

THE RECOVERY ROOM



Children & Affairs

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Introduction from Tim: *Earlier this week I had a phone conversation with my two oldest children, Cara and Caleb, in which they talked about their experience of growing up in a family that was being torn apart by my affair. Let me give you a little more context to our story...*

Before I had my affair, I was on staff at a large Midwest church. I hate telling that part of my story. It's one thing to admit your own infidelity, but the indiscretions of pastors and priests have become so cliché and I hate to be just another statistic in that scenario. But that's part of my story. And it's important in this context because my children attended a school that was associated with the church and so it was not unusual for them to see me around at two things (church and school) they were very involved in.

I appreciate Cara and Caleb's willingness to talk about these things, and I think that what they have to share will be helpful to you.

Tim: Caleb, Cara... I appreciate you both being willing to do this. I want to start with asking you both: When did you first realize that something wasn't quite right in the family?

Cara: I think I had a suspicion that something was happening because when I was at school I saw you walking with the other woman quite often. I think there was a time when I asked you about it. I questioned it a little bit, but at the same time you were my dad and I didn't want to believe that was true. When I actually recognized something was wrong was the moment you and Mom sat me down and told me. That was difficult.

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When that conversation took place, Mom was to my left and you were standing. I saw how hard it was for you to tell your daughter something you knew would hurt her. There was shame covering you and I jumped up from the couch and hugged you and said I forgive you. It was my perspective as a child: "This is all I have right now to make this right; I still love you and I forgive you." I probably never would have guessed what was actually what was going on. Did I wonder? Yeah, but I never would have thought that was the reality.

Tim: How old were you at the time?

Cara: I was 14.

Tim: What about you Caleb?

Caleb: I was in sixth grade. Before that, I cannot think of a time when I had any suspicion, so I was completely unaware.

I was thinking about growing up and about your and Mom's relationship. I don't think I was ever aware of any kind of issue at all, whether it was related to an affair or not. I have no memory of you guys fighting about anything. The only memories I have are actually really good memories of you together, so I think I was quite unaware of it then. I was too young to even really know what to look for.

The only time I caught a hint was the day you guys told us. I remember coming home and Mom's family was there, all her sisters and cousins. That wasn't too unusual, but clearly something was different about them that day. I remember coming home from school and walking in the front door and everyone was just looking at me; they were sad.

You and Mom were away talking with Cara. Then Cara came home, walked through the front door and I'm pretty sure she was crying. I remember you guys asked me to come with you and you told me what had happened. I think you did most of the talking; Mom was pretty silent.

From what I remember, I just kind of sat there. I understood enough to know what physically happened, but I don't think I really grasped what it meant for our family. I was blindsided; I had no anticipation of it at all.

I returned home and everyone knew you had just told us. They wanted to ask me stuff, but I just ran right up to my room and sat on my bed and cried for a long time. I think people came in and checked on me but that's all I remember about the day.

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Cara: Before we were told, I remember being at your sister's house. I don't know where you were going or what you were going to do, but you pulled me aside as you were walking out the door and you just hugged me. You were crying and you said, "Cara, you know that I love you so much" and I said, "Yeah, I know." I saw this look in your eyes that said something serious was going on. I think maybe that was the first time I thought something was going to happen...

Tim: Man, I don't even remember those conversations with you.

Caleb: That's crazy you don't remember those because when I think about the memories of finding out about the affair, that is the one memory that is most vivid.

Tim: You would think those conversations would stand out, but honestly I do not remember them. I have other more vivid memories.

One memory that I have often thought about and talked about is a memory that happened some years before the affair. The two of you were walking home from school and I think Cara had a friend whose parents who were getting a divorce. She apparently was talking to you about it as you walked home.

As I saw you guys coming up to the door, I could tell something was wrong. I asked you what was going on and Cara told the story. You were both concerned that mom and I were going to get a divorce. We sat down on the couch. I think I asked mom to come in and I said to you, "Listen, there may be times we get upset with each other or disagree with each other, but we love each other. A lot of things may happen in this family, but that's one thing you will never have to fear because your mom and I will never get a divorce." I think it was on the same couch that I later told you we were divorcing. That's why that stands out to me.

Cara: I don't even remember you guys telling me you were getting a divorce.

