

Navigating Difficult Terrain – A Positive Outcome Story

By Edward Malinowski

There is perhaps no relationship that is more perilous or rewarding than that of your source family, including Mother, Father, Brothers and Sisters. Having a family that works is an excellent foundation for having a powerful life, though we all know people with strong families who struggle in life. While having a family that is not cohesive and strong can be a great obstacle in creating a life well lived, we've also all heard of people who have overcome those obstacles and had a great life. We have all heard the stories of pain and suffering, of joy and triumph, of long term love and long term hate that go along with these family relationships. We've heard about dysfunctional families, and I'm not as sure we often hear of functional families, though I'm sure they exist. This is a story of my family, a difficult challenge we faced, and a positive outcome that has resulted. The assignment this paper is written in response to is meant to be a reflection on my part in causing, facilitating or influencing a positive outcome in an organization. The organization is my family and my facilitation as described here should in no way be construed as the sole source of the positive outcome, only my part in it and only as seen by me. It should in no way diminish the impact each of my family members has had on the positive outcome as I know we've all played our part.

The story begins in the summer of 2007, though the history comes from long before that, back to the days when I joined this family. Dad was up from Florida for his "while the weather is nice here" summer visit, Mom was in Florida working through the process of divorcing Dad, and Frank, Christine, Lisa and I were doing our things. Christine is the oldest, nine years my senior and lived in Alexandria, Virginia at the time of this story. Frank is one year younger than her, and lives about 10 minutes away from me with his wife and three kids. Lisa is five and a half years older than me and also lives nearby with her husband and four kids. I was

the baby of the family, and apparently the accident, though I've only recently gotten any slight confirmation that that may be true. I've been happily living my dream life with my wife and three kids for some time now, created in the context of the question "What is it to have an incredible relationship with your spouse?" Much of my personal pursuit of this question probably comes from my desire to improve upon the lackluster model for married relationship my parents provided. It wasn't bad, just not optimal.

As far as the divorce, Mom had been claiming she was going to divorce my Dad for nearly as long as I can remember. My very first memory involves my parents arguing about something, though I don't recall exactly what. It most probably had something to do with my Dad and his drinking alcohol which has been a large part of the family story all along. My mother started going to Al-Anon, AA for the non-drinking spouse or other family members, some time when I was very little and my father has been an alcoholic in her mind ever since. He did quit drinking when I was about ten years old without the assistance of a 12 step program or any rehab facility. I don't know if he'd ever say that he was or that he was not an alcoholic. I don't know myself. As far as I can tell, you're not until you say that you are. That's when you know you are.

In my little boy's mind he was just my Dad. He was happier when he was drinking, grumpier when he was not, and apparently he loved my Mom very much because when she "really" threatened to leave, he stopped drinking. Cold turkey. I remember he spent a lot of time sleeping in those days, probably as a result of some sort of depression, withdrawal or something. Soon after we moved into a new house so my sister Lisa could go to a different high

school, Dad bought a motorcycle as part of some mid-life crisis or renewed zest for living, and life seemed pretty decent. From there I moved through high school, the army, moved out of my parent's house and was making it through college.

While I was in school, and around the time that I met my wife, was the next time I really heard my Mom talking about divorcing my Dad. Who knew what their relationship was like? I sure didn't. They traveled together from time to time and mostly did their own thing by themselves. It seemed to work. My Mom continued to attend "meetings" (Al-Anon for those in the know) and Dad rode his bike whenever he could until he retired. After a few years of being retired and traveling all over the country on his bike, sometimes with Mom and sometimes without, sometimes with my Brother, sometimes without, sometimes with me and sometimes without, he eventually lost some of his confidence behind that big Harley and stopped riding. About two years after I was married, my parents decided to move down to Florida together.

