaky as I held her.

I learned the following week that Leena had gone from our session and called Devang out of a meeting. She had asked him to come home early to her. A first. She needed him to hold her. She breathed in the scent of his peppery hair, felt the warmth of his arms. The pressure in her chest eased and she felt safety running through her veins. He listened as her tirade of loss and sadness,

rage and hurt flowed out of her into his increasingly damp shoulder. She'd cried for a long time, sobbing noisily. He had been kind, and he had held her. He had made her a cup of tea. She was surprised by how much calmer she felt. They agreed they needed to see Anita together: they needed to find a way forward.

Leena looked at me with a pride and warmth in her eyes that I hadn't seen before. The process between one phase of life and another can be achingly long, and sometimes it is wonderfully simple. In this case there was a real shift in Leena: her husband's support and love enabled her to picture a future where they were a close family, but she didn't have to maintain such a tight grip. They had met with Anita and agreed a compromise for the wedding. Anita was still wary of her mother, there was tension between them, but they had leaped the largest hurdle and had a plan to go forward. Leena loved a plan.

I felt the release of tension in my body. I told Leena that the power parents have to influence the wellbeing of their adult children is often underestimated. The relationship needs to be reconfigured, for sure, and the power balance recalibrated, but fundamentally the child is always a child with their parents. I wanted Leena to know that she could use her power collaboratively with Anita. She didn't have to have power over her. I talked about the importance of argument, which, when voiced, can be better than simmering disagreements. There are ways to have arguments that do battle over views but don't attack those engaged in them. Closeness can follow an honest disagreement, maybe allowing time for each party to feel less raw. It is never the argument that truly matters but the capacity to repair.

I touched on the symbolic meaning of her daughter's marriage. It was psychologically for Leena the symbol of her own physical decline, when she had to relinquish her unconscious youthful dream of immortality - her repair came through recognizing the healing power of generational continuity, perhaps even her future grandchildren, in whom the youth and beauty would reside.

Leena didn't need to see me any more: she had allowed herself

to change and felt our work was done. I very much hoped it was and wished her well.

Lucas

Newborn, New Dad

Lucas contacted me through an online search, asking me if I would see him to help him adjust to the birth, six months previously, of his son Lee. He told me in the email that life was calming down after the initial stress of a newborn. He wanted to take time to focus on how he felt, and on his central question: 'What kind of father am I?'

A few weeks later, when he walked into my room, he grinned broadly, his green eyes twinkling as he sat down. He was small but strong. He looked around the room, checked it out and nodded, not necessarily approvingly but getting his bearings as to where he was. I could feel him centring himself. On hearing his accent, I made the infuriating mistake of assuming he was American, and was told firmly that, no, he was Canadian, from Toronto.

Lucas lived in London as a freelance artist working for media campaigns, but that wasn't his choice. His voice dropped, he frowned and pushed his hand up against his jaw, against the discomfort of his words. He was selling his creative soul to the commercial sector because he hadn't as yet (the 'as yet' was very important) been able to establish himself securely as an artist to earn a decent living. His wife, Heather, a Chinese Canadian, was seven years older than Lucas. Aged forty-six, she worked as an executive in the pharmaceutical industry. It meant long hours and a lot of travel. She earned considerably more than her husband.

I soon realized how different this process would be from my usual therapy work. Lucas had high energy and a curiosity that drove the sessions. In adapting to being a father, he wanted to raise his awareness of all aspects of himself; he was distressed, maybe 'shaken' is a better word, but he wasn't in pain. Pain isn't the only

agent of change. Lucas seemed confident. This was going to be a robust exchange, which was interesting for me.

Lucas told me his story to give me context. He had already had therapy, and he wanted to use his childhood as the reverse map of how he'd bring up Lee but didn't want to delve too deeply – he'd done that. His starting position was, and this was said with emphatic certainty, that life was a constant flux of change. 'Change happens, but rarely in a straight line.' He said he was quoting Barack Obama, perhaps not the exact words the President spoke. I nodded vigorously.

Lucas had been brought up with what he felt was a deluded view, that the world worked by a fixed set of rules, and if they were followed – doing the prescribed job, dressing in a particular way, going to the right school – success would follow. As a child he'd been confused by this narrative, but now saw it as an attitude that had brought him real unhappiness. When he told me, 'It was gas-lighting,' I sat up. That is a strong term: I understood it to mean that because his parents hadn't told him the truth, he felt as if they had been psychologically manipulating him, which was crazy-making.

I could see humour was his default response, but beneath it I sensed the embers of anger, which had been slowly scorching him for years. The biggest lie was more significant: his mother was a lesbian. She had known it for a long time, but it terrified her, and she'd sublimated her sexuality until Lucas was nineteen, when she finally came out and divorced his father. As he spoke his voice faltered. He had some sympathy for her difficulty – to be a lesbian had been unacceptable then – but he was hurt: he hadn't been able to trust the people he loved and needed most. The lies he'd been told, the mask his parents had put on, to paint a picture of a 'happy family' had caused it to collapse in on itself. In the process it robbed Lucas of his childhood story, and left a void in him: he couldn't be sure of what was real and what was fake.

Understandably, Lucas felt enormously protective of his son and this pulsed through him. He feared his story or, even worse, his pain would unconsciously transfer to Lee. He knew they were

separate beings, but he had seen history repeat itself too often. I felt touched by his energy to be the parent he hadn't had and warmed by thinking how fortunate Lee was to have a dad like him. I also felt a little old: I knew that as part of the process he would have to forgive himself when he failed to be the perfect parent, as he inevitably would. We need to be, as Donald Winnicott, the British pioneer of child development, said, 'a good enough parent'. But at least he would fail differently from his parents.

Lucas had described his wife as 'clever, beautiful and really, really fun'. Heather came from a family of business people who had moved to Toronto from Hong Kong in the early 1990s. A mutual friend had often talked about her, and tried to introduce them, but Heather's work had got in the way. When he had finally met her, briefly at a gallery, he had felt a spark - 'She was kind of wonderful.' He rang her the next day and left a voice message saying how much he liked her, how incredibly pretty and smart she was, and he wanted to take her out. He smiled at the memory of how uncool he'd been. She'd rung her best friend for advice as to whether or not she should accept Lucas's invitation, and her friend had been all for it, confident he was 'the one'.

They'd had a terrible first date. Lucas had taken her to what he thought was a cool bar, but it was crowded and noisy, which made him anxious and awkward. Heather had been relaxed and, on their many subsequent dates, they fell in love. She was defiantly independent. She wanted his love, their intimacy and sex, but she also wanted the freedom her career brought. He adored her brilliance, her earthiness, their shared humour, their lovemaking and her laugh, and wanted their lives to be more entwined. They had fought this battle through their courtship. Money was also a flash-point: she believed in his work as an artist but wanted him to earn more money.

They married two years later. He wanted me to know how bad the fights had been, for I had responded to his happy ending and not the turmoil. I thought perhaps fighting and still loving each other at the beginning of a relationship was an interesting foundation

from which to marry, rather than fairy-tale blissful love. They had seen each other's worst sides, found ways to repair after a fight, and many of the key questions – sex, money, power and communication – had been examined, cross-examined, and they'd come to terms, or not, with them, but knew the difficulties.

It had taken them five years to conceive Lee, with four rounds of IVF, which Heather, as the major breadwinner, had paid for. I acknowledged how stressful and difficult for the relationship the years of trying for a baby must have been, and Lucas agreed it had been awful – the endless terrible waiting, for treatment, for results, to get past risky dates. They'd both had massive meltdowns through the turmoil of the treatment, the psychological rollercoaster of needing to have hope, and those hopes being shattered when it failed, picking themselves up for each new attempt, plotting dates on their calendar for sex (just in case they could bypass IVF) and possible due dates, wrangling to gain control over nature.