Caleb: No I don't remember that either.

Tim: There was a day when all of you came into that middle room, the one with the fireplace and sat on the couch. Mom and I were both in there and told you that we weren't going to be married. I can't believe you don't remember that. [Note: After this interview, we determined that this conversation was our announcement of separation, not divorce. I moved out of the house soon afterward.]

Caleb: When I was thinking back through the memories, one of the other vivid ones is sitting in that room

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on the couch just crying. It felt like we had meetings in there all the time and always ended up crying, but I wonder if it was that specific event. I remember we sat there and it was just miserable...

Tim: Well, I know you guys were really confused by all of that. You weren't really sure what was going on or what it meant. There was a lot that went on. What stands out most in your memories about that time during the affair?

Cara: It's twofold. One: mom's pain. Being the oldest, I think I was exposed to it the most and brought into a scenario that wasn't healthy. I understand pain now, so I have compassion and grace towards what happened. But the reality was I was fourteen; I didn't process it in a healthy manner.

Some of the news I was pulled into did damage. I think Mom told me too much and brought me in as her ally. Because of that, I was not permitted to own my own pain in the scenario. I mean, I wanted to love her, I wanted to help, I wanted to be her comfort, but it was a good year and a half that she laid in bed crying. The details she told me about the affair and the stuff she had me do for her, like investigating things, that hurt me.

There's more to that story than I've ever told anybody because I love Mom and understand that she was hurting; I understand what pain does to a person. But if I were to go back in time, I probably would separate myself a little bit more from all that. I don't think a child should be exposed to the details of the affair because you are my parent. Regardless of your mistakes, you are a part of me and I love you. I love both of you.

So that was the first part: Mom's pain. It was a difficult reality to walk home every day from school and see that. I remember a moment when I was sitting at the piano and thinking, *I don't like here anymore; it's difficult to come home.*

But I also felt a pull when I was with you. You wanted me to understand your side of things. I get that; I would want that for my child, too, but I don't necessarily think it's healthy. I would hang out with you and hear your side then hang out with mom and hear her side. I felt stuck. I felt like I didn't know what the right thing to do was. You and mom were caught up in your own pain and at times your children's feelings were not considered.

Caleb: It seemed like you guys were on opposite sides. Before that, I was completely unaware of anything going on in either of your lives that would have caused me to view you as anything but perfect. I had no idea that you made mistakes. Then, all of a sudden, it was extremely obvious there were two people on very

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different sides. Before, if you told me jump off a bridge I would probably jump off a bridge because why would I doubt you? Suddenly, I had no idea if I could trust either of you because you both would tell us very different stories. When we told something to the other parent, that parent would say, “Oh, that's not true, they're lying to you.”

That's what happened a lot of times when we went home to Mom. The reaction I remember more from you was “Well, that's not completely true; you haven't heard my full side of the story” because you probably felt like mom was spinning things against you.

As a child, you definitely move away from having two parents you can trust to guide you to having two parents with whom you need to figure out who's lying and who's not. You're kind of caught in the middle trying to figure that out.

I probably gave Mom a “Get Out of Jail Free” card for a lot of things. She had diplomatic immunity in my book. Whatever Mom told me, I was pretty much on board with. She didn't trust you and questioned a lot of what you said, but I knew it wasn't always true what she was thinking.

I knew Mom wasn't perfect, but I really leaned on her for a lot of things and probably pulled away from you just because I had to choose which parent I was going to trust. Mom was there every day and was the one, in my mind, that had been doing the right things, so I went towards her.

Cara: I was trying to understand both sides, but it's difficult when you haven't had life experience to understand that properly.

Caleb: You had the affair, okay. A lot of people have an affair and then, you know, people move beyond it. Actually, I think it can be totally okay and healed. But you had an affair and then there was a long period that I was completely oblivious, unknowing of what was going on. I didn't know whether or not you were still seeing the other woman. I didn't know if you and mom were getting a divorce or not. I didn't know if you were going to be living with us any time soon. I was just completely unaware, always trying to figure out what was going on.

There was a time when you moved out of the state and then came back. When you came back, I'd question: Is he back with the other woman again? Mom would obviously suppose you were and so I'd hear that accusation from her. The affair wasn't just a one time thing; it started a chain of events that continued for probably three years. What was going to happen in our family during that time was a complete unknown. I wondered whether you were going to divorce or not.

