

Susan Safer is a computer programmer. She hopes that her experience will offer some insight into the consequences of child custody battles on children.

Secret Allies
By Susan Safer

Last night I dreamt that my ex-husband and I were working together to help our child. I woke up suddenly at around 3 a.m. struck by the strangeness of the dream. It wasn't strange in a bizarre way. Actually, it was a very normal scenario for a dream: a mother and father concerned for their child. It was strange because my ex-husband and I hate each other and have not cooperated with one another for over ten years. Moments later I was hit by another realization. We were now secret allies.

Had that dream and the thoughts that followed it in the middle of the night come to me about ten years earlier, maybe my daughter wouldn't have had to suffer so much. Maybe. Maybe.

I think that if I had known then what I know now, I would've handled it very differently. But I don't blame myself. I was missing critical information. Like what the future would bring, for example. Like an understanding of the legal system and the effects of divorce and custody battles on children. At the time, I voraciously pursued advice from psychologists, lawyers and the clergy. Now I realize that most of them were as ignorant and helpless as I was about preventing the bad effects of divorcing parents' actions on their developing children.

The thrust of my crusade was to take care of my daughter. It was my responsibility. In theory, I'd have had no problem with my child living with her father. I didn't feel that she had to be with me. What I felt, though, is that if she lived with him, he would drive her to the point of despair with his insatiable need for control.

He wouldn't beat her, at least not physically. He's not a physically violent person. He is a big man, however, and prone to raising his voice and intimidating others. The chill of thinking about his psychologically terrifying methods being used on my child for an indefinite period of time drove me to fight for custody.

That feeling of being backed into a corner. The one that makes you feel completely helpless and hopeless and sometimes worse, worthless. It's confusing. On the one hand, you feel that you are a competent person living in a free country and you have choices. On the other hand, his arguments, which he never tires of promoting, make you feel as though your head is being held under water. Until you agree to his "suggestion" you will be badgered without a break. And agreeing is not enough. You must convince him that you are actually happy with his suggestion rather than showing that you have been coerced into "agreement". If not, you will be made to feel guilty, stupid, and

contemptible. Finally, you start believing that you are contemptible-not because of the abuse that he has heaped upon you-rather because of the abuse that you now heap upon yourself for being so spineless.

I felt I had no choice. I simply had to protect my daughter from this. I had a fantastic lawyer. He not only understood the situation, but he was also able to drive the point home to the judge. Unfortunately, custody was not enough to protect my daughter from the onslaught of low self-esteem that her father's manipulation heaped upon her. He sabotaged her childhood at every opportunity. Not out of maliciousness. On the contrary, he thought he was helping her by making sure that as many things as possible did not work out for her in my world. It's not because he hated me, but because he hated the life that I had chosen for myself. He hated my religion and thought that I was brainwashed into my beliefs rather than attracted to them by their beauty and practicality. He didn't want that for our daughter and was bound to protect her from this at any cost. The cost turned out to be a personality disorder that torments our daughter and all those who love and care for her.

Now I wonder if I should've let her go from the beginning. "It's ok, Honey. You can go and live with your dad. If you ever decide you want to come back, we can talk about it. In the meantime, you go and try to be the best you can be. Don't worry about a thing. Just take care of yourself."

If I had said that, perhaps she wouldn't have always felt that no matter what she did she was betraying either her father or her mother. She couldn't enjoy making either one happy. There was always the flip side haunting her.

Had I known then what I know now, I think I would've predicted that without any prompting from me, my daughter would've come to realize on her own, much more quickly, that her father wasn't good for her and that he was hurting her inside and that she had to do whatever was necessary to protect herself. If she hadn't come to that realization, she was probably beyond the reach of any help I could give her anyway. But I couldn't see that at the time because I wasn't able to realize this even for myself without the help of an excellent psychiatrist.

Over the years, our daughter has gone back and forth. She has experienced all that to which her parents were capable of exposing her. She has felt moments of intense materialism and moments of deep religious conviction. She has had moments of unbelievable clarity in understanding even the most subtle aspects of her situation. Most of all she has felt like a needy victim hoping, waiting, and calling to be rescued. She has lied, cheated, stolen and hurt herself. She has been a responsible employee and is talented in dealing with small children, old folks and "special" folks. Maybe that's because she's "special".

As a teenager, she is not openly rebellious. She loves her parents despite the fact that she believes that they "messed" her up. She is correct, I think. Collectively, we did mess her up even though her doctor told me that not all children who are the products of wrecked families like ours turn out this way. She is a sweet girl. She makes friends easily because she is so helpful and charming. She has stood up for unpopular kids in high school when they were being humiliated. All of her relationships are extremely strained, though, due to her neediness and feelings of insecurity about her identity. Inevitably, she gets hurt. If you add to this the pressures of the adolescent, it often feels unbearable. A teenage girl may think to herself that she is fat and ugly so nobody will want to be with her. If you throw in the constant, nagging feeling that she has betrayed her father (by not betraying her mother) and betrayed her mother (by not betraying her father), the resulting unending negative messages to the brain are maddening.

I can't undo what is done. My only contribution now can be to cooperate with her father in helping her. In the last few months of living with me she had come to the realization that the religious girls' school she attended was doing wonders to reverse the damage inflicted upon her by the loud, cruel remarks of boys in the public school she previously attended. We finally found a doctor that seemed to be getting somewhere with her. Her father convinced her that it would be better for her to move back out of town with him, however. Thanks to the doctor, her father realizes that she suffers from a personality disorder. He is trying to find the best therapist in his city to help her.

After ten painful years of constantly wondering how to help my child, I'm suddenly peaceful. It occurs to me that I've tried to help her in every way that I possibly could. Now, it's up to her. If she wants to help herself, I will continue to stand behind her. Until that time, I will make huge efforts to forget the pain of the last year; the last ten years, and to live as I've never lived before: proactively. Not always fighting fires but looking for enjoyment. Finding enjoyment. Creating opportunities for which to look forward.

One of the methods my daughter used to get what she thought she wanted was to play one of her parents against the other. Since her parents were loath to communicate with one another, this often worked to invoke rage and righteous indignation of one parent against the other. As a result, my daughter was often rewarded with whatever it was that she set out to achieve. Unfortunately, she always alienated one of her parents in the process. For this her emotional health paid a high price.

Now that her father and I are communicating, by email most of the time since we really can't stand to hear each other's voices, our daughter will no longer be able to play one against the other. We will attempt to provide her with the consistency that she has lacked for so long. It's true that she is already 17, in her last year of high school and hasn't yet found the necessary therapy. It's so sad that it has taken me ten years to see that no matter how difficult it may be to accept, it's sometimes necessary to have secret allies.