

Bifurcation of the family story

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I love [this article on raising teenagers by Rachel Cusk](#). I didn't at first. During the beginning paragraphs, I thought that it was going to be another generational screed about how teenagers are monsters.

I still remember when I was a teenager, I went to a conservative Southern Baptist church and heard James Dobson quoted often. He said that teenagers should be locked in a barrel and fed through a knothole. Then when they turned 16, parents should fill in the knothole. The parents in our church quoted this advice often, with winks and knowing nods, like we weren't standing *right there*.

(I just looked this up. Dobson was quoting Mark Twain. And I feel a bit better that the advice came from a humorist, but I didn't know that when I was young. I just got nervous anytime I was in the same room with a barrel and my parents.)

Teenagers are at such an amazing place in their lives. I still tear up when I think about the youth in my church 15 years ago, and my heart burns with a sort of aching pride and sadness. My own daughter, it seems, is at her most interesting so far. Although I have loved each stage of her life, now she is a place where we can talk about politics, history, literature, (non)religion and feminism for hours.

The [article](#) takes a shift when the author began to tell the story from the teenagers' perspectives. She explains:

Adolescence, it strikes me, shares some of the generic qualities of divorce. The central shock of divorce lies in its bifurcation of the agreed-upon version of life: There are now two versions, mutually hostile, each of whose narrative aim is to discredit the other. Until adolescence, parents by and large control the family story. The children are the subject of this story, sure enough, the generators of its interest or charm, but they remain, as it were, characters, creatures derived from life who nonetheless

have their being in the author's head.

All of this has an extra layer of meaning for me. Not only did it help me to understand what is happening as a parent, but it's helping me with my own storytelling, as a daughter. I am writing a book for HarperOne about healing from religious wounds, which means I am telling a much different story than the one that my mother tells about God and our family.

Of course, I have long left my mother's narrative and formed my own. But it's always tricky, particularly in the age of Facebook, when my political ideas and religious actions still appall my mom's friends. Men and women I haven't spoken to in twenty years send me frantic private messages because I don't believe the same things they do about contraception, women's rights, the death penalty, mass incarceration, poverty, health care, torture, pacifism, vegetarianism, Muslims... hmmm... wow. Now that I list them and I know that I can go on, I'm realizing that I have gotten more correspondence than I thought from my mom's friends.

Many of these people I deeply loved. They were important in my childhood and formation. I hate that I have let them down in some way, but it's odd that they have a difficult time believing that I could have a different story than theirs. Others, I hardly knew and I wonder why they feel the need to police the thoughts of their friend's offspring. It would be difficult to imagine a scenario where I would send a long email arguing with a friend's son or daughter. I suppose it's the nature of Facebook, or because my story has taken form in a public way.

I still worry that I will embarrass my mom in front of her friends. But my mom has given me a great gift: she promised me that she will not read my book. It's not from a lack of support or interest. She has cheered me on throughout the process. I doubt it's even a literal promise. But it is a covenant she made, not only from a mother to a daughter, but from one writer to another writer. It is one that says, *Even though our narratives are so deeply enmeshed and entwined, I'll let you have your own story.*

And for that, I am tremendously grateful.