We laughed at the having to have sex. He agreed it was a little mechanical at times but 'For men it's less mechanical when you're with someone you love, and is there such a thing as bad sex?' I countered that there certainly was, but I was glad he hadn't known it. I realized I only saw couples who were in despair while infertile, and perhaps Heather had found it more extreme, but in Lucas I sensed a quiet pragmatism. Or perhaps his coping mechanism was denial. I suggested to him that the awfulness of the procedures hadn't stayed with him, influencing his view of the future. Now they had Lee, Lucas's distress had fallen away, and he was left with both the happiness of being a dad and the added strength of having survived and succeeded. His sharp response, reiterating how the painful memory of it remained with him, startled me.

On reflection, I should have known, better than most, that a positive experience rarely wipes out painful ones. Even if, over time, there is a sense of growth. Old psychological injuries can lie hidden in the back of one's mind and spring to the front, with surprising force, when triggered by a new painful experience or an echo of the old. This led me to discuss with my supervisor the

disconcerting truth that I had consistently missed Lucas's suffering, and had leaped to the hopeful. We explored together that perhaps Lucas's clean-cut look and his positive energy had blinded me to the reality that his appearance did not necessarily match his internal battles. His shiny green eyes did not express a shiny happy heart. How could they? He had done the therapeutic work in adjusting to his 'gaslit' childhood, but nothing would erase it. I wondered if there was also a surface Canadian sensibility of optimism, which further obfuscated my seeing his truth.

As thrilled as Heather was at becoming a mother, she had been thrown by it emotionally. The initial physical discomfort of stitches and sore nipples, combined with panic that she didn't know what to do, or how to do it, meant she felt permanently anxious. Heather needed her sleep to function, and its sporadic unpredictability had led to her obsessive preoccupation with it – to the extent that she couldn't sleep even when Lee was asleep for fear that he was about to wake up. The negative spiral ratcheted up, evidenced by a written log tracking the dismally few hours she'd slept. More sensitized by my supervision, I stopped myself telling Lucas that everything Heather felt was normal. It can be diminishing to have one's unique experience cast as 'everyday'.

Lucas had been on a high initially, holding Lee in his arms, crying with joy and relief. It had felt surreal, hard to believe that what he'd dreamed of and longed for, had feared would never happen, was a reality. But a few weeks later, he had felt overwhelmed. He was someone who resolved difficulty with actions, and although he could help by soothing Lee, changing his nappy and looking after Heather, he felt a restless vigilance, as if he was looking for danger. We agreed that we know we are actually in the process of adapting to change when we feel that edginess. Learning new ways of living is always uncomfortable to begin with. The necessity for Lucas and Heather to sublimate their own needs to meet Lee's wasn't something any antenatal class could have prepared them for. It was shocking on every level, and he realized as he spoke that he had by no means adjusted to this. He vehemently wanted me to

know how much he loved Lee, how being with him was an absolute joy. He shook his head, trying to hold the love he felt for his child and the fear that his responsibility for that little being engendered in him. How hopeless he felt at times. He felt like the child.

I wondered who had been able to support them, in those first months, with that cocktail of intense emotions. Both sets of parents had come for a week each. Their presence had eased the isolation, and Heather's mum had helped with the nights, but that had come with its own demands: Lucas had had to see his parents separately, and his mum had needed looking after more than she was able to care for them. There was rivalry between both sets of parents: they had totted up who had spent most time with Lee. It seemed to come more from their insecurity than love of the baby. Lucas wanted to take back his words, worried he'd been mean: he knew the grandparents had suffered during his and Heather's period of infertility, too, and were thrilled at Lee's birth.

Lucas and Heather had been aware for the first time of the price they paid by living far from home, missing the old bonds of college friends and other family. Heather's National Childbirth Trust class was her closest network, but its WhatsApp group was a mixed blessing, sometimes giving helpful information and tips, but other messages were competitive - 'Who has the most perfect baby / is the most perfect parent?' - which triggered toxic feelings of inadequacy. Heather had told Lucas that finding the mother in her was a similar process to an actor using a prop, like a pair of red shoes, to step into a new role. She had to consciously work on and develop herself as a mother, try out ways of being, practise until it became second nature.

I saw Lucas looking out of the window. When he turned back, he said quite forcefully that he didn't want to use up the session looking back. It had been helpful to describe the beginning but he wanted to look at their present. Heather was about to start work again. It raised complex issues.

Over the next few sessions, Lucas discussed Heather going back to work and how it brought up the matter of money and the division

of duties. He described it as the conversation they'd been having throughout their relationship, which they'd never resolved. He felt it was like a tennis ball: they batted it back and forth but it would hit the ground and, eventually, they would have a fight. Heather wanted him to make more money: she no longer wanted the responsibility of being the main breadwinner, and she wanted to be able to change her role at work, to put in shorter hours with less travel. She reiterated what she'd always said: she believed in him as an artist, she wanted him to pursue it, but also wanted him to earn more.

Lucas's dilemma was that he had tried to give up on the dream, doing other jobs that paid more, but he'd hated them and gone back to being an artist. Everybody said to him, 'Don't give up on your dream. It's who you are.' He felt it was indeed who he was but could see the difficulty. On down days he wondered if he was being delusional, a Peter Pan, and whether he needed to grow up. But then he shook his head: he wasn't ready yet. He had an inherent need to be an artist and felt an unwillingness to let it go. He looked down as he said, 'The poker pot is heavy - I'm deep into the hand, I can't turn back.' Lucas asserted, really speaking to himself, that for now he'd continue. He'd hold on to the fact that when it worked it was very lucrative, and he'd had some successes, good feedback, some sales that had kept his hope alive. The art business was fickle and mainly out of his control. He could control his work, though, and its quality, the one day each week he put aside for his own creative output and studio visits to let people see what he was doing. He'd put his energy and hope into that. Decision made. Until it came around again.

We went deeper into the relationship between him and Heather to unpick how it had changed since Lee was born. Lucas was energized: looking inwards, he realized how much the years of infertility had depleted their resources as a couple, and the extent to which the birth of Lee had enriched them. As he spoke, he was excited at being able to articulate that as parents they had found a way of aligning and working together which was new and felt like growth. We celebrated that, for a couple who had fought their way into marriage,

they resolved parenting issues relatively simply. If they disagreed they fought better, quicker, to find a resolution. Lucas said, 'I want to hang a lantern on that point. This is really what I've uncovered here that I needed to work on, and we've done it.'

It cannot have been a coincidence that in the next weeks their sex life sprang back: they felt desire and connection at a depth that empowered them both. He said quietly, 'I didn't know how lonely I'd felt until we got that back. It had been such a huge part of us.' Lucas spread his hands in front of him, looking at this new landscape. As if he was making a promise, he said, 'This thing is for ever.' I could see that their commitment to the family unit had built a more stable bond between them. It is what couples hope for when they have children, but often the reverse happens: the chaos of a new baby can create bigger rifts in the pre-existing fault lines.