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Tim: I remember wanting my children to respect me, not wanting to be the bad guy who was blamed for everything. There were times I wanted to defend myself against some things that were being said. Some things that were said about me completely justified, but there were many things said that weren't justified, and some things that were absolutely untrue. I struggled with how much do I tell you.

There were many times I decided to not say anything, expecting that you would eventually figure some things out. But I'm sure that other times I did say too much and sometimes I actually lied to you. I can't remember specifics but I was lying to everybody because after I moved out of the house I reconnected with the other woman. The affair picked up again and continued for quite a while.

Caleb: I remember times when I was with Mom and we would drive by the place you were staying just to check on it.

Cara: Yeah.

Caleb: We'd drive by to see if the girl was there or not. I think that's why I was always completely confused about whether you were with her because I'd hear a story that you weren't but then Mom would drive me by to look for her. I couldn't put the two together.

Cara: We hid behind the bushes one time to peek on you.

Tim: Oh, dear. I know the affair took your mom to a tremendous place of pain. There were words and behaviors that came out of her that I had never seen from her before, so I know it impacted her in significant ways. That's just how she dealt with the hurt. Those things weren't true of her before and I don't think they've been true of her since. It was just really, really rough.

Caleb: I was trying to think back through to what Mom was doing during this whole thing. It sounds horrible to say but I just remember Mom being in bed all the time. I learned and understood what depression was at that time. I don't think I'd ever heard the word before, but quickly saw what it was. It became the norm that my mom was depressed.

Cara: One time she pulled up behind the other woman. She got out of the car and start screaming at her in front of all of my friends. Oh, it was so embarrassing. But I do get it. Pain makes a person do things not normal for them.

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Caleb: There have been two really hard times in my life and that was one of them. Those two to three years felt dark and heavy. I watch mom go through depression and then... I don't know if I was clinically depressed...

Cara: You were depressed. It was on your face.

Caleb: I went through a phase where I was never happy. Cara and I can joke about it now, but there was a time when she would ask me about it. And it wasn't just her; there were people in my school asking me the same thing: "Do you ever smile? Are you ever happy?... It's so weird you just never smile." I don't think I knew why, but I just never smiled. I was pretty emotionally dead.

There came a point where I was probably at my emotional lowest and I would go lock myself in the bathroom. I don't think I would have ever done anything, but I would fill up the sink with water, stop the plug, look at the water, and just think about what it would be to stick my head in it drown myself.

It's weird to say, but I do remember. I don't think I wanted to do it, but I thought about it because I didn't understand why I was so sad all the time.

I remember going to mom's bathroom and stealing her Prozac at the time.

Cara: Yes I did that, too.

Caleb: I was really excited. I felt bad taking it but I thought it was going to be really nice to feel good for a little while. It didn't do anything, obviously, because I only took it once or twice, but I was definitely at the point where I was looking for something to make me feel happy. It just seemed like a really dark time.

Tim: How did the experience of family change for you guys?

Caleb: Going from having parents you could go to and they'd be there for you to having parents that you just weren't sure were telling the truth. That was a big change for me. During that time, I stopped going to you guys for mostly everything.

During middle school and high school, I can't remember where you guys were. All my middle school and high school memories are of me at my friends' houses, doing things with them and their families. There were two different friends that had really good brothers and sisters. Their parents were both there and I basically just lived there.

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Tim: You had a sad story about a birthday too.

Caleb: That's right. I came home and it was my birthday. I remember there was a big coloring book thing on the table and it said Happy Birthday. That was it. I don't remember anybody in the house. Nobody said anything. I think it was probably still so early on that everyone was just absorbed in what was happening.

Tim: I come across parents who are in affairs and tell themselves (and I'll admit I told myself this, too): "Well, if the affair goes on, the kids are going to be okay. They'll learn to be fine with me. Kids are resilient; they'll get over this. Even if I end up with this person I'm having an affair with, they'll eventually learn to accept them. It's a little bump everybody has to go over, but we'll be fine on the other side of it."

What do you think about that?

Cara: That's a detached perspective. I think the best way to handle it is to sit down and talk to the kids. I would have loved for someone to sit down and talk to me about my feelings, my struggles, my perspective on the relationship and what would or wouldn't be okay with me.

