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cuts you off, how
do you heal the rift?

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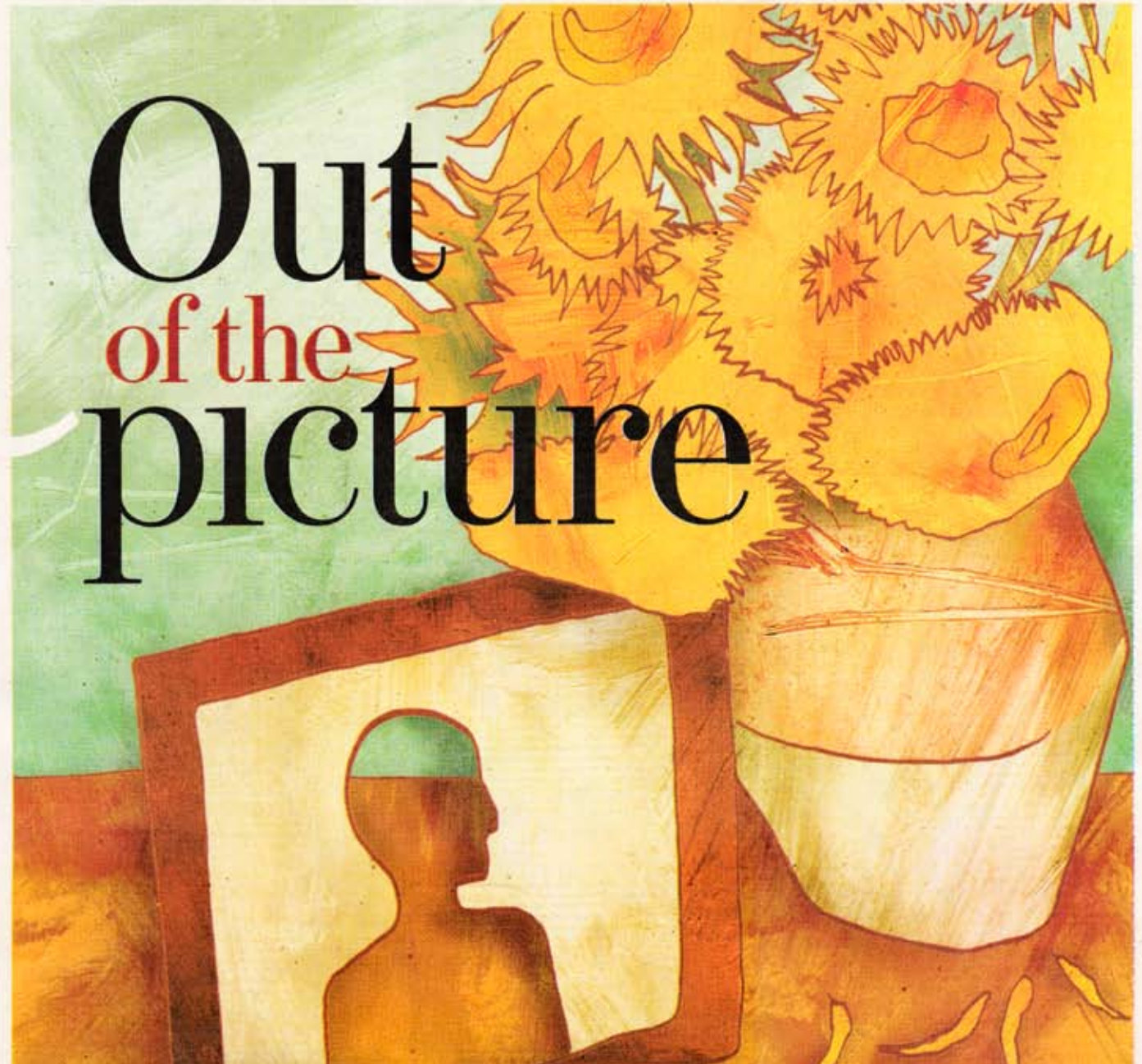
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Lindsay Lohan sports the socks-with-boots look.