Lucas wanted to explore further how their parental roles influenced the power dynamic between them. As he laid out his role, he sat more upright in his chair, rubbing his hands along his thighs: 'I'm a very involved dad. We just about play the reverse gender roles. It is a modern marriage.' I learned that most of the duties had a natural division, although there was always the odd battle over whose turn it was to do what. On the whole Heather would have the idea, and he would implement it. When Lee was being weaned, Heather had been insistent that he had healthy food to an extreme degree, homemade bone broth, only organic, nothing processed. I sighed inwardly at the thought. Lucas had fought it originally, how much work it would be for him, since he was the one doing the shopping and cooking, but his chest expanded with pride as he described how much he loved doing it, the satisfaction he felt in giving Lee wholesome food. It was his equivalent of breastfeeding, enabling Lee to thrive. He was determined to do this for the rest of his life and grinned at his commitment.

I acknowledged that their shared enterprise in loving and caring for Lee had brought Heather home, and their relationship closer. But their arguments about money were continuing, and although we had already discussed it, it remained a risk factor.

Lucas sat silently. He pushed the palm of his hand against his jaw, his discomfort signal. 'Money is the boulder in the river.' He knew the conflict would intensify in the future 'because you can never fully figure it out'. He was right.

My experience has taught me that there is often one fight that runs through an entire marriage, usually about being loved enough, sex or money. Leaving them unresolved, with no movement from either side, means that over the years the arguments pile up. Each partner holds their position tighter, until it becomes a stand-off, each side going silent or attacking. Over time it builds an impenetrable wall that brooks no resolution. I asked Lucas if he could imagine changing.

He didn't speak. Then, as if continuing the fight with Heather behind her back, he told me even she would admit that since the birth of Lee his flexibility had been a boon, for he took up a lot of the slack. Lucas looked proud as he described their routine. He looked after Lee one day a week, when he'd take him out to do something creative in the morning; they'd joined a playgroup at the local library in the afternoons. He got Lee up, did the drop-off and collection at his crèche, and gave him tea, did the bath-and-bed routine. Heather tried to get home before Lee was asleep, and always did the nights: her time alone with him was very precious. Lucas had clearly argued his case: now wasn't the time for them to resolve the money problem; his job fitted their life extremely well.

I wondered what the internal adjustment of becoming a dad looked like. 'It is believing I have...' His leg was kicking, which told me more than his words. He looked up, tears in his eyes, and finally the word 'Lee' broke out of him, as the reality of having a live, healthy son began to sink in. He sobbed tears of relief, mixed with the tears of pain he hadn't cried during the years of white-knuckle ride on the baby-making rollercoaster of hope and heartbreak. We let the image of Lee hang between us as we smiled into each other's eyes. Daring to trust that he had a healthy son was a long, complex process. What else was there?

Lucas wanted to be a relaxed, fun dad, but a dark force presaged

doom in the background of his mind. As he talked, he realized he feared that the moment he really believed all was well, the bad gods would come down and smite them. It shaped his behaviour: he hated friends picking Lee up for fear of infection, was hyper-vigilant when they took him out, and the idea of an aeroplane practically gave him a panic attack. We explored how he might hold both feelings, his fear and his trust, side by side, one not knocking out the other. It would help him make choices for Lee in the future.

Lucas had booked only a few sessions and soon we were on our final appointment. I wondered if it had been useful. He told me that, in talking and being heard, he had let himself know what he already instinctively knew but he could hold on to it now with more confidence. We talked and he reiterated that life was all about change. People tried to make sense for themselves as to why certain things happened at certain times, as if there was some overall design to life, which he didn't think was useful. What he did know was that having a family marked him as having fully stepped into adulthood. His own family was a significant new base from which to grow and change. Growing and changing he was certainly doing.

Wande

Being a Working Mother

Wande, short for Yewande, was thirty-eight years old and contacted me via a former client. She wondered if I'd heard of her, as she was a well-known stand-up comedian and scriptwriter with her own show. She grimaced, a kind of twisted half-smile, when I told her I didn't know her, biting her bottom lip, as if I had proved a point to her about her worth. Wande told me she was married, with an eight-year-old son. She wanted therapy because she felt she was struggling with authenticity issues: she was a performer with a public persona, then went home where she was a mother and wife. She couldn't quite make them fit together. Her head

dropped and her voice faded when she said 'how to be a mother' was the part of her that carried most disquiet. She played nervously with her thick black hair, cornrow-braided and held in a loose ponytail, her legs crossed, while her green Dr Martens boots quietly kicked the air. She tipped her head back, and drank her tube of Smarties in gulps. I could see that her great beauty and success did not anchor her confidently. I had a sense of her scattering internally, fragments of herself blowing just beyond her reach.

I wanted to check how she felt about seeing a white therapist, given she was black. When we met our life stories met, too, our different histories informing and influencing us. I am a privileged white woman born into a white culture with its history of dominance over people of colour, and she a black woman, middle class and educated, yes, yet with a very different story. I asked her to tell me if I made assumptions that were wrong or if I inadvertently upset her. She agreed it was an important part of her identity and she was glad I had named it openly. She felt it might be useful if there were misunderstandings between us because this was a rare place we could actually unpick them – rather than hold the injury silently.

Wande felt she shouldn't be coming to see me: so many others were suffering more than her. She was 'lucky' but that luck was swiftly followed by her fear: 'I worry more about money than I ever have. I have this foreboding of scarcity and being unlucky – that it will all go wrong.' As her words tumbled out of her, a wiser, more understanding thought emerged, spoken in a quieter, reflective voice: 'Fundamentally I believe whether we are a cell-mate or fortunate, we are the same, and we can all feel insecure.'

I acknowledged that she seemed to hold at least two opposing views of herself, one rather more forgiving than the other, and I wondered if there were more. Her eyes widened, and there was a note of excitement in her voice as she told me about herself as a 'frozen daughter'. Her father had had a devastating car crash, which had taken many years of slow rehabilitation for him to recover from and had thrown the whole family into a state of suspended shock. In contrast to that, she felt alive and confident when

performing on stage, although once she came off she would be lambasted by loneliness and fear – there were days when she couldn't get out of bed and was overwhelmed by crushing sadness and weariness.

The two versions of herself flew across her face as she spoke. I noted to her that they didn't seem to listen or speak to each other, and we needed to get to know each important facet better. I didn't say much: she seemed to take a lot from hearing her own swirling thoughts spoken out loud. It can take months to uncover so much information from a new client, but as a writer and performer, she'd interrogated herself for her material, making it readily available in therapy: a bonus.

It wasn't until the session was over that I realized with a thud of anxiety that Wande had asked, 'What's the point?' but hadn't answered the question. This was where we had to start the next session. Was she suicidal? Or was it simply a question about the meaning of life? She told me that she had discussed her suicidal thoughts with friends and, as a group, they'd agreed there were times when they believed the world would be a better place without them. I gently questioned whether she was talking in the third person, almost outside herself.

She held her breath – sat stock still, boot pointing sharply upwards. There was a long silence as she looked past me. She murmured, 'I'm haunted I won't win the battle.' I left space for her words to land, for us both to take in their full meaning, and asked her to tell me about the battle.

It took some time to unravel. Her words caught in her throat. I had an image that they were in freefall, endlessly whirring in her mind, but dragging them into the light, speaking them, was painful, and it took grit to expose them. In the end I understood she had layers of fear in her, some of it traumatic fear from her father's accident. She'd built a carapace over it, which meant she didn't feel authentic: she felt she put on 'me' for people, and could not absorb the positives or her success. Most of her energy was used in blocking her self-harming thoughts. She beat off her despair with alcohol and social

media – ‘I run around in circles like a beaten dog.’ She knew her son, Kemi, would suffer if she died, and that helped to tether her, but it connected her to another cavern of disquiet: herself as a mother. I suggested we put that on hold for now and focus on the thoughts she was suppressing. We needed to hold them up to the light.