It would be very difficult for me to embrace your affair relationship if it had actually become something. It was established in an unhealthy boundary.

Tim: Right. Eventually, the main reason I ended the affair was a recognition that it would never be something that would fit well with my children or my family in the future.

Cara: I met with the other women one on one. I went over to her house and talked to her. I actually did like her as a person. She was somewhat redeemed and broken about the decisions that she had made and the impact it had on our family.

Caleb: That was a lot further down the road though, just to clarify.

Cara: Yeah. Absolutely. That was years later. But I wanted to gain a greater understanding of the situation and wanted to hear all sides. I understand the decisions made when your world doesn't quite make sense and you're not happy; you want to escape from it. I think that's what most affairs are: just an escape.

Tim: There will be parents that will be listening to this who have been unfaithful, or currently involved in affair, or who have been betrayed and are wondering whether their marriages are even going to survive. As

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kids who've gone through this, what would you say to each parent in that scenario?

Caleb: It depends on what the parents want. Being a child of somebody who had an affair, everybody decides to tell you their story, too. I've heard some that have really turned out better for the family. If the person that had the affair genuinely wants forgiveness from the family, my advice is to believe your kids will absolutely forgive you. It's probably going to rock their world. It's going to be really hard and they're going to view you differently for a while, but I know without a doubt kids are resilient and they love their parents. They want to see the best in their parents. They will forgive like crazy.

There's a guy I work with whose dad had an affair. He told the family about it and he asked for forgiveness. They worked through it and he has a phenomenal relationship with his dad now. When we talk about our different stories, he'll say watching his dad go through that and choose his mom taught him a ton about what real love looks like.

I think there's always forgiveness in the family. Working through it will be tough, but it's going to be really tough either way. Kids can absolutely get over it. If parents are worried about their kids ever forgiving them I say kids will forgive.

In regards to the person having the affair: the idea of them leaving and staying with the affair partner and the kids being okay with it... that one makes my head spin. I would have had a hard time seeing that situation ever working out well. I'm sure there are families where it has happened and the kids have learned to deal with it after a long time. But in my mind it would be almost like a dad saying, "Okay, well... I'm replacing your mom" rather than "Oh crap, I made a mistake and I want forgiveness from that."

Instead of being a mistake, it's a decision they keep making. That, to me, is really different. I would have had a hard time if you'd stayed with that other woman. I think that would have changed the course of our relationship. I probably would have pulled really far away from you.

The fact that I did get from you, over and over, a sense of "I don't want this, I'm moving beyond this" meant that I could forgive you. I always forgave you; I tried not to hold it against you. I think the kids will be quick to forgive as long as the parent wants forgiveness for it. But if the parent doesn't see it as something that needs forgiving, their kids may not want to forgive them for it.

Cara: It's difficult for a child to embrace the fact that "You chose this woman and you ruined my family... you ruined my security and you're still going to pick her." It comes across as a personal rejection. I agree, I don't know if I could embrace that relationship even if I liked her. I would have felt like you chose her over

your entire family.

Caleb: Yeah, I would absolutely agree. It would feel like she's more important than us.

Cara: So I'm glad you didn't.

Caleb: Yeah. Yeah.

Tim: What about the ones who were cheated on—the betrayed parent. Anything from your experience you would want to say to them?

Caleb: It was really important to have other people around me that I could go to for that support and guidance. I remember Grandma and Grandpa moved close to us right around that time. That was a huge help for me. I'd go over to their house hang out with them. I'd watch their relationship.

I'd ask Grandpa things and we'd talk about what was going on in our lives. He would always ask me how things are going. We talked through it and he made a big impact on me.

I had good friends and teachers, too. They would pull me aside and talk with me and offer support. Even some of your former colleagues at church, because they knew and loved you so much and loved our family, wanted to help us as much as possible.

I have a friend I'm working with now who recently found out his wife has cheated on him and is filing for divorce. He's got three kids. He'd heard my story and asked, "What hope do I have for my kids? Is this going to scar them forever." I told him that kids are resilient. They'll get through it if you just love them. There's a lot of maturity that can come out of this if the kids are able to process through it.