The next summer, my Dad came back while my Mom stayed there in Florida. That was it. She basically told him to find his own place if he came back to Florida and he did. Five years later, my Dad was still coming back in the summer to stay in the old house here and in the winter he would go back down to Florida. My Mom rarely came back here at all. She was living in the place they stayed in together for that first year and after about five years of separation and wondering if my Mom was ever going to allow him back my Dad heard rumors that some guy was living in that place with her. "Just friends", my good Catholic, Order of the Franciscans trained Mom said. It certainly was questionable. But who knows the truth, especially in a family?

As for me, I was pretty ticked off at my Mom for the way she handled things. And I'd let her know every time she'd call me. I'll never find out if it had anything to do with my ranting to him about how wrong it all was or not, but eventually when my Dad went back down there and checked in on the house and validated that there was indeed somebody there, he stopped paying the bills. The divorce papers arrived on Christmas Eve of 2006 about two months after my Dad stopped paying for things.

The summer of 2007 came, and the divorce was winding its way through the slow court's process while my Dad made his way back up here for his summer visit. Two months later he was in the front yard of his house here, walking around and talking to the neighbors. A neighbor's overly friendly dog was out and came up to my Dad and jumped up on him to play. My Dad fell over in the street, broke his femur and took an ambulance ride to the hospital. I met him there in the emergency room where he was in a good amount of pain that only amplified his normally feisty spirit as he kept cursing at that "damn dog". Despite the feistiness, he also looked quite concerned about his future and maybe even a little afraid. The next morning he went into surgery to put some pins into his leg and the effects of the anesthesia seem to have never worn off. While the dementia was probably already taking a toll on my dad we didn't really notice anything. But for certain, my Dad hasn't been the same since that day.

Today, Dad lives in a home in Avon Lake where an amazing woman takes people in his condition into her house and cares for them. This story is about that positive outcome and navigating my family through the onset of dementia for my Dad, working through a divorce

between my Mom and Dad, and keeping all of us surprisingly united as a family. It didn't start out that way.

As I said, when my Dad came out of that surgery he wasn't the same guy that went in. He didn't know where he was and he barely made sense when he was speaking. The doctors told us that sometimes, especially with elderly people, it took a while for the anesthesia to work its way out of their system. My sisters, brother and I (the team), were in action spontaneously juggling it all. We were visiting, keeping a handle on bills, maintaining the house here, and receiving calls from my Mom about where her money was while Dad made it through his rehab assignment.

This story wouldn't be a very amazing one without that last part, the part about Mom calling us for money. Many people go through what we went through with our Dad. But not a lot of people go through that with their Mother processing a divorce, essentially through us. Immediately this was the most difficult thing to take and if I still sound a little incomplete with that part of it it's probably because I am. I'm not sure if my Mom didn't believe us about Dad, or didn't trust us that we were being honest with the funds, or if she was just hell bent on continuing to blame him for everything in order to justify the whole thing to herself (my choice), but those calls asking where money was were really tough to take. In the midst of everything the team was juggling and trying to deal with in taking care of our own hectic lives, as well as Dad's, I couldn't comprehend the selfishness of my Mom and that manifested itself in a lot of anger.

One evening I was preparing for a seminar that I was about to lead and my Mom called. For some reason I answered the call even though I'd already gone through the process of "clearing my thoughts" to be an open space for seminar participants. This call from my Mother caught me totally off guard and I would not be lying if I said that my level of Emotional Intelligence fell into the category of "dumb as a rock" on this occasion. I had argued with my mother before about the way she was handling this situation, but never had she called me directly asking for the money that my Dad had either agreed to send her or had arranged to send her with the divorce lawyer. My Mom also seemed very skilled in pressing just the right buttons to activate that child's guilt that I wasn't even aware was there.