There was an endless ‘ladder of musts’, some of which were about telling herself she was lazy but needed to work, about trusting and feeling afraid, about being found out as a fake. The battle she fought with alcohol: she knew she should stop but couldn’t make the decision. The geography of herself had changed, and she didn’t have the map. But in the voicing of her worries the map was emerging. We did a relaxation exercise at the end of the session, for me as much as for her: I’d felt tight too. I could see she was calmer. She gave me a twinkly smile as she left. The session had been intense.

That high kick did not last. Wande had left my session feeling calmer but jumped straight into a relentless schedule of shows all over the country. Away from home, adrenalized when performing and then anaesthetized by drink to wind down, she had not wanted to wake up in the mornings. I gently reflected back the toxic pattern she’d described, careful not to shame her but to show her I could feel how much distress she was in. She sobbed deep noisy tears. For a long time. Snorting with laughter, while apologizing for using my tissues as she rhythmically pulled them from the box. We both felt the relief in Wande owning the truth of her pain.

Her tears subsided. She pressed the tissues hard on her eyes, breathed deeply, then looked up at me, bang in the eye: ‘I’ve got to stop drinking.’ I nodded. Letting herself know this conclusively – no more exhausting shall-I-shan’t-I – brought the sun into her face. She gave me a 3D colour film of what a sober life would be like: waking up fresh, energetic, free . . . The list went on. I asked how she planned to stay sober, which was maybe a bit tough but it was important to bring her back to basics. ‘Take each day at a time,’ she said, with confidence. She reached her decision quickly between us, but it had taken Wande months of thought, research, ambivalence and

turmoil. Our conversation was part of a long process: we aren't always open to a new beginning. We can't switch ourselves on and off as we choose. We need time. Time to withdraw and retreat, to freeze even, before we try again. In this instance, something chimed. There was an alignment, a hum of energy, between the permission she gave herself to be sad and being heard, her problem, her choice, her decision, and she clicked. Boom.

We spent a number of sessions bedding in her developing sober trust in life. She'd start each session with 'Week two, I'm sober', 'Week three, I'm sober', badges of honour that I cheered and celebrated with her. Wande was more reflective and smiled into my eyes, quite often laughing at herself. I didn't question this as a defence, more an expression of relief that she wanted to live. I felt the leaching of her poison.

Wande's speed in bouncing back was, in my experience, unusual. It showed a robust underlying resilience: her secure and predictable childhood, with loving parents, lots of friends, enough structure. Her core sense of identity and beliefs gave her foundations that held firm when threatened. Her father's accident was a fault line that had shaken those foundations and skewed her trust in herself as a woman, a mother, and as a successful scriptwriter and comedian. Alcohol, the false god she had called on to make her feel better, had exacerbated the fault line. There was work for us to do, many layers of her experience to be explored and understood, so that she could make the shift from her past self to integrate it with who she was now. I was confident that she would configure her new self over time.

When Wande focused on herself, she looked up at the sky, towards the light, where she'd access joyous memories. When she felt a wave of sadness or pain, she looked to the left as if a bad guy was sitting on her shoulder. Part of Wande's struggle to find who she really was, as opposed to who she thought she should be, was whether to allow herself to know how much she disliked the sheer grind of mothering. It felt taboo to complain, as if complaining would make bad things happen. As the child of parents who'd been

imbued with the importance of hard work as the route out of poverty (the reason her grandparents had left Nigeria), she felt it was wrong, even transgressive to complain. She cried hot tears of frustration with herself that she was having a 'crap time in my privileged life', when her grandparents had had no expectations and would never have complained. Then she breathed, and I helped her imagine talking to her grandmother and seeing the warmth in her eyes. A moment later Wande's excitement burst through, remembering her grandmother's rich laugh. When she talked about these hurdles I could see the stand-up comedian performing, and knew this was giving her material, but I didn't want to lose her feelings beneath. She had moments when she really craved a drink, but did a breathing exercise we'd agreed on, and moved her attention to something else, to disrupt the obsessive thoughts.

Inevitably Wande had fought with her husband, Ty, circular fights in which both were hurt and upset, blaming yet knowing there was no one to blame, and all they really needed was to hold each other. A clearer picture of Ty emerged. He'd been bullied and had a lonely childhood. He was analytic and mathematical, the opposite skills from Wande's. But he was patient and fundamentally kind. He wanted to do the right thing for the right reasons, and when Wande could explain things to him, and he could understand her, he would practise them. Since Wande's therapy had started, he had developed a skill he was proud of: letting Wande download her worries and listening without giving her answers. Wande was immensely touched to watch his serious face and see the effort it took him not to give her a solution. She felt she had the equivalent of a PhD in emotional intelligence, to his GCSE. She laughed as she noted this, and then a light went on: her knowledge of how different they were helped her to be patient and clear in translating how she felt to him.

When Wande spoke about her parents she whispered, as if they could hear her. She held them in huge affection and respect but, as with many aspects of her life, some confusion. She felt guilty even talking about them. Her father, prior to his accident, was a

traditional dad who spoke to her as if he was a teacher, expecting her to obey, which she rarely did. Since the accident, he had become more like her mother, warmer and softer, but she missed his power.

The car crash had happened on a wet night, very near home. He'd swerved to avoid an oncoming car going too fast in the middle of the road. He should have died. He'd been unconscious in intensive care for days, and when he came round his doctors were unsure as to what brain function he'd have left. Over weeks he found his voice, and slowly learned to converse, but he'd also broken his neck. He was in hospital for five months, had been told he would never walk again. He'd overcome that through years of physiotherapy and sheer determination, although he couldn't use his left side, and walked with a stick. Sometimes in pain he had to resort to a wheelchair.

The accident was a minefield that Wande didn't want to go over again. She held her breath and swallowed whenever she mentioned it. She'd had Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR), which reduces trauma symptoms, and therapy, but the wound was just below the surface, and could be reopened faster than she could stop it. While they were close, she felt a gap between the person she now was, how she lived, and her roots. At university and then through her career she mixed with 'posh people . . . this thing they call social mobility is a mindfuck if you're the one doing the mobilizing . . . At uni I felt like I lived in two worlds. There was the world when I was with my friends - very English, mainly white - and then I went home to another country with exotic foods and colours, different attitudes and rules. A sick father. But I didn't know the rules of the posh white people either.' She felt her parents' pride in her but - this remained unspoken - she being a black woman comedian working in a predominantly white space felt scary to them. They had accepted a system that didn't treat them as equals, borne the harshness, yet had succeeded in making a good life for themselves, while staying within their own community. Wande had stepped into an unknown world, which felt risky, as well as exciting.

Our recurring preoccupation with transitions centres around identity: who we are, autonomy; our sense of freedom, and making meaning; the underlying purpose we ascribe to our lives. All of this is disrupted when we have a child. It seemed to me that Wande's process of adjusting to parenthood had been blocked by the traumatic birth of Kemi, which had been intensified by the trauma of her father's car crash decades earlier. Becoming successful and publicly recognized added further pressure to her identity issues because she felt people liked her too much for no reason, and others probably disliked her, also for no reason. While she enjoyed her sense of competency when she performed, she felt shame as an incompetent mother, which hit her when she tried to write at home: 'I always feel a bit like a slug that someone is about to dump salt on. Every time I sit down to write, I confront all of that.' And she felt conflicted about self-exposure, embarrassed by having put out stuff about herself into the world which was against her family values. As she recognized her hunger for attention, self-disgust flowered in her, like hemlock, and blocked her openness to take in the good things. Once she'd spewed her disgust, she was free to be pragmatic. She realized she was doing a job that was 'Amazing. I can do this thing which means I get to pick my son up every day.'