Photo by [unreadable]
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Out of the picture



A loved one in your family has cut you off emotionally – and seemingly forever. Dare you dream of healing the rift? YES.

By Betsy Storm

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Since Rudy Giuliani stepped into the presidential race in 2006, his children, ages 17 and 21, have been noticeably absent from his campaign. Giuliani is publicly enduring a situation that millions of Americans deal with in private—a phenomenon that psychologists call an “emotional cutoff.”

Here’s the scenario: A parent, an adult child, a sibling or someone else who stars in your family constellation cuts you off. Whether gradual or sudden, it’s always a knife to the heart.

Psychologist Mark Sichel, author of “Healing From Family Rifts,” describes these estrangements as being “buried alive.”

Shame and embarrassment abound among people who experience such rifts. Although few statistics are available on the incidence of family estrangement in the U.S., the Australian Institute of Family Studies reports fully 20 percent of adults are cut off from a sibling.

“I do believe that estrangement is quite common and that families feel ashamed of it because such distance flies in the face of what we think families are supposed to be about,” said Tribune advice columnist Amy Dickinson.

An estrangement that develops gradually is less likely to be accompanied by a dramatic exit and slamming door. Many people simply drift away from loved ones when they are unable to reconcile their issues and sort out emotional aches of the past. Because it’s often subtle, they frequently don’t realize that if not dealt with directly, temporary distancing often becomes permanent.

Divorce and its aftermath are common sources of family rifts. Giuliani’s relationship with his two children has been strained since Giuliani’s surprise announcement at a 2000 press conference that he was leaving their mother, Donna Hanover. In 2003, he married Judith Nathan, a woman he had described in 2000 as “his very good friend.”

Evanston resident Amy Krause, now 37, was 7 when her parents divorced. Her dad remarried almost immediately, and Krause quickly grew to love her stepmom and the two children born into her father’s second family. Everything was going great until her father divorced again, starting yet a third family.

“I was angry and hurt,” said Krause, who was largely cut off from her father for the last 20 years. Six years ago, when her father discovered he had cancer, he and

PLEASE SEE **RIFTS** » PAGE 10

Tips for healing a painful cutoff

Find a skilled therapist. Not only can a wise therapist help you work through the feelings caused by emotional cutoffs, he or she also can help you devise a strategy for trying to resolve the issue, or help you determine how to proceed if reconciliation isn’t possible or desirable (perhaps, for example, because of a situation involving abuse). Robert Noone, executive director of the Family Service Center of Glenview, Kenilworth, Northbrook and Wilmette, says that helping people explore the family dynamics that contribute to family cutoffs is almost always enlightening. Noone recommends checking out thebowencenter.org and clicking on “Bowen Theory,” then “Emotional Cutoff” for background on the subject.

Don’t play the blame game. “We live in such a blaming society,” says E. Maurlea Babb, a licensed family and marriage therapist and founder of Chrysalis, the Center for Individual and Family Therapy, in Wheaton. “Most parents do the best they can.” Babb believes reassurance, affirmation and a non-judgmental attitude can repair many relationships. “I’ve seen a lot of miracles,” she said.

Forgive. Rev. Elizabeth Andrews of Chicago’s 4th Presbyterian Church recommends that the door to possibility remain open. “Allow space for grace to come in.”

Don’t let the cutoff define your life. Although one can do everything in his or her power to heal an estrangement, it’s possible to move forward and live a good life, even if a cutoff is never repaired.

—B. S.

» RIFTS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Krause forged a tentative reconciliation. Her dad recovered, and his cancer went into remission. Last year, when the cancer returned, Krause traveled considerable distances on several occasions to offer love and support to her dad and his family.

Fox River Grove resident John Mazurek, a therapist with a private practice in Arlington Heights, says he committed "the biggest mistake of my life" after a bitter divorce 30 years ago. He unwittingly put his daughter, Martha, into the uncomfortable position of arranging her own visits to him.