We were talking earlier about whether you should tell a child everything or tell them nothing in an attempt to protect them. I think there's a healthy balance in between. I wanted to know what was going on because if I didn't know I'd to guess, but my guesses were really off. I would unjustly view you and mom in ways I shouldn't have because I was trying to guess at things. I needed to know enough to understand the baseline of what was happening.

Cara: I wanted to understand it, but I wish we hadn't been brought into your pain, into your reality. There should be a healthy balance. Parents should have a support system and kids should have a support system (counselling or whatever). Parents should reach out to people their age, not their children, to help them

navigate through their pain.

Tim: Cara, you said earlier that if you could go back in time. your response to Mom probably would have been different. When you said that, I was thinking, “If we could go back in time, that wouldn’t have even been necessary because there is no doubt in my mind I would make different choices and our family would have remained together.”

But we can't. There are consequences to the choices we make.

I can look back with a lot of regret, but I can also look back with a lot of gratitude for you, for the fact that I can stand here today and say “my children have forgiven me... there is grace on the other side of all of this stuff.” Unfortunately, I see some families where grace and forgiveness are not granted. Sometimes the division between parents and kids remains for a lifetime, but I’m very thankful that’s not our story.

Caleb: It's nice to be in a place now where you're remarried, Mom's remarried, and I have a good relationship with both of your spouses. I live in the same town as Mom and so I go over there regularly. She and her husband love our daughter, Ava, and play with her. We love both of them.

And I love going to your house. You and Sharon love Ava and Ava loves you. Life moves on and now Ava has three sets of grandparents. It's totally cool and it works. She loves all of them the same. She's still too young to recognize what's going on but in her mind it's no big deal. She's got three sets of grandparents.

Someday we'll be able to sit Ava down and help her process what happened, help her understand how there was forgiveness and healing from it. Was it the right choice at the time? No. But, she's going to make so many wrong choices and she's going to have to ask for forgiveness and we will forgive her just like we forgave this situation. There's nothing she can do that we won't forgive.

Tim: My children stand out most among things that impacted me during the time of my confusion in the affair. One thing that was very clear to me, even when I was experiencing it, was how emotionally disconnected I sometimes became from you. My way of coping (not going nuts and probably not putting a gun to my head because everything I was doing) was to just cut myself off from those feelings.

But those feelings would sometimes sweep over me and overwhelm me in unexpected ways. The connections with my children were probably the most significant influences in bringing me to the place of eventual brokenness. It was too late for our family to be saved, but at least it was the start of dealing more honestly with everything that I'd done. So you guys have been a very important part of this process all

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along. I have huge regret in knowing the pain and scars you have to carry for all of that.

Cara: There's healing in you taking ownership of what you did. I respect that. We've come to a place with you where there's no defiance towards what you've done. You own it and that allows for grace and open communication, which is a big deal.

Caleb: When someone has an affair, the people around them have a tendency to define them as *that person who had the affair*. For a while, my tendency was to think, "Oh well, my dad's the one that had the affair." But like Cara said, there's been healing. That's irrelevant at this point in my life. You're not the dad that had the affair; you're just my dad. You're not Ava's grandpa that had the affair; you're just Ava's grandpa. Yes, it's part of the story of all of our lives, but it's been totally healed over. Your affair is not the defining feature of you at all anymore.

Tim: If there's anything I can do to help minimize the regret that marriages and families will carry with them for the rest their lives—that's what drives me to do what I do. If I can plug in at any place along the way and encourage a different kind of thinking and a different kind of outcome, that's what I want to do.

Cara: Papa, I love you. I love you and I forgive you and I am grateful that you're even doing this kind of work.

Tim: I'm thankful I get to do it too. It's not always an easy thing to do. Listening to you guys... it's hard to listen to some of this stuff but...

Caleb: Yeah I know. That's the one reason I didn't want... I was hesitant...

Tim: No, no, no. I'm thankful you did this. I'm open with my story and I think that's what makes us healthy: being honest and vulnerable about these things. I appreciate you both.

Caleb: We love you.

Tim: I love you too.

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- **Phone Coaching** (AffairHealing.com/phone-coaching)

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- **Couple's Recovery Retreats** (MarriageICU.com)
- **Counseling in Central Florida** (AffairHealing.com/affair-counseling-orlando)