Her parents were committed grandparents and regularly helped with Kemi, who adored them, while Wande and Ty were busy working. She started crying as she talked about her parents, not painful tears, tears of tenderness and awareness. I could see her clenching her fists and asked what that was about. She was worried they did too much, which led her to realize that 'The thing that distresses me, I compare myself negatively to my parents. I think I'm doing something bad to Kemi, but I don't know what it is.' She felt they instinctively knew how to be parents better than she did. They'd been steady and present. Also, there'd been a shift in her relationship with them all those years ago, after the accident, when she'd felt she had to make them happy, while suppressing her own fear. Part of her felt sad that she hid her true self from them. And she'd paid a price too. She was no longer

blissfully ignorant that loving someone was risky, and that devastating accidents could happen to those she loved most.

I asked Wande if she was ready to talk about Kemi. She looked down, pressing her beautifully bejewelled fingers into her forehead. She felt their foundations were 'wobbly', that he'd turned from a happy toddler into a complex boy. More shamefully, she was happy to escape him and go back on the road for her show. While she was away she'd imagine this happy family, and yearn to get home, but once she was there, she'd be greeted by this furious child. 'Kemi could dismember us both and put us on a bonfire.' She struggled to admit to the cocktail of rage he set off in her, finishing by saying heavily, 'I'm not sure it was a good idea to have children. I don't feel safe enough.' She added that intellectually and as a feminist she thought it was absolutely fine to go away for work, but the reality was entirely different from the theory, which offered no solution for the guilt she felt when she was away, or the fury Kemi felt towards her when she came home.

Instinct told me to ask her to take a step back and tell me about the early years with Kemi. When had she felt it go wrong? Wande told me she'd had a gruesome birth that ended in an emergency Caesarean. She'd been in agony, screaming and powerless. Men in green coats had come and cut her open, and she'd nearly died. Kemi had got out, but he'd nearly killed her. The consultant had said to her afterwards, in a chirpy voice, 'We nearly lost you.' But Wande hadn't felt chirpy, she'd felt 'screwed over'. I understood that Kemi's birth had set in train a complex process that was only being revealed as we spoke about it eight years later. The agony and fear of her father's accident had been reignited by Kemi's terrifying birth, the image of men with knives, and her sense that loving him was like loving a time bomb. Her determination to be a good mother meant she could override it when she was breastfeeding Kemi, but when she started working again, becoming successful very quickly, it destabilized her and, in particular, her connection with herself. She loathed herself for enjoying the praise so much, turning to Twitter and alcohol to numb her predominant feelings of being a 'useless worthless person'.

Our work wasn't to eradicate the negative, and celebrate the positive, but for her to find permission within herself to allow both voices, and adjust her perspective to a more manageable image, which allowed her to get on with her job.

In the weeks that followed, Wande thought a lot about Kemi, talked to Ty and consequently changed how she spoke to her son, realizing he wasn't in the least bit interested in her work life. He saw it as competition. Now she was letting him be in charge of their time together and showing him more attention. She'd tell him how much she'd missed him and, as boring as it was, played the games he liked: Pokémon and Match Attax. He loved it. There had been a moment one morning before school, always the stormy time, when he'd kicked off, and she'd managed it better. She felt they'd got to a place where he could express his feelings and she'd been the parent she'd wanted to be. Over the next weeks she was surprised to find how much she had grown to enjoy being with Kemi. She'd read a book that said, 'All types of love need work and fierce commitment.' Having that in her mind as a focus helped her get away from the shame.

We'd had a break for the holidays, and when we next spoke I could see Wande had a buzz about her. 'I really like sobriety,' she said, with a proud grin, looking like a teenager who had won a prize. She enjoyed the clarity of it, but at other times she could hear this gremlin on her shoulder, questioning whether she really was an addict: 'Do I really have to do this? Why can't I be a normal person?' This was the key to her sanity. Before, there had been a clamour of voices. Now, in hearing clearly the cross-messaging that was pinging into her mind, she could choose which message was the right one for her. It put her in the driving seat of her own life, in a way she had never experienced before.

I could feel Wande's growing confidence in herself, her authentic self, with all its complexity. She was giving it her sober time and attention, which meant a great deal happened inside her between sessions. She said, 'It's our secrets that make us sick.' The

strange magic of voicing her thoughts and being heard was working. We agreed our work for this phase of her life was complete: Wande now knew herself well enough to give herself the attention she needed to keep herself on track. 'I realized that if I spend time being aware and noticing the good stuff, but also noticing, and not pushing away, the bad stuff, it works for me. Living intentionally in the moment and being grateful.'

Reflections on Family

The etymology of 'family' is interesting: it comes from the Latin *famulus*, meaning 'servant in a household'. That sense of being in the service of our family, and vice versa, is a fresh perspective and rings true. Family relationships can be our most rewarding and crucial connections, yet they are by no means simple. Even the word 'family' will conjure different images and sensations for each of us.

The traditional Western picture is of a family unit consisting of parents and children living together as a stable and supportive base from which the children develop into adults. For the 19 million families in the UK, there is no norm: every child, parent and couple is unique and creates their own way of being. Family is no longer defined by biology, marriage or even a home. In the last few decades new ways of creating a family have developed: there are single-parent families, same-sex families, extended families, polyamorous families, families made up of friends with no blood relationships, and blended families consisting of the couple, the children they have had together, and the children from their previous relationships.

For all its complexity, the role of a family could not be more essential to our wellbeing, and the wellbeing of society. Family is, for most of us, the closest network of people we consistently love, who know us inside out, and are a reliable base to turn to in need. Family is the single most important influence on a child's life and their outcome, and it is essential for children to feel loved, connected and

protected to grow and thrive. Children learn from their families how to form relationships, function in society and at work. Happy, secure children are more likely to be happy, secure adults.

When families work, they are the source of a deep-seated and profound confidence that we are loved, that we have our team who wants to support us, believes in us and cares what is happening in our lives and in our inner world. Family forms an invisible glue of togetherness and we know we are not alone. It gives us the strength to face the brickbats of life. A strong family will even support the fight for turf between each other, and the fight for its members to be who they are. There isn't a greater gift. Yet family is often the source of our most searing pain, for where we love most, we can also hate and hurt most. Hence the saying that a parent is only as happy as their least happy child. Each family member has a profound influence on every other member, for good or ill.

Families are complex systems in which much more goes on below the surface than we can see on top. Beneath each grandparent and parent are the hidden legacies from their own childhoods, 'the ghosts from the nursery', which create patterns of relating. These patterns trigger all those primitive feelings when we love and fear losing love: jealousy, rage, obsession, hope and despair. The territory of love in families is the hidden ground we consciously and unconsciously fight over. It is to my mind the root of most of the function and dysfunction in all of our lives.

Life is difficult and brings tough challenges for families, like losing jobs, bereavement or illness, which have to be accommodated. Even without negative events the juggling demands of work and home often feel relentless. It takes enormous psychological resource, time, money, patience, self-awareness, endurance and commitment to develop a functioning family. By this I do not mean idealized perfect relationships: I mean Winnicott's idea of 'good enough', which allows for our flaws and vulnerabilities, but overall creates a sense of reliable loving between family members, where the intention is for the good of the other, and they are loved as themselves, without conditions.