While the phone interaction was hostile and resonant leadership wasn't on the radar, in retrospect this was the day that I gave up being "the youngest" and assuming that there would be anybody in my family that would be more capable of seeing these events through to some satisfactory level of completion other than me. For me, it was definitely a textbook example of a tipping point (Boyatzis, 2008). I'd never really noticed the way I related to myself in life, everywhere, as "the youngest". But it was like a pervasive filter that shaded all of my interactions. I was always looking for somebody else to be the one, or the grown up, or the leader. I'd never considered what it would be like for that to be me. I totally laid into my mother on that phone call and though the words I was speaking all related to her and her responsibility in the matter what I was really upset about, subconsciously, was that she was making any of this my responsibility. Why would I have to handle my disabled Father's payments to her? It was in their formerly joint checking account for God's sake. "Go withdraw the money yourself", was my attitude. What wasn't obvious to me was that I had always seen a

different future for my family, a different way that things could have been and that I'd never wanted to be responsible for it. That day I jumped in feet first and vowed to lead, at first in "protecting" my Father and as time went on in ensuring that our family remained a strong unit even if it was in a new form.

While I had embraced a new leadership role, there were many challenges that the team faced. The first is that there was no strong model of leadership, resonant or otherwise present in my family for most of my life. There was no shared vision of what the family could or should be and certainly no communication in this regard. I would say that my sisters and I had attempted to have these conversations in the past but we had always relied on attempting to get our parents to be the leaders of the family. While our parents were "in charge", I wouldn't say that either of them was leading. If they were, they weren't communicating the vision to the rest of us. It all just happened in a haphazard, whatever will be, will be method.

The second was that none of us had been through a situation such as this before and we didn't have a lot of experience in it. This was going to be experiential learning in its most raw form. My Dad had dementia and we knew very little about the effects of it. Additionally, the doctors could not tell us if it was Alzheimer's disease or some other form of dementia. We didn't really know what to expect. On top of that, my Mom was divorcing my Dad and didn't seem to believe us that there was anything really wrong with him. Essentially, she was divorcing my Dad through us. Finally, we all had our own lives. Christine lived in Virginia, Frank had 3 kids and his wife and they both worked, Lisa had 4 kids and she and her husband both worked. I had a wife who worked, I worked, and we had three kids.

After that initial blow-up with my mother, and probably one other, where I attempted to force her into recognizing the way she was being about this whole situation, and after causing her to hang up on me several times by laying into her with my verbal blades, I had a realization that this wasn't working. I realized that there was nothing that I would ever be able to say or do to have my mother be any different than she was and that most of that desire was for my own needs, not hers. These emotionally charged interactions were "wake-up calls" (McKee, Boyatzis & Johnston, 2008) for me, looking at what I wanted my own family to be and extending that out to all my relationships.

Around that time I'd heard a Zen Master that I knew speak the words that would become my internal mantra in all interactions with my Mom. He said simply, "Rocks are hard. Water is wet. And Mother is Mother." This simple saying allowed me to begin being mindful (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005) in my interactions with my Mom.

It has been said that you'll never have a fully complete and nourishing relationship with another human being until you are able to complete with and be fully in relationship with your parents, and particularly your mother. Within that view of relationship I'd attempted to be fully complete with my mother for years but until this series of events occurred it always seemed forced and ultimately elusive. There was always something I wanted my mother to be for me, that in my mind I thought she "should" be for me, that I was never able to believe that she was, or get her to be. This was all a lie I told myself because I didn't want to be responsible for the outcome of my own life. My whole life was her fault. In this series of events and with the

satisfaction that I was already successfully leading my own family, I was able to take responsibility for my life and that of my original family.

In taking on a role of leadership there were a number of things that I really saw needed some focus in this situation, not only for me but for the whole team. I was really lacking some compassion for my mother and empathy for allowing her Ideal Self to be. The entire experience was occurring for me as an attack against what family was supposed to be, or my vision of family. At the time I had a lot of resentment for all the good Catholic lectures my mother had given me growing up only to see her cast all of that aside, ditch my father and shack up with some dude. After I spent some time being angry about it, it became evident that I would have to let go of that “ought self” (Boyatzis, 2008) vision of family and really re-invent the possibility of ideal self for family as it occurred for me. I spent some time inquiring into what the must-have aspects of family were. In the end I came up with open communication, love, and a supportive environment where each family member could fulfill their vision of their dreams, as the key elements of family.

