

What to do.

The man had been emotionally distracted for almost twenty-six years, but he finally decided to sit with what he had been avoiding. He knew what he was avoiding, yet he had still chosen to continue. The man had rationalized, and kept rationalizing, his decision by following his rule that if he didn't know what to do, his choice was to do nothing, but avoidance was doing something. Still, he wanted his children to make the situation right, since they were the ones who had made it wrong.

His daughter, the love of his life and a stronger-willed child you will never meet, ran away from home at sixteen. Her running away destroyed her younger brother, but when she told him it was their father's fault, he sought solace and revenge by hating his father.

That became her go-to story; her father had abused her emotionally, so she ran away. She left out all the times he saved her financially, all the times she would live with him again, and all the times he literally bailed her out of situations her bad choices landed her in.

She also never admitted that she had made up the story about emotional abuse.

The man knew his daughter and son were bad-mouthing him instead of celebrating the good father they really had, and while he remained loyal to them, he was deeply hurt. And life went on for the three of them. The man chose to avoid telling his children how he felt about their treatment of him. He would allude to his hurt, but he never said it outright. Why? The man feared losing them, but now, looking back, he could see he had lost them all those years ago. The man knew his children were using him, yet he still gave them any help they asked for. Maybe he hoped they would remember him: the single parent who had given them fourteen years of care and security, the man who had never left them, the man who had loved them as they openly betrayed him.

His daughter said to him, “It must have been hard raising us on your own”. Her comment raised his hopes that she might remember some of what he had done, but no, that was not to be.

So now, finally, he sat with everything he knew and remembered. He remembered not eating at times because there was only enough food for them. He remembered being poor and going back to Junior College to get educated to acquire a better-paying job. He remembered the college hiring him to teach English and math, quintupling his hourly wage. He remembered the hard times, and he remembered the happy times too: the camping trips, the holiday dinners with grandma, grandpa, and other family members. He remembered them being happy most days. He never drank alcohol, nor did he use any recreational drugs. His purpose in life was to raise his children.

The one thing he never considered was that his children would betray him for their personal gain. The personal gain that empathy and sympathy from others offers. The man stopped himself from trying to find a reason for their disloyalty.

The man thought, “Yes, they were children 26 years ago, but today they are adults.”

The man had relived this story in his head countless times, and now he wanted to move forward by making a decision that wasn’t more avoidance, and a decision that would allow him to remove the bonds that bound him to this circle of avoidance.

The man took several long, deep breaths, waited and then took another before saying aloud, “Okay. I’ll move forward without you, my children.” The silence that followed startled him, and his heart skipped a few beats. The man sat quite still, letting the experience unfold.

“What am I doing?” he questioned. “Do I have to do this? Why can’t I leave everything alone and see what happens?” The question went unanswered for several minutes, and then he heard himself say, “You’ve tried that, and it depressed you, remember?”

From the silence, the man listened to himself say this: “Your children don’t want you. They want what they can get from you; all you are is a safety net for them.”

The man sat quietly. He was stunned. He was sad and wanted to cry, but he had stopped crying a long time ago. He knew he was making an existential decision, and the fear of making this decision was why he had been avoiding this moment for over a quarter century.

The man said to himself, “Okay. I know how to do this: I’ll place my hopes and fears for a life with my children into a mental image picture of a helium-filled balloon that I hold by a thin string. I will then let go of the string.

The man then followed his own instructions and watched the balloon slowly rise away.

The man thought, “I’m still here. Yes, I’m alone, but being alone is not punishment to me.

Punishment to me is false love, false caring, and false loyalty.”

He sat and watched the balloon until it was finally out of sight. There was no joy, yet the man smiled.

Written by Peter Skeels © 10-13-2026