A healthy family is one in which there are more positive interactions than negative, in which each person feels respected, valued and heard, in which conflict is acknowledged and repaired – there is always conflict: where you have people, you have disagreements. The strength of a functioning family is in its members' ability to communicate openly with each other, their sense of belonging, in which they choose to spend time together, have fun together, laugh together, and in which they are boosted by the love and warmth of seeing each other. A healthy family has a basic level of trust: they know there is someone, a group of people, who is on their side. It also allows for each person to be celebrated for their successes, without the fear of condemning envy – a familiar problem in families. All of this requires a dedicated commitment to family: it has to be prioritized over other life demands. Going back to the Latin meaning, families require our service.

My case studies focused on the parenting aspect of families: Leena's difficulty in recognizing Anita as an adult who needed some autonomy; the transition into fatherhood for Lucas; the adaptation Wande needed to make as a working mother to her eight-year-old son. Every story in this book has a significant part focused on family because family, whether it is functional or dysfunctional, forms the bedrock of our lives. What was important about Leena, Lucas and Wande was their self-awareness in recognizing that they held the responsibility to change. They were willing, despite it being painful, to explore for themselves their difficulty, to protect themselves against the inevitable 'stuckness' and damage that would have ensued if they did not confront it. The problem with dysfunctional families is the inability of family members to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions, and continuously to repeat those damaging actions, rather than working to change them.

Family Systems

Each member of a family contributes to creating a pattern of beliefs, ways of behaving, and the permission or injunction of what

may be talked about within their particular family. Roles may be played by each person – such as the fixer, the difficult one, the clever one – and there is a dynamic between each family member which affects everyone. All of this makes up a family system and, as in all systems, it likes balance: each element has a part to play to keep the whole balanced. When one member behaves out of character, it becomes unbalanced. Parents are the primary agents of change in holding the responsibility for addressing their family's difficulties. Families that have open communication, consistent boundaries, self-awareness, goodwill and trust are more robust in managing the transitions and thereby disruptions that inevitably occur. It is not necessarily the solving of problems that matters, but the trust that is developed by having open discussion.

A dysfunctional family does not know how to deal with difficulty: no one knows what to expect, either verbally or behaviourally, or trusts that their difficulties will be acknowledged and resolved. At its worst, conflict, bad behaviour and often child neglect occur continuously. This causes high levels of distress for everyone, which can lead the family to break down.

Tolstoy wrote, 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' I disagree. I believe every family is unique. No family remains the same, and it is unhelpful to think of them as either good or bad. Most families operate in a spectrum that will, at different times, be pulled towards functional or dysfunctional.

An image commonly used to represent the family system is a baby's mobile above a cot. When the family is working well there is a dynamic movement between each element of the mobile, which recalibrates to find a balance depending on the environment. If one part of the mobile goes missing or is tilted, it tips the mobile on its axis, and it takes a great deal of work to recalibrate it. One member of the family may act out the poison in the system, often through mental or physical illness, destructive behaviour or addiction, and unless the whole family system takes responsibility and addresses it collectively, the dysfunction continues for everyone.

Those patterns become embedded and the rupture is increasingly fixed. Sibling rivalry is a painful example, a poison that often runs in families: one sibling has to put the other down in order to raise themselves up. As a result approximately one-third of siblings describe their relationship as rivalrous or distant.

We all know how family feuds take a terrible toll on the people who hold the grudges, and impact everyone close to them. This is as true for divorced parents and their children as it is for siblings. Monica McGoldrick, an American family therapist, reflects that we can't run logic through an emotional system, meaning we have to seek ways to process emotion, however painful and disruptive it is. For example, logic will tell the divorced parents they have to get on for the benefit of their children, when every fibre of their being wants to annihilate the other. McGoldrick also points out that even if, for our mental health, we make the difficult but necessary decision to cut all connection with our family, its members never entirely leave us. There is always a part of us that suffers the cold chill of disconnection from them.

Family systems can be influenced and informed by the generations before, either consciously or unconsciously. Theorists believe that unexpressed losses, secrets or negative events travel alive and untouched across generations until someone is willing to deal with them. Typical examples would be the tragic death of a family member, or cousins who don't speak because their grandparents fought about money. Family therapists often use genograms to uncover these stories and messages from the past that hold such power in the present. McGoldrick advises, 'We make the best decisions if we pay attention to where we've come from and the future – what do we owe our grandparents, parents and our grandchildren?'

The Importance of Fathers

In what is thought of as the traditional nuclear family structure, the mother looks after domestic matters while the father is the 'breadwinner', working away from the household; the pair have at

least one child. In this model, fathers tend to be condemned for not being involved enough and the importance of their role is ignored. In the past fathers held the position of all-powerful patriarchs, and later their value was measured by their income, even being sidelined by psychology research, where the focus was on the mother. It is different now, not least as the range of fatherhoods (for instance, in gay relationships) has broadened the general perception of the role of fathers.

Research shows the increasing importance of fathers in modern-day parenthood. Fathers are changing, and how that change evolves is not always clear. The expectation of modern men transitioning into fatherhood is multi-faceted: they can be expected to act as breadwinner, lover, guide, friend, playmate and carer. The phrase that is often repeated in the studies of new fathers is the importance of 'being there', which is certainly different from previous generations, whose experience as children was of often 'absent' fathers. There is certainly a generational shift: fathers, like Lucas, want to be more involved, feel sad and upset when they miss out on key moments in their child's life, and don't want to carry the pressure of being the sole breadwinner.

As children grow up, the father's role is as complex as the mother's and unquestionably as important. From their child's infancy the father's involvement has a direct influence on that child's development of self-esteem, more so than the mother's. This links to their educational and, ideally, career success. Children with a father who is invested in them and spends time with them are more likely to be emotionally secure: it gives them the confidence to explore and step outside the safety of their familiar surroundings. Children who have a secure relationship with their fathers are more likely to form stronger social connections with others as they mature. Fathers set a positive role model for their child, which helps build gender-role qualities in adolescent boys and girls. For adolescent girls, it models for them positive opinions and experiences of men, which has a profound influence on the quality of their future relationships.

New Fathers

After Lee was born alive and healthy, Lucas and Heather assumed that, since they had spent many distressing years trying for a baby, their relief and joy would outweigh their exhaustion and the turmoil of learning to care for him. That was not the case. Their joy in and love for him knew no bounds but it did not protect them from the turbulence his birth unleashed.

New parenthood is difficult on many levels. There is the neurobiological level of change: oxytocin levels rise, and sleep/wake patterns are radically disrupted. At the interpersonal level the couple's relationship has to be renegotiated as they form a new relationship with their baby and have almost no time for each other. At a practical level they are learning many new skills in how to soothe and care for their dependent baby while needing to reorganize their work and handle financial challenges.

This massive shift in themselves happens at a time when the demands of their new baby are intense, and their own needs for love, sleep and care are unlikely to be met. It is the phase when the relationship is under severe strain. Paradoxically, as they become a happy family of three, the mother and father can feel more alone than ever. They may see versions of themselves they haven't seen before, and really don't like; there may be a build-up of resentment and criticism. It requires lots of deep breaths, commitment and very good communication skills to protect against fractures in the relationship. Support for each other is key: it creates the trust to dare to be open to new ideas and, through reflection, to change. Hopefully, through the bumpy ride, they learn that the reality is different from their dream, and if they had a picture of their ideal family, they learn to accept, even embrace, that 'ideal' does not exist.