Also, I saw that each of us on the team had a desire to ‘do something’ to put our family back on a new stable footing, but neither of us were really sure what that something was. While I was ‘bull in a china shop’ embracing my new self-appointed leadership role by taking my Dad in to live with me and attempting to handle his financial situation it was clear that I had to delegate some of this responsibility and somehow empower my sisters and brother to take some action as well. This became most apparent after we found a small handgun sitting out on the dresser in the room of my house where my Dad was staying and had a brief conversation

with the Doctors about some of the destabilizing mental effects of dementia. My wife was not pleased that there was a potential for violence, and neither of us were very pleased about finding a gun out in the open, in our house, with two little kids. For about two months, we put my Dad back in his own house until he fell again while walking on his own to the bank.

At the time, I wouldn't have used many of the terms I'm using in this paper to describe my behaviors or actions and I didn't have too much of a clue how to lead a family in the direction of open communication, love and creating a supportive environment. I did have some experience previously in taking a seminar where communication, commitment and love were the result in my individual life, out of which I created the relationship with my wife. I invited my sisters to review this course with me as they had also taken the seminar individually, and in fact introduced me to it. What was different was that we had never gone through it together, with a commitment to developing a future for our family and to resolve specific issues related to caring for both of our parents. I didn't pressure either of them into taking the course but gently let them know what I was interested in getting out of it, communicating that shared vision and inviting them to participate with me.

We also invited our brother to participate but he wasn't interested, so we allowed him to participate in his own way. My brother has always been a positive deviant (Pascale & Sternin, 2005) in our family and in the world. He's the only never-smoker to come out of our family, he says "shoot" instead of our other favorite family word, has hardly ever been a drinker, and ended up being a fireman. He is an all around All-American. We weren't worried that he would do his part.

In the three day course each of us had the opportunity to look at our lives and each of us was able to complete our past and invent a future to live into, similar to reconciling the ideal self and the real self in Intentional Change Theory. We came out of the course with a united approach for caring for our Dad and it was time to begin experimenting and practicing our approach. My sisters took the lead on finding a place for my Dad to stay after his next round of rehab hospital stay following the bank parking lot fall. I was thrilled to see them both taking action and being empowered in their approach as we seem to be a family of reflectors. Their final selection for the home to put my Dad in was not my first choice, but given the short time frame that my sister was in town for, and the commitment they both showed in researching and selecting a facility, I didn't dispute the selection. We also completed the transition of making Lisa the official power of attorney for my Dad's financial life as my Dad wished.

Over time my Dad's health continued to decline and it was apparent that we were going to have to move him somewhere with more personalized care as he was getting angrier and angrier and spending more time in his room at the home than he had been in the past. With Christine living in Virginia, Lisa and I took the lead on finding a new place while my brother Frank gave his input on the final selection. We looked into several of these personal home solutions and took a gamble on our current caregiver. She is from Romania and didn't currently have any residents in her home so the risk was that my Dad would be the first. Her husband, her mother and she would be splitting the duties and it was obvious they were committed to doing this because they'd put an entire addition on their house to accommodate the residents after working in another home for a few years. We felt that the more personalized care and being in a family environment with a real family from "the old country" would be beneficial to

my Dad and we were amazingly correct. While my Dad's mental state has continued to decline, his spirits are better than I've ever seen them. Every time I go visit him and I see the interactions he has with Carmen I'm amazed and feel so blessed to have found her.