"I later realized that she felt pulled between two warring parents and thought she had to make a choice between us," said Mazurek, who has not seen his daughter in 17 years. While Martha never said, "I don't want to see you anymore," the cutoff eventually became a way of life.

When repairing a family relationship simply isn't feasible, an alternative that psychologist Sichel calls "the second-chance family" often satisfies the human desire for a core group of loving supporters. Peter Monaco of Batavia has experienced substantial rifts with his family of origin, but he and his wife's family have established a lasting bond of affection.

Monaco's mother-in-law, Marlyne Olson, lives in Portland, Ore., and stays in touch with her daughter and son-in-law via regular telephone conversations.

Statistics are unavailable on the number of emotional cutoffs that are eventually mended, perhaps because the process is unscientific at best.

"I believe that, depending on the circumstances, families can and do find ways to heal from estrangements and bridge the gap between them," Dickinson said. "Sometimes the birth of a grandchild or a serious illness can bring people together. In my column, I urge people to grab these opportunities to come back together—even in the smallest ways."

This much is certain:



Photo for the Tribune by Warren Skalski

Peter Monaco turned to his wife's family, including mother-in-law Marlyne Olson, when cutoffs developed in his birth family.

Books that offer help

■ **"Difficult Conversations"** (Penguin, \$15) by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen and Roger Fisher offers practical guidelines on how to initiate and direct the sticky, uncomfortable conversations that are an inevitable part of life. The authors are affiliated with the Harvard Law School and the Harvard project on negotiation.

■ **"Healing From Family Rifts: Ten Steps to Finding Peace After Being Cut Off From a Family Member"** (McGraw-Hill, \$15.95 paper) by Mark Sichel abounds with compassion and insight from a psychologist who has experienced emotional cutoffs in his own life. He provides a

10-step program that addresses the painful experience of dealing with familial ruptures.

■ **"I'm OK, You're My Parents: How to Overcome Guilt, Let Go of Anger, and Create a Relationship That Works"** (Henry Holt, \$24) by Dale Atkins is intended for the adult child in the parent-child relationship. Rather than blaming one's parents for everything that hasn't worked out as one would like in life, Atkins helps the reader identify ways to work through anger to create a working relationship with one's parents. She offers examples and strategies to move through them successfully.

—B.S.

Mending a broken relationship is a journey for the tortoise, not the hare, demanding patience, hard work and forgiveness.

Krause and her father have navigated the shoals successfully; the two say they are now closer than they've been since her child-

hood.

"It's by no means perfect," Krause said. "I had to give up the dream of a 'traditional' father-daughter relationship." But, after all these years, "it seems like, at last, we've established some common understanding of our relationship."

A personal journey of reconciliation

The phenomenon of emotional cutoffs is every bit as heartbreaking as it sounds.

When my then-18-year-old son, Colin, cut me out of his life six years ago, I was devastated.

Colin stopped calling me, ignored my letters and chose not to walk me down the aisle when I remarried four years ago. I despaired of ever regaining a loving relationship with the tall, handsome and engaging young man whose face and sense of humor so resemble my own.

Reflecting on our difficulties, recently resolved, Colin, now 24 and a recent graduate of the University of Illinois, put it this way:

"Our cutoff began with my extremely poor high school performance. There was great frustra-

tion on all sides. When my mom decided at the beginning of my senior year after a particularly bad (and loud) argument that I had to go live with my dad, I blamed her for the drastic changes brought on by that move.

"Initial feelings of anger and resentment eventually subsided, and in their place a feeling of emotional numbness took over.

"But by the middle of my college years, I realized I missed my mom. After a slow, gradual and difficult process, we began rebuilding. Now, things are great between us.

"A willingness to set aside past differences and acknowledge that we really love each other were critical factors in our reconciliation."

—Betsy Storm