Being a parent inevitably forces the adult, like Lucas, to examine their own childhood, and brings out both the agitated child and fear of repeating the pattern. It comes as no surprise to learn that a National Childbirth Trust survey in 2015 found 38 per cent of new

fathers are concerned about their mental health. In a 2015 study, what surprised men most was the amount of tension that having a new baby caused in their relationship with their partner. In some ways you can never be prepared for the full impact of having a new baby, but it seems men are not talking enough to each other or don't fully expect this to be a time of turbulence, tension and chaos.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) statistics from 2017 show that there are 232,000 stay-at-home fathers, which is, interestingly, the lowest number since 2014. The number had been rising since 1993. Commentators believe stay-at-home fathers are re-entering the workplace because, like women, they feel society does not value or reward them for the work they do at home. They feel they are only given high status through paid work. Lucas and Heather may represent the future in that they will need to negotiate with each other who works and who stays home. It is unlikely to be a fixed role, but one that changes over time and circumstances – for a couple to see themselves as sharing bread-winning rather than there being a single breadwinner. All the research points to the necessity to reinvent oneself through life, and to have the adaptability to move in and out of different occupations.

When the mother is breastfeeding it can leave the father not knowing how to 'be there' but, with some thought, it is possible to find other ways to be physically close to and caring for their child. Having skin-to-skin contact, bathing them, or soothing their baby after a feed are ways to create connection with their infant – and have the added benefit of giving the mother a rest. Research from 2006 shows fathers who spend more time caring for their babies on their own are less likely to separate from their partners than those who are less involved.

Parenting: My Way or the Highway

The noun 'parenting' came commonly into use in 1959, but it certainly wasn't a concept familiar to most parents of that generation.

Since the late 1970s there has been an increased understanding of the importance of parenting, and consequently parenting style has changed. In our culture today, parents, more frequently mothers, take seriously all areas of a child's wellbeing, daily life and success. For some people, being a parent can become all-consuming, with their time and resources spent solely on looking after every aspect of their children's lives. With the advent of social media, parenting has, for some, become a competitive sport, one parent outdoing another through perfected images of family life – although there is a movement against this, with new and honest blogs, like Susan Kirby's 'Unmumsy Mum' and Gill Sims's 'Why Mummy Drinks' to name but two, which try to redress the balance.

It was in this environment that Wande felt she was failing as a mother. One of the arguments she battled with was her absolute right as a feminist to work, and the painful reality of her son's fury over her absence. For any parent to be the parent they want to be, the parent they can be proud of, it is necessary to unravel the many complex emotions that live within us. Journaling is a good way of doing this – jot down thoughts and feelings over a number of weeks and clarity will emerge.

One of a parent's key transitions is to love and respond to the child they have in front of them, rather than the child they might wish to have. We might bond with our child because they are like us, or withdraw from them because they are like us, or even hate them for having the qualities of the father we've divorced, but that is unacceptable. We have a responsibility to see them and love them for who they are.

Among the reams of advice on parenting, I find the idea of building resilience in our children most helpful. I turn to the work of Dr Michael Ungar, the Canadian family therapist who is among the best-known writers and researchers on resilience in the world. The message of his book *I Still Love You* – whose title alone says it all – is that if we are to build resilient children who flourish in a complex, ever-changing world, they need nine things: structure, consequences, parent-child connections, lots and lots of strong

relationships, a powerful identity, a sense of control, a sense of belonging/culture/spirituality/life purpose, rights and responsibilities, safety and support. I like his simple clarity – I like at least knowing what I need to be giving my children – even if it seems a tough ask.

Parenting Adult Children

Leena faced the challenge of her daughter's wedding, her own loss of control over Anita. As their lives progress, there will continue to be thousands of smaller and larger versions of this dynamic. Our Western perspectives value self-reliance and separation as our children become adults. One of the definitions of success has been that parents have done a good job when their children no longer need them and are not beholden to them.

However, the separation is now far less clear for contemporary parents than in previous generations. Most 'Baby Boomers' (see page 295) have a more involved and connected relationship with their children than they had with their own parents, who expected their children to leave home and get on with their lives as soon as they were eighteen. As a parent today, how do we negotiate the line between being available and supportive, and neither abandoning nor intruding on our children? It is a difficult balance to achieve, which changes over time from when children are young adults to becoming parents themselves to eventually, ideally, supporting their parents as they age.

It is helpful to be thoughtful and discuss with adult children what the areas of tension are likely to be and how to manage them. As with all difficult conversations, how you communicate, as much as what you say, will predict whether or not it will be well received. The tone of your voice, your body language, being open and discursive, rather than directive, all aid collaborative discussions.

Some parents believe they deserve more acknowledgement, even payback, than they receive. They may extract it by still controlling their adult children. Perhaps parents can never get back all

they have given, or the reverse: they may be richly rewarded. Maybe their children only realize in retrospect all their parents have done for them, often when they have their own children. Be that as it may, new boundaries between adult children and their parents have to be defined, where the power no longer resides solely with the parent.

Parents need to respect the decisions and choices of their children and, in the main, give an opinion only if they are asked. Questioning our children is difficult, because we want them to know we're interested in them and their lives but difficult topics, such as finding a partner or having a baby, are best responded to when the child brings them up.

Money is always complicated, on many levels. It is imbued with potent feelings, which have to be acknowledged: power, love and favouritism between siblings. The problems of children borrowing money from parents, the terms of the borrowing, or what they can expect when you die, to name but a few, are some of the common challenges. It helps to be clear, transparent and discuss openly the issues that will protect against later resentment and battles. Every family is unique, which means there can't be catch-all, age-specific rules around when we jump in to help our children with money or rescue plans, but our attitude matters: that we come from a position of trusting their view, respecting their plan, not making them beholden to us, and not taking control. The difficulty for the adult parent is that we are wired to protect our children, to keep them alive and well, and that instinct to protect them doesn't fade when they are adults. To us, at some level, they are always our baby. But we do have to love and accept what is happening to them, and back off while finding other ways to soothe our own anxiety.

A new person in the family, through marriage or cohabitation, changes the make-up of the family, and when that couple have children together, even more so. For the person marrying or cohabiting, it is worth noting that, unless there is a rift, you marry your beloved and their family. It brings together two worlds and

ways of being, which can cause real conflict at one end of the spectrum, disquiet or, at the other end, absolute joy. Families of multiple generations who get on well together are more resilient in dealing with life's difficulties, simply because there are more people to turn to for help. It is the responsibility of everyone to adapt: be open, flexible, sensitive, and co-operate together. Timing matters: offensive remarks or behaviours made at the beginning of the relationship, before the trust and love have developed, can haunt the relationship longterm.

Being a successful parent means giving your child roots *and* wings. The adult child needs to step off the 'mother-ship' (or 'parent-ship') and create their own ship. Their life is not our life: we have to acknowledge that they are different from us. We need not only to accept them but embrace them as they are and accept who they love. Wanting to exert control or influence over your child only causes fracture. It is clear from the research of Dr Deanna Brann, psychotherapist and author of *Reluctantly Related*, that the adult child has to be loyal to the spouse/partner, not their family of origin. If children remain loyal to their family of origin, the love relationship is at high risk of breaking down. In my experience it is never wise to criticize how our children parent theirs, particularly with non-verbal sighs and 'hms', or passive-aggressive remarks such as 'It's interesting you're doing X... I did...' It is guaranteed to cause offence, and what you once believed may be outdated so no longer considered good for your grandchild.

The power parents have to influence the wellbeing of their adult children has, to my mind, been underestimated. It is important we recognize that, and do our best to reconfigure the relationship and recalibrate the power balance. Do you remember going home as an adult and reverting to your childlike self or, worse, a grumpy teenager? This is because our relationship with our parents is embodied in us, and is triggered at the speed of light, far faster than our thoughts. We needed our parents' love and care to survive when we were babies, and the power of that connection never entirely dissolves.

This is true, too, for the parent of their adult child. The emotion parents and children have for each other can be overwhelming when the parents are concerned for the child or they disagree intensely. I'm not referring here to minor squabbles that are forgiven and forgotten. Leena, whose rage meant she wanted to punish and crush the child she had loved and protected with all her being, was frightening in her fury. It is catastrophic for the relationship to act on those feelings: it develops into a reciprocal punishing of each other, hurting each other, which escalates to become a stand-off. You can never take back the words you said in anger, and they can haunt the relationship for ever, re-emerging in the next altercation.

When angry with your child, or very worried about them, it helps if you avoid sounding off in the heat of the fury. Stamp around with a friend or partner: get the rage out – but not on your child. We have to exercise self-control, however difficult that is. Furious hurtful words tear holes in your bond. They usually come from a place of hurt, maybe based on rejection, but your child is an adult who needs to reject you and get on with their life. Let the fury or worry settle, then practise what you are going to say – write it down. Really think about it, so that when you do speak, it will be received as thoughtful and not an attack.

There are many stories of the agony caused to parents when there is estrangement between them, their adult children and consequently their grandchildren. The causes of the rupture are as varied as people. There are some circumstances over which the parents of adult children have no control, however hard they have fought to reconcile the relationship. They are left with the painful task of having to find a way of living with this new and devastating loss. There are also stories of the reverse, when parents choose to have no relationship with their children, or a scant relationship, which is an equally painful living loss for their children. In my experience, it is likely that the person who has cut themselves off has done so because their feelings are so overwhelming that the only way they can cope is to shut them down. Indifference is the opposite of love, not hate.

Estrangement is toxic, with many innocent parties damaged along the way, and often this can be transmitted to the next generation. I would urge each person involved to fight as hard as they can to repair the relationship, which is no easy ask. It requires the courage to overcome the profound hurt from the rejection, and to dare to withstand further hurt. But, however hard that is, it is important to know in your heart of hearts that you personally have done everything within your power to build the bridge of reconciliation. You can fight for the relationship by offering small tokens of connection, like sending cards or photographs, even something funny: it doesn't need to be a big and demanding gesture. Often it is small steps that slowly rebuild the connection. In some cases, getting professional input, a therapist or mediator, to help unpick what happened in a safe and contained place, can be transformative. The residue of hurt that remains from a permanent estrangement never dies, even after death, and is often ignited further after death.

'Boomerang Kids'

Increasingly adult children like Caz (who appears in *Work*, pages 136–45) are unable to – or choose not to – leave home, or come back after some years away. The number of 'boomerang kids' is increasing: in 2015 the ONS reported that 3.3 million young adults (aged 20–34) are sharing a home with their parents in the UK. That is the highest number since records began in 1996. The main reason may well be economic, or delays in formalizing love relationships or getting careers off the ground. Yet it is worth parents examining their part in it: are they providing so much for free that their child doesn't want to leave? Are they infantilizing their child? Are they frightened of children leaving and being alone with their partner? Children staying at home is not necessarily a good thing for either party: new research from the London School of Economics shows that the quality of their life together decreased for the parents when a child moved back home. There

can also be an increasing financial worry too, that parents' savings are being spent, which leaves them exposed in old age.

My view is that, in this scenario, parents need to create a new set of rules for their adult children. Consider the following:

- Agree from the outset a fixed term for the length of time the adult child is to live with you – it is harder to do this later on.
- The adult child makes an agreed financial contribution to the household.
- You all agree to share household tasks.
- Discuss disagreement flashpoints that happened regularly before the adult child moved out, and explore ways of circumnavigating them in the present.
- Agree house rules about friends, music, etc.

Culture and Parenting

I am focusing on Asian culture because it was relevant to Leena, but the complex weave of heritage, culture and integration in present society would be true for any immigrant and the subsequent generations.

Research shows first-generation immigrants from collectivist cultures – which emphasize the needs and goals of the group over the needs and desires of each individual – practise what we in the West see as controlling authoritarian parenting styles. Parents may insist on an arranged marriage, or that their child goes into a particular profession, in order to hold on to their sense of identity in a foreign land; they may even be somewhat stuck in a particular historical-cultural time from their past. This creates tension, even big clashes, with second, third and fourth generations, who have acclimatized to the more individualistic Western culture.

Other Asian parents wish to transmit to their children the rules and obligations that reflected their race, ethnicity and culture, to uphold their heritage culture and remain part of their Asian

society in the UK. Yet they also want their children to be immersed in British culture, to learn English, navigate institutions, such as school and university, and celebrate mainstream British traditions and holidays. It requires a complex oscillation between the two cultures to find a way to encourage the children to hold on to the norms of their heritage but also to integrate and become part of their existing culture. When this is successful, it gives their children the bonus of greater depth of experience and the flexible creativity to move between two worlds.

When second-generation British Asians become parents, surveys show they actively consider the diversity of where they send their children to school. They feel extremely upset (more so than their parents before them) if they are subject to racial abuse, although they tend to face it less overtly than their parents (mostly in the form of microaggressions). They often wish their children to have a diverse mix of friends, since for many this was frowned upon by their own parents. Their heritage remains important to them – as it does to all of us – and they may turn to their parents (the grandparents) to teach their children the important aspects of their cultural heritage, including religious practices and cooking, which they may have rebelled against and didn't fully learn.

These second, third and fourth generations create their own rules, which may, for example, disapprove of intermarriage or the reverse. We all know families, or are in families, who have particular traditions, perhaps over religious holidays or birthdays, that may come from many generations back. What is true of all families is they develop their own rituals and accepted behaviours. It is part of human nature to create rules and habits to enable us to live more easily together and in society. It fulfils that key family requirement: to keep the family system stable.

Grandparents

Wandé's parents were very involved in their grandson's care. Lucas and Heather's parents stepped in to help when their grandson was

born and overall they found it rewarding. Research on functioning families reveals that grandparents find this fulfilling and spend an average of just over eight hours a week looking after their grandchildren; in the UK, 2.7 million grandparents are regular care-givers.

Grandmothers, like mothers, are likely to do more of the care and are more likely to change their own working life to take on care duties. Those who work part time do as much as those who are retired. The research found two-thirds (65 per cent) of grandparents across the UK provide some form of care for their grandchildren, making it easier for parents to go out to work. It saves families around £1,786 in childminder bills per year – a £16.1 billion saving across the UK. The financial saving is highly valued, even vital for some families.

In the case of separation and divorce, grandparents often resolve the financial problem that ensues by providing childcare for free. The highest levels of grandparental help take place in families that break down, but that is not matched by satisfaction levels. These are lower, presumably because it is much harder work helping distressed children and parents. A recent survey showed 90 per cent of grandparents believed it had a positive impact on their life. But many saw they had to 'put themselves out' and almost half felt their children did not appreciate them. Others felt pressured into taking on more of the care duties than they wanted.

The most common difficulty was that grandparents felt powerless in terms of exercising control over their grandchildren when they didn't agree with their children's discipline style.

There are important benefits: the grandparents enjoy better health, with all that running around after little ones, and the grandchildren are enriched by the input of two generations of people who love them deeply. For parents, the comfort of knowing that their children are looked after by someone they trust and who loves them is immeasurable.