Following Dad's move and prior to the divorce being finalized my Mom's Father died. I was on the phone with her in Florida and she was distraught and didn't know what to do. Despite the harsh and confused feelings she brought up for me regarding my Dad, I was able to practice mindfulness and coaching with compassion (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005) during this conversation with her and allow the conversation to be all about her. She wasn't sure what to do about coming to Ohio for the funeral and I just listened to her and let her work through whatever was there. After I listened to her until there was really nothing left for her to say, she still wasn't sure what to do. But I could hear that she needed to come here and she just couldn't figure out how to commit to doing that. In the stillness of the listening and space that I granted my Mom, free from judgment, I offered to come down and fly back with her if that was what she needed. I think she really heard my commitment to her, my desire to support her, and my love, and she knew that I was serious. She told me she would call me back. She called me back a little while later to tell me that she had bought a ticket and when she would be here. I didn't end up doing anything for her, but I knew in the moment that she had been listened to and supported by me in that same way that she would always be on the phone with all those other desperate Al-Anon housewives that she was a sponsor for. I was able to contribute to her in a way I'd always wanted to and in that moment I was complete with my Mother.

My brother spends a lot more of his time than any of us visiting and is always the one taking Dad to doctor's appointments. Each of us has been able to make a difference in my Dad's care by contributing in the area of our strengths without being overwhelming for any of us. Lisa has been able to complete all of the financial interactions and transactions with my Mom resulting from the now finalized divorce and everything has been split down the middle, including the sale of the house and all of the retirement accounts that they jointly held. While this financial aspect has probably been the most difficult task of all emotionally, my sister has handled it all with a fairness and grace that makes it clear that my Dad made the right choice in his decision to choose her as the power of attorney for his affairs, even as his mental capacities declined.

In the end, the positive change that was affected went far beyond the placement of my father in the amazing and caring facility he is in now. My mother recently visited to attend her high school reunion of all things. She did call when she arrived in town and she visited our house with her "friend". While I can't say I was ecstatic to see my Mom, I was mindful enough to know that I wanted her to leave knowing that she was loved. She wanted to see my Laundromats, so I took her on a tour of my empire and I hugged her hello and goodbye warmly with no expectation or unfulfilled want from her.

My eldest sister Christine has just gone on the adventure of a lifetime by taking a position to teach English to children in Abu Dhabi. Prior to her departure my family went on a trip to the Outer Banks and we stopped by her place on the way. We visited and it was great to see her and be unaffected by her concerns stemming from her imminent departure and packing

up of her house. Her willingness and boldness in exploring the world have always been an inspiration to me and this most recent move is no different.

My brother brings me mail and bills from Carmen's house whenever we're picking our kids up at school at the same time. By visiting frequently and transporting my Dad to doctor's visits, he contributes the most of any of us and he does it in the way that works the best for him. There's no big show about it, no claim to leadership or anything like that. It's just good old fashioned hard work and dedication, the things that I've always known to expect from him.

My sister Lisa has always been the person I trust most in the world. She has always looked out for me and we take care of each other. This experience has been no different, has given us many opportunities for coaching with compassion, and our relationship is stronger than ever.

As for my Dad, there can be no more positive outcome than the outcome I've had with him. Shortly after evicting him for having a handgun in his room and putting him precariously on his own, I had a moment with my Dad that is nearly indescribable in words and encompasses all of the love that a son could ever have for a father and a father could have for a son.

My wife and I met for dinner one evening with the kids and we drove separately, so I picked up my Dad to join us. After dinner I took him home and helped him get inside the house. Feeling bad or guilty or whatever for just dropping him off there and leaving him I sat and stayed for a few minutes. When the hour would get late it would get more difficult for him to speak so I just sat and was "being with" him. He looked sad, and frightened, and that he didn't want me to go. As I said, it's difficult to explain what happened, but I didn't do anything

with all of that feeling that I received from him, I was just being. I was really just being an open space for whatever was there for him and whatever was happening in his experience and being with him, over there, in his experience. Also, I was loving him, without words or actions, just powerfully loving him. (Spink, 1997) I'll never know what the experience was for him, but as I looked into his eyes, and as he started sobbing while I comforted him with an embrace, I received all the love I've ever wanted from my Dad. It was a lifetime of love and appreciation shared in a two minute span of time, beyond words and beyond time and something that every father and son should share before either of them slips into that place where there are no more words to express what could have or should have been said. That moment allowed me to be who I declare that I am today, love present and experienced in the world.

Thank you for your